

# TEACHER TIME



*(or, rather, the lack of it)*

BY MARTY SHOLLENBERGER SWAIM AND STEPHEN C. SWAIM

TEACHING IS wonderful, fascinating, and it's never, never dull, one of those professions in which you can really say, "I change lives."\*

*An American civilization student writes that "when I stepped off the bus into the Ephrata Cloisters, I felt as if I could feel and smell another world, another century." A ninth-grade world history student writes in her journal that "writing in clay with papyrus reed as did the ancient Sumerians was messy, and hard, but interesting and very exciting." Or that "I thought ancient men were the Flintstones, stupid, ugly...and now I know that early men were extremely intelligent and clever to make and use the tools they had and to survive in hard places."*

*Some lessons in eighth-grade world geography are "light bulb lessons." Kids' eyes light up when things begin to connect. For example, we discuss the function of skin color and the theories about why dark skin evolved near the equator and light skin evolved in the northern forests of Europe where people encountered less ultraviolet rays. You can see students thinking "Oh, that makes sense!" They have important questions, such as "How did I get my Korean grandmother's facial bones and my black granddad's skin color?" The African-American students sit a little straighter when they figure out that the first people in the world were African. In a world history unit on Greece, we study ancient Greek architecture to learn what the Greeks valued. One activity is looking at Greek details in buildings in Arlington [Virginia]. Students find pillars and pediments all over town that don't hold anything up, but are there as a connection to those European and Greek traditions. Pediments over doorways remind us of who we are. School is helping*

\* When the first person is used in this article, it refers to Marty Swaim.

*students make sense of the world.*

*My favorite experiences are those in which I see a student discovering that she or he has a mind. For example, the usually silly ninth-grader pauses midway in a discussion about the English invasion of France and says, "Can you tell me why the English wanted France anyway? Didn't they have enough?"*

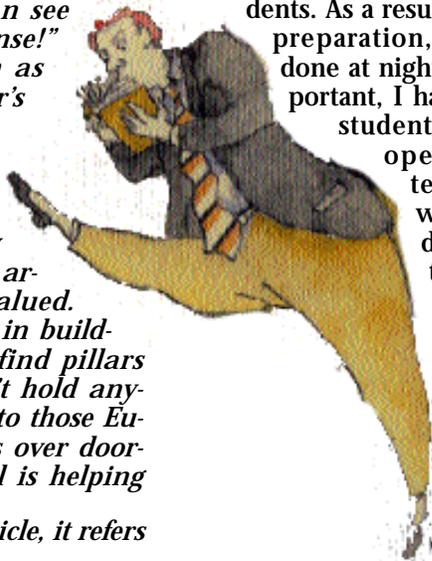
*"What do you think?" I asked. She thought some more and said, "I think they were greedy."*

*In that same class, in the midst of student analysis of the tracts that Martin Luther wrote to argue with Pope Leo X, Karen says, loud and clear, "Well, Mrs. Swaim, who was right?"*

*"What do you mean, Karen?" I said. "I mean was the Pope right or was Luther right?"*

At the same time, although I love teaching, I could leave it tomorrow. The personal price that I have to pay to work as a teacher is very high. I have to work far more than 40 hours per week because, like other teachers in America, almost all of my official work time is committed to the classroom instruction of students. As a result, most of the necessary planning, preparation, and grading must be regularly done at night or on weekends. And, just as important, I have little or no time for individual students. Statistics show that no developed, industrial country requires teachers to spend as many hours with students in class each week as do American schools. "Despite relatively low pay, teachers in the United States devote more hours to instruction and supervision of students each week and have longer required workweeks than in any other country, including the nations with six-day weeks, such as Japan and Switzerland."<sup>1</sup>

In 1984 when I began to teach high school social studies in Arlington, I was totally over-



whelmed by the amount of work. I came to teaching after five years in which I founded and operated a contract catering business with 18 employees, not a light responsibility. Teaching was, and is, much more work. To do the planning needed for each day and to have a chance of keeping up with grading papers, I worked two to three hours every night. Typically, I worked Sundays, roughly from 10 A.M. until 10 P.M., with breaks for lunch and supper. First, I planned out the next week's lessons for three different subjects (each with classes meeting five times per week), I wrote out teaching materials, and I organized the readings and equipment for the class.<sup>2</sup> I finished grading work handed in the week before. In the first year I taught four classes per day, one class less than full time, an easier load than most first year teachers have.<sup>3</sup>

