

An open letter to all students

Ed Grisamore / The Telegraph, Macon GA

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Dear Class:

Welcome to the first day of school. Summer is officially over; so it's time to wake up. No more snoozing until lunch. Time to wipe off the dust and rust.

Hope you're looking forward to an exciting year. I see where you bought a new backpack during the tax-free weekend. Looks like you've got some other cool stuff, too. I like those new shoes. Your pencils are so fresh they don't even have teeth marks.

No, I am not your self-appointed teacher; I'm more like a surrogate professor or coach. I'm someone who has been brought in to give you a pep talk at the beginning of the academic year.

This message is for first-graders at Quail Run Elementary in Warner Robins, seniors at First Presbyterian Play School in Macon and every grade and school in between.

Others may read over your shoulder; but I've saved this space especially for you. And it has nothing to do with geometry or sentence diagramming.

Follow these principles and you will have the best school year of your life.

So listen up.

Respect your teacher: They are your friend, not your enemy. They have to wear a lot of different hats. It's a thankless job that doesn't pay nearly enough money. Teachers often have to dig into their own pockets to keep things going. And a million trees have to die to keep up with all the paperwork. Don't make their jobs any more difficult. One day you may be asked to name the three people who have had the most influence on your life. No doubt a teacher will be one of them.

Learn something new every day. And not just what you're assigned to learn. Be curious about the world. Fill yourself with wonder.

Don't be cruel. Never make fun of the way someone looks, talks or dresses, especially if they cannot help it. My family moved around a lot when I was growing up, so I was always the "new kid" at school. I had a difficult time fitting in and was the victim of a lot of insensitivity. So I know how it is to have your feelings hurt. Maybe you do, too. Channel your energy into something constructive.

Look people in the eye when you talk to them. That's the best piece of advice anyone ever gave me. We live in a world of disconnect, so never underestimate the value of eye contact when you communicate. It's like holding hands with someone's face. You might be surprised at how much more you actually listen, too.

Move your body. Don't be a couch potato chip. Life is not a spectator sport. Exercise something besides your thumbs in front of a video game.

Vaccinate yourself against the whine flu. So what if you don't like the food in the cafeteria? Be thankful you have something to eat. Some people in the world don't.

Be well-rounded. Nobody likes a square. You won't learn about life by always burying your head in a book. Join a club. Start an adventure. Get involved in community work. There's a lot more to it than your grades. Experience is the best teacher you'll ever have.

Have fun. Be good. This is some wisdom my local preacher friend always dispenses to his daughters. It's about balance. Moderation. Have fun – but not so much fun that you can't be good. And be good – but not so good that you can't have fun.

I'll see you at graduation.

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