or teachers, back-to-school time signals a new year more clearly than January 1. As we start a new year, many of us try to make a clean start by selecting one or two back-to-school resolutions. Can you think of a promise you made to yourself to improve certain aspects of your school setting? Do you remember how long your resolve lasted?

When we try to develop new behaviors or habits, some backsliding is natural. Long-established patterns of thinking, talking, behaving, and reacting take conscious efforts to change. The important underlying motivation, however, is to continue trying to improve—trying to do something better—from now on. Teachers benefit from this type of introspection that leads to the cycle of reflecting, monitoring, and growing.

You may be looking for some resolutions for your new year. Twelve are offered here to provoke your thinking and to encourage you to make your own.

Twelve resolutions

1. Look for models. Patterning our actions, language, behavior, or self-discipline after someone whose qualities we admire can be a simple path to self-improvement. Notice the admirable qualities of someone in your field or someone who has similar responsibilities to yours, and see if you can practice these desirable traits until they become habits.

2. Mentor a student or new colleague. Any one of us can point to a person or several people who took a special interest in us at a given time in our careers. These people often profoundly influenced our paths toward confidence, integrity, and professional success. Notice a colleague or student who may need mentoring. Offer him or her your personal support and guidance.

3. Keep classes alive. Constantly searching for ways to keep our classrooms alive with thinking and curiosity is a worthy quest. University, secondary, elementary, and preschool classes deserve to be stimulating, inspiring, and confidence-building. Because there are so many valuable experiences, there is no one combination of expectations that is “right.” No matter what activities we include, our classes should engage students’ vitality, capture their imagination, and inspire them to seek further knowledge and skills.

4. Avoid “I’m busy.” Talking about how busy or tired we are too easily becomes a habit. And the people to whom we make these remarks are most likely as busy and as tired as we are. Telling colleagues how hard we are working and how tired we are may more frequently elicit feelings of annoyance than feelings of sympathy toward us. Also, constantly thinking and talking about how busy and how tired we are may result in a self-fulfilling prophecy. When people ask how things are going or how we are doing,
perhaps we could tell them about something that is particularly interesting or satisfying to us.

5. Work with unfamiliar students. When, as university professors, we volunteer to teach a class of elementary, junior high, or high school students, we are reminded of the myriad responses that are not frequently a part of our teacher preparation classes or ensembles. Choosing a class to teach that is not made up of high achievers gives us the most powerful messages about the differences between university students and younger students. Those who have difficulty learning teach us most about how to teach. We may too easily rely on memories of “how it was” to guide our training of teachers. It is important to remember, however, that how it was is not necessarily how it is, and how it is is something we ourselves should experience as teachers, not just as observers.

When, as public school teachers, we arrange to have a swap day with a teacher who works with students from a different ethnic or socioeconomic population, we return to our own situation with new eyes. Having firsthand experience with a different set of teaching circumstances can help refresh our work and our view of our own teaching situations. For all of us, it can become a habit to presume that the best of our situation generalizes to all other settings, but that the worst is unique to us. And, sometimes, without a contrasting experience, the positives and the negatives of our teaching situations can become distorted. Our goal for this resolution is to gain a more complete picture of the challenges facing students and teachers in diverse settings.

6. Compliment colleagues. Colleagues deserve our compliments for a job well done, an insightful comment, admirable behavior, or consistent conscientiousness. Rather than reserve praise exclusively for concert performances, support faculty and administrators for their professional behavior throughout the year. Identification and support help guarantee continuation of the outstanding qualities we see in others.

7. Minimize destructive language. It is easy to participate in critical language about colleagues and students. Sadly, student bashing often occurs in
teachers’ lounges or similar settings. University and public school teachers can vow to minimize those descriptions of a student that they would not use in front of that student’s parent. When we use destructive words to criticize a fellow teacher or a student (especially for the purpose of humor), those words can (some would argue do) negatively affect our perceptions of that teacher or student. This perception impedes our own effectiveness as a teacher and colleague. Private or public ridicule of others is not the behavior of that paragon we each would like to be, the “educator.”

8. Read professional literature. Just as disciplined, consistent practice helps maintain a certain level of musical proficiency, disciplined, consistent reading of professional journals and books helps maintain an informed, investigative approach to teaching. Read, but do not limit yourself to, music and music education sources. Excellent professional and personal insights are available in educational, psychological, sociological, self-help, and artistic sources, among others.

9. Consider long-term and short-term effects. In our daily teaching dilemmas, we often rely on what works both in teaching content and in training students’ behaviors. Sometimes, however, what works in the short term can be detrimental to students in the long term. Can you think of any examples of this phenomenon? Whether the issue is teaching breathing, sequencing concepts, rewarding behavior, praising efforts, giving feedback, or any other typical classroom practice, teachers can consider and question the long-term consequences of conditioning students to perform, behave, or react in a specific way. When we project the long-term, sometimes snowballing, effects of our immediate choices, the speculative hindsight may be revealing enough to make us question the desirability and advisability of our current practices.

10. Balance your personal and professional efforts. Several years ago I worked with a wise woman who said, “One day I realized that my family was never getting the ‘best’ of me. By the time I got home from the office, I was tired, stressed, preoccupied, and uncheerful. Now, I consciously save some of my best for my family, and even use the drive home as a buffer from the work at the office.”

This insight can be a haunting reminder of how hectic our professional lives can be. Those of us who become more and more attached to what we do in our jobs can find ourselves less and less able to have normal, healthy relationships and conversations outside our jobs. As the saying goes, “If you are what you do, then when you don’t, you aren’t.” Our challenge is to avoid letting loyalty to our careers become slavery to our careers, compromising our personal relationships, health, happiness, and fulfillment.

11. Recognize potential for change. As individuals we can recognize that during some periods of our lives we may have shown more discipline, interest, honesty, diplomacy, incentive, and professionalism than at others. This same phenomenon is true for our students and colleagues. Exhibiting behavior that is insensitive, annoying, belligerent, or dishonest does not guarantee that a person will always be that way. In his remarks on learning-disabled individuals, a psychologist once said, “Some people make great seven-year-olds, but not very good forty-year-olds ... and vice versa.” As educators, we must guard against overtly or covertly stunting a person’s growth during a period of his or her life that may just be a phase of instability or turmoil.

12. Reflect on the long-term value of our work. Our role as educators is to change people by offering them information, skills, and opportunities for self-awareness. There is no better position than that of a teacher to have subtle and monumental impact on the long-term quality of life for our young people. When we forget this truth, our jobs become tedious, routine, and lifeless. It is the appreciation of and enthusiasm for our role as leaders of positive change in the lives of our students that can help us begin each day with renewed inspiration and resolve.