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### Welcome to my world: A third-year teacher's story

Kelly Maynard, Star Tribune

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**Editor's note: As schools struggle to hang on to young teachers, many young teachers struggle to hang on. Caught between layoffs and tenure, Kelly Maynard kept an account of her make-or-break third year as a Minneapolis teacher.**

Jan. 10, 2003

*The first week back after winter break. It's Friday. The week had its ups and downs, as they all do. Blood on the floor. A student pushing me in the hall. A fire drill on a cold day. Students making crank calls between classrooms.*

*I'm glad the week's over. I dreaded it for the two weeks of vacation. Truth be told, I didn't touch any schoolwork until Sunday, and then I worked for about five hours. It would have been better to do a bit at a time, but the thought of school put a knot in my stomach.*

*I got sick a few days before returning. Flu? Perhaps. Stress-related? Probably.*

I teach middle-school math at Cityview Community School, a Minneapolis performing-arts magnet school for prekindergartners through eighth-graders. I'm a third-year teacher, which means this is a big year. When May comes, I'll either achieve tenure or be informed that my services are no longer desired by the Minneapolis School District. Sometime in there, I'll probably be laid off and (probably) rehired. This will be my third time at both.

I agreed to keep a diary in 2003 for several reasons. Nearly one-third of teachers leave the profession after only three years. My story might give some clues about why that is. Also: It seems to me that some of the people who have the strongest opinions about how to fix our struggling schools have no idea what it's like inside one. This story, which includes diary excerpts and other recollections written later, offers a slice of life in one person's class in one inner-city school.

I've changed the names of some of the children to protect their privacy, but the stories are 100 percent real.

It was early afternoon, and I'd walked about 10 kids to the computer lab. I hadn't yet mastered the art of being at the front and back of a line simultaneously, so as we turned a corner, two frequently off-task children went missing, and I knew they'd wandered down to an elementary hall.

Good grief. It's bad enough if they disrupt *my* class, but here my students were disrupting other teachers' classes. Still, I couldn't leave the rest of my group unattended. So I ushered them into the lab and called the office, a behavior specialist and another teacher, putting out the alert for the two wayward students.

Within minutes, a voice boomed over the loudspeaker that two sixth-graders were missing and gave their names and the room where they should have been (with me).

The public shame gave me an idea for a new T-shirt, a la "Plays well with others." Mine would say: "Can't keep track of 10 kids."

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This is my second career. Before teaching, I was a full-time copy editor at the Star Tribune. I began volunteering in public schools as a trial for teaching. I love kids, and when I was one, I loved school. Teaching seemed a natural fit.

I got my license in April 2000. After bugging people in the Minneapolis district all summer, I had three job interviews the week before Labor Day. I was offered jobs at all three schools and chose Cityview in north Minneapolis because it was closest to my home. I signed my contract for about \$32,000 a year on a Friday and started teaching the following Tuesday.

I've kept my foot in the door at the newspaper, working part time in the sports department. I have a third job, at the music counter of the Electric Fetus record store.

Some people, especially my mom, think I'm nuts to work so much. But the other jobs helped smooth my transition to a much-lower income bracket.

More important than money: The other jobs keep me sane. I hate to admit this -- and I don't like what it says about society or about education or maybe about me -- but I find my part-time jobs more rewarding, in some ways, than teaching.

I value the sense of accomplishment I have at the end of a shift from finding a rare CD for a customer or meeting a tight news deadline. But at school, the piles of papers never abate; the line of kids with questions or problems never goes away; the lesson book is always staring me in the face; there's always another parent to tell me what I'm doing wrong.

At school, what I usually feel at the end of a shift is overwhelmed.

