

# Teach from Your Best Self

Teachers, this book is a guide for taking care of education's most valuable resource: you. Author Jay Schroder, founder of the popular Teach from Your Best Self Institute, demonstrates why the version of ourselves that we bring to teaching matters and describes how we can rejuvenate ourselves while maximizing student learning. Part I explains why the self that a teacher brings to the classroom is important. Part II explores skills that will help us sustain a best-self state in all manner of situations. Part III delves into those moments when we're provoked beyond our limits and our "hurtsspots" come sharply into view. It offers ways to avert a reactive state or recover from it. Lastly, Part IV provides simple approaches for building a more durable, best self for the long term—a best self with deepened capacity to respond rather than react in the pressurized conditions of teaching. With fresh ideas presented throughout, you'll learn how to prioritize your own well-being so you can continue to make a difference for your students.

**Jay Schroder** has taught high school English and social studies for the past twenty-four years in both mainstream and alternative education settings. In 2021, he founded the Teach from Your Best Self Institute, an organization with a mission to support and inspire educators while advancing a new model for revitalizing education.

# **Teach from Your Best Self**

**A Teacher's Guide to Thriving  
in the Classroom**

Jay Schroder

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*This book is dedicated to my mentor, Paul Richards, who continues to inspire, challenge, and believe in me.*

*And it's dedicated to the educators who endure heartbreaking conditions in education to give kids a shot at a great life. You are my heroes.*

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# Introduction

This is a book for teachers. Unlike most education books, this book puts you, the teacher, at the center. It's a guide for taking care of education's most valuable resource, which is you.

Every successful organization has a source of magic. Corporations go to great lengths to protect this—the formula for Coca-Cola, Colonel Sanders's secret recipe. Think of that source of magic as the goose that lays the golden eggs for the organization. Organizations fail when they don't take care of their golden-egg-laying geese.

In education, the goose is not the textbook, it's not the technology, it's not the curriculum, and it's definitely not the standardized test. It's not even the students. If you put 30 students in a room by themselves and supply that room with textbooks, computers, and learning materials, it's unlikely that anything resembling constructive learning will occur until you bring in a teacher. For decades, education has been abusing and neglecting its golden-egg-laying geese, and now the whole system is on the verge of collapse.

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic had stretched many educators beyond the breaking point, 44% of teachers were leaving the profession during their first five years on the job (*Richard Ingersoll Updates*, 2018). The stresses of teaching during the pandemic and in the aftermath have made the situation worse. According to a May 2021 report from the CDC Foundation, 27% of teachers self-reported symptoms consistent with clinical depression, 37% of teachers self-reported symptoms consistent with generalized anxiety, and 53% of teachers reported that they are considering quitting (*Mental Health Impact*, 2021). A subsequent survey conducted by the National Education Association and published in early 2022 showed that since the onset of the pandemic, "55% of



educators are thinking about leaving the profession earlier than they had planned” (Walker, 2022).

So many teachers have been leaving that there aren’t enough qualified teacher applicants to replace them, causing staffing shortages in districts throughout the nation (Lieberman, 2021). School administrators have been coping with tens of thousands of unfilled positions by expanding class sizes and having teachers spend their prep periods substituting in other classes, creating even more stress for the teachers who remain. Some states have dealt with the problem by lowering standards for who can teach, filling positions with people who are ill prepared for the realities of the classroom.

For decades, teachers have been treated like replaceable cogs in a student-processing machine, as if teacher turnover didn’t matter. But teacher turnover matters. A 2012 study of 850,000 fourth- and fifth-grade students over eight academic years in New York City found that teacher turnover harms student learning (Ronfeldt et al., 2013). It’s also expensive. A 2017 study showed that districts spend more than \$20,000 every time a teacher leaves (*What’s the Cost of Teacher Turnover*, 2017). Nationally, that’s an annual cost to school districts of \$8 billion (Garcia & Weiss, 2019).

