TRICKS OF THE TRADE
MATH TRICKS TO HELP ALONG THE WAY

Bethlyn Eby & WFISD Math Staff
WFISD STAFF
Remember when you were a kid and saw a teacher at the grocery store? You thought, “Really? They exist outside of school?” Yes, teachers are real walking, breathing people. They have hearts, souls and dreams. The only difference between teachers and most other people is that the job is never over. If it isn’t grading, it is planning. If it isn’t planning, it is parent phone calls. If it isn’t parent phone calls, it is student activities... I could go on and on. With that in mind, we decided instead of having Ward retype all of the ‘tricks of the trade’ hints that we got from the rest of the district, we would just scan them in as they came to him. I absolutely loved reading the hints in the handwriting of each of the staff members. It is a great reminder that there are a huge crowd of wonderful parts that make up the excellent whole that is WFISD’s math team. We are so blessed to be a part of this whole!

At the end of the book are a few blank ‘tricks of the trade’ pages. As you come up with more ‘tricks’, please fill out those sheets. We would love to have more hints to add to our ‘TRICKS OF THE TRADE’ book. We will copy those for each staff member to add to his book.

Thanks for all of your help in making this book possible.

Sincerely,
Bethlyn Eby and Ward Roberts
MATH BOOK
Introduction:
I want to give myself a little disclaimer here. I love to share my little tricks, but even in my 'white top' years I am a little intimidated to share my thoughts and ideas with others for fear that I will embarrass myself with something I write. What if I make a mistake? What if I do not communicate clearly? What if people roll their eyes at me? I have had the courage in my lifetime to parasail, ride a zipline upside down after climbing a rock wall up to the zipline (at 46 yrs old), take a job driving a ski boat at a camp in Minnesota where I knew no one, repel off a huge mountain, blob (at 51 yrs old), skateboard down 6 floors of a spiraling parking lot in Houston (I’m hoping the statute of limitations is over for this one), get married, have children and hold my dying mother’s hand. Why does this book cause so much fear in me? I may never know. What I do know is that if we let fear stop us from sharing our best practices, we will never be better as a whole. Even if there is nothing in this book that you can use, please use this encouragement to be bold in your career.

Bethlyn Eby

MATH TIPS

#1. Multiplying and Dividing Integers
Have your students draw a tic-tac-toe board.
Place positive signs in a diagonal tic-tac-toe.
Finally, place negative signs in all other spaces.
This represents:
- neg. x neg = pos
- neg x pos = neg
- pos x neg = neg
This works for both multiplication and division.
Warning: This does not work for addition and subtraction of integers.
Thanks to my former student Betty for showing me this trick. Many students have benefited from her sharing this with me.

#2. Teaching Adding Integers
Kids like examples that deal with themselves.
Do a series of questions with the kids.
‘Yes’ answers are a positive. ‘No’ answers are negative.
Questions:
Who would like a free 100 today? 12 girls say ‘yes’. 14 boys say ‘yes’.
That’s 26 yes’s. 12 + 14 = 26
Who would like 6 hours of homework tonight? 12 girls say ‘no’. 14 boys say ‘no’.
That’s 26 no’s. −12 + −14 = −26
Who would like our party to be a spa party? 12 girls say ‘yes’. 14 boys say ‘no’.

That’s 2 more no’s than yes’s.  $12 - 14 = -2$

Who would like our party to be a hoops party? 12 girls say ‘no’. 14 boys say ‘yes’.

That’s 2 more yes’s than no’s. $-12 + 14 = 2$

Once they catch on to the concept, you can let them give you the rules.

Same sign? Add , take the sign.

- pos. + pos. = pos.
- neg. + neg. = neg.

Different Signs? Subtract and take the sign of the heavier.

- pos. + neg. = ? Subtract and take the sign of the heavier vote.
- neg. + pos. = ? Subtract and take the sign of the heavier vote.

Warning: Define heavier as the one that you have the most of...not the biggest.

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**#3. Common Error with Exponents and Negatives**

Kids often think that the following are the same. They are not!

- $-3^2 = -9$
- $(-3)^2 = 9$

Without the parenthesis the exponent does not apply to the negative sign.

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**#4. Dividing Fractions**

My son’s elementary teacher used this little rhyme with her kids:

“When you divide, don’t ask why; just flip the second and multiply.”

The good thing about this saying is that it reminds them that it is the ‘second’ number that must be flipped or inverted. We get 8th graders who think you are supposed to flip everything.

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**#5. Remembering Squared vs. Cubed**

When labeling an area, we might use ‘inches squared’ because we are measuring how many squares fit on the figure. Note that a square is a 2 dimensional figure. When labeling a volume, we might use ‘inches cubed’ because we are measuring how many cubes fit in the figure. Note that a cube is a 3 dimensional figure.

We can use this as a reminder that anything to the 2\textsuperscript{nd} power is squared and anything to the 3\textsuperscript{rd} power is cubed.

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**#6. Anything to the Zero Power**

Anything to the 0 power is equal to 1. $3^0 = 1$

How does that work? You can explain this concept using cancer cells.

Let’s say that a person has a certain type of cancer in which each single cancer cell splits into 3 cancer cells after a certain amount of time.
After the first split, the patient would have 3 cancer cells. \(3^1 = 3\)
After the second split, the patient would have 9 cancer cells. \(3^2 = 9\)
After the third split, the patient would have 27 cancer cells. \(3^3 = 27\)
And so on....
But at the very beginning, before any cancer cell splitting occurred, how many cancer cells were present? Just one! All cancer starts with one cancer cell before it begins to split.
\(3^0 = 1\)

#7. Multiple Choice – Which Formula
When a student is at a total loss as to whether to use perimeter, area or volume on a multiple-choice test, have the student look at the answers. If the answers are all in units squared, find the area. If the answers are all in units cubed, find the volume. Now, if the answers have no exponent on the unit of measure it’s a little trickier, he is either finding the measure of one edge or the perimeter. He must go back and read the question carefully to be sure he is answering the right question.

#8. Subtracting Integers
This is one of those concepts that there are as many tricks as there are teachers that teach the concept. In our class, we use:

*Leave, Change, Opposite.*

There is no memory magic about those words. It is in how you say them. Usually I will have one student who takes off on this saying and gives it a rhythm. The year that Montrail put rhythm to it was the year that every single student got it!

- **Leave** – the first number is left as it is
- **Change** – change the operation from minus to plus
- **Opposite** – give the last number the opposite sign

**Warning:** Students want to start doing this to addition problems as well. Make sure that they only use this on subtraction.

#9. Stealing a 1 from the Whole Number in a Mixed Number
Sometimes you have to take a 1 from the whole number and give it to the fraction in a mixed number. Many people refer to this as borrowing; I actually call it stealing because we never really give it back. I also call it stealing because the kids have always heard of it as borrowing and it makes them sit up and go “Huh?” Anything that makes them sit up and go “Huh?” is good!

**EX:** \(7 \frac{2}{3} = 6 \frac{5}{3}\)

Notice that we did steal the 1 from the 7 because we never gave it back to the 7; we gave it to the \(\frac{2}{3}\). (This will come in handy with our Robin Hood method in #10.)
Now for the real trick. When you give the 1 to the $\frac{2}{3}$, you simply add the numerator and denominator together (2+3) to get your new numerator of 5. Thus the $\frac{5}{3}$.

