

Challenges of Teaching in Under-Resourced Schools

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Beginning and experienced teachers in under-resourced schools were surveyed about 571 potential challenges they can face. The teachers reported that they encountered many of the challenges during the school year, and, in fact, many every day of the school year. The greatest number of challenges for both beginning and experienced teachers were with students, including discipline and behavior problems as well as individual differences and diversity concerns. A major message emerging from this study is that the main focus of teacher education for teachers headed to and serving under-resourced schools should be to increase knowledge about how to deal with students. Although there are many other challenges besides the students, most of them can be handled by beginning teachers, and even when they cannot be, they are not as serious as the challenges posed by students.

This is an article about the challenges faced by beginning teachers in under-resourced schools. As an advanced organizer, we will make the case, based on research that we have conducted, that beginning teachers in such settings face many challenges, although most are solvable by beginning teachers. Even more positively, the challenges decrease by the second year of teaching. That said, we have found in our research that many of the challenges continue, with veteran teachers reporting many of the same challenges reported by the beginning teachers.

We begin this article with some background about the program we serve. This provides some context for understanding the studies and findings then reported. Interested readers are referred to our forthcoming book, *Stories of Beginning Teachers: First Year Challenges and Beyond* (Roehrig, Pressley, & Talotta, 2002) for much more extensive coverage of the studies and results presented here, including a number of detailed case studies about how the beginning teachers in our program have coped with particular challenges they have faced. We found their stories inspiring, and we think many others will find inspiration in them as well.

Background

We are affiliated with a radically alternative teacher education program. The Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE) provides to college graduates the opportunity for two years of teaching service in Catholic schools. The ACE

teachers are teachers of record for all of these two years. In general, these schools are under-resourced, with a number of them located in major urban areas—Charlotte, Charleston, Atlanta, Dallas, Fort Worth, Austin, Phoenix, Tucson, and Los Angeles. Although the two years of service is paid service, the stipend provided to ACE teachers is below minimum wage. Health insurance is covered, however, as is tuition in Notre Dame's teacher education program, which extends over the entire two years of service.

The two years begins with a summer school at Notre Dame that focuses on how to run a classroom, with instruction targeted at the grade level and content specialization of each participating teacher. This is a massive undertaking, since the 80 or so new participants in the program serve in elementary, middle, and high schools. Lots of courses and sections must be offered, with a positive consequence being that classes are small and intensive. Nationally prominent faculty are recruited to Notre Dame to serve this program, so the ACE teachers are exposed to much of the best thinking in teacher education. In addition to coursework, the ACE teachers have a 5-week student teaching experience in South Bend during the first summer, which is fully supervised. This permits the participants to try out what they learn in their summer school classes.

Once the summer session is complete, the ACE teachers travel to their assignments and begin their first year of teaching. During both years of teaching service, ACE teachers live together in houses of four to seven. Although one motivation for such communal living is economic, a more

important motivation is that such living provides support opportunities. These young people help one another confront the challenges of beginning teaching in a new environment. Most ACE teachers teach in unfamiliar communities and are often immersed in cultures they have not experienced before. Communal living is intended to help with some of the many challenges faced by these beginning teachers, with those challenges the main thrust of the paper.

During their first year of teaching, the ACE teachers receive other support. Each ACE teacher has an on-site mentor, who is a teacher in the ACE teacher's school. The principals hosting ACE teachers are also required to observe and provide constructive input to ACE teachers. During the year, ACEs take additional coursework over the internet, with the discussions in this course often pertaining to challenges faced by the teachers, with ACE teachers across the program and nation providing supportive input to one another. An especially important resource, however, is field supervisor visits. For ACE teachers who are experiencing challenges, the resources of the program permit the field supervisor to work intensely with teachers to provide them the help they need. Sometimes additional resources are called to the school and ACE teachers' classrooms. For example, on at least one occasion, a Notre Dame-based staffer covered a primary-level classroom so that the ACE teacher could spend some time in the classroom of a master teacher to see how first grade can function when it is done well. In short, the first year teachers in ACE are supported as well as or better than most first year teachers. Even so, the challenges are many.

