

CHAPTER ONE

Learning Your Way Around the School

“Welcome Visitors! Please report to the Principal’s Office,” reads the sign at the entrance to the elementary school. Indeed, in many ways, you are much like a visitor during your first year of teaching. You will encounter all the accompanying levels of confusion and disorientation along with the newness and excitement that are typical for an intrepid explorer who is navigating unknown territory without a map. There is much to experience and learn ahead of you, and, like the explorer, you are eager to start your journey.

As many times as you may have previously visited a school, during university field placements or perhaps even as a parent or a relative of a student, you are always struck by how big the place feels and how busy people appear to be. They all seem to know just where they are going, always in a hurry, making contact with many different people along the way. The place appears to be a maze of offices, rooms, hallways, and labs, each connected by a layout that probably once made sense to someone in charge of designing spaces. To the newcomer, however, whether an entering student or a new teacher, the school may seem overwhelming. You can’t wait to start exploring!

ORIENT YOURSELF

Your first task is to learn your way around the school. We don’t mean just memorizing the quickest route from the entrance to your

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classroom. After you've received the official tour, found out where to park, and learned what room you are assigned, make it a priority to get "unofficial" guided tours from an experienced teacher, a secretary, a student, and a custodian (especially a custodian!). This school is the place you will be spending most of your life during the coming years, so you will want to orient yourself as quickly and comprehensively as you can.

As you walk around, note how the activities of the building are organized, and start making a mental map. For example, are grade levels grouped together with K-2 in one area and 3-5 in another? Are the cafeteria and gym close to one another? Once you are settled in your classroom, you will want to locate many other important places. These include the

- principal's office(s),
- nurse's and health office,
- custodians' office,
- counselors' office(s),
- cafeteria,
- teachers' lounge,
- grade level office/workroom,
- library/media center,
- technology/computer lab,
- graphic arts and copy room,
- gym, and
- restrooms!

You want not only to find these locations but also to start learning how people operate on a daily or usual basis. Are you expected to stay on one side of the counter in the main office? Can you go into the copy room and use it when you want, or do you need to fill out a request form and submit it ahead of time? Do people use separate stairwells for going up to the second floor and coming down to the first floor? Is there a restroom specifically for adults? Who can use the small restroom in the nurse's office? How can you borrow a broom to clean up from time to time? There will be many customs to learn quickly so you understand how your new school functions and how people expect you to blend in with them (Cattani, 2002).

MAKE FRIENDS WITH THE SECRETARIES AND ASSISTANTS

The school secretaries and administrative assistants will most likely be your first points of contact. They will help you get settled, provide you with keys and supplies, introduce you to people, and guide you through the appropriate paperwork. Spend some time getting to know the secretaries and administrative assistants as soon as you can. Ultimately, they can be your strongest supporters or the biggest obstacles throughout your career.

Most schools have teaching assistants assigned to various areas throughout the school. Every grade level may have a teaching assistant, or grade levels may share an assistant. Usually the primary grades, especially the kindergarten classrooms, have teaching assistants in every classroom. The library/media center and the technology lab probably have teaching assistants too. These individuals can help you obtain information or gain access to materials and supplies located in their areas. And although there may seem to be an abundance of individuals to get to know throughout the building, you will know who everyone is and what they do quite soon.

As you first tour the school, no doubt you will have many questions to discuss with your school guide. Rather than overwhelming this person with the sheer number of inquiries swirling around inside your head, select the most critical ones, and save the rest to ask other people later. Here is a sampling of the most critical questions that teachers need to have answered:

- What's my schedule?
- Where is the restroom?
- Where are the textbooks and supplies located?
- When's lunch?
- When do we get our class lists?
- When's the first faculty meeting?

Although all questions are important, it is vital to consider the timing of your questions. While most people are only too happy to help, be respectful of when and how often you approach them.

