

"WHEN I STARTED TEACHING,
I WISH I HAD KNOWN..."

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This book is dedicated to

Sean Duarte, a beginning teacher extraordinaire.

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"WHEN I STARTED TEACHING,
I WISH I HAD KNOWN..."

Weekly Wisdom for Beginning Teachers



36 Weeks
of Wisdom,
Advice, &
Support

CAROL PELLETIER RADFORD

CORWIN

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CONTENTS

Letter to Beginning Teachers	ix
Acknowledgments	x
About the Author	xiii
WISDOM HELPS YOU GROW	1
Needs of Beginning Teachers	2
Wisdom Through Stories	3
How to Use This Book	6
Stay Inspired	10
GETTING STARTED ~ CREATE A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS	13
Week 1: Give Students a Fresh Start ~ Meaghan Calkins	14
Week 2: Make Student Confidence Your Goal ~ Jessica Concha	18
Week 3: Create Routines for EVERYTHING ~ Linda Howard	22
Week 4: Learn About Your Students' Families ~ Adam Pelletier	26
Week 5: Trust Your Ideas ~ Lisa Dix	30
Week 6: Be a Team Player ~ Jennifer Barrientos	34
Week 7: Embrace Your Mistakes ~ John Radosta	38
Week 8: Find a Mentor ~ Kathi Rogers	42

GAINING MOMENTUM ~ FIND YOUR STRENGTHS **47**

Week 9: Share Your Love of Content ~ Brooke Traverso	48
Week 10: Introduce Yourself and Say Something Positive ~ Sam Rhode	52
Week 11: Make a Human Connection With Each Student ~ Meghan Raftery	56
Week 12: Discover Your Students' Hidden Talents ~ Mia Pumo	60
Week 13: Accept Advice Gracefully ~ Diane Mackie	64
Week 14: Be Compassionate ~ Mary-Margaret Mara	68
Week 15: Remember It Takes a Village ~ Alicia Desrochers	72
Week 16: When You Fall Down, Get Back Up! ~ Melissa Carr	76

STAYING IN THE FLOW ~ FOCUS ON TEACHING AND LEARNING **81**

Week 17: Give Students the Tools to Shine ~ Sandra J. Brower	82
Week 18: Get Help When You Need It ~ Traci Rizzo	86
Week 19: Use Relevance to Engage Students ~ Serena Pariser	90
Week 20: Give Feedback to Support Student Growth ~ Jenna Monahan	94
Week 21: Use Student Surveys to Assess Your Teaching ~ Tyler Brundage	98
Week 22: Be Your Authentic Self ~ Chandra Joseph-Lacet	102
Week 23: See Kindness in Action ~ Sarah Berger	106
Week 24: Get to the Root Cause ~ Stacey Hervey	110
Week 25: Change the Way You Look at Your Failures ~ Maryanne Margiotta	114
Week 26: Honor Your Teaching Style ~ Erin Jacobson	118
Week 27: Gain Trust Through Sharing ~ Nicole Forinash	122

Week 28: Expect the Unexpected ~ Pam King	126
Week 29: Apologize When You Make a Mistake ~ Jaclyn Lekwa	130
Week 30: Give Yourself Grace ~ Cassie Tabrizi	134

CLOSING THE SCHOOL YEAR WITH INTENTION ~ CELEBRATE YOUR GROWTH **139**

Week 31: Acknowledge Students Publicly ~ Julia Poole	140
Week 32: Invite Your Students to Grade You ~ Joan Vohl Hamilton	144
Week 33: See Your Success Through Your Students' Eyes ~ Nancy Legan	148
Week 34: SLOW Down and Reflect ~ Tara M. Dexter	152
Week 35: Be a Leader ~ Megan Martens	156
Week 36: Find Reasons to Celebrate ~ Mike Pelletier	160

LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD ~ REFLECT AND PLAN **164**

Closing Letter to Beginning Teachers	164
Assess Your Year: What Did You Learn?	167
Pay It Forward: Share Your Wisdom With Others!	169

Appendices

Appendix A: Overview of Companion Website Resources	173
Meet the Teachers Who Contributed to This Book	173
Bonus Wisdom	174
Weekly Wisdom Reflections: Online Journal	174
Weekly Wisdom Affirmation Posters (Printable)	174
Dedication Background Information:	
The Sean Duarte Story of a Beginning Teacher	175

Mentoring in Action Resources	175
Introducing the Legacy Teacher Network	175
Create a Circle of Light	176
Maintaining a Life: Margaret Metzger's Message to Beginning Teachers	176
The Art of Living: A Message From Carol	176
Appendix B: Seven Ways to Support Beginning Teachers Using This Book	177
References	179



For resources related to "*When I Started Teaching,
I Wish I Had Known . . .*"
visit the companion website at
resources.corwin.com/WeeklyWisdom.

