

Four Qualities of Great Teaching

June 2015

Volume 2, Issue 10

In this *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, veteran professor Rob Jenkins (Georgia Perimeter College) describes the qualities of K-12 and college teachers “who most move us, who have made the most difference in our lives, and whom we most wish to emulate.”

- **Personality** – Great teachers tend to be good-natured and approachable; professional without being aloof; funny, perhaps because they don’t take themselves or their subject matter too seriously; demanding without being unkind; comfortable in their own skin, without being in love with the sound of their own voices; natural; creative; and always willing to consider new ideas, sometimes on the spur of the moment. Some of us enter the classroom with more of these traits than others, says Jenkins, but that doesn’t mean we can’t develop and fine-tune how we come across. “With apologies to Lady Gaga,” says Jenkins, “your students will never know if you were born that way or not.”
- **Presence** – This is “the ability to appear completely at ease, even in command, despite being the focal point of dozens (or even hundreds) of people,” says Jenkins. “That’s a type of presence to which we can all aspire, whether or not we’re born with great charisma. All it takes is a degree of self-awareness, a little concentration, and a fair amount of determination.”
- **Preparation** – “Knowing what you’re talking about can compensate for a number of other deficiencies,” says Jenkins, “such as wearing mismatched socks, telling lame jokes, or not having an Instagram account.” He believes preparation has three levels:
 - Long-term: Your professional degree and training;
 - Medium-term: Reading extensively in your field, attending conferences, and continuing to explore new ideas and teaching techniques. “It means being so familiar with your subject matter that you can talk about it off the cuff,” he says.
 - Short-term: Great teachers go into every class meticulously prepared – but also constantly reassess what they’re doing, prepared to abandon ineffective or outdated strategies.

Important Dates:

- **PBIS Team Plenary**
- June 16
- **Last Day of School (half-day for students; full-day for teachers)**
- June 30



Four Qualities of Great Teaching Continued

- **Passion** – “Of all the qualities that characterize great teachers, this is the most important, by far,” says Jenkins. “Passion, or love, manifests itself in the classroom in two ways: love for students and love for your subject matter.” Some educators are always complaining about how their students are irresponsible and disrespectful, say stupid things, don’t do their work, etc. Jenkins has found that students pick up on this attitude and heartily dislike those teachers. Jenkins wants to say to them, “If you dislike students so much, why are you in this business? Why in the world would you want to spend so much of your time with a bunch of people you find so disagreeable?”

“Conversely,” he says, “the faculty members who seem to love teaching and love (or at least really like) students are the ones who are the most popular and, I believe, the most effective... Students might not even like a course at first, especially if it’s one they’re required to take, but a teacher’s passion for the subject can be extremely infectious.”

“The 4 Properties of Powerful Teachers” by Rob Jenkins in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 3, 2015 (Vol. LXI, #29, p A31-32), <http://bit.ly/1Cbnx0B>; Jenkins can be reached at Robin.Jenkins@gpc.edu.

