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ABSTRACT

This booklet is a tool to help teachers find ways to keep their commitment to education strong. It shares success stories of educators who have kept their professional dedication alive, despite day-to-day hassles and significant obstacles. It also outlines steps teachers can take to keep their energy levels high. In each section space is provided for educators to write down reflections, goals, and ideas. The first of two sections explains some tips for experiencing personal renewal. For example, one tip involves writing down a list of 10 things that make a difference to someone. Since it is important to keep all aspects of a teacher's life sharp, this booklet lists four areas that teachers should sharpen to feel personal renewal: (1) physical health; (2) meeting social and emotional needs; (3) spiritual fulfillment; and (4) mental exercise. A good sense of humor keeps spirits high and wards off stress. Section 2 details activities and methods that lead to professional growth. Teachers should read outside materials and apply the readings to their teaching. Other tips for professional growth include taking a course or workshop, becoming a mentor, and applying for a grant. (KDP)

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KEEPING *Spirits* HIGH

RENEWING OUR COMMITMENT TO EDUCATION

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I NTRODUCTION

Those who serve our country's schools have a profound effect on the future. Without an education, today's children and youth don't have a chance at fulfilling the

American dream. Every day, educators stimulate learning, engender curiosity, share knowledge, develop skills, and prompt questions in order to give children that chance.

However, educators also must cope with dwindling resources, increasing responsibilities, and growing public scrutiny.

How do school employees handle the trials and frustrations inherent in their jobs? Some simply give up, withdraw into a shell, or leave the profession. Others look inside themselves and to their colleagues to keep their spirits high.

Even though society does not always recognize our efforts, we know the future depends on us. As educators, we can work together to build the prestige of our profession. But our contribution to society also depends, at least in part, on maintaining our intellectual edge and sustaining our enthusiasm.

How To Use This Booklet

Keeping Spirits High is not a substitute for well-deserved recognition or higher salaries. However, it is a tool to help each of us reach inside ourselves to keep our commitment to education strong.

Thankfully, in the face of social and financial stresses, most educators simply refuse to give up or give in. Their mission is simply too important!

This booklet shares success stories of educators who have kept their professional dedication alive, despite day-to-day hassles and significant obstacles. It also outlines steps each of us can take to keep our energy levels high as we continue to take on the most important job in the nation ... educating our next generation of citizens, workers, parents, and leaders.

In each section, space is provided for you to write down reflections, goals, and ideas. The first section explains some tips for experiencing personal renewal. Section 2 details activities and methods that lead to professional growth.

PERSONAL RENEWAL

Each day, thousands of dedicated educators find the energy and commitment to make a difference in the lives of children. You probably see them every day in your school system. Yet, you also may know colleagues who have become dispirited or disenchanted. You may even be feeling this way yourself.

Recognize the Difference

What makes the difference? It can't be only extrinsic factors, because most educators work under similar conditions. At some point in their careers, most have had to deal with budget cuts, discipline problems, angry parents, and countless other frustrations. Yet, some have found a way to stay motivated and enthusiastic, while others probably are wondering why they entered education in the first place.

The big difference between those who stay motivated and excited about their jobs, and those who are feeling burned out, must be something intrinsic. In other words, some educators find the inner strength and drive to keep their spirits high, despite all the obstacles and very real problems they face each day.

No easy answers. How do some educators manage to keep themselves invigorated and enthusiastic? What works for one person may not work for another. (And, let's face it, there are some days when *nothing* works very well.) But successful educators have adopted some helpful techniques to stay energized.

Take Control of Your Attitude

Talk to some highly motivated educators, and you're likely to discover they've taken control of their attitude. In other words, they look at a problem from the perspective of what they can do about it. For example, Nancy¹, a veteran teacher, developed her own motivational strategy for when she feels burned out:

I grew up knowing I wanted to be a teacher. I can still remember how excited I was the first time I walked into my own classroom. But as the years went by, I found myself losing some of my enthusiasm.

I didn't want to change jobs — there has never been anything else I've wanted to do. But I knew something had to change. That something was me.