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LEARN THE POLICIES AND REGULATIONS

You probably will be given a map of the school and an official *Teacher's Handbook* that tells you about the policies, rules, and professional responsibilities of your job. In it you will find

- the district and school mission statements;
- organizational charts;
- professional expectations for teachers;
- guidelines for teaching about controversial issues;
- selection lists of supplementary materials;
- information on the uses of technology;
- procedures for reporting child abuse;
- policies related to grading and attendance; and
- procedures regarding student discipline, safe schools, and other issues.

Read the manual carefully as soon as you get the chance, as it will include much information useful throughout the school year and your career. Here's a basic insight: the manual will answer many of your initial questions and will prevent you from looking somewhat silly if you ask them of secretaries and colleagues. Frequently, faculty meeting discussions and decisions will reference information found in the manual that everyone else already knows. You want to be well informed in preparation for these meetings, especially at the beginning of the school year.

The handbook may contain the publicly espoused values and expectations, but it does not necessarily describe how the school operates. To find out the "actual" version of the school culture (Schein, 1985), you will need to be aware of the interactions among students, staff, and faculty over time. You will want to discover answers to the following key questions:

- Who has power and control in the school?
- Who and what influences the principal most?
- How are decisions made?
- What are the major conflicts that erupt most consistently?
- What coalitions have formed among faculty and staff, and on what basis do these groups maintain their memberships?

These are just a few questions to consider. More topics will be suggested later.

PREVIEW THE DAILY AND WEEKLY SCHEDULES

Every elementary school has developed finely tuned weekly and daily schedules to ensure that all students are in school the number of minutes required by state law and receive the required number of minutes of instruction as determined for specific subject areas. Time in school includes classroom instruction as well as time for music, art, and physical education, usually called “specials.” If the school has bells, they generally ring only at the beginning and the end of the school day. The teacher must be aware of the specials schedules along with times for recesses and lunch.

Schedules distributed by the principal at the first faculty meeting (or at a day-long retreat) will inform you of the days and times to be followed throughout the school. You will find out the times your students report to and are dismissed from school as well as the days and times for specials (music, art, physical education or PE, library, and perhaps technology), lunch, and recesses. Plus, you will discover if you need to meet your students in specific locations and if you are expected to escort them to and from their specials classes. You will also learn if you need to stay with your students when they are served lunch and if you have supervision “duty.” And, you will learn your lunch options—the school cafeteria, the teachers’ lounge, or, if there is an open campus, the places where groups go out for a quick meal.

It is helpful to know the schedules for your own students and the other classes in your grade level, as well as the schedules assigned to all other grade levels. Some schools stagger the times by grade level or even by classes within a grade level, particularly in the lunch room or on the playground (so everyone is not arriving or leaving at the same time). In addition, you (a student or a parent) may need to locate a teacher or student in another class or grade level, so we suggest that you keep one copy of the school’s daily and weekly schedules handy in a notebook and another one posted on your own bulletin board for easy reference.

MEET YOUR GRADE LEVEL COLLEAGUES

Most elementary schools are organized by grade levels. If you are the single teacher in an area such as music, you may be grouped with other disciplines or specials. Many schools have designated grade level and discipline area team leaders or chairs. While their authority

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varies from school to school, chairs tend to serve as liaisons between the administration and the grade level faculty and staff. In some districts, the chairs are responsible for overseeing schedules and budgets; in other districts, these tasks remain the domain of the principals. Your grade level chair most likely will provide you with teacher resource materials and curriculum guides; the chair will inform you how to obtain texts for your students, supplementary materials for your teaching, and supplies for your classroom.

In some districts, the faculty members in each grade level conduct all planning together. They write lesson plans, design integrated units of learning, develop unit assessments and testing, and plan special events as a group. They meet regularly to review objectives and to discuss student progress. Most likely, you will find much-needed support and many creative ideas readily available at these meetings if this is your situation. If not, you will need to find a mentor, preferably someone who has taught your assigned grade level before and who is willing to share his or her expertise and resources with you. If such support is not available in your school, hopefully you will be able to network at district level meetings and professional conferences. In some schools, principals assign mentors formally; in other schools, you will need to seek your own avenues of support.