*Education is the most powerful weapon
which you can use to change the world.*



How to Finish the School Year Strong

1. **Don't coast; instead, be more intentional.** Don't allow yourself to go on autopilot. Instead, choose to be intentional about making these last days count. Set one or two end-of-the-year goals and make it a priority to do all you can to influence your students during these last few days.
2. **Keep first things first.** When you're overwhelmed and there are a million things to do, remember to keep first things first. Focus on what really matters and realize that the rest will get done eventually.
3. **Draw on relationships you've built.** You've spent a whole year building relationships with your students and their parents, and as a result, you likely have more influence now than you ever did before. Take advantage of every opportunity to speak the truth and impact their lives.
4. **Strategically prioritize what to teach.** If you've got way more material to cover than you have time to teach, don't just keep plodding along. Instead, sit down and decide what is most important for them to learn. Then focus on that.
5. **Don't plan to finish teaching too early.** For those of you who are right on track and are about to finish your curriculum, I have a word of caution for you – don't finish too early. One of my first years I finished my math curriculum a week early, planning review games for the last week. The problem was that once I told the kids we were done with the book, I had trouble keeping them focused and out of trouble for the last few days. Since then, I've decided to have my last test closer to the last day of school.
6. **Communicate with parents.** Don't just turn in your final grades and walk out the door. Take the time to have one last communication with the parents of kids who have struggled in your class. Give them suggestions of things they can do over the summer to help prepare their student for the next year. Even if you don't think they'll heed your advice, taking a few moments to send them a final email shows them how much you really do care about their student.
7. **Try to leave things as organized as possible.** Notice I said *try*. I know how much there is to do, but the more organized you can leave things now, the smoother things will go next fall. So take a few moments to jot down notes for yourself of what worked and what didn't. And maybe even to tackle those disastrous desk drawers. (Do I dare even mention the closet?)
8. **Decide to enjoy these last days.** Simple but profound. Instead of counting every moment till you're done, choose to enjoy these last days you have with this group of students. It will soon be over and you'll be relaxing. But this opportunity – your time with these students – will be done. So choose to enjoy these days while you have them and to view them as a gift. This one mental decision will impact everything else you do.

Tips to Share with Parents

Parents often ask for suggested learning activities to do with their children during the summer so here is a list compiled by Scholastic that you can share.

Summer Math Activities

Help students maintain their math skills and keep them thinking in numbers all summer long.



For Grades K–3:

- **Shopaholic:** What can you buy for \$5 at the corner store? From the ice cream truck? In a hardware store? At the beach?
- **Change it up:** Start collecting change in a jar on the first day of summer. On the last day, estimate your change, count it, and plan a special purchase.
- **Summer patterns:** Create patterns using summer items (popsicle sticks, shells, flowers). Or, draw patterns in the sand or dirt using a stick or your hands. See how long you can carry out your pattern — along the length of the sandbox, or across the grass.
- **Napkin fractions:** Fold paper towels or napkins into large and small fractions, from one-half to 1/16. Use markers to label and decorate the different fractions.
- **Design hunt:** Keep an eye out for shapes, patterns, and designs when you're out and about. You never know what you'll find in the architecture at the airport, the shopping mall, or even the grocery store.
- **100% delicious:** Use ice cream to make fraction sundaes. Can you make an ice cream sundae that is one-half vanilla and one-half chocolate? What about one-third chocolate, one-third vanilla, and one-third strawberry? Can you cover a scoop of ice cream with one-quarter each nuts, sprinkles, cookie crumbs, and gummy bears? Or can you eat a bite of ice cream that is one-half chocolate, one-half vanilla? For older children, calculate the percentage of each ice cream flavor in the sundae.



For Grades 4–8:

- **Record-breakers:** Use a stopwatch to time yourself running, roller blading, swimming, or biking. Then try to beat your time. Be sure to keep the distance you're moving the same for each trial. Graph the results. (You may need a partner for this.)
- **Where will you be?** Using a map, calculate where you will be if you travel 20, 50, 100, or 1,000 miles from home.
- **How many ways?** As you're exploring your neighborhood during the summer, how many routes can you take to the school, the grocery store, the mall, or your friend's house? The catch: No backtracking, and you must take a new route each time.
- **Let's eat:** Prepare a meal or dish for the family. Before you go to the supermarket, find a recipe, write what you need and how much. At the supermarket, choose the best-priced option.

Summer Reading Activities

These ideas will keep kids engaged in reading, writing, and thinking creatively even on the hottest days.