After completing the first year of teaching, ACE teachers return to Notre Dame for a second summer of course work, followed by a return to their school for a second year of teaching, which includes all the supports that were in place for the first year of teaching. After completing the second year of teaching, the ACE teachers receive a masters of education degree from Notre Dame and are eligible to apply for initial teacher licenses. About 80% of the graduates of the program are involved in education the year following graduation, often continuing in schools that are under-resourced.

Studying the Challenges of Beginning Teaching

The school year in an ACE classroom can start with a bang, literally. Last autumn, we received calls from Los Angeles, detailing for us that during the first week of school, there had been an incident in the third grade classroom of an ACE teacher serving a school in Watts. Someone on the street outside the school shot through the classroom windows while class was in session, with a person on the street killed in the incident. The ACE teacher rebounded well, keeping her students calm throughout the event and getting life in the classroom back to normal very quickly. The children did some teaching on this occasion as well, letting their

teacher know that shootings were common in this neighborhood. The ACE teacher went on to have an outstanding year in the school, including working with a donor that resulted in a much needed financial gift for the school. ACE teachers accomplish a lot during their teaching service, often in the face of difficulties.

Of course, it is not just ACE beginning teachers that find the first years in the classroom to be challenging. In fact, there is a great deal of evidence spanning the 20th Century that beginning teaching is challenging, including many case studies of novice teachers who were challenged by their experiences (Adams, Hutchinson, & Martray, 1980; Barr & Rudisill, 1930; Broadbent & Cruickshank, 1965; Brock, 1988; Cruickshank, Kennedy, & Myers, 1974; Dollase, 1992; Dropkin & Taylor, 1963; Featherstone, 1993; Fuller, 1969; Grantham, 1961; Hermanowicz, 1966; Hoy, 1968; Johnston & Ryan, 1983; Kane, 1991; Kennedy, Cruickshank, & Myers, 1976; Koontz, 1963; Kowalski, Weaver, & Henson, 1994; Lee, 1974; Lortie, 1975; Martin, 1991; Moller, 1968; Olson & Osborne, 1991; Rapp, 1986; Ryan, 1970, 1974; Ryan, Newman, Mager, Applegate, Lasley, Flora, & Johnston, 1980; Sandidge, 1989; Shapiro, 1993; Stegall, 1966; Stone, 1963; Taylor & Dale, 1971; Thomas & Kiley, 1994; Thompson, 1991; Veenman, 1984; Wey, 1951). We reviewed this literature—with especially detailed scrutiny of all the published case studies—to identify the challenges of beginning teaching. We identified 571 unique problems of beginning teaching, which could be grouped into 22 categories (see Table 1).

After we reflected on this huge list, we recognized that there were really five overarching sources of problems: (a) There were challenges caused by the teacher her- or himself: For example, they could lack knowledge about how to teach or curricular issues. They could have problems with the induction or mentoring process. Beginning teachers sometimes have views conflicting with school culture. They can have personal life issues. Gender and sexual issues can interfere with their work as teachers. (b) Students can challenge by misbehaving and not being motivated. Individual differences between students, including racial and ethnic diversity differences, are often difficult to manage. Teacher-student communications can be difficult. The students can present gender and sexual challenges. (c) Issues of professionalism are salient for the beginning teacher. Young teachers are expected to teach, plan for teaching, manage, and discipline classes well. They must assess their students' competencies. There are always extra jobs in the school, from coaching to cafeteria duty. Much of the teacher's work requires resources, often resources that are in short supply. The young professional is expected to participate in her or his own induction process and respond to professional mentoring. (d) Other adults in school are sources of challenge, from teaching colleagues to administrators to parents. Interactions with all of these folks can include clashes with school culture, problems over induction and mentoring, and gender and sexual challenges. (e) Life outside of school can be challenging, from personal

Table 1
Categories of Challenges of Teaching (Roehrig, Pressley, & Talotta, 2002)