In education, we've become accustomed to being told we aren't doing a good job. Newspapers are full of stories about how test scores are declining. Parents tell us it must be our fault if their child doesn't get straight A's. It's too easy to let those voices control our attitudes about who we are and what we do.

I've made a folder that helps me remember my successes. In it, I stick things that remind me I'm doing a good job — a note from a parent, a picture drawn by one of my students, a certificate from a seminar I attended. Now when I'm feeling down, I just look through my folder. I call it "instant motivation!"

¹To protect the privacy of those who spoke honestly during interviews for this publication, some names have been changed.

Look at Your Accomplishments

All of us have moments when we emotionally “run out of gas.” During these times, it’s easy to convince ourselves that no matter how hard we’ve tried, nothing we’ve done has made a difference.

When this feeling of despair strikes, try taking an honest look at your accomplishments. One method is simply to list these accomplishments, or you might try writing an informal autobiography. Think about how you helped a student succeed ... or the day you gave a presentation to the school board that resulted in a policy change ... or the time you organized a fundraiser that helped put a new roof on a community building. Each of these recollections will help you realize that you *have* made an important difference.

You also may want to set aside some private time each day for writing in a journal. A brief period of daily reflection can help you sort out your feelings, think about your life goals, and evaluate your progress in working toward them.

Make a quick list

Perhaps you don’t have time to write your autobiography. Maybe you hated keeping a diary as a child and certainly don’t plan to start now.

In that case, take 30 minutes and think of 10 things you’ve done that made a difference for someone. Write your list on an index card, and keep it in your purse or pocket so you can refer to it often.

ACTIVITY:

List your personal goals and note progress you've made in achieving them. What opportunities are available to help you meet your goals? What obstacles might impede your progress? How will you overcome them?



Stay Sharp

Many time management books use this story to illustrate how we need to keep “sharpening” our abilities to be more effective in every task we undertake:

Once upon a time, two foresters went into the woods to cut down a tree. The first set to work feverishly and worked without stopping. But at the end of five hours, he still had not cut through the tree.

The second forester worked more deliberately. In fact, he seemed to stop after every few swings of the axe. After five hours, he not only had cut down the tree, but had chopped it into logs to send to the saw mill.

“I don’t get it,” said the first forester. “I worked longer and harder than you did. But you’ve made more progress. How can that be?”

“Simple,” replied the second. “Every few minutes, I stopped to sharpen my blade.”

Four areas to “sharpen”

In his book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, author Stephen R. Covey outlines four areas in which we need to “sharpen the blade”:

Physical health. The connection between good health and good spirits is undeniable. After all, it’s difficult to have a positive outlook on life if you’re sick, tired, and generally run down. Yet, for many people with busy, demanding lives, personal health and fitness are the first things to fall by the wayside.

Taking care of your physical needs – sleep, exercise, and nutrition – is an important step toward feeling in control of your life. Most experts say you should exercise at least three times a week for 30 to 40 minutes. Working out to a fitness videotape, taking a brisk walk, attending an aerobics class, or participating in a favorite sport are all ways to increase your fitness level.

Evaluate your diet. Are you eating too many foods that are high in fat, but low in nutrients? Do you rely on caffeine to get you started in the morning? Many excellent books and magazine articles can help you make the dietary changes to move you toward a more healthful lifestyle.

Social and emotional needs. Your interpersonal relationships have a major impact on the mental energy you bring to your job. Friends and family may be a valuable support system for you.

Educators, in particular, may feel their profession isolates them from other adults. Therefore, opportunities to connect and share with colleagues are important to your professional and emotional well-being. As Bill, a principal, noted:

There are times when I just have to talk things over with someone who understands what I'm going through. That's when I pick up the phone and call a fellow principal. Maybe we'll make plans to meet for dinner. Or maybe we'll just spend some time talking. But that contact always makes it easier to deal with the situation.

Spiritual fulfillment. Each of us has a core set of spiritual values that guide our life. Paying attention to this spiritual dimension is a way to recommit ourselves to the things we believe in most deeply.

For some people, spiritual development comes through participating in an organized religion. Others find that listening to music or spending time in nature provides them with the spiritual growth necessary to renew their spirits.