Jan. 24

*Ugh! It was a short week, but it managed to have all the stress and misery of a regular-length one -- and more. I told my mentor that if I had access to another source of insurance, I would have quit today.*

*Even simple requests lead to power struggles. "Please have a seat." "If you have gum in your mouth, please get rid of it." "Hands to yourself." "Get in line." These are reasonable requests, but often I get eye rolls, teeth sucking, back-talk. At worst, students respond by swearing at me, laughing in my face, pushing past me.*

*That's what gets me down: Simple tasks become ordeals, and trying to get students to do the job they're at school to do can become so confrontational so easily. That bothers me more than the fights or other bigger explosions, because it's so constant. Wears me down. But next week's a new week.*

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Most of my students would fall into the "at-risk" category. Almost 20 percent of Cityview students receive special-education services; almost 30 percent receive some English-language services; 85 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunches, a key indicator of poverty. The population is diverse: The majority of the children are African-American, with Hmong a distant second. The staff is diverse, with more male and minority teachers than is average across the district.

But categories don't tell the real story. Many of my kids can tell you where the crack dealers live; many have seen shootings or are related to a victim. One student with a chronically ill mother missed many days because she had to baby-sit for her younger siblings. One boy with a bad temper started storming out of the room even more often after his father was released from prison. One child whose mom was a drug addict was caught several times stealing money from teachers.

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One afternoon, Joey's mother came to school with him. She was having trouble believing what we were telling her -- that Joey was skipping class, not turning in any work, and lying to us to go to the office. Throughout the year, she had threatened to remove Joey -- to which some of my colleagues and I would say, "That's your decision. Let me know if you need help with that process."

On this day, Joey's class lined up outside after lunch. We were standing against the wall when Mike, another student in the class, made a comment about Joey's weight. Joey's mom, standing nearby, didn't hesitate to jump in and insult Mike.

Not wanting to escalate the situation -- and having to maintain control of the rest of the kids -- I waited until we got inside to address Mike. Once I got the rest of the group settled and working on a classroom assignment, I called Mike out of the room, talked to him about his behavior and assigned him to detention.

Meantime, Joey's mom arrived -- just seconds too late to hear Joey swear at another student. She was yelling about how "these teachers don't f---ing do anything!" and yanked Joey out of class. Swearing and threatening the whole way, she marched through the hall with Joey and right out the front door.

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I feel as though on some days, my job is a lot like that of the doctors on "M\*A\*S\*H." No matter how hard they worked or how much time they put in, they lost patients. Too many pieces of the puzzle were out of their control.

Well, I'm not doing surgery. But no matter how hard I try or how much time I put in, I can't "fix" the baggage my students bring to school. Some are going to drop out. Some are not going to pass the eighth-grade basic-skills test -- even in 12th grade. Some will end up victims of gang violence. Some will use and deal drugs. Some will end up in jail. No matter what I do.

Feb. 7

*I'm halfway through my third year of teaching, so I've gone through the quarterly report card routine 10 times. It hasn't gone smoothly once. The latest attempt included a crashed network and dead printer.*

*But even before we could get to those problems, my friend Carrie Wohlrabe -- the sixth-grade language arts teacher -- and I had an impromptu 50-minute meeting with another teacher, a behavior specialist, the principal and a particularly perturbed and disrespectful student. I also had to make my best guess on grades for students in an elective for which the teacher quit halfway through the term.*

*By the time this batch printed out, it was past 4:30, and 807 (what we fondly call the Minneapolis school headquarters, after its address on West Broadway) and its mail center were closed.*

*It's times like these -- or when I'm pulling used tissues out of the recycle bin or scrubbing the sink in my classroom with the cleanser I bought -- when I can't help but think that Michelle Pfeiffer didn't do any of this stuff in "Dangerous Minds."*

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My school is new. The building is barely four years old, and the staff as a whole is young. We have a large percentage of untenured teachers, and we've had considerable turnover. My first year, one member of my team quit on the third Monday of September. This year, two of the four people on my team were replaced in November; one resigned because of job stress, and one was forced to go on leave because of performance concerns and was replaced by a long-term sub. We've had three principals in my three years.

We have a new principal this year, Nell Collier. She's a master manager, a hard worker, and she's committed to making our school safe: She fought to get video-surveillance cameras installed, and within a week they helped catch a Cityview student and his friend trying to steal a car from the staff parking lot.

In other words, we're trying -- hard. But many days, it feels like all we do is react to crises. When you see a child removed in handcuffs from the middle school or a teacher attacked and bitten by a *first-grader*, it's hard to think in the long term.

