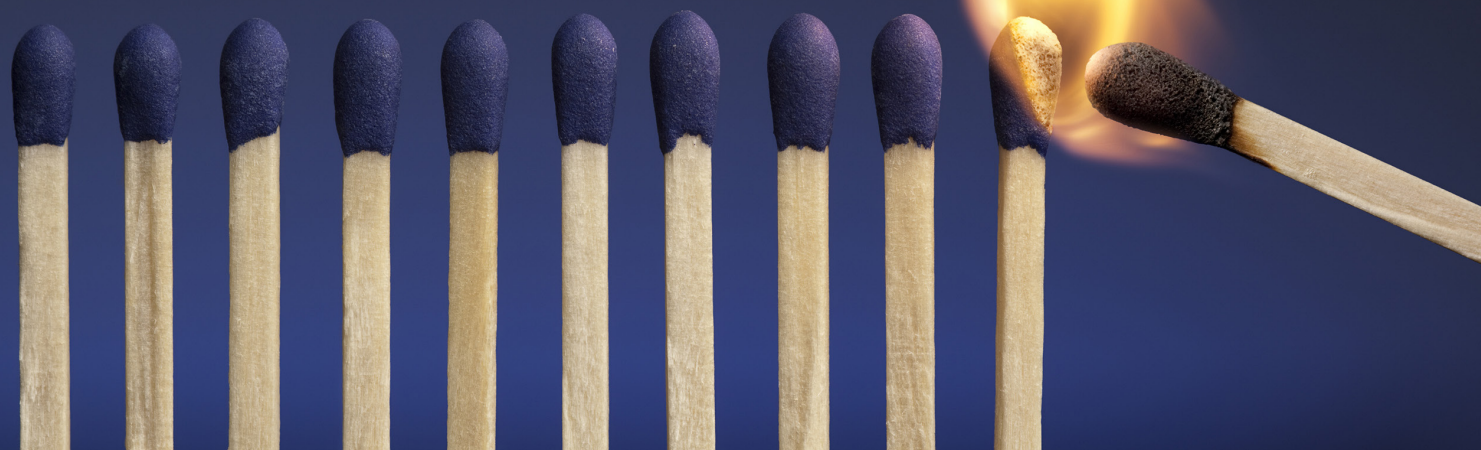


Feeling the Burn? How to Ignite Your Passion as an Educator

by Joyce J. Click



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When I recently retired from teaching choir and general music after forty-four years, I was surprised by the number of colleagues who questioned my decision because I was still passionate and enthusiastic. I loved working with students but explained that at age sixty-six, it seemed a fitting time. Other effective co-workers had made the same decision once they approached a similar milestone. So what are the factors that contribute to occupational satisfaction? Nationwide, we are hearing reports of teacher burn-out that contributes to teacher shortages. Universities have seen a 35 percent decline¹ in the number of students majoring in education over the past ten years. Outstanding educators are being hired away by private industry and businesses.² Burnout, a condition in which an educator has exhausted personal and professional resources, is being reported by growing number of professionals in schools.³

A Mayo Clinic report⁴ cited six possible causes of burn-out:

1. Lack of control
2. Unclear expectations
3. Dysfunctional workplace
4. Extremes of activity or chaos
5. Lack of social support
6. Work-life balance

As I reflect on my own career in education, I unknowingly combated these issues in several ways.

Lack of Control

I learned to “work around” the rhetoric and focus on what I could control. I identified supplies, instructional materials, and field experience opportunities that benefited my students. Writing grants to groups such as Donors Choose, The NEA Foundation, Adopt a Classroom, and local parent and district funding sources helped me provide for students rather than spending energy being frustrated by a lack of funds.

Unclear Expectations

Educational trends and initiatives come and go. I decided not to spend time embracing one methodology, as every child learns differently. Instead, I focused on specific objectives that promoted a growth mindset and observable progress. Best practices, backed by research, provided more long-term success in my classroom pedagogy.

Dysfunctional Workplace Dynamics

Some of the best advice I received was to steer clear of negative influences surrounding education. I figured out ways to maintain a positive perspective such as picking a new path to walk to the office that avoided negative individuals. When “water-cooler” gossip circulated, I excused myself from the conversation.

Extremes of Activity or Chaos

I paused my activity level and took three slow breaths when feeling stressed. I repeated encouraging self-talk phrases such as “I can do this” and “I am the adult here” during tense situations. Consistently following a clearly defined classroom management plan in a methodical rather than frantic manner helped classes feel safe, secure, and regulated.

Lack of Social Support

I surrounded myself with like-minded individuals whom I trusted to keep discussions non-judgmental and confidential. During my first year, I asked a co-worker to help me revise my classroom management plan. In the final semester, I invited a long-time mentor to critique my conducting gestures during rehearsals.