No matter how you fulfill your spiritual needs, be sure to make time for these activities on a regular basis.

Mental exercise. Continued personal growth is an important step toward self-renewal. Whether you acquire new knowledge in your profession or simply explore another area that interests you, mental exercise is as important as physical exercise for your long-term health and well-being. This mental development also reminds us that we are all lifelong students.

Here are some ways you can work on your mental development:

- Take a course (it doesn't even have to be related to your job).
- Read a book on a subject you'd like to know more about.
- Visit a museum or special exhibit.
- Watch a television documentary.
- Get together with friends or colleagues to discuss specific topics, such as books or movies.

Keep a Sense of Humor

A daily dose of laughter is one of the best ways to keep your spirits high and ward off stress.

Here are some ways to nurture your sense of humor:

- Cut out cartoons that make you laugh. Post them where you can see them – on your refrigerator or bulletin board, inside your grade book, or near the coffee pot at school.
- Look through your TV listings for programs that will make you laugh. Many old favorites – *I Love Lucy*, *M.A.S.H.* – are still replayed regularly.
- Use your camera and fill up a roll of film with humorous photos of your students, pets, family, or friends.
- Read *Readers' Digest* and other magazines for jokes and amusing stories.
- Look through the entertainment section of your newspaper. If you see a musical comedy, play, or personal appearance by a comedian that you'd like to attend, enter the date in your calendar.
- Spend time with people who make you laugh.
- Don't take yourself too seriously.
- Look for the lighter, funny side of situations that normally annoy you.

ACTIVITY:

Write down specific ways you can invest in your physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental well-being.

Use Visualizations and Affirmations

When basketball star John Paxson made the three-point shot that won the Chicago Bulls their third NBA championship in 1993, he wasn't surprised. After all, he later remarked to reporters, he'd visualized himself taking that shot hundreds of times.

Today, many professional athletes have begun to harness the power of the imagination. They use two tools: visualization and affirmation. Visualization involves "seeing" yourself in a particular situation. It is based on the old adage that practice makes perfect. In this case, you imagine a challenging situation and rehearse it until your imagined behavior becomes automatic.

Imagine and experience. For example, imagine yourself in an encounter with a difficult parent. The more clearly you can visualize the scene, the more deeply your mind will experience it.

Think about what the parents are likely to ask and how you will respond. Then, as you imagine this meeting, "see" yourself handling the situation with self-control and dignity. Later, when you actually meet with the parent, you'll have a much greater chance of acting in the way you mentally rehearsed the situation.

Affirmations

Short, positive declarations you write and repeat regularly are another powerful mental tool. A good affirmation has five characteristics: It's personal, positive, present tense, visual, and emotional.

For example, here are some affirmations you might try:

- I treat students and colleagues with respect and expect them to treat me the same way.
- I choose to work with others, instead of isolating myself.
- I choose the satisfying work of helping mold our nation's next generation.
- I choose to enjoy the time I spend at my job.

Many people spend some time each day silently repeating their affirmations. Others post affirmations where they will see them often, such as on the bathroom mirror, the car dashboard, or the refrigerator door. Constantly repeating affirmations to yourself helps make them a part of your subconscious mind.

Balance Life and Work

In Chinese cosmology, the opposite principles of Yin and Yang combine to form "all that comes to be." This harmony of contrasting forces illustrates the balance we should strive for in our personal and professional lives. As important as our profession is, it is only one part of who we are. Family, friends, and outside interests can play a critical role.

Whatever role you play in the school system, your job takes a lot out of you. Pursuing outside interests and activities will help you recharge your emotional batteries.

Pursue outside interests

If you're not setting aside time for your own needs and interests, you're much more susceptible to "burn out" both on and off the job. So, whether you're interested in making music (join a choir or community orchestra) or hunting down inexpensive treasures (take a weekend and scout out garage sales and antique stores), be sure to make some time in your life for YOU.

