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110 Strategies to Problem-Solve the Hard Parts of Teaching

the new teacher handbook

BERIT GORDON

HEINEMANN • PORTSMOUTH, NH

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introduction

Here are a few of the regrettable things I did as a brand-new teacher:

- I went out all night dancing with my coteachers in the Dominican Republic (my first full-time teaching job). Then, I napped for twenty minutes in the school parking lot, drank a coffee, and taught. Never again.
- I had favorites.
- I had students who, on awful days, I wished would get mono and be out for three weeks.
- As a new teacher in a New York City high school with 140 students (my second full-time teaching job), I "lost" a set of papers because I couldn't handle grading them.
- I gave myself pep talks on the walk to work.
- I ugly cried on the walk home.
- I waited for the star teacher down the hall to leave, copied the lesson she had prepared on her board, and used it myself.
- I covered student writing in "constructive" comments and rationalized it because I used purple ink, not red. No one read them.
- I opted to be paid across ten months instead of twelve to make my rental deposit. I did not budget and was flat broke that summer.

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As I write this book, I find myself "new" again—at a new school, teaching a new class. I dismissed my students twenty minutes early on the first day, and no one corrected me.

New teachers and their students can survive these mistakes when we learn from them and do better. What leads new teachers to leave is feeling so overwhelmed that they lose the energy to find answers and solve problems. This book equips new teachers with strategies to address inevitable challenges.

The goal is to end the day by saying, "I taught today!" Having more and more of those days is what fuels teachers. We feel good at teaching when we are good at teaching.

On the other days, we can say, "I learned today." We catch what went wrong and find actionable steps to do better; those days aren't so defeating.

There are many answers to the hard parts of teaching, but they're not always rooted in what genuinely helps every kid, current research, or doable steps that keep teachers in teaching. Use this book to stay energized and in problem-solving mode.

You came here because you care about teaching and students. Those are the only nonnegotiable ingredients to being a wonderful, lifelong teacher. You can figure out the rest with support, kindness to yourself and others, and strategies to keep growing.

Why do we need this book now?

The news is full of stories about teacher shortages, districts desperate to fill classrooms with qualified educators, and rising teacher burnout. While a teaching career can be rewarding, energizing, and lifelong, it can also be taxing, demoralizing, and brief. We need ways to keep you in teaching and feeling good while you're there. You and your students deserve a happy teacher (or at least a reasonably content one, most days).

One of the best solutions for having teachers who feel good and are good at their jobs is more time. Teachers, especially new ones, need more time to plan, collaborate, grade, communicate, and reflect. There are pockets of schools making critical changes in that direction. However, teachers are often asked to do more with less time and fewer resources. What used to be two protected prep periods in a teaching day might now be one forty-two-minute period, often taken up by unpaid coverages, duties, professional committees, IEP meetings, and extra student support. Some of those help students. But they all come at a cost: teachers without the time, energy, or resources to do their job well.

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Not only is there less time with more responsibilities, but there is also often less support for new teachers and their challenges, some of which weren't prevalent a decade or two ago. For example, more teachers are fast-tracked through alternative-route certification programs, which we desperately need. Still, that results in teachers building the plane while flying it. We may also see

- challenging student behaviors and high emotional needs;
- cell phones battling for students' attention;
- increased caregiver expectations, but not necessarily support;
- far more standardized assessments plus the expectation to use the data from those numerous assessments;
- complicated online curricula and learning platforms, often without training on how to use them or connect them to students; and
- less autonomy on what we teach and more evaluations on how we teach it.

I've worked with new teachers who are on the brink of exhaustion and mental health collapse. One teacher said he regularly thought about walking in front of a bus because it would mean not having to show up to work. Another lost a significant percentage of her body weight and had chunks of hair falling out because of stress. Many tell me they are depleted and defeated.

I've also worked with administrators who were frustrated by new hires' attempts to achieve a (needed) work-life balance by strictly adhering to contract hours or substituting devices for personalized instruction.

We need current frameworks and strategies that help new teachers enjoy teaching and become good at it without going through a hazing process, surviving their first years instead of thriving.

New teacher burnout isn't caused (only) by hard work. It comes from hard work that doesn't pay off. When teachers' efforts don't get students to work together, line up, read, or write, they feel defeated. Burnout (and new-job searches) creep in.

