

# EDUCATION MATTERS

A publication of the Association of American Educators Foundation



## Edunomics

By Vann Prime

**I am one of the lucky ones. I teach in a school that has many excellent teachers. But for nine years, I've observed the larger public school system in crisis and the contentious debate that surrounds it. Why is it failing? How can it be fixed?**

**E**ducation—or, as economists refer to it, “investment in human capital”—is a cornerstone of every model of economic growth. If our children are not well educated, innovation and productivity will wither away. In other words, our long-term collective quality of life depends on the quality of our schools. And, by most measures, they are inadequate to the task. What are we doing wrong?

My view is that many problems in education are economic in nature. By this I don't mean that more funding will solve the problem. I mean that the way we run public education violates virtually every basic tenet of economics. We have constructed a public school system that seems intentionally designed to provide the wrong incentives to administrators, teachers, and students.

Take teacher tenure. Job security with few conditions allows teachers to settle, to become lazy and pro-



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professionally static. Tenure creates a strong disincentive to innovate or work harder. Tenure attracts to the profession security-seekers rather than risk-takers, and provides no upward mobility for the ambitious few.

Now imagine a job where one not only cannot get fired, but also receives automatic raises simply by being there. Even for the most conscientious teachers, there is no incentive to do more than the minimum because no matter how hard those teachers work, they cannot be paid more. There are no cash bonuses, no rewards for performance. After working many (truly exhausting) years, few teachers could be faulted for either shifting into a lower gear or moving on.

These are hardly the only disincentives to becoming a teacher. When, at age 37, I started teaching high school, I began, in both salary and rank, as a first-year teacher. Despite my having worked in intelligence, diplomacy, and business, I was treated like, and earned essentially the same salary as, a 21-year-old teaching second grade. And, like my first-year peers, I was subject to the seniority system’s stubborn adherence to a last-in, first-out policy.

It doesn’t take the sharpest imagination to understand why this would be a disastrous way to run an organization. If I were, say, managing a pharmaceutical company, would I pay someone with fifteen years of experience in pharmaceutical research the same salary as the new undergraduate intern simply because they were both new hires? Could I expect the same outcomes from both? The same productivity? Of course not. Then why would I pay them

identically or fire the last one hired, regardless of performance? This is nonetheless the norm in public education.

When I first thought about teaching, I called my county school system. I explained my professional background, including graduate degrees in international affairs and, later, in international economics. They told me to apply immediately. Then I found out that, despite my background, according to the state of Maryland, I was not qualified to teach history, political science, or economics. Until I completed twenty-nine credit hours of teacher training and became certified, I would be employed as a long-term substitute, a job with full hours, low pay, no benefits, and the real possibility of my being released at the end of the year.

State-mandated teacher certifications (backed by No Child Left Behind Act-based rules) are preventing highly qualified candidates from becoming teachers. I was an all-too-rare exception. At the time, my wife and I were in a secure enough financial position that I could take off two years without any income to become a teacher and then earn around \$45,000 a year once employed. How many experienced professionals, especially those with families, could do that? Why should they have to? I had the academic background and pedagogical skills I needed to be a teacher before expending all that time, money, and effort on a graduate degree in education.

Teacher quality is the key to improving public education in the United States. Nonetheless, we systematically dissuade highly capable people from becoming teachers. If we are to improve our educational system, we must instead create economic incentives that draw the best people into the profession and keep them there. ■



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# Getting Involved & Going Back to School

**B**ack-to-School is such a great time for teachers! The excitement of the new school year is really unmatched, and the annual fresh start provides a professional gift, allowing all teachers to start anew and begin implementing new ideas and projects. You can do those things you wish you'd done last time around, and avoid making the same mistakes. The possibilities are endless.

Here at AAE, we are embracing the Back-to-School season like never before and want to make this AAE's best year yet. After a year of unprecedented social media growth, AAE hopes you will join us in building an even more robust online community for our members. Follow AAE on Twitter, comment on our daily blogs, and share your views on our Facebook page. Get involved with our advocacy and media relations efforts by sharing your thoughts on legislation or new trends in education in your state. Take advantage of AAE's professional development opportunities by applying for an AAE Foun-

dation scholarship or grant. Most importantly, let others know about the professional association you belong to so your colleagues know about AAE as a professional option.

