My Year as a Teacher
A First-Time Teacher Learns the Hard Way Novice is stunned to find she's unprepared for class

Series: My Year as a Teacher. **Chapter 1**

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New York Newsday reporter Emily Sachar took a one-year unpaid leave of absence in September, 1988, and taught eighth-grade mathematics at IS 246 - the Walt Whitman Intermediate School in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn.
Before applying for the job, she notified Board of Education officials. Whitman's principal and many teachers knew of her previous experience as a reporter and during the first semester, Sachar told her students.
This series is her account of the year as a teacher, based on her journal and interviews conducted after her return to New York Newsday in September. The students profiled in the series appear with the permission of their parents. Their names have been changed to protect the confidentiality of their school records.
Sachar, 31, a reporter for 10 years, has been employed by Newsday and New York Newsday since 1982. For 2 1/2 years prior to her leave, Sachar covered the Board of Education and the New York City school system. In 1980, she graduated from Stanford University with a bachelor's degree in economics.

SEPTEMBER 20, 1988
THE BASKETBALL sailed over my head again - from Roger to Nathan, back to Roger, over to Andrew, then to James, back to Roger.
"Okay, that's enough. Will you please take your seats?" I shouted. My voice was cracking, I was yelling so loud. "The period started 10 minutes ago."
My math class in Room 327 was turning into a gym class.
"Dribble," Roger mumbled. "Dribble, dribble, dribble. Up and score!" The ball banged against the back wall, landed on a desk and bounced to the floor.
My attendance book fell out of my hand. Nathan grabbed it, dangled it in my face, and threw it Frisbee-style against the blackboard.
Roger, a 6-foot, 2-inch rubber band-of-a-boy, sat on top of a desk, whistling and twirling his basketball. He looked happy. I was miserable.
"Okay, enough," I yelled, stalking to the back of the room. "Now, sit down and get to work." I walked to the front again. No one was buckling down. Roger threw the basketball into the air again. I decided to begin the lesson - a 10-minute lecture followed by problems for the kids to do at their desks. Then I made the mistake I never made again: I turned my back on the class to write on the board.
Whack. Something hit me. Three boys broke into laughter. A small rock was rolling on the floor.
"Who threw it?" I screamed. I felt my face flush.
I tried for 15 more minutes to quiet the room. Then, in desperation, I stormed to the door and threw it open.

"Isn't anyone out here?" I shouted. I expected to see a teacher or a security guard, somebody who could help a new teacher whose class had gone out of control. The hall was empty.

I shut the door, stomped to the chalkboard again, trying to be dramatic. "Your homework is . . . " I said, standing sideways so I could still watch the class.

The bell rang and the students raced for the door.

It was 9:35 a.m. One class down and four to go. My fifth day as a teacher at Walt Whitman Intermediate School in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn had barely started.

I THOUGHT I would be capable of teaching in a city school. I had heard stories about the difficult life of junior high teachers in New York City, but I thought my experience would be different. I knew my subject and, even though I wasn't a commanding presence at 5-foot-1 and 103 pounds, I figured that just being a teacher would grant me some respect. I knew what to expect, I thought. For 2 1/2 years, I had covered the schools and the Board of Education as a reporter for New York Newsday.

Six years ago, I wouldn't have gotten this job. And, in most cities in America, I would not have been able to teach without credentials and teaching experience. But since 1984, the New York City school system has been desperate for new teachers. And five years ago, the Board of Education loosened its requirements. People no longer need formal education training or student teaching experience to teach in the city. And the teacher shortage is expected to intensify by the mid-1990s, when 40 percent of the city's 63,726 teachers will be eligible to retire. The board has been recruiting new teachers at colleges all over the country and in Puerto Rico, but there still are critical shortages of bilingual and vocational teachers and teachers of science, special education and math.

When I actually started my job as an eighth-grade math teacher, I was stunned at how unprepared I was. Never had I felt so inadequate, so alone, so exhausted.

I confronted kids my first week who cursed at me and refused to take their seats, and I desperately wanted to win the respect I had taken for granted. One teacher told me to give zeros to kids who weren't prepared, so I did. The kids joked about it. When I switched to the opposite approach - rewards - the kids still laughed. I tried yelling and got hoarse. I tried smiling and got taunts. Once, I even tried crying to win the attention of kids in one of my slower classes. I got a quiet room for a day, but havoc by the end of the week.

