



Podcast: You've Got This: Surviving Your First Year as a Teacher

HOST: Welcome to the inaugural episode of the "Teaching Exceptionally Podcast". "Teaching Exceptionally" is produced by the Council for Exceptional Children, the leading professional association of special and gifted education teachers. For more information, please visit www.cec.sped.org.

In this episode, titled "You've Got This: Surviving as New Teacher", we'll be talking to the authors of the CEC's newest publication, the survival guide for new special education teachers, Catherine Creighton Martin and Clara Hauth. Catherine is the mother of a child with a disability and currently teaches students with disabilities at Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia. She's also an adjunct professor at George Mason University. Clara is an assistant professor of special education at Marymount University with more than 10 years of public school service as a special education classroom teacher and as a lead mentor for new teachers.

Clara and Catherine, thanks so much for being with us.

Guests: Thanks for having us.

HOST: We're going to jump right in with the first question. If each of you could go back in time and give advice to yourself when you were a new teacher, what would that advice be? Clara, let's start with you.

Clara: Oh my goodness, that's an awesome question because I would love to go back and talk to my first teacher self. I think you're so nervous and so worried about doing the right thing all the time that I would tell myself, "Take it easy on yourself. Don't be so hard on yourself." The other thing I would definitely stress is that you can't do it alone. You need to reach out to mentors or lead teachers or team teachers, co teachers, administrators, all of those people, counselors, everybody in the building is going to be there to help and support you. I think that was one of the things that I thought I could do it all by myself. You come to it in a roundabout way and you realize that it really does take a big team of people and you should rely on that team because they've been there a lot longer than you have as a newbie. That's not always easy to do.

The other thing that I would do is also make sure that I was prepared and organized. Again, reach out and ensure that the school system ... I understand how things worked in the school. Of course, focus on the students and don't worry about making mistakes. That kind of goes back to the beginning, as well. You're going to make mistakes and you need to learn from those and, if you do, you know, move on. It's okay. That and don't be terrified to talk to parents. I think that's one of the things that we tend to shy away from when we're new at this job. Understanding that parents are really a huge part of the team is a critical thing that I would tell myself.

The other thing I would tell myself is to, again, enjoy the teaching and work with the kids. Have fun. Understand that it's about the learning and learning doesn't have to be boring. It should be engaging and fun. Go with it. Sometimes your students bring things out and be willing to just go with that thread instead of always having a scripted response. I think those are the things I would definition tell myself. That and definitely go out with peers, too, just to get yourself familiar with the school.

HOST: That's all excellent advice. Catherine, if you could go back in time, what advice would you give to yourself back when you were a brand new teacher?

Catherine: Sure. That is a good question. Really, to echo some of the things that Clara mentioned, I would really find a specifically content area mentor if that's provided. Really spend some time with that content area mentor. If not, seek somebody out in your building who you trust in order to learn the content most effectively. Second would be to focus on essential knowledge within the curriculum. Our learned often require and necessitate different types of teaching styles and learn at a different pace, so knowing the essential content knowledge of the standards for the state is really critical in order to know exactly what to teach. Second, I would look for finding a special education mentor to help with the IEP process. It's somebody that's been through the ropes before, really using our book as a guide. I think that our book has some outstanding resources, especially through the special education process, to make sure that you're checking all of the legally compliant things that are required of special education teachers.

Third, I would really focus on having relationships with your students. I think that one of the most powerful things that we can do as educators and, especially, special educators to improve students' academic performance is actually to focus on the relationship that we have with them. To have these very positive in every single interaction with students and then, finally, I would say expect it to be difficult. It's okay that it's difficult. This is a learning process and, in my opinion, having been a career switcher, one of the more difficult professions to have.

Speaker 1: Some more excellent advice. Let's move on to our next question. It comes from a Twitter follower. Angela in Michigan. She says her biggest challenge is managing all of the paperwork. She said she didn't know there'd be so much. It's an issue that you hear a lot from special education teachers. It's even made some headlines recently. What are your suggestions for dealing with the volume of paperwork required by special education teachers? Catherine, let's hear from you.

Catherine: Wow, that is a really good question and definitely hits the heart of whether you're a first year teacher or a tenth year special education teacher. Case in point, I had three IEP meetings this week and next week I have another one. That's a tremendous volume of information. I think that you have to prioritize, number one. The first thing that I always do is I sit and I look at my things that have to be done essentially. Believe it or not, I have, I use sticky notes. Some people can use their iPhones or you can use your computers. Whatever helps you organize your material best and knowing ... What I put on my stickies, literally at my desk, are essential things that I have to get done that day, but if an emergency happens, which it does in teaching, sometimes you don't get to it until later. That comes back.

In all sincerity, I take a lot home with me. Last night, I did probably 45 minutes of just IEP work. This weekend, I'm going to take home another hour and a half. Again, I think it comes to prioritizing the paperwork. Knowing what's most important. When you're new, it's hard. You don't always know your priorities. Again, I think that having a special education mentor and a content area mentor to help you out. Know how to prioritize and they can help with that too.

HOST: We're going to wrap up with one final question and this one goes to you, Clara. When new teachers enter the classroom, they've got the technical skills they need to survive. Well, what would you say are the important soft skills that new teachers need to develop?

Clara: Wow. Well, soft skills are absolutely those personal attributes that you have to have to succeed in the classroom in the school building and beyond. You've got to be able to, I would say new teachers really need to ... Again, I go back to that team structure. Form relationships with people in your building. Of course relationships with your students and, of course, building relationships with your family. I'm also going to add in there, I forgot before, relationships with all of those itinerant teachers that you're dealing with. Students who have occupational therapy or speech therapy. All of those people, you've got to be able to coordinate, which leads me to that organizational and coordination piece.

You've got to be flexible and able to really look at the big picture as you're walking into a building with your students. Primarily making that student focus your main objective and that is how am I going to best serve the students in my classroom. In doing so and creating the relationships and building on the network in the building and also being extraordinarily organized, as well as, I think, flexible, with how things run in a building. Also flexible with your lessons and flexible with your students. You're going to be dealing with a lot of different types of behaviors. You really have to be able pull from that toolbox. You learned all those things in school and maybe you've had a little on the job training, but you really have to know how to access that information. I'll go back and say, again, I think the book gives new teachers that option. Gives them a touch stone. A place to tab those pages and write notes down of the things that they need to really conversant at when they become new teachers.

HOST: That's more great advice. Thanks so much Clara and Catherine, our Survival Guide authors.

Clara: Great.

Catherine: Thank you so much. Yeah, we appreciate it. Take care.

Speaker 1: The Survival Guide for New Special Education Teachers is available now from CEC. Visit the CEC catalog at pubs.cec.sped.org to order your copy today. Please also visit the CEC website for information on student memberships, student discounts to the 2016 CEC convention in St. Louis and information on how you can get involved with the 40th

anniversary of IDEA, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Also, stay tuned for the next episode of "Teaching Exceptionally". Coming soon.