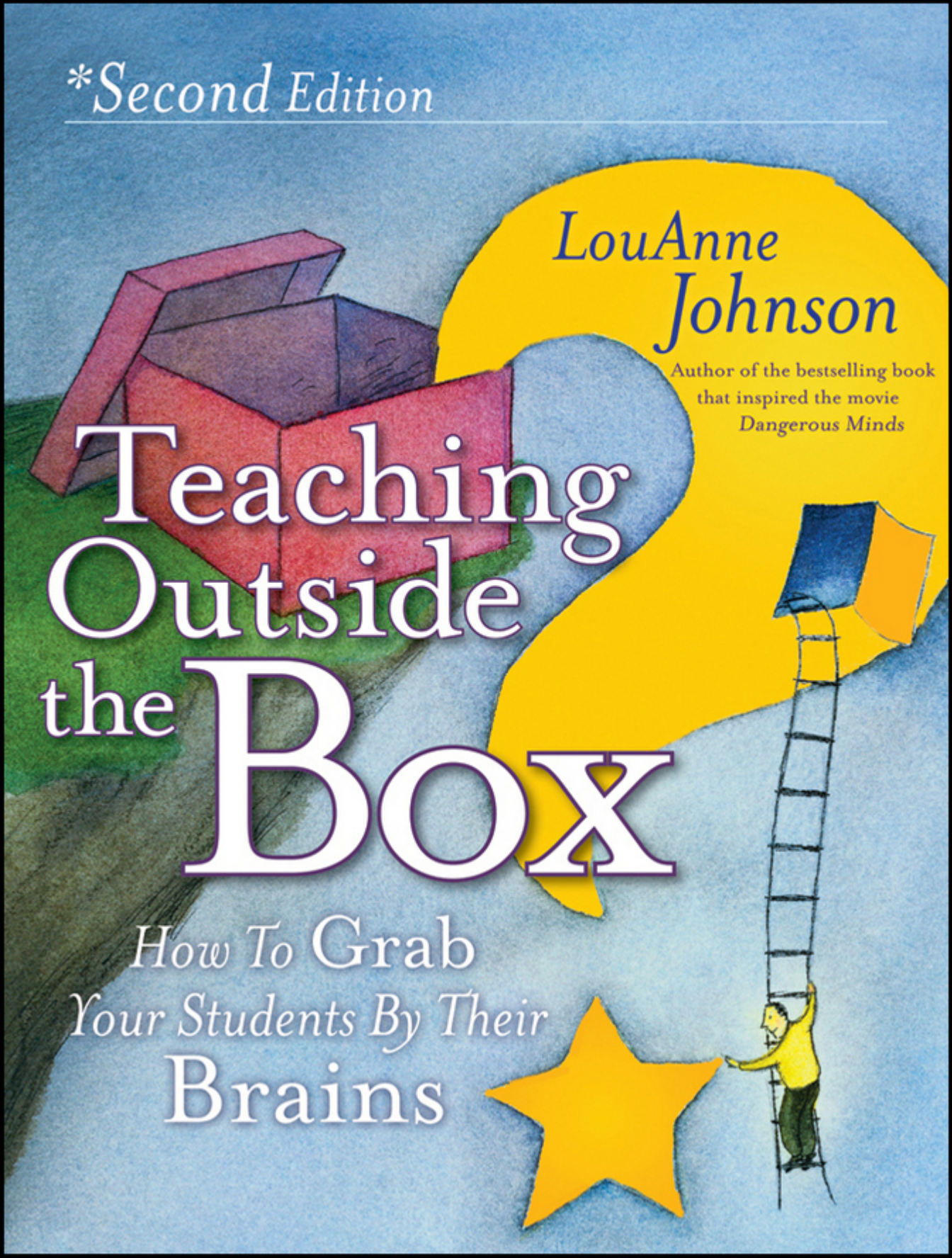
*Second Edition

LouAnne Johnson

Author of the bestselling book that inspired the movie *Dangerous Minds*

Teaching Outside the Box

How To Grab Your Students By Their Brains



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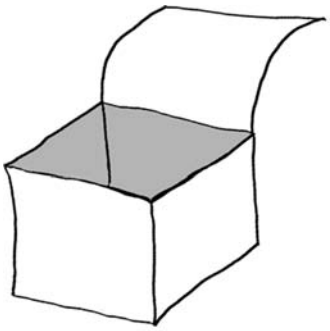

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THE AUTHOR

LouAnne Johnson, author of the *New York Times* best-seller *Dangerous Minds,* is a former U.S. Navy journalist, Marine Corps officer, and high school teacher. Johnson is the author of seven nonfiction books and the novel *Muchacho*. At present, she is an assistant professor of teacher education at Santa Fe Community College in New Mexico.

