

Organization Made Easy!

Tools for Today's Teachers

Frank Buck, Ed.D.



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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my wife and best friend, Davonia. She is my inspiration. Her love and encouragement over our more than 20 years of marriage made possible this book and so many other joys in my life.

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About the Author

Frank Buck served as a central office administrator, principal, assistant principal, and band director during a career in education spanning almost 30 years. He has served as an editorial advisor for the National Association of Elementary School Principals and has authored articles published nationally aimed at helping others become better organized and better managers of their time. The workshops he has conducted over more than a decade have drawn rave reviews from teachers and school administrators alike.

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1

The Universal Challenges of Time Management and Organization

In *The Harried Leisure Class* (1970), Staffan Linder begins with the following poem:

*Good-by, Sir, excuse me, I haven't time.
I'll come back, I can't wait, I haven't time.
I must end this letter—I haven't time.
I'd love to help you, but I haven't time.
I can't accept, having no time.
I can't think, I can't read, I'm swamped, I haven't time.
I'd like to pray, but I haven't time.*

— Michel Quoist

The time constraints, and feelings which accompany them, are typical of our culture. In the forty years that have passed since that book's publication, the pace of society has grown more frantic. The demands of a changing world translate into increased demands on our time, and it seems to get worse with each passing year. Technology, with its promise of making our lives easier, has provided us with cell phones which ring constantly, a daily barrage of e-mails, and a general overload of information. The "time crunch"

◆ 1

causes stress, and teachers are hungry to find relief from the stress and want to feel in control of their days.

It is possible not only to survive, but to thrive, in an age of limited time and unlimited demands. This book shows how. Teachers will find specific tools aimed at organizing surroundings, managing time, and increasing productivity.

Many published books address personal organization and time management. The topics are also favorite subjects of magazine articles. This popularity illustrates both the importance of these topics to our culture as well as how elusive mastering them can be.

My first book, *Get Organized! Time Management for School Leaders*, was written to fill a void in the literature. Too often, time-management books target the business executive. Although it is true that those in the educational arena share many of the same challenges, it is also true that schools are unique places. I provided a book that recognized that uniqueness. Since its publication, the book has found a particular niche with school administrators. Feedback has described it as being “practical” and an “easy read.” Mission accomplished!

This book is written for *teachers*. In particular, my focus is on three groups of teachers. In the first group is the beginning teacher who overnight inherits a classroom which may well have been left in disarray by the predecessor. Without a system for organizing the surroundings and cataloguing the newly acquired responsibilities, the excitement of landing the job can quickly give way to a feeling of being overwhelmed by it. Colleges of education rarely prepare their students for the volume of responsibilities which will come their way.

In the second group is the experienced teacher who is new to that particular school. Regardless of how well organized and familiar one’s old classroom was, walking into the new classroom brings back the feeling of being a new teacher. Every school has its unique rituals, routines, and procedures, and the learning curve can be steep. The teacher needs a system that will transform a room left in chaos. The teacher also needs a system that will take responsibility for organizing and remembering everything that must be done in those early days and weeks.

In the final group is the teacher who has come to the conclusion that it is time to “turn over a new leaf,” and has the suspicion that life does not have to be as hard as he or she is making it. This teacher is the one who we hear saying, “I’ve got to get organized!”

Time-management books tend to offer a smorgasbord of suggestions, yet fail to provide the necessary depth to make a difference for the reader. This book provides the teacher with a complete system for managing time, getting organized, and staying organized.

2 ♦ Organization Made Easy! Tools for Today’s Teachers

Finally, the role of technology in our lives has increased exponentially in a relatively few years. The hallmark books on time-management and organization from decades past are unable to help us in this area. Publications such as this one are needed to address both the problems technology poses and the opportunities to harness the capabilities technology can offer.

This book will not eliminate the time demands that go hand-in-hand with this profession. What it can do is provide some tools and techniques to help the busy teacher address those demands more efficiently and effectively. The results will be a feeling of being in control of the day, a decrease in stress, and an increase in the sheer joy that the profession can offer. Moreover, the teachers will find more time to spend on that which is truly significant—perhaps on some of the quests outlined in the poem which began this section.