- **Water writer:** Using a pail of water and a brush, have kids write words on the blacktop or sidewalk.
- **Sell summer:** Tell kids: Try a new product or activity and write about it. How would you describe it? Would you recommend it? Create an advertisement to sell it to others.
- **Plan a trip:** Have kids use the Internet, travel guidebooks, brochures, and maps to plan a dream day, weekend, week, or month-long trip.
- **Summer sleuth:** Have kids follow a story in a newspaper during the summer, or investigate a local story (e.g., an upcoming fair). Tell kids: Write about the event as it unfolds so that you have it documented from start to finish.
- **Play it:** Take an adventure book with a clear plot ([*The Phantom Tollbooth*](#), [*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*](#), etc.) and invent a board game based on it.
- **Comic strip:** Write a comic strip about a fictional character or yourself. See how long you can keep the strip going. Read classic comics for inspiration.

Summer Science Fun

Summer is the perfect time for children to explore their extracurricular interests, like science. Here are some activities that will have children hypothesizing all the way to September.

- **Map the weather:** Keep a running log of the weather. Include temperature, humidity, clouds, precipitation, wind, air pressure. Can you predict what the weather will be tomorrow?
- **Invent a recipe** for a summer drink and share it with your friends. For example, the Citrus Sizzler: 1/2 cup Sprite, 1/2 cup pineapple juice, 1 spritz lime juice.
- **Museum gallery:** Collect pinecones, rocks, shells, or other natural objects to organize, categorize, and label. Present your own natural history museum.
- **Hot-weather inventor:** Design an invention that you can use during summer. Some ideas: sunglasses that change color from red to yellow to blue, or a new beach toy.
- **Answer a question:** How long does it take an ice cube to melt outside in the summer heat? In the refrigerator? In an air conditioned room?

Making Summer Reading Less of a Drag

In this *School Library Journal* article, Carly Okyle criticizes the approach some high schools take to summer reading – requiring students to read classics like *The Scarlet Letter* and *A Farewell to Arms* and write weekly journal entries. This approach is seen by some teachers as beneficial to academic achievement – or at the very least helpful test prep, since the vocabulary in classic literature tends to pop up in AP tests and the SAT. But avid readers tend to resent being forced to read, struggling readers find the classics too difficult to understand without help, and any student can fake the required paperwork by using literary cheat-sheets like SparkNotes. “As high schoolers,” says California student Heather Smith, 16, “we like to think we have some freedoms rather than have someone spoon-feed us what we’re supposed to know and what we’re supposed to think.”

Jennifer Frantz, supervisor of language arts in a New Jersey district, joins others in arguing that having a required summer reading list is an unproven strategy and it’s better to give students free choice of what they read. “Reading is best and most effective when you create a positive experience around it,” says Ellen Riordan of the American Library Association. “Reading for pleasure improves stress levels and test scores,” says California librarian Faythe Arredondo. “A lot of teens coming into the library are only there to read what they have to. They take no enjoyment in the offerings, and I feel it kills their love of reading.”

Kiera Parrott of *School Library Journal* has ten suggestions for escaping dreary book assignments and “flipping” summer reading. Students choose a book and then do one or more of the following:

- Draw a map of the setting.
- Write a short story about what the character(s) would be doing one year later.
- Imagine you could interview the protagonist. What three questions would you ask?
- Redesign the cover.
- Write a letter to the author or illustrator.
- Write a short book review remembering to include a few sentences describing the book as well as a few sentences about why you liked it – or didn’t.
- Choose two people or characters from two different books who you think would be great friends, explaining why
- Choose one book location or setting to live in for a week – it can be fiction or nonfiction. Which book would you choose and why?
- Take a photo of the cover of each book you read. Create a photo collage or animated trailer (perhaps using Animoto).
- Recommend a book to a friend or family member. Which title did you choose and why?



