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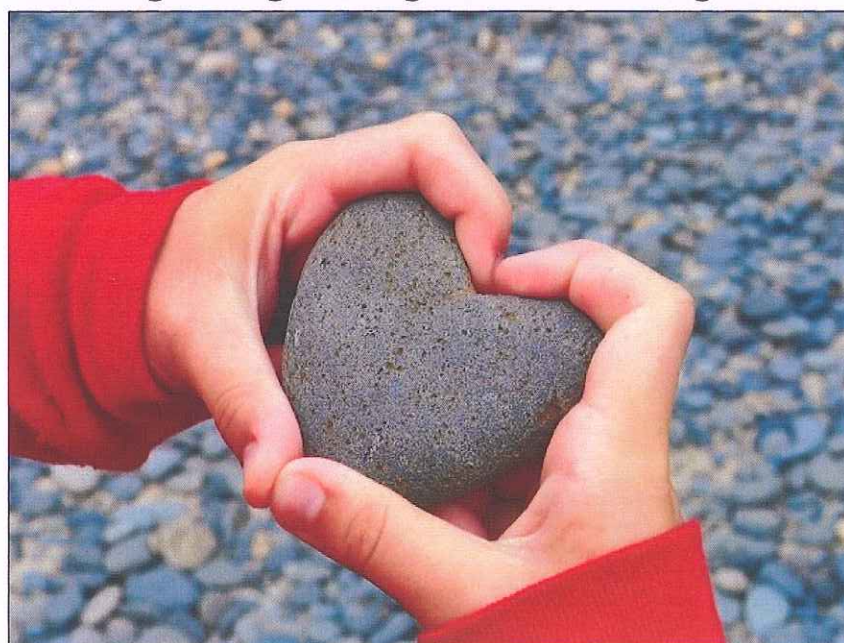


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Fostering a Long-Lasting Love of Teaching

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February 14, 2017

It is February, and as usual, I love my students. I no longer feel the polite, anxious, and determined love of August, but a more genuine affection that comes from really knowing them. By this point in the year, my students and I have figured each other out. I know their interests, work habits, and personality quirks. They know how to tease me and what questions will prompt me to tell a story. We have established a level of mutual respect, and now we laugh more heartily, grin more frequently, and feel a warmth in the classroom despite the gloomy weather outside.

I'm in a similar season in my career. Somehow the weeks have turned into semesters, which have turned into years, and I find myself a veteran teacher. The love I have for my profession is deeply rooted in the person I've become, and I find a satisfaction in being an education veteran that I couldn't have predicted in those first

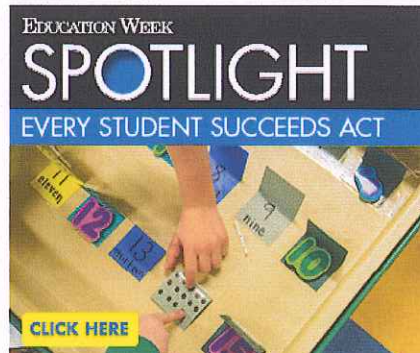
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turbulent years in the classroom. After all, love is a flame, a madness, a battlefield—pick your metaphor—and teaching can be, too.

Full of good intentions, I blazed through my first few years in the classroom, loving my students fiercely, putting in long hours, making countless **mistakes**, and shedding many tears. Fortunately, with persistence and a lot of support, I was able to survive those years. Now my relationship with teaching resembles all the best long-lasting loves—rich, fulfilling, still passionate, yet less likely to hurt.

Unfortunately, many enthusiastic and talented teachers do not get to this point. The recent **international teaching shortage** is reflected in the revolving door of 20-somethings who cycle through my own school, and schools around the country. These teachers leave for **financial reasons**, for more respect, to pursue opportunities for advancement, or because the physical and emotional demands of the job are just too difficult. **Their stories** are compelling, and I empathize with them—but it's also difficult for those left behind. Studies have shown that teacher turnover is costly, not only for school budgets but for **student achievement**.