But, even in those first frustrating weeks, I saw signs that I might be able to become a competent teacher.

Students quickly learned my name and said hello in the hallways. Many proudly handed in homework and sought my approval. And the talent of some students - not just in math - offered a delight I had never expected. Students wrote poems and drew pictures and asked me to watch them perform at recitals. At Christmastime, some of my kids wrote touching, heartfelt messages that made me weep.

And then there were days I felt truly inspired as a teacher. One day, in my top class, I taught the whole period dancing and singing in rhyme. It made little sense, but the kids cheered and clapped. I was thrilled, and the class quickly settled into a comfortable pattern; I could pat a student's back and get a smile, not a scowl. I did

well, and so did the students.
Most of the time, though, I didn't feel like dancing. There was so much I hadn't expected. I wasn't prepared for the textbook shortages and the spitballs, the broken furniture, incomplete homework, rationing of supplies and uninvolved parents. I had expected cracked plaster and broken window shades, but I wasn't prepared for classrooms bathed in graffiti. And, as well as I thought I knew my math, I wasn't prepared to teach whole chunks of the curriculum, such as "performance objective 8.12.03.01A," which told me to teach students to "determine a permutation of n things taken r at a time where r l or = n."
Before the year was over, I would learn the difficult lessons of what it's like to be a teacher in one of New York City's difficult public schools. Many students I had in class were years behind in reading and math and had no concept of the nation's history, yet most had no idea what that ignorance would mean for their future. Teachers, chronically overworked and often isolated, are burdened with dozens of chores that have nothing to do with teaching. Administrators must spend more time on paperwork and maintaining order in the hallways than on helping teachers teach. And families bring such a wealth of social problems to the schoolhouse door that disciplining their kids often seems more urgent than teaching them.
Yet, I also saw surprising strengths - students who see a clear correlation between work today and jobs tomorrow, and teachers who, in spite of the problems, motivate and dazzle their students day after day. LANDING THE JOB was the easiest part.
I walked into the Board of Education's employment office in late May, 1988 - a product of middle-class parents and suburban St. Louis, Mo., public schools. Two months later, I had a temporary one-year license to teach, the sort of emergency certificate the board gave to 12,943 teachers last year.
I hadn't taken any education courses in college. But to obtain the license, I needed only a bachelor's degree. I had never taught before, and that did not matter, either. The Board of Education fingerprinted me, but never asked for personal or professional references.
When I first applied, I had hoped for a license to teach English. But the board said no; I had not taken sufficient college coursework. The board also wouldn't give me a license to teach junior high school or high school math, again because I didn't have sufficient college class work. I had made the mistake of taking calculus in high school, and not enough math in college.
But I could, the board said, obtain a license to teach elementary education, even though I had never taken courses in elementary ed. The only prerequisite for that license was a bachelor's degree. And there was a benefit to this license - some intermediate school, the board told me, might be willing to accept the license and let me teach math there.
During the brief testing, the Board of Examiners, which licenses city teachers, asked only that I demonstrate a modicum of organizational skill and an ability to speak and write proper English. In a 15-minute oral interview that was taped and timed, I answered two questions about teaching second grade that I had been given an hour to prepare. Then came the 300-word essay, which asked another question about second-graders. I later learned from an examiner who was an assistant principal at my school that I could have made five grammar or spelling

