

Five Reasons Why Teaching Is Still Great

By Paul Barnwell

I can open up just about any news source and click on yet another manifesto about how teachers are exhausted, [schools](#) are failing, or parents don't parent.

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But there is no other job I'd rather have than teaching right now.

I'm downright tired of the negative news. There are still countless reasons to celebrate the profession and we educators are due for a reminder.

1) Countless Small Wins

I'm hard-pressed to think of another profession with the potential to have so many small victories and breakthroughs every day.

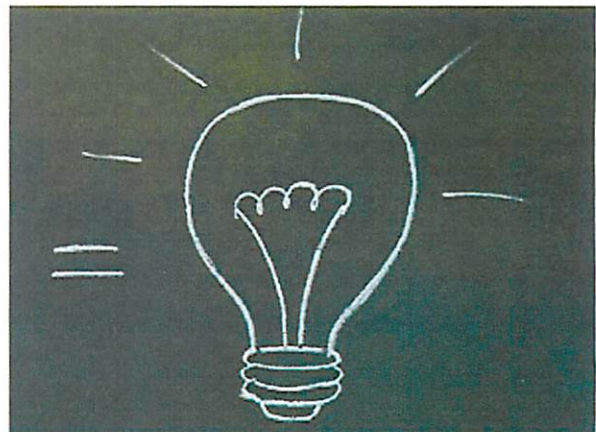
Take this past Wednesday, for example. Jajuan, Deonte, and several other students voluntarily stayed after school for English tutoring. They helped me teach a student from another class, Anthony, about appositives and complex sentences. They raced up to the whiteboard grasping green and blue dry erase markers and explained the basic structure of a literary analysis paragraph. They *wanted* to be there, to get better. I smiled inside and out. Pretty big win.

Earlier in the day, I told Kirsten that somebody fixed my speakers. Her eyes lit up—she lives for music. At the end of class, I played one of her suggestions off the class playlist. Small win.

Some of my former students with intellectual disabilities emphatically fist-bumped me in the hallway, asking when they could be in my media class again. Small win.

Demetrias, an oldest child who lives with her mom and four younger siblings, often taking on enormous childcare responsibilities, entered class with some good news. She asked if I could help her [apply](#) for an advanced media summer program. Bigger win.

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There are still many thorn-in-the-side moments during the school day, and it's not easy to ignore and filter them to make room for small wins and breakthroughs. But it's possible, and it's one reason why teaching is still great.

2) You Can Focus Your Efforts

The demands keep piling up on our desks and in our psyches like an overflowing garbage bin. We need to raise test scores. We need to stay everyday for tutoring, if necessary. We need to call parents. We need to sponsor more clubs and activities. We need to **fill out** paperwork.

I refuse to add to the already-significant demands of my job, however, by making **excessive personal and professional sacrifices** to do things that parents, local businesses, politicians, and other adults should be doing more of, like helping build character, crafting more sane education policy, and providing opportunities for youth to be positively engaged in communities. I'm only effective day in and day out in the classroom when I can put on the brakes and focus on what's in front of me.

But I will dedicate myself to focusing my efforts on what matters: teaching and nurturing kids, creating engaging **lesson plans**, and charting student growth. If I focus on what I can do well and control in my classroom, I'm not going to spend much time on or stress about the other stuff. My contract does not require me to fix society, even though that's the explicit and implicit message we educators receive daily.

That's not to say I don't choose to be a **teacher** leader; I do on my own terms. I don't say yes to everything. Part of my job—part of my commitment to my students—is to say no when an opportunity isn't a good fit. We can—and must—do this, especially if policy makers and building leaders continue to pile on demands.

3) It's Not a Desk Job

Some days, due to testing or being flat-out tired, I'll spend a good chunk of my time in my \$20 faux-leather chair, procured from a local Goodwill store. But most of the time, I'm buzzing around room 137 and Fern Creek's hallways, creating opportunities for more small wins. As I circulate, I'm challenging and supporting individual students, but I'm also building connections—asking Daneshia to analyze the latest hit by Trey Songz, or complimenting Lawrence on his art project on display.

It's these types of interactions—strongly linked to my No. 1 reason why teaching is still great, the opportunity for countless small wins—that keep me going, and make me appreciate the lack of redundancy in the job.

I've been teaching nearly nine years. And I never wake up and think, *Wow, I've got to face another day just like yesterday, or like last week, or like last month.* The variety of challenges and encounters keeps the work of teaching exciting. Yes, it can be exhausting at times, but I'd never describe my job as boring.

4) I'm Encouraged to Play With Technology

I've used **Edublogs** with middle and high school students. While I've **retracted my more permissive stance on cell phones** in the classroom, I've tested out **Poll Everywhere** and other services that allow students to use their gadgets. Via Skype and Google Drive, I've

connected my class in Louisville with students in Miami to collaborate on writing and media work. I've utilized all sorts of tools to challenge students to create authentic digital-storytelling projects.

Plenty of professions are light-years ahead of education when it comes to technology—but there are few jobs that offer so much possibility with technology tools and applications. Some tools are better than others, for sure, but this is part of the journey, part of what it means to innovate on a daily basis.

5) There Are No Limits to Professional Growth and Exploration

Many teachers—including myself—gripe about inflexible and mandatory professional development within their school districts. There is good reason for the displeasure: Teachers are excluded from the design of the training sessions, so the results don't match what we need. But I'm guessing if you've got a dynamic idea, lesson, or classroom structure to share, your principal won't stop you from swapping ideas with others, or creating your own professional development session.

And then there's the professional development available beyond our schools, via online communities and independent organizations like [ASCD](#) that offer outstanding networking and professional growth potential. Many educators even consider [Twitter](#) to be a great PD source. They've learned to navigate the sea of 140-character messages to share and build on ideas with educators around the world.

Three organizations outside of my school district help recharge my batteries by connecting me with dynamic folks and ideas: Middlebury College's [Bread Loaf Teacher Network](#), the [National Writing Project](#), and the Center for Teaching Quality's [Teacher Leaders Network](#).

It's easy to feel isolated within our buildings and school districts. But with a little bit of effort, we can find and create the professional networking and development that suits our needs.

Let's Hear From You

Many of us have challenging work environments, but we can also be proactive in celebrating and creating the moments, students, and conditions that keep us returning to the classroom year after year.

What made you fall in love with teaching to begin with? What great things have you discovered as your career has unfolded? What do you do to maintain your own job satisfaction?

Paul Barnwell has taught in the Kentucky Public School System since 2004, and he now teaches English and digital storytelling at Fern Creek Traditional High School in Louisville, Ky. He's currently striking a balance between work and life by bow-hunting, gardening, watching football, and writing. A member of the Center for Teaching Quality's Teacher Leaders Network, Paul blogs at [Mindful Stew](#).

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