LETTER TO BEGINNING TEACHERS

Dear Beginning Teachers,

This is a book of wisdom from experienced teachers who have come before you. Our wisdom is offered to you as a gift to support your growth and enhance your success in the classroom. We all know that learning how to teach takes many years. It also requires us to pay attention to the ways in which we manage our time, our classrooms, our students, and our own self-care.

One of my mentors, Roland S. Barth, wrote a book titled *Improving Schools From Within: Teachers, Parents, and Principals Can Make the Difference*. This book profoundly influenced my perspective on my role as a teacher. Not only did it inspire me to share ideas, reach out for help when I needed it, and eventually become a teacher leader, but it also made me feel important. It made me realize I could make decisions and improve the school from my classroom.

As educators, we often get advice from people who are *outside* of our classrooms. What we need today is advice and wisdom from other teachers who have been *inside* the classroom. This is where the true wisdom of our profession lives.

The most powerful form of learning, the most sophisticated form of staff development, comes not from listening to the good words of others but from sharing what we know with others. . . .

By reflecting on what we do, by giving it coherence, and by sharing and articulating our craft knowledge, we make meaning and learn.

~ Roland S. Barth (1986)

It has been a great honor to read the stories, the practical tips, and the self-care advice from the experienced teachers who graciously submitted their wisdom to this book. Their craft knowledge demonstrates how much we know and how much is hidden from us if we don't share our ideas with each other.

Stay connected to your heart, and remember why you chose this profession.

Carol

x "When I Started Teaching, I Wish I Had Known . . ."

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Thank you, David, for generously taking on most of the household duties so I could gather the stories, create the overall message, and write this book.

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I am grateful to all my students over the years who have shared their stories and dreams with me. You have been my greatest teachers.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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WISDOM HELPS YOU GROW

Wis-dom: noun ~ the quality of having experience, knowledge, and good judgment; the quality of being wise. “Listen to their words of wisdom.”

Teacher wisdom comes from actual experience in the classroom. It is an intangible quality gained through life experience or, in this case, teaching experience. When we look at the data that report teachers make at least 1,500 decisions each day (Klein, 2021), we realize how important these responses are to success in the classroom. A wise teacher is one with good sense and an attitude that has evolved through much experience. You will meet some of these wise teachers in this book—teachers from all subject areas and levels and with varying years in the profession who have learned from experience and want to share it with you. These teachers are your mentors for this year, providing you with guidance from their inside-the-classroom experiences, and wisdom learned from the mistakes they have made.

Beginning teachers are often very surprised by the quick pace of the classroom and how to respond to the many decisions they make in every moment of the day. When students walk through that classroom door the environment quickly changes. Novice teachers need practical ways to manage their time, their classroom routines, and the students' energy, so the classroom doesn't turn into chaos. The old paradigm of preparing teachers to learn how to teach in a trial-by-fire experience is not helpful to

you or your students. Our goal is to support your growth and development by sharing our wisdom through stories, practical tips, and advice for self-care. Why reinvent the wheel when you can be mentored by experienced, wise teachers?

Needs of Beginning Teachers

As a beginner, you probably have come to understand that your competence in your subject area is not always enough to engage your students and make you successful in the classroom. You may have some level of confidence, but you are still looking around at those experienced teachers and wondering, How did she do that? What is the *magic* experienced teachers have that you can't seem to grasp? You may even have asked yourself, How can I find this intangible wisdom?

Educators around the world are coming to realize that competence and confidence are not enough to keep beginning teachers teaching. Retention of beginning teachers is a problem. We are all now realizing that we must have an intentional focus on teacher wellness if we want our novices to succeed in the classroom. As a beginner, you may be overwhelmed by the workload, the day-to-day rhythm of teaching, and those 1,500 decisions you have to make. I have learned that when we work harder and longer hours it influences our health, and it actually doesn't help us maintain our balance in the classroom. That is why we include a "Take Care of You" piece of wisdom each week. Your health and wellness influence the classroom environment.

In addition to taking your own wellness seriously, as a beginning teacher, you want to learn more about how to manage your classroom more

effectively. How you manage your time, your energy, all those classroom routines, and any student behavior issue is important to creating a smoothly running classroom. That is why we include a piece of practical wisdom in one of these management areas each week.

Growth and development require all the right conditions. Sun, water, good soil, and conditions for reaching up and taking risks. Teaching is a creative pursuit. Teachers are not only technicians to deliver content knowledge; they are also inspiring role models and creators. YOU are important.