But what happens when we give new teachers proven strategies to manage their time and a class, connect with others who love teaching, get students to respect one another, plan well, and engage every learner? Those new teachers are energized—they get to more and more of those days when they can say, "I taught today!"

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How do I read this book?

This book contains tried-and-true, research-backed strategies to help you solve new teacher challenges. Each chapter is tied to a teaching goal, and within the chapter are strategies to help you meet that goal. Strategies are titled as questions from new teachers so you can find practical, easy-to-implement answers. The questions came from new teachers across the United States and Canada, so you'll be reminded that you're not alone—every new teacher faces challenges.

No need to read the handbook from cover to cover. New teachers don't have that time, and your biggest challenges might not be the same as those of the new teacher next to you. Dip into the book's strategies, choosing what you need.

Choose strategies based on what you have in place and what you're ready for next. Each chapter relates to a different teaching goal, and they all progress toward a solid first year and long-term success. You can start with any chapter, but the first ones (taking care of yourself, managing your time and a never-ending workload, getting routines and relationships in place) will set you up for more success with the goals later on (building connections with caregivers, fostering student independence, boosting talk and collaboration, assessment, and more).

How do I know what goal or chapter to start with?

There is no right place to start, but you will set yourself up for the most success by using the checklists in this introduction to find the right goal and chapter for you (see pages 10–17). The items in the checklists will help you determine if those are things you want to work toward and, once you've tried strategies in that chapter, celebrate your progress as you check items off. If you can't check off items after trying a few strategies in a chapter, go back to a previous chapter to build up more of a foundation. The more strategies you try, the more items on the checklist you'll easily tick off.

Being a new teacher shouldn't feel like drowning in the unknowns. You deserve to feel like "I've got this." Each strategy is designed to get you one step closer.

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When I see a strategy titled with one of my burning questions, how do I use that strategy to help me?

The **Coach/Admin support** sections are specifically designed for those who are helping new teachers along the way—from classroom management strategies to student engagement techniques. At its essence, this book shows teachers that when something isn't working, they can try something else! Here's where to find that something else, with guidance both for teachers and their mentors.

The **subtitle** will orient you, very briefly, on what's in this strategy. Then, you'll immediately get actionable steps on what to try. There's little fluff here—strategies dive into concrete moves that help you solve problems. The steps to take are laid out for you so you can see just what to do, bit by bit.

Those steps are sometimes outlined in an **At a glance** section. This is like when online writers summarize long articles in a TLDR (too long, didn't read) synopsis. Skim the At a glance section when you're rushed and need a quick answer. Later, check out the **Digging deeper** section for a longer explanation of what to do and why. The other strategies keep everything together in one section—you'll find all you need to know in a single read-through.

2.4

Coach/Admin support

Spend more time on names with groups of new teachers than feels necessary. They have an onslaught of new information to track, and they will appreciate it when you repeat introductions. Plus, it will show you care that everyone knows one another's names, not just you.

In the classroom, lead an activity so the teacher can circulate and ask each student if they're saying their name correctly. Follow up after the first week to see if the teacher knows everyone's name. If not, ask how you can help. Make it a shared priority.

Want to know more?

My Name, My Identity website

How important are names? And how do I learn them all?

Knowing everyone's name and pronouncing it correctly is a top priority. Practice lots.

I distinctly remember a teacher who confused my name with a classmate's all year. Unsurprisingly, I didn't work hard in that class. Mispronouncing students' names can go further—it can harm their well-being. Learning students' names—and pronouncing them correctly—is one of the first and most powerful ways we show students they matter in our classroom. And don't worry: I can't remember what I had for dinner last night, but I've learned how to remember everyone's name in a few days—it's possible.

At a glance

- Learn students' names and pronouns as soon as possible, using the name they want to be called and saying it correctly. If you teach the same group across the day, try to learn them all within the first day or two. Give it a week or two if you teach multiple classes.
- Have students practice and use everyone else's name.
- Say names frequently and with warmth.