Warning: You do not want to oversimplify this step. Students are taught this in 5th or 6th grade, translating the 1 to $\frac{3}{3}$. Then they are shown that $\frac{3}{3} + \frac{2}{3} = \frac{5}{3}$. The students must be exposed to this concept. But if by 8th grade the student still cannot put his mind around this step, we can show him the shortcut. I taught forever before one of my student teachers showed me that trick!

#10. The Robin Hood Method of Subtracting Mixed Numbers
This story works for subtracting mixed numbers when the first fraction’s numerator is smaller than the second fraction’s numerator.

EX: $8 \frac{1}{6} - 3 \frac{5}{6} = 7 \frac{7}{6} - 3 \frac{5}{6} = 4 \frac{2}{6} = 4 \frac{1}{3}$

(You may need to refresh their memory on the Robin Hood Story.)
When trying to subtract we find that we are whole number rich because we can subtract the whole numbers easily (8-3). But we find ourselves fraction poor because we cannot subtract the fractions ($\frac{1}{6} - \frac{5}{6}$). So we must steal from the whole number rich to give to the fraction poor. When we steal 1 from the 8, we will give it to the $\frac{1}{6}$ to make it $\frac{7}{6}$ and we now have the freedom to easily subtract.

Warning: If you do not make a huge goofy deal over having to change the fraction $\frac{1}{6}$ to accommodate the fraction $\frac{5}{6}$, then they will subtract the whole numbers from left to right and subtract the fractions from right to left. EEEEK!

NON-EX: $8 \frac{1}{6} - 3 \frac{5}{6} = 5 \frac{4}{6} = 5 \frac{2}{3}$

#11. Order of Operations
Order of operations is one of the easiest concepts in the curriculum. But many kids do not get this. We need to use tricks wherever we can to keep ‘remembering’ interesting, but we have to be sure that we are not creating another problem elsewhere. Some teachers use PEMDAS, Parentheses, Exponents, Multiplication, Division, Addition and Subtraction. Other teachers use ‘Please Excuse My Dear Aunt Sally’. What problem does this create? Students believe that Multiplication always comes before Division and Addition always comes before Subtraction. As an Aunt Sally kind of gal, I have begun to be very sensitive to the way I write the saying.
I tell them that multiplication is like boys and division is like girls. When I let you out to go to the lunch line, who gets to go first? (In theory, ladies should go first, but we won’t go there!) Whoever gets there first gets to go first. The same thing is true with Multiplication and Division! The same thing is true with Addition and Subtraction. Whichever one gets there first, gets to go first.

I am always surprised when I have a student who asks, “Now, which two go together add and subtract or add and multiply? I will ask them to remember when they learned how to add and subtract. They answer first grade. I will say to them, “The ones you learned together go together.” I would say that the ones that are the opposite of each other go together, but that can create a new confusion. I always want to keep it as simple as possible.

**#12. Central Tendencies**

These little tricks are the same ones that I used in Jr. High. But if it ain’t broke...

Mean – The mean teacher gave me a bad average.

Mode – The most often used. (Warning: I used to say most, but some confused it for the one with the most value.)

Median – The median is in the middle of the road.

Range – When I hit my golf ball on the golf range, I was proud of the difference of where the ball landed and where I started.

**#13. Negative Signs in Fractions**

Remind kids that fractions are simply division problems. When negatives signs are entered into fractions, just use the tic-tac-toe board on trick #1 to get the final sign.

EX: $\frac{-3}{-6} = \frac{1}{2}$  $\frac{3}{-6} = \frac{-1}{2}$  $\frac{-3}{6} = \frac{-1}{2}$  $\frac{3}{-6} = \frac{1}{2}$

$-3 + -6$  $3 + -6$  $-3 + 6$  $3 + 6$

$neg + neg$  $pos + neg$  $neg + pos$  $pos + pos$

**#14. Scientific Notation**

When teaching Scientific Notation, give all of the rules first.

The decimal must be after the first non-zero digit. $1 \leq x < 10$

There must be a multiplication sign.

Always multiply by 10.

The 10 must be raised to a power.
Then give a plethora of examples and non-examples. Let the students identify which are in scientific notation form and which are not. If it is not an example, the students must identify which rules do not apply. I’ve tried to teach this a million ways. For some reason, this is the method that has lead my students to greatest success.

WARNING: If you can convince your students of this early, you will be way ahead of the game. **Scientific Notation is not about counting zeroes; it is about counting decimal places!**

#15. **Translating Percent to Decimal and Decimal to Percent**

Percents are out of 100. The number 100 has two zeroes so we know we are going to be moving the decimal 2 places because there are 2 zeroes in 100. But which way do we move the decimal. We move it in alphabetical order.

\[ P \leftarrow D \quad \text{Going from percent to decimal move} \]
\[ D \rightarrow P \quad \text{the decimal to the left, alphabetically.} \]

\[ P \rightarrow D \quad \text{Going from decimal to percent move} \]
\[ D \leftarrow P \quad \text{the decimal to the right, alphabetically.} \]

#16. **Graphing Trends or Slopes**

When your bank account is increasing, that is positive.
When your bank account is decreasing, that is negative.
When your bank account is staying the same, there is 0 activity in the account.
You can teach your kids to have these images in their mind to tell whether a trend in a graph is positive, negative or zero.

![Positive Trend/Slope](image1)
![Negative Trend/Slope](image2)
![Zero/Mean Trend/Slope](image3)

Warning: The question of pos., neg. or zero trend may be asked in an indirect way. The picture may clearly be positive, but the question may ask you to find the trend between two activities backwards. Always read carefully.

#17. **Slope**

When graphing a line using a single point on the grid and the slope, we usually use the ratio \( \frac{\text{rise}}{\text{run}} \). To help my students remember that rise comes first and then the run, I sit in a chair and ask them to imagine (without great joy) what would happen if I ran before I rose. They all agree that I would fall. So from that point on, when they get it backwards someone yells...literally, “You are going to make her fall!”
#18. Word Problems with Percents

Sometimes we are going to use the formula: \( \frac{\text{part}}{\text{whole}} = \frac{\%}{100} \)

The percent and 100 are easy to find. But which numbers are the part and whole? I been told that ‘part’ is usually by the ‘is’ and the ‘whole’ is usually by the ‘of.’ Still read the problem carefully to be sure that they are not pulling a fast on you! Since part and % coincide, I usually tell the kids to replace the word ‘percent’ with ‘part’ and see if that reveals which number really is the part.

#19. The Big Four for Simplifying Fractions

The Big Four begins with, you guessed it, a big four. Let’s say we want to simplify the following fraction.

\[
\frac{64}{104}
\]

We will put the numerator and denominator in the two squares at the top.
What goes into both numbers? 2
How many times? 32 and 52
Now what goes into each of those? 4
How many times? 8 and 13
There are no more common factors.
The bottom two numbers reveal the fraction simplified.

\[
\frac{64}{104} = \frac{8}{13}
\]

I use this for kids who never really quite ‘got it’ in 5th or 6th grade. Eventually they will wean themselves from it.

