Dennis-Yarmouth RSD

Instruction Office Newsletter

# 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.

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## IMPORTANT DATES

- June 10 - DYHS Graduation Saturday
- June 14 - Flag Day Wednesday
- June 18 - Father's Day Sunday
- June 21 - Summer begins at 12:24am Wednesday
- June 27 - Last Day of School Tuesday)

## IMPORTANT NOTICE:

**Central office** is a **fragrance-free zone** so please be respectful and plan accordingly when you visit.

Due to one of our members at the CO being highly sensitive to any type of fragrance, we ask that staff visiting/meeting at the Administration building refrain from using any scented products. Fragrances from personal care products, air fresheners, laundry and other cleaning products have been associated with adversely affecting a person's health. We ask that we all work together to make the environment a safe and healthy workplace for everyone.

Thank you very much for your cooperation!

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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.

## *Do Schools Teach the Full Range of Skills Needed for Adult Success?*

In this *Kappan* article, James Nehring and Stacy Szczesiul (University of Massachusetts/Lowell) and Megin Charner-Laird (Salem State University) share a synthesis of the skills they believe adults need for successful lives:

### *Cognitive skills:*

- Recall
- Application
- Analysis
- Evaluation
- Creative thinking

### *Interpersonal skills:*

- Communication
- Cooperation
- Empathy
- Trust building
- Service orientation
- Conflict resolution
- Negotiation
- Responsibility
- Assertiveness
- Advocacy

## Intrapersonal skills:

- Flexibility
- Adaptability
- Appreciation of diversity
- Valuing learning
- Cultural appreciation
- Curiosity
- Forethought
- Self-regulation
- Self-monitoring
- Elf-evaluation

Some regard these as "21st-century skills," but Nehring, Charner-Laird, and Szczesiul believe these have been the keys to life success well before the current century.

How many of these do schools teach? Just three, say the authors, even in schools where students get high state test scores: application, recall, and (sometimes) analysis. Nehring, Charner-Laird, and Szczesiul reached this conclusion by asking teachers in nine high-performing Massachusetts schools to submit all instructional artifacts for a single week – worksheets, project descriptions, rubrics, quizzes, tests, homework assignments, and more. "Analyzing the nearly 2,000 instructional tasks embedded in these materials," they say, "we found that recall and application topped the list, with analysis a distant third and only occasional demands for evaluation and creative thinking…" The interpersonal and intrapersonal skills almost never showed up.

To take a closer look, the researchers visited three of the schools that were especially focused on 21st-century skills, observed 22 classrooms, spoke to focus groups of teachers, and interviewed school leaders. Same conclusion – although there were a few exceptions. Most teachers presented students with complex content, but the tasks students were asked to perform were simple recall and application – for example, in an AP U.S. government class, students answered recall-level questions about democracy, party identification, Democrat, Republican, blue state, red state, and purple state and named factors that would predict a person's party affiliation. Many teachers assigned tasks with complex instructions and procedures, but little higher-level thinking was required of students – for example, in an elective history class for juniors and seniors, the teacher transitioned students to the next textbook chapter, delivering material at a breathtaking pace: chapter classifications, videos, articles, learning objectives, learning targets, learning outcomes, essential questions, a guiding question, a project, online quizzes, self-pacing, corrections, and the requirement that students score 100% on all quizzes. This was all quite daunting, even for students paying close attention, but the intellectual demand was strictly recall.

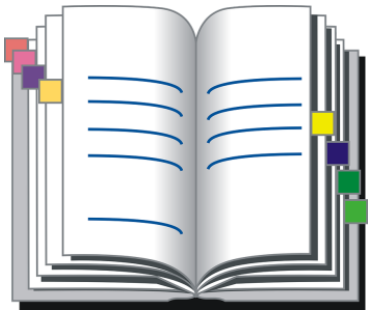

However, in a few classrooms, students were being taught the full range of cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal skills. In a 10th-grade honors humanities class, for example, students were asked to invent questions to guide their study of Western imperialism in China (having just finished a unit on the colonization of Africa). Guided by the teacher, students brainstormed possible questions, decided which were most important, and edited questions until the questions were intellectually stimulating and open-ended. Some results: *Why did countries want to imperialize China? How did the Chinese succumb to imperialism? How was Chinese culture disrupted by imperialism?* As the class proceeded, it was apparent that this teacher was working on virtually all of the adult skills.

