

Call and Response: What gets you through the tough months of teaching?



When I think about “getting through” and those times being “tough,” the sentence implies a bad or negative situation. Some months are tough and getting through is my only option. The opposite is, perhaps, that some months are “easy” and you “coast” through them. I don’t think either point of view is helpful during the school year. I don’t want to coast or just get through. What I really want is an impactful and meaningful teaching experience. I have come to realize that tough times can be more meaningful, leaving me with the feeling that my teaching matters. I’m not looking for easy, and not even happy, but I am looking to enjoy my time teaching and that comes when I find meaning in the work I do.

– **MICHAEL HUNTINGTON, SENIOR FELLOW**

Good strong coffee, chubby baby-arm hugs, evenings after dark on the front porch, walks in the forest, tiny frogs crouching on doorknobs, the grins of shy students, questions I can answer, and the questions I can’t.

– **LIZ DENGATE, 2020 TEACHING FELLOW**

A list of things I do that get me through the tough months:

Eat lunch with another teacher. I almost never spend time in my classroom by myself during lunch. I always run over to another teacher's room, the staff break room, or just sit outside and have my lunch. It has helped a lot in allowing me to turn off my teacher mode. Just yesterday I ate lunch with one of the new Spanish teachers in the break room.

Have a dance party in my room. Every day after school I turn on some happy music from my Spotify playlist and wipe down the board, grade, or lesson plan. Whenever my favorite part of the song comes on I pause and wave my hands around somewhat in time to the song. It's normal until I do this with other teachers in the room.

Quiet the voice in my head that tells me I failed. It's really easy to focus on that one disruptive kid who derailed the lesson during a tough period. However, I step back and remind myself, there were the other 30 kids who did learn something from the lesson. And I celebrate that.

Read Calvin and Hobbes. On one particularly tough day of teaching in February, I was very stressed from not knowing how to deal with a few students in my first period. I came to school with no lesson plan. I parked my car in the teacher's lot, walked into first period, laid my head down, and started crying. As the students came in, I couldn't stop crying. One student left to get the principal, and my principal came in and had me call the day off. My parents picked me up and took me home. At home they fed me and I spent two hours re-reading my Calvin and Hobbes anthology books. They brought me so much laughter and joy, just like they did when I first got The Essential Calvin and Hobbes when I was in third grade.

Rewatch Rita Pierson's TED Talk on YouTube. There is nothing more inspiring than this video. I especially think about the line "You know kids don't learn from people they don't like" and the line "minus 18 sucks the life out of you, plus 2 says it ain't all bad" and "When my momma died two years ago at 92, there were so many former students at her funeral it brought tears to my eyes not because she was gone but because she left a legacy of relationships that could never disappear." I always cry a little at the very end of the talk.

Read my yearbook my students and other teachers signed last year. I spent \$95 for a yearbook last year, and my students signed it. Whenever I feel as if I am not making an impact or my lessons are not up to par, I read those messages.

– **OLIVER YANG, 2021 TEACHING FELLOW**

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