



The BEACON

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Queries? email Rebecca Reiss (next page)

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In this issue: A Day At School in New Mexico

Editor's Note

This issue of the Beacon is devoted to answering this question: what it is like to be a teacher these days? We received this article from a New Mexico teacher; someone in the trenches. This science teacher offers a rare and candid glimpse into the experience. By most accounts, this is not atypical. Other K-12 teachers report similar classroom and school-wide frustrations, obstacles, and yes, joy and satisfaction. Please note as you read this just how well this teacher knows the students, the value added to their lives by their interactions, and how complex and sophisticated the job has become. While the content of this story is based upon real events, to protect the innocent all names are changed and we are not revealing the teacher's identity.

A Day at School in New Mexico

I'm a high school science teacher in rural New Mexico. At my site you'll hear snatches of Spanish as kids pass by, often laughing uproariously. You might see students typing on their laptops in a fervent attempt to finish an AP European History assignment on time. Others jaunt by in their football jerseys. Some might have a bag of cookies from baking class, a shiny box from their sheet metal class, or smell of oil from an engine check in auto shop. There are also those who lament their sadness or anxiety over issues ranging from boyfriends to their tragic home lives. Most of them are laughing and kidding around as they open the door for you with a smile and a greeting.

For many years people have made comments about "kids these days." Mostly, they view the educational world through a lens of nostalgia. Sometimes they make judgments based on glimpses from their kids' lives. Adult commentary makes a person wonder. Are kids buried in customized social media, unable to connect with the world outside of the glimmering screen? Do helicopter parents nag teachers to treat their children with special favor? Are kids testing endlessly without reprieve? And why didn't that No Child Left Behind thing work? My favorite is the commentary about how we spend so much money on education, but we aren't seeing results.

Every teacher's experience is unique. Here is a little snatch of a normal day as a science teacher in my neck of the

woods. Let me begin by explaining that it is this year that the science department must implement new Next Generation Science Standards. These standards are profoundly different from those that we have used in the past. We have new teaching materials and a new progression of science classes. Our school gave every student a laptop computer in September, and teachers now have access to a college-style software platform to deliver instruction. The winds of change have certainly whisked our little campus into the 21st century in one big gust. All I can say is that it's messing up my hair.

I've had the same hairdo since 1988 when I began my career. After accepting a position as a science teacher at a rural middle school, I was given a roster of 160 students, a key to my classroom, and a box of chalk. It's been my experience that, over the years, parents have become more engaged, and students are more empathetic than in the past. That's a good thing.

So, let's begin on a sunny day at a high school, sitting high on the mesa, nestled beneath the mountains, east of nowhere.

7:00 – 7:35 Before-School Teacher Preparation Period

We report to a staff meeting concerning test security on this fine Monday morning. When administering standardized tests, we are to ensure that students do their own work and we must report any irregularities. After the meeting, I have about 10 minutes to spare before first period begins. With a cereal bar in hand, I fire up the computer and check my email. There are a handful of notifications and student work entries with pleas to grade them even though they're late. There is even an email to me from home about particle physics. It fits right in with the spectroscopy lessons I gave to my astronomy kids last week. They will be thrilled to know that photons can actually carry force.

Ezra comes in to clarify his notes from Friday's lesson. He wants to be a neurosurgeon and is well on his way. One of my former students has a PhD in neurobiology, and she too gave great attention to detail.

7:35 – 9:05 1st Period Chemistry

Students breeze in. There are a handful of students who want make-up work. They are reminded of the

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procedure for making these determinations on their own. Final due dates are posted on the board with a one-week grace period. One of them, Isaac, has been absent on and off for well over 20 days this semester. Email exchanges with his mom indicate that he is often sick. I agreed to change his grade for the first grading period. This required that I complete a set of complex paperwork tasks so that central office would open the gradebook to alter Isaac's grade after the grading period had closed. He had to be tutored and pass the test before I gave him a passing grade for that grading period. Currently it is three weeks into the third grading period, and we haven't begun the process of tutoring and make-up work for the second grading period. The dear young man is apologetic and respectful. He, like other kids, wears his white earphones dangling from atop his ears. They jiggle as he pleads with a charming smile. I explain that I have to start class and to consult me during advisory period or, preferably, after school. At least he was on time today.

