

Feeling Discouraged? 10 Moments of Joy From Educators

By [Catherine Gewertz](#) — March 17, 2022

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These pandemic years are rough on educators. Some days they want to quit, overwhelmed with exhaustion, grief, stress and controversy. Other days, though, from out of nowhere comes one of those moments: a slice of pure joy that keeps them going.

Teachers and principals from around the country shared those moments with Education Week. Tender, funny, and poignant, none of them negate the systemic issues that need fixing, like the low pay and unrealistic expectations they endure. But they provide critical sustenance and inspiration when they're so badly needed. Here are their stories, edited for length and clarity.

'So much good in what we do'

I was in a difficult situation with a disciplinary decision. I had parents in my office, and they weren't happy with the decision I was considering for their student. I'd walked out in the hallway, and I was pondering my options, and I felt overwhelmed, like someone was going to be unhappy no matter what I did.

Just then I got a message from the master sergeant for our Air Force Junior ROTC program. The kids were celebrating because they'd taken first place at two drill meets, and they wanted me to join them. I get there, and the kids are all smiles, and they say, 'Hey, Mr. Reyes, would you take a picture with us? Pleeeeeze?'

And in those moments I realize that there is so much good in what we do as leaders, that our experiences with them are making a positive impact. I get injected with confidence that we're moving in the right direction. When I get an opportunity like that, to get out and smell the roses, it makes the harder stuff seem not as bad. —*Fernando Reyes, principal, Harlingen High School South, Harlingen, Texas*

'They all just start singing along'

I have a Google form that students can put song suggestions in. I review them every weekend and make a play list, and we listen during independent work time. When kids hear their song, they get so excited. Or when a really good song comes on, they all just start singing along.

In one of my classes, they harmonize. Like last week, a song by Ella Mai, "Boo'd Up," came on, and they started singing different parts in harmony. They didn't even know they were doing it, really; they're just singing along.

By the time the playlist is on, we're like 45 minutes into a 75-minute class, and we've been working hard, and when they start singing, it reminds me of what connects us. There's a childlike happiness I feel. It doesn't matter that some of them don't get along, or some are having a bad day. In that moment, we're understanding that song, and we're all bonded. —*Theresa Bruce, 8th grade social studies, KIPP Harmony Academy, Baltimore*

'I'm holding in my hands this evidence of the circle of life'

When I was hired here, I replaced the woman who'd been my high school teacher, Kay Henderson. I went to work in her old classroom. She left all of her teaching materials, decorations, everything. One of the things she left was the copy of *The Catcher in the Rye* that she used to teach from.

It has all of her old notes in red, and her yellow highlights, and notes I added to it a few years ago. She made such a difference for me as a student, and she was a mentor for me in my first few years as a teacher, and I have this little piece of her to carry on. And this year, first semester, I had my own student teacher, and she was a former student of mine.

So I'm holding in my hands this evidence of the circle of life in education. It reminds me that we mentor students all the time, and we also have the potential to mentor future teachers. —*Haley Lancaster, English/language arts, Lincoln High School, Vincennes, Ind.*

'An hour of pure joy'

We do "positive office referrals" for kids, where every staffer gets to choose two children each week to come to the office to be celebrated. They have these little yellow slips of paper, and they check off behaviors like empathy, problem-solving, or being respectful or kind.

They come to the office on Friday afternoons, and we make a huge deal out of it. The whole staff, the parent volunteers, we just ooh and aah over them. It's an hour of pure joy. For me to see them in that elated state fills my bucket. —*Amy Gonzales, principal, Nan Clayton Elementary School, Austin, Texas*

'A place of peace and magic'

I do these building walks in the early mornings. No one's there yet. It's my time to center, to pray, to think about the humans that will go back and forth in these halls all day long. I started taking pictures of teachers' classrooms when they're quiet and texting them to them, in the wee hours, before school. It's an idea I got from a mentor, Dr. Steve Matthews, the superintendent of Novi schools.

I thought maybe I could connect teachers to that sense of peace, saying, I know this place seems so hectic during the day, but look at your classroom: It's a place of peace and magic. To just reach out with a simple text and let people know, "I see you. I see your space, and this is what we do." Sometimes I take pictures of the playground, or the sunset when I'm leaving the building, or the clouds around the flagpole when it's at half-mast. These images can help us stop and be in the moment in our lives, with our school community.

What I'm learning, my approach, is to find joy in the natural part of this work. Testing, academic gains, that's what I call the technical part of the work. But where we are right now, when the lightbulbs go on, why you walked into the classroom to do this job, that's the natural part. It's who your soul is as an educator. —*Walt Sutterlin, principal, Washington Woods Middle School, Holt, Mich.*

'Thank you for being my student'

I've started ending my classes by saying, "Thank you for being my student." It goes back to fall 2020 when we were virtual. I had to have everyone muted, and I didn't realize how isolating and weird it would be. I was speaking into a void and it felt really lonely.

