

do the math by Penny Kittle

Teachers are expected to reach unattainable goals with inadequate tools.

The miracle is that at times they accomplish this impossible task.

Haim Ginott

My students file in from the hall as soon as homeroom moves out, and the clock is on for me. In the passing time before class begins I put the agenda on the board, collect absence notes, and take attendance. Casual conversations help me gage the day and check in with my kids, because the clock is ticking: ninety divided by twenty-four is under four minutes a kid per day; I've got to do a lot at once. I'm writing at the chalkboard and fielding questions when Krystal says behind me, "Mrs. Kittle, I found out last night that my dad has cancer," her voice crumbling. She gathers her hair in both hands and looks away as I turn.

"Ah Krystal," I stammer. "I'm so sorry."

"Thank you," she answers.

It is hard to be close to such grief; it is contagious.

"Can I turn my essay in on Monday?"

"Of course," I sigh.

The bell. The schedule's not up, but I have to begin. Teaching writing requires tremendous organization: models of great works, samples of my own process so they can find a path through a genre, and time with each student. I have to find a way to divide up my block-scheduled eighteen-week course into enough pieces to build trust with my students so they'll take risks and write well. I have to give them tools to improve their writing and enough encouragement so they'll believe they can. And I have to listen. I hand Krystal the tissue box. I know her family and had hoped so much for a different diagnosis. But the bell has rung; I'm already behind.

I realize I'm the envy of my colleagues in this country who teach English with classes of thirty, thirty-five, and more, but twenty-four is still too many. I can't get it all accomplished, not even close. Working with seniors—focused on goals I believe are hugely important: preparing them for the rigor of college work; correcting errors in style, usage, structure, and support for an idea; providing vision for great writing through carefully chosen mentor authors like Mitch Albom, Leonard Pitts or Barbara Kingsolver takes time. I have to help them find topics they can connect to, supportive organizers they need to break down the writing into parts, and the tools to analyze the craft of other writers so they can begin to build their own. The days disappear like parking spaces at the mall. I have less than nineteen minutes a week of class time per student, if there aren't any lost days from sickness, snow, suspension, family crisis, or family vacations.

In between classes I glance at our local paper. A columnist is ranting about one of my new English teachers again; he calls him lazy. The paper chooses that sentence to bold and box to draw readers in, always anxious to start a fight. As I read I'm stunned at the outright lies, but the paper printed them and others will believe. As if teaching isn't hard enough already, I sigh. I know

it is frustrating to be outside this big system we call school—judging its effectiveness by the few assignments brought home and the selected stories our children tell. But ‘lazy’ keeps spinning in my mind long after I’ve put the paper aside. He says teachers should be assigning and reading an essay a week from every student. Not a bad idea. I would like to, actually, but I don’t know how it can happen.

I pull out my calculator; there’s so much he doesn’t understand. I assigned one essay every other week last semester and it just about crushed me. When the papers came in I read every one at least twice: once for content flow and an understanding of the writer’s purpose, and then a second time to suggest, encourage, correct and compare to the rubric we use for evaluation. When I was cooking—enough caffeine and quiet to be at maximum productivity—I could do all of that in ten minutes per essay, which times twenty-four students was four hours for one class. Most high school teachers carry four courses, so now that is sixteen hours of reading and responding to just one essay. That isn’t sixteen hours of misery by any means; student writing often delights and surprises me, but it is sixteen hours. There goes the weekend.

And the trouble is, that is on top of the fifty-hour work week already put in planning lessons and teaching them, staff, department and committee meetings, parent phone calls (for discipline, attendance or just concern, let alone to say how much I enjoy a child), parent meetings, professional development to retain my certification or address a district initiative, ordering supplies and books for my classroom, and then fitting in sporting events because I know how much they matter to my students. I add music performances and drama so that I can honor them all, but it adds up. If I’m really conservative here, I’d say that 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. barely covers all of that stuff. When you add another sixteen hours for reading those essays or other student work and my own professional reading (I subscribe to four journals), we easily have more than a sixty-hour work week. Thirty-eight weeks a year equals 2280 hours total. Perhaps you know that a typical work year is 2080 for fifty-two, forty-hour weeks. Suddenly I know why I’m so tired all the time. This is why my husband complains that I fall asleep in my own drool when we rent a video to watch together. It’s why we eat too many meals out, and I drink too much coffee. Just add in the guilt I feel for leaving a child behind—a truly haunting situation—and my cup just ran over.

There just isn’t enough time to do all we believe is necessary in this work, not even close. I’ve done the math for twenty years now; I’d challenge that columnist to do it for even a week. We’re in trouble in this profession and *we know it*. Needs are greater than ever, both emotionally and academically, so the kids seek more time than we have. But this is combined with a national teaching shortage. More than half of all new teachers leave education—for good—in the first three years of work. The talent I’ve seen pass through the doors of our school in the last five years is staggering. When we lose another teacher this spring, after hours of investment in helping him understand our curriculum and assessments and student population, will the rest of us have the stamina to keep going? Some years I wonder.

I wish I had more time in my day for students like Krystal. She's articulate and appreciative; one of those kids that keeps me going. Her dad was at graduation looking better than I expected, and I pray he will survive. But I also know this: if it was my daughter facing the loss of a parent, I'd want to believe that every adult in the school would take care of her, not just assign and grade her schoolwork. Teachers are called to do far more than deliver content to young minds; we need to shepherd kids to adulthood, sometimes because no one else can.

How do we find the time?

I'm honored to do this work, but I've done the math and it scares me.

It must be why I teach English.