From a first-year teacher . . .

I was just 21 and a new college graduate when I was hired to teach third grade at an elementary school with 920 children. Our third grade pod was located apart from the main section of the school. I had never been in this particular school, and I felt lost in every way. Fortunately, my classroom had a side door that opened into Sharon's classroom. On that first day, I introduced myself, and Sharon took me under her wing. She taught me how to make the learning both fun and productive, how to collaborate with the other third grade teachers to tap each one's expertise, and how to develop my own style. Most of all, from Sharon I learned how to pace myself so I could enjoy my work and myself to the fullest.

INSPECT YOUR CLASSROOM

Once you have been escorted to your assigned classroom and are on your own, allow yourself sufficient time to revel in the feelings that you are experiencing. This classroom is *your* room: the place where

you will be working your magic. There are bulletin boards to decorate, furniture to rearrange, supplies to order and store. Mostly, though, you just want to get a feel for the space.

This classroom will become a home away from home not just for you but for your students as well. Soon you will be transforming it from four bare walls to a world of teaching and learning that is safe, welcoming, and exciting to everyone.

We suggest that you draw a map of your classroom. Note the locations of the doors, windows, permanent storage units, wall-boards, and electrical outlets—items you cannot move. Include the dimensions on your map. Over the next few months, weeks, or days, you will begin to create a sense of place. You will want to carry your map with you as you select classroom supplies and decorations, and having the dimensions will be useful information. The next chapter will discuss in depth the organizing of your room.

INTRODUCE YOURSELF TO THE CUSTODIANS

Other important persons to get to know are the custodians. Most elementary schools have both a day custodian and a night custodian. The day custodian will play an important role in your life. There will be many times when you will want the day custodian to help you. You may need help moving furniture, boxes, or equipment. The day custodian will unlock your door (when you forget your key), repair the pencil sharpener, replace lights, and attend to toilets. More important, the day custodian will come to your rescue when a child is sick in your classroom. These unpredictable moments will occur, and you will need help . . . immediately. We all greatly appreciate the day custodians in every elementary school!

In the afternoon or evening, your room will be serviced by the evening custodian. While a thorough cleaning may take place once a week or less often, most likely wastebaskets will be emptied daily. Show students how to stack their chairs on their desks or tables to facilitate sweeping or vacuuming. Custodians will appreciate your keeping the room neat and having students clean up the areas where they work. Usually custodians can provide you with cleaning supplies—paper towels for unexpected spills and all-purpose cleaners for desktops. Make sure you communicate clearly the status of information left on your chalk- or whiteboards. Writing “Please do

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not erase; thank you!” on sections of the boards you want to keep posted will avoid miscommunication problems.

FAMILIARIZE YOURSELF WITH SAFETY

As part of your school orientation, you will need to familiarize yourself with safety procedures in the event of an emergency: fire for certain, and depending on your location, hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, earthquakes, tsunamis, landslides, or volcanic eruptions. (According to a sign posted in a New Zealand school, in the event of a volcanic eruption, you should close all windows and doors.)

In learning your way around the school, make sure to find out where the fire alarm nearest your room is located, where to direct students in the event of fires and fire drills, and where the designated shelters and supplies are for other disasters. Fire drills are usually a surprise, so be prepared. And, traditionally, one is held during the first few weeks of school.

Schools today also provide for safety and shelter-in-place protection. Your school district may have a system that uses color codes for (1) evacuating to the playgrounds, (2) securing the perimeter with activities continuing, (3) remaining in classrooms with doors locked, and (4) returning to all clear. We suggest that you tag specific pages in your school handbook with bookmarks or sticky notes for quick reference. In many schools, teachers are expected to post safety procedures; you could have these procedures and an up-to-date student roster ready on a clipboard with an attached pencil to take with you quickly in the event of relocation.

