

New Year's Resolutions David Long

To paraphrase National Public Radio's Car Guys, "Well, now you've gone and done it! You've squandered another perfectly good summer spending more time thinking about the next school year than recovering from the last one." At least that is what I've done, and now—by the time you are reading these thoughts—that next school year has begun. In fact, for the last twenty seven years, I have begun the year with this feeling. Evidently, many of us are feeling similarly wasted as the new school year approaches: "According to the National Center for Education Information, . . . forty percent of public school teachers plan to exit the profession within five years, . . .," (Feller, Ben. "Retirements Seen Raising Teacher Turnovers." The Associated Press. 17 Aug. 2005. <http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2005-08-18-teacher-turnover_x.htm>

On the other hand, one of the delights of being a teacher is the built-in beginnings: new school years, new buildings, new colleagues, new administrators, new courses, new semesters, new marking periods, new units; and, of course, most importantly, new students and new parents. All these beginnings are opportunities to recommit to principles we held when we began—or are beginning—our careers. Even though the beginning of a new school year is not a New Year in the formal sense, I am making a few resolutions for this new year.

1. I resolve to value and care for my building—grounds, halls, cafeteria, equipment, and classroom(s)—with enthusiasm and pride, even though it is not new, nor am I new to it. I have tended to be overly focused on "my" room, while ignoring most of the remainder of the building. I would like to think that focus has been positive, but it might have been an ostrich-like attempt to avoid possible inconveniences, or just simple obliviousness on my part.

2. I resolve to be a welcoming committee to my new colleagues, in all departments, not just in the English department. I have tended to isolate myself from teachers in other departments in the past. While I recognize intellectually that strategies that work in other disciplines often transfer to teaching English, I have not actively sought input from teachers of those other disciplines, and I know new colleagues will have training and experience that can enhance and renew my teaching. Before gleaning ideas from new colleagues, I will do what I can to make being new a joy rather than a trial.

3. I resolve to support and cooperate with the new administrators at our school. Perhaps these colleagues are as uncertain of how they and the faculty will work out our new relationships as is the faculty. And perhaps, amiable support and willing cooperation with new administrative approaches will foster more a positive atmosphere for the entire school community.

4. I resolve to do all that I can to make the new course I am assigned to pilot a success and pleasant for the students assigned to take it. New course requirements, especially those replacing electives, will be unpopular with students placed in them, especially the first time the course is "offered." I will do whatever I must to help students view the course as a benefit rather than a punishment.

5. I resolve to treat both semesters as equally welcome and joyous beginnings. Helping students to feel the opportunity of newness may be as important as providing

them with opportunities to master the knowledge and skills a class is intended to develop.

6. I resolve to help students see the second marking period of each semester of our one-semester courses as an opportunity to extend first marking period successes and to recover from first marking period difficulties. As important to success as beginning with enthusiasm, persevering with determination.

7. I resolve to introduce each unit with some connection to students' lives. Too often I have waited until somewhere deep into a topic or theme to look for the connections; perhaps making the relevance clear earlier will engage more students earlier. I'll certainly need to know my students earlier to be able to find connections.

I resolve to include parents in their students' educational experiences. Part of this effort in my district will be to increase some of those parents' sense of the importance of education. Another part will be to channel micro managing parents' involvement into productive channels. Mainly, I need to communicate to parents what students need to be doing at home and to enlist parents' help in monitoring students' homework efforts.

9. I resolve to know my students more personally than I have know students in the past. As I have aged, the need to keep some emotional distance between my students and me has diminished, but my hard-learned formality has become a habit and perhaps a hindrance to meeting the needs of some students.

I resolve to attend this year's NCTE annual conference in Pittsburgh in November. Find me there to discover how I'm doing with these New School Year Resolutions; I'll be working in some capacity for NCTE, NWPCTELA, or PCTELA.

Beginning a new year is a good time for renewed commitment.

Not New Year, not spring, but a time of and for renewal,
new students, new courses or curricula.

from Spring '06