Category	Examples
Classroom discipline	Spending too much time on discipline Not disciplining enough Not knowing when and how to punish students
Student misbehavior	Students cutting class Student inattention Student violence and weapons violations
Motivating students	Undermotivated students Students under too much pressure to do well Students who do not believe they can do well
Individual differences between students	Immature students Angry and depressed students Students living in poverty
Assessing student work	Being concerned about how to do assessment Lacking confidence in ability to judge student work Keeping up with volume of assessment (grading)
Relations with parents	Alcoholic, divorced or parents with other characteristics adversely affecting student Lacking support of parents Getting parents to come to conferences
Classroom management	Challenges of organizing classroom environment, especially if move from room to room across day Difficulties in teaching and monitoring students at same time Specials teachers sometimes do not show up on time
Resource issues	Insufficient supplies and materials Dated textbooks Classroom in disrepair
Teacher-student communications/interactions	Learning names of so many students Hard to relate to students who want to be left alone Handling students with rage
School-based demands on time	Too much paperwork Committee work Coaching can be draining
Relations with colleagues	Cliques among teachers Disagreements between teachers about fundamental goals of the school Other teachers suspicious of your methods of teaching
Planning lessons and school days	Not receiving enough information before school starts to plan well Not having enough time to plan Stressed by staying one chapter ahead

Table 1 (continued)

Categories of Challenges of Teaching (Roehrig, Pressley, & Talotta, 2002)

Category	Examples
Classroom instruction	Balancing direct instruction and constructivism Meeting needs of individual students and needs of whole class Providing challenge to the brightest students
Receiving little mentoring and inadequate guidance	Being observed by mentor is stressful Receiving little information about the folkways and norms of the school Another teacher who is supposed to be mentoring you does not do so
Relations with principals and administrators	Principals being critical or disrespectful Principal directives that are vague Worrying about being rehired the next year
Diversity issues	Teaching students from different backgrounds than your own Being a victim of racial resentment Students claiming you discriminate
Lack of knowledge about how to teach or curricular issues	Encountering a situation that teacher education did not prepare you for Teaching is not as good as it could be because you feel you cannot see links between theory and practice Not knowing how to teach writing (e.g., composing) to students
Conflicts with school culture	Disagreements with school policies/methods for assigning to special education Disagreements with the school's approach for handling special needs students Perception that the curriculum is too rigid
Personal life issues	Having little spare time Difficulties getting continuing education credits Physical illness or injuries interfering with teaching
Having unconstructive attitudes and perceptions	Feeling anxious, overwhelmed, or incompetent Feeling the rewards of teaching are not great enough Not believing that the material being taught is important or useful for students
Gender and sexual Issues	Being sexually harassed by another teacher Having a student flirt with you Finding a student attractive
Concerns about the greater community	Community is deteriorating, with this negatively affecting life in school Community is boring Community is hard to get around

life issues of finding one's way around a new community to accepting the ways of life in that community.

Our informal interactions with participants in the program led us to believe that every one of the 571 challenges might have been experienced by at least some of our teachers. This motivated a desire to design a study tapping all of the challenges. Our interactions with the ACE teachers, however, also made us keenly aware that virtually everyone found the second year of ACE service to be easier than the first year in the program. The ACE teachers seemed to learn a great deal about how to deal with challenges during the first year of teaching service. Thus, we felt it essential for the study to address both challenges confronted by first year teachers as well as challenges confronted by second year teachers. Finally, our involvement in the schools served by ACE as well as extensive involvement in schools as part of our larger research program suggested to us that many of the 571 challenges do not go away with increasing experience; many of the challenges facing beginning teachers are challenges facing teachers in general. The stage was set for several studies.

Studies of Beginning Teachers

We developed a questionnaire tapping all 571 challenges found in the review of the literature. Both first and second year teachers completed a questionnaire requiring them to indicate how often each challenge occurred, from "never" to "every day or almost every day." A total of 50 of the 74 enrolled first year and 27 of the 57 enrolled second year ACE teachers completed the questionnaire, for a response rate of 67.57% and 47.37% respectively. A subset of the teachers (10 first year and 10 second year teachers) also rated the seriousness of each challenge if it were to occur.

The first result was that the ACE participants reported that challenges were common in their school lives, with the average ACE teacher reporting more than 200 of the challenges occurring during the present school year (i.e., the questionnaire was completed in the second half of the year, near the end of the year for most participants in the study). Even more dramatic, the ACE teachers reported that every day was challenging, with them reporting an average of 23 challenges occurring daily. Consistent with our expectation, every one of the 571 challenges was reported as occurring by at least one ACE teacher. In short, beginning teachers serving under-resourced schools live in a school world that demands much of them beyond simple lesson planning and showing up for classes.