That first year I did what I needed to survive and, I hoped, do a good job. To get the school work finished, I stopped doing my housework, except laundry and cooking. My family was supportive, and managed the personal consequences of my work. Stephen (who rarely got home from work before 6 p.m.) did the dishes and helped with cleaning, and we shopped for food together. Our two daughters at home did their own cleaning and laundry. I did not visit our daughter in Florida, and rarely had time to see our son in college at Virginia Tech.

I thought putting in 60 hours per week was the result of inexperience. But when I looked around, I realized that most of my fellow teachers worked the same hours. They came in at 6 A.M. and left at 4 P.M., worked through lunch, and assumed that when they assigned a test or paper they would spend evenings and all day Sunday grading it. I began to see that public school teaching was basically a 60-70 hour a week job advertised and paid for as if it were a "9-5" professional job.<sup>4</sup> Sometimes I got very depressed about the consequences for my personal life; I could not travel to Pittsburgh to see my mother-in-law when she was ill. We had fewer people over for dinner, and we did fewer things with our children because one day of each weekend was always obligated to school.

As I recognized that this level of intensity came with the job of teaching, I tried to find less labor-intensive ways to get students involved in learning, such as pairing students to read, discuss, and edit each other's work. Student editing develops student responsibility, and does change initial demands on the teacher. Eventually, however, I have to read student writing. The methods that might really lighten my load are, in my view, not good for students if used regularly: multiple-choice tests, fewer writing assignments, no required rewriting, reading assignments with simpler vocabulary requiring less preparation and follow-up, and using fill-in worksheets instead of writing responses to reading.

The problem I had in finding time to plan and mark

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assignments and meet with students is not, of course, unique to social studies. In addition to the daily homework and class work products, quizzes and tests, English teachers assign books to read and report on, and papers to write. A math teacher assigns proofs and word problems that must be read and graded, and science teachers assign lab reports.

Some observers believe teachers are adequately compensated for long hours by having a winter break, a spring break, and 9 to 10 weeks in the summer. However, the total break time actually is less than the overtime hours spent during the year. Furthermore, for me and for many teachers, the summer time without students is rarely time spent primarily on personal matters. As soon as school is dismissed, there is a week of filing materials and later in the summer, a week of planning for next year. Most teachers, most summers must take professional work to keep up in their field and to meet recertification requirements. Teachers are employees who actually work 11 months and get paid for 10. In addition, many colleagues must work in the summer in order to meet living expenses.

It is true that many people with professional jobs work as many hours as teachers and don't get as much time without their clients. However, these persons for the most part are lawyers, doctors, owners of small businesses, corporate executives, or others who generally get paid (or have the prospect of getting paid if they succeed) far more than teachers can ever be paid. Often these professionals do not have to work long days for their entire working years, and/or they can retire very early.

My description of the toll that teaching takes is obvi-

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<sup>1</sup> E. Howard Nelson and Timothy O'Brien, *How U.S. Teachers Measure Up Internationally, a Comparative Study of Teacher Pay, Training, and Conditions of Service* (Washington D.C., American Federation of Teachers, 1993), p. 75.

<sup>2</sup> A very small amount of the material for any of my classes (world history and American history) was provided. My first classroom had no materials, not even dictionaries and atlases. I borrowed them from other classes. (This school system has one of the highest per-pupil expenditures in the state of Virginia.) I had texts for each student and a list of some audiovisual materials. A doctor might begin his career with a library and equipment, or a lawyer might buy a library with his practice. But teachers build up similar resources over a long time on their own. The Arlington Public Schools provides one small professional library for about 1,000 teachers, and a rotating collection of audiovisual materials. My high school library had some professional teaching materials. But, of course, to use all of these scattered but possible sources took time. Time was what I did not have.

<sup>3</sup> I had completed student teaching but, at the most, student teaching gave me one week of experience in a subject. I also got four-fifths of the salary, and no benefits.