Digging deeper

Calling students what they want to be called is essential in establishing your classroom community. Memorizing names will pay off tenfold in management, relationship building, and creating a classroom community. Here are some ways to get there:

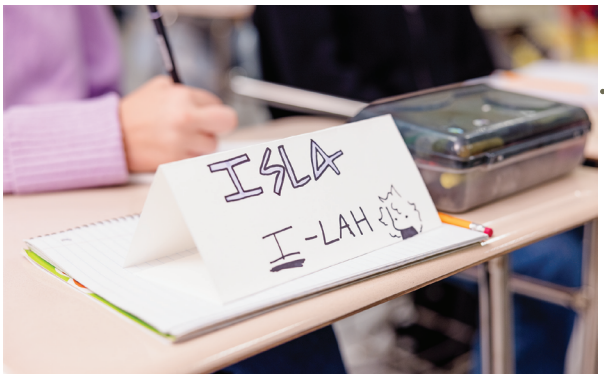
- Ask students to say their names like their family says them, and write them down phonetically in your notes. Add notes to your roster with details to help you remember.
- Access last year's yearbook to help memorize student faces and names.
- Use a seating chart until everyone knows everyone's names.

In **Want to know more?** you'll find a reference to other resources that will help you learn more about this strategy and others like it.

These sections also acknowledge these educators for bringing us tried-and-true ideas.

For more information about this Heinemann resource, visit https://www.heinemann.com/products/e18110.aspx.

- Have students create tent cards with what they like to be called on both sides so everyone can see. They can add a phonetic spelling.
- Have each student fill out an index card, and use these as flash cards as you're teaching to practice names. They should include
  1. Their name: what they like to be called (and any pronunciation help)
  2. Their (number seats so you all know where their assigned seat is)
  3. An identifying detail that won't change in the next few weeks (hairstyle, glasses, freckles)
  4. One thing they want you to know. (This is confidential; a few may use it to reveal something important. Follow up on this privately so they know they're heard.)
- Practice names with the whole class repeatedly so everyone learns each other's names.
- When students enter, greet them by name. If you forget a name, playfully ask for a hint and offer a small reward (a sticker, the chance to line up first). When they line up to leave class, practice again. Get students to do the same. Let them help each other. When you see students outside class, call out their names.
- Jot down notes for anyone whose name you hesitate on or forget. Start with their name tomorrow and write any detail to help you remember.



Names matter! Get everyone to learn each other's names the way they want them said.

Grade-level adaptations

K–2: Instead of having students fill out the index cards, you can fill out a seating chart with the same information.

It's working if

- Students correct you and others if their name is mispronounced.
- Everyone says each other's names how they are meant to be said.
- By the end of week one, you know everyone's name and pronouns.

Resource

Video 2-2
Get It Quick **The Name Game: Memory Tricks That Stick**

Grade-level adaptations tailor the strategy for your age group. Good teaching is universal, but child development is not. Likewise, the daily life of a K–5 teacher seeing the same group across the day and that of a secondary teacher seeing many groups can be quite different.

It's working if indicators are typically based on what you or students will do as a result of the strategy, clarifying whether this strategy worked. They'll also help you pat yourself on the back as you mark progress.

Almost every strategy has an **image** showing what you'd write on the board, a planning document, or what you and your kids would be doing in the classroom. Use the image to help you envision how things will go, and tweak it to make it your own!

Get It Quick **Video:** Seeing is believing. These brief (one- to two-minute) videos will walk you through the strategy in a friendly, straightforward manner. I will give you the essential info verbally, so if you prefer listening to learn over reading, go here.

Demo **Video:** See it in action. You'll see and hear what a real teacher does, along with actual students and their authentic responses. Watch these with colleagues to learn together.

What to Say: When the strategy is conversation-heavy, perhaps showing how to avoid a power struggle with a student, navigate a tricky conversation with an upset parent, build connections with students, or shut down disrespect from students, you'll see a script of sorts, giving you the language to use so you feel confident knowing what to say and when.

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The essential first step: how to find the school where I can teach, learn, and succeed

I've been a new teacher at a K–8 school in the Dominican Republic, a private boarding school in Connecticut, a public high school in New York City, a program for high-needs students, a program for gifted and talented students, and this semester, a university in New Jersey, teaching writing to first-year college students. Each time, my learning curve has been steep, and each time, I've floundered and found my way. Feeling like "I've got this" happened faster in some places than others. Your school's culture will be a huge factor in who you become as a new teacher and your ability to feel effective.

I see a vast range of school cultures in my work. As a consultant, I'm privileged to be part of incredible schools, primarily public, in rural, suburban, and urban districts across the United States and Canada, including many Title I schools. They are filled with deeply caring and hardworking educators who prioritize the needs of *all* students and their teachers. I see people happy to enter these buildings. More and more, I'm part of exciting initiatives that help their new teachers thrive.

