

The logo for Edutopia, featuring the word "edutopia" in a lowercase, serif font, with the "e" and "o" in a larger, bolder font. The logo is set against a dark, rounded rectangular background.

NEW TEACHERS

# What I Wish I'd Known as a New Teacher

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It's been two decades since my first year in the classroom. I reflect on that time and wish I'd known a few things about myself, about teaching, and about my students. Some of what I wish I'd known could have been shared with me -- some I just had to live and learn from.

So I offer this reflection both for new teachers as well as for those who support them. And so if you work with a new teacher, I'm hoping you might stop by their room in the next few days and share some insights from your own experience. And if you are a new teacher, then I'm hoping these reflections might help you feel validated, hopeful, and resourceful.

**1. This will get better.** The first year of teaching is so, so hard. You don't even know why it's so hard -- you can't wrap your head around that because you're in survival mode. It's so hard because you are being asked to push your heart and mind and body in ways you never have. You are making thousands of decisions each day, and there are big parts of you that know you don't know what you're doing. So you question the decisions you're making each day (questioning is good, it is) but that questioning also makes you feel tired and insecure. It will get better. You're just overloaded. You're learning so much (I know you can't even recognize this because you're so tired) but it'll sink in as the months pass. Nothing will ever be as hard as the first year.

**2. Always work from the heart.** If your actions and words emerge from the heart, you can't make too many mistakes. Let yourself love your students; don't be afraid of falling in love with them. That's the path to take as a new teacher. Get to know them, indulge your curiosity, spend time learning about who they are as human beings -- the rest will follow.

**3. They will remember this about you.** Your students will remember how you made them feel, whether they felt loved and cared for by you. I know this: I'm in touch with dozens of former students who were amongst the first groups of kids I taught. They remember my love for them in various ways; they don't remember the lessons that I botched, or that I didn't return their homework within a promised two days, or my disorganization. When I listen to what they remember, I hear that it was my love for them -- and I did love them, deeply.

**4. Be open to surprises.** Students will surprise you -- they will learn things you didn't think they could

learn, they will grow in ways you didn't expect. You might think that a particular student will struggle later on (he's already been retained in second grade and he can't spell his own name and clearly has a learning disability). Then ten years later you might find yourself at his high school graduation hearing that he's been accepted to art college and there'll be tears ruining your makeup and you didn't bring tissues and when he sees you he grins and gives you a huge hug and says, "Ms. Aguilar, I'm so glad you came." You'll still be crying and telling him how proud you are. It will truly be one of the most joyful days of your life. He was also in your classroom that first year, when you thought you'd ruined them all. "You were really nice to me and you encouraged me to draw," he says, and you beam.

**5. Find a coach.** Find someone who can support your growth, someone who has training to be a coach, someone who will observe you and give you feedback and help you fulfill the vision you have for yourself as a teacher. You won't be able to figure this all out on your own. You can't see what you can't see. You don't know what you need to know. Ask for a coach, beg, search out all possible options -- and find someone to help you grow.

**6. And if you can't find a coach . . .** Move. Find another school. I'm serious. Find a place where someone will support you in your growth as a teacher. Ok, if it can't be a coach, settle for a mentor, perhaps an administrator who will commit to supporting you in a non-evaluative way, or find a partner-teacher who might be a mentor, or a professional learning community of teachers who observe each other. You won't be able to guide your own development by yourself -- the weekly (if you're lucky) or annual professional development won't be enough.

As a new teacher you need a lot of feedback and support. Don't stop searching out support until you get it. If you feel like you're learning and increasingly meeting the needs of your students, you'll feel good. You'll stay. And kids need teachers who stay.

The first year (like a first love) has so many highs and lows and I still get both dreamy-eyed and panicky when I remember the 1995-96 school year. Capture this year, share stories with people you trust, and then in twenty years, look back and write yourself a "What I Wish I'd Known" letter.

**Source:** [www.edutopia.org/blog/what-i-wish-id-known-new-teacher-elena-aguilar](http://www.edutopia.org/blog/what-i-wish-id-known-new-teacher-elena-aguilar)

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