The Universal Time Crunch

If you feel the crunch of too much to do and too little time in which to do it, welcome to a very large club. In the 1972 classic book *The Time Trap*, Alec Mackenzie states, “Of the thousands of managers I have polled, from board chairmen and chief executives to first-line supervisors, only one in a hundred has enough time.” Peter Drucker’s 1966 hallmark work, *The Effective Executive*, tells us that “Effective executives...do not start with their tasks. They start with their time.” Drucker goes on to say, “Nothing else, perhaps, distinguishes effective executives as much as their tender loving care of time.” What Mackenzie and Drucker found to be true in the business world then is just as true in the arena of education today.

Organization, Time Management, and the Art of Teaching

Teaching is a blend of art and science. It is a complex discipline where theories regarding best practice change rapidly. Great teachers constantly expand their knowledge bases. They continue to learn. They communicate with other teachers. They challenge their assumptions. They spend time learning to use technology. They view change as a friend. They realize what was true yesterday will not necessarily be true tomorrow. Few things are constant in education. There is one element, however, that is unchanging. That element is *time*, accompanied by the feeling that there is never enough of it.

Some may dismiss attention to organization and time management as being separate from teaching. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Every good thing we do for our students, our school systems, our communities, our families, and ourselves is accomplished through the dimension of time. Furthermore, time is finite. We cannot buy, beg, borrow, or steal any more. We can only manage the 168 hours we are given each week. Our ability to

plan, to enlist the help of others, and to achieve our goals is directly related to our ability to organize our environments efficiently and use time effectively.

How This Book Will Help

The ability to organize and manage time is crucial to our professional success, yet it is neglected in our preparation for that profession. For more than a decade, I have led workshops in these areas. The feedback I have received from participants is that the tools shared with them truly do make a difference in their productivity. Every time I hear the comment, “You changed my life,” I am more convinced than ever that these concepts are teachable, and with a little practice, become second nature.

In this book, I share those tools with you. After reading the book, you will have a comprehensive system for bringing order and control to your personal and professional life. What you will read is practical and easy to implement. Do not be surprised when your level of stress diminishes as your level of organization and time management increases. Your focus can be on the present and on the joy in the moment.

2

Handling the Paper Blizzard and Decluttering Your Room

A place for everything, everything in its place.

— Benjamin Franklin

The teacher's desk can easily resemble a mountain of paper. That mountain can easily spread to window sills, surrounding tables, and every available flat surface. Work to be graded, graded work to be returned, notes from parents, material from committee work, and assorted books make finding *anything* tough. In addition, the new teacher inherits a classroom that may have been left in disarray by the predecessor.

How great it would be if the papers that sit on our desks would go away and magically come back exactly when we need them! That is exactly what this first tool will do.

I first saw this concept as a young boy during visits to my dad's office. He was a lawyer operating in a one-man shop. With no secretary, bookkeeper, or associate, he handled every aspect of his practice by himself. I noticed the first thing my dad did each morning was to open one filing cabinet drawer. In that drawer were files labeled with numbers from 1 through 31. If the date was the fifteenth day of the month, he pulled out the "15" folder. In that

◆ 5

folder were papers related to the various people he would be seeing that day. Every piece of paper he would be working with that day was contained in that folder.

I thought my dad originated this idea, and it was one I put into practice from my first day as a teacher and have never left it. Later, I learned that it is an old and very common tool in the business world called the “tickler file.”

Setting Up a Tickler File

Creating a tickler file requires nothing more than forty-three folders and a convenient place to put them. The first thirty-one folders are labeled 1 to 31, with each file representing a day of the month. The remaining twelve folders are labeled January through December, representing the twelve months of the year. The system is ready to go.

The idea is simple. When paper arrives that will be needed sometimes in the future, decide when you would like to see the paper again and drop it into the appropriate file. If the paper is going to be needed within the next month, slip the paper into the correct numbered folder. A piece of paper dropped into folder “17” will resurface on the seventeenth day of the month. For papers which will be needed again more than a month in the future, drop the paper into the correct *monthly* folder. The paper not needed until sometime in November is filed in the “November” folder.

At the end of the month, the folder representing the next month is emptied into the 1–31 folders. For example, at the end of February, the “March” file is opened, and a decision is made about what *day* in March each item is needed. The papers are then filed in the 1–31 folders.