Suggested Rules for School Psychologists



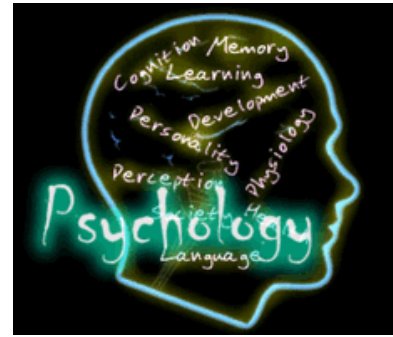
In three issues of *Communiqué*, National Association of School Psychologists president Stephen Brock suggests the following for working effectively in schools:

- **Focus on student needs.** “Especially as a young 25-year-old school psychologist,” says Brock, “I think I may not have had this rule clearly in mind. As a result, at times I found myself challenged when trying to wade through the divergent views of parents and my fellow educators... If I wanted to sleep soundly at night, I needed to ensure that my recommendations were student centered.”
- **There is no such thing as bad data.** It’s the interpretation of data that’s usually the problem. For example, the test scores of an impulsive and inattentive student may not show what the test is designed to measure, but they tell a lot about the student.
- **Look for information that guides interventions.** “I need to always ask, ‘So what?’ when evaluating the relative importance of any given assessment finding,” says Brock. “Interesting data are not necessarily meaningful data.”
- **Be prepared to ask difficult questions and deliver bad news.** School psychologists need to cope with their own feelings and bite the bullet – for example, asking a teacher, “Have you implemented the IEP?” or telling a parent, “Your child is having thoughts of suicide.”
- **Everything is data.** “Assessment is much more than simply administering tests,” says Brock. A student’s behavior while taking a psychological test may tell as much, or more, than the test itself. RIOT is a useful acronym: Records, Interviews, Observations, and Testing.
- **Statistics do not dictate actions.** “[T]ests don’t make psycho-educational recommendations,” says Brock. “I do... Without a competent psychologist to make interpretations, the results of any assessment are not just meaningless, they are dangerous.” Just because a student’s score is two standard deviations below the mean doesn’t mean the student has an intellectual disability, and just because an IQ score is above 70 doesn’t rule out eligibility for specific services.

Suggested Rules for School

Psychologists Continued

- **Never draw a conclusion from a single data source.** School psychologists need to triangulate with multiple sources of information to reach solid conclusions.
- **There is no such thing as an untestable student.** Even if standard assessments aren't producing useful data, there are other ways to get a handle on any student's issues.
- **Earn the privilege of sharing an "expert" opinion.** School psychologists sometimes don't have instant credibility, says Brock. "I have found that one of the most effective ways to earn this privilege is listening (and I mean truly listening) to the parents and teachers who are the typical consumers of my recommendations. I have found that when these individuals feel that I have understood what they are telling me, they are much more likely to consider and follow my recommendations."
- **Strive to give away psychology.** All psycho-educational consultations are teaching opportunities, says Brock. "My goal is to help teachers, administrators, parents, and students themselves understand learning, learning processes, and how to best ensure student success... For when I am successful in giving away school psychology, the consumers of my services will increasingly be able to independently meet the learning needs of students, which in turn frees me to work with others."
- **Be attentive to what students do well.** Identify strengths and use that information to guide interventions, Brock advises. "All students, no matter how severe their learning challenges, have their islands of strength. I need to find and use them."
- **Tell students what they should do, not just what they should stop doing.** "Each and every student has something that we can celebrate and that will help guide him or her toward greater success at school," says Brock.



- **Be humble, ask good questions, and be a life-long learner.** School psychologists know a lot, says Brock, but there's always something new to learn from colleagues, parents, and students.

- **Be a critical consumer of psycho-educational tools and interventions.** Today's unproved theory can become (with the appropriate study) tomorrow's best practice.

"Rules for School Psychology I, II, and III" by Stephen Brock in *Communiqué*, December 2014, January/February 2015, and March/April 2015 (Vol. 43, #4, #5, and #6), <http://www.nasponline.org/publications/cq/43/4/president-s-message.aspx>, <http://www.nasponline.org/publications/cq/43/5/president-s-message.aspx>, and <http://www.nasponline.org/publications/cq/43/6/president-s-message.aspx>; Brock can be reached at brock@csus.edu.