mistakes per page and still passed the written exam.
I got the elementary-ed license, but no help finding a job. Despite the critical shortage of teachers, the Board of Education didn't maintain a central clearinghouse where vacancies were listed. Correspondence from the board came on letterhead without phone numbers. And I had no idea who at the board might explain the hiring system to me.
I eventually figured out that each of the city's 32 school districts has its own system for hiring new teachers. Some require applicants to consult the district office; others tell teachers to call individual schools. Not sure whether the Board of Education or a district would ever contact me about a job, I went hunting on my own. I discovered that I'd have no trouble getting a position teaching junior high math, even though I had never had to demonstrate proficiency in the subject.
At Walt Whitman, an assistant principal interviewed me for about five minutes, four days before students were to return to school. She had two vacancies in the math department, she said. "You really think you can handle the eighth grade?" she asked, after explaining that my paperwork duties would be burdensome. "Yes, I'm certain I can." I had taken college calculus courses and certainly knew basic math, and I was organized enough to do the paperwork.
The job description was brief. I'd run a homeroom, patrol the hallways and auditorium four periods a week, and teach math to five classes of eighth-graders. It sounded perfect, and I was delighted.
My salary would be $23,000 - about $3,000 less than a first-year city garbage hauler would earn - but I wasn't insulted. I figured I'd only be working six hours and 20 minutes a day, and I'd have all that built-in time off.
The first day of school was Sept. 14, 1988. The awkward adolescents milled in the graffiti-covered courtyard, hunting friends and homeroom teachers. I stood off to the side.
The school is a four-story horseshoe tucked between auto body repair shops and neatly kept, attached houses three blocks in from bustling Flatbush Avenue. Across the street, new condominiums were going up.
The population of the school, and its purpose, had changed dramatically since the laying of its 1939 cornerstone. Once one of the highly regarded elementary schools for the Jewish population that saturated Flatbush, the school had become the neighborhood junior high for a flood of West Indian immigrants.
Based on reading scores, the school is ranked 146th out of 179 junior highs. In the 1988-1989 school year, it would enroll 1,711 sixth-, seventhand eighth-graders, of whom 89 percent were black, 8 percent Hispanic and 3 percent Asian. There were three white students in the school, one of whom was the son of the head of the parents association.
`WELCOME BACK to Walt Whitman," I said to the students, trying to sound like a veteran. "We're going to have a great year."
I stood on my toes and held a placard bearing the name of my homeroom class as high as I could over my head.
"Anyone for 8-5?" I yelled into the mass of kids.
Randy, a beefy boy with a big grin and arms too long for his body, offered to hold the placard. He was at least a foot taller than I am. "You're too short, lady," he said.

"How you gonna get them kids to listen to you?"
I didn't answer. But the same thought had crossed my mind.
That day, I had four classes with about 28 students in each. I wouldn't have my fifth class until the next day. I had no textbooks, too few desks and too much confidence. I was armed only with a 19-hour, three-day training session given by the Board of Education two weeks before. There, I had learned a few survival skills, like how to fill out a Delaney Book, the decades-old attendance roster, and how to make sure all my pens didn't get lost the first week. "Don't lend anything to a student, even a pen, without getting an IOU - an umbrella, a Nintendo tape, a mirror," our trainer, a veteran junior high teacher, had told me and my class of 31 fellow recruits.
Our trainer also had some pert one-liners. If a student says, "Drop dead," we could retort: "You don't listen to everything I say, and I won't listen to everything you say." If a student says, " - - - you," we reply: "I don't want to, and I doubt you could."
I had expected to teach a complement of tough and easy classes. I was given the top class in the eighth grade, a middle class and three bottom classes. But I wasn't bothered; my very bottom class had only 23 students on register, six fewer than the average, and I figured the smaller size would be adequate compensation for any behavior problems.
More upsetting was the difficulty getting materials. Chalk was handed out a box at a time. And "out of order" signs were already taped to the copying machines; even when they worked, teachers were not permitted to use them. Materials for students were rationed even more stringently. For the first three weeks of the year, we were not allowed to distribute textbooks. Yet, we were also limited to one class set - 35 copies - of any worksheet. If I needed worksheets for more than one class, I had to forbid the students from writing on them and retrieve them for my next class. A supervisor had to sign off on anything I wanted to have copied.
When materials did become available, they were often unusable. The eighth-grade textbooks, for instance, used language like this: "To express a numeral naming a mixed number as a decimal numeral, we express the numeral for the common fraction as a numeral for a decimal fraction and annex it to the numeral for the whole number." Many of the exercises in the textbook were just as complicated. And I never received a teachers' edition; our school didn't have one.
Even the brightest students found the books frustrating. "This math class would be far better if we get a better book," Laura, one of my brightest students, wrote in an essay. "That book don't explain anything and when it do, it explains it differently than how you explain it. Sometime it confuses me and I think I'm doing the problem wrong."
I put in hours and hours of work at home. Those first weeks, I stayed up until midnight every night, drafting lesson plans, calling parents to complain about kids' behavior in class and grading papers.
My early days in school, which I thought would be consumed with teaching, instead were devoured by discipline problems. One day early in the year, the students in one class rattled their desks whenever I turned to the blackboard; another day, the two boys from my bottom class who had started the basketball stunt threw a Super Ball around the room.