Tickler files must be kept close at hand so that papers can be dropped into them throughout the day. For this reason, select a file drawer in the desk. While manila folders may be used for the tickler files, hanging files offer several advantages:

1. They stand upright and will not slide down in the drawer.
2. Their sturdy construction makes them excellent for the steady use they will receive.
3. They slide back and forth easily on their rails.
4. Manila file folders containing papers related to a particular project can be placed inside them.

Many teacher desks are not equipped with rails for hanging files. Any office supply store will carry a hanging file system that can be assembled in minutes.

Tickler files, when used properly, will receive a great deal of use. For this reason, choose high-quality files. Stagger the position of the labels so

that tabs are not hidden behind each other. Label the tabs neatly. Be sure the drawer is large enough to hold the set of files comfortably and that the drawer slides easily. A teacher's world moves quickly. Anything that makes the system the least bit cumbersome will cause that system to sit idle in no time.

Tickler Files in Action

Let's begin with an example that is all too common. Imagine receiving the memo outlined in Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1. Memo to Teachers

Memo
To: Teachers
From: Principal
Please complete this form and bring it with you to the faculty meeting on Tuesday.

This job actually has two parts:

1. Complete the form.
2. Bring the form to the meeting.

Completing the form is something that could probably be done on the spot. In fact, if a task will take only a few minutes to complete, you should complete it when it first appears. If you are going to take the time to look at it, completing it right then will save having to refamiliarize yourself with it later.

The second part of the task is the part that causes the trouble. The form has been completed and today is only Wednesday. What are you going to do with this piece of paper from now until Tuesday of next week?

In all too many classrooms, the drill resembles the following scenario. The paper is carefully placed on the corner of the desk so as not to be forgotten. For the next half-day, that paper is moved around in an effort to find other papers under it and around it. You look up from the current work countless times and see that piece of paper, each time thinking about how you must remember to take it to the meeting next week. Just after lunch, a student places a piece of makeup work on top of it. You have just experienced the beginning of the end!

By Tuesday, this piece of paper is buried seven layers down and has not been given a thought in days. You leave for the faculty meeting, and guess

what is still buried on your desk? You realize dropping papers on the corner of the desk doesn't work!

The next time, you try a different approach. "I'll tape it to the wall," you think. "That way it won't get lost." This time, as you leave for the faculty meeting, where is the form? More than likely, it is still taped to the wall. One of those little rules of life is that whatever is taped to a wall becomes part of the décor!

An easier way exists. In this case, the memo needs to resurface on Tuesday. Simply drop it in the tickler file that corresponds to Tuesday's date. It is out of sight and out of mind. Furthermore, it is not cluttering the desk or decorating the wall. On Tuesday morning, you pull the folder for that day and dump it on the desk. There is the form along with any other papers that at some time in the past you wanted to see again on this particular day.

Other Examples

What else might be placed in the tickler files? Here is a partial list of possibilities:

- ◆ Tickets arrive for an event that occurs three weeks from now. Drop them in the numbered file corresponding to the date of the event. On that date, the tickets appear. No need exists to add them to an already cluttered purse or wallet for fear of forgetting them on the concert date. Nor will they be slipped into a nearby drawer and forgotten. Instead, on the day they are needed, they appear.
- ◆ Birthday cards need to be bought for friends and relatives. Buy all of them with one trip to the card shop. After arriving at home, address all of the envelopes and attach return address labels to the whole batch. Pencil in the date each card needs to go in the mail, and do so in the spot where the postage stamp will later go. Simply drop the cards in the appropriate tickler folders. Throughout the year, cards will appear on the exact days they need to go in the mail. Sign the card, seal and stamp the envelope, and drop it in the mail. You will never forget a birthday again!
- ◆ A flyer arrives outlining the driving directions for an upcoming workshop. You will need that item on the day of the workshop, so put it in the tickler file. It will appear the morning of the workshop.
- ◆ While completing a report for one of the school committees of which you are a member, you see that you do not have all of the

information needed. Rather than allow the report to sit on the desk, jot down in your “signature tool” what information you need to obtain and make a plan for how you will get it. The “signature tool” is defined and explained in the next two chapters. Slip the report into a tickler file for several days in the future. When the report resurfaces, complete it using the newly gained information.