A native of rural northwestern Pennsylvania, Johnson served nine years on active military duty, achieving the rank of Journalist First Class in the Navy and 2nd Lieutenant in the Marine Corps. She holds a BS in psychology and a master's degree in teaching English.

In 1989, Johnson began teaching as an intern at a northern California high school. Two years later, she was appointed department chair of a special program for at-risk teens. During the government evaluation of ten similar pilot programs, Johnson's group was rated first in academic achievement, increased self-esteem, and student retention. Her memoir about that experience, *My Posse Don't Do Homework,* was adapted for the 1995 hit movie *Dangerous Minds,* starring Michele Pfeiffer. *My Posse Don't Do Homework* also was condensed in *Reader's Digest* magazine, and, under the title *Dangerous Minds,* has been published in eight languages, including Italian, German, Japanese, and French.

Following publication of *My Posse Don't Do Homework,* Johnson continued to teach high school English for eight years, then left teaching full-time to return to college for more graduate studies in writing. Subsequently, she served as lead ESL instructor at Lexington Community College in North Carolina and as an adjunct

instructor of developmental reading and writing for Western New Mexico University. She has also designed and presented workshops in classroom management and motivation for teachers across the country. A staunch advocate of school reform and a popular keynote speaker, she has presented addresses to over one hundred organizations, including the National School Boards Association, the National Council on Curriculum Development, the Association of Texas Professional Educators, National Hispanic University, and the European Council of International Schools. She has appeared on several television shows, including *Oprah, CBS Eye to Eye, NBC Weekend Today, Maury Povich,* and *CNN Talkback Live.*

INTRODUCTION

Whenever I finish writing a book and face the task of writing an introduction, my childhood comes back to haunt me. "Don't toot your own horn," Grandma Lucy Johnson used to warn me. "People will think you have a big head."

I honestly don't believe my head is exceptionally big. I know that I'm not the best teacher in the world. There are thousands of teachers in this country who do the same things I do in my classroom, but they don't have the time or energy to go home at night and write books. And though I'm not the world's best teacher, I am an excellent teacher and I know that my approach works. My philosophy, briefly, is this:

> When students believe that success is possible, they will try.
> So my first priority in any class is to help my students
> believe in themselves and their ability to learn.

During the past two and a half decades, I have taught adult English-language learners and college seniors, high school remedial readers and honors-level university freshmen, advanced placement high school juniors, developmental readers, GED students, and—most recently—alternative-licensure education students who decided at age thirty or forty or fifty that what they really want to do is teach school. I have also presented over one hundred keynote speeches and workshops around the world, which gave me the opportunity to meet thousands of gifted teachers. I took copious notes. And I spent many hours out of those twenty-five years asking questions, reading research about brain-based learning and nutrition and classroom

lighting, corresponding with teachers and education students via e-mail, observing veteran teachers in action, sharing best (and worst) practices with other teachers, advising new teachers who approach me with classroom management problems—and trying to design a way to incorporate all of that information into one book.

The first chapter is a letter I wrote for all teachers, thanking them for teaching. I don't think it is possible to thank teachers too often for the work that they do. Next, I asked myself, what if I could sit down for a few hours with a new teacher and share all the things I wish I had known before I started teaching? That imaginary conversation became the first six chapters. And judging by the feedback I have received from readers, some veterans also enjoy those chapters—some for the nostalgia of recalling their own starry-eyed optimism or for some tip or strategy that they found helpful. Chapters Seven through Nine contain a collection of strategies that I have created, borrowed, or tweaked from my experience, observations, conversations, and research. Nothing world-shaking here. A few unusual suggestions, such as studying successful horse wranglers to gain insight into teaching rowdy students or adjusting student attitudes by pointing out that there are only five things we *have* to do in order to stay alive (and going to school is not on the list). But the middle chapters are primarily meant to provide a buffet of side dishes for teachers to pick and choose from, depending upon their tastes and appetites, as well as those of their students.

Chapters Nine and Ten contain information about the effects of essential fatty acids on brain function and light sensitivity—the two most popular topics from my workshops and speeches. This information originally appeared in my book *The Queen of Education* (Jossey-Bass, 1994) and has been revised and updated for its inclusion here.