<sup>4</sup> A substantial portion of this time is working longer than the "school day" as stated in the teaching contract. In Arlington, teachers are required to be present in school for 7.5 hours per day, or 37.5 hours per week. A 60-hour workweek results from working an extra 1.5 hours at school, Monday through Thursday; two hours each evening, Monday through Thursday; and a full 8.5 hour day on Sunday. Adding an additional 1.5 hours each weekday evening and four more hours on the weekend, as often occurs, brings the workweek to 70 hours.

ously highly personal. But if you sit in on any teacher lunchroom conversation you will find that frequent topics of conversation are time, the lack of time, the lack of a personal life, the difficulties of having one. As a teacher who returned to teaching when my youngest child was in second grade, I do not know how teachers can work and raise infants. Those teachers must never sleep.

My first year in middle school, I taught across the hall from two first-year teachers. By then I was a six-year veteran. "Do you have a life?" was their regular question for me, because they did not. I have known other first- and second-year teachers, excellent teachers, whose beginning experiences were marked with periods of tears and near collapse because the time and emotional demands of teaching were so great. Recently, a second-year teacher, a second-career person coming from a demanding line of work, asked me when the workload would level off. And I explained what has been my experience, that by my seventh year, with preparations in four different subjects under my belt, the workload began to make me less anxious. I met this teacher's husband at a winter staff party, and he wanted to know if maybe by the third year of his wife's teaching, sex could again be a part of their marriage. I said "Talk to my husband. Perhaps a schedule for time together is what you need to do."

It is important to itemize the demands on my time, and that of other teachers, not to complain, but because until a workable remedy is found to this chronic overload, our teachers and our schools are destined to fall far short of the goals we have set for them. Students will continue to pay a price for the fact that their teachers do not have enough time for each of them.

If you are a parent, think about how much one-on-one time or time in a small group your child actually has each day with a teacher. Think about how much time a teacher has to give thoughtful attention to that project your child worked on for a month.

A friend said to me that he knows teachers who do not spend 60 hours per week on their work. So

<sup>5</sup> For example, public school secondary teachers in urban, suburban, and rural areas told U.S. Office of Education researchers that they worked an average of 46.9 hours per week on school-related work, considering work done in school and after school hours. (*Schools and Staffing in The United States: A Statistical Profile, 1993-1994*, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education [Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1996], p. 74.) The 46.9 hours per week are divided as follows: 1) required to be at school 33 hours; (2) time spent in activities with students outside of school hours, 5.3 hours; time spent in activities outside of school hours without students, 8.4 hours. A National Education Association survey reports that in 1996 the average secondary school teacher spent 52 hours per week on all teaching duties. (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics, 1977* [Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1977] p. 79.) Public elementary school teachers in the same Office of Education survey reported that they worked an average of 44.2 hours per week, divided as follows: (1) required to be at school 33 hours; (2) time spent in activities with students outside of school hours, 2.1 hours; time spent in activities outside of school hours without students, 9.1 hours. The NEA Survey reports that in 1996 the average public elementary school teacher spent 47 hours per week on all teaching duties.

do I. But in good schools, these people are the exception. It is amazing how many teachers work 60 hours each week or more during many weeks of the year. But it is unrealistic to expect most teachers to have to work such long hours in order to do their jobs well. National surveys show that most teachers work considerably more than the hours stated in their contract. The average number of hours worked is usually reported to be around 45 to 50.<sup>5</sup> For school quality, however, the important point is not the amount of time that the average teacher reports working, but the amount of time required to do a good job of teaching. The teaching workload should be designed so that a teacher can do an excellent job working a reasonable number of hours a week.