#20. The Big Four to Find Common Denominators

Let’s use the Big Four example in trick #19 to work this problem.

\[
\frac{7}{64} + \frac{9}{104}
\]

We will need to get a common denominator in order to add these fractions. This time we will put the two denominators in the squares at the top.
Once again we divide out the common factors from each number until there are no more common factors.
Now, multiply all the numbers outside of the squares to reveal the common den.

\[
2 \times 4 \times 8 \times 13 = 832
\]
Notice that the bottom two numbers are 8 and 13. Those are the numbers you will multiply to the numerators to make the equivalent fractions needed to add these fractions.

\[
\text{EX: } \frac{7}{64} + \frac{9}{104} = \frac{7 \times 13}{64 \times 13} + \frac{9 \times 8}{104 \times 8} = \frac{91}{832} + \frac{72}{832} = \frac{163}{832}
\]

It is a little confusing at first, but well worth taking the time to learn it. Each time I have tried to teach it to my students, I have had a huge revolt. Then I will sit on it for a month and try to teach it again. Their response? Mrs. Eby, why didn’t you teach us this before? Aye yih yih!

**#21. Dependent and Independent Axes**

To show students which axis is the dependent axis, hold a pencil vertically like the y-axis on the elmo. (Remember, y reaches high.) When you let go of the pencil, does it stay standing? No, because it is dependent on your holding it to stay vertical.

To show students which axis is the independent axis, hold a pencil horizontally like the x-axis on the elmo. When you let go of the pencil, does it stay horizontal? Yes, because it can stay in place independent of your holding it.

Warning: There will always be one kid who is able to balance his pencil vertically on the eraser. So make a point to balance it on the point.

**#22. Formula Chart**

For the first two years I was back in teaching I watched my students take the TAKS test and never touch the formula chart! Of course you cannot say a word to them while they are testing. I imagined myself walking by a student’s desk, accidently knocking off the formula chart and then loudly saying, “OOP! YOU DON’T WANT ME TO KNOCK THIS VERY VITAL FORMULA CHART OFF OF YOUR DESK!” Because I value my job, I did not stoop so low. But I knew I needed to train my next set of student to use their formula charts.

For the last 5 years the story has been completely different. The first day of school, the kids come into my room where each desk has a laminated brightly colored formula chart hanging from its side so that students can easily flip it up every time they need it. Within the first week, I spend a whole day training the kids to use the formula chart in a ‘Scavenger Hunt’ type of setting. I confess that I assumed that they could understand the formula chart. I was wrong. They needed to be taught how to use it.

Finally, I explained to them that when I taught high school Geometry in the early 80’s, my students were required to memorize everything that is now on the formula chart. The only way my students could get this kind of help would be if they wrote it on a cheat sheet. So, just think of it as a ‘legal cheat sheet’. All of a sudden they realized that they had a good thing going. Every now and then one will fall off the desk. I love watching the kids, without looking up, try to flip up their missing
formula chart...we get a good laugh out of it when they realize it is not there. But silently I am jumping up and down because the formula chart is now a habit.

#23. Metric Conversions

King Henry Died BY Drinking Chocolate Milk
Kilo  Hecto  Deca  non-prefix  Deci  Centi  Milli

If I want to convert a kilometer to a decimeter, I would count how many hops it would take to get from kilo to deci or King to Drinking. It would take 4 hops to the right. That means I would move the decimal 4 places to the right to change a kilometer to a decimeter. If I want to convert a milligram to a kilogram, I would hop 6 places to the left. That means I would move the decimal 6 places to the left to change milligram to a kilogram. Notice that the BY says ‘non-prefix’. This would be units of measure without a prefix. Units like grams, meters, liters, etc... would fit here. Embarrassingly, this is the only way I can convert to this very day.

#24. Height?
The height of a 3 dimensional figure is the perpendicular segment that connects the bases. This is an easy concept when the figure is standing up. But what if the figure is on its side? This is how the height lesson will go: “How tall do you think I am?” “Well, my driver’s license says that I am 5’5”.” “Does everyone think that’s fair?” “So, what if I fell down on the ground? (If you are bold, you’ll lay on the ground to imbed the memory in their mind.) Would I still be 5’5” or would I have to go change my driver’s license?” “Of course not! My height is the length from the top of my head to the bottom of my feet, whether I’m standing or laying down.” Then you would go on to explain how the height is not an up and down type of thing but a base to base type of thing...standing or laying down.

#25. Perimeter, Area and Volume
There are certain things that I say to the kids so many times that they can practically hear my voice when they are testing. One of these things is:

Perimeter frames...
Area covers...
Volume fills...

By Christmas you should be able to say Perimeter...pause...and they will fill in the words. And so on...
There are a scary number of phrases like that. But I have never had a year yet when a student didn’t say after the TAKS test: “Mrs. Eby! I could hear your voice while I was testing!”

#26. Warning About Exponents
Make a big silly deal about the following:

\[ 3^2 = 3 \times 3 = 9 \quad \text{NOT} \quad 3^2 = 3 \times 2 = 6 \]

It seems so simple to you and me, but if a kid gets the wrong idea in his mind early on, it is a real hard habit to break.

**#27. Same Volume, Different Surface Area**

If two different rectangular prisms have the same Volume, the long skinny one will have the greatest surface area. The squatty body one will have the smallest surface area.

OR

If two different rectangular prisms have the same Volume, the one whose dimensions have the greatest range has the greatest surface area. The one whose dimensions have the smallest range has the smallest surface area.

**#28. Solving Equations**

There are certain concepts that are so huge that you want to go overboard so that they will remember FOREVER! This is one of those things that once I say the first word or two of the concept, they will be able to repeat it FOREVER!

EX: \( 3x + 5 = 14 \)

This is how the example would go. Regular type is my dialogue. The BOLD CAPS is what the students will say in response.

Solving equations is the opposite of ORDER OF OPERATIONS.

What do we want alone? \( x \)

What do we need to get rid of? \( 3 \text{ AND } 5 \)

Between mult/div an add/subt., what do we get rid of first? \( \text{ADD/SUBTR} \)

What is the opposite operation? \( \text{SUBTRACT} \)

When two things are added together and you want to get rid of one, you do THE OPPOSITE OPERATION, YOU MUST SUBTRACT.

Whatever you do to one side of the equal sign, YOU HAVE TO DO TO THE OTHER.

Now what do we want to get rid of? \( 3 \)

If two things are multiplied together and you want to get rid of one, you do THE OPPOSITE OPERATION

Which is? \( \text{DIVIDE}. \)

Whatever you do to one side of the equal sign, YOU HAVE TO DO TO THE OTHER.

Always CHECK!

To be honest, sometimes their minds are not engaged as they respond with the words. Similarly, I cannot tell you how many times I was at Fain Pool during the summers when I found myself singing ALL of the words to every 60’s and 70’s song that came on the loudspeaker. How is it that I could remember every word to ‘Crimson and Clover’ but could not remember my next door neighbor’s name? I never made an attempt to memorize any of those songs. But the repeated exposure to them made them stick in my head. I’m hoping that this will work with math too. Former students tell me it works!


#29. Which Axis is Which?
“Y reaches high”
The other one is the x axis.

#30. Ordered Pairs
We need to not take for granted that our students know how to graph ordered pairs. I have my students make a prompt in the corner before starting a graphing assignment. First I remind them that this is called an ordered pair because the letters are in alphabetical order, second because there are a pair of them.
This is the prompt:

\[(x, y)\]

I remind the students that the x axis looks just like a number line. I tell them with the y axis...if you die and go up that is positive, if you die and go down, that is negative. I hear students repeating that to themselves as they graph. Do not use the if you die illustration if you have someone who would be offended by it.