Chapter Eleven gives an update on my "posse" from the movie *Dangerous Minds,* and Chapter Twelve offers a positive view of our profession which gets more than its share of bad press.

That brings me up to date on my notes so far. I'll have to buy a new notebook for my new job. I'm sure the new teachers in my classes will have much to teach me.

Sometimes I receive an e-mail asking if I could please add more suggestions for elementary school teachers in my books. I have done my best in this new edition, but my contribution in this area is still limited. I have successfully tutored several young children at their parents' request, but I have no training in early childhood or elementary education other than helping to raise four stepchildren for a few

years. But I truly believe that most successful teaching strategies can be tweaked to fit students across a wide range of ages and abilities.

Human beings are human, and students are students. Regardless of their age, almost all students have the same concerns: Will I be able to learn the material? Will the teacher like me? Will I like the teacher? Will my classmates like me? And regardless of the subject or age level we teach, most effective teaching strategies can be modified to fit our students.

Here's an example of a grade 2 activity that I applied, with a few modifications, for a student in his mid-sixties.

In preparation for one of the courses I teach, I watched a video clip where a teacher created a "circle of friends" in her elementary school classroom. She asked six youngsters to sit in a circle and discuss all the good things they had seen each other do in school that day. The object of the exercise was to change the children's perception of their classmate, Matt, who always seemed to be in trouble. The teacher believed that if everybody, including the teacher and Matt himself, thought of Matt as a troublemaker, he would continue to live up to his label. When the other children complimented Matt for staying in his chair, not hitting people, and listening to instructions, he beamed. And, just as the teacher had hoped, Matt started repeating the positive behaviors. She stopped thinking of him as a troublemaker, and his classmates changed their opinions of him as well.

While I was viewing that video clip, I found myself thinking, "That boy reminds me of Joe," the oldest student in one of my classes—and the least popular, judging by the sighs and eye rolling of his classmates whenever he raised his hand during class. Joe had a tendency to ramble off-topic, and the more impatient his classmates became, the longer he rambled. Nobody wanted to sit with Joe during small-group activities. And eventually I found myself sighing when I saw his hand waving in the air.

I realized that if I allowed my impatience to show, it would give tacit approval to Joe's classmates to dislike and disrespect him. So I started looking for any small positive contribution that Joe made to the class and I made a point of thanking him in front of the other students. I removed the extra chairs from the classroom so that Joe couldn't be excluded when the students formed small groups, and I joined the group that contained Joe so I could engage him in the evening's activities. Before long I noticed a few classmates talking to Joe during the break, swapping stories about their recent public school classroom observations. I would not characterize the relationship between Joe and his classmates as friends, but they

no longer ostracized him. And, most important, I stopped thinking of his questions as interruptions, which in turn changed my attitude. Surprisingly, once everybody started acting more interested in what he had to say, Joe seemed to have less to say. Or perhaps he no longer felt a need to demand attention once people stopped ignoring him.

I still have much to learn as a teacher. (I'm sure teachers who read the first edition of this book, especially reading teachers, will appreciate how much less I know now than I did when I wrote that first edition!) Every class of students brings new lessons to learn. The lessons aren't really new, but a lesson may be new to me, or it may be a reminder of something I learned previously, something that didn't take hold because it wasn't connected with a personal experience.

The title of this book, *Teaching Outside the Box,* isn't meant to imply that this book contains completely new or unique teaching strategies—there really is nothing new when it comes to teaching. Create a unique and unusual way to teach something, and you will find that somewhere along the line somebody else has already tried your method. Plato, perhaps, or Maria Montessori. What I mean to imply by the title is that I encourage teachers to step outside of the box that so often delineates teaching, where the focus is on changing student behavior to meet our expectations instead of changing our own behavior to evoke a different student response.

For example, chewing gum is a sticky problem (sorry, I couldn't resist) for many schools. Kids love chewing gum. And millions of students are threatened and warned and punished for chewing gum every day, even if they don't stick it under their seats or between the pages of their textbooks. It's an endless battle—as long as you continue to try to stop kids from chewing gum. One resourceful principal at a school where the custodial staff complained daily about having to spend so much time trying to remove dried gum from the floors and under the desks and chairs stepped outside the box and decided that since it was impossible to police all of the students all of the time, his school would no longer be a gum-free zone. Instead, his entire teaching staff taught their students how to chew gum politely and dispose of it properly. The result? No more complaints from the custodians. No more sticky floors and desks. Happy students.