It’s no wonder teachers are leaving. Teachers make on average 20% less than other professionals with similar education and experience (Allegeretto & Mishel, 2020). They are assigned large classes of students with widely varying skill levels, many of whom have no interest in learning what the teacher is assigned to teach them. Some students enter the classroom impacted by trauma or social pathologies that poorly equip them to learn anything at all. Schools are dealing with a surge of mental health issues to such an extent that the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and the Children’s Hospital Association “declared the pandemic-related decline in child and adolescent mental health a national emergency” (Vestal, 2021). Meanwhile, opportunistic outside forces are seizing on the crisis to interfere with the work teachers do while beating a steady drum of misinformation that adds to the chaos and villainizes educators.

These are the circumstances in which classroom teachers struggle to help students close pandemic-caused learning gaps,

while trying to avoid getting Covid and worrying about protecting their students and themselves from getting shot. This convergence of troubles has led public education into “a crisis of epic proportions” (Meckler, 2022; Perna, 2022), with a recent survey naming teachers the most burned-out employees in America (Marken & Agrawal, 2022).

Since the report *A Nation at Risk* was published in 1983, education reform has been focused on standards, rigorous testing, and a succession of new initiatives for teachers to implement. Though not given a voice in these reforms, the burden of carrying out the initiatives and the responsibility of ensuring their success has fallen to teachers. When students fail to meet the desired results on standardized tests, new mandates are instituted that require teachers to learn new strategies, new techniques, new instructional methods, new technology, all of which teachers are expected to implement under conditions of ever tighter oversight and control.

This myopic focus on making teachers do more and controlling what they do is based on the false notion that if teachers could just do enough of the right things, then test scores would increase, classes would run smoothly, and schools would finally be successful. Having been told for the past 23 years that I must learn to do more kinds of classroom cartwheels to improve student learning, it’s clear to me that this is a road to nowhere. Even before the pandemic, in spite of the billions of dollars spent and untold teacher hours devoted, educational outcomes had flatlined or declined. Trends in national data show that twelfth-grade math skills in 2019 were the same as in 2005, while reading skills in 2019 dropped seven points compared with 1992 (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2019).

It’s hardly surprising that student performance isn’t increasing. The cost of requiring teachers to do more and more is increased teacher stress. Studies show that teacher stress and burnout negatively affect student performance, essentially subverting the gains one might expect from teachers’ additional work. The first empirical study of the relationship between the emotional exhaustion of teachers and student achievement was conducted in Germany in 2016 and involved 1,102 German

elementary school students. This study was designed to explore the association between teacher stress and student performance in mathematics. Controlling for factors such as the teacher's gender and years of experience, as well as the students' socio-economic status and cognitive abilities, researchers discovered that teachers' emotional exhaustion correlated with significantly lower student mathematics achievement. The negative effect of teacher stress on student performance was higher in classes containing greater numbers of language-minority students (Klusmann et al., 2016).

Clearly, education needs an approach that prioritizes the well-being of teachers. One starting place is to consider the way of the *ninja*. In feudal Japan, the ninja were stealthy fighters who specialized in covert missions. Ninja missions were often harrowing, and the ninja were always outnumbered; however, the ninja were so good at what they did, they inspired legends. The way of the ninja was *in shin tonkei*, which means creating the greatest effect with the least amount of effort. *In shin tonkei* required that the ninja know in every situation what mattered most and concentrate their efforts there.

After over two decades of waging my own covert mission to find a sustainable approach to teaching, I have discovered that what matters most isn't what I *do*. It's not the strategies I use, the standards I teach to, the technology I utilize, or the instructional methods I employ. It's the quality of my presence, the state of being I bring to my students.

Teachers already have a sense that the quality of their presence matters. When they're having an off day, when they're flustered or stressed out, things don't go as well regardless of the strength of their lesson plans. But when they step in front of their students open and refreshed, just about any decent teaching strategy is likely to work.