- ◆ A “problem of the day” is one of the resources you use for your classes. Drop each one in the appropriate tickler file.
- ◆ The test for the current chapter is prepared and ready to duplicate, but the copier will be out of order until Thursday. Drop the test in the file for Thursday. It will be out of sight and out of mind until the day you can do something about it.
- ◆ Thursday arrives and the test is now duplicated even though you will not give it until Wednesday of next week. After all, that copier could go down again! Put the test copies in a manila folder and put the whole folder in next Wednesday’s tickler.
- ◆ Makeup work is being submitted, and you wish to grade it all in one batch. Pick a day for this task. As makeup work rolls in, throw it in that folder.
- ◆ You wish to pay all of your bills in one sitting a couple of times per month. As they arrive, throw them in one tickler folder and pay them all at one time when that date arrives.

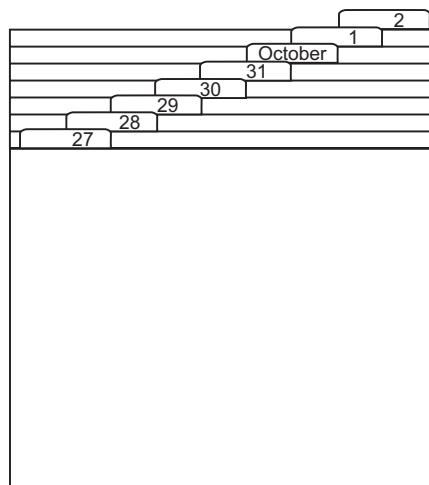
For the teacher who is new to the profession or new to the school, the ticklers files serve another very valuable function. In each job I have held, the early days involved going through papers left behind by the last person. Many of them begged the question, “What do I do with *this*?” The best answer in many of those cases was simply to put it in the tickler file and let it resurface a month later. With another month of experience in that job and in that location, I knew exactly what those miscellaneous papers meant the next time they appeared.

Daily Ritual

For the tickler file to work, checking it daily must become habit. This ritual can be either the last thing before leaving in the afternoon or the first thing in the morning. A good feeling does exist when all of tomorrow’s paperwork has been sorted before the day begins, and the first thing to attack the following morning is left squarely in the middle of the desktop—the otherwise *clean* desktop.

In this example, the date will be September 27. Figure 2.2 illustrates how the tickler files will look.

Figure 2.2. Example of Tickler File



As today is September 27, the “27” folder will be in the front of the drawer. The contents will be emptied on the desk. The proper place for the “27” folder is now in the back of all of the numbered folders, right behind folder “26.” This file now represents *October* 27. Notice that the file for the next month, October, sits as a divider between those files representing days in September and those representing days in October. In addition, once October 1 arrives, the “October” folder will be in the very front, serving as a reminder to divide its contents among the 31 folders behind it.

On the desk will be all of the papers that at sometime in the past you had decided you should be seeing on September 27th such as the following examples:

- ◆ The birthday card that needs to go in the mail today.
- ◆ The tickets to tonight’s concert.
- ◆ The driving directions for how to get to the concert.
- ◆ The folder of materials to discuss with Penelope’s mom with whom you have a conference this afternoon.
- ◆ The phone message to call Mr. Jones. When you tried to call him last week, his secretary said he would be out of town until the 27th.

In this section, we have examined both personal and professional examples of using the tickler file. The tickler file is not just a tool for school.

Having an additional set of tickler files at home is a great idea. That way, no matter whether at home or school, papers you need in the future will be filed away where they are sure to return at exactly the right time.

Forgetting Is a Good Thing

Much of the stress in life is related to the many responsibilities teachers in today's world are expected to remember. From the examples presented in this chapter, it becomes obvious that tickler files relieve that stress by doing the remembering. When you drop a piece of paper in the tickler file, *you can now forget about it*. In fact, the entire system outlined in this book will require you to remember *exactly two things*. *One* of them is to check the tickler file first thing in the morning. The second is to look at the *signature tool*, either paper or digital, which will be examined in the upcoming two chapters.

"But what if I forget to check my tickler files?" exclaims an overwhelmed teacher. This question is typical of someone who half-heartedly uses the tool. Although some items are in the tickler file, this person also has papers all over the desktop. Busy working with this pile of papers, the thought of still more being in the tickler file never occurs.