And more and more, I'm questioning whether I have it in me to stick it out and see my school come of age.

Feb. 21

*Another short week. We had Monday off for Presidents' Day. The week was all right. We've started a new geometry book in class, and students like this one. They get to work with shapes and cool manipulatives.*

*Several sixth-graders were suspended this week. No big fights or anything; it was just one of those weeks, I think, in which the administrators had had it with the disrespect and defiance.*

*One morning en route to school, I stopped at SuperAmerica and picked up a four-pack of muffins and four boxes of wooden pencils. I can't keep up with the demand for pencils: They're stolen, broken, thrown, borrowed, never returned. I've tried selling them, lending them, trading them, keeping a box of golf pencils at the door of my room. Still, I haven't found a foolproof system yet and I feel as though I hemorrhage pencils! You can't always count on the materials you need being in the school storeroom, so sometimes it's just easier to buy them yourself.*

*I put my muffins and pencils on the counter. The supervisor who was ringing me up glanced at my purchases and then at me and said, "You a teacher?" "Yeah." (Pause.) "Kind of sucks that you have to buy stuff for your kids, huh?"*

*Yeah.*

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One of the biggest wakeup calls for me has been dealing with parents who don't trust me or the school --

or who always take their child's word over mine. For the record, I don't have the time, energy or desire to lie about kids. I don't call homes to "get kids in trouble."

One Friday at 5:30, I called the grandmother of a student who was routinely challenging everything I said in class -- laughing at me, interrupting me, cussing at me. We had a long chat about the girl and the fact that, though she's very bright, she wasn't turning in any work.

The grandmother lectured me on how I should handle the students in class. My patience turned to puzzlement after about 30 minutes when she changed gears. "And Ms. Maynard, if you ever have any stains you can't get out, I have just the thing." What? "And I also sell makeup." Why was she giving me a sales pitch instead of some cooperation?

March 7

*I heard through the grapevine that my school reached its 300th suspension of the year this week. One wonders what our tally might have been if it included all the incidents for which kids would have been suspended if they didn't qualify for special interventions or if they hadn't already had so many suspensions that another one would be pointless.*

*On Wednesday, after my reading class, I returned to my desk to find a baggie with two large hairballs in it. Hmmm. Was this a prank? A mistake? Or perhaps a generous gift to the short-haired teacher whom students forever call "bald-headed"?*

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Nothing in teacher college prepares you for the meetings. I'm not just talking about our weekly sixth-grade team meetings, or about staff development meetings -- in which an hour's worth of material often is covered in two or three. I'm talking about the regular IEP (Individual Education Plan) meetings for students who receive special-education services.

Then there's FBA meetings. Those are Functional Behavior Assessments, for students who have been suspended for 10 days or more. (We have several of those in sixth grade.) Then there's meetings of SSST, a problem-solving committee that evaluates children's issues and brainstorms interventions.

I haven't even touched on meetings with parents, middle-school meetings or weekly staff meetings, off-site district meetings, or the impromptu meetings the administration calls to announce news -- whether it's budget cuts or crime news, like the shootings that killed a high school student and injured the brother of one of our kids.

Every month, meetings suck up hours of time and energy. Some of those hours could be better spent planning lessons or meeting with students. Can we just get the handouts?

March 11

*It's only Tuesday and already, it's been a very long week. The sixth-graders are taking the district's NALT tests, and that eats up a big chunk of class time. Compounding the situation, five new sixth-graders joined my homeroom in the past three days. They had to be assessed to find their academic level so we could throw them right into the appropriate standardized test.*

*Our first passing time today featured a very loud fight in the middle of our common area. Two girls*

*were punching, hitting, grabbing and pulling out each other's hair extensions. Several adults had to pull them apart, and even more adults came to help quiet the students who were cheering and laughing. This happened about 15 feet behind where I stood coaching one of the new students in her first experience with a combination lock. Welcome to your new school.*

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I know that I won't be allowed to teach math again next year; I've been teaching on a variance, but my license is in language arts. I'm not sure I want to do the same job again, anyway. I feel as though I've given the homeroom gig the old college try, and I'm not satisfied with what I'm able to do. As a homeroom teacher, I have four classes ranging from 20 to 28 students, in addition to reading, advisory or elective classes.