When students are still confused, especially for my dyslexics, I have them set up their commands on the ordered pairs before they even start to graph.

EX:  
\[(-2, 3) \quad (4, -6) \quad (9, 0)\]
Left, then up. Right, then down. Right, then stay.

#31. Y-intercept
Warning: Teach the students that y-intercept has nothing to do with the speed; that would be the rate. This is a huge hole in the kids’ perception of the y-intercept.

#32. Zero in the Denominator
Why can’t you have a zero in the denominator? Fractions are simply division.
EX. 1: \[
\begin{array}{c}
6 \\
2
\end{array}
\]  
EX. 2: \[
\begin{array}{c}
6 \\
0
\end{array}
\]

EX. 1:
Put 6 pencils on the overhead. Call a student up and ask them to split those 6 pencils into 2 equal groups. Clap when they put them into 2 groups of 3.

EX. 2:
Ask for a volunteer to put the 6 pencils into 0 groups. I love it when one of my extremely confident students comes up and tries to do it. Eventually the class starts to throw out the possibility that it cannot be done. Clap for the class then for your brave volunteer.

One year my students decided that it could be done. If you were on the Star Ship Enterprise and you shot the 6 pencils with the 'Beam Me Up Scottie, Gun", during those moments after shooting the gun and before the bubbles materialize into the pencils again, then they were in 0 groups. I love it when I don’t have to be the one to come up with the goofy memorable stories!

#33. Figures are Congruent, Numbers are Equal
My math methods teacher at Texas A & M was absolutely amazing. His was the best class I took to prepare me for teaching. He spent one full day on mathematical integrity. I was surprised to see how many of the things we do are not quite mathematically accurate. Hint #33 is in honor of him.

Figures are congruent and Measures are equal
Congruent figures have the same shape and size. So, unless the two numbers that you write down have the exact same shape and size, then they are not congruent! The reminder here is to be true to mathematical integrity. Students will laugh at you, but they will remember that you cared enough to do it right.

#34. Square Roots are NOT Division
This is a HUGE common error that students make. They think that square roots are division! Square Roots answer the question: What times itself gives me this number? NOT DIVISION!!!!

#35. Perfect Squares
If you know that the number you are finding is the square root of a perfect square, you can easily figure out what that square root is by looking at the number’s ending digit.
If the perfect square ends in 1, the square root must end in 1 or 9. (1 or 81)
If the perfect square ends in 4, the square root must end in 2 or 8. (4 or 64)
If the perfect square ends in 9, the square root must end in 3 or 7. (9 or 49)
If the perfect square ends in 6, the square root must end in 4 or 6. (16 or 36)
If the perfect square ends in 0, the square root must end in 0. (0)
If the perfect square ends in 5, the square root must end in 5. (25)
EX: $\sqrt{676} = \text{The only numbers that end in 6 when squared are 4 and 6.}$

$20^2$ and $30^2$ are 400 and 900, so the answer must be between 20 and 30, so the answer must be 24 or 26. If you already know that $25^2$ is 625, you will quickly know that the answer is 26.

How is this a shortcut? Big numbers cause some kids to shut down. Once the students can use this system, they are much less likely to just blow off the problem.

**#36 Simplifying Fractions**

Many teachers use the term ‘reducing fractions’. This can lead students to believe that you are actually making the fractions smaller. In fact, the fraction is staying the same, but being renamed in a more simple form...thus simplified fractions.

**NEW TEACHERS: The following section is dedicated to new teachers. In 16 years of teaching, I have done millions and millions of stupid things. Of course these are the very things that have molded my character and formed the basis for my classroom policies. You will have to make a few of your own mistakes and form policies that fit your classroom and your personality, but if I can help you avoid a few pitfalls by sharing some of mine then it will be worth it.**

**JUST TAKS**

*The One Question I Needed*

How many times have you had a student fail the TAKS test by one question. One year, due to the lack of planning by a staff member no longer in the district, our TAKS overflow kids got moved around 3 times. I saw one of my kids in the hall after the 3rd move. He said that he got tired of moving so he just guessed on the last two. “It was only two problems!” Famous last words... He failed by one question. From then on I have made a huge deal with my kids to work each question as though it were the one question that they needed to pass the test. What I really want kids to know is that we should strive for excellence in everything that we do. But in 8th grade that only works for a very few kids and those kids really don’t need anything said to them at all.

*Pay Attention to Details*

Barbara Carroll taught me a lot when we were together at Barwise. (Coming back after 12 years off from teaching, I needed a lot of help. And still do.) But the most significant concept she taught me was to teach my students how to pay attention to details. Some of the most brilliant kids will sweep over the question and answer
what they think the question is about to ask. (I’m not brilliant, but I am definitely
guilty here.) My Academic students often need help weeding through the wordiness
to the meat of the problem. Once they get to the meat, they are often surprised at
what they know! Barbara’s method of getting kids to focus on the details is to: 1.)
Read the question completely. 2.) Underline the question, 3.) Circle important
information, and 4.) Show significant work. (You know the difference between work
and significant work.) Now, Barbara took her students much deeper than these
steps but these four are a good start. On TAKS reviews I would often grade in part
on accuracy and in part on if students followed the 3 steps. It made a significant
difference for my students. (Thanks for sharing with me Barbara!)

*Formula Chart
As stated earlier, make sure the students know the formula chart.

*Three Parts Brain, One Part Courage.
One year Andria Borgman, my student teacher, finished student teaching just before
the TAKS test. On her last day she left a TAKS test gift for all of our students. She
had flagged a pencil for each student with empowering words on it. The kids were
blown away that she would think of them on this important day. They held onto
that pencil like Dumbo held onto the ‘magic’ feather that he believed gave him the
to fly.

On the day of the TAKS test, I stuff my pockets full of gum, lollipops, etc… and go to
the cafeteria where the kids are all waiting to come into the building. I hand out
goodies like the Easter Bunny on Easter morning. With each piece of candy comes a
gush of encouraging words specific to that student. It is incredibly empowering to
our students to know that we believe in them.

*Where Math, Room and Mind Meet
Our school has made a practice of asking us the names of our most ‘at risk’ non-IEP
kids. Our counselor graciously puts those kids in our room so that these kids feel a
higher level of comfort. For them, my room is where math takes place. Whatever
edge we can give these kids, we should do so!

*Sacred Saturdays Surprisingly Unsacred
Often times we get the feeling certain kids do not care about the TAKS test. But
when the rubber meets the road, you will be surprised who cares. Offer a Saturday
Review Session the Saturday before the TAKS test. Open it up to all students, split
the objectives in three parts and do a rotation with 2 other teachers. It cuts the
work in thirds and the kids do not lose interest quite as easily. Donuts and pizza
help! I have always required parent signatures, with a phone number where I can
reach a parent in case there is a discipline issue. I require kids to be engaged and on
time. One year while at Barwise, about 30 minutes after we started, a boy I thought
would never come appeared at my door. With respect I had never heard from him
before, he said: “Mrs. Eby, I’m sorry that I am late. I ended up having to ride my
bike from East Side and it was awfully cold. Can I come in?” Not only did he come
into my room for the day, but he touched my heart forever.
ON DISCIPLINE

*Was I Ever Young?
When disciplining kids, always remember what it was like to be their age.