Consider for a moment what the teacher who properly uses the tickler files will witness: a completely clean desktop. *Everything* is filed for the date it will be needed. Few people would face a clean desktop and not suspect there was paper to be handled somewhere!

One Little Memo Pad

For the first several years of my teaching career, my organizational system consisted of a memo pad in my shirt pocket and my tickler files. Any new ideas or commitments went straight onto the memo pad with one sheet being devoted to each item. Part of the daily routine was to drop each of those slips of paper into the tickler file. Each morning, the tickler file for the day would contain a variety of slips of paper for me to put in the order in which I wanted to accomplish them. I then had my marching orders for the day!

That system was enough to get me started. It may be enough to get the beginning teacher started. For the veteran teacher who lacks a system, the notepad may be enough to begin the road towards being a master of one's tasks instead of letting the details fall through the cracks. As one assumes larger and varied projects within the school, the tools needed for the job will change. The chapters on the "signature tool" will provide that support. When the number of tasks and projects is large and the ability to retrieve any piece of it instantly is desirable, the search capabilities of a *digital* signature tool will be necessary.

Three Little Boxes

Tickler files allow for a clean desktop. During the day, however, every teacher will deal with three types of paperwork and need places to put them:

- ◆ New paperwork just arriving.
- ◆ Papers from today's tickler file that cannot be completed immediately.
- ◆ Work produced that will now need to go to someone else.

Three boxes will organize the three types of paperwork:

In

In provides a place to throw anything new. The benefit is being able to continue focus on the task at hand without being distracted by every incoming piece of paper. During the typical day, a variety of items cross the desk:

- ◆ Today's mail.
- ◆ Memos from others in the school.
- ◆ Notes from parents.
- ◆ Phone messages.

Stop to examine and handle every piece of paper as it arrives, and the constant interruptions will prevent the accomplishment of much of anything. "In" provides a spot where all of the incoming barrage can be housed until it can be handled. "In" can take a number of physical forms. An inexpensive letter tray is an excellent choice. A file folder will work. An empty desk drawer is also a possibility.

Getting to the bottom of the Inbox must be *one single activity*. One goes to the mailbox at home and removes *all* of the mail, sorts it all, and handles it in one sitting. Likewise, the Inbox is a place where papers collect. Handling the entire stack must be a single task, not a day-long marathon. Many people complain of never being able to reach the bottom of the Inbox. The great fear is that somewhere towards the bottom lurks an emergency. The secret here is to make a decision on what each piece of paper represents:

- ◆ Throw junk mail immediately into the trash can. Throw away virtually all catalogs. Use the Internet to search vendor sites there rather than filing catalogs and purging them when new ones arrive.
- ◆ Tag items that can be handled by other people with an appropriate note to them and place in "Out."

- ◆ Return quick phone messages as soon as the paper is touched. Depending on the nature of call, handling other papers while carrying on the conversation is an option.
- ◆ Place reading material together in a folder or in one section of a briefcase. Before leaving for a meeting, grab some of it. While waiting for a meeting to start, waiting at a doctor's office, or waiting for a train to pass, having reading material at hand turns wasted time into productive time.
- ◆ Place items which will be handled on some future day in the appropriate tickler file.
- ◆ Some items will take time to complete. Make a quick decision on what needs to be done, add the item to the task list, and then place the paper into "Pending."

Pending

Some papers cannot be acted on immediately yet will be needed later in the day. *Pending* provides a holding tank for them. For example, today's tickler file includes papers related to a conference to be held with Penelope's mother this afternoon. *Pending* provides a place to put those papers until the time of the conference. *Pending* could be a letter tray. A desk drawer can just as easily be devoted to this function.

Out

This box houses the papers that need to go somewhere else other than the classroom (or office for nonclassroom teachers). These items would include:

- ◆ Outgoing mail.
- ◆ Material for someone else to file.
- ◆ Papers to go somewhere else in the building.
- ◆ Items to be taken home. If a briefcase is kept near desk, these items could be placed there.

At one or more times during the day, emptying *Out* will be one single activity. As with *In* and *Pending*, *Out* can be a letter tray, a desk drawer, a folder, or a neat stack placed under a decorative paperweight on a nearby table.