Work-life Balance

I left work each afternoon at a specific time, except when evening programs were scheduled. I made sure that I had everything ready for the next morning before departing for home, including lessons plans and instructional materials. I designated daily time blocks to answer work-related e-mails, generally a block in the early morning and one in the afternoon during a prep period.

Master Teachers Respond

Ten career educators in my professional learning community shared what ignites their passion for teaching, and I recorded their responses here:

- Love the big payoff moments such as a great performance or seeing an individual student grow. (Mr. G)
- Enjoy high school students for their well-developed cognitive abilities and childlike curiosity. (Mr. P)
- By far, the students are the best part—getting to know them as human beings and seeing them grow as people. (Ms. K)
- Being paid for reading, writing, speaking, listening, and learning while helping students develop confidence and find their voice. (Ms. B)
- Seeing the “lightbulb” moments and observing students learning something new. (Ms. S)
- The saying is true, “You can’t teach them until you reach them.” Everyone has a story and they just need an adult to listen to them. (Ms. E)
- Watching students believe in themselves and start taking risks in their own learning. (Mr. L)
- Helping students develop a vision for their life beyond high school and see those young adults get launched out into the world. (Ms. H)
- Being creative and renewed each year and receiving feedback from students. (Ms. J)
- Observing the growth that each individual student makes over the span of time. (Mr. D)

These experienced instructors gave their best advice for “avoiding the burn.” It is no coincidence that many of their comments had similar themes.

- You must take care of your mental and physical health to be the best teacher you hope to become. (Mr. D)
- Find ways to laugh and learn with students and just close your door (literally and figuratively) to the outside noise of administrative and societal judgements. (Ms. J)
- Do not believe the word “can’t” and remember that teaching is not a sprint, but a marathon. (Mr. L)

- If you do not take time for yourself and your family, you will not survive. Protect yourself from unreasonable demands. (Mr. E)
- Look for the gains, however small, that students make. Know that you are making a difference even if it is not visible to you right now. (Mr. H)
- There is no need to continue working in a toxic environment. If you experience actual dread going to work, then find a new school. (Mr. P)
- Always strive to teach from a positive perspective. Look for special traits in your students and don't be afraid to point them out. (Ms. S)
- Don't take work home every night, as you deserve rest. (Mr. K)
- Hold on to the big payoff moments, like after a student graduates and tells you how much they loved your class. (Mr. G)
- Read Ralph Waldo Emerson's "From a Letter to His Daughter"⁵ often. "Finish each day and be done with it. You have done what you could... Tomorrow is a new day; begin it well and serenely." (Ms. B)

Conclusion

Now is the time for you to start your journey on the path to a fulfilling long-term career in education. Our students need your collective experience and wisdom. Create your *Catch Fire Action Plan* that will help ignite your passion and "avoid the burn."

Catch Fire Action Plan

1. State what you like about teaching on a Post-it Note and refer to it daily.
2. List a negative influence that you are going to avoid.
3. Select one resource that will help your instruction and a possible source for funding.
4. Draft a learning objective that you are going to focus on.
5. Write a phrase that you will say to yourself when you are stressed.
6. Identify a person you trust who will serve as a collaborator and schedule a meeting time.
7. Designate two times per day that you will read your work e-mails.
8. Target a time for leaving work each day.

Select two items from the *Catch Fire Action Plan* above that you are going to implement this week and reward yourself for following through. Eventually your new behaviors will become habit and you will have more energy, avoid the burn, and be joyful in your career. **CT**

NOTES

- ¹ Myah Ward, "The Teacher Shortage Problem is Bad, Really Bad." *Politico*, August 15, 2022, accessed August 21, 2022 <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/politico-nightly/2022/08/15/the-teacher-shortage-problem-is-bad-really-bad-00052053>.
- ² Kathryn Dill, "Teachers are Quitting, and Companies are Hot to Hire Them." *The Wall Street Journal*, February 2, 2022, accessed August 8, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/teachers-are-quitting-and-companies-are-hot-to-hire-them-11643634181>.
- ³ Tim Walker, "Getting Serious about Teacher Burn-out." *NEA News*, November 12, 2021, accessed August 6, 2022, <https://www.nea.org/advocating-for-change/new-from-nea/getting-serious-about-teacher-burnout>.
- ⁴ Mayo Clinic staff writers, "Job Burnout: How to spot it and take action." Mayo Clinic Health Information, June 5, 2021, accessed August 20, 2022, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/burnout/art-20046642>.
- ⁵ "Finish Every Day and Be Done With it," <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2018/12/19/finish-day/>, 1939, *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson in Six Volumes*, Edited by Ralph L. Rusk (Professor of English at Columbia University), Volume 4, Letter from: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Letter to: Ellen Emerson, Letter date: April 8, 1854, Letter location: Concord, Start Page 438, Quote Page 439, Columbia University Press, New York.