You are responsible for your students' safety as soon as they arrive on the school grounds. Systems will be in place for them to get off their school buses or out of their family cars and to walk onto the school grounds safely. There may be bus loading zones, car delivery areas, and crosswalks—all with supervision. Some elementary schools expect the teachers or teaching assistants to provide the supervision before and after school. Some elementary schools enlist the help of parent and community volunteers along with student safety patrols.

Student safety is your responsibility throughout the day. You will be informed if students have special physical, mental, or emotional needs that you must attend to during both formal and informal instructional times. You may be required to meet a particular student

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at the door each morning and provide assistance. You will be informed of students who take medications, and you will be responsible for seeing that students not only deliver their medications to the nurse in the health office but also go to the nurse in the health office at the specified times to take the prescribed medications. Plus, you will be told about students who have estranged family members whom they cannot see or with whom they cannot leave school at any time. Keep a record of this information as you get it. We suggest a notebook that you can carry with you.

Check your handbook for your responsibilities as a teacher. You will probably discover that your responsibility for the students in your care continues should an emergency extend beyond the school day. You will want to talk with your students about procedures if they get home and no one is there. Many students live within walking distance of the school; they may return to you or the main office for assistance.

Although students' telephone numbers and addresses are kept in the main office, we suggest that you create a directory of your own, listing this information along with work locations, telephone numbers, and e-mail addresses for the parents; the grade levels and teachers' names of siblings; and any other pertinent information that you may want at your fingertips, especially when the main office is closed. One teacher we know keeps a notebook with her at all times throughout the school year, so she can reach her students and their families whenever necessary.

Also, you are responsible for your own safety and that of your family. If you have an elderly parent or young children of your own for whom you provide care, develop contingency plans for them. Think about how your family members will be cared for on those days that you need to go to work early or stay late. Some of these extended days will be planned, and you can make arrangements in advance; others will be unplanned. Establish ways that you and your family can communicate easily about times when your plans change unexpectedly—such as when you need to attend an emergency faculty meeting or parent conference after school. And try to arrange this communication so it doesn't disturb your professional duties.

Also, sometimes you will elect to stay late to work on a special project in your classroom. Please do not stay at your school all alone if your principals and colleagues have urged you to leave when they leave. You always want to let someone in the office know your

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plans, and you want to tell the evening custodian too. No one wants to be surprised by the other.

INVESTIGATE YOUR SCHOOL'S TRADITIONS

Every school has its own unique culture and customs. Some customs are established by the administration, such as dress codes; others emerge from student, staff, faculty, or parent input, such as school mascots and school colors. Back-to-School Night, Open House, parent-teacher conferences, curriculum fairs, award ceremonies, holiday celebrations, fundraisers and other events often have many rituals associated with them. For example, November may be marked by food drives held around Thanksgiving.

Some schools also collect blankets and toiletries to distribute to the homeless. National Education Week is celebrated the third week in November with recognition for teachers that may range from school banners to small gifts of appreciation from students, the school, the district, or parent organizations. Throughout the year, there will be school assemblies for different purposes, such as guest speakers and awards for student achievements. Most likely, there will be grade level programs along with choir, orchestra, and band concerts in the evenings along with schoolwide festivals and schoolwide dances.

These traditions are as much a part of the school experience as anything to do with the physical building. They may sound a bit confusing, if not overwhelming. The point is that you fully join the school culture, becoming part of the school family. Students and administration will greatly appreciate your visible support and eager participation.

ACQUAINT YOURSELF WITH THE SCHOOL'S HISTORY

Your elementary school may have a long and rich history. Perhaps you attended this school as an elementary school student yourself, and returning as a teacher is a dream come true. You'll be amazed at the number of people who stop by after school or attend the special events to see their old classrooms and past teachers. Soon you will be one of these past teachers sharing memories with your previous students.