Support teachers, on the other hand, tend to work with smaller groups of students. When they come into my class, their lower profile seems to invite less abuse from the kids. I see some of them accomplishing things with these kids that it's too hard to do when it's 25 to 1.

I've pitched an idea to my principal. I suggested a job on the support staff -- teaching small groups, helping other teachers in their classrooms, doing test preparation. She was open to the idea.

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I dread one of my fourth-quarter math classes. I have it every other day, right after lunch, and I fantasize about calling in sick on those days.

Here's the thing: I know which girl is going to make the loud "HOOT" when I turn my back. (Ironically, she's the same girl who made me a card for my birthday and gave me a copy of her school picture.) I know which boy will hide the warm-up assignment I put on the overhead projector. And I can make a very educated guess about who spilled my coffee, who stole my overhead markers, who threw the box of plastic math shapes all over the floor and who wrote "Ms. Maynard is a b----" on the board. But I can't catch them red-handed.

When you're a teacher, you've got to have something they call "with-it-ness." You have to be on top of everything, have eyes in the back of your head. I'm usually pretty good at this. But with this particular class, I've gotten to the point where I put everything that isn't tied down into a locked cabinet and tape the overhead sheet to the projector before the kids walk in the room. When the hi-jinks take place, I document what happened and often share the notes with the assistant principal. On several occasions, he interrogated suspects and made calls home.

I have pretty thick skin. I've been called lots of names and have been insulted about my hair ("You bald-headed skeezer"), shoes ("You buy your shoes at Payless") and the way I talk ("You're not my mother!"). I usually shrug it off. Once in a while I'll cop an attitude right back to the kids, which either makes them laugh or stuns them silent. But some days, the 17th or 18th insult makes me snap.

That happened one afternoon with this class. I was trying to keep my cool, had lots of work ready, but I'd lost control of the lesson. I was out of strategies; I had no new seating plans, no new tricks up my sleeve. When a behavior specialist walked into my room, I walked out. I went to the assistant principal and said, "I can't finish that class."

I walked into the copy room on the verge of tears. Then I just got mad . . . at the handful of kids who

were making every other afternoon hell for me; at the rest of the kids in the class, who were laughing and encouraging them; at everyone else in the school -- can't someone do something? -- and at myself, for not being able to handle a bunch of 12-year-olds!

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It hasn't been all bad. In fact, fewer than 5 percent of Cityview students have had chronic discipline problems. Most kids are usually doing exactly what they're supposed to be doing -- which makes it so frustrating when the bad behavior of a few wastes the time of so many wonderful children.

The class I had my first year is starting high school this September -- and many of my superstars passed the eighth-grade basic-skills tests on their first attempt!

One high point involved one of those students, Karl. Karl's very bright. Funny, talented, polite, charming, the second oldest of a wonderful family. But he was turning in sloppy work and was starting to be rude to me.

One day after school, I spoke to him in my sternest tone (which makes me laugh now). I said, "You need to think about what kind of expectations I should have for you. If you want me to have high expectations, you're going to have to change what you're doing. If I need to lower my expectations, you just let me know, and I'll start expecting mediocre work from you."

He left my room fuming. I worried that I'd come down too hard on him.

The next morning, when the rest of the class was leaving the room, Karl hung back. When we were the only two left in the room, he said, "Hi." It didn't register. I laughed, and I said, "Hi, Karl. Uh, didn't you already say hi to me today?" He said, "No, *high*. I want you to have high expectations."

I could have hugged him. He made my day. Make that year.

Carrie and I have semi-regular "planning meetings" (read: we work at school till after dark, then end up at a bar for dinner). One night in a poorly lit, smoky bar over a couple of beers, we brainstormed our next intervention to deal with kids who were clashing in our classrooms. We decided to split our four groups differently, considering ability, effort and behavior. This increased the adult-child ratio in one group to 1:9.