The bell rings and the last students scurry in. After answering an introductory question concerning the lesson objective, I hand out an open-notes homework quiz. Some students remark, "Oh, is there a homework quiz today?" Due dates, like these, are posted online in two different locations as well as announced daily. About half of my kids have notes to reference while the others wing it.

While monitoring the quiz, I take attendance. Six students dart in tardy and four are absent. Attendance is relatively good — progress reports went out Friday and students have found a little more urgency concerning their studies. Recently my morning classes have had 5-10 students absent every day. Every absence is worth two class periods, because we are on block scheduling. So, if a kid has 20 absences, that is the equivalent of 40 regular class periods in a traditional schedule. Honest to God, I have no idea what to do or say about providing an education for a student who has over 15 absences (30 class periods). Yes, there are phone calls, threatening letters sent home, the administrators conduct parent-teacher conferences, and there are hearings. If the absences are excused, students can have 100 absences, and there is nothing that the school can do.

Joel needs a pencil, and I hand him a cheap wooden one along with a plastic sharpener. Funny, students who neglect to bring pencils rarely return them. I spend at least \$100.00 on school supplies, for both students and I, at back-to-school sales. For the last couple of years, we were given a \$100.00 credit card for supplies from PED. That sure went fast! I bought a variety of tape as well as scantron forms for the scantron (a device that scores test answers from bubble-sheets) I nabbed it off eBay for \$168.00 seven years ago. Since I began teaching at this site, the school district has been unwilling to purchase a scantron grading machine for teachers. Instead they offered several iterations of unreliable and unnecessarily tedious assessment software that, today, no longer exists. I was thrilled that I didn't have to buy another batch of bubble-sheets for my scantron as I have done every year.

For the six special education students, I hand out pre-prepared notes for the quiz and today's lecture. One of these students wants to take the quiz with special education assistance during advisory. I need to somehow find out who the designated special education teacher is and deliver the quiz to her. I make a note.

During the quiz I consult with my student aide. Samuel has been my student for four years, taking every class I offer. He was in my video production club for three years. He is competent and efficient like his brother. I arrange for him to prepare a lab. He asks for another roster to record grades. I make a note.

After the quiz, I give a short interactive PowerPoint presentation. Students are reminded to take notes. Abel doesn't have any paper. He smiles and remarks that he isn't good at remembering details. I strongly disagree, telling Abel how untrue that is. The big lovable kid has been in two of my classes and never fails to provide correct answers. After Abel's grandmother was diagnosed with cancer, this "A" student is failing. She's all he has. His mom abandoned him years ago. His dad's in prison. We've had many conversations about his anguish.

The interactive presentation is where conceptual connections are made, and academic language is acquired. I am convinced that many students struggle with school mostly because they don't understand how to use language, and they fail to persist when learning gets tough. During the presentation, two students need to be reminded to pull their earphones out, and three are asked to put their cell phones away. One is reminded a few times to focus on learnin' instead of chattin'. Two students join class at this point. One of them is Eli who has 21 absences. I chastise him for neglecting to come in after school to get the help he needs. I wrote him up for ditching last week, since none of his other classes have the same string of absences. He claims that he's not ditching if he's just late. "It's hard to get up early, Miss, and then I start watching Netflix, and then..." He shrugs. "My other teachers don't mark me absent. They don't care." I doubt that, but who knows? Permanent subs and new uncertified teachers don't understand, or are too overwhelmed, to follow school policy. Some are young and want to be cool.

This class has fallen a full day behind. A few days ago, after quizzing students verbally in class, it was evident that they didn't understand the nuances of reversible chemical reactions, so I retaught the lesson. It's important to continually watch for blank stares, pause, and check for understanding to make sure kids are not lost in the woods. Twenty of these students are passing, while eight are not. There are six A's and two of the five special education students have "C"s.

Next, I prepare students for a lab. They must be shown what to do. Reading directions is too much for many of the students to understand. The lab cost me around \$25.00. I could have written a purchase order for the supplies, but that would require a great deal of paperwork, which has to be submitted at least six weeks prior to the lab. Some supplies, like ice, cannot be purchased in this fashion. Many of the other supplies, like chemicals and worn and dirty glassware, are located across campus in a storage area for which I have no keys. I have to make arrangements with other harried teachers to gain access.