I believe one solution for teacher turnover is **advocating for our profession**. But I also think educators, amid our many challenges, need to remember how to love what we do.

So how do we develop a love of teaching that lasts? Obviously, our students inspire us to teach, but what if even that love is clouded by paperwork, politics, testing, and such? I'm certainly no expert, but I chatted with other veteran educators, and we each shared many of the same strategies:

Be a Lifelong Learner

A key to long-term success in the classroom is a willingness to try new things. Public education is ever-changing, and while change can be intimidating, it is also incredibly rejuvenating. Over the past three years, for example, I've switched to **standards-based grading**, created self-paced learning modules, and arranged my classroom for flexible seating. This year, for the first time, my students blog weekly. Whereas traditional essays explore assigned topics and are written with a teacher's scrutiny in mind, these blogs allow students to choose their own topics and to write for a broader audience. As a result, my class has produced some of the most authentic writing I've seen in all my years as a teacher. There have been failures along the way, of course, but implementing these changes has brought me much joy, keeping that "spark" alive.

Be Invested

Seeking opportunities for teacher leadership is both gratifying and invigorating. When my superintendent asked teachers in my district what we would find rewarding, aside from monetary compensation, we overwhelmingly requested opportunities for input and investment. It feels good to be heard, to know that we matter, and to aid in decision-making. Feeling invested in your school and community validates your hard work and makes it easy to stay. I'm fortunate to have discovered a school district I love, and after 17 years, there are few teaching joys greater than recognizing the new mom or bearded gentleman waving at me in a store parking lot as one of my former middle schoolers.

Find Your Support

I would not be the teacher I am today without many individuals investing time and effort into helping me be successful. My first principal believed in me, despite my disastrous classroom management, and my first teammates helped me navigate parent conferences. I am a more effective teacher because of collaboration with my professional learning community members.

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One of my favorite pieces of marital advice I received was, "Everything's better with a friend." Even life's most mundane chores are pleasant in good company—this principle has been true for me not only in marriage, but in teaching. I can't count the hours I've spent laughing with teammates while making copies. We always make an effort to love our students, but it helps to love our colleagues, too.

The relationships we build within our schools are critical, and burnout is inevitable if we don't help each other. (Fortunately, if you feel alone in your building, there are numerous virtual communities available, from Twitter to the CTQ Collaboratory.)

Choose to Love It

Another great piece of advice I received before marriage was that love is not just a feeling; it's a decision. This idea also applies to teaching. There are always bad days, difficult months, and sometimes even entire school years that feel more draining than others. In those challenging times, it's important to step back and *decide* to love teaching anyway. **Practicing gratitude** is a proven technique for improving happiness, so try to focus on the good.

Also, choose to bring back the fun. Earlier this year, when one of my teacher friends was in a slump, I asked her, "What do you and your students really enjoy?" Then I told her, "Do *that*." Play an extra round of a digital learning game, sit together on the floor for a read-aloud, plan a lesson outdoors. There's nothing wrong with making your class an enjoyable place to be; in fact, it's quite the opposite. If you're not feeling the love, odds are your students aren't either.

Don't Give Up

People are not attracted to education for the money, respect, or recognition. We teach because we love helping students, we love learning, and we want to make a difference. Remember that. And if you know in your heart you love teaching, then don't give up. Because we—your students, your colleagues, your communities—need more teachers who love our profession. And we need you to stay.

*Cristie Watson (@CristieWatson) is a National Board-certified teacher and member of the **CTQ Collaboratory**. She teaches 6th grade English language arts and social studies at Gravelly Hill Middle School in Efland, N.C., and she enjoys working with beginning teachers.*

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2:16 AM on February 16, 2017

The best way is for organizations to foster a love of teaching in their teachers is to remove as many demotivators as possible. Teachers can be as positive as they can be, but if the organization does not support them, the teachers will leave.

ericpollock@yahoo.com

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