That's what I mean by teaching outside the box. Shifting our focus so that we can see ourselves and our students from a different perspective. Fixing ourselves instead of fixing our students. Sending positive notes home to parents of students who misbehave, instead of sending negative news. Saying, "I really like you and it would make me so happy if you would do this assignment that I created because

I wanted to help you learn this new skill," instead of "If you don't do that assignment, you'll be sorry, Buster." Asking all your students to stand up and wriggle like worms instead of demanding that they sit down and fold their hands in their laps when they clearly have too much energy to focus quietly. Requiring everybody in your class to make a mistake instead of seeking perfection. Instead of constantly focusing on test scores, declaring the third week of each month as a test-free week. And so on.

There are literally hundreds of very good books about how to teach this or that. *Teaching Outside the Box* does not address the particulars of instruction so much as it focuses on what I believe is the key factor in any classroom: the student-teacher connection. My goal with this book is to help make teaching more enjoyable for both teachers and students. It breaks my heart to see so many frustrated teachers who truly care about their students but seem unable to reach them, just as it breaks my heart to see so many children who truly hate school.

On the other hand, my heart sings when I receive a letter such as this one from Laura Hauser, who sent me an e-mail asking for advice about taking over another teacher's class of "difficult" students.

31 August 2004

Ms. Johnson:

This is the end of my third week of teaching. I was given 125 "remedial" students. The other teachers told me they wouldn't show up to class. If they did, they would either sleep or disrupt the class; they wouldn't do homework and they didn't care if they passed or failed and I'd have to throw most of them out at some point or another.

I took a lot of your advice to heart. I went in on day one and told them all that I could guarantee they would have the best year in school they had ever had. I asked if that interested any of them, and they all admitted it did. I told them I only asked for three things, and I would do the rest. They had to show up every day; they had to come in with the attitude that they could and would learn something; and they had to try. I told them the story of Edison taking ten thousand tries to invent the light bulb and told them that I was only asking that they try three or four times. I asked how many had been told they were stupid or couldn't do math. Every hand went up. I told them it wasn't true; they just hadn't been taught math in a way they could understand it. I told them there

were two words I would not tolerate in my class—"I can't"—because they all could and there wasn't a stupid one in the bunch.

Three weeks later, my students show up on time. The few who skipped in the beginning don't skip anymore, and no one skips on Friday, because it's cookie day. They do logic problems every day that require them to think, and now they ask for more. They do their homework; and if they get a low grade, they ask to fix it and turn it back in. I've told them I only care that they learn it and that if they're willing to do their homework or tests again, I am certainly willing to grade them again. I cut them some slack in the discipline department, but when I speak they stop and listen; and when I take someone outside and ask them to settle down, they do. I'm having a blast, and so are my students. Students tell me it's the first time a math teacher has actually cared about them and made them feel like they could succeed. Students that have on-the-job training in the afternoon come and hang out in math instead of leaving—some show up three periods a day—and participate in each class.

I can't thank you enough. If I had listened to those other teachers and not to you, I would be having a miserable year. But it's more rewarding than I could have imagined!

I know you're very busy finishing up your book, but thought you would like to know how much fun I'm having!

Laura Hauser

My fondest hope is that this book will help many more teachers define their own effective teaching philosophies, develop their own positive discipline policies, and experience the joy of teaching, just as Laura has.

I truly believe that teaching children is the noblest profession. Yes, the pay is sometimes insultingly low, and working conditions can be appallingly shabby. But we don't teach for the money or the glamour—we do it for the love.

Teaching Outside the Box

chapter
ONE

Dear Teacher: An Open Letter

Dear Teacher:

Thank you.

Thank you for being a teacher.

And thank you for choosing to use your time and talents teaching students when you had so many other career options, most of which offer better pay, more comfortable working conditions, and much more respect from the general public than the teaching profession does.

Thank you for taking yet another exam to prove your competence, although you have already completed five or more years of college and hundreds of dollars' worth of standardized tests.

Thank you for continuing to teach higher-level thinking skills and advanced academics, in spite of having test after test after test added to your curriculum requirements, without any additional instruction time.

Thank you for getting up at 5 or 6 a.m. every day to go to a graceless room bathed in artificial light, a windowless closet, or a dilapidated trailer and for coping with the malfunctioning or nonexistent air conditioning and heating.