More positively, however, many of the 571 challenges were rated as occurring rarely if at all during the typical teacher's year. In fact, the ones that were frequent were in the minority, with Table 2 containing the 30 challenges that were reported as occurring at least a few times a month on average by the ACE teachers. What is most salient from a study of Table 2 is that what challenges the ACE teachers

the most is the students, including misbehavior, lack of motivation, and diversity. Even the professionalism issues, in the areas of discipline, classroom management, and planning to meet diverse student needs, all involve the students.

Table 2 collapsed across all of the ACE teachers, reflecting that for the most part, the frequent challenges were the same regardless of whether the teacher was a first or second year teacher, an elementary or middle or high school teacher, or an individual serving an urban or rural or suburban school. Even so, there were important exceptions to the generalization that the most frequent challenges were similar for teachers. One was that high school teachers claimed low motivation was a challenge much more than did elementary and middle-school teachers. The high school teachers reported that their students did not accept responsibility for their failures, lacked enthusiasm, felt material being taught was irrelevant, did not have a work ethic, complained about homework, and often were bored. Another important exception was that teachers serving predominantly African-American student populations tended to report more challenges with students being tardy. Those working with predominantly Hispanic students were likely to report not having enough time to help each student as much as needed. Those in schools serving impoverished students reported having to deal with more angry students. Teachers serving more economically advantaged students reported more problems with rude and disrespectful students; however, they were less likely to have students harassing them.

The less able teachers, as evaluated by the field supervisors, were more likely to report problems both with students and with fellow teachers. In contrast, the more able teachers worried more about their teaching—such as having enough planning time. Both less and more able teachers were challenged by the job, but the more able of them seemed to be worried about more than just keeping order and control of the students. More able teachers worried about delivering high quality lessons and had less time for themselves. The better teachers were more self-reflective, reporting more self-doubts and more feelings of being overwhelmed.

Some issues are considered serious challenges when they occur frequently, and they do occur frequently for teachers serving under-resourced schools (see starred items in Table 2). These challenges include those students who are often disruptive and uncontrollable, those who frequently do not do their assignments or homework, and those who have special education needs or come from dysfunctional families. Beginning teachers do not have enough time to teach these students as much as they need to be taught, nor do they have enough time for themselves. In short, there are huge and common challenges for beginning teachers in under-resourced schools.

There are other challenges that do not happen often, but when they happen they are big hassles (see Table 3). Again, most of these challenges involved the students. There have been several occasions when ACE teachers have been

Table 2
Challenges Rated as Occurring At Least a Few Times a Month

Source of Challenge	Challenges by Category
Self	
Lack Knowledge of Teaching	Encountering a situation teacher education did not prepare you for
Personal Life Issues	Not having any spare time*
Professional	
Classroom Discipline	Finding balance between being in control and being too autocratic
Classroom Management	Students leave the room messy Individual students are disruptive or uncontrollable*
Planning Lessons and School Days	Not enough time to teach each student as much as needed*
Students	
Misbehavior	Students who are inattentive Disruptive student hyperactivity Students sitting inappropriately (e.g., sprawled over or sitting on desk) Students who are tardy Students talking too much
Motivation	Students do not do assignments/homework* Students do assignments/homework late Students do assignments/homework haphazardly Students turn in sloppy work
Individual Differences	Students who are immature Students who are angry Students who are overly tired Students who are social misfits Students who are mean* Students who are hard to reach Low ability students Gifted students Students living in disorganized/dysfunctional families* Students with short attention spans Students with vastly different abilities Students with special education needs* Students with problems understanding material Students who watch too much TV Students who are rude/disrespectful*

* Considered serious if it happened frequently.

in schools where corporal punishment was common. Often, a great deal of counseling from field supervisors and Notre Dame-based staff is required to assist ACE teachers dealing with this reality. Notre Dame prohibits ACE teachers from administering corporal punishment, and much of our counseling includes supporting the teacher to resist pressures in the school to participate in the physical discipline of students. Our counsel also includes instruction about how to keep students out of situations where they could receive corporal punishment (e.g., teaching them how to deal with students in the classroom rather than send them to the principal, who is likely to use corporal punishment with students, and teaching them how to communicate with parents so that any concerns expressed to parents do not lead to physical abuse of children). Although these challenges do not arise frequently, they present dilemmas for the teachers and often require a great deal of support.

