

An Inspirational Message from Clinton Todd

2022 Burroughs Wellcome Fund Northeast Region Teacher of the Year

To the Brave, Bold, and Benevolent Beginning Teacher:

As your school year is underway, I'd like to thank you on behalf of our kids. The choice to enter and to remain in public education is to be commended. This work isn't easy. The challenges are many, and the payoff isn't always grand. Still, you chose. You chose to be a benefactor. You chose to serve kids. There are few paths that have the potential to uplift a life and shape the future the way yours will. Choosing to teach is both a beautiful burden and an expansive opportunity to learn, lead, and provide support. I began my teaching career 16 years ago, and I will never regret my choice. Over the years, I have learned that my most powerful teacher tool is neither an instructional strategy nor is it an assessment practice; it is an understanding of the importance of connections. I would like to share some insights on how recognizing both internal and external connections have benefitted my work in hopes you find them useful as well.



Self-awareness is one of the most valuable traits an educator can possess. A solid understanding of your personality, influences, and emotional state are vital for anticipating how you may act or react in a given situation. In a school, each day comes with its share of surprises. Our students' needs and moods may shift unexpectedly. Unforeseen events can alter our schedules. Teachable moments arise and take priority over a pre-planned lesson. Teachers must be able to adapt to the unknown. For me, daily variables keep the work interesting and exciting. While I cannot predict every random occurrence, I can anticipate my own response because I have been intentional in learning who I am through purposeful self-reflection. Reflect on those times when you were at your best as well as those situations you could have handled better. Do not dwell on personal disappointments, but rather see them as gifts because they have informed the person you are today. You will make mistakes; appreciate them as your teachers.

Your experience is your guide. Use it to empower and propel you forward. I have a simple personal mission statement that has directed me for over two decades: I support young people, especially those who need it most. Living my mission keeps me focused and satisfied. I chose that mission because I was once that young person. I grew up a gay kid with an unstable home life in rural Duplin County. I know what isolation and inequity feel like. A wise woman once told me that you bring all of yourself into your classroom. Rather than bring past trauma, I made a conscious decision to bring appreciation for both my hardship and my identity. I strive to be the type of adult that I needed so that all of our kids are better supported. Connecting to your history and your struggles can drive your purpose for others.

Knowing yourself also helps you to better function with others. If you know you have a tendency toward frustration when thrown a curveball, like the discovery of a paper jam in the copier at just the wrong time, take a moment to recognize your frustration and remember that stuff happens! One moment of acknowledging a human emotion will be better than hours of repressing it while the stressors of the day continue to build. Your students are more attuned to your emotions than you may realize; their day

suffers when yours does. While we are all human and tough days are inevitable, our kids aren't responsible for the weight we may carry into the classroom. Make a point to take care of yourself. Be your best self in front of your kids as often as possible. When challenging moments arise, model healthy coping mechanisms. When you can't do that, ask for help. None of us are infallible, and sometimes we need others.

Connecting to yourself also helps you to communicate with your team. I admit that I'm a sucker for a personality test. I'm an INFP, Enneagram 4 wing 3, Green, Gryffindor, if any of that is recognized or relevant. These assessments can be silly fun but can also build team rapport and understanding. For instance, I can sometimes be idealistic, innovative, and imaginative. While that approach is wonderful for generating new ideas and seeing the bigger picture, my projects may suffer from inconsistency and lack precision without assistance or intervention. It helps me to have detail-oriented, analytical teammates for a balance of strengths. You are not alone! Connect with your colleagues. Get to know each other in a meaningful way. Ask about their families and their interests. Show them appreciation. Trust them. Find ways to contribute. Build and maintain a support network so that you all may support your kids.

Connect with those kids! Treat kids as you would want to be treated. Everyone likes a kind tone, an affirmation, and having someone believe in them. Build relationships through common threads, genuine interest, and an appropriate degree of transparency. I believe creating the opportunities and structure to facilitate learning is greater than direct instruction. Make some space for your students to have a choice in how they explore content and demonstrate success. Invite students to self-assess and self-reflect so that they connect to their own learning. Push them to exceed self-imposed limits so that they connect to their confidence. Listen to them, and connect with their hearts.

Thank you for choosing our kids, and making those connections every single day.

Best Wishes!

Clinton Todd

BT Professional Development Corner



The NCDPI ELA Team is excited to release a [monthly literacy-based newsletter](#) for the benefit of beginning teachers or anyone who hopes to learn and keep up to date with best practices and resources to enhance instruction. This newsletter is a bite-sized version of the ELA team's quarterly newsletter, the SCOOP, which is embedded along with other resources. Each consecutive newsletter will follow the same format centering on a different topic. This month's newsletter targets the importance of reading materials selection, examples of how to do so, and sample work to guide and model the process. If you have any questions regarding the newsletter, please reach out to Daniel.fugazot@dpi.nc.gov.

Thank you,
The NCDPI ELA Team