

# Preface

Whether you are an energetic novice, an exhausted veteran teacher, or a master teacher who is continually looking for ways to improve your craft, this book has the potential to help you notch up your effectiveness. *How to Survive and Thrive in the First Three Weeks of School* is based on a “big idea” represented by the following “equation”:  $3 + 3 = 33$ . I call this set of numbers a *numerym*. [Note: Numeryms are similar to *acronyms* but use numbers rather than letters to communicate a complex idea, e.g., 24/7 or 9–11.]

My use of  $3 + 3 = 33$  is an adaptation and expansion of a numerym coined in the early 1980s by an unknown staff member from the American Federation of Teachers’ (AFT) Educational Research and Dissemination Division. At that time,  $3 = 33$  was used to describe a body of research showing the impact of classroom management techniques established early in the school year (the first 3 weeks) on overall student achievement during the remaining 33 weeks of the school year (Emmer & Evertson, 1980). AFT personnel subsequently developed a teacher-training program that is still being offered by that organization (A. Gill, personal conversation, June 6, 2005). This idea is not a new one, but similar to essential habits for bodily health, like daily flossing and regular exercise, it needs to be revisited and reinforced periodically.

Principal Craig Spiers and his assistant, Tony Contos, administrators at Joliet Central High School (JCHS) in Illinois, adopted  $3 = 33$  to communicate the importance of doing the “right things” during the first 3 weeks of the school year, after several JCHS teachers went through the training. Staff members know what the numerym means: Time invested in the beginning of the school year to teach routines and expectations will pay dividends in achievement later on. Craig explains the importance of  $3 = 33$  this way:

**When teachers at any level or in any subject haphazardly introduce, postpone, or skip the explicit instruction and mastery of important classroom procedures, they inevitably reduce or even eliminate the likelihood of high achievement for many of their students, as well as creating a downward spiral of frustration, exhaustion, and stress for themselves. (C. Spiers, personal conversation, January 10, 2005)**

I have personally witnessed the power of well-taught routines, rules, and rubrics in classrooms and schools where teachers and students are focused on learning and achievement is high. Conversely, I have observed what the absence

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of structure and expectations can do to lower teacher morale and depress student achievement. The central concept of  $3 + 3 = 33$  is this: *Routines, rubrics, and rules (the 3Rs) taught and mastered at the beginning of the school year (3 weeks) result in a productive remainder of the school year (33 weeks).*

The numerym  $3 + 3 = 33$  expresses the educational version of winning a game, match, or race during the initial minutes of competition. Teachers who spend the first 3 weeks of the school year intentionally teaching and then assessing their students' mastery of the routines, rubrics, and rules necessary to succeed in their grade levels or content areas are able to implement a full "academic press" during the remaining 33 weeks of the year. Not only do they survive and thrive professionally, their students soar academically. [Note: *academic press* is "the extent to which school members, including students and teachers, experience a strong emphasis on academic success and conformity to specific standards of achievement" (Lee, Smith, Perry, & Smylie, 1999).]

I call the educators who consistently implement  $3 + 3 = 33$  *with-it teachers* (WITs). WITs are on top of, tuned in to, aware of, and in control of three critical facets of classroom life: (1) the management and organization of the classroom, (2) the engagement of students, and (3) the management of time (McEwan, 2002, p. 48).

### **The Goal of This Book: With-It-Ness for All Teachers**

The goal of this book is to provide all teachers with the knowledge, skills, and motivation to become WITs. Of course, there are many other ways that teachers acquire with-it-ness: (1) through trial and error, (2) by taking a classroom management course during preservice training or working with a with-it supervising teacher, (3) in a teacher induction program that is accompanied by mentoring from a with-it teacher, or (4) in ongoing professional development and coaching. *How to Survive and Thrive in the First Three Weeks of School* offers you an additional way to observe and acquire with-it-ness: an opportunity to learn from dozens of WITs at every level (K–12) who generously share their own personal routines, rubrics, and rules toward the goal of helping you become a WIT.