The phone rings from across the room. It's a grandparent of one of my 7th period special education students, Rachael. She wants to talk with me about Rachael's grade. Even though the grandma works for the school, she's unaware that during class I'm busy assisting students and checking for understanding. My over-achievers are stalled, because they want to compete their lab perfectly. Ezra and Sarah, my advanced students, are already finished, and I need to

give them extension tasks. One group has mixed all of their chemicals in the graduated cylinder, which is pouring over the top with foam. The grandma insists on explaining how the judge will award her grandchildren back to their addicted mom if they're not passing all of their classes. Across the room I can see that Jacob is becoming overwhelmed by the noisy lab activity. He has a terrified look on his face. Last month he had a complete mental meltdown. Pacing and mumbling, he panicked, and it was all I could do to talk him down and get him to the counselor's office. None were there; they must have been administering make-up tests. The secretary had to handle it, because I had to get back to my class. The kids are kind to Jacob. He has been fragile like this for years.

My students leave the lab area as good or better than they found it. The follow-up questions require drawing a model of molecular interactions, in accordance with the state-adopted science standards. Students become frustrated with this. I could easily draw one, and they would happily copy it. They have had extensive instruction including simulations and YouTube productions concerning this topic. Critical thinking requires a little bit of frustration, and no one likes frustration. It's the over-achieving students who are the most demanding and dominate my time. Special education students need constant feedback according to their modifications, and they are a definite priority. Mexican national students perform well at this task, because drawing a model doesn't require language. Several students have hands up. There isn't enough of me to go around. "Ma'm, I just don't understand," one kid implored, and I keep asking him questions until I find a new way to explain. I catch the student behind him watching Netflix on his phone and reprimand him. He explains that he was watching TV, because he needed help, and I wouldn't give it to him. I confiscated his phone. I whisk through the room and see that some students haven't made progress on their assignment. A couple haven't even started. One thinks he's done but has it all wrong. He has been a proud member of the smart-guy-done-first club, but not today. Most students want me to simply give them the answer, and I am tempted to do it, but that's not how kids learn to figure things out for themselves. That's not how science is mastered. This is the fodder students use to justify poor grades: "She won't help me," they tell their parents. But I know they are capable of better, and better they will do.

Students begin packing up for the bell. They haven't finished the lab, but I have them turn it in. We have to move on, because they're behind, and I'm required to keep pace with the other chemistry teachers. I ask the students if any will come in during advisory period and help me break down the lab. None are willing to do so. When the bell rings, two students stay behind to talk about their grades. Isaac is one of them.

One of the email exchanges between Isaac and me involved his desire to be on the honor roll despite his excessive absences. He thinks that if he does his missing assignments that he should be able to have a 3.5 GPA. That's true for many of his classes. He explains that he can't come in for

advisory periods. I honestly don't know what to say. His grade will be determined by his mastery of chemistry. With over 20 absences, he will be lucky to pass unless he can teach himself. The other student, Ham, who waited patiently, has also been absent for over a week. He wants to make-up assignments from over a month ago. The answer is "no."

9:05 – 9:55 Advisory Period (A study hall where students can visit their other teachers for tutoring)

My freshman in advisory period bustle through the door while I write passes for Isaac and Ham. Samuel has already returned to break down the lab even though I didn't ask him to.

It becomes a frenzy. Advisory students, who need to go to other classes for tutoring, give me their forms to sign. Chemistry students who need tutoring begin to arrive. I load the presentation for them to review and promise to drop by later. At the same time, I take attendance. Jabidah is missing. After checking his first period attendance, it appears as though he has ditched several advisory periods. I call the front office for security to look for him, and I make a note to write a referral.

To add to the chaos of advisory period, five minutes into the period we must stop in our tracks and recite the pledge of allegiance both in English and in Spanish, followed by announcements that have to be converted from email to a file on the school network so that the other computer in my room can project them.

While checking on the chemistry students who need tutoring, I notice one of my advisory freshman students is playing poker on his computer. This student is failing four classes. After chiding him I call one of his teachers, fill out the paperwork, and send him off for tutoring. Another chemistry student turns up and we ascertain the assignments he needs to make up.

Most of the students assigned to my advisory class have absolutely nothing to do, and because a couple have an excellent GPA, I ask if they would mind putting away lab equipment and getting out new supplies for the next lab. Meanwhile I need to check on my chemistry kids. One of the presentations has disappeared from the school's online platform, and I need to chase it down.

