

EDUCATION MATTERS

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Happy Teachers: Resolve to Find Joy

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Just about anyone who has spent time in a classroom has thought about quitting. Many times. Sometimes regularly.

Yet, in spite of the pressures leading to teacher burnout, including new intense pressure related to teacher evaluation, many people still find deep and lasting career and personal satisfaction in the profession.

Because of our own struggles with burnout, we wanted to know what these teachers do to stay happy in the classroom despite numerous pressures such as low pay, school politics, inadequate parent or administrator

support, behavior management problems, and tenure debates, so we created a survey to find out. Our purpose was to identify and examine those factors that matter to happy teachers in how they find, and keep, happiness in the profession of teaching.

We sent an email with a link to an anonymous survey to every bachelor's and master's education graduate from Missouri State University since 1995 that said: "Are you happy being a teacher? Willing to take a 5-minute survey?" Teachers were asked in the email to forward the message to other teachers and teacher education organizations. Additionally, a few random emails were sent to teachers and principals in every state.

What Contributes to Teacher Happiness

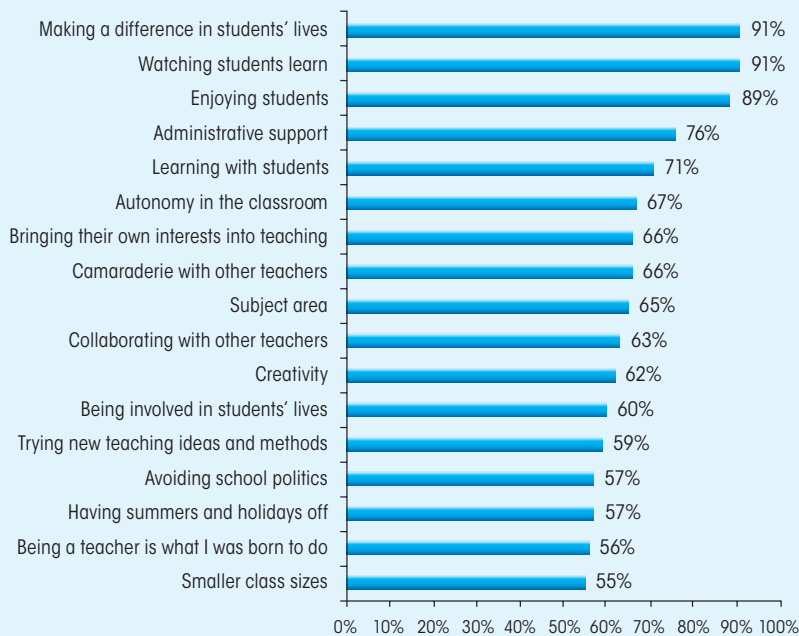


Figure 1. What contributes to the happiness of 50% or more of the teachers

Of the almost 1,700 responses, the majority of the responses were from teachers in public schools.

The first question on our survey asked respondents if they were happy being teachers. Of those who said yes, 44 percent said they were “very happy” being a teacher, and 13 percent said they were “somewhat happy” being a teacher. We had two questions: 1) what contributes to your staying happy as a teacher? and 2) what things do you do to stay happy as a teacher?

What makes teachers happy

When teachers were asked to write additional aspects that contribute to their happiness that were not on the list, the top three patterns that emerged were: 1) expressions of appreciation, 2) relationships, and 3) laughter and humor. It was humorous to us how many teachers also mentioned chocolate. One teacher wrote what sounded like a bumper sticker: “Laugh often. Eat

chocolate.” Another wrote, “Margaritas, chocolate, and coffee.” Humor aside, many teachers mentioned how much it encourages them to hear words of appreciation, especially from students, but also from colleagues, parents, administrators, the community—anyone. One teacher said, “Administrative support is very important, but administrative appreciation is far more so. I can get great things done with the support

of my administration, but when they appreciate the small, everyday things that my job entails (and they vocalize it), it keeps me motivated to do things both great and small.”