Thank you for eating your lunch out of a paper bag on a folding chair in a sparsely furnished lounge where a working coffee maker is a treat and a functioning microwave oven is a luxury.

For spending your so-called time off grading papers; making lesson plans; and attending professional development conferences, committee meetings, restructuring meetings, parent-teacher conferences, school board meetings, and continuing education classes.

Thank you for working countless hours of unpaid overtime because it is the only way to do your job well and because you cannot do less.

And for not reminding people constantly that if you were paid for your overtime, you could retire tomorrow and never have to work again.

Thank you for consistently giving respect to children who don't know what to do with it and don't realize what a valuable gift you are offering.

And for caring about children whose own families don't care—or don't know how to show that they do.

Thank you for spending your own money on pens and pencils, erasers and chalk, paper, tissues, bandages, birthday gifts, treats, clothing, shoes, eyeglasses—and a hundred other things that your students need but don't have.

For spending sleepless nights worrying about a struggling student, wondering what else you might do to help overcome the obstacles that life has placed in his or her path.

Thank you for raiding your own children's closets to find a pair of shoes or a sweater for a child who has none.

For putting your own family on hold while you meet with the family of a struggling student.

For believing in the life-changing power of education.

For maintaining your belief that all students can learn if we can learn how to teach them.

For putting up with the aching back, creaky knees, tired legs, and sore feet that go with the teaching territory.

Thank you.

Thank you for giving hopeless children enough hope to continue struggling against the poverty, prejudice, abuse, alcoholism, hunger, and apathy that are a daily part of so many tender young lives.

For risking your job to give a child a much-needed hug.

For biting your tongue and counting to a million while a parent lists the reasons why your incompetence is responsible for the misbehavior of his or her undisciplined, spoiled, obnoxious child.

For taking on one of the most difficult, challenging, frustrating, emotionally exhausting, mentally draining, satisfying, wonderful, important, and precious jobs in the world.

Thank you for being a teacher.

You truly are an unsung American hero.

You have my respect and my gratitude,

LouAnne Johnson

chapter
TWO

Are You Teacher Material?

"How can I tell if I'm really teacher material?" a teacher candidate asked me in an e-mail. "Can I learn to be a good teacher? Or is it something you have to be born with?" She went on to explain that she had recently abandoned a well-paid position in advertising in order to pursue her dream of becoming a teacher.

"I know I will make a lot less money as a teacher," she wrote, "and I have accepted that reality, but now I'm wondering what will happen if I get my degree and get a job, and then I hate teaching. What if I find out that I just can't do it? I have a feeling that teaching is going to be very different from being a student teacher or observing experienced teachers. I guess what I'm asking is: Do you have any advice that might help me make the right decision about becoming a teacher?"

"To teach or not to teach?" is a question that stumps many people. Far too many of us know bright, energetic people who spent five or more years earning a bachelor's degree and teaching credential only to quit after one or two years in the classroom. New teachers give up for a long laundry list of reasons, but the most common complaints include disrespectful and disruptive students, apathetic administrators, overwhelming stacks of paperwork, lunchroom politics, parental pressure and pestering, and mental or emotional exhaustion.

Those complaints are valid. I have to say that I have worked with some excellent administrators, and their support enabled me to be a better teacher. But even with good support, teaching is very demanding and difficult work. Children today suffer from a host of emotional, mental, and physical challenges that affect their behavior and ability to learn. And unfortunately, many of their role models encourage them to treat themselves and others with extreme disrespect. Dealing with children requires abundant reserves of patience and tact. An indestructible sense of humor also helps. Government regulations have created a testing and accountability monster that consumes mountains of money, paperwork, time, and energy—and teachers have the task of feeding the monster. The monster is fickle, too, so if last-minute changes upset you, teaching will tax you to the limits of your flexibility. If you don't bend, you will definitely break. Of course, you already know that the pay is atrocious, primarily because people outside of education view teaching as babysitting with books. Thus, if wealth and prestige are important to you, teaching will be a disappointment. And teaching can be physically painful: hours of standing on your feet, bending over to read small print on small desks, and lugging boxes of books and papers to and fro can send you home with tired feet, an aching back, and a headache.