Wisdom Through Stories

The stories you will read in this book each week are shared by teachers of varied ages; from different subject areas, states, and districts; and with various years of experience. Some are still teaching, and others have retired. I refer to retired teachers who are still inspired as *legacy teachers*. Their wisdom and dedication to manifesting a fulfilling career in teaching are inspiring. Each teacher was invited to share a significant experience that they recalled from their teaching career that helped them develop as a teacher.

I believe teacher stories are important. I know when I have shared my stories with teachers in the past, they felt the message and used it to reflect on their own experiences. You have stories too. Use this book's prompts at the end of each week to jot down your insights. Sharing our stories with each other is what creates our "community of teacher learners," and it helps us know we are part of something

bigger than our school and district. We are part of a noble profession of educators.

I would like to share one of my stories with you. It is titled “Bloom Where You’re Planted” and is adapted from *Teaching With Light: Ten Lessons for Finding Wisdom, Balance, and Inspiration* (2021).

My school burned to the ground the year I was accepted into a teaching sabbatical. My classroom was destroyed, and my school was gone. Everything I had created for my elementary classroom was lost. I had to fulfill my obligation to a fellowship I’d been offered, all the while knowing at the end of the year I had to return to my teaching position, whatever that would be. It was an awkward time for me personally and professionally. When I returned, I was one of two teachers assigned to teach in one of the portable classrooms parked in the back of the school. My old classroom had colorful learning centers, rugs, special decorations, and personal items for the students. This portable had nothing, except some old desks that hadn’t been used in decades. I was devastated. I remember crying on the first day of school as I looked at the trailer. I was going through the grieving process that my colleagues had experienced the year before. Only I was doing it alone.

I felt like a first-year teacher—isolated and overwhelmed. I reached out to my colleague Pat from the fellowship and talked about leaving teaching. I didn’t think I could recreate all I had done in my classroom and do it in a trailer! Pat came to visit me.

I sobbed. She listened. As she left, she handed me a card with the message *Bloom where you're planted* on the front. She encouraged me to stay put and not make a hasty decision to change my teaching assignment, reminding me, "You bring your skills, your years of teaching experience, and your passion for teaching to this moment. Use your strengths."

One of my proudest moments as a teacher happened that year. A student named Billy was waving furiously, trying to get my attention one day near the end of the year. He was shouting, "I finished my book! I did it! I finished the whole book!" Tears came to my eyes as I thought about this student. He was in the fifth grade, and he had been able to hide for all these years that he couldn't read. I noticed this deficit one day. Instead of pointing it out to him or asking him about it, we began to read together every day. And then, one day, he could read on his own. Years later I reconnected with Billy, and he shared his memory of learning to read and how he went on to college and became a teacher!

The crisis of losing my classroom to fire, being placed in a portable trailer in the back of the school, and feeling isolated for a year could have led me to leave teaching or look for another position. Instead, it was the year I learned most about who I was as a teacher. I not only bloomed as a teacher but was able to help one of my students bloom, too. I learned I really was a good teacher, and a good teacher can teach anywhere.

How to Use This Book

The obvious way to use this book is to read each week's entry in order and reflect on its wisdom to see how it relates to your growth as a teacher. But if you are anything like me, you might want to skip to the end and peek to see what is ahead for you. You may even want to read all of the management ideas sprinkled throughout the book because that is what you need right now.

This is your book of wisdom, and you can use it the way that best supports you. What I do highly recommend is that you schedule your *Weekly Wisdom* into your regular weekly planning time. You want time to read and reflect on what might be useful to you each week. I also encourage you to review the bios and photos of each teacher on the companion website to acknowledge their contribution to your journey.

HOW WEEKLY WISDOM IS ORGANIZED

School years have cycles and rhythms that relate to activities or content knowledge to be taught. I like to think of them as seasons. This book is organized into weeks and grouped into sections by seasons. These are not strict boundaries by any means—just a way to think about the wisdom in an organized way through the cycle of a school year.

Weeks 1–8

Getting Started ~ Create a Community of Learners

Weeks 9–16

Gaining Momentum ~ Find Your Strengths

Weeks 17–30

Staying in the Flow ~ Focus on Teaching and Learning

Weeks 31–36

Closing the School Year With Intention ~ Celebrate Your Growth

WHAT TO EXPECT EACH WEEK

Within each week, you will find four types of wisdom from a featured teacher to take in, explore, and practice: a story, a management tip, a self-care message, and an affirmation.