Here's how Andy, a school bus driver, describes his hobby of singing in a barbershop quartet:

Singing in a quartet is entirely different from what I do all day. Driving a bus can be isolating – I spend most of my time with children. But when I sing, I have to work closely with other adults. And after spending all day with my back to my "audience," it's great to see people face to face!

ACTIVITY:

List 15 things you like to do. How many of them have you done in the last week? The last month? Try to make time for at least two of these activities this week.

Develop a Mission

Spend some time considering your mission in life. Do you have one? What is it?

George Bernard Shaw defined his mission this way:

I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community and as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die. For the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no brief candle to me. It's a sort of splendid torch which I've got to hold up for the moment and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.

Chances are, part of your mission probably involves helping others. You also may want to nurture a satisfying family life and cultivate your own continuous learning. Whatever your personal mission, take some time to write it down.

Your mission can help serve as a guiding light throughout your life. It will help keep you focused on what's important ... and help you forget about what's not.

A MISSION TO GROW AND LEARN

Bob Tschirki, superintendent of Cherry Creek School District 5 in Englewood, Colorado, has a mission "to make a difference every single day. My goal is to not fall short. Whatever I do, I want to do well."

Staff members at Cherry Creek share Tschirki's drive. "As educators, our job is too important to do anything less," he says. "We work to create an environment that is open and nurturing, where people feel valued and know their thoughts are important ... where the things that matter are the dignity and integrity of all humans."

Tschirki tries to look at many of the challenges facing education today as "opportunities to grow and rethink what we're doing."

For example, Tschirki was surprised when over 500 parents recently applied for a limited number of spaces in a charter school with three other districts.

"I sent a letter to every one of these parents inquiring about how they feel and what they might be dissatisfied with. Most of them just wanted someone to answer their questions ... to know that they mattered to the district," he says.

Tschirki keeps staff energized through personal visits, letters, and other communications. He meets with different representatives from each of the district's 40 schools six times a year. The district also has sponsored an education summit for parents and educators "to answer the question 'How do we face the new realities in education and provide leadership that will inspire others?'" Tschirki said.

In all his interactions, Tschirki constantly tries to let people know how much he values and respects them. "I also work to help others appreciate the humanness of our organization. We're people, not rocks or machines. We bring passions and feelings to our work and, for me, that's very motivating," he says.

ACTIVITY:

Write down your mission statement. Think about how your daily activities fulfill your mission. Has your mission changed since you first entered education? Why?

L PROFESSIONAL GROWTH

While most school systems attempt to provide professional development and training for their employees, scarce resources and mandates often limit what they can offer. Most educators find supplementing formal professional development with various activities increases their skills and job satisfaction.

Just as you can foster your personal renewal, you also can take steps to energize your professional life. Here are some of the techniques educators have used to keep their professional spirits high.

Read!

Many educators have found that reading professional publications is a great way to reenergize themselves. Here's what Marlene, a secondary school teacher, had to say about her professional reading:

I started with magazines because the articles were short and varied. That's important – we teachers don't usually have long periods of time during the day. Now I read everything I can get my hands on – professional journals, books for beginning teachers, general magazines about teaching. There's almost always at least one idea I can try in my classroom.

Apply your reading

As you read, keep a stack of index cards nearby. Jot down ideas that you may use later. Start a "tickler file" of these cards for times when you're looking for a new idea or activity.

You and some of your coworkers also may want to begin a discussion group to share what you've learned. In the Wisconsin Rapids school system, teachers and administrators meet together, read professional literature, and discuss important issues.

"We as a staff are responsible for the quality of the school as a whole and the quality of our work lives. That means we all have to make decisions that affect the entire school. It's hard to make good decisions without having the right information," says John Davenport, the district's director of instruction.

Staff members identify topics that interest them – everything from the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics standards to whole language instruction theories. Davenport adds, these professional reading groups are "catching staff members' attention and they're talking together."

Too busy to read? Most of our days are so full that reading may seem like an impossible luxury. But try using some different strategies to work in reading time. Use 10 minutes of your coffee or lunch break for professional reading. Keep a magazine near your bed and read before dropping off to sleep. One educator even found that she could do some professional reading while she was riding an exercise bicycle!