And then there are the students. It might seem facetious to say that you should like children if you plan to teach school, but apparently many people overlook this obvious fact. Every staff lunchroom has at least a few (and most have a large handful of) complainers and groaners who spend their breaks and lunch hours plotting against "the enemy," sharing their strategies for revenge, nursing their wounds, and displaying their battle scars. These are not necessarily bad people, but they are people who grew up and immediately forgot their own childhoods. Like people who fall in love with the idea of owning a dog, dreaming of the unconditional love a dog will offer, forgetting that puppies pee on the carpet, vomit on the bath mat, chew your slippers, and poop on the lawn, some would-be teachers envision themselves standing in front of a quiet, orderly classroom, facing a sea of silent,

adoring, obedient, angelic little faces. When those angelic faces turn out to belong to noisy, messy, occasionally ill-mannered, selfish, and obstinate little stinkers, those teachers go into shock. Some fail to recover. They become bitter, humorless, and overly strict; and they spend the rest of their years in the classroom making themselves and their students miserable by trying to make reality fit their impossible fantasies.

All right, that's the downside of teaching. If you're still reading, still thinking you might like to be a teacher, then you are persistent and optimistic—two very helpful attributes for would-be teachers. And you are right to be hopeful, because the upside of teaching is so much bigger and so much more important than the downside.

Teaching is the most wonderful profession in the world. As a teacher, you make a direct, tangible contribution to the future of our country and the world by helping young people acquire knowledge and skills. You know that you are spending your life in an honorable pursuit and that your life has a purpose. Teaching provides endless challenges and opportunities for growth. Every day, teaching tests your interpersonal communications skills, your academic knowledge, or your leadership ability. On a good day, you'll be tested in all three areas, and you'll pass all three tests. You have the opportunity as a teacher to share your passion for learning with young people. If you are a good teacher, you will also inspire, motivate, and challenge those youngsters to develop their individual strengths and talents; and you will feel the incomparable joy when one of them (usually far more than one) realizes how much you have given and makes his or her way back to your classroom to give you a hug and a teary thank-you. And you will cry your own tears. And when you go home, you will share that student's thank-you with your family and friends, and they will all cry a few tears. When you go to bed that night, the last thing you will think before you go to sleep is, I did a fine thing. I helped a child become a successful adult. And that night, you will dream the sweetest dreams.

SUPER, EXCELLENT, OR GOOD?

Teachers come in three basic flavors—super, excellent, and good. (Of course, there are mediocre teachers and, sadly, terrible teachers. But teaching poorly is not acceptable or excusable, so such practices are not included in this discussion.) Which flavor of teacher you decide to become depends on your personal strengths,

intimate relationships, professional goals, and individual priorities. Before you begin teaching, seriously consider how much time and emotional energy you can afford to spend on your work outside the home. Take a long look at your life, your relationships, your financial and emotional obligations, your personal and career goals. If you find it hard to view your own life objectively, discussing your situation with a friend or close relative may improve your perspective. If your sister points out that you like expensive clothes and your husband reminds you that you become impatient and overly critical under stress, for example, you will need to decide whether you are willing to trim your wardrobe and do the hard work required to develop more patience.

Decide what is important to you and which aspects of your life should take priority. Will your children, parents, spouse, or partner feel neglected if you spend some of your free time creating lesson plans or counseling students? How much emotional energy will you need to conserve during the day in order to have enough left over for your family at night? Will you feel comfortable counseling students about their personal problems, or would you rather leave such things up to their own parents or guardians?

There is no right or wrong answer to these questions, but if you know the answers before you begin teaching, you will be a happier, more successful instructor. Not everybody can or should be a super teacher. It is perfectly acceptable to be an excellent or good teacher. (Poor teaching, however, is never acceptable.)

Super teaching requires the highest amounts of physical, emotional, and mental energy. Super teachers usually arrive at school early and stay late. They also attend seminars and continuing education classes, volunteer for student activities, and make themselves available to students who need extra help, both in and out of the classroom. Because super teachers enjoy a solid rapport with their students, they don't have to focus so much time or energy on discipline in their classrooms. Instead, there is a give-and-take, an ebb and flow, the teaching equivalent of the runner's high that so many athletes find addictive. Unfortunately, unless they are extraordinary people with impressive reserves of natural energy or unless they make an effort to rejuvenate themselves regularly, super teachers may find themselves in danger of burning out.

Super teaching demands huge amounts of physical and mental effort, and depending on your budget it may absorb some money as well. If you are single, childless, and unattached, you may choose to devote the bulk of your energies to teaching for some period of time. However, if you are a single mother with three