Even when I wasn't trying to cope with major disruptions, I had to confront the incessant talking and disrespect of many students - to me and to each other. The first few weeks of school, I considered a period successful if I was able to teach 10 minutes out of the 43.

I had expected reliable procedures for handling discipline problems. There were few. I quickly discovered, when admonished by one of the assistant principals, that I was not allowed to send ill-behaving students into the hall. I was told to phone parents after class, and, as a last resort, to refer the students to the dean.

But, when I tested the authority of the eighth-grade dean by sending him a student who had violently rattled a desk whenever I turned to write on the board, the dean wrote back, "This is not a discipline problem. Please readmit to class."

Although I initially assumed my classes were the only ones in which students misbehaved, I began to notice on my assigned patrols of the hallways that students were out of their seats yelling or misbehaving in one-third of the classrooms.

Ultimately, I realized I had to cope on my own. I stopped yelling and started talking to students one-on-one. Ever so slowly, I built relationships with my kids. One of the students who had cursed at me the first week stood up one day a few weeks later and screamed at the top of her lungs, "Shut the - - - up, and let the lady teach."

I was stunned, but couldn't help smiling.

UNTIL I WALKED into Whitman, I had no real sense of the range of abilities of New York City kids. I saw some children who were illiterate and unable to do first-grade arithmetic, while others wrote complex poetry and understood Euclidean-proof geometry.

I expected the school to have some sort of tracking system for students, but I had no idea tracking could be so blatant, so rigid and so insensitive to children's needs. At Whitman, the 510 eighth-graders were grouped into classes with numerical rankings, from 8-1 for the best performers to 8-16 for the slowest - and every kid knew what the numbers meant. I taught the top and bottom classes, as well as 8-7, 8-12 and 8-13.

Except for 8-4, a class that was hand-picked and tracked for math, the math abilities of the students were irrelevant to their class assignments; they were tracked based on their reading scores. Generally, strong readers are strong at math and weak readers are slow in math, but not always.

Right away, I realized the tracking system worked against some of my students. Larry, for example, was a kid in my bottom class who had terrible reading problems, but was terrific in math.

"I wist I had a teacher just to teache me," he wrote me in an essay. "to help me know my work and know what I am doing. But that not possible because my class do baby work."

In my three bottom classes, fewer than half the students knew the times tables, and several could not do basic addition. One day, I asked Mary to add 17 and 7. She counted out the answer on her fingers.

And many of the kids couldn't solve basic fourth-grade problems. On the first quiz, I posed this problem: "If there are 400 people at a movie and eight rows of seats, how many people sit in each row?" Of 78 students in my three bottom classes, 52 got the answer wrong. When one student told me she couldn't read the question, I

knew she was not alone, just braver than the rest.

All teachers were supposed to require the kids to write. But, on the first assignment I gave, only three of my students turned in essays that contained no spelling, grammar or punctuation errors. More than two dozen students could not construct a simple sentence. Typical of them was a student in one of my bottom classes. Asked to describe his feelings for math, this boy wrote: "math and other things like card games. i like. odd and divided and muiltlely the topic that be most inporant." This student had scored in the 39th percentile in reading, not that far off the 50th percentile, which was the national average.

But others were advanced far beyond their years. Dianna turned in a perfectly organized and poignant essay on her feelings for math. And Fred, with his essay, showed me his solution, with diagrams and flow charts, to a complicated extra-credit logic problem.

With my slow classes, I was willing to start at the beginning.

"You all don't know your times tables, do you?" I said one day, passing back the disastrous first quiz. "All right, today we're going to learn the nines."

Some of the kids looked relieved, but others seemed angry. One girl pulled out a mirror. One boy started whistling. Two other boys crumpled up their test papers and threw them on the floor.

I told everyone to clear their desks.

"Now, repeat after me," I said, walking down one aisle. "9 times 9 is 81. 9 times 9 is 81."

Silence.

"Again. 9 times 9 is 81." A few kids repeated.

"Louder. 9 times 9 is 81." I couldn't tell if it was anger or interest, but some of the kids started chiming in.

"Now, let's really go for it," I said. "9 times 9 is 81."

