There is a distinct narrative about the first year of teaching: It is notoriously difficult. It’s known to be hard because novice teachers tend to have poor classroom management skills, some lack supportive mentorship structures, and many enter the teaching profession unprepared for the context and demands of their schools.

So, when I stood at the front of the classroom last August, I fully embraced that my first year of teaching would be exacting and the results imperfect. Those first few months, I focused on small victories like maintaining some semblance of order throughout my lessons. I watched veteran educators, took ample observation notes, and tried to replicate their demeanor the next day in class. My priority was not on being an excellent educator, merely an above-average first-year teacher.

Still, even first-year teachers have dreams. I imagined that maybe one day in my first year I would have a “perfect class”: every student would be on task and engaged. I envisioned a “perfect week” where I was ahead on lesson planning (instead of hastily drafting the night before) and giving detailed feedback on assignments every day. But, as the fall progressed and the leaves lost their chlorophyll, I also shed some of my loftier goals. By early March, in the last weeks of the before times, my desire of sending a positive text to every student’s family had never occurred. My intention to design a more engaging reading intervention unit had never gotten off the ground. My hope of rebuilding the relationship with the student I sent out of class a half dozen times had never come to fruition. Even in the pre-COVID era, the demands of licensure coursework, lesson planning, and grading always pushed these oth-
The Pivot Issue

er priorities lower on the to-do list to the point they remained unfulfilled.

Then, on March 13, I said farewell to my students. They packed up Chromebooks, I cleaned out the snacks in my desk, and we transitioned to remote learning. Not only was I naive to believe that we would return in person after spring break, but I gave little thought to how my professional priorities would shift.

Initially, it felt as though the year might as well have started over. I had to figure out how to run virtual office hours via Zoom, record engaging lessons at the kitchen table through Loom, and give feedback through the side-panel “private comments” feature of Google Classroom. Adapting to new technology platforms for remote learning was jarring to the point that I put off thinking about what the priority should be as a teacher, novice or veteran, in this novel situation.

Now, however, nearly five months on, I have had abundant time to consider my priorities as a teacher. What I realize now — what I would tell a first-year teacher this fall — is that my priorities were flipped all along. Strong classroom management, planning ahead for lessons, and frequent feedback are all well and good, but they are no substitute for the relationships you build with students and families.

I wish I had sent those text messages home last September to build connections with families early. I wish I had spent that extra weekend creating relevant lessons that bridged academic content with my students’ lives. I wish I had figured out how to reach that one struggling seventh-grader so he could have been successful before and engaged in remote learning later.

The first year of teaching was bound to be challenging with a class of 30 12-year-olds. I could not have imagined how drastically my core beliefs about what it means to teach would have shifted this far in one year. As I think ahead to the first year of starting online, I have reconsidered what the priorities of a teacher should be. Stay connected. Keep engaging. Be concerned.

"Weeks and weeks of remote teaching and learning and mask-wearing made real life seem like an inescapable sitcom. With a dark soundtrack."

CHRISTIAN, BECKETT (TOP), BERKELEY, AND KARLA LIFE-Long EDUCATORS GRANVILLE, OHIO

So, how have you preserved the memories of teaching and learning from this past spring?

How are you holding onto the moments of your family collectively faking its way through turning living rooms into faculty lounges, flipping kitchens into science labs, accepting bedrooms becoming Zoom conference rooms?

I imagine an empty box.

Perhaps an old shoe box. Certain to crumble deep within the soil. Perhaps something more elegant, more refined; something worthy of being marveled at generations from now.

But I imagine a box. Empty.

A time capsule.

It’d be something our family would methodically fill with mementos, souvenirs, and talismans from our family’s most unexpected spring.

I try to list the items we’d bury.

Try to imagine the artifacts that’d mark the COVID-19 pivot from our family’s life attending the same beautiful school campus together in Texas before spring break to the awkwardly hacked home campus we rushed into service as teaching and learning went fully remote.