*Do Unto Others...
When disciplining kids, always ask yourself how you would want someone to discipline your own child for this behavior. Oh and by the way, never think that your own child is beyond any behavior you see on any of your students.

*Anger
On that rare occasion that you really become angry with a student, make sure that you use that very controlled anger on behalf of that student. Some kids will feel cared for in the midst of your anger because, in some backwards way, they believe that if they can arouse that level of emotion from you, then you must really care for them. If your anger is because the student has inconvenienced you and you want to give retribution, then remove yourself from the situation until you have gathered your senses. Remember you are the adult and (s)he is the child.

*Punitive or Productive
Never let detention be a time where the kids just sit and ponder what they have done. They will only use that time to ponder how angry they are at you. Usually the point of detention is to replace learning time that has been stolen by the student. So use your captive audience to get some Math time in. Amazingly, they may find themselves volunteering to come in the next time. If the student is absolutely defiant and will not work with you, have an alternate plan in place. I keep a few “TAKS Facts” folders in my room. Each folder has about 4 pages front and back of Math Facts that students need to know for the TAKS test in one pocket, notebook paper and a pencil in the other pocket. I will tell them that they are welcome to leave as soon as they have finished copying pages one to three. Discipline with a productive outcome is always the best.

*At The End of Your Rope... or Star Bellied Sneetches
I graduated from A & M in December of 1981. So my first teaching job started in the middle of the year. I lucked into a great job in Richardson teaching high school Alg. II and Geometry to really great kids. Enough teachers had babies that year that I was able to keep that caliber of student the following years as well. In 7 years of teaching at that school, I never even considered sending anyone to the office for discipline issues. I sat out of teaching for a number of years to be with my children in the early years. When I started teaching Jr. High in 2003, I realized how much the world had changed. I have always loved kids, all ages, all races, and all kinds. And I loved the kids I had the first year back, but I had one class whose behavior was so outrageous
that I wasn't sure if anyone was learning anything. What do you do? I called parents, I gave detentions, I wrote referrals, I gave Saturday School, I went to their games, I gave them treats... NOTHING WORKED!

Finally, at the end of my rope, I told my students that I was finished fighting those who chose not to learn. I was splitting my room into learners and non-learners. I put everyone who wanted to learn at the front of the room and all the ‘non-learners’ in the back. All they were required to do was to stay out of the ‘learners’ space. The ‘non-learners’ were shocked. They hated being outside of the loop, literally. Within a week, each of the ‘non-learners’ came to me privately and asked to become a ‘learner’. Inside, I would be dying to embrace them like the father embraced the prodigal son, but outside I responded very carefully. "Well, I don’t know. The learners are sure getting a lot done. If I let you in, you may stop that again. I’m not sure I can take that chance." After an appropriate amount of begging, this time on their part, I would let them into the ‘learner’ section. For the rest of the year, when those kids acted up, I would ask: ‘learner’ or ‘non-learner’? Learner, Mrs. Eby.

Who knows if it would work again, but when you have tried everything else in the world, it is worth a try. I can’t guarantee you that it will not backfire on you and you better start with some really fun lessons that make them want back in the learning loop. But it is something to ponder. Oh and by the way, the original ‘learners’ felt cherished. We are often so busy oiling the squeaky wheel that we don’t have energy left for the well oiled wheel.

GRADING

*X Guards The Spot
When grading papers always put the X on the answer. This will prevent kids from being tempted to change the answers once the paper has been returned and accuse you of grading incorrectly.

*HELP
Make sure parents know ahead of time what to expect of your grading. I give each parent a ‘HELP! I’M DROWNING IN MATH’ handout before school starts and tell them to put it on the inside of the kitchen cabinet during the first six weeks. I tell them that by the second six weeks they will probably want to move it to the outside of the cabinet and refer to it often. (Attach a copy.)

*Follow The Paper Trail
Kids often blame their teacher for losing their papers. About 99% of the time the paper is still sitting in the student’s binder. Have a clear paper route plan that each student is completely aware of. This will take the responsibility off of you and put it on the student. You will need a place for each class to put its papers, perhaps an ‘inbox letter trays’. (A parent just made me a lock box with 6 slits in it that students could put their papers in but not take them back out. Before this, I have had a few
students take papers out of my trays and copy them before returning them to the tray.)

You also may want to buy a plastic file box to take home with you. Office Depot has one with a handle at the top and a lid that pops up so you will always have a little stapler, paper clips, grading pens, sticky notes, etc... I have a Graded and Grading Folder for each class in my file. I also keep a folder for all of my active Keys in my file. I take papers up from a class, staple them together, and put the papers in the Grading Folder of the file box while in view of the students. (Later, I can use the fact that a paper does not have staple marks on it to solve some late issue debates with students.)

Students who have late papers, corrected papers or make up work will put them straight into their class period’s letter tray.

Each one of my students knows not to hand me individual papers. If you ask any of my students what will happen if they do hand me a paper, they will say: “You will lose it.” “That’s right! And whose fault will it be?” “Mine, because I knew you would lose it.”

*Grading Goal?
When developing a grading policy, remember that our ultimate goal is for kids to learn. How does my grading policy encourage my students to continue to learn? Note that this may be different for your Academic students verses your Honors students.

*Be Kind To Yourself
If you want your Academic students to do something, you must grade it. Few are going to do the work ‘for the sake of learning’. But be kind to yourself in the way that you grade. When I taught at Barwise and my own daughter was at Zundy, she brought home what we have labeled as weekly ‘Stampy Sheets’. Her math teachers would give her a ‘Stampy Sheet’ every Monday with the week’s assignments listed on the ‘Stampy Sheet’. Each day her teacher would walk quickly through the room to stamp the ‘Stampy Sheet’ of each student who completed the night’s homework. At the end of the week, the teacher would take up the ‘Stampy Sheet’ and give a weekly grade off of that sheet. (See Attached)

CHEATING

*Not All Cheating Is Created Equal
Cheating is another problem that you will face. There is a lot of pressure for kids to excel in school. The pressure is so much for some kids that they will do what they would not ordinarily do so that they do not have to face the disappointment of that person that they do not want to let down. Consequences are always justified, but ponder why the student cheated before you deliver the consequences. You may be
able to help the student at a level deeper than just the cheating incident if you take the time to consider the person.

*Share and Share Alike
One way to handle cheating is to consider the fact that one brain did work for two people so split the grade between the two students. I have had up to 4 people split one grade. The original grade was an 80; each student got a 20. I usually do this for daily grades that will not make a huge impact on the grade but will make an impact on the student.

*Bully Cheating
At times you will find that some dominating students have pressured a shy otherwise well behaved student into letting them copy off of his paper. I always make sure that the dominating students see me discipline the shy guy along with them. If I do not then that establishes his weakness and leaves him open to being made fun of by the dominators. On a rare occasion one of the dominating students will stand up for the shy guy. That is very significant for the dominating guy's character and for the confidence of the shy guy.

I also make sure I visit with the shy guy when the other guys are not around. The conversation will go something like this: “Man, you need to use your backbone. You’ve done the hard work and they get a free ride. That is just not right. I understand that it is hard to say ‘no’ to these guys but you are going to have to. From now on when someone asks you to copy, you say that you tried that once and it did not pay off. Tell him that he can’t copy but you would be happy to help him as he does the homework. You will probably not be pressured from that guy again.” Also, offer to allow that student to turn in his papers early so that he does not have to fear someone pressuring him to let them copy.