As we reflect on the really serious challenges, we also know that these challenges are not always solved, or if solved, not solved well. Thus, we can recall incidents that were resolved only by the teacher changing schools and starting over (e.g., following difficult interactions with other staff members and/or a principal). We also have memories of teachers who needed extensive psychological counseling to deal with a challenge (e.g., the death of a student, charges of racism). Occasionally, we have had students who have quit the program after failing to deal effectively with a challenge.

There were some real positives in the data, however. First, most of the 571 challenges are ones that beginning teachers can handle. This is important to emphasize given the number of challenges that ACE teachers face every day. The Roehrig et al. (2002) book includes case studies of teachers dealing with multiple challenges and finding solutions to problems. Second, there were no extremely serious challenges that happened frequently. Nothing like those summarized in Table 3 occurs very often. Third, second year teachers reported slightly fewer challenges than the first year teachers.

A Study of Experienced Teachers

In order to determine whether the challenges tapped by the questionnaire are unique to beginning teaching or are more general (i.e., challenges for all teachers), a sample of more experienced teachers ($N=55$) completed the questionnaire. These teachers were the mentors for the first-year ACE teacher-participants and served in similar situations to them. About 83% of the contacted mentors participated in the study.

Of course, we are not the first to study the challenges of experienced teachers (see Adams, Hutchinson, & Martray, 1980; Dunn, 1972; Echternacht, 1981; Koontz, 1963; Leiter, 1995; Litt & Turk, 1985; Olander & Farrell, 1970; Pharr, 1974; Rudd & Wiseman, 1962; Thomas & Kiley, 1994). What we found in reviewing the previous studies, however, were many of the same challenges found in our review of

challenges facing beginning teachers. No one, however, has ever tapped the exhaustively complete set of challenges that we compiled in the 571-item questionnaire.

The results were clear. Although the experienced teachers reported fewer challenges in the past year than the beginning teachers, they still reported many challenges in their school days and world, averaging 154 challenges reported per teacher. Whereas the beginning teachers had claimed that there were about 30 challenges occurring several times a month or more often, the experienced teachers only reported 17 such challenges (see Table 4). Every one of these frequent challenges were challenges involving students! The students in under-resourced schools remain a challenge even for experienced teachers.

There were many positive messages when the reports of the more experienced and less experienced teachers were compared. Life in school definitely was less challenging for the more experienced teachers. Their personal lives are better, with fewer headaches and less loneliness and more spare time. Experienced teachers reported feeling more in synchrony with the school culture and more at peace with the students. With experience, there were fewer concerns about classroom discipline, management, and communications. Relations with other teachers and administrators are better for more experienced compared to beginning teachers. More experienced teachers report that instruction is easier, as is assessment, managing resources, and juggling non-teaching responsibilities in the school. Lessons are better and easier, from planning to dealing with questions posed by students. Although the students remain challenging, they are less challenging. Most salient, experienced teachers report fewer problems with student motivation than do beginning teachers.

Nonetheless, just as there are infrequent challenges that are very serious if they occur in the lives of beginning teachers, there are analogous infrequent but serious challenges reported by more experienced teachers. There are fewer of them, however. Most involve students—students committing thefts, fighting, not obeying a teacher, being tardy, not doing assignments or homework, or turning in sloppy work; hyperactive students who are disruptive; students who live in disorganized or dysfunctional homes; and students who are angry or otherwise hard to reach. Experienced teachers have a small number of infrequent but serious challenges involving other adults—parents who neglect or are not interested in their children and teachers who insult or are insulting to students.

Discussion

Serving as an ACE teacher is challenging, as is serving one's career in the under-resourced schools that participate in the ACE program. That said, the ACE program receives five applications for every spot in its class. Moreover, 95% of the participants complete the program, with virtually all of those who do complete being very satisfied with the

Table 3
Challenges That Would Be Serious Even If They Occurred Infrequently and That Do Occur Occasionally

