



Serenity Prayer for a Teacher

Nancy Snipes Mosley, Public School Teacher

One of my most prized possessions is my grandmother's cross-stitch of the Serenity Prayer. As I hung it on the wall in my new house this summer, I was flooded with thoughts about the coming school year.

God grant me Serenity to accept the things I cannot change...

Public education is complicated and costly. Despite our attempts to improve school resources and teacher conditions, the political landscape has not been friendly to these changes. Decisions about education involve the cooperation of educational leaders, politicians, and voting taxpayers. This can feel so unlikely at times it makes me want to give up. I've been spending too much time lamenting this reality rather than trying to find ways to navigate through it.



There is no cure-all for reaching all students. Every year I get a new idea for how to reach my low performing students, and I start the year optimistically believing this will finally be the year all of my students will succeed. Sure enough, I'll reach students I wouldn't have in the past but then lose other students who would have responded better with my old method. Some adolescents will actually sabotage their own success for some psychological or social reason unknown to you.

My family needs me and I need them. I can't always put off time for my family until the weekend or the holidays or summer break. We provide each other unconditional love and care that is needed every day. All the time I spend on extra school work is non-refundable and the work will literally never be done. Time with family is precious and limited. My kids will stop wanting to always hang out with me, then they will be too busy with their own school work, and then they will grow up and move out.

...Courage to change the things I can...

I will stop trying to fix everything all the time. I genuinely want to improve my teaching and help my students more, but I get too stressed when I get in over my head. It makes me uneasy to let something go that needs work, but students are resilient and don't require everything to be perfect. In fact, trying to perfect everything doesn't work and may even backfire. Embracing my classroom as a "work in progress" will give them a model of a true learning environment.

I will let go of misguided feelings of guilt. I want to walk out of my classroom and feel good about what I did accomplish rather than guilty for not doing more. When I really do need to do something different, guilt is a helpful signal. But when I just feel guilty all the time over things I can't change, it tends to make me both insecure and defensive. I plan to practice mindfulness through yoga and meditation so I can be more aware and accepting of myself.

I will start taking better care of myself during the school year. I can no longer stay up half the night to grade papers or skip lunch several days a week to help students. I need to take breaks throughout the day to use the restroom, get water, stretch, walk the halls, and talk with colleagues. When I have a medical issue, I am going to take care of it immediately instead of risking it getting worse. I am not going to let work interfere with my plans to cook healthy meals and exercise.

...and Wisdom to know the difference.

Which battles should I be fighting? When I started writing for Red 4 Ed, I was very optimistic about helping influence the outcome of the most recent state and local elections. When that did not happen, I got discouraged but also motivated to try harder next time. Something that would help me the most is school calendar reform - anything that would increase the number of workdays and spread breaks more evenly throughout the year. But if that is not going to change any time soon, I have to make more time for myself and encourage others to do the same. I started cutting back on my hours two years ago, but my lessons and assessments were still so high-maintenance that it didn't work out. Last year, I said no to some leadership opportunities and limited my participation in committees. Most importantly, I had to start changing how I taught and ran my classroom so I would not burn out.

What can I simplify or scale back? Last year was an interesting experience. On the positive side, I learned how to do some things more efficiently by focusing on the purpose and end goal of everything I do. In some cases, this got me to think of something that was not only more efficient but also more effective. The weeks where I stuck to my reduced workload plan, I was more refreshed during class and had more mental energy when giving feedback. However, I could not always meet all the demands of the job. I had less time to prepare for lessons, less time to grade, less time to contact parents, less time to complete paperwork, and less time to organize my classroom. I was much more likely to forget to do something or simply run out of time to meet a deadline. I had to think of it as a juggling act with too many balls for one person to juggle, so I just had to choose which balls to let drop.

What really matters here? During this time, my father became critically ill and spent almost two months in the hospital. I missed over a week of school and spent many more afternoons going to visit instead of staying after school to work. We got lucky and he recovered, but this was a massive wake-up call. Taking care of family is my first priority, and school can go on without my constant attention. My colleagues handled plans and grading; my students were sympathetic and patient while I caught up. I got to be a person, a daughter, a caregiver, not just a teacher. We all focused on the biggest priorities and everything turned out okay in the end. It was good that I had already decided to cut back, because if I had not, there would have been less room to adjust. Building in more time for "rainy days" would also create more opportunities throughout the semester to give students the breaks and personal attention they need.

I am putting these statements and questions in italics on a sign as a reminder for the coming school year. You can download a [printable version](#) to keep in your plan book or make your own. (It is made from a picture of the actual cross-stitch I inherited from my grandmother, Frances Snow)