A variety of books, plays, and personal and professional development courses also are available on audiotape. You can listen to audiotapes while you commute, exercise, clean, cook, or any other time you want. And, because they are auditory, these tapes are excellent ways to learn a language, listen to a play, or improve speaking and other communication skills.

Take a Course

Enrolling in a course or taking a workshop is another way to challenge yourself and continue learning new ideas.

If you haven't been a student for awhile, taking a course also can be an insightful exercise. Experiencing the learning process again probably will help you better understand how your students feel when presented with new material.

ACTIVITY:

List some books and magazine articles you've found helpful or uplifting.
What colleagues could you share them with?

Courses have another important benefit – they help you meet colleagues who share your interests. By working together with these people, you can discover other ways to increase your own job satisfaction, at the same time that you're improving education for the children in your school or district.

Taking the initiative. One Kansas school district has made professional development a cornerstone of its efforts to attract and retain excellent staff members. Marilyn Green, the director of curriculum and instruction for the Salina Unified School District 305, describes what happened to a group of teachers who decided they wanted to improve the way they taught reading in their building:

They (the teachers) asked for help in identifying places to visit and experts to contact. They set up their own visitations to other schools. They brought in practitioners from across the state to visit their school. They ended up implementing a new reading program in the building. These teachers are energized. And their energy has spilled over to affect their students!

Look at how you learn

“Just as you appreciate individual differences of children in classrooms, you need to appreciate your own way of learning, growing, and renewing,” Green adds.

Everyone has a preferred learning style. Some educators may be excited about taking many courses covering a wide variety of topics. Others may prefer to concentrate on one or two areas of interest. There's no right or wrong way to foster your own professional growth.

If your district does not offer a course that you think is important for your professional growth, don't be afraid to let your supervisor know. Chances are, if you're feeling a need for additional training, so are others in your district.

Unfortunately, professional development often is one of the first things to get cut or reduced when budgets get tight. If you've had a training request rejected in the past, try not to let this experi-

ence discourage you from pursuing other opportunities. Let your supervisor know the advantages of investing in professional development activities. Will you be able to train others in your department after attending a particular course? Is there a discount if more than one person from your district attends?

Become a Mentor

"In my practice as a psychiatrist, I have found that helping people to develop personal goals has proved to be the most effective way to help them cope with problems," says Ari Kiev, author of *A Strategy for Daily Living*.

When you were just starting out in your job, did you get a helping hand from a more experienced person? Perhaps you're ready to help someone new to education or a colleague who needs some guidance.

Some school systems have formal mentoring programs for matching up experienced educators with colleagues who are new to the system or the profession. If your school system has such a program, consider volunteering as a mentor. If not, check with local universities or professional associations. Or, you might know someone informally who could benefit from your experiences and support.

Double advantage. The benefits of mentoring are twofold: At the same time you're helping to build the confidence of a new employee, you'll probably find your own motivation increases.

Here's what Kevin, a teacher, said about his experience mentoring a colleague who had just joined his department:

I found that I was constantly challenged — why do we do things this way? What would happen if we tried something different? ... It felt great to help someone out — now I take just as much pride in my colleague's accomplishments as he does!

Apply for a Grant

Sometimes all that stands between you and a great idea is a little money. Yet grants are available to support virtually any activity that goes on in schools.

If your school system says it's all right, fill out grant applications for projects that are important to you. Businesses, government agencies, and foundations are among the groups that provide funds for worthy educational projects.

Do a little background research on organizations before applying to them. Your chances of getting a grant will increase if you focus on organizations who fund the specific types of projects you're developing.

Joanne, a science specialist, found out the value of grants when she decided to create an outdoor classroom:

There was an old, unused courtyard that was overgrown with weeds. The district had no money for turning it into the kind of learning space I had in mind. So I asked for help from local businesses and clubs. Some donated money. Others provided supplies – someone even brought in a truckload of dirt!

The enthusiasm was catching — my students helped move the dirt from the front of the building to the courtyard. Today, we have a beautiful classroom in an area that once was an eyesore.