Getting involved is easy and here are some specific Back-to-School suggestions:

- **Back-to-School Fairs.** Most school districts have some sort of beginning-of-the-year meeting, sometimes called an Opening Day, a Benefit Fair, or Orientation. With new and veteran teachers coming together to discuss the new school year, fellow teachers, clubs, and associations are often allowed to set up tables to answer questions and distribute information. If you have some spare time, why not set up a table for AAE? Contact your administrators for the details, and AAE can send you materials and promotional items!
- **Faculty Meeting.** There's always that first Back-to-School faculty meeting for your school. It only takes a few minutes to tell your

fellow educators about AAE and to pass out information. Just let your principal know, and you can ensure your colleagues are protected and supported this school year. We can provide you with suggestions of what to say and answers to frequently asked questions.

- **Mailboxes.** In the busy life of a teacher, sometimes our mailboxes serve as the only lifeline to the outside world. If your school allows, consider placing some AAE materials with a personal note about your experience as a member/why you are a member in a colleague's mailbox. Sometimes a few words of encouragement and your testimonial can make all the difference.
- **Discuss the Issues.** Is your state experiencing new and exciting education reform changes? Do you and your colleagues discuss these issues and what they mean to educators? If so, mention that you are a member of AAE and share with your colleagues AAE's member-driven philosophy. As a member of AAE, each member has the opportunity to take policy surveys and comment on the issues. Let them know that with AAE, their voice is heard! ■



## Remember,

Back-to-School is your new beginning, your blank chalkboard. Make your new school year resolution to share AAE with your colleagues and help us make this AAE's best year ever. Visit [aaeteachers.org/GetInvolved](http://aaeteachers.org/GetInvolved) for more ideas today!





By Adam Cobb

# Getting More Out of Your Teacher Evaluations in the New School Year

In most states and school districts, teacher evaluations have become a fact of life. While the intended goal of evaluations is to help support and improve teacher performance, many teachers struggle with making the most out of their evaluation. Though many components of teacher evaluations lie outside a teacher's control, there are things any teacher can do to ensure he benefits from his evaluation. Here are a few suggestions for making the most out of your evaluation in the coming year:

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## Complete a Self-Assessment

One great idea to help you get more out of your teacher evaluations is to regularly conduct self-assessments. Request a copy of the document that will be used to measure your evaluation, or dig up a copy of an old evaluation you received, and use it for a self-assessment. At the end of a specific day or week, reflect back on your performance in the classroom and rate yourself as though you had “observed” your performance. Ask yourself questions like:

- What did I do well?
- What actions/resources/approaches seemed most helpful to my students?
- In what areas did I struggle?
- What things could I improve and how?
- What additional skills/experience/knowledge would help me improve my performance?

“The important thing is to intentionally engage in development activities, implement what you’ve learned, practice new approaches, and continually evaluate your progress and success.”

Be honest about your performance, strengths and weaknesses. Write down your observations and reflections.

Now set yourself goals for improvement and identify some development activities that can help you get there. Again, write these down. Make sure your goals are specific and give yourself timelines to complete the development activities. Then periodically check in on your progress.

Completing a self-assessment is a great way to periodically reflect on your performance and take charge of your own development and success. While we all tend to evaluate ourselves reflexively, particularly after a bad day, periodically completing a more formal self-assessment and writing down your feedback, goals, and action plans help to overcome our natural tendency to do nothing and encourage a proactive approach to self-improvement.

### Engage in a Dialogue with Your Evaluator

Wherever possible and appropriate, engage your evaluator in a dialogue about your performance; don’t just rely on the written evaluation. Share your own insights. Ask for clarification of feedback where needed. Ask your evaluator for suggestions or guidance for improvements. How would he have handled the situation? What learning or development resources does he recommend? Does he know a teacher he considers a “master” in this area? If there are specific aspects of your performance that you’d like feedback on, ask your evaluator to focus on these before your evaluation. If a previous evaluation flagged areas for improvement, ask your evaluator for feedback on these, to verify your progress.

Your evaluator is supposed to be there to help you, not to judge you. By seeing him as an ally and engaging him in a dialogue about your performance, you’ll get practical feedback and helpful advice to help you succeed.