The effect of the new groups was fascinating. Elvira and Jordan -- both generally very shy -- became leaders, even raising their hands and volunteering to show their work on the overhead! With a little help, Vincent and Tevin completed geometry projects, illustrating and describing the characteristics of eight polygons. Chong did extra credit and then helped other students. On the first day of the new groups, Kwa, who's nothing if not loud, impressed me when she sat next to the most quiet girl in the room, "so I can get to know you better."

I appreciate these small successes.

May 8

*During the morning staff meeting on the second Thursday in May, every staff member received a carnation as part of Teacher Appreciation Week. That afternoon, about 20 of us -- first-, second- and third-year teachers -- found pink slips in our mailboxes.*

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It's not looking good for Minneapolis' laid-off teachers. My principal says she's never seen it this bad. It's become standard practice for new teachers to be laid off in their first few years -- effective the following September -- but they typically are rehired within a few weeks, or at least before the end of the current school year. Not likely this year.

Several factors are at work. In the slow economy, schools are taking their knocks, along with everyone else. Add to that decreasing student enrollment; the number of Minnesota children in public schools is declining as parents move out of the cities, switch to private or charter schools and take advantage of the option to bus their children to suburban schools.

I'm not mad about not having a job. I guess I feel more sad than anything.

I knew all this going into it -- the layoffs, the bureaucracy, the funding problems, the tenure system. So, who could I blame for the mess into which I threw myself?

May 23

*Perhaps the most valuable personal item I keep in my classroom broke today. It was a peace lily in a pot designed and painted by my partner teacher. I student taught with her for eight weeks in her fourth-grade class, and when my time was done, she presented me with this beautiful gift. She'd painted on it, "Inside every great teacher is a great kid." I loved it.*

*Well, someone bumped it off the shelf today. It was an accident. I realize I should know better than to leave something valuable out -- right between the other plant with the busted pot that got knocked over and the globe with a huge dent from being punched. I do that a lot -- blame myself. If a class goes poorly, or the room's a mess, or we're behind schedule in our curriculum, I try and figure out what I could have done better. I can't change the kids; I can only change myself.*

*Maybe it's my literature background that makes me see symbolism in inconsequential events. But when I heard the pot smash and saw the plant land sideways on the floor, I couldn't help but think about the enthusiasm and energy I used to have -- before I dove into this job.*

June 11

*Yesterday was the last day for students. Today was the official last day for teachers. I feel as though I should be celebrating for -- if nothing else -- finishing the year. Not everyone can say that.*

*But it's been pretty stressful these past few weeks. It gets awkward whenever a conversation crops up about next year. We've been hearing a lot of, "Have you heard anything?" and "So what are you going to do?"*

*Good question.*

*So I'm not feeling too celebratory. Neither was the teacher who learned for certain that she wouldn't get her job back today when her replacement showed up to "check out the space." Timing, timing.*

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I alternate between wanting a job and wanting to flee. A handful of images from this year that made me feel I wouldn't make it through the day are still vivid.

Like the field trip near Fort Snelling when the National Guard was called because one of my students pulled a fire alarm. Or the day one mother had to be removed from the school when she came in to fight a student who was bothering her child. Or the time a student put nail polish remover in a teacher's coffee. Or the time the student kicked out the window to a classroom door and then knocked over the overhead projector because he was "frustrated."

Early June

*My principal wants to hire me back, but she can't do anything yet. A middle-school language arts position is available at Cityview, and I'm qualified. But the situation is stalled until Human Resources recalls me.*

*Once in a while, I ask myself: How much do I want to work for a district that makes it so hard to stay? Take, for example, the letter I received from the district that says, "upon a recent audit of teacher licensures, we realized that your license is expiring in June 2003." It's not. It's good through 2004.*

*If this school district is doing this much to push me away in my first and most difficult years of teaching, I may look into private schools. Or maybe I need another new career. Ugh.*

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In my first two years, I went through something like 120 course hours of training in math curriculum, as well as three grad classes to get middle-school certification. To continue teaching math, I'm supposed to have shown that I'm making a good-faith effort to work toward a math license.

I haven't. I had great intentions last year at this time. But once school started, I realized that I didn't have the time or money for the classes it would take to get a math license.

