

# Finding Balance, Finding Time

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It's not news that many teachers feel their carts are overloaded. The pressures of responding to the demands of students, parents and supervisors are onerous. Teachers juggle many responsibilities—inside the classroom, within the school environment, and in their personal lives. It is a complex profession and it seems to keep getting more complex. Teachers are dealing with issues that their colleagues of 20 or 30 years ago could not even imagine. Some of the responsibilities teachers now face include: individual program plans for students; spending many hours on data collection; dealing with social and learning issues; learning and implementing new programs and new curricula, including new technologies; increasing demand for administrative, clerical and committee duties; and the list goes on. All of these things can be made more stressful by everyday issues like student attendance, student discipline, pressure from parents, and personal issues in the home. Of course, teachers are also engaged in activities unrelated to school. Family, friends, leisure and community service are essential components of an enjoyable, well-rounded life. Making time for them matters. The “teacher profile” is one of a helper, a doer and someone who always “makes it happen,” sometimes in the face of personal sacrifice. How can teachers dial the pressure down and find a manageable balance among these competing interests?

## Reflecting on your teaching self

Teachers choose a career in teaching because they are enthusiastic about imparting knowledge and interacting with students. That enthusiasm and passion, however, can sometimes lead to burnout. Teachers feel strongly attached to their students, colleagues and schools and often have trouble drawing the line and finding balance.

It is sometimes essential to stop and reflect. Think about where your time is being spent. Are you spending the majority of your time on your professional and personal priorities? (You may need to focus on what your priorities are in the first place.) Are you spending most of your work time on endeavours that are useful and meaningful for your students? If not, why?

## Workload is not getting lighter, so how can teachers manage time?

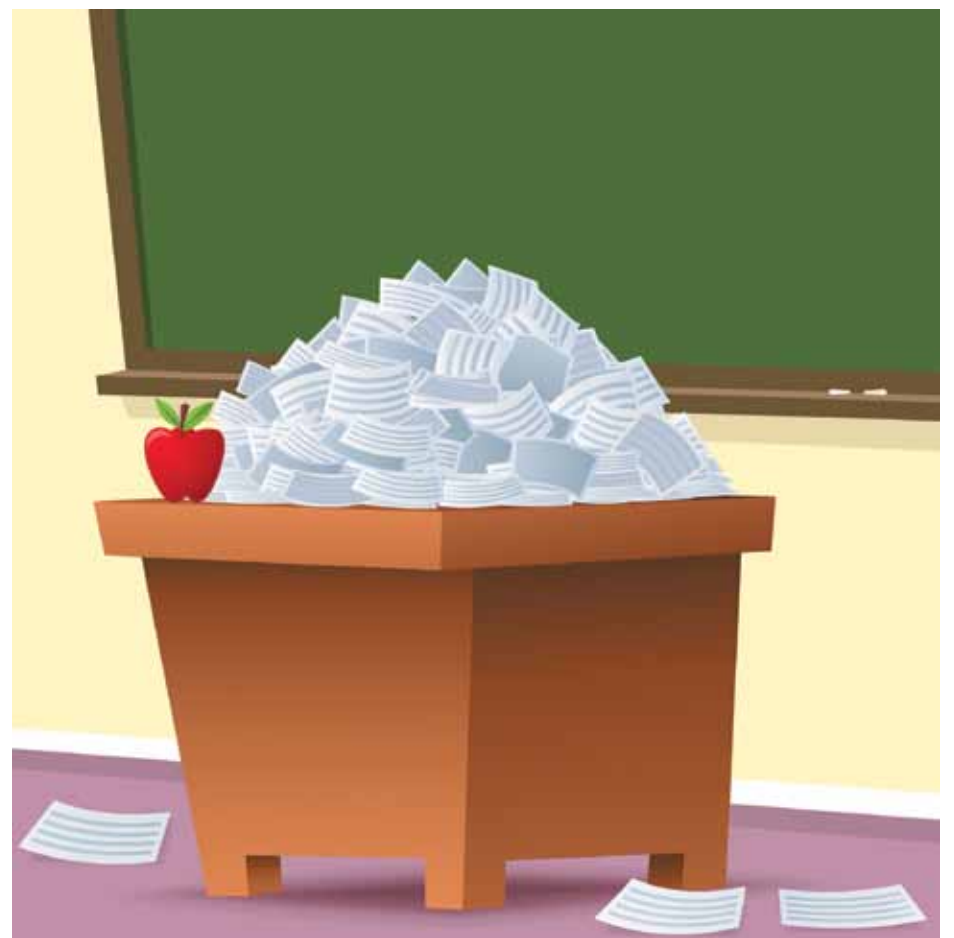
One way to look at time is to divide it into three time zones. Let's call the first time zone “Structured Work Time.” Structured Work Time encompasses the time you spend in the classroom, in scheduled meetings, and other work activities. The second time zone is referred to as “Unstructured Work Time,” which takes in all the work tasks that teachers do which fall outside the classroom but are still directly related to the school environment. Finally, we'll call the third time zone “Personal Time,” which, unsurprisingly, covers everything outside of work.