Source of Challenge	Challenges by Category
Students	
Discipline	Having to administer corporal punishment* Pressure from principal (or some other administrator or teacher) to use corporal punishment*
Misbehavior	Students harassing beginning teacher** Having suspicion that a student may be involved in illegal activity (e.g., selling drugs)** Students stealing** Students fighting** Students abusing alcohol** Being physically attacked/hit by student(s)* Evidence that a student committed a crime* Being a victim of student vandalism* Student committing or threatening to commit suicide* Students dropping out of school* Students who are gang members* Students who extort money or other goods from other students* Guns or other weapons in the school* Students abuse drugs*
Individual Differences	Having a student who is being abused** Having a student whose parent dies** Having students who can't read** Having students with eating disorders* Having a student who dies* Having a student who is murdered*
Diversity Issues	Having a student who shows racial prejudice** Minority students (or their parents) who feel they are victims of discrimination by you* Students or their parents accusing you of racial prejudice*
Gender/Sexual Issues	Having student who engages in sexual misconduct
Professional	
Classroom Management	Person enters room without authorization and will not leave* Having to make moral compromise to keep peace with students* Student disappears from your classroom (i.e., you cannot find a student who is supposed to be with you)*

Table 3 (continued)
Challenges That Would Be Serious Even If They Occurred Infrequently and That Do Occur Occasionally

Source of Challenge	Challenges by Category
Other Adults in School Relations with Parents	Parent threatens to ask that you be dismissed*
Relations with Teaching Colleagues	Other teachers being critical of you; tactless, rude, or insulting to you* Having to make a moral compromise to keep the peace with other teachers*
Relations With Principals/Administrators	Being threatened with dismissal by principal or other administrator* Being uncertain about whether you will be rehired next year*
Gender/Sexual Issues	Being sexually harassed by another faculty member or subjected to sexual innuendo by another faculty member* Learning of a seduction attempt of a student by another teacher*

* occurred infrequently ** occurred moderately frequently

Table 4
Challenges Rated as Occurring Frequently by Experienced Teachers

Source of Challenges	Challenges by Category
Students Misbehavior	Inattentive students Disruptive student hyperactivity Tardy students Students talking too much
Motivation	Students do not do assignments Students turn in sloppy work
Individual Differences	Students who are immature Students who are angry Students who are overly tired Students who are hard to reach Low-ability students Gifted (more able) students Students living in disorganized, dysfunctional families Students who have short attention spans Students who have vastly different abilities Students who have problems in understanding the material Students who watch too much television

experience. Most are so satisfied that they are deciding to stay in education for the immediate future with many deciding that education is their career calling. Working in challenging and under-resourced schools can be highly rewarding for young people.

In fact, we are about to undertake an analysis that is directed at the accomplishments of the ACE teachers in these schools. These accomplishments have been substantial. On the low-tech end, a school without running water before the ACE teacher arrived gains a drinking fountain because of the efforts of the teacher. At the high-tech end, a school with few computers before the ACE teacher arrived is now fully wired. A school without a drama program gains a very good one because of the extra-curricular efforts of an ACE science teacher. Besides solving the 20 or 30 small challenges they face every day, ACE teachers also solve big challenges. The present analysis was aptly named as being about challenges, despite the fact that many could see the questionnaire items as 571 obstacles to being a good teacher.

This analysis of challenges has been invaluable to the ACE teacher education program. It has helped us to focus our teacher education efforts on preparing ACE participants for the challenges they will face. ACE participants do arrive at their schools better aware of what might happen as a function of this study. More than that, however, this study has made clear to the faculty that the biggest and most enduring challenge for teachers in under-resourced schools is the students. We are working hard to do all possible to provide as much information as possible to ACE teachers about how to deal with the many challenges that students can present.

One mechanism for doing so is to have those new to ACE read case studies of ACE teachers coping with challenging students in their settings. In fact, those case studies are now being used in some of the classes, with the expectation that the cases will be used even more widely when they are available in a published book (i.e., Roehrig et al., 2002), which will be in time for the next session of the ACE summer school. At a minimum, these case studies inspire, sending the clear message that the challenges of beginning teachers can be met, that the students in under-resourced schools can do better than they might have had the ACE teacher not accept the challenge to do all possible to educate them. Beyond inspiration, however, teachers in under-resourced schools need know-how to work with their students, with the need decreasing somewhat with experience but not going away. A major thrust for all working with teachers who are in under-resourced schools or heading to under-resourced schools is to build their knowledge of students and how to work with students so that they will make the most of their own talents and the opportunities the school can provide to them. The challenge is to do better for the students. The message that comes blasting through in this analysis is that if you want to improve these schools, think about the students, the students, and the students! We feel blessed at ACE that there are so many young people who want to do just that.

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