*Breaking Bad News
When do you call the parents? That is a personal call. I usually let the kid decide if he wants to tell the parents the first time he is involved in a cheating situation. If it happens again, I try to contact the parents. Always make a photocopy of the papers that were copied so that you can show the parents if the problem becomes habitual. No parent wants to believe that their child has cheated. Sometimes the only route to believing is seeing.

*If It Quacks Like a Duck? Does It Have to Be a Duck?
I have had kids that will not admit cheating. I will have the evidence in front of them. I can show them how the two papers have all the same work, right and wrong, in the same position on the paper. I can show them how they miscopied a -1 and made it a 7 or made a greater than sign a 7, yet still came up with the right answer. I can show them how one paper crossed out an 8 to make it a 1 when simplifying a fraction, yet they wrote an 18. Still, nothing. What do you do? I don’t know. As always, photocopy the papers. Ask your administrator for advice. That’s why they get the big bucks! I have also had a student come up with the same exact
weird answers as another student that I know is not the cheating type of kid. The kid would rather eat brussel sprouts than cheat. What do you do? I don’t know. Teaching is hard! Sometimes we win and sometimes we lose. Don’t lose heart. (For me, this is easier said than done.)

SUBSTITUTE TEACHERS

*Arm Them With Info.
Being absent is much harder than being present. Avoid absences. Things will come up where you must be absent. Have a clearly marked substitute folder available at all times. In this folder you should have a generic informational note to the substitute. Give only the classroom policies that will be used during an absence day (tardy policy, attendance policy, bathroom policy, talking policy, and anything else that a student might use to get the upper hand on a sub). In the generic note, kindly, remind the sub that (s)he should not be on your computer or spend the day sitting behind the desk reading...students automatically think that you cannot see them if you are behind the desk. Leave a seating chart, marking all students that are helpful and students that are not so helpful. Give the substitute the names and locations of other teachers that are helpful. If there are special needs students, PLEASE save the sub and the student embarrassment and let the sub know about the issue. Leave referral slips, detention slips, bathroom passes, Smart Lab passes, paper for notes and a writing utensil for the substitute. Keep a section of the folder for ‘surprise absences’. Leave an easy but time consuming assignment with complete instructions of how the student should complete the given assignment. Have the substitute take up the assignment so that students will not spend hours on it at home that night and so that you can see who did and did not work during the class time. Give students who did not work or misbehaved for the substitute stiff consequences upon your return. If you do not, they will repeat the behavior for the next substitute. Classes or students with ideal behavior deserve a reward of some sort.

*Sub-Contract
I have had certain years where my students have been a bit more disrespectful than other years. During those years my students must sign a substitute contract at the first of the year so that they will be aware of what I expect from them on a sub day and what the consequences will be for not following those expectations. (Attached)

*Cut ‘Em Loose!
On planned absence days, always leave very very clear instructions. One time, years ago, I wrote out very clear instructions for my substitute on the back of an old worksheet, in an effort to ‘save the trees’. I left clearly marked papers to be handed out for each of my classes to work on. When I got back the next day, I found that the substitute had not read my notes, had gone and copied the old worksheet from the back of my instructions to give to all my students...ignoring the worksheets on my desk under the clearly written instructions and turned me in to my administrator
for not being prepared for my substitute. When you find a substitute that is not
good, please let your administrator know and save one of your colleagues the
trouble that you have gone through.

*The Proverbs 31 Substitute... A Good Substitute, Who Can Find?
Establish a relationship with a substitute. I have a handful of substitutes that have
taught my subject. I can leave them with my students and it is almost as though I
had been there myself. These substitutes are a rare blessing. For times when you
cannot get one of these, keep all your instructions very simple. I also keep my ear
out for young people that I know are interested in becoming teachers some day.
When I cannot get one of my former teacher substitutes, I try to get one of these so
that they can get some classroom experience to see if they really would like
teaching. Follow up with these substitutes. Be encouraging and be gracious to these
substitutes. They are not you. And there is really no substitute for the real thing.
(I thought about dedicating this paragraph to my favorite subs, but I don’t want
anyone else to steal them from me! What’s mine is yours, except when it comes to
my substitutes!)

MOVIES

*This Is Just Me
I am just going to air a pet peeve of mine. Through the years, when one of my own
children has come home and said that they watched “The Little Mermaid” (or some
other obscure movie) in class as a reward, I get very frustrated. My first thought is
that if I had known that my child would be wasting his/her day on a movie, I would
have kept him home. My second thought is that students watching a movie all day is
really for the teacher’s benefit so she can play catchup, not for the students’ benefit.
If you truly want to reward your students for good behavior, do a fun project that
relates to your subject matter. Science, build small parachutes and launch them
from the top of the school building. Math, do scale drawings to reinforce
proportions. English, have a day where students bring their favorite magazine
article and write a review over it. Just as punishment should fit the crime, rewards
should relate to your subject matter thus adding a level of respect to that subject
matter. If you do need a day to play catchup, be forthcoming about that. Give the
kids a library book day or sudoku day, something that will stretch their minds in
silence. Are movies always out of the question? Not if significant subject matter
learning really does occur from the movie. Students should also be held accountable
for what they learned during the movie.
Whew! There, I feel better now!
PARENTS

*Front Load Info.
Always communicate all policies and procedures clearly to all of your students and parents. You keep a signed copy in your files, the student should have a copy in his binder, and parents should be given a copy at open house. Each six weeks I try to write an update letter to my students and their parents. If you have a demographic that has computers at home, keep up with students through your web page and through emails. When you have a very important document to send home, have students sign out for the document. Later you will be able to show parents the signature.

*You’re Right, It Is Hard
A parent conference is one of the most difficult areas for a teacher. I have now been on both sides of the desk, one side as the teacher and the other side as the parent. It looks very different from each side. Also, I use the term desk as a metaphor. Never sit behind the desk while talking to a parent, you want to break down barriers not hide behind them. If you do not feel confident going into a conference, invite an administrator or a respected more experienced teacher to join you. Be sure to communicate your expectations to your conference partner before the parents arrive.

*Sacred Ground
As teachers, we must be sympathetic to what the parents are thinking and feeling from their side of the desk. First and foremost, we must remember that these parents really do love their children, so from the beginning know that you are treading on sacred ground. Second, whatever you say about the child, you are saying about the parent, because parents think of each child as an extension of themselves. What does each parent want to hear? Your child is great. I see a wonderful future for your child. You have done such a good job with your child. You are a success. There is hope.

*Below the Iceberg
Where is the child coming from? You will never know for sure. No family is perfect. If there is a perfect family, let me know who they are, I want them to raise my kids! There are many things that may come into play at home: problems with the law, divorce, financial issues, parental job loss, illness, abuse, perfectionist parent, child’s temperament… You never know, so listen carefully as parents talk and be gracious!

*Take the Time to Know Your Subject
Get to know your students. Know something positive and unique about each student. When you meet with a parent, begin by talking to them about the positive things that you have observed in their child. Do not make something up! Even
though they may defend their child to the death, they know when you are pumping sunshine and you will immediately lose credibility with them.

