

From the Editors' Desk: Pivotal Moments



Change is hard. You've heard it before. As humans, we are creatures of habit. As a teacher, it can be very easy to fall into a routine marked by schedules and the bell. The longer we teach, the more difficult it can be to make meaningful changes—to our methods, to our philosophies, to ourselves. When we encounter stories of teachers who have made meaningful changes, we often find that there were one or two pivotal moments that sparked—or even demanded—change.

When I first began teaching, I tried my hardest to never take a day off. My first school even offered bonus pay if you took no sick or personal days for the year. In my first two years, I saw no problem with this. I rarely got sick and if I did (prior to the COVID-19 pandemic), I would just go to work anyway and tough it out. I didn't have kids. I didn't even have a dog yet. I got my perfect attendance and I got my bonus. During my third year of teaching, my grandfather died—the first of my four grandparents to pass. I had to take one bereavement day to make it back to Michigan from Ohio in time for the funeral. I found out later that bereavement was charged the same as a sick day and as a result, I wouldn't receive the bonus pay that year.

I'm sure the perfect attendance bonus policy was created with good intentions. If the district didn't have to pay for a sub, they wanted to pay it forward to us. Impact is greater than intent, however, and I felt like I was being kicked while I was down. At that moment, my veil of privilege lifted and I started to think about how this system wasn't only unfair to me. It was ableist toward teachers with physical or mental health problems. It was inconsiderate to teachers who had dependents to care for. It was supporting a system that encouraged teachers to burnout. I left that school in 2018, but I suspect the perfect attendance bonus policy in that district didn't make it through the pandemic.

Even without unfair policies, I know many teachers still hesitate to take days off. The work to create meaningful sub plans, especially at the last minute, can be daunting. On top of that, there are sub shortages everywhere, so there's no guarantee one will even show up. During the 2022-2023 school year, my youngest child was hospitalized eight times with croup. In addition, my two toddlers brought home colds; RSV; hand, foot and mouth diseases; sinus infections; ear infections; bronchiolitis; stomach bugs; and COVID-19. Aside from my maternity leave, I missed more school that year than I had missed in the 10 combined years of my career. I wrote sub plans on my phone while nursing my sick infant in a dark hospital room. I worried how my absences would affect my students.

I was surprised to find that at the end of the first semester, my students performed about the same as previous years on their exams. Even though I had to take many sick days, when my sister came to visit that spring from out of state, I decided to take two personal days to spend with her. I started to prioritize my family and myself, even if that meant I had to occasionally miss work. At the end of the year, I felt like my students were as prepared for the next step as they had ever been. On my end of year survey, students commented that they felt supported and challenged by me and not a single one commented on my absences. It took a couple of pivotal moments to change my thinking, but now I'm a firm believer that you should TAKE YOUR SICK DAYS (and personal days too).

In this issue of Kaleidoscope, you'll read about some small changes that Knowles Fellows have made that had positive impacts on their students. You'll read about

how pivotal moments led two educators to redefine excellence in their school and another to begin to teach science through multiple lenses. You'll follow the journey of two teachers defining and redefining their "why," one through poetry and the other through a letter to herself. The Kaleidoscope staff knows how important it is for these teacher stories to be shared, and we hope that hearing these stories might be a pivotal moment for you: that something you read sparks a change in your own practice, and that you might also be encouraged to share your story.

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