But at the end of the day, as I let students go, they started unmuting and saying, "Thank you, Miss Roberts." It was like this cascade, and I nearly started crying. I thought, what can I do to carry this on in my classes now that we're in person? Now I end my classes that way, and hardly a kid leaves without saying it back. Sometimes they even beat me to it.

This is my 34th year teaching, and this thank-you piece has changed me. I'm more conscious of the fact that we're a team, we're in this together, that I need to hear their voices. I started saying it to colleagues, too: Thank you for being my colleague. It's super cheesy, but I'm nothing if not cheesy. I don't want to play it cool. I want to be my authentic self. And if you make fun of me for showing too much grace, vulnerability and love, I'm OK with that.

There are substantial problems in the world of education that aren't going away. But if we don't find some joy in those little moments, I don't know how any of us keep going. —*Laurie Roberts, English/language arts, Timberline High School, Boise, Idaho*

'They inspire me'

I'm the adviser for our Gender and Sexuality Alliance. They inspire me. I've been on the edge of tears multiple times this year. We went to the state capitol last week to advocate for and against proposed legislation. [One of the bills requires people to use restrooms that correspond to the gender assigned to them at birth.] One of the students, who is trans, spoke with the sponsor of the bill [Republican Jake Merrick].

She requested that he be pulled off the Senate floor so she could talk to him. And he did, he came and spoke with her. He had to go back in several times to vote on legislation, but each time, he came back out and reengaged in conversation with the student. They disagreed, but he was polite and honest. It was a rare moment to see an ideological divide with both people reaching across the divide. The courage of that student! And the transparency of that senator! It was very rewarding.

There's COVID, and so many forces against public education, and all of this weighs on me. It's hard not to get swept up, and think, what else could I be doing? How many dozens of other jobs are easier than this one? But these moments provide balance. They tell me I'm in the right place. —*Aaron Baker, government and international studies, Putnam City North High School, Oklahoma City*

'This is why I picked this profession'

A student in my class has autism. She really struggles finding friends, or a partner in class activities. I work with her on those things, and I see she's getting better.

A few weeks ago, the students were working with partners to summarize text. Her row went first to pick partners, and she wandered around, not quite sure, and everyone grouped up. She looked at me like, how do I handle this? And I said, it's OK, go find a group, and ask if you can work with them.

She walked over to a group, and asked, and waited, and she got kind of anxious, flopping her hands around. But they were like, “Yeah! Sure, come work with us!” It brought a smile to my face, and I felt an overwhelming sense of pride in her. It reminds you that it’s OK to be brave and go into difficult situations. I’m proud of the kids who said she could join them, too.

People can get a little stuck in the negativity and forget about those little moments of joy. It doesn’t negate all the difficult things, like low pay, and working conditions. But seeing the amount of growth my students are making, not just academically, but emotionally, reminds me that this is why I picked this profession.—*Brianne McGee, 2nd grade, Arbor View Elementary, Elkhorn, Neb.*

‘It’s really nice when someone notices’

I got an email last Friday from the parent of a student. He said, my son has raved about you since day one. He loves your teaching style, and he told us that you realized the kids weren’t getting something, and you modified the way you taught to help them understand. He said he was grateful.

In Algebra 2, we’d been working on quadratic equations, and the kids were just not getting it. They’re juniors, and I’d been relying on them to develop their own system of taking notes. But they weren’t doing it. They weren’t retaining anything. So I created a system for them, and changed how I’m giving assignments and how we’re doing quizzes. I’m focusing more on, you need to show me how you did this problem, before we move on.

This one parent, I know him, and he and I are not on the same side of a lot of issues. We’re very different. So that email meant a lot coming from him. As teachers, we try to do what’s best practice, but it’s nice when someone notices.—*Elissa Messinger, math and science, Red Land High School, Lewisberry, Pa.*

‘I’m hopeful about the future because I teach’

After all that virtual learning, it’s so fulfilling, so good for the soul, to see that these kids are still willing to push themselves, have difficult conversations. Last semester, we read *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo. We had a discussion [about themes in the novel], and one of them was whether we owe our parents a debt of gratitude.

One kid was adamant, yes, my parents have done so much for me, we owe them that respect. And another, she’s gone through the foster system, she had a very different perspective. She challenged my other student to see the complexities. And afterward, she got up and hugged him. It was like out of a movie. It was a master class in how to have civil discourse, and still see the value of each other’s perspectives.

I tell my friends, I’m hopeful about the future because I teach. —*Kara Stoltenberg, 12th grade English/language arts, Norman High School, Norman, Okla.*

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