The influence that a teacher's state of being has on students is both profound and ignored. In the high-stress conditions of education, a teacher tends to teach from whatever version of themselves the circumstances bring out. For instance, having too much to do and not enough time to do it is likely to bring out a version of the teacher that is overwhelmed and maybe irritable.

People assume they are stuck with whatever version of themselves circumstances stir up—that it's natural to react to chaotic, stressful situations with a grumpy, agitated self. But this is not so. We are never stuck with any version of ourselves. In the wings of every moment, there is a best self quietly waiting to be chosen and embodied to help us meet each circumstance in our own best way.

By “best self,” I don't mean a state of continuous composure. Rather, I am suggesting that we are at our best when we are the most authentic—when we are connected to our deepest values, open and curious, able to respond to the situation rather than react. As we learn to access this best self and act from it, our teaching transforms. Our students learn, and we are fulfilled in our work.

As it exists right now, the education system is not built to support teachers to bring their best. However, once enough of us are conserving ourselves and beginning to thrive, we can use our joined voices to turn schools into communities of learning that support the best self of every teacher, learner, school employee, administrator, parent, and volunteer who steps into the building.

The first step in enacting this change is to give teachers classroom approaches they can begin implementing today that will increase their effectiveness and help them preserve their well-being. The purpose of this book is to hand you methods so that, no matter the culture of your school—the policies, the circumstances, the mandates—you can, ninjalike, employ *in shin tonkei* to achieve high-impact teaching with less effort.

## **The Experiences and Influences Behind This Book**

This book would not be possible if it weren't for three powerful forces in my life: an illness, a mentor, and a karate path.

Chronic illness is rarely considered to be positive; however, it can force us to learn things we would otherwise never learn. During my final semester of college, I succumbed to chronic fatigue syndrome. After staggering my way to graduation—right when my adult life was supposed to be starting—I moved back in with my parents and went to bed for a year. During this

period, I saw a parade of doctors, none of whom were able to help. I spent much of my twenties depressed or asleep.

I didn't begin to recover until I stopped fighting my health condition and started to accept it. This was neither easy nor intuitive. My health improved enough for me to go back to school to earn a teaching credential. I became a teacher, but I was still far from healthy; the smallest bit of stress would flatten me. To survive as a teacher, I had to lower my stress and preserve my energy. But how? The daily pressures of teaching were overwhelming. There were plenty of days when, just to get through, I slept on the floor behind my desk during lunch, and plenty of weekends when I couldn't get out of bed. But over time, I developed approaches to teaching that left me fulfilled instead of wrecked. In time, I found that the approaches I used to conserve my health were not only good for me; they were good for my students as well.

I could not have learned any of this had I not been exposed to new perspectives from a mentor. In my early 30s, I landed in southern Oregon so broke that I had to sell my clunker car to rent an apartment. I bought a bicycle and got a job waiting tables. I heard from a friend about a man named Paul Richards who, I was told, could see things. I didn't know what to make of this, but I was eager to talk to anyone who might be able to help me with my health condition. We arranged to meet, and on a warm spring morning, I pedaled my bicycle to his house.

In the previous decade, I had met a lot of people who claimed to have some unique ability; most had been disappointments. I parked my bike, and Paul, smiling widely, stepped out of his front door to greet me. He shook my hand, and I followed him into his music studio, a small outbuilding where he kept his guitar, a computer, a keyboard, and a mixing console.

Paul casually explained that, as a young man, he'd been mentored and trained in specialized ways of using awareness and attention. If I decided to learn from him, he didn't want me to believe anything he said. Instead, he wanted me to experiment and test the skills out for myself. The best reason to learn, he said, his eyes twinkling, was because it was fun.