Share What You've Learned

Educators tend to downplay their accomplishments. A teacher who develops a great unit may say to herself, "Oh, everybody does something like that."

Well, everybody doesn't do things the way you do. Odds are, you can share a tip on how to manage the first day of school ... how to teach fractions ... how to encourage good behavior on the bus ... how to prepare lunch for hundreds of students ... or how to make a budget report clear and understandable.

By sharing what you've learned with other colleagues, you'll help make your entire school system a better place for kids and adults. You'll also get the satisfaction that comes from being recognized as an "expert."

Does your school district offer professional development classes? Offer to teach one on a topic that interests you. Or, submit your idea to your state or national association. You may find yourself presenting a program to people from all across the country.

SEARCHING FOR FUNDING

The federal government, private foundations, and corporations are potential funding sources for education projects.

Publications such as the *Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance* and the *U.S. Government Manual* provide information on federal grant programs. To order, contact the Government Printing Office, Superintendent of Documents, Washington, D.C. 20402-9371, (202) 783-3238.

The Foundation Center offers the most comprehensive information on foundation giving. The Center's national collections are located in its headquarters in New York and Washington, D.C. For a list of cooperating collections nationwide, call (800) 424-9336. A biweekly newspaper, the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*, 1255 23rd St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20037, (202) 466-1000, is also an inexpensive source of both federal and foundation grant news.

You also might try contacting the Development, Research, or Sponsored Project Offices of nearby universities, colleges, and corporations to find out what type of programs they fund.

Communicate

One of the worst problems facing educators is isolation from other adults. Teachers spend most of their day behind closed doors. Administrators may find it difficult to get out of their offices.

Look for ways to communicate with others who perform your same job or who work in the same school or district. The Delton, Michigan, schools are taking this approach through the T² (Think Tank) program. Each month, two or three staff members from every building, along with members of the administrative committee, get together to talk, socialize, and solve problems.

Gordon Christensen, a teacher at the district's high school, says the Think Tank originated "as a formalized gripe session. Many of us – myself included – had reservations about whether or not it would lead to any lasting change."

Today, however, Christensen is one of the program's strongest supporters. The informal monthly meetings give everyone an opportunity to say what's on their minds. "The Think Tank can often keep little problems from becoming big problems," he adds.

In some cases, issues raised at Think Tank meetings may be dealt with immediately. At other times, they may be scheduled for in-depth discussion at a later meeting. For example, group members now vote on the district budget.

"That's led to some heated discussions – and some important compromises," Christensen says.

Inclusive development. The Kenmore-Town of Tonawanda, New York, schools are making every effort to include a broad range of school district employees in professional development classes.

Dottie Vienne of the district's professional development office comments, "It's very likely that a class might include a custodian, a teacher, an administrator, and a cafeteria worker all sitting in the same room and working toward the same goal. They get to form relationships with people across the district. It's a great way to reduce isolation."


Joining your professional association is another effective way to network with colleagues. By attending meetings, workshops, and conferences with others in your profession, you're likely to discover new ways of solving common problems.

Try Something New

Remember your first day on the job? You had no trouble keeping your spirits high. (In fact, you may have had to calm yourself down.) Trying something new is a great way to keep your interest and motivation high. By facing and overcoming a challenge, you give yourself a boost that will keep you going.

Here's what Mary Anne, a school district transportation coordinator, said about a new computerized system she installed in her office:

In the beginning, I was nervous. Would I be able to learn the new software? Would it work? Or would we end up with children left on street corners throughout our district? It took literally months of planning, but finally the day came when we tried our first schedule completely on computer. It was great! I felt a tremendous sense of accomplishment.



CONCLUSION

Keeping our spirits high is a constant challenge. On the other hand, this challenge gives us constant opportunities to learn new things, evaluate our goals, meet different people, and nurture our personal development.

We hope some of the tips in this publication will help maintain your excitement, energy, and motivation. Remember, educators are helping to shape the future. You're a valuable part of the most important mission in society – developing our nation's future generation.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

AASA has published *Keeping Spirits High* to provide educators with a tool for renewing their commitment to education ... one of the most rewarding, challenging, and important commitments in society today.

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