## Why Teachers Have So Little Time To Spend on Each Child

A few simple calculations show that teachers who spend time planning for each class period and paying attention to each student's work have no choice but to work about 60 hours per week or more. Most of the time that teachers are required to be in school is spent teaching. Based on my experience, with teaching five classes, lunch, and breaks to use the facilities, in a required secondary school day of 7.5 hours, there is at most about an hour and a half per day that is not completely taken up with required duties. This time is usually split—20 minutes before school, 20 minutes after school, and about 45 minutes during the day. Most of the time not spent in teaching is needed for copying tests or other materials for upcoming classes; getting or returning library books; filling out forms regarding attendance or special education students; checking with counselors regarding problems a student may be having; planning with other teachers about shared activities or conferring about a student both teachers teach; making arrangements for a field trip; or trying to return parents' phone calls using an office phone (since teachers do not have phones in their classrooms, an incredibly inefficient way of saving money). These tasks are important and need doing, but it is a rare day when there is even a half hour of uninterrupted time during the school day for planning and marking papers. In addition, on most days, after-school time is spent in required meetings one or two afternoons per week and working with a student or two who come after school for help.<sup>6</sup>

But let's optimistically assume that teachers are able to use 45 minutes per day of required school time for planning or marking papers, which adds up to almost four hours during the week. Even using these four hours in school (which teachers rarely have unencumbered), the following table shows that teachers of aca-

<sup>6</sup> According to a survey conducted by the U.S. Office of Education, the average secondary school teacher spent 5.3 hours per week with students outside of contract-time hours. (See U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement *Schools and Staffing in the United States: A Statistical Profile, 1993-1994* [Washington, D.C.: GPO, July 1996] p. 74.)

demic subjects must work about 60 hours per week to be able to spend just 12 minutes planning for each class and nine minutes per week reviewing each student's work, still not enough time to give thoughtful comments and feedback.

**Table 1**

SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS: RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN (1) HOURS WORKED PER WEEK AND (2) TIME AVAILABLE FOR PLANNING LESSONS AND REVIEWING STUDENT WORK*			
Total hours worked per week**	Hours per week for planning and marking papers	Illustrative combination of time to plan for each class and to spend each week reviewing each student's work	
		<i>Planning per class preparation</i>	<i>Reviewing work of each student</i>
45 hours	9	6 minutes	3 minutes
50 hours	14	10 minutes	5 minutes
60 hours	24	12 minutes	9 minutes
70 hours	34	15 minutes	13 minutes

\*The table assumes teachers (1) are contracted to spend 35 hours in school each week, (2) spend an additional five hours per week after school meeting with students and parents or in required meetings, (3) are able to use about four hours per week of contract time for planning and marking papers, (4) teach five classes per day, and (5) teach 125 students per day. Amounts shown are rounded to nearest whole number.

\*\*Hours worked at school and at home.

Source: Calculations by Stephen Swaim

Similar time pressures are experienced by elementary school teachers although the work is not the same. They have to plan four, five, or six different subjects and mark papers in each of those subjects for an average of 24 students. Assuming that elementary teachers have 30 minutes per day in which they can plan or mark papers (time that most elementary school teachers do not get) they, too, must work about 60 hours per week if they are to have adequate time to plan for their classes (which includes assembling and preparing all the materials to be used in the classes) and to have one-half hour per week to review and comment on each student's work in multiple subjects.

If students are to learn how to write and think well, assignments such as essays, research papers, or written exams should be given frequently. However, it takes time to read and correct such work, time that is hard to find even in a 60-hour workweek. In my history or geography classes, I have students assist each other by discussing their first and second written drafts among themselves in small groups and I meet with many students to edit papers in class. But I must read all the papers at least once, usually twice. If I spend just 10 minutes per paper, not really much time if I am to make thoughtful comments to help the student, this translates into nearly 21 hours of time to mark the papers of 125 students. In many other jurisdictions, secondary teachers are responsible for 150 students, another 25 sets of papers.

Some assignments that I give, such as writing an autobiography or interviewing another student and writing his or her history, take 20 minutes each to grade, even using a grading guide prepared ahead of time. Furthermore, to teach students to write, their papers should be revised and graded again—add another 15 to 20 hours. When grading writing on weekends, I get to the point where I am grateful for the students who do not complete the writing assignment; their bad habits help me to survive.

Planning also takes time. Planning is the teacher's art of taking the text, other materials, and the knowledge in one's head and setting up the class so that students are engaged and learning. To prepare for further education, students must not only learn basic facts, but they must have a chance to use these facts and concepts in writing, oral presentations, and other experiences. And almost all students will do better if a variety of approaches are used in class. Whatever a teacher's teaching style, primarily lecture or primarily hands-on experiences, thoughtful preparation takes a great deal of time.