### **Who This Book Is For**

This book has been written for all K–12 teachers:

- Preservice teachers who are eager to learn as much as they can before stepping into their first official teaching position
- Recent graduates of undergraduate and graduate teacher-training programs who want to become WITs as quickly as possible

- Beginning teachers who are eager to make a difference immediately in their classrooms
- Alternative-career teachers who, although mature and successful professionals in other fields, need guidance in how to transfer their knowledge and experience to working with students
- Highly effective master teachers who are always eager to add tools to their teaching toolbox
- Experienced teachers who are feeling the pressures of standards-based instruction and assessment and are looking for ways to become more productive
- Teachers who are frustrated by the lack of discipline, respect, and motivation they see daily in their students
- Teachers who are demoralized by their lack of efficacy and want to feel empowered and energized once again

*How to Survive and Thrive in the First Three Weeks of School* will also be helpful to the following groups of educators:

- College and university professors in preservice teacher-training courses
- Administrators who provide professional development for teachers at all levels of experience
- Building-level and central office administrators who coach, mentor, supervise, and evaluate teachers
- Instructional coaches and mentors who desire to improve the performance of the teachers with whom they work

## What With-It-Ness Is Not

Before you read further, let me clarify what with-it-ness is not. First, with-it-ness is not the *only* trait one needs to be a highly effective teacher (McEwan, 2002). The lack of with-it-ness, however, is one of the most common reasons why teachers at any level fail. Teacher dropouts are usually dedicated and hard-working individuals who care about kids and want to be effective but fail to thrive because they don't have a plan for how to accomplish what they and their students are expected to do.

Second, being a WIT does not mean you must be an automaton that reads from a prepared script and never has any "fun" in the classroom. Nor does being a WIT mean that you must run your classroom like a drill sergeant. You will discover as you meet the WITs in this book that each one puts a unique spin on with-it-ness to accomplish their stated goals. Although they may wear wacky costumes (Chesnutt), dance for their reading groups (Vitale), give their students "the hairy eyeball" (Lander), play musical chairs with honors biology students

(Robertson), or talk with the animals (Oosterbaan), they pursue their academic missions with dogged determination.

## Overview of the Contents

*How to Survive and Thrive in the First Three Weeks of School* contains seven chapters. Each one presents vital information that will enable you to develop your own personalized  $3 + 3 = 33$  plan toward the goal of becoming a WIT.

The Introduction defines important terms and concepts and describes how the WITs were selected.

Chapter 1 describes how to establish a classroom environment that fosters student engagement. It explores a variety of ways to use classroom space and plan seating arrangements to enhance students' learning. You will find sample seating plans and room arrangements to stimulate your thinking about what will work best for you.

Chapter 2 focuses on the walls and bulletin boards of your classroom, discussing how to make your walls do the work of instruction while at the same time creating an aesthetically pleasing environment. It contains samples of posters from the classrooms of WITs at various grade levels and a menu of possible ways to use your walls to teach.

Chapter 3 examines precisely what kind of teaching models, moves, and approaches WITs use to teach the 3Rs, the important routines, rubrics, and rules that make their classrooms function like well-oiled machines.

Chapter 4 introduces dozens of organizational, academic, and social routines used by WITs. When mastered by students, these routines foster self-discipline and independence in your classroom, giving you more time and energy to teach.

Chapter 5 treats the subject of rubrics and shows how they can be used to raise expectations and ultimately student achievement, while Chapter 6 discusses how best to establish rules and choose rewards that build motivation and character. Finally, in Chapter 7, you will learn how to develop a personalized  $3 + 3 = 33$  plan for implementation in your classroom, whether at the elementary or secondary level. Examples are given from both levels.

In addition to the multiple routines, rubrics, and rules, you will also find advice, suggestions, and reflections from WITs regarding how they stay on top of, tuned in to, aware of, and in complete control of what's happening in their classrooms.

## Special Features of This Book

*How to Survive and Thrive in the First Three Weeks of School* also contains a variety of special features—tips and ideas you can use tomorrow in your classroom:

- With-It Teachers' Roundtables—honest and practical observations from with-it teachers on the “big ideas” of each chapter
- Answers to frequently asked questions from both new and experienced teachers
- A With-It Teacher's (WIT's) List containing more than 200 time-savers, noise breakers, attention getters, silent signals, homework helpers, and menus to make it easier for you to convert your allocated teaching time to academic learning time