## How much time do you spend in each time zone?

Zone 1, Structured Work Time, is fairly self-explanatory. The instructional day is predetermined, as are your assigned duties. Most teachers know what the average day will look like in its basic form.

Zone 2, Unstructured Work Time, is harder to pin down and harder to manage. What is essential to remember about your Unstructured Work Time is that it should be less about quantity and more about QUALITY. Making yourself aware of how much time you actually spend in this zone may surprise you. It is helpful to make a rough plan (if only in your head) about the time you plan on spending in this zone on a daily or weekly basis. This will help you manage your overall time far more wisely. Ask yourself—how often do I stay at work past the time I planned or expected? Let's say you generally stay past the instructional day for 90 minutes. How often do you extend that time to two hours? Three hours? Set yourself goals on what you need to get done in those 90 minutes and try to stick to them.

The reality of many professions is that work comes home. Evenings, weekends, and holidays are often spent assessing and planning. Consider the time you spend working at home. Are you rushing through your Personal Time in order to get to your Unstructured Work Time? If you are constantly putting things off at work because you're planning on “working on them at home,” chances are your



Unstructured Work Time is affecting your Personal Time. There is a limit to the amount of time you can spend in Zone 2. Reflect on what a realistic limit is for your individual circumstances. If Structured Work Time and Unstructured Work Time are making up the bulk of your life—including weekends and holidays—it's likely time to step back and make a reassessment in order to reclaim some of your Personal Time.

Unstructured Work Time also encompasses extra-curricular activities. These are things that teachers are great at organizing and participating in at their schools. These types of activities could include supervising a school dance, coaching a sports team, organizing a debate team, or giving additional help to students after school or during lunch. How much time do you spend doing these types of extra-curricular activities?

## Setting realistic boundaries

You are responsible for setting the boundaries between the time zones. You have to decide how to best divide the time available to you. Increasing pressures in our personal lives—from caring for aging parents, to dealing with childcare, to coping with financial issues, to managing relationships with spouses—can affect teaching, just as stresses from teaching can affect our personal lives. If you are stressed in your personal life and stressed in your working life, you may be on the road to physical and mental burnout. Teaching is your career, but it does not take precedence over your physical and mental well being.

You may find yourself in situations

where you feel you are being pressured to devote more and more of yourself to Unstructured Work Time. Your teaching career is a long term commitment; you can only do so much in one school year. If you can't take on something this year, there may be room for it next year. You can't do everything at once. No one is “on” 100% of the time. Sometimes you have to pass up an opportunity or a request in order to preserve the balance between the zones. Teachers often feel guilty when they are unable to fulfill every request that comes their way. Don't be! You are likely already overloading yourself. Remember—your Personal Time is sacred; you need to create it, protect it, and cherish it. Your Personal Time is NOT less important than your work time.

## Finding balance is a long term goal

While it is easy to write about “finding balance,” the reality is that learning to balance our time can often take a lifetime. If you find yourself constantly scrambling and scrounging for time, however, it's likely a good indicator that you need to step back and reassess how you are dividing your time and how you are handling the myriad of commitments in both your work and personal life. You might have to take this step back several times a year—possibly more often. The optional things teachers do bring richness and enjoyment and non-traditional learning opportunities to the school community. There are very few other work environments that see so much volunteer work done by its employees. Teachers should be proud of this commitment.

## did you KNOW?

The Early Intervention Program (EIP) invites NSTU members to sign up for our Wellness email list at **Be\_Well@nstu.ca**.

Please contact Erin at [ekeefe@staff.nstu.ca](mailto:ekeefe@staff.nstu.ca) to provide her with your NSTU email address. The **Be\_Well@nstu.ca** list will provide information about the EIP and other wellness topics.

