

---

# *Foreword*

I remember it like it was yesterday. My first day of teaching, that is. It was September 1996 in Room 323 at John Burroughs High School in Burbank, California. I was ready to face my very own class of real live tenth graders and teach them the mysteries of English. My seating charts, the ones I spent a ridiculous amount of time perfecting, were beautifully printed out. The walls papered in sunny colors with eye-catching posters tacked artfully here and there. In my arms, a sheaf of terrifically important, hot off the copier, papers ready to pass out. On me, a polished, smart-looking outfit with sensible, made-to-last-all-day shoes. I had a megawatt smile and enough enthusiasm to fill a dozen classrooms. I was SO ready. By second period, my naïve ideas of preparedness met the gritty reality of classroom dynamics, and I was exhausted just trying to keep up. By third, I was terrified; by fourth exhausted; and by sixth, ready to walk out and never return.

If you would have asked me, on the eve of my first day as a real teacher, if I was ready, really ready, I'd have given you a hearty yes. And that's the strange magic of teacher preparation programs. I left mine certain that I'd done the important work of becoming ready to teach. I'd had experiences and opportunities and assignments that had truly shown me not just how to teach, but how to teach skillfully and well. At least, that's what I thought. And I wasn't wrong. You DO walk in ready, but an actual classroom is a remarkable and very real crucible that has its own lessons for you, lessons you cannot learn until you are the teacher.

And here's what's utterly wonderful about being the one in charge in the room. No matter how ready you are, how prepared you feel, you don't really know a thing. But you learn, and you learn fast.

You see, the growth curve in our profession is enormous. You are better at 10:00 a.m. than you were at 8:00 a.m., and by 2:00 p.m. your lesson is amazing. On Tuesday, you're much better than you were on Monday. And Friday? Friday is a gift you give your students . . . you're that good. And don't get me started on the first day of your SECOND year of teaching. On that day, you are truly the rock star teacher you've grown to be. Naturally, as is the order of things in teaching, in walk your new students

and a completely new dynamic presents itself. All the skills and talent you brought with you don't seem to work the same magic on these kids, and back to square one you go trying to figure it all out. It's alarming and wonderful at the same time, which is why our job forces us to stay on our toes every single day.

After 18 years of this, there's only one thing I know for certain, and it's this: I don't know very much for certain. There has not been one way to teach my classes or one strict set of ideas or procedures that worked every year or with every group of students. There just isn't.

What I do know is that I have needed to fill my metaphorical teacher toolbox with every possible tool, tip, technique, idea, and strategy possible so that when new situations in my classrooms arise, I have a deep set of possible options from which to grab as I try to teach my way through. The idea of the teacher's toolbox coupled with the gritty determination to grow and get better by staying open to new ideas and best practices are what turns good teachers into great ones.

And that's where this book comes in.

In the pages ahead, you'll learn from some of the country's best educators about what REALLY works in classrooms. From their experiences comes wisdom along with a whole host of tried and true, practical, hands-on solutions for you to use in your classroom. That's another one of the perks of our professions—our close proximity to other practitioners and our easy access to the greatness that exists in the classrooms right down the hall.

I don't know where I'd be if I didn't have Traci, Karen, Stefanie, Joe, Jim, or Alex to call on for ideas, hope, inspiration, or even just a shoulder to cry on. I am who I am because of the collection of ideas and skills I've gathered from my peers, filtered through my own philosophy and sensibilities, and put to use in my classroom. In that sense, I'm a patchwork quilt of all the great things I've learned from other teachers, but how I patched those pieces together makes me the unique teacher I am proud to be. That's how we grow. Your growth into greatness simply depends on your community of support. This collection of great ideas about what REALLY works in classrooms is another great tool to add to your toolbox; perhaps it's the greatest tool of all. That you can decide for yourself, but it's important you have it as you set out to create or transform your classroom into the vibrant and engaging learning space for all of your students.

I wish I'd had a book like this before I stepped into Room 323 all those years ago. I'm glad I have it now.

Rebecca Mieliwocki

*2012 National Teacher of the Year*