The workload problem takes a different form for elementary teachers than it does for me as a middle-school teacher, but the time problem is, if anything, worse. Although elementary school teachers do not have one set of papers for 125 students, they often have papers for reading, writing, spelling, English, science, math, and social studies from 24 (or more) students. Elementary teachers have just as much to grade and actually more materials to prepare. Teachers for kindergarten may not give letter grades, but they comment on hundreds of work products weekly, tran-

**Table 2**

PUBLIC ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS: RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN (1) HOURS WORKED PER WEEK AND (2) TIME AVAILABLE FOR PLANNING LESSONS AND REVIEWING STUDENT WORK*			
Total hours worked per week**	Hours per week for planning and marking papers	Illustrative combination of time to plan for each class and to spend each week reviewing each student's work	
		<i>Planning per class preparation</i>	<i>Reviewing work of each student</i>
45 hours	9	10 minutes	12 minutes
50 hours	14	15 minutes	20 minutes
60 hours	24	30 minutes	29 minutes
70 hours	34	40 minutes	45 minutes

\*The table assumes teachers (1) are contracted to spend 35 hours in school each week, (2) spend an additional four hours per week after school meeting with students and parents or in required meetings, (3) are able to use about three hours per week of contract time for planning and marking papers, (4) teach five subjects per day, and (5) teach 24 students per day. Amounts shown are rounded to nearest whole number.

\*\*Hours worked at school and at home.

Source: Calculations by Stephen Swaim

scribe student writing and reading, record student work, and spend a great deal of time in conversation with parents. They have to plan 10 times as many activities for each hour of teaching, since, generally speaking, a kindergartner's attention span is one-tenth as long as that of an older child.

If a teacher spends "only" 45 or 50 hours a week on school work, what is not getting done? If it takes a teacher 15 or 20 hours outside of school to grade essays from an assignment, you can see that teachers may decide to assign less essay writing. If 10 hours of preparation time on the weekend is required to write out the materials for a new, student-directed unit, teachers will plan fewer of those kinds of units than would be the case if more planning could be done during a teacher's workday.

What about conversations with students? How much time can a teacher spend with a child, one on one? For most students, very little. If I wanted to spend 10 minutes a month talking to each of my middle school students privately—a modest amount—I would have to find about 20 hours at lunchtime or after school. Of course, that does not happen. It is extremely frustrating to teach students in a large class who have special academic interests or a problem with which they need help and have no way to give them the time they need.

Many teachers, driven by conscience and living in personal circumstances that allow them the time, give the writing and homework assignments and the time to individual students that good education demands. One of our children had an unmarried public school high school math teacher who always returned graded tests the next day. It isn't hard, though, to see why many teachers can't do that. Some have children to raise, some need a good night's sleep, some spend time with spouses and friends, some coach Little League, some need to relax or hit the softball field, some are active in church or community service projects. The pressures are to find ways to do less planning and assign less student work that requires individual grading, just in order to survive. These pressures naturally lead teachers to use multiple-choice tests, assign fewer book reports, and fewer writing assignments. Over all, that equates to less education for each child. Until workloads are adjusted to permit teachers to devote individual attention to their students, and to do more planning and grading in the workplace rather than at home on nights and weekends, efforts at

school reform are destined to fall short.

Lowering teacher workload, both the number of students in class and the number of classes a teacher teaches, to obtain higher academic quality has been market tested in this country. That is what people pay for who send their children to private, non-sectarian preparatory schools. In every such school we know of, teachers have substantially lower workloads than in public schools. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the pupil/teacher ratio in public schools is 80 percent higher than in non-sectarian private schools. Ratios are 17.6 teachers to 1 student for public schools and 9.8 to 1 for non-sectarian private schools.<sup>7</sup> These private school teachers teach fewer classes each day, and class sizes are lower. For example, in a college preparatory school that one of our children attended, teachers taught four academic classes a day, often in the same subject, in a day with eight or nine periods. This gave the teachers about three hours a day at school for planning, marking papers, and meeting with students even after fulfilling responsibilities for study hall monitoring and student activities. In all, the teachers in that school were usually responsible for about 50 to 60 students—less than half the number for which teachers in regular public secondary schools are responsible—and they never had more than 72 students. Private school students have as long a school day as those students in public school; the private schools simply hire more teachers.

