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Top of their class: Five teachers who have a jump on the new school term
By Gina Salamone
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City teachers head back to class this week after a well-deserved two-month break. But some never stopped working, using the summer to sharpen their skills for the new school year. From an art teacher who designed a mural on a [Brooklyn](#) building to a science teacher who traveled to [Japan](#) with her students, these five educators already have a jump on the new school term.



Kindergarten teacher Mercedes Valentin and her daughter, Naomi Davila, 8, unpack a box of school supplies.

MERCEDES VALENTIN

TEACHES: Kindergarten at P.S. 24 in Brooklyn

SPENT THE SUMMER: Buying classroom supplies for students with a \$500 gift card she won for teaching safety skills

Working with a room full of 5-year-olds, Mercedes Valentin remains ready for spills, accidents and anything else that comes her way. "Safety is always a priority with these little ones — not only when they're with me, but when they're on their own or in the playground," the 34-year-old says.

While searching for tools to teach her kids safety last year, she came across the Got 2B Safe Web site — a partnership between Honeywell Hometown Solutions and the [National Center for Missing and Exploited Children](#). The program encourages teachers to plan lessons based on four major rules: Check First, Go With a Friend, It's My Body and Tell a Trusted Adult.

"Because my kids are so small, I would use things like puppets and role playing," Valentin explains. "And I'd give them some sort of scenario and then stop it midway and ask them what the child should do. Like, 'What would you do if there's a stranger trying to play with you in a playground?'"

She submitted her lesson plan in a Got 2B Safe essay contest that judged how teachers incorporated the rules in class, and found out in June that she was one of 100 first-prize winners nationwide.

Valentin scored a \$500 [Staples](#) gift card that she used in August to buy classroom supplies like markers, stickers, alphabet games and folders.

"I don't think people realize how much money a teacher spends out of pocket during the year for classroom supplies," she says. "So this prize came in handy. To have a good stapler that they can actually use and a hole puncher that's not going to hurt their fingers is so important in kindergarten."