Oh, look, Jeremiah has snuck in one of the earphones dangling over his ear, "Come on Jeremiah, you know the rules." "but Miss, I concentrate better listening to music." He replies. "Hand them over." I say. Like many freshmen, he wants to argue even though he's heard the interchange several times. Somehow, he believes I will change my mind for him this time.

Two of my former students wander in to chat while I call up the freshman advisory students to go over their grades. Like most adolescents, the adorable girls are full of smiles and hugs while oblivious that I'm really very busy. They have managed to squeak out of their advisory period to run loose on campus. Sigh.

It's a good day. Most of my advisory kids are passing their classes, but a third continue to fail one or more of theirs.

At the beginning of the year it was a dire situation with only a handful above a 2.0 GPA. I chide and encourage. One of the boys is far more interested in talking about his new steel-toed boots than the 39% that he has in Spanish class.

Advisory period is like juggling with too many balls in the air. Needless to say, at the end of the day, I will exceed my 10,000 steps logged on my fancy watch. The bell rings and it's finally, mercifully over. Only, wait, there's a chemistry student who needs to airdrop his assignment...

10:00 – 10:55 3rd Period Astronomy

It's five minutes into class, and with the assistance of three students, we finally get the assignment airdropped onto my laptop. It's clever how Apple products can move files, like this assignment, from one device to another through Wi-Fi. Unfortunately, technology can be flakey sometimes. Since my astronomy students are busy creating space colonization presentations, I run over to the next building to snatch the assignment from the printer. I must use a key to get into the building where the printer is located, and it's a hassle, so I cut through my neighbor's classroom. I notice that in this class, by far, most of the students are playing on their phones or computers. On the back row, Samuel has a giant can of nuts I bought him under one arm and his phone perched on his knee. The teacher is lounging at his desk. It's an online credit recovery class, in which students can work independently to pass courses that they have previously failed. I have watched as two teachers, who manned this class over the years, have completed post-graduate degree programs while being paid a teacher's salary. I'm a little miffed about that. I don't have time to go to the bathroom, much less earn my degree, while teaching science.

Since astronomy is an elective class, the expectations aren't as strict, and students are more motivated. As students do research about the place in the galaxy that they are trying to make habitable, all I need do is roam around, give direction and keep students on task. We spend a great deal of time laughing. Jarrod is wearing a pair of women's black boots with wine-stem heals today, and he is alight with commentary and conversation. Third period is always a jolly time; that is, unless Leah is having a bad day. When she does, she sits piteously at her table and cries through the entire class period. She refuses to talk with me about it. I really worry about her.

Five kids are missing, some because of a guest speaker presenting ways to win a scholarship. One kid doesn't have a computer charging cord. One of the computers is loading extremely slowly. I would have had the same problem in the old computer lab, but now that we are expected to deliver more of our instruction using technology, the issues have become more prevalent and frustrating. There have been many classes where students have missed instruction because of technology glitches. But then again, there have been many classes where the planned lab experiment failed due to equipment issues or some other mishap. Scrambling for ways to rescue a lesson is always a trick. I'm glad to have the new

technology but wish I knew more about how to fix it when it breaks. The kids are keen and teach me a great deal. It's a true delight what can be accomplished with the plethora of new gadgets. They fall quickly by the wayside when they're not reliable, though.

A school police officer drops by to say hello. There are two armed campus police officers as well as three unarmed security personnel wheeling around campus. Other than the front gate, the school grounds are cordoned off shortly after first period, and the gates are not unlocked until dismissal at 2:30. Students must be checked in and out of school from the front office during school hours.

You might have noticed that this period is shorter than the others. That's because we have third period every day, while the other classes meet every other day for longer periods of time, except for Friday where every class meets except for advisory and 3rd period. If you're confused, that's to be expected. The schedule was crafted to save money and carve out instructional time for an advisory period. This hodgepodge is the result. High school teachers can teach as many as 190 students per week (not including their advisory students). That's a lot of grading, and we are required to have at least two grades per week per student posted in the grade book. Progress reports and report cards are issued every three weeks. That's a fast turn-around. Some teachers can't keep pace, and sometimes they will go as long as a month without grades posted.