### Focus on Development

The focus of your teacher evaluations should be on your continued development and success—how can you become an even better teacher than you are today? When an evaluation identifies areas for improvement, look for development activities that can help you and take action. It may be something as simple as asking a model teacher or mentor for advice, doing some reading, or observing someone else. You can also start a discussion in the staff room or participate in an online forum. The important thing is to intentionally engage in development activities, implement what you’ve learned, practice new approaches, and continually evaluate your progress and success.

### Seek Additional Feedback & Support

Between formal evaluations, it can be helpful to solicit additional feedback on your performance and support. Trying to master a new skill takes some practice and time. Ask a fellow teacher, your principal, or even a volunteer parent to observe you and give you feedback. Then make adjustments until you feel you’ve mastered the skill.

Your teacher evaluations can be a valuable tool to help you in your professional and career development. By playing a more active role in the process, you can support your learning and improve your performance. ■

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# Back-to-School Report: Battling Germs and Staying Healthy

According to a recent survey comparing the overall health and well-being of eleven different professions, teachers were ranked the highest in terms of overall quality of life. The distinguishing factor that helped to give teachers the happiness edge appears to be rooted in perspective—teachers regard their job as a “calling” and not just a gig that pays the bills.

Despite the inherent satisfaction that comes from the call to teach, back-to-school time means that teachers are back to being in the trenches every day and are once again extremely vulnerable to catching some horribly mutated bacterial infection spawned in the deep, dark underworld of student fingernails. When you put your germ goggles on, you see opportunities for illness lurking in virtually every corner of your teaching life. If you couple this with the more-than-thriving stress that plagues teachers, it’s a certainty that, at some point in the not-too-distant-future, you will be saddled with the flu—or worse. Now that school is almost back in session, what’s a teacher to do to battle germs

and stay healthy?

Some teachers take the “whatever doesn’t kill you makes you stronger” approach to the battle of Teacher vs. Germs. These tough teachers jump headfirst into the pool of illness that is their classroom and believe that, no matter what they do, they will get sick. Because getting sick is inevitable, it’s best to suffer through the illnesses and build up your immune system.

Other teachers, however, take a preventative approach. Music teachers, for example, are famous for their Lysol songs where they wipe down the keys on their piano before and after each music class. The teachers in the “prevention is better than a cure” camp have a three-year supply of hand sanitizer on their desk and might be

seen opening doors with paper towels or Kleenex.

It’s a tough battle, but when you’re called to a high-energy profession like teaching, you have no choice but to win. While each teacher has his own way of battling germs, managing stress is an important way to stay healthy. The more the stress is managed, the easier it is for your immune system to battle those school germs.

Additionally, the more you manage stress, the better chance you have at **staying positive** now and through the rest of the school year. Your calling as a teacher is about perspective. If you have a negative perspective, you are inviting germs to you. After all, “if anything can go wrong, it will.”



Along the same lines, it’s important to **rest**. It’s going to be a long school year if you’re already waking up at 3:00 am with nightmares about how you taught that algebra lesson. Be aware of how much sleep you are getting at night and be mindful of the quality of that sleep. Resist the urge to build lesson plans in your sleep, and try to turn off your brain.

Many teachers are guilty of drinking too much coffee and not enough water. Boost your immune system by drinking orange juice, cranberry juice, and green tea from time to time. In addition to **staying hydrated**, it’s equally important to **stay nourished**. Remember to have snacks throughout the day. You’d be surprised at how much better you do when you have a midmorning granola bar to jump-start the blood sugar. It’s probably easier to be nice to the kids who give you the hardest time, too!

These little tricks, in addition to your regular sanitization routine, should fortify your immune system now that we are in back-to-school mode such that you have a better chance of staying healthy for the better part of the school year. Happy teachers are also healthy teachers. ■



