

You Don't Have to Start at 100%

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After a restful summer, many educators come into September ready to hit the ground running. From developing elaborate lesson plans to volunteering for extracurriculars and committees to setting up a picture-perfect classroom, the school year often starts with lots of enthusiasm and long hours spent trying to meet every need. And while it is easy to get caught up in the excitement of a new school year, it also may not be realistic to maintain this energy for the next 10 months. The school year is a marathon, not a sprint, so below are some tips for starting the year in a way that feels manageable beyond September.

Check your "default setting"

In the excitement of September, we often return to our default settings. It is easy to fall into old routines without thinking much about them. While some of these routines are helpful and necessary, others are driven by expectations we have placed on ourselves over time. This year, try noticing the expectations you place on yourself. When you catch yourself thinking, "*I should answer that email tonight*", "*I should make this better*", "*I should take this on*", ask yourself:

- Does this really need to be done?
- Does it need to be done now?
- Does it need to be done by me?
- Does it need to be done to this standard?

The purpose here is to be more intentional with the limited time and energy you have. Recognizing what is required, what can wait, and what doesn't need to be done at all will help ensure your energy is spent where it is most needed.

Set a sustainable pace

The patterns and boundaries you establish in September can shape the rest of the school year. That makes this the perfect time to set a sustainable pace before an unsustainable one becomes the expectation. With the excitement of the new school year, you may find yourself willing to stay late, bring work home with you, take on another committee, or revamp all your lesson plans. While these things may seem feasible now, will they still feel that way in November?

Instead, protect some of that energy for activities that help you recharge and feel like yourself outside of work—whether that is exercise, a hobby, time to catch up with friends, or an evening with nothing on the agenda. Establishing these things as part of your routine now can make them easier to maintain once the demands of the school year increase and the September energy begins to fade.



Leave some gas in the tank

Despite our best efforts, things won't always go according to plan this school year. Illness, report cards, a student who needs some extra support, or a difficult situation in your personal life can add another layer of demand on top of your normal routine.

It can be helpful to think of your energy as something to be budgeted, rather than spent completely. If you've already used all your energy on maintaining your usual routine, you'll have less capacity to respond when something extra or unexpected comes along. Budgeting your energy also means recognizing that your energy may be needed in places beyond work. Protecting your capacity to attend to situations in your personal life doesn't make you a less dedicated educator. It is part of making sure you can continue showing up for your students with care, patience, and attention.

September is an exciting time to set goals, try new things, and bring fresh energy to your work. The goal is not to hold yourself back or care less about your work. It is to be intentional about where you spend your energy, so you have something left to give when you need it most. Give yourself permission to question your self-expectations, set boundaries before they become difficult to change, and leave room for the unexpected. Although your September self may be ready to give 100%, your November self will be grateful you didn't.

The NSTU's Early Intervention Program is available to members who are working or on paid sick leave and are experiencing an illness or injury. For more information on the Early Intervention Program, visit nstuinsurance.ca. To self-refer to the program, please email nurse@nstu.ca or call 1-800-565-6788.