In that first conversation, Paul uncannily summed up two challenges I was facing. The first was that by living at the fringe of society without any kind of professional certification, I was doomed to struggle just to make ends meet. The second was that I believed too much in my own effort and that continuing to live that way would most certainly continue to drain me. I needed a career, and I needed a new approach to life.

I began meeting with Paul regularly. One day, he gave me a laminated card to put in my billfold. On one side were the words “Question Your Instincts.” On the other side, “Trust Your Presence.” I carry this card as a reminder that my instinctual reactions to situations, many of which bring up my worst self, always lead to the same old outcomes I’ve experienced a thousand times before. But an open, curious presence—a best self, in other words—opens the door for new experiences and much richer returns.

Paul was a black belt in karate, and after working with me for a few months, he suggested I take up karate as well. Over the past two decades, I’ve trained under two karate senseis. I earned my black belt from Sensei Aaron Ortega. After Sensei Aaron retired from teaching karate, I began training with Grandmaster Tom Spellman. Both men have profoundly shaped my development as a martial artist and as a man. While Sensei Aaron gave me the basics, expertly modeling the mindset of a warrior, Sensei Spellman refined my technique, introduced me to the history of martial arts, and taught me how I could use martial arts principles to improve my whole life.

Although neither Paul nor either of my karate senseis focused on helping me become a better teacher, my illness galvanized me to hear everything they offered through the lens of how I could teach without destroying my health. In 2000, as a second-year teacher, I told the principal’s secretary that I was going to learn how to do this job in a way that filled me up rather than depleted me. At the time, I had no idea how to do this.

It took me 15 years, and a great deal of struggle along the way, to fulfill that promise, but I did. In 2018, my father passed away, and I started thinking about my own limited time. I knew

I had something valuable to share with other teachers, so I spent the next year developing material for a teacher training. Then the pandemic hit and trainings stopped, so I pivoted to writing this book.

In 2021, I led the first Teach from Your Best Self training—designed as a full-year experience that started with a one-week intensive workshop followed by monthly Saturday sessions. I wanted to know if what I had learned was shareable, if it could benefit other teachers as it had benefited me. And if indeed it benefited other teachers, I wanted to know if those benefits would flow toward their students. It turned out that the training worked; the participants were unanimous in that this material needed to be shared as widely as possible.

## **About This Book and How to Use It**

This book draws on my own experience as well as research in neuroscience, psychology, trauma research, Eastern martial arts systems, and other traditions. It is organized in four parts, and I recommend reading them sequentially.

In Part I, “The Challenge of Teaching,” we tour through the obstacles, often misidentified, that teachers face and explore why the self that a teacher teaches from matters so much.

In Part II, “Skills and Principles That Matter,” we explore practical classroom approaches for sustaining a best-self state in all manner of classroom situations. In addition, we explore how teachers can inspire students to be in their own best self, which makes the teacher’s job immensely easier.

In Part III, “Tools for Emotionally Challenging Moments,” we delve into those moments when we’re provoked beyond our limits. We look at research-backed approaches for averting a reactive state and, if we do fall from our best self, recovering it as quickly as possible.

In Part IV, “Creating a Resilient Best Self,” we consider research-supported ways of dismantling the psychological machinery that, when triggered, hijacks us from our best self. In this part of the book I introduce simple, time-efficient approaches

for building a more resilient best self, one with deepened capacity to handle the pressure-filled conditions of teaching.

Finally, in the Conclusion, we consider how the Teach from Your Best Self model can be used to transform education.

At the end of each chapter you'll see instructions to grab pen and paper and respond to a few reflective questions. Reflecting on these questions in writing will help you to integrate the approaches introduced in each chapter into your daily teaching routine.

You may consider reading this book as part of a book group with other educators, discussing your responses to the reflective questions when you meet. To quote a line from poet William Stafford, "The darkness around us is deep," which is an apt description of the circumstances in which teachers perform society's most sacred task. Under such conditions, it helps to work together.

I'm honored to be your guide as we take this journey. So come on, let's go.