

ORGANIZING YOUR LIFE

Tips for the Multigrade Teacher

BY NADINE HAYES MESSER

Once the school year begins, I feel as if I'm on a merry-go-round that won't stop until June, and I can't seem to get off," I recently told a friend. Perhaps you have felt the same way. Just when *does* a teacher have time to get organized—especially if you teach several grades, and serve as the principal, secretary, and janitor?

Managing your life can be an overwhelming task, but here are five steps that may help you to utilize your time better while possibly even reducing stress: plan, simplify, organize, delegate, and maintain balance.

Plan

Get a planning notebook or calendar. Many types of handy organizers are available at office supply stores. A planning notebook should contain space for notes, an appointment calendar, an address section, and helpful charts. I use a 5 1/2 x 8 1/2-inch three-ring binder with tabbed dividers for categories such as lists, menus, and addresses. Some electronic planners are available, too. The

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best ones store hundreds of names and addresses as well as appointments and memos. Marilyn Cooley suggests using a notebook for addresses and birthday and Christmas card lists.¹ You can carry this small notebook or planner with you to and from school.

Or you may prefer to post a large yearly calendar on the wall of your office or home. You can write in birthdays, medical appointments, workshops, payment deadlines, reunions, and church and school events. This chart gives you an overall look at the year in advance.²

Another planning essential is the familiar "to-do list." Compile your list on a pocket planner or spiral notebook, rather than on slips of paper that can easily be lost. Some time management experts suggest that you spend time each evening outlining the things you need to do the next day.³ Time management specialist

Dru Scott maintains that "regardless of your individual circumstances, *every good morning starts the night before.*"⁴ It's helpful to prioritize the list so that you can do the most important items first. You could even divide your list to match segments

of your day: before, during, and after school.⁵

It is helpful to make up a daily schedule, listing the order in which you do your tasks. This saves time because it prompts you about which task comes next. Keep the schedule general, leaving room for flexibility.

If you have trouble getting started in the morning, it may be helpful to lay out your clothes the night before. Lunches can be preassembled and refrigerated. Breakfast preparations, such as setting the table or mixing frozen orange juice, can also be done the evening before. Prepare early, so you don't begin the day rushed and frustrated.

Plan ahead for Sabbath by making your preparations throughout the week. Even though school is dismissed early on Friday, you won't enjoy the Sabbath nearly so much if you frantically rush home to clean house, do baking or laundry, mow the lawn, and wash the car. Schedule some of your work for Sundays and weekday evenings so you can experience the calm, restful Sabbath that God invites us to enjoy. Planning is the key.

Simplify

After years of collecting pictures, articles, and other materials that might someday be useful in my teaching, I decided to simplify. How? By throwing out, giving away, or selling excess items. You may want to do the same. After all, how many egg cartons and oatmeal boxes do you actually *need* in your supply cupboard?

You also have to *quit* collecting. Don't

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just throw things out—stop saving them, as well. Prevent some of the piles from developing by sorting your mail when it arrives. Donations of used items can be graciously declined or passed on to another organization if you do not need them.

Put an end to clutter.⁶ Have a filing cabinet for really important articles, and file them promptly. Put useful catalogs behind labeled dividers. When a new catalog arrives, file it immediately and discard the outdated one. Discard catalogs that you cannot use, and ask to be removed from the firms' mailing lists. Donate old magazines to the local library, prison, or laundromat.

Be selective about extracurricular activities for your class. Consider forgoing

fund-raising activities unless you have excellent Home and School or volunteer parent help. Work with your pastor to see if some of your programs could be combined with other church functions, such as having Investiture with a vespers, church service, or graduation. Especially in the busy final months of the school year, limit the number of programs.

At home you can simplify your menus and meal preparation to save extra minutes as well as energy. Buy lunch supplies and other groceries in larger quantities so you don't need to make extra stops at the store during the week. Set up a lunch-making center in your kitchen: a drawer or cupboard where you can store lunch bags, containers, napkins, plastic spoons, and non-perishable

lunch foods. You may wish to buy foods that come in individual serving sizes, as well.

Constantly seek ways to simplify and streamline your life—eliminate unnecessary work, programs, activities, and materials. Barter your skills for needed items or services—if you are a good mechanic and have an artistic neighbor, offer to fix her car in return for her designing a bulletin board for your classroom.

Organize

During your working day, try to group similar chores together⁷—making phone calls, typing letters, duplicating materials, running errands, meetings and visits with parents. Utilize quiet time for planning, correcting, and other tedious work with-

out being interrupted. Be aware of interruptions by others or yourself, and try to take measures to prevent them.

Group similar items together. Have a place for everything, and keep everything in its place.⁸ That is easier than having supplies, books, magazines, teachers' manuals, and papers scattered in stacks throughout the room. Keep often-used items in convenient locations (near the places you use them), and store seldom-used material in less-accessible areas.

Set up a filing system. Either file all papers as they come in (handling each piece of paper only once), or have a box or tray where they can stay until your regularly scheduled filing day. You can eliminate much work by tossing all "junk" mail as it arrives and by placing checks and bills in a file folder to be given to the school treasurer.

Select suitable containers in which to put information, magazines, booklets, school board minutes, and teaching materials. There are notebooks, 3" x 5" card

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files, Rolodex files, magazine storage boxes, bins, desk trays, dishpans, diskettes, and other organizers that will serve this purpose. For example, Rolodex card files can be used for names and addresses of constituents, suppliers, maintenance service firms, and school families. At the end of the year, sort through your filing cabinets and discard any duplicates or other materials that are no longer useful.

