



CCNews

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Student Teacher “Do”s and “Don’t”s: A Guide to Surviving and Thriving in the Field

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Congratulations! You are about to embark on one of the most meaningful and important parts of your journey to becoming a teacher. Getting into the field breathes life into the theory you’ve learned in your coursework and allows you to put your professional aspirations into practice.

In our program we refer to the combined practicum and student teaching experiences as a “year-long job interview.” In most areas, even big cities, the teaching community is closely connected. We often find ourselves separated from each other by only one- or two-degrees. As novices in the field this connectedness can work to your advantage, or it can come back to bite you.

Your performance, both in and out of the K-12 classroom, will be watched closely. A good performance will often result in a job offer from a principal or a recommendation to a friend and colleague that they “need to hire” you. On the other hand, a poor performance can lead to questions about your ability and a lukewarm response when a colleague asks your supervisor for a recommendation.

A strong performance in your field experience doesn’t mean you need to be perfect everyday. To the contrary, it often means taking the stance of a learner—recognizing that you have much to learn, being willing to listen, and seeking to continue to improve. And it means displaying those attitudes consistently in your interactions with your K-12 students, your colleagues, and your mentors.

Below are 12 tips for success. These tips, based on the good, bad, and the ugly that we have witnessed in our work as teacher educators, are intended to help you not just survive your field experience work, but to thrive. This is an exciting time in your professional growth. These tips will help you make the most of it!

Tip #1: First Impressions Matter

When you go for an interview and arrive for your first days of school, dress professionally—no flip-flops, yoga pants, bare midriiffs, or cutoffs. Model the kind of professional dress you will want your students to aspire to. When you send introductory emails or write a thank you note following an interview, use formal language and titles—don’t

abbreviate words into text-speak and call principals or cooperating teachers by their first names. Using Mr., Ms., Dr., or Principal in your address demonstrates respect for both the individual and the profession.

Tip #2: Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

In your undergraduate years if you missed class in a lecture hall with 200+ students, no one noticed. When you miss a day of student teaching, everyone notices. This is a professional role and communication is essential. Establish and communicate a clear schedule for when you will be in the classroom. If you have an emergency and won’t be able to be at school the next day, contact your cooperating teacher, let them know what is going on, and share any plans you may have prepared for the class so that they won’t be burdened with additional last minute work. Before your supervisor comes for a visit, email your lesson plans, tell them what to expect, and share any questions or concerns you’d like them to watch for during the observation or discuss during the de-brief conversation. And schedule regular weekly meetings with your cooperating teacher to plan for the next week, check in on your progress and, clarify any concerns. Keeping the lines of communication open with both your university and your field placement will be essential to ensuring a smooth and successful experience.

Tip #3: Ask What More You Can Do

Every year we have a few students who, when asked to supervise recess or run some photocopies, will ask, “Do I have to do that?” Although neither expectation may be spelled out in the student teaching handbook, complaining about these kinds of requests will quickly earn you a poor reputation. Of course we want you to be able to focus on the teaching and learning that goes on in the classroom, but all teachers take on additional responsibilities. Wherever possible, step up. Instead of asking what you have to do, ask what more you can do. Our most successful candidates will often spend many more hours on campus than required—participating in collaboration meetings, supervising school dances, coaching team sports, sponsoring student clubs, or helping with afterschool homework. These can be great opportunities to get to know your students and colleagues in informal settings, build relationships, connect to the community, and

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establish yourself as a dedicated educator who is willing to go above and beyond.

Tip #4: Be Open to Critique

It is never easy to hear criticism, but to grow you must be willing to listen. None of us are perfect the first time around... or the second, third, or thirtieth. When you sit down to de-brief a lesson with your cooperating teacher or supervisor, try to avoid a posture of defensiveness. Recognize that we all want you to succeed. Ask questions if the feedback isn't clear. Think aloud how you can apply the critique to future lessons. Take notes that you can review later when you've had more time to process. And if the feedback seems too positive, ask what you could do better. Your students are another incredible source of feedback. Although it can be scary to ask them directly (after all, kids can be frighteningly honest and direct), students often provide the wisest counsel. They know what works and what doesn't, and their suggestions can provide powerful ideas for strengthening the teaching and learning that goes on in the classroom. And contrary to many new teachers' fears that asking for feedback from the students will be perceived as a sign of weakness, our experience has consistently been that those who are brave enough to ask are often respected all the more by their students for being willing to listen.

Tip #5: Ask for Help When Needed

Sometimes one of the hardest things to do is to ask for help. We tend to want to keep it all together and pretend to have everything under control, even when we know that things aren't really working. Although the desire to persevere is admirable, you will be better off if you acknowledge difficulties that you are encountering in the classroom and ask for help from the people who are there to support you. In all likelihood, your cooperating teacher and supervisor have already recognized areas of concern. When you broach the topic and ask for help, you demonstrate self-awareness, professionalism, and a desire to grow and learn—desired characteristics for educators at all stages of our careers.

Tip #6: Stretch Yourself

Every now and then we will have candidates who argue with their placement. Sometimes there are legitimate concerns but more often the arguments are about the candidate's own issues rather than the placement itself. The candidate who isn't comfortable in urban settings may claim that the drive is too far. The candidate who doesn't yet understand how to work with second language learners may attempt to find their own placement at a suburban school that they attended themselves. The candidate who isn't yet confident in a project-based or flipped classroom may complain that there isn't any teaching going on. If you do have placement con-

cerns, we want you to share them, but be aware that we may push back. Part of our job as teacher educators is to ensure that you have a diverse series of experiences that prepare you to work in a wide range of classrooms. Recommending you for a teaching credential at the end of the program means that we believe you are ready to serve all of California's students, not just a selected segment. Stretch yourself. Be willing to get out of your comfort zone and try new teaching contexts while you have the support of the program. And trust us... We've done this before and we want to work with you to help you become the best teacher you can be!