The case for a substantial reduction in teacher workload is also supported by comparisons with other industrialized countries.

One of the first insights I had about the connection between teacher workload and academic standards came from conversations with Fulbright exchange teachers from France who worked at my high school. I discovered that if I taught an academic subject in their high schools, I would meet students in class 16 to 18 hours a week or less, not 25 as I was doing. Their class sizes were about the same as ours, or less. Their class schedule directly increased the time available to them to meet with individual students, plan, and grade.

*How U.S. Teachers Measure Up Internationally: A Comparative Study of Teacher Pay, Training, and Conditions of Service* compares teacher workloads in the United States with those in other countries.<sup>8</sup> The study gathered data on 19 economically advanced countries from a variety of sources, including the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) publications, embassies in this country, and government or teacher union officials in foreign countries. Data in this study for the average number of instructional hours per week and the average class size, show:<sup>9</sup>

- U.S. primary teachers spend more time with students than teachers in any other nation studied. The study found U.S. primary school teachers spend over 30 hours per week in instruction. Japanese primary teachers spend 20 hours in front of students, and German teachers 21 hours.
- U.S. high school teachers spend more hours (22.9) in instruction each week than those in any of the

<sup>7</sup> The ratios for private non-sectarian schools are calculated by co-author Stephen Swaim from enrollment and teacher information available on pp. 70, 71 of the U.S. Department of Education's *Digest of Education Statistics, 1997* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1997). Public school ratios are calculated from data on pp. 58, 59 of the same document.

<sup>8</sup> E. Howard Nelson and Timothy O'Brien, *How U.S. Teachers Measure Up Internationally: A Comparative Study of Teacher Pay, Training, and Conditions of Service*, (Washington, D.C.: American Federation of Teachers, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37, Table II-3, "Instructional and Required Work Time for Teachers."

other countries examined except for the high end of the range for England. Japanese high school teachers spend 20 hours per week teaching, German teachers spend 18, and French and Spanish teachers, 15-18. In 12 of the 19 countries, secondary school teachers teach 20 hours or fewer.

■ The U.S. falls in about the middle in class size.

European countries with lower teacher instructional time do not reduce the amount of time students spend in school or in academic classes. Students there just meet more teachers than American students do, and can take more subjects per week because not every class meets every day.

In interpreting this information, remember that the data represent national averages, so that within each country some schools may vary considerably from the figures shown here. Also, this information says nothing about the composition of the student body (diversity based on ethnic or economic group, language differences, students with disabilities, etc.); the structure of the educational system (determining admission to certain types of schools by tests, use of private tutors to supplement school instruction, etc.); what a teacher is expected to do (lecture, mark homework assignments, provide varied types of learning experiences, etc.); or quality of instruction. In Japan, where teachers have larger class sizes than in the United States, families do not rely on the regular teacher for all instruction. Japanese families typically hire tutors to make sure their children pass exams, and students study with those tutors after their regular school day. Furthermore, Asian cultural norms are more supportive of education than American norms. Japanese teachers can expect the families of their students to be involved in their school work and to carefully monitor their children's progress. These practices are not reflected in the school statistics.

The teacher workload that we find in private schools in the United States and in public schools in Europe works to educate students to a high level of quality. Why not plan such workloads for teachers in American public schools? Teaching is a wonderful job, endlessly fascinating, challenging, good for the mind and the soul. It is probably the most important job in this society in the 21st century, after the job of being a parent. But it is completely unrealistic to expect to create high quality, American "educate-everybody" schools on the basis of a workload that requires a 60-hour workweek.

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## Ordering Information

*Teacher Time* may be ordered from Redbud Books, 2111 Wilson Blvd., #700, Arlington, VA 22201; or by calling toll-free 877/450-7489. The cost is \$12.95 plus \$3.95 for shipping and handling. (In Virginia, add 4.5% sales tax.) The toll-free number takes major credit cards during regular business hours. *Teacher Time* is also available from Amazon.com.