*Search For the Good
Here are some examples of how you can disarm a parent as you deal with an issue. “Joe has got the greatest smile. It is hard to be mad at him when he flashes that smile my way.” “I really sense that deep down Suzie cares about her schoolwork. On the days that she does not have her work, she gets so frustrated. I think she would be so much happier if she could walk through the door each day with the confidence that her work is done.” “Johnny loves to be with people. I think that if he really understood that his behavior is taking away from the learning of the kids he loves to be with, he might begin to think twice before he talks out in class.” “Ann is quite energetic. I think that will play well for her as an adult, but until that time we have to come up with a way for her to survive the next 4 years in a school setting.” Often times it is not what we say but how we say it. The best thing about approaching the student with a positive perspective is that it reminds us of the good in our student.

*One Team, One Family (Stolen Title, But a Good One)
If parents believe that we are on the same team, you will win them over. First, be sure that you ARE on the student’s team! Remember that you are the adult and he is the child. You are never to lower yourself to childlike behavior or statements. If you find yourself unable to act in the adult role, get help from someone you respect. It is less humbling to ask for help than to ask for forgiveness after you have really messed up a parent conference.

*Ask For Help
I cannot tell you how many times I have been at a loss of what to do with a child and said to the parents, “Nobody knows your child like you do. What has worked for you at home when this behavior arises?” Parents will often times soften at that point and tell what has worked for them. This does give confidence to you as a teacher that, okay, it is not just me, they have just admitted that it is occasionally an issue at home as well. If the parent says that they have never observed that behavior, tell them that you will check with their other teachers to see if that is a common thread through school or if it is just an issue in your class. If it is just in your class, call the student in for the parent conference and see if there is something going on that you are unaware of. Be open to change. If it happens in other classes as well, include other teachers in the next parent conference.

*Child or No Child
When should the child be in the parent/teacher conference? I like to have the student in the conference when I believe they have not been fully honest with the parents, when there is apathy involved or when the student needs a game plan for academic success. Have the student bring their binder to the conference. Be sure that you have copies of all policy and procedures sheets that have been given. Have a folder with all items that have a parent signature on it. DO NOT BE DEFENSIVE AT ANY POINT!!! Begin by asking the student to tell the parents about specific policies
that are in place in the class. Example: “Jimmy, tell your folks how we do homework in our class. Is it graded for accuracy or completion? What are you supposed to do if you get stumped? How often have you come in for help? What happens if you do not come in with your homework? How do you get makeup work when you are absent? Where do you turn that makeup work in? Where are you supposed to write the answer bank for Practice Sheets? Can you show us where you have done that on your papers?” Unless my students are in a coma, they are able to answer all of these questions and many many more. If a student does not answer a question, pull out the sheet that communicates that procedure or policy, highlight it and give one to the student and one to the parent. When a parent does not want a child in the conference, include an administrator in that conference.

*Are You Friend or Foe?
As kids get older, parents get tired of hearing the same old complaints about their child over and over again. Many parents are tackling this huge responsibility of raising kids alone. Make this conference different, partner with your students’ parents. Come up with a game plan for success with the parents. Define each person’s role and FOLLOW UP! While I am meeting with a parent I must always ask myself is this ‘iron sharpening iron’ or is this ‘blunt force hitting’. At the end of one, the tool is sharper and the end of the other there is damage. Parents do not want a gripe session about their child; they want help.

*Cut Your Losses
Over 99% of my parent conferences will end in productivity. On a very rare occasion, you will get a parent who is completely immovable. One year I taught the son of two elected judges in a very large city. The kid was basically being raised by a nanny and often fell short of the requirements in class. When the student earned a C in my class, this is how the PHONE conversation went: “Smith boys don’t get C’s!” “I understand that Mark is not of C intelligence but that is what he earned this 6 weeks.” “Why!” “As I said in my notes to you and your son and in my phone messages to your secretary, he has not turned in the assignments that were due in this class.” “He had them done.” “Yes, I believe that he did, that’s why I continually asked for them. But he continued to have excuses as to why he could not turn them in.” “If you knew he did them, why didn’t you go into his binder and get them.” “Because I have 125 students, I cannot go into each student’s binder to get their assignments.” “Oh, so you are saying that you cannot handle this job.” Somehow, supernaturally, I kept my cool. But at that point an old proverb came to my mind, “You cannot reason with a fool.” Now, just because that came through my mind, that didn’t give me an excuse to let it come through my lips. My outer shell remained calm and respectful (once again, a supernatural event). But I realized that this man had no intention of seeing his son’s responsibility in the situation. I ended the conversation with “Perhaps, sir, but all I know is that I cannot give grades for papers I have not seen. You are welcome to visit with my administrator further if you would like.” At that point, you hightail it to your administrator so that he knows the whole story before he faces the parent. In 16 years, I can remember 4 immovable parents. This is the exception not the rule. But for that rare exception, decide how
much of that parent you can handle, partner with your administrator and focus on the real purpose you are at that school...TEACHING KIDS!

STORIES

You've got to learn to laugh with your kids and at yourself.

*One time I called down a girl for talking while she should have been working. Her response? Mrs. Eby! I couldn't have been talking, I was putting on my lip gloss!

*I used to work on an overhead projector. I had to keep a squirt bottle with water in it to wash off my transparencies as I worked. One day I came in at the bell after guarding my door, only to find that my students had put a live goldfish in my squirt bottle. I went the whole class period pretending that I didn't notice until the very last minute when I pretended to notice for the first time. Talk about a captive audience. They watched my every move to see if I would notice. If there is one thing a teacher does not want to mess up, that is a captive audience!

*Back in the late 70 and early 80's, high schools used to have smoking pits and dipping areas. I know, crazy huh? In the mid 80’s studies proved definitively that smoking was bad for your health and thus the end of the pit and dip. After the end of pit and dip, one of our 'extra' duties was to guard the area formerly used for these activities. My friend Brenda Shelton and I were on guard one day when we found two boys dipping. We stared 'em down like the cowboys they were and said: "Swallow or take a trip to the principal, your choice." They actually swallowed. (This will only be significant to the ones of us who have actually swallowed a little dip ourselves.) I promise, they turned red like an old Donald Duck cartoon! Rumor has it that if they had to do it over again they would take their chances with the principal.

*This same friend of mine was the Summer School principal one year while I was teaching summer school. That could mean nothing but trouble. Between classes one day I was in the restroom washing overhead projector pen off of my hands when a student and I struck up a conversation. We actually had a very pleasant visit, until she pulled out a cigarette and lit up. She generously offered me a drag. Bless her heart, you should have seen her face when I told her that I was a teacher. (I looked quite young way way back when...) The most hilarious part was when I had to take her down to the principal's office and tell my friend what she had done. Brenda very professionally nodded, asked the child to step out of the room for a few minutes at which point we began to laugh so uncontrollably that we felt guilty giving her more than a warning.

*Words of wisdom to the ‘nursing mom/teacher’. Be sure that when you go into the closet to pump in the middle of the day that you make your 'DO NOT DISTURB' sign
big enough for the most absent minded student to notice. I walked in as a white faced adolescent boy was running out of my fellow teacher’s room. He learned a little more science that day than he bargained for. He also learned to read the sign on the closet door.

*Always make parent phone calls alone. I was a young newly wed, making my ‘final failure phone calls’ from home. The parent was not home so I was leaving a message, “Mr. Smith, all of our grades are in and Rusty’s final grade is a 20…” Just as I said that my husband walked in the door and said in his ‘outdoor voice’, “A 20? How can anyone make a 20!!!???” End of year exhaustion, the element of surprise, Brian’s face and the honesty of his question, “How does anyone actually make a 20?”... Well, there it all was, on the answering machine. I held back the laughter, barely, finished my message in choppy phrases that masked my need to laugh out loud and 2 days later Brian and I moved to Indiana. Seemed the best way to handle that one.