But not all schools are there yet. Many new teachers will inevitably be offered positions in schools with high turnover rates. Those rates may exist because last year's teachers felt psychologically unsafe, lacked support, or were penalized for circumstances out of their control, among other factors. Because of their unhappy departure, a space opened for you. This is a reality for many new teachers, and you may bravely rise to the challenge. But I encourage you to persevere for a school that has a healthy ecosystem for teachers and students or is actively working toward one. Your future teaching self deserves the best start possible. Future generations need you to stay in it for the long haul.

Determining whether a potential school will nurture or harm you is challenging. You are eager to find gainful employment, so it can be tempting to overlook red flags. But the reality of the growing teacher shortage is that you *will* find work and, likely, multiple offers. Some of your best energy in determining your success as a new teacher is in the application process.

When you get offers, ask about the criteria on page 8, and if they say yes, ask what that looks like. Talk to multiple people, including teachers. Look up stats online. See if you can visit the school when students are there. Try to visit a class in the grade or subject you'll teach and attend a staff meeting. Look around: do students and teachers

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look happy to be there? If schools are reluctant to answer or provide this information, they may be busy and need to make the hiring decision. Tread lightly. However, they may not have the answers or don't want to admit the reality.

Administrators invest a tremendous amount of time and energy in hiring. They want this to work for both of you. Asking these questions shouldn't be seen as unprofessional—it shows you care about doing your job well. But use their responses as indicators of their investment in teachers. And administrators, if you're reading this, be ready to answer these questions for future hires! They deserve to know.

Try to get as many answers as you can before accepting a position:

- [ ] What support is offered to new teachers? What does that look like exactly?
- [ ] What curriculum will I follow? How much autonomy is there in what I teach and when?
- [ ] (Especially for online curricula) What training is available to understand the curriculum and help students at different levels?
- [ ] How many assessments are given across the year? What time and support are offered to use the data from these assessments?
- [ ] How are standardized assessment scores used in evaluating teachers' performance?
- [ ] How many duties do teachers have?
- [ ] How much protected individual planning time do teachers receive?
- [ ] How do teachers access needed supplies?
- [ ] Do I need to submit lesson plans and, if so, what feedback will I receive?
- [ ] Am I expected to be on professional committees?
- [ ] What is the range of student numbers in a class?
- [ ] What professional development opportunities are there?
- [ ] What meetings happen regularly, and what is the purpose of those meetings? (Are they about instruction and students?)
- [ ] What are the specific expectations for my role?

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Another approach is to take whatever information you can glean from online research and talk to as many people as possible. Then, check the criteria the school has in place or is working to create. Some of these criteria are adapted from the introduction to Lisa Gonsalves' *Educational Folly* (2023):

- [ ] Teachers have some autonomy in their instruction and practices.
- [ ] Test scores and standards are not the primary focus, and teachers are not penalized for low scores.
- [ ] Teachers have access to essential resources to do their job.
- [ ] If teachers try something new and make a mistake, they are helped and encouraged, not shamed or punished.
- [ ] Teachers feel psychologically safe and supported.
- [ ] Meetings focus on instruction and students.
- [ ] Clear expectations exist for teachers' and others' school roles.
- [ ] Clear, written policies exist for students and parents, and the administration helps hold them accountable.
- [ ] Professional relationships exist across levels (admin and teachers, grade levels, support staff).
- [ ] There is a healthy number of teachers with experience.
- [ ] Turnover is low (teachers and administrators).
- [ ] New initiatives and curricula are rolled out gradually so teachers know how to use them.
- [ ] If teachers struggle to deal with a behavior issue, they have a clear avenue of whom to turn to for help.
- [ ] The school's issues and challenges are not blamed on the pandemic.

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I hope you find a school with all these things in place. But the more your school lacks, the harder it will be to feel effective and have an impact as a new teacher. Without many, adjust your expectations and know you'll need to focus on protecting your sense of self and mental health. Some schools are working hard to transform their cultures. Admitting there is work to be done can be a good sign. But don't let their need to fill a position override your need to work in a place that sets you up to succeed. Other schools might give beautiful answers about how they do things, but visiting classrooms and meetings shows the reality doesn't match up.

Wonderful, caring people will inevitably work in schools that lack all of the criteria. It is not to say you are doomed or won't find rich experiences and possible mentors. But you will likely face challenges bigger than you and your abilities as a new teacher.