Mid-June

*I've been keeping an eye on the listings for private schools in Minnesota, and I made some calls about alternative and charter schools in Minneapolis. I even sent my résumé and application to my old Catholic high school in Springfield, Mass.*

*No bites. I'm starting to get nervous. I was laid off last year and the year before, but both times I'd been hired back at this point.*

*A few months ago, I was sure I wouldn't do this, but now I'm leaning strongly toward thinking that a homeroom job at a school with which I'm familiar is a lot better than no job.*

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My friend Carrie told me a story from summer school. She said a few of the frequent offenders from my fourth-quarter math-class-from-hell were bragging to another teacher about all the stuff they did to Ms. Maynard -- took my stuff, hid the overhead, etc. Apparently, they thought the teacher would be amused.

They still don't get it.

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Sometimes I wonder if the people in Minneapolis public schools' Human Resources get it. Just in case teachers on the front lines in tough schools don't face enough abuse and frustration from kids and parents -- they can rely on indifference and even ineptitude in the schools' bureaucracy.

I made the error of trying to resolve the error about my allegedly expiring license in person. As is typically the case, it seems as though the only person who can answer my question is "in a meeting."

I was directed from Secretary 1 to Secretary 2, who roundly ignored me for about a minute while she transcribed something. I explained my problem. She looked up the info and told me the only thing that was expiring was my temporary math license (which, she said, had expired in 2002; that makes my getting the letter now even more puzzling). She affirmed that my elementary and middle-school licenses were good for another year. I started to say that it was unnerving to receive such a letter after I'd been laid off. When I was in midsentence, she nodded and turned to answer the phone.

I left the building telling myself I should expect that kind of treatment by now. My boyfriend and I joke that the department should be renamed from H.R. to I.R.: Inhumane Resources. But that's not funny at all.

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Mid-July, and Minneapolis has laid off more teachers. My saving grace could be my middle-school license; even more elementary layoffs were expected. I submitted an application to an alternative school, because I felt as though I should be doing *something*.

I talked with Lynn Lurvey -- my good friend with whom I've taught since Day 1 in 2000 -- once or twice a week; we were in the same boat with the same licensure. She'd put out some feelers, too, but had no bites yet.

Aug. 11

*Human Resources strikes again. I got a call from my principal and a call from another middle school today. I'm apparently at the top of the list of teachers who are "recalled" -- for a math position.*

*Knowing that can't be right, I call Human Resources, which tells me what I already know: I wouldn't be hired back in a math position because of my license situation.*

*I asked if I could be removed from the math list and placed on the language arts list where I belong. It's apparently more complicated than that. I could be taken off the math list, but to get on the language arts list, I am told, I may have to APPLY.*

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I ask myself what I'd do if the homeroom/math job at Cityview were the only job available to me. I pause. The thought of losing my health insurance sends chills up my spine. Then I have to remind myself of how bad I felt so often in the past three years. I'm pretty sure I'd say no.

Aug. 18

*Two weeks before the start of school, I get the word while I'm visiting my family in Massachusetts. Voicemails from my principal offer me a part-time support staff position at Cityview -- or a full-time language arts position. I must have finally made it to the right list.*

*I took the part-time support-staff job. And I'm excited about it. Some of my friends weren't sure if they should be happy for me, since part-time work means part-time pay. But I am convinced that, at this point, I would regret returning to a homeroom, whatever the pay.*

*My biggest disappointment is that Lynn will be teaching language arts at another school in Minneapolis. It turns out she could have been rehired at Cityview, where she knew the kids and the staff. But -- after waiting and worrying all summer -- she signed a contract with another school the day before the same position opened up at Cityview!*

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On Aug. 21, I went to school, feeling cautiously optimistic. My hope is that working with fewer students will give me the chance to get to know them better and give them more individual attention. And I hope that fewer hours mean less stress.

Looking around the school, I saw some new faces, and I already missed some of the faces that didn't return. Once again, as we approached Labor Day, a few positions still had not been filled. Other positions were filled by people who don't have exactly the right licensures. Déjà vu.

I've got to believe that there's a better way to do this.

Still, when I saw my principal for the first time, she gave me a hug, and I told her it was good to be back. I meant it.

***Kelly Maynard, 32, joined the Star Tr***

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