Teachers also wrote about the satisfaction they receive from working with others. One teacher said, “Interacting with the students and seeing their progress makes me so happy. I love being able to connect with my students and their interests and then show them how their interests connect with what we’re learning.” Another wrote, “Collaborating with other professionals both regarding academics and classroom management keeps me motivated with fresh ideas.” Figure 1 shows what contributes to teacher happiness.

How teachers stay happy

When teachers were asked what they “do often” to stay happy as a teacher, again, three answers stood out: 1) keeping focused on the students (85 percent), 2) working closely with colleagues who are positive (79 percent), and 3) reminding themselves of why they are there (71 percent). Only two of the eleven items on the list were checked “do often” by fewer than 50 percent of the teacher: 1) go to workshops to learn new teaching ideas (47 percent), and 2) keep a file of positive

What Teachers Do to Stay Happy

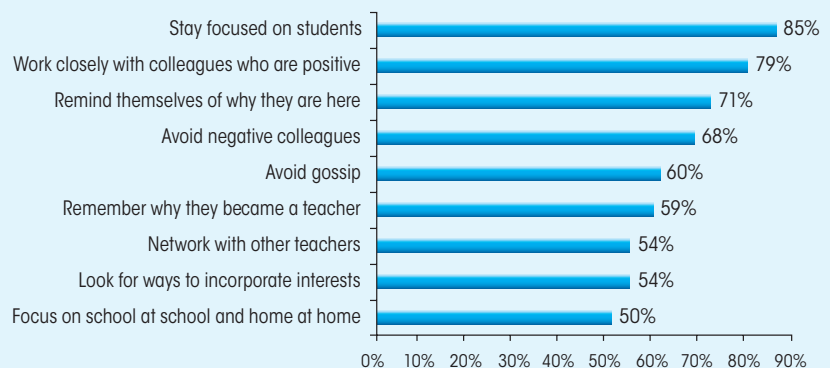


Figure 2. What 50% or more of the teachers do to stay happy in the classroom

notes from parents and students (43 percent). Figure 2 shows what 50 percent or more of the teachers “do often” to stay happy in the classroom.

The top three themes teachers wrote about to stay happy in the classroom included: 1) developing a balance between personal and professional life, 2) involving themselves in communities of learners, and 3) relying on spiritual beliefs. An overwhelming number of teachers listed how they have learned the importance of finding a balance between their personal and professional lives. For their professional lives, they want to be involved in a strong community of learners where they are challenged to learn and grow. They thrive professionally on those relationships. Personally, they have learned they need to have what many teachers called “me time” and times when they connect with their spiritual side, whatever that might be.

A surprise to us was that some teachers wrote that taking the survey helped them. One teacher said: “I’m on the edge of burnout now. Your survey gave me some good ideas to keep in mind.” Another wrote: “There are things on this list that I had not thought of doing.”

These comments reminded us that when the going gets tough, which it always does, teachers look for ways to stay encouraged, and they want to be reminded of how they can remain happy in the classroom.

“...teachers who are happy in the classroom have searched inside themselves and their internal sources of strength, and...they ‘follow their bliss.’”

What we can do

The results of our survey are in line with the findings of Hurst’s and Reding’s (1999) interviews with seventy-seven teachers from Missouri and around the country about what they do to stay happy in the classroom. When looking for teachers to interview, they were not looking for good teachers; they were looking for happy teachers. Three themes emerged from their interviews: Happy teachers 1) love to learn, 2) love their students, and 3) bring their own interests into the classroom to make learning more meaningful for themselves and their students.