I got a halfhearted recitation.

I brought my face one inch from the nose of one of my students. "You, too!" I said. Her face was cocked to one side, her body slumped in the chair.

"Say it!" I yelled. "You're one of the ones who doesn't know it. 9 times 9 is 81."

She cursed at me, then laid her head on her hands again and feigned sleep.

The kids were easily frustrated and often discouraged. One day in September, I graded a test of one of my bottom classes. One of the students had earned 45 out of 100. I wrote on his paper: "Nice work on the first half. Now, let's work on decimals." I had painstakingly corrected each problem and shown, step by step, how to work it. Marking the 29 quizzes had taken more than two hours. But, when I passed back the paper, the student didn't even look it over.

"Forty-five?" he said. He cursed, crumpled the paper into a ball and threw it on the floor. "This class is - - - up."

THE STUDENTS' frustrations became my own. I so wanted them to try that I began modifying my grading system, altering the curriculum and lowering my standards. I knew I was lying to the kids, but it seemed the only way to interest them in school.

Even the school building itself contributed to the frustrations. The halls were as densely crowded as a packed subway car. I taught 23 classes a week in 10 different rooms. My homeroom, which met twice a day, met in still another room.

Sections of the school reminded me of a dirty tenement. Rats and mice lived in the gym, and sometimes made appearances. Except in the nurse's office, soap was virtually nonexistent. One of my classrooms was covered with graffiti; another had a layer of crayon smeared across its chalkboards. The classrooms were so littered by the end of each school day that it was often hard to see the floor beneath the trash.
One afternoon, an assistant principal called me to his office.
"Have a hard day, Mrs. Sachar?" he began.
"Actually, no, it was great," I said.
"Well, your room wasn't."
"I guess I didn't notice. I was tired and I just ran down to lunch. What was wrong?"
"Paper everywhere. Desks out of line. It was a real mess."
I was sure it had been a mess. I hadn't checked. But I still felt humiliated and furious. I was giving every ounce of energy I had to the job - sleepless nights included.
I didn't know what to say. My eyes were welling with tears. "Okay," I finally said. "I'll try to do better. I will."
CHAPTER 2: The Kids Profile of a School How the Walt Whitman Intermediate School compares with city averages for intermediate schools for the 1988-1989 school year

	Whitman	City Average
Students on Register	1,711	1,021
Staffing		
Assistant principals	5	3.1
Teachers	130	74.0
Guidance counselors	4	2.4
Paraprofessionals	12	6.7
Ethnic Distribution/Students		
Black	88.8%	38.4%
Hispanic	8.1%	34.4%
Asian	2.9%	7.3%
White	.2%	19.9%
Ethnic Distribution/Teachers		
Black	54.9%	22.4%
Hispanic	.1%	8.5%
Asian	1.5%	1.2%
White	42.9%	67.9%
Utilization Rate	111%	81.4%
Average Class Size	26.7 students	28.6 students
Average Monthly Attendance	86.6%	85.5%
Economic Data		
Students eligible for free lunch	50.8%	51.7%
Students eligible for reduced-price lunch	13.6%	8.3%
Student Stability Rates	% in the same school	
for at least 1 year	91%	93%
for at least 2 years	83%	49%
for at least 3 years	58%	18%

Experience of Teachers % with less than five years' experience in city school system 29.2% 28.3%
Reading Scores At or above national average
Grade 6 35.8% 47.2%
Grade 7 29.2% 49.2%
Grade 8 41.9% 46.3%
Math Scores At or above national average
Grade 6 38.4% 58.0%
Grade 7 17.5% 41.6%
Grade 8 20.1% 41.3%
Notes: Numbers may not add to 100% because of rounding. Socioeconomic data and experience of teachers - Data given as city averages are for all city schools. Data are not broken down for intermediate or junior high schools. Utilization rate - Enrollment
/capacity ratio. Reading scores - Based on the May, 1989, Degress
of Reading Power test. The national average is the 50th percentile.
Math scores - Based on the April, 1989, Metropolitan Achievement
test. The national average is the 50th percentile. To achieve this average, a student must correctly answer 70 of 110 questions in sixth and seventh grades and 73 of 110 questions in the eighth grade.
SOURCES: Board of Education, United Federation of Teachers, Council of Supervisors and Administrators