11:00 – 11:30 Lunch

All of the students have a thirty-minute period to obtain their lunch and eat. There are about 35 students that file into my room. These are kids that have populated my classes for years. Most are Samuel's friends. Others are groupings of very sweet girls. At the end of last year, they came in after school was out to help with putting away my supplies. All of the lunch crowd is friendly, respectful, and they clean up after themselves. If I get behind on my grades, they'll bail me out. It's a love fest. Today they are listening to America's "Horse with No Name," because they have decided they are "old souls."

A young man comes in to get his make-up work. It takes at least five minutes to explain that he cannot simply turn in a bunch of missing work at the end of the grading period, so he can pass. He must prove his mastery on exams, which are 60% of his grade. I explain that he is welcome to come in and retake tests. He explains that he has work after school. "What about advisory?" I ask. "Yeah, maybe." He shrugs.

There are six new emails to attend to during lunch. Two are lists of students who will be out for sports and band. Another is a reminder from the special education department about all of the documentation required for student modifications as well as notifications to case workers and parents that is necessary in order for a special education student to fail a class. The weekly news blast is posted by the administrator in charge of creating it. There is one email from a teacher in charge of English Language Learning student test data with a three-page attachment of their test scores. The data is raw, and the email contains no

key for proficiency cut scores. Sorting through that will take hours. The last is an interchange between myself and another chemistry teacher about an online simulation as well as the timing for a common formative exam that I haven't given yet. He moves through the curriculum at a faster pace than I do. He's realized that he needs to go back and have his students do a lab that he skipped. This man is conscientious, and sharp as a tack. I couldn't have asked for a better person to partner with over the past several years.

My student teacher, Grace, comes in and has lunch with me. She's a dedicated soul who will make an excellent teacher. I throw my lunch in the microwave, and we chat about her teaching program. In one of her UNM classes, the student teachers were sharing experiences regarding discipline issues. Grace shared an incident involving one of the other cooperating teachers for a fellow student. I was horrified to hear that this cooperating teacher ignored several young men who were watching porn instead of completing their classwork. The cooperating teacher allowed the behavior, because she was too embarrassed to say anything to the boys. Grace surmised that she would have sent them off to the counselor. I would have made it into a teaching moment about how women must be treated as people, and there would be dire consequences if they were caught doing it again.

Lunch is over before I can introduce the lunch crew to Jethro Tull's "Aqualung."

11:35-1:00 5th Period Astronomy

This is the same lesson from 3rd period except that I need to present the criteria for the space colonization project. It's easy for kids to think that sci-fi movies are real and want to gloss over what is necessary to keep someone alive in space indefinitely. The students are less focused in this class, so I have to be more vigilant. Getting and keeping their attention is a hassle. Two students need to be woken up, two phones are taken away, and several students have to be reminded to stay off computer games.

Samuel has ROTC this period and Sgt Bryant allows him to come in to grade. It may sound as if Sgt. Bryant is being lax, but he's not. I have witnessed his ROTC program turn around and provide a path to success for more at-risk students than any other program, ever. While printing a new roster, I remind Samuel to sign up for the ACT (American College Testing entry exam). "Yeah, I've been taking practice tests on the computer, and I'm doing really well except in math. I should have paid more attention in geometry." He smiles. We both remember his freshman year when he needed to be woken from slumber almost every day and was absent every other day. I spoke to his brother about it back then, and he was a little more wakeful, but he's had to make up classes in credit recovery. In his defense, he had a series of permanent substitutes in math that year. I insist that he sign up for the ACT. He pulls up the online test practice and gets to work.

An aide for the special education department drops by to get a signature on new modification sheets for special

education Individual Educational Plans (IEP). Every year, it is required that every special education student have a parent-teacher conference concerning their IEP. There must be at least one of the student's teachers at the meetings. Those teachers are pulled out of class to attend. The special education aides supervise regular education students while they are gone. Teachers who have a high number of students in special education must attend more of these meetings.

Grace is busy with her college work, as well as updating our online assignment platform. One of her professors requires that she provide a full year of lessons. The final document will count over 100 pages. She has other papers due as well as study for the teaching exam. It's a heavy schedule for a mom of three. There are only a hand full of UNM students who are attempting to obtain a bachelor's degree in education.