*One day I was teaching another one of my fascinating lessons when I realized that one of my students was asleep. After numerous tries at waking her up, I decided to let her sleep. We were about halfway through the class when all of a sudden, while in her sleep, she ripped a big one (expelled gas, as my mother taught me to say). Bless her heart she slept through the gas, the laughter and the Febreeze. When she woke up, you can imagine the reaction of the other students. Fortunately, she laughed along with them. From that point on, I have told that story to every single student who has fallen asleep in my class. Out of pure mortification, I have few students who sleep in my class these days. (Feel free to use this story to your own advantage.)

*One Christmas season we had a door decorating competition. I walked out of my door as a newspaper photographer was taking the teacher across the hall’s photo. She was posing in her Christmas sweater in front of her door. I knew that she was the type that would hate that kind of publicity so I said: “Hey! I’m wearing a Christmas sweater. Do you want me to join you?” “Sure!” The next day my husband opened the newspaper and there was our picture under the caption: ‘HOLIDAY FASHION FAUX PAS”. We had posed for an article about how Christmas sweaters were out of style! So what do we learn from this? Never have your picture taken with a beer in your hand, hugging a person other than your spouse or while wearing a Christmas sweater.

*It was the end of the first day for solo week of one of my amazing student teachers. This particular year, I had a rough group of kids, especially the girls, but if anyone could handle them Andria could. As I walked down the hall I got the strange sense that something was brewing on campus and if something was brewing it would be with one of my kids. I asked a couple of kids to tell me what was going on. No one would speak. Finally, I asked: “Do I need to go check on my room?” One girl blinked once to indicate yes. Just as I came running around the corner there comes the
teacher across the hall with one girl...the teacher’s eyes the size of saucers. Next came my student teacher, white as a ghost, escorting another girl to the office. I walked in the room and for the first time in 6 months the room of now 24 girls was silent. I said: “I do not want to hear a word from anyone except for the one person who is going to tell me what happened!” Still, silence. After an extremely pregnant pause, one girl finally lifts her hand from under the desk to reveal the biggest wad of hair I have ever seen in my whole life! As I began to look around, it looked like a beauty shop floor! Very seldom do I let my students catch me off guard. But my face must have been hilarious because we all completely fell apart in laughter. Upon regaining my composer, we had the standard ‘fights are stupid, no boy is worth that’ talk. One of the greatest things about teaching is that there is never a boring moment.

*Whenever I am running a little bit late coming back to my class from a bathroom break between classes, I will inevitably stumble on a couple of kids running late to my class as well. To keep things alive I will look at them and say: “If I beat you, your tardy.” And then I will take off running! Of course this surprises them because I am not a spring chicken, but they take off running anyway. One day I was going particularly fast in a pair of particularly slippery shoes. As I took the 90 degree turn, I went sliding spread eagle across the hallway. What do you think the girls I was racing did? They jumped right over me and kept running. While I lay on the floor laughing too hard to get up, 2 of my students came to the door not sure whether to help me up or lock the crazy lady out. They made the right choice, I declared them that day’s favorite students and we all got a good laugh at my expense!

*You know the single faculty women’s bathroom is an issue on our campus. One day I did not want to wait in line for the women’s so I decided to boldly use the men’s room. Unfortunately a male substitute evidently did not get the ‘lock the bathroom door and close the stall’ memo! I did not have to glance twice before I knew I had to take off as fast and nonchalant as I could hoping that my mistake would go unnoticed by the comedy team of Brewster and Young, who happened to be standing in the hall as I flew by. No such luck!! The moral of this story? Some things in life are worth the wait.

*Very early one morning, as my 12 year old daughter and I rounded the corner in my little mini van, we noticed a huge circle of kids outside in the front yard of the school. It didn’t take but a second to realize that there was a big fight in the schoolyard. Not sure what to do, I did what any sane person would do, I sat on my horn as hard as I could, drove up into the school yard, jumped out of my van and started yelling, at the top of my lungs “Alright everyone scatter!” Kids started running every-which-way. It looked like a nest of roaches spreading when the lights are turned on! Fortunately, our receptionist, a very capable woman, had already made her way to the center of yet another girl fight. So I went back to my mini van, still parked in the middle of the school yard with my sweet daughter staring, eyes wide open, mouth ajar. She could barely get the words out: “You are a crazy lady!”
That wasn’t the last time I heard that during the day, but I did find a way to break up a mob, fast!

*One weekend when I was young and single, I took an extra day off and headed to the ski slopes for a long weekend. I got back at 4am, just in time to take a short nap before heading to school for the day. I seldom gave worksheets for kids to do all period, but this particular day, I thought it more productive than spending 6 hours trying to make full sentences that sounded mathematical. You know how it goes when you realize that someone in the room is asleep? There starts a little snicker that builds into a crescendo of laughter. All I remember was hearing a crescendo of laughter. I was sitting at my desk with my knuckles holding up my chin, my eyes were closed. Wisely, I kept my eyes closed and said: "Alright you are all funny, I’m not asleep, get back to work!” The moral to this story? Always stay one step ahead of your students, even in your sleep.

*As our high school’s student council sponsor, I got to teach a leadership class to the student council officers. One year, I had a particularly precocious group of officers. (Much later on I found out that each month when the boy officers were supposed to be changing the message on the sign in front of the high school, they were stealing, one by one, the busts of the great writers that were supposed to watch over the books in our school library. I think the last count of the year was five missing busts.) One slow day I was trying to be an example to my officers as one who uses one’s time wisely, I was teaching my students how to do face sculpture. How do you do face sculpture? Well, you put strange folds all over your face and scotch tape them into place, of course. We had spent about 15 minutes perfectly sculpting our faces into what could easily be the faces of creatures on Star Wars (it was the early 80’s). When, for the first time in the history of the school, our principal made his way out of his office and down the half mile or so it took to get to our end of the hall. Our principal, Mr. Parks was a serious man. He was so serious that we all swore that even his wife called him Mr. Parks. Well, there was the one time when Brian and I were dating that he looked Mr. Parks right in the face and said: “Hi, Ron.” Hi, Ron? No one did that. My face must have shown the shock because that day, Mr. Parks almost changed the expression on his face. But when Mr Parks walked in on our face sculpture exercise, none of us could change the expressions on our faces, they were stuck with tape! I tried to say something. He just looked over his glasses at us, kind of the way I do to people now, and said: “Uh, forget it…” He walked out the door and never dropped in on us again. The moral of this story? If you are stupid enough to say yes to volunteering to sponsor student council in the biggest high school in Richardson, you can get away with a lot...because you know they can’t fire you. No one else is stupid enough to take your job!

***My first responsibility is always to see that my students are safe and that they are learning. Everything in my class should be about the kids. Beyond that, feel free to laugh with your students and for heaven’s sake learn to laugh at yourself. Four weeks ago, one of those student council officers came to town to have dinner with
my family. She is 42 now. She brought her husband and 3 children with her. We had a wonderful time together. Sometimes when you give all of yourself to your students, years later, you gain a lifelong friend. I am so blessed!