A connection between these two studies is that teachers who are happy in the classroom have searched inside themselves and their internal sources of strength, and



they do as Joseph Campbell (2004) suggested—they “follow their bliss.” They have learned what makes them happy and they focus on that: making a difference in students’ lives and watching them learn while continually learning themselves. They have decided, as Abraham Lincoln did, that most folks are about as happy as they have made up their minds to be. They have made up their minds—they want to be teachers, so they find ways to stay happy as teachers in spite of the pressures inherent in the profession. Based on our survey and the candid responses from teachers, the following are six recommendations for what teachers can do to stay happy as teachers:

1. Keep focused on the students. The teacher’s desire to impact their students’ lives is what drew most teachers to the profession in the first place. Student engagement and enthusiasm is infectious and motivating. Teachers need to remember they are making a difference whether they see the outcome.
2. Learn along with the students. It keeps teaching fresh and interesting, and it models for students an enthusiasm for learning.
3. Bring interests and experiences into the classrooms to share with students. This makes learning more meaningful for students and more interesting for teachers.
4. Seek out positive and appropriate relationships: with students, with parents, with administrators, with colleagues, and through faith-based and community involvement.
5. Find a balance between home and school. Make a conscious effort to focus on school while at school and on home while at home.

6. Make choices to manage stress in appropriate ways. Yes, this may involve chocolate. Teachers must take care of themselves. Flight attendants instruct parents in an emergency to put on their own oxygen masks before their children's, because if parents pass out from a lack of oxygen, they can't help their children. The same applies to teachers; if they become burned out because of a lack of passion, they will not have as much to offer their students.

Final thoughts

In conclusion, the results of our survey did not surprise us, but they did confirm for us what we know about teachers—they want to make a difference in people's lives and they want to keep learning. They strive to find a balance in their own lives so they have the energy and willingness to keep at this most worthy profession in spite of the challenges of juggling all the expectations that come with students, parents, administrators, communities, and governing mandates.

Dealing with teacher burnout is not easy. We struggle with it almost daily ourselves. The same things that cause burnout at the elementary level cause burnout at the college level. It is the human natureness of it all. To be effective teachers, to find that innate sense of worth, and to powerfully impact students learning and even their own lives, teachers are well served to examine the aspects that make them want to be there. Those are the parts of teaching that make them happy. ■



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Professional Development: It's Not All Workshops and Conferences

For many teachers, when you bring up professional development, a certain image pops into their heads. For many, professional development still means collecting professional development hours, usually through attending workshops, conferences, or many even webinars. This image of a highly structured, one-time event model of professional development persists, even as knowledge increases that this type of professional development is ineffective and thus educational leaders attempt to push away from it.

This older model persists mainly because it is easy and familiar. Teachers know that they can sit back, listen to an 'expert,' and check off a box that they need to keep their licenses. Professional development does not have to be mere box-checking. As noted earlier, it's well known that this type of professional development does not have long-term impact on teaching.

Teachers across the country are beginning to stand up and demand professional development that is relevant and impactful to their careers, and this means moving away from the workshop/credit hour model. As teachers begin to take greater control over their own professional growth, new unique forms of professional development begin to emerge.



“Teachers across the country are beginning to stand up and demand professional development that is relevant and impactful to their careers...”

One of the most unique forms of new professional development comes in the form of edcamps. Edcamps on the very surface appear to share many similarities with conferences. They are usually a day-long event on the weekend, where a group of educators gather in a meeting space to attend sessions dealing with education. Edcamps, sometimes identified as part of the unconference movement, stop looking like normal conferences at that point.

Edcamps shed some of the trappings that are normally associated with conferences. They don't have keynote speakers or vendors lining up to sell things. They don't have an organization or foundation in charge of organizing them and setting the agenda, and they're typically free as well. Teachers who attend an edcamp don't see this as a weakness. For them, this is part of the selling point. These conferences are intended to build from the bottom up, not the top down.

Unlike other conferences, there is no predetermined conference. Instead, there will be a spot with times and rooms listed, and anyone who shows up can fill a timeslot with a topic of their choosing. This makes edcamps extremely responsive to their attendees. Teachers who attend edcamps are encouraged to find the sessions that best meet their needs, so if enough people express a desire to learn something, soon someone will step up to lead a session.

Technology plays a huge role in edcamps as well, with social media often helping in the planning and buildup as well as distributing information during and after.