The Story

As you read the stories, I invite you to be open to the big ideas the teacher is sharing. It doesn't matter if it is not about your age group or subject area. Listen for the key message: how this teacher learned how to be successful. In my story above, a key message was this: *You bring your skills, your years of teaching experience, and your passion for teaching to this moment. Use your strengths.*

After you read each story, you will have an opportunity to “Pause. Reflect. Act.” This is a signal for you to use your insight and your wisdom to think about how this message is useful to you. You may want to keep a journal or use the journal on the companion website to jot down your thoughts. This writing will be useful to you at the end of the year when you look back to see how much you have grown.

The Management Tip

This is where you will find practical wisdom for the classroom. The research says that most teachers say they need to know a lot more about MANAGEMENT! Time management, classroom routines and rituals, and ways to manage student behavior issues. So, each week you will read the teacher's suggestion for you in one of those three management areas. Here is an example:

How to Manage Student Papers

Here is one of my best time management tips for collecting assignments from students. Assign a number to each student in my classroom. The number relates to the alphabetical order of students in my grade book. Before students pass in any written assignment, they put their "number" in the upper right corner along with their name. A student leader collects the papers and puts them in numerical order for me, so I can easily enter the completed assignment in my grade book. If a number is missing, we can see if that student is absent or just forgot to hand in the assignment. A sticky note on the top sheet lists any missing numbers for easy follow-up with students when they return to school. It's an easy and efficient way to collect papers, record grades quickly, and see which students were absent.

The Self-Care Message

Featured teachers will also share how they take time for themselves so that school doesn't become so overwhelming. You may already do some

of these things, and some ideas may be new to you. The message is for you to do something that resonates with you. The goal is for you to find ways outside of schoolwork to live and enjoy. Many of us “love” being teachers and find that working more and harder is just what we do. But we all know that is a recipe for disaster when the challenges get more intense and we don’t have a regular routine in place for detaching from school. Here is an example:

Walk in Nature

One of my favorite activities to calm myself down is to take a forest-bathing walk. The term *forest bathing*, known as *shinrin-yoku* in Japan, is a way to find peace and lower anxiety. I dedicate a specified amount of time to be on a nature path near my home. The goal is not exercise but to take in the sights, sounds, and smells of the forest through our senses. Forest therapy works for me to relax my nervous system and quiet my mind. It is best done alone, but if a friend wants to join in, remember there is no talking. It is a meditation-in-motion activity.

The Affirmation

Positive self-talk can take the form of affirmations. These are positive phrases or statements we use to stay in the moment and keep us from any negative or unhelpful thoughts. They are easy to use and offer us a way to stay focused on the positive. I have included one each week, drawing on the content of the teacher’s story and message. All you need to do is repeat it or write it in your journal to help turn your week around. We often get

caught up in what we can't do, and the struggles sometimes dominate. Using some positive self-talk can make a difference. And yes, this is based in science—and research shows it works if you practice.

Sample Affirmations for Teachers

Who I am is enough.

I am guided by inner wisdom.

I express my truth with confidence.

Energy fills my life.

I am free to express what I'm feeling.

I know the right thing to do.

Use the affirmations in each *Weekly Wisdom* entry to bring a positive focus to your week.

Stay Inspired

You will notice common themes emerge from the stories and practical wisdom. Paying attention to your students, keeping lists, and unplugging from the work will be shared by many of these experienced teachers. When you see the same message repeated, note it as a reminder to look at this topic again more deeply. We don't learn how to teach in one year, or two, or even twenty! Teaching is an ongoing development—we

continue to grow, learn, and emerge as the most important influencers of our students' success.

Remember, you are not alone. You can reach out at any time to an experienced teacher in your school or call a friend. Find a mentor if you don't have one. Don't let your stress overwhelm you. Learn how to find that balance in your home and work life, so you can find ways to enjoy teaching.

We know that this one little book of wisdom may not be enough for you and that you may need more support to find the momentum you seek. This is just a beginning step. Use *Weekly Wisdom* as a nurturing guide, and let this wisdom from these mentor teachers support you so you can ease through your beginning years gracefully. Nourish yourself and be kind to yourself. *You* are what your students need most.

This is your book, your journey, and your year. Read the stories, reflect on the wisdom shared, and take away what resonates with you, and what works for your classroom. You get to decide how you will integrate the ideas into your busy life one week at a time. And remember, *YOU* bring *your* wisdom and intuitive self to the classroom too. Listen to your gut and use your own intuition to guide your decisions.

Most of all, have some fun! Teaching has some hilarious moments that you just can't make up. Let's not miss the joy because all of our attention is on the challenges. Your health and wellness influence your students' health and wellness. In many ways, this book is as much about your students as it is about you. As one teacher said to me, "Happy Healthy Teachers = Happy Healthy Students."

Welcome to your *Weekly Wisdom* journey. Let's begin!

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