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Find out more about your school's history. Perhaps the school is named for a city or state leader. Ask who your notable alumni are. Here's a story illustrative of this insight from a new teacher:

I was zipping along through my teaching day in mid-September during my first year of teaching. The door opened and there stood the principal and the state governor. No one had warned me that either one of them was coming. Fortunately, the classroom was in good order; the students were engaged in writing autobiographies and drawing self-portraits for display at the upcoming Back-to-School Night. The principal walked over to me and introduced the governor. As a young child, the governor and his family had lived in the neighborhood and attended my school! He was holding a press conference later that day to promote increasing funds for education and wanted to see his former classroom.

The principal introduced the governor to the fourth graders, telling the students why the governor wanted to visit the school and this particular classroom. The students were great. We had just started studying state history in social studies, so we knew where the state capital is located, who the governor is, and some of his duties. The governor allowed them to ask him some questions. Plus, I had placed the students' names on their desks, so the governor could call on individuals by name. Impressive!

Fortunately, I had brought an inexpensive camera to school to keep in my desk for moments just like this. I asked the governor's assistant if I could take photographs of the governor with my students. This was approved, so all the students got their pictures taken with the governor. Those students will always remember the day the governor came to visit. Most of all, we were all in awe that a fourth grader who sat in our room, grew up to become the leader of our state!

INTRODUCE YOURSELF TO OTHERS

As you cross paths with other people, introduce yourself and tell them what you teach. This is how you will build important relationships with the school personnel. When you talk to others, remind them of your name. We offer two secrets to help you learn new names and faces. First, get a copy of the previous year's school pictures, yearbook, or newsletters. Here you will see the teachers for each grade level and area of specialization, the teaching assistants, the

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principals, and the administrative assistants. You can read about various events featured by grade levels or areas of specialization, about afterschool clubs, and about the traditional activities anticipated eagerly by students, their families, and the community.

Second, sit next to a friendly colleague or your mentor at faculty meetings and ask that person to quietly identify a few individuals at each meeting. Faculty and staff tend to sit at meetings with other members of their grade level teams or teaching groups. Individuals tend to speak for their whole group when expressing an opinion. New teachers can rapidly associate members of various groups with their voiced concerns.

Be assured you won't remember all the names of people the first time you meet them, nor will they remember yours. You will have to ask individuals again to tell you their names and what they do. You may not remember where everything is located either. It takes time to learn your way around the school.

TAKE A BREATH . . .

The first year of teaching is indeed one of the most exhilarating and challenging times in your career (Kottler, Zehm, & Kottler, 2005). Remember that it will happen to you only once; yet this remarkable experience will remain with you for the rest of your life. You will be tested in ways that you can't imagine, and you will find rewards in the most unanticipated moments. You will learn many things about yourself and the process of learning.

There will be precious little time for contemplation or in-depth planning. Your time will be taken up by meetings, grading, and trying to stay ahead of the students. Some of the things you hope to do will be put aside, at least temporarily. That's okay. Your main job is just to learn your way around, to get to know your students, and to experiment with teaching styles and methods until you find things that work well for you and your students. As you find time, you can reacquaint yourself with some of the classic literature (Bruner, 1977; Dewey, 1938), university textbooks (Wink, 2004; Zimmermann & Keene, 1997), and supplementary guides to help you with the first days of school (Jones, 2000; Wong & Wong, 2001). Before you know it, you will be the expert showing someone else around the new school.

Suggested Activities

1. Next time you are in an elementary school, note the school layout and the traffic patterns both inside and around the outside of the school. Discuss how the school is organized so it runs smoothly and meets various functions. Examine the before- and afterschool activities.
2. Shadow a teacher for a day. Note where the teacher goes and how many people the teacher comes in contact with during a given day.
3. Find out what names you should use to address the secretaries, teaching assistants, custodians, cafeteria workers, and other staff members. Find out what names your students should use. In some schools, everyone uses a title and last name to address everyone all the time. In other schools, adults use their first names in private conversations.
4. Make a copy of the fire and other designated safety procedures right away so you know where to go at all times whether you are with students or not with students.