If several of these boxes are unchecked after some months of teaching, you owe it to yourself to scale back your expectations of what you can do as a new teacher in this environment. Be as kind to yourself as possible. Understand that you can do everything in this book and follow every bit of advice, but you may still feel ineffective at essential aspects of your job.

Most of the solutions and answers in this book can help no matter where you are, but some will not. No strategy will help you feel safe in a school that doesn't prioritize teacher and student well-being. No strategy for extreme student behaviors will help unless the school is dedicated to helping you help that student.

New teacher, it is your job to stay in teaching, get good at teaching, and help the students in front of you as best you can. You deserve a place that lets you do just that, so find one of the many schools with dedicated teachers like you!

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Growth at a glance: new teacher checklists

(See OR I-1 in the Online Resources to download these checklists.)

Check off what you regularly have in place, not what happens on a perfect day. If there are a lot of unchecked items, guess what? You're a normal first-year teacher! Now dip into these strategies and stay here as long as you need.

When you can check off most of these things, you're good to go. Congratulate yourself and choose another goal, or simply bask in growing at this essential part of teaching!

Chapter 1 • Checklist: How do I thrive, not just survive?

- [ ] I protect my sleep.
- [ ] I have someone to go to in my building for support, and they like teaching and students.
- [ ] I regularly take note of what's working.
- [ ] I celebrate successes (including small wins) with someone.
- [ ] I set boundaries that work for me.
- [ ] I protect ten hours a week of additional work time so I can do my job well.
- [ ] I use kind self-talk.
- [ ] I prioritize my well-being so I can help others.
- [ ] I create routines and avoid making unnecessary decisions.
- [ ] Occasionally, I leave right at contract hours and nap, go for a run, play with my dog, or do whatever feeds me.

For more information about this Heinemann resource, visit https://www.heinemann.com/products/e18110.aspx.

Chapter 2 • Checklist: How do I get to a well-managed classroom without a lot of management?

- [ ] I feel comfortable greeting my students and helping them learn where to go, what to do, and how to do it, for every part of my class.
- [ ] I know every student's name, and they know everyone else's.
- [ ] I welcome students with a short community-building routine every day.
- [ ] I have students who know the rules and, on a good day, feel responsibility for creating a respectful classroom community.
- [ ] I see students following directions and procedures without reminders.
- [ ] I feel calm and in control when helping students who struggle to follow routines and directions.
- [ ] I don't need to raise my voice or repeat myself to get students to follow procedures.
- [ ] I feel comfortable using terms like *504* and *IEP* and have ways to help students who have them.
- [ ] I organized my classroom so the space works for everyone—it's decluttered, welcoming, and shows what I value: students!
- [ ] I make small updates to my classroom setup based on feedback from my students.
- [ ] I am kind to myself as I do this challenging work.

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Chapter 3 • Checklist: How do I keep things running smoothly and address student behaviors as they arise?

- [ ] I speak calmly and steadily when students have outbursts or behave poorly.
- [ ] I show students, especially those who struggle with expectations, that I am on their side.
- [ ] I don't engage in power struggles.
- [ ] I hold students accountable by having them solve problems they create and having them repair harm.
- [ ] I am aware of how my identity and background might cause biases, and I work to correct those potential blinders and misconceptions.
- [ ] I address disrespect from student to student and show that it is not tolerated.
- [ ] I delegate appropriate tasks to students and involve them in the shared responsibility of our class.
- [ ] I am kind to myself as I do this challenging work.

Chapter 4 • Checklist: How do I build respectful relationships with and among students?

- [ ] I know details about every student unrelated to their academic performance.
- [ ] I plan for time to connect with students and have them connect, just like I would for any learning activity.
- [ ] I try to accept and value students just as they are. I'm not waiting for them to feel cared for until they change behaviors or anything else.

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- [ ] I work to have students act respectfully toward me, but even more so toward one another.
- [ ] I am aware of how my identity might present barriers (even unconscious ones) in understanding students who don't share my same background, gender, race, or other factors.
- [ ] I am confident that my students don't just hear me say I care about them—they know and feel it.
- [ ] I am kind to myself (and students) as we work on this together.

Chapter 5 • Checklist: How can I work well with families, administrators, and colleagues?

