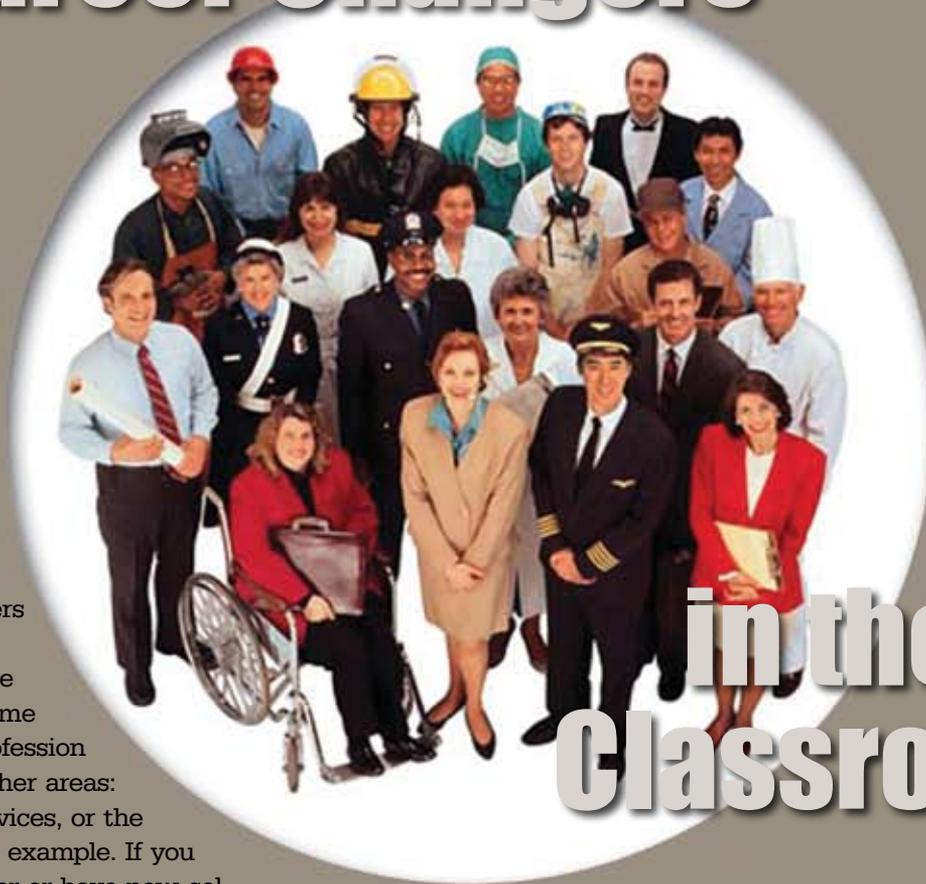


Career Changers



in the Classroom

One of the fastest growing demographics among new teachers is career changers. Career changers are individuals who come to the teaching profession after working in other areas: industry, social services, or the armed services, for example. If you are a career changer or have new colleagues who are career changers, the following information and tips may help you or your neighbor down the hall make a smooth transition to this newly chosen profession.

Characteristics and Challenges

Career changers bring a wealth of real-life experience to the classroom. Often they are very strong in their content areas and may easily provide concrete answers to questions such as “Why do we need to know this?” or “How can I use this information?” Though the ability to offer another perspective is an advantage in the classroom, colleagues can help career changers remember that they are teaching children, not subjects.

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Some career changers have not been in schools in a long time, so they may suffer culture shock when they enter the classroom. If their previous employment allowed them to “leave their work at the office,” they may be surprised at how much work is left at the end of a school day—teachers grade and plan at home and on weekends. Many careers provide all materials or allow these items to be requisitioned. As school budgets tighten, many teachers end up paying for classroom items themselves. Classroom management has changed as well. Running in the halls and chewing gum has been replaced by cyberbullying and the use of controlled substances. Career changers may need guidance in dealing with these issues.

High-stakes testing may be foreign to new teachers, especially if they move to a different state after their training. Accountability takes on a different appearance that includes new terms and many acronyms. From No Child Left Behind (NCLB), adequate yearly progress (AYP), and “highly qualified status” for teachers to the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) and various state exams for students, the vocabulary is as new as how success is measured.

Advice from Career Changers

Clemson University in South Carolina has a successful Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program that places approximately 40 career changers each year into middle school classrooms. Recent graduates, pictured below, shared the following tips that they believe are particularly important for career changers:



- Take a multivitamin and get plenty of sleep. It's tough to stay healthy as a teacher. Be proactive. Tape or Tivo® shows shown after 9:00 p.m. and watch

them on the weekend. Go to sleep and wake up at the same time every day.

- Get to school early. Your most productive time will be before students arrive. Create a routine that allows you to prepare for the day in a relaxed manner. It also will impress your principal!
- If you have a family, grade papers or prepare lesson plans at the kitchen or dining room table after the evening meal. This central location allows you to be part of the family while still getting your work done. To encourage a considerate atmosphere, have children do their homework at the same time you do paperwork. This practice will help reduce noise and interruptions and reinforce the idea that “mom or dad is working.”
- Catalogues are great sources for small, inexpensive items for the classroom, such as embossed pencils and seasonal bookmarks. Get used to spending your own money for supplies and extras.
- Even if you haven't read Harry Wong's *The First Days of School*, take a page of advice from his book: Spend the first day in your classroom establishing procedures for the school year. Let students participate.
- Be consistent, fair, and firm. After establishing procedures, stick to them.
- Talk to your new colleagues and find out the “hidden curriculum” or unwritten rules of your school.
- Find out, as soon as possible, what standardized tests your students will take, when they will take them, and what the significance of their performance is.

- Overplan. If students are engaged and on task, they will not be discipline problems. Always have something for students to do.
- Carry a cell phone. You'll need it to contact the school if bad traffic or a flat tire delays your arrival at school.
- Have good emergency substitute plans in your desk at all times. If these plans involve a film, be sure you have an arrangement with the school's media specialist to let your sub have the proper equipment that day. Be sure to include information on locating the proper equipment.



“Creating a Substitute Plan” in NTA Online Extra on the *New Teacher Advocate* Page of www.kdp.org.

- Prepare a classroom emergency kit with bandages, latex gloves, bottled water, over-the-counter remedies for headaches, stomachaches, and other minor maladies (for you, not for students!), personal necessities, a change of clothing, a towel, an umbrella, and a \$10 bill for emergency gas or lunch money.
- Buy inexpensive postcards from the post office. Use them to jot down and send positive notes home. Postcards work best because students can see that they contain good news, and they will not be tempted to “intercept” your message should they happen to get the mail that day!
- If you give a student a pencil, book, or other item that you want back, make a swap. That is, take one of his or her shoes in exchange, and swap back the items at the end of class.

Conclusion

Career changers are different and yet the same as any new teachers. They are excited and a little nervous. They have individual strengths and weaknesses. Overall, they have much to contribute to their new profession. However, as the name implies, “change” can be difficult, and a successful transition into the public or private school classroom is a team effort. Experienced teachers and new teachers who have gone through traditional teacher preparation programs need to share their experience and wisdom. It's a win-win situation. 🍏