Here is how those three boxes interface with the list of sample items that could resurface in today's tickler file:

- ◆ The birthday card that needs to go in the mail today. Once the stamp is placed on it, throw it in "Out." When it is time to dis-

perse the entire box, take the card and other mail to the main office and place in the school's outgoing mail.

- ◆ The tickets to tonight's concert. Put them in "Out," or go ahead and put it in a purse, wallet, or pocket.
- ◆ The driving directions for how to get to the concert. Throw in "Out," put in a briefcase, or possibly put in the purse or fold and put in a pocket.
- ◆ The folder of materials to discuss with Penelope's mom with whom you have a conference this afternoon. Place in "Pending."
- ◆ The phone message to call Mr. Jones. When you tried to call him last week, his secretary said he would be out of town until the 27th. Place the call immediately if convenient. If not, put a task in the "signature tool" to place the call and throw the message into "Pending" if the message contains some other information needed during the conversation. If the message simply contained the name and number, put the task in the signature tool and throw away the paper.

After having conducted countless workshops, participants tell me that instituting tickler files has made a significant difference in their ability to organize the paper in their lives. As a fellow practitioner, it is the tool that has allowed me to work with a clean desktop and a clear head my entire career.

Chapter 6 examines a second function for the tickler files. This second function also calls for a second label for each file. That point is clarified in the chapter.

The "Inbox," the "Mail Center" and Student Work

Teachers exist in a world where they receive paperwork from anywhere from 15 to 150 students on a daily basis. Having a system which minimizes time spent collecting, sorting, and returning papers is a huge time saver.

For the teacher, providing an "In" that students can access prevents interruptions. When a student has a note from a parent or makeup work to be turned in, where can they put them? Without clear direction, the answer will be to interrupt the teacher throughout the day to hand over miscellaneous pieces of paper.

One "In" may not be enough. Multiple letter trays allow teachers to pre-sort items. By using a different letter tray for each class period, having a designated letter tray especially for makeup work, or having or a tray strictly for absence notes and other correspondence from home, students placing the paperwork in the correct tray sorts the items.

My ninth grade English teacher, Betty Smith, had the most well-organized set of multiple Inboxes I have ever seen. Her system consisted of a freestanding cabinet with double doors on the front. Inside the cabinet were several shelves. On each shelf sat several letter trays. In the back of the cabinet were slots cut corresponding to the position of the letter trays. Each slot was labeled with exactly what was to go in it. Mrs. Smith had the cabinet turned so that one of the sides was against the wall. She had access to the double doors on the front. Students had access to the slots on the back.

An important element is that students have access to “In,” in whatever form it takes, as soon as they enter the room. Papers are placed in the appropriate “In” before the students take their seats, eliminating time spent collecting papers.

Another idea recognizes the fact that papers should be placed in the order in which the names appear in the grade book in order to speed grade entry. As an early childhood teacher for more than 20 years, Pattie Thomas used a numerical sorter to accomplish this end. The device features strips of cardboard or plastic stacked on top of each other and secured at one end. Each strip is slightly shorter than the one below it. The end of each strip is labeled with a number. Each student in the class was assigned a number at the beginning of the year. Each time a child turned in an assignment, he or she placed the paper under the correct numbered strip on the sorter. Mrs. Thomas remarked that she could tell at a glance which students did not have an assignment. More importantly, when she slid the papers out of the sorter, they were already in grade-book order.

Just as collecting papers is a procedure that is repeating multiple times every day of the school year, returning student work is an equally regular occurrence. A good system saves time every day while a poor one serves as a daily time sink. For the elementary teacher, a “mail center” provides an efficient way to return papers. The system simply involves a cabinet or other device which allows a cubbyhole or pigeonhole for each student. Papers to be returned and new papers to be distributed are placed in the student’s “mailbox.” This procedure works especially well for the student who is absent. Anything that has been missed during the absence awaits the student upon the return to school.

Reference Files Are Different

Discussions to this point in the chapter have centered on *action* items. Each piece of paper prompts us to *do* something. This portion of the chapter examines a system for handling reference information. We do not know when or if we will need the information again. The important element is that if we need it, we can find it quickly.