# Top 10 Back-to-School Tips for New Teachers

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- 1. Be prepared.** Give yourself enough time to set up your new classroom, plan a route to school, make calls to future colleagues, get enough sleep, and secure professional educator liability coverage. You're beginning a new school year, so be prepared!
  - 2. Give your classroom some pizzazz.** Decorate your classroom so that your students will be excited to come to school. Make sure they get a feel for who you are as a teacher.
  - 3. Introduce yourself and build relationships.** Post a fun biography of yourself outside your classroom and encourage colleagues to do the same. Students and teachers may identify some commonalities to foster relationships. Be nice to the school secretaries and custodians. They know the school and the students, and chances are they will help you in the future.
  - 4. Keep records and get organized.** Set aside a place for keeping receipts of expenditures that could be deductions on your income. Similarly, organize your personal papers, as you never know when you'll need to produce a work-related document.
  - 5. Make a good first impression with students and colleagues.** Make sure your class knows from the beginning that you are well organized and in control. Your students must feel that you are prepared and know what you are doing.
  - 6. Establish the rules early.** If you want discipline to work, start off by establishing class rules right at the onset of the school year. Let the students help develop and establish the rules. They will be more likely to follow them. The rules should be posted in the classroom and all students should see them early on.
  - 7. Set a class goal and work towards building team spirit.** Working together toward a goal can help foster team spirit. Start your planning early in the fall to build enthusiasm for a charity project or service endeavor.
  - 8. Develop lists and resources.** Develop go-to resources to consult in a pinch. Know where to get help if you need it. If you see a lack of worksheets on a certain subject, build a network of free online resources to print at the ready.
  - 9. Be realistic and do your very best.** Determine early on what issues prove challenging in the year ahead. While you can't win every battle, addressing concerns with your students, colleagues, and administration will be less of a hassle if dealt with early.
  - 10. Never forget why you teach.** Keep your troubles in perspective, and always remember to be flexible, patient, and maintain a sense of humor. ■



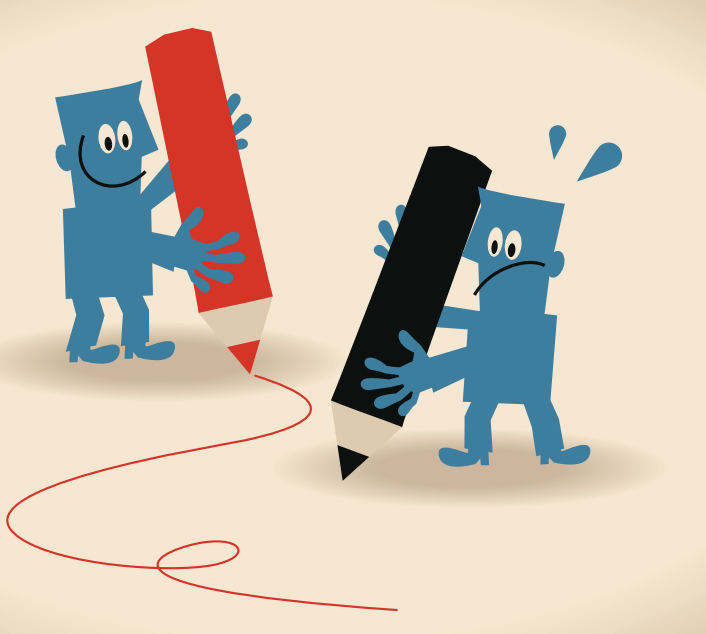
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# AAE Joins Pinterest



**It's official:** AAE has joined Pinterest! Described as a teacher's "new best friend," the new online bulletin board is a great way to organize ideas ranging from professional development resources, to fun quotes, and teacher tips. AAE's new Pinterest page will host boards featuring technology, professional development, classroom ideas, and fun inspirational tools.

If you haven't checked Pinterest out, now is the time. Teachers all over the world are using Pinterest to improve instruction and connect with colleagues. Whether they are pinning bulletin board ideas, images they might use in their classrooms, or links to technology resources, all are discovering new ideas to improve teaching and learning. This simple resource allows teachers to gather teaching ideas visually and then share them with others. It can also be a fun stress reliever!

If you are a first-time user of Pinterest, you can learn about the social networking site on their instructional page. Don't forget to follow AAE's new Pinterest account! Visit our page at [www.pinterest.com/AAEteachers](http://www.pinterest.com/AAEteachers) and bookmark us today. ■

## You Speak Out: Write for AAE!

Do you have strong opinions about an education policy issue? Are you implementing a new program in your classroom, school, or district that you would like to share with your fellow members? Write an article for the Association of American Educators!

AAE is constantly looking for new material to share in *Education Matters* or on the AAE blog. We would love to hear from real classroom teachers and members interested in sharing their experiences. Whether you are interested in class size, teacher choice, education reform, cutting-edge curriculum, or anything in between, don't hesitate to contact AAE's editorial staff. Email AAE today at [Editor@aaeteachers.org](mailto:Editor@aaeteachers.org) with your articles or ideas.