- [ ] I have reached out to every student's caregivers with something positive I've noticed about their child.
- [ ] I trust that all of my students' families care deeply about their child's success at school, no matter what level of involvement I can observe.
- [ ] I share regular updates with families about what their child is learning and other essential information.
- [ ] I have a templated response for handling parent concerns that keeps my response from being defensive, acknowledges their problem, and briefly states what each party (student, caregiver, and teacher) can do to help the situation.
- [ ] I go to administrators with concerns or struggles (if I have them) instead of complaining to others.
- [ ] I have set aside time to meet with my para (if I have one) to discuss the plan and how we can help one another.

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- [ ] I have at least one teacher friend in my building who knows my birthday and how I drink my coffee. They like students and teaching (most days).
- [ ] I am kind to myself as I take on this challenging work.

Chapter 6 • Checklist: How do I increase student independence?

- [ ] I see students solving problems on their own more.
- [ ] I have more energy at the end of the day.
- [ ] I feel less guilt about not "rescuing" students.
- [ ] I track students' stamina, and it is going up, bit by bit.
- [ ] The whole class is able to work on their own for at least the number of minutes equal to their age in years at a stretch (e.g., five-year-olds can work for five minutes straight).
- [ ] I sense students' confidence growing through competence, not just praise.
- [ ] I offer students support when appropriate, and I support students equally across the class.
- [ ] I am kind to myself and my students as we take on this challenging work.

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Chapter 7 • Checklist: How do I teach when they're all at different levels? (and every class has students at different levels)

- [ ] I am in the habit of looking at my curriculum and summing up, in my own words, the one thing I'm going to teach students that day. I base this on what I know will meet most students' needs.
- [ ] I always model, step-by-step, what students will do themselves. I explain what I'm doing and how.
- [ ] I try to keep my whole-class instruction short and sweet. I time myself to see if the number of minutes is about the same as my students' age (number of years).
- [ ] I feel comfortable pulling a small group and helping them with a specific need.
- [ ] I pay attention to whether students get my lesson. If they don't, I switch gears.
- [ ] I provide ways for my multilingual students to engage with and feel part of every lesson.
- [ ] I welcome back absent students. I have ways to help them feel in the mix.
- [ ] I see a diverse group of learners with varied needs as a good thing and as what makes my class special.
- [ ] I am kind to myself as I take on this challenging work.

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Chapter 8 • Checklist: How do I plan effectively and efficiently?

- [ ] I know what I'm teaching before I go into class.
- [ ] I have a system for planning that I use consistently.
- [ ] I have a template for planning (unit and daily lessons) that I use consistently.
- [ ] I spend less time combing through materials available online.
- [ ] I end units on time. I let it go if students didn't get everything just right; we move on.
- [ ] I don't stay up all night planning before an observation.
- [ ] I can reasonably predict whether or not my plan will go according to plan.
- [ ] I usually get to all of my planned lesson within the planned time by eliminating time sucks.
- [ ] I am kind to myself as I take on this challenging work.

Chapter 9 • Checklist: How do I get students talking and working together?

- [ ] I feel comfortable calling on any student, and they are comfortable responding or passing until I come back to them.
- [ ] Shyer students participate more.
- [ ] I help students listen well in addition to speaking well.
- [ ] I have ways to intentionally pair or group students.

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- [ ] I assign pair or group work in a way that lets all group members contribute.
- [ ] I include group talk and work (including pairs) as a regular part of my classroom structure.
- [ ] I am kind to myself and my students as we take on this important work.

Chapter 10 • Checklist: How do I manage assessment?

- [ ] I check student knowledge and learning before I start a unit and frequently throughout the unit.
- [ ] I use what I glean from these checks to tweak my lesson plans, add support as needed, and make assessment changes.
- [ ] I know what the final assessments are by the start of the unit. Students do, too.
- [ ] I assign meaningful work to students. I don't grade or give feedback on all of it.
- [ ] I have ways to reduce the time I spend grading final projects and papers.
- [ ] I get work back to students sooner, which matters.
- [ ] I talk to my students about ways to feel ready and calm for standardized assessments. They have practical moves and know how to take the test.
- [ ] I see the data I get back as (more) valuable. I use the parts that help me help kids.
- [ ] I put less energy into grading and more into figuring out what students know and need to know, planning accordingly, offering support, and staying connected to students.
- [ ] I am kind to myself and my students as we take on this important work.