While informative and good for building community, an edcamp is still a one-day event. It lacks the continuous and persistent nature needed to bring about true improvement in teaching style. A bit better in this regard is the growth of video clubs.

Like edcamps, video clubs come from the bottom up, not the top down, and are driven by teachers. The concepts of observing another teacher to learn from them, videotaping lessons for self-improvement, and working with a coach to improve teaching are not new or unique, but, in video clubs, are combined in a way that they have



Resources to check out:

Edcamp

www.edcamp.org

Boost Teacher Learning with Video Clubs

www.edweek.org/tm/articles/2012/08/28/tln_repass.html

not previously been.

Video clubs are formed around a core group of educators who meet together regularly. Each meeting a teacher will videotape a lesson and share it in front of the group. The entire group then watches the lesson together, jotting down notes on what they see, and share with each other when the observation is over.

By sharing a video of their own teaching, the teacher who shared that week gets valuable feedback and hints, much like one would through coaching. Their awareness of their craft is heightened, and they have a built-in support network to help them improve. The rest of the teachers get to see what went wrong, allowing them to look for and avoid it in their own teaching, and also all the little tricks that particular teacher uses in his classroom.

In short, all who participate get something out of each session, regardless of how they participated.

These unique forms of professional development are nowhere near the only options for teachers looking to get out of the workshop/webinar/conference mold. Like all good forms of professional development, these programs are collaborative, allow professional exploration, and are tailored to the needs of the educators participating in them. Educators are encouraged to explore the many different forms of offerings out there and find a type of professional development that truly helps them improve their craft. ■



AAE Recognizes National Teacher Appreciation Week and National Charter Schools Week in May

This week, May 5-11, 2013, is both National Teacher Appreciation Week and National Charter Schools Week. AAE is pleased to recognize hardworking educators and celebrate the growing national public charter school movement this week and every week.

As you know, AAE is a committed supporter of not only American educators but also charter schools. As the leader of the national non-union educator movement, AAE is committed to supporting teachers in all education settings by promoting professionalism, collaboration, and excellence in the profession. This week is a special occasion for all of our members. We are thrilled to support you!

For more about National Teacher Appreciation Week and National Charter Schools Week, visit their respective websites for information about how you can get involved. Don't forget to visit AAE's new website for charter school stakeholders www.AAECharters.org for the latest in charter school news. ■

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Member Mention: Tracie Happel Appointed Commissioner



AAE Wants to Recognize YOU!

Have you reached a milestone in your teaching career, recently implemented a new program, or received your Doctorate degree? AAE wants to know!

Please email awards@aaeteachers.org to be recognized in upcoming editions of *Education Matters*.

Recently AAE was honored to fund member Tracie Happel's attendance as commissioner for Wisconsin at the Education Commission of the States (ECS) Conference. ECS is a nationwide nonprofit, nonpartisan organization created in 1965 to improve public education by exchanging information, ideas, and experiences among state policymakers and educational leaders.

Each state has its own commissioner's board, appointed by the governor of that state. Tracie Happel was appointed as a commissioner by Governor Walker to represent Wisconsin. Below is an interview with the newly appointed commissioner.

What does being commissioner entail?

ECS has two national meetings per year: a winter meeting and a summer meeting. This past December was the winter meeting, held in Denver, CO, and I was able to attend. The summer meeting will be held on June 25 and 26 in St. Louis, MO. The public is invited to attend and participate.

What do you do at the meetings?

At the Commissioner's Meeting, I was able to mingle and interact with national policymakers, senators, governors, and other respected educational professionals. This particular meeting focused on three main areas: early reading, college readiness, and teacher evaluation systems. The meeting was only two days long, but we met during breakfast, lunch, dinner, and after dinner over drinks and hors d'oeuvres.

What was the experience of attending the meetings like for you?

It was never-ending but completely fascinating. The level of discussion, competence, and research kept my head spinning the entire two days. Some very real and passionate people are working for our children and our schools, and I was humbled to be present. ■





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