The fire alarm goes off just as the period is ending. Someone must have pulled it, because fire drills are usually scheduled in the middle of class. It's cold outside as we trudge out past the parking lot. Students stand in line while I take roll and show my green laminated all-students-accounted-for card to the roving administrator. The "all clear" is called and we dismiss to the next period.

1:05 – 2:30 7th Period Chemistry

The kids arrive in spurts and sputters. Isaac arrives with another student and wants to attend class. That's code for, "ditch my 7th period." I tell them to get a pass from their 7th period teacher, and I don't see them again.

Seventh period is a day ahead of my other two classes and two days ahead of first period. They answer their introductory question and then proceed to the open-note homework quiz. From the scattered empty chairs, it's evident that there is some kind of activity excusing students from class. Sure enough, there are eight students absent. It was spring sports that claimed them last month, but this month it's all-state band. One student asks to borrow a pencil.

In this class, 23 students are passing with eight failing. Seven students have an "A" average. Because Grace is student teaching, there are two teachers working diligently with these kids every 7th period. Grace is able to sit and work with the 5 special education students as well as the English Language Learners. She becomes overjoyed when they make connections.

Grace begins her part of the lesson with a video-plus-question follow-up. Done correctly, students will report through random questioning what they understand about chemical bond energy. Grace can then clear up misconceptions and tie the material to the learning objective. She is rockin' the mini lesson. Our district would be wise to hire her.

My second student aide, Rebecca, is in the foyer with her basket of papers. I ask her to stop grading and work on her scholarship applications. She says she will after she finishes the last little pile of the assignments that she's

working on. Rebecca, too, has taken all of the classes that I offer. She's a gifted student who loves poetry and earned a 31 on her ACT. This score is unusual since the highest obtainable score is 36 and the district average for ACT is a 19. I have witnessed how several of my students with a 4.0 GPA have scored below a 20 on their ACT. Last year's valedictorian, who earned an appointment to the Air Force Academy, could not achieve higher than a 28, even after several attempts.

I begin the interactive presentation portion of today's lesson. After a few slides, the students must answer an essential question that requires them to directly address the standard for this unit. Grace worked hard on this particular interactive presentation. We assist students in synthesizing the information from all aspects of the unit into a clear and coherent formal answer. Kids hate this part.

Rachael, (the granddaughter from the 1st period phone call) sits with another special education student, Leah, and they are completely lost. Neither of them has the pre-prepared notes that I gave them at the beginning of the unit, so I give them another copy. Neither has ever attended tutoring before school, advisory, or after school. Leah is giggling with the young man on the end. He has a stud earring with a tiny marijuana leaf glazed inside. The pair are glassy-eyed and completely clueless.

A parent-teacher conference with marijuana-leaf guy's father revealed how much the man had believed his son's explanation for his 36% average. Clearly the teachers were discriminating against his son. After expressing how much I wanted to see his son succeed, imploring the father to help in this endeavor, and describing the various tutoring opportunities, it was hard to deny that marijuana-leaf-guy was lying. The Spanish translator, who is also a popular teacher as well as the baseball coach, worked out the details involving several occasions of ditching my class. Marijuana-leaf guy admitted that he was too "bugged" to come to class sometimes, so he didn't. Stone-faced, the father didn't say much as he took his boy home.

Grace and I visit every student in the class several times, assisting them with their formal answer to the essential question. Three students are asked to remove their earphones and a few students are asked to close their computers and put away their phones. Essential questions are to be done using their notes for reference. When the timer dings, I randomly ask students to read their answer. Students know that they will be held responsible for quality answers, and, after months of conditioning, they deliver. Students respond with competent answers; even Enoch gives worthy input.

Over the past few months, Enoch has made it no secret that he thinks chemistry class is stupid. "I don't learn that way," He yelled at me one day. On another day during advisory period, Enoch told me to "f**k off!" as he marched out the door. A student who witnessed this affair, said, "Enoch's my friend, but you're just trying to help." He shook his head and continued, "I'm sorry that I was

such a jerk in class sometimes.” Enoch was given a discipline referral for this incident as well as ditching class later on that day. A few days later, I admonished him for attempting to give Google answers to an essential question. I had a parent-teacher conference with his mom that was attended by his older cousin who translated Spanish for Enoch’s mom. The cousin was one of my former students. He just laughed when Enoch began his antics. Enoch showed great disregard for his mom. When pressed for explanations for his behavior, he replied, “Can we go now?” When the cousin stayed rooted to the chair, Enoch demanded, “let’s go!” It was awkward and uncomfortable, but Enoch is coming around. Some kids have a tough time growing up.