Tip #7: Put on Your Game Face Everyday

Teaching will be hard. There will be mornings when you want to pull the covers over your head and go back to sleep. You can't; education professionals don't get to take the day off. Get up, put a smile on your face, and project positive energy to your colleagues, your supervisors, and your students. Chances are that the offhand comment made by a colleague or the negative responses from students that so devastated you have long since been forgotten by them. Each day is a new day to be successful. Some of our most respected candidates are the ones who have had to face adversity but remained focused and professional, coming back in the next day with a smile and a determination to make things better. Maintaining a consistently positive attitude each and every day will be critical to your success this year and to the professional reputation you are working to build.

Tip #8: Cultivate a Professional Image

Becoming an educator means that you lose a measure of your autonomy and anonymity. You are certainly still allowed a life outside of school but you need to be aware that the wall between your professional life and your personal life is permeable. What you say to a friend on a trip to the grocery store may be overheard (and then repeated) by parents or other teachers. What you post online about politics, religion, or partying will be found by students or school officials. We've had candidates who have made amazing career connections by building professional online profiles using social media. But we've also had a couple who have had job offers rescinded after they posted images of themselves partying a bit too hard on the weekend. Be aware that although you may leave the physical building at the end of the school day, being an education professional is something you maintain 24/7.

Tip #9: Mind Your Ps and Qs

“Please” and “Thank you” are phrases that should be used early and often. As a student teacher you are a guest in someone else's classroom and school. And as awkward as this can be for you at times, it can be equally challenging for your cooperating teacher. It is truly a gift that they are welcoming you into their classroom home, be gracious and appreciative.

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Recognize that at times you will need to defer to the expectations and norms that they have established. Be careful to avoid making judgments or assuming greater authority than you have earned. Statements like, “Well, I wouldn’t have done it that way,” or “I think it would be better if…” can be easily perceived as dismissive and disrespectful. Be respectful of your cooperating teacher’s time—show up when you say you will, do what you have promised, and remember that they have other obligations. Be generous—if you stop for Starbucks on your way into school in the morning, pick up a cup of coffee for your cooperating teacher. And don’t forget to express your appreciation to the other people at your school—good relationships with janitors, school secretaries, classroom aides, and administrators are essential to ensuring that you are able to navigate the system effectively to meet your students’ needs this year and can be instrumental in helping procure that job offer for next year.

Tip #10: Bring Your Creativity into the Classroom

Although you will need to be respectful of the norms of the classroom, don’t be afraid to bring your own voice, personality, and passion into the classroom. One of the challenges you will face as a student teacher is the temptation to channel your mentors. While we want you to learn from the teaching techniques and instructional approaches of those around you, ultimately, you have to find your own style. This can be as simple as telling a story from your own childhood when introducing a new topic in social studies, sharing your sense of humor with a silly mnemonic device to help students remember verb conjugations in Spanish, or making a Star Wars themed video to help teach a math concept. Bringing your personality and passion into the classroom will help you feel comfortable and confident as a teacher and will allow students to get to know you a bit more, building trust and rapport in the classroom community.

Tip #11: Get Tech Savvy

Many of our candidates are in classrooms with teachers who are doing outstanding things with technology. In these classrooms, you’ll be expected to keep up—cooperating teachers won’t have the time or patience to tutor you in basic technology skills. Other student teachers may be in schools with strong school-wide adoptions but teachers who aren’t yet confident in their abilities to use technology to strengthen instruction. In these classrooms, they may look to you as someone who is (often) younger and more recently in school, to help with the use of devices, apps, and tech integration. If you aren’t familiar with the platforms and devices the school is using, take time to investigate. Connect with colleagues who may be using similar devices at other schools, research online resources, get connected to expert educators through professional associations and the Twitterverse. This can be an

outstanding opportunity to demonstrate leadership and can help position you as an innovative educator.

Tip #12: Show You Care

More than anything else, to be a successful teacher you have to care about your kids. And you can’t just care about the ones who sit still and pay attention. You also have to care about the ones who roll around on the floor and pick their noses; the ones who boil over with anger or frustration; the ones who forget their homework and struggle on tests; the ones who seem to want to defy you at every turn. We can teach you a lot about instructional strategies, planning, and assessment techniques, but it is up to you to nurture an attitude of care for each of the students in your classroom.

And it isn’t enough to simply know that you are supposed to care, you have to actively demonstrate it. Show you care in the interactions you have with students—take time to get to know them as complex individuals who are much more than a homework completion rate or a score on a math test. Attend their sporting events. Volunteer to help with lunch duty. Hang out in the hallways during passing period. Ask them about their interests and aspirations. Get to know their families and communities. Show that you care in the way you talk about your students—be careful with the language you choose in your characterizations. Wherever possible emphasize their strengths. Learn the power of the word “yet”—there’s a big difference between declaring, “She’s not good at fractions” and observing, “She’s not good at fractions yet.” And stay away from negative, student-bashing conversations; venting sessions aren’t productive. Nurturing an attitude of care about each and every child isn’t always easy but it is absolutely necessary—when principals, other teachers, and most especially, parents, evaluate you as an educator, they have many considerations, but the most important is—“Do you care about my kids?”

Conclusion

These twelve tips may not answer all of the questions that will arise in the coming weeks and months as you begin your work in the classroom but hopefully they provide you with an understanding of what it takes to be successful. If you are willing to embrace these challenges, then the journey ahead promises to be extremely rewarding. And one last tip—have fun! You get to spend each day with remarkable children and young adults. Enjoy the ride!

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