Arrange your classroom in a convenient way, so the things you use most often are in easy-to-reach locations. For instance, I've placed my desk near the classroom entrance, the adjoining office, the reading

table, and my teacher's editions. The piano and stereo are farther away, since they are used less often.

Find a handy spot to post lists of emergency procedures for your class, important telephone numbers, substitute teacher information, and upcoming activities. I've begun compiling a three-ring binder with this information—my personal teacher's manual.

Each year, make a master checklist with your students' names listed alphabetically down the left margin. Duplicate copies whenever you need to record information about your pupils, such as permission slips turned in or school picture money paid.

What do you do with all those professional journals? You could save the entire journal, then organize the collection in magazine storage boxes or have the set bound. You could toss them out after you read them. Or you could tear out, staple, and file the pertinent articles and toss or give away the rest.

Delegate

Don't feel as though *you* must do everything. Assistance is often available from several sources, even though it sometimes seems harder to show someone else how to do a job than to do it yourself. Have your more mature students put up bulletin boards, change calendars, do daily chores, straighten books, cut out letters, etc. Try not to redo their work if it's not up to your standards.

Use volunteer teaching assistants—if this works for you. Ask your local conference office of education for a list of guidelines for working with teaching assistants.

Ask your Home and School to organize periodic work bees to help do heavy cleaning, maintenance, painting, and yard work at the school. One year we asked church families to sign up for one month of weekly cleaning at the school. A list of weekly and once-a-month duties was posted in the hall. Some schools allow families to exchange janitorial work for tuition. Work bees have helped organize our school library.

Look for alternatives. If volunteer help is unavailable or unsatisfactory, it may be better to hire someone if your school can afford it. One year, after struggling with undependable volunteers, a secondhand lawnmower, and knee-high grass and weeds, our school board decided

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to hire a lawn-mowing service to come as needed during the growing season. The board found the needed monies, and the lawn looked much nicer.

Try team teaching with certain units or classes. Share the responsibility with another teacher, volunteer parent, or community resource person. At my school, two mothers and the pastor come once a week during the winter to teach gymnastics for an hour.

At home, delegate some of your household chores to your spouse, children, or outside help. If finances allow, hire a cleaning person, retiree, or high school or college student for half a day each week. Or take your laundry to a laundromat with a drop-off service.

Share the church work with others, as well. Don't overload yourself with too many church offices, committee meetings, and other responsibilities. Take time for yourself, your family, and friends.

Keep a Balance

Balance giving (such as teaching) with getting (such as learning): read books, take a course, attend a conference or seminar, travel, visit another school, call the teacher in a nearby church school, or take long walks. One winter, when I had been feeling low, I received a large envelope of poetry written by one of my neighboring teachers. What a lift! Share your burdens and take time for a little shop talk. You'll feel more refreshed and better able to utilize your skills and time.

Balance your activity. Work at school often involves tedious mental effort. Doing some physical exercise or activity will help you to be invigorated and healthy. After my students go home in the afternoon, I often take about 15 minutes to play the piano before I begin my paperwork. Take time to attend a concert, learn a new hobby, or develop outside interests.

Remember to spend quiet time and take care of your spiritual needs through prayer, meditation, and Bible study. I've found it helpful to set aside a few

Teachers' Tips on Time Management

PLAN: "One hour before school each day to organize for the day."—*Waneta Harris.*

SIMPLIFY: "Take advantage of the use of concept lessons that cross ability/age/grade levels."—*John Shafer.*

ORGANIZE: "Combine as many classes as you can. I make sure I'm ready for the next day before I leave school."—*Karen L. Robbins.*
"File it all. My brains are in my notebooks."—*Jim Palmer.*

DELEGATE: "Parent volunteers to help with labor-intensive tasks such as library work, immunization records, filing, typing, reading groups, memory work recitations, some teaching in areas of their expertise."—*Lawrence R. Rogien.*

KEEP A BALANCE "I read a lot, climb mountains, play tennis and ping pong, fish, jog, share interests, sweat."—*Jim Palmer.*

minutes before my students arrive to read a verse and pray for guidance in the activities of the day.

Take breaks to avoid fatigue. Get a drink of water, stretch, or do deep-breathing exercises throughout your school day. Your students will appreciate these breaks, also. Play with your students at recess, or walk around as you supervise.

Limit your time at school to certain hours. If you don't, your work will expand to fit the time you stay there, and you will become fatigued. There is always more you *could* do. Walk out the door at a certain hour without carrying work home . . . and

without feeling guilty.

Go to bed early enough to get a full night's rest and wake up on time, fitting all your morning chores into the time you have before school.

By keeping a balance in your life, you feel more like working when it's time to work as well as enjoying the other components of your life.

Don't be afraid to adapt time-saving tips to your needs. Experiment to see what works best for you. Look for creative ideas to manage your time, activities, and materials, while still being a flexible, loving person who cares about people. You may still feel as though you are on a merry-go-round during the school year, but maybe you'll at least get off without feeling dizzy. ☺

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Marilyn Cooley, *Checklist for a Working Wife* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1979), p. 129.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 127, 128.
3. J. L. Barkas, *Creative Time Management: Become More Productive and Still Have Time for Fun* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1984), p. 56.
4. Dru Scott, *How to Put More Time in Your Life* (New York: Rawson, Wade Publishers, Inc., 1980), p. 136.
5. Barkas, p. 55.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*