During the lesson, the phone rings occasionally. A student is called to leave early, and the counselor wants to give some paperwork to another student. A diagnostician makes arrangements with a kid for a session the next day.

The assistant principal drops by. He’s great about making observations. “I’ve never once caught you sitting down,” he sometimes remarks. His visit today is to ask that I find a way to help a student to pass chemistry. “I’ll be happy to assist any student,” I reply, “but, she’s never once come to talk with me, nor has she come in for tutoring.” The principal nods and asks me to do my best.

Principals call students in for failing grades and attendance on a regular basis. Students plead their case. It is up to the principal to determine what the circumstances are. Some teachers are held responsible for their unprofessional practices. It is my job to make it clear that my professional conduct is beyond reproach. A teacher’s reputation is based on meeting policy requirements, going above and beyond for their kids, and providing bulletproof documentation.

Students are asked to take out their laptops in order to complete a computer simulation on concentrations and solutions. These simulations are perfect for acquiring an operational understanding of science concepts. Students are deeply engaged in this activity, and Grace and I visit each student to assist in their learning.

Two minutes before the bell, students put up their chairs and pack up their things until the bell rings. They are reminded, as with every class, about deadlines.

2:30-5:30 After School

Grace and I review her lesson. It was wonderful to see her personality shine through. She is working on classroom management and remembered to pause and wait until all students were quiet and attentive before she addressed the class. As Grace departs to pick up her children from school, Rebecca stops to chat. She needs a letter of recommendation for a scholarship opportunity. I make a note. This will have to wait until Saturday when I come in to work on my evaluation documentation. Like most teachers, I must upload

hundreds of pages online to prove I have mastered my trade. Administrators are required to read this documentation and rate teachers according to dozens of criteria points. I don’t know when I’ll have a chance to grade the brochures – probably over Thanksgiving break.

Abraham, a special education student from 6th period, comes in for tutoring. The lead administrator arranged transportation for him. Our school has a new after-school program, which is fully funded for busses and even snacks. This is the first time I’ve seen teachers paid adequately for sponsoring clubs and activities. Hopefully, student attendance will pick up.

While working with Abraham, Ted, the new teacher down the hall, pokes his head in the door. He wanted to thank me for help with lesson planning and suggestions for classroom management. He is in the alternative teaching program and completely overwhelmed with his teaching situation. Grace and I speak quite frequently about his plight. It is quite a feat to take over classes from a permanent substitute in September. Learning numerous software programs, complying with dozens of school policies and procedures, applying basic pedagogy, performing classroom management, preparing lessons, grading papers, attending classes, and completing his schoolwork, all while developing relationships with students, is like building an airplane while flying it. He doesn’t have a student aide. I have no doubt he works around 60 hours per week. Ted has a college degree in science and is well qualified to find a job in his field. It wouldn’t surprise me if he takes one. His morning commute is 45 minutes. He says he just wants to have time for a good long bike ride.

I sit down with Abraham. His ability to process is slow. That would explain why he can’t keep up in class. What a sweet kid. He works hard and smiles when he finishes, reminding me that he needs to leave for home. “Will I need to come again tomorrow?” He asks. “Have you finished your brochure?” I reply. He hasn’t, so he’ll need to come back in for that and also to retake a test.

Now it’s time to lesson plan and make copies. I bring up my interactive PowerPoint presentation for nuclear chemistry, and go to work on it, stopping briefly to check on the copier in the other building. It has to be unjammed periodically. The sky grows dark through the window. I’m lucky, because Grace will put all the YouTube links on the presentation tomorrow as well as post it on the online assignment platform. Otherwise I would have to complete that as well. The copy machine is out of magenta ink, so the last set of copies will have to be completed tomorrow after school.

I lock up both buildings and drive home. There’s a wondrous crescent moon, surrounded by Venus and Jupiter, hanging on the horizon. We’ll have to talk about that tomorrow in astronomy class.

If you have comments on or questions about this essay, e-mail them to the editor, Rebecca Reiss, rebecca.reiss@nmt.edu. Please include the word “Beacon” in the subject line. We will be happy to address questions and will consider publishing comments in an upcoming issue of the Beacon.

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