What was going on in the classrooms that were providing a much higher level of instruction than the rest of the school? Here's what Nehring, Charner-Laird, and Szczesiul concluded:


- ***It was the teacher, not the subject.*** This level of intellectual and affective

demand cropped up in different subjects, grades, and classes with different student achievement levels. The variable was the teacher.

- ***Teachers taught disciplinary knowledge across all three domains.*** These outliers managed to weave rigorous instruction of content across the cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal domains, putting to rest the notion that content- and skill-focused instruction precludes higher-order thinking – and vice-versa.
- ***Teachers were attuned to the social-emotional dynamics of their students.*** These exceptional instructors created "a harmonious environment," say the researchers, "demonstrating an understanding that doing so is a prerequisite to academic learning."



- ***Teachers adapted their teaching to the moment.*** They "continuously adjusted their teaching in subtle ways as they sensed changes in tone and climate."
- ***Teachers had a wide repertoire of effective moves.*** And they used them with "stunning fluency and density," say Nehring, Charner-Laird, and Szczesiul. "Watching any of these teachers was like watching a virtuoso soloist perform with a symphony orchestra. The expert work of these teachers demonstrates that to teach well – that is, to teach a deep and broad range of skills while also addressing disciplinary knowledge – requires intelligence and years of practice."
- ***Instruction was tied to complex assessments.*** Often designed by the teachers themselves, these checks for understanding stood in contrast to the test-prep oriented assessments in other classrooms.


- ***Teachers built strong relationships with students.*** They showed a powerful desire to connect with pupils as people as well as scholars.

What does all this mean? First, Nehring, Charner-Laird, and Szczesiul suggest that schools need complex, high-level assessments to make all classrooms accountable for teaching the full range of adult skills. Second, "excellence requires highly skilled teachers with finely tuned radar and improvisational ability." And third, "good teaching is about caring relationships, a parental affection that gives and receives, that honors the fundamentally human nature of our work as educators. In an era of big data, we would be well to remember that all our work is ultimately about a single child."

"What Real High Performance Looks Like" by James Nehring, Megin Charner-Laird, and Stacy Szczesiul in *Phi Delta Kappan*, April 2017 (Vol. 78, #7, p. 38-42), www.kappanmagazine.org; Nehring can be reached at james_nehring@uml.edu.

## Orchestrating "Productive Struggle" in Math Classes

"When a teacher models and provides direct instruction at the start of a lesson, it rarely enables students to explore mathematical tasks or engage in productive struggle," says Drew Polly (University of North Carolina/Charlotte) in this article in *Teaching Children Mathematics*. However, the so-called Gradual Release lesson plan is deeply embedded in U.S. pedagogical culture: the teacher models how to solve a problem **(*I do*),** then goes over the problem with the whole class **(*We do*),** and finally gets students working independently **(*You do*).**

But researchers have found that if students grapple with a task before the teacher explains and models it (and receive appropriate follow-up), they're more engaged and learn better. Perhaps shifting to this approach would solve what Polly identifies as one of our biggest math achievement problems: "students consistently struggle with how to approach, set up, solve, and reason about cognitively demanding mathematics tasks."


There's a caveat: the struggle-first lesson plan may not be appropriate for students with certain

learning needs. That suggests a flexible approach in which students who need direct instruction get it when needed. Polly details the 5E approach, in which students spend most of a lesson exploring mathematical tasks with limited support from the teacher, and some students get individual or small-group support:

***Engage*** – The class is given a math task or activity.

***Explore*** – Students have time to work on the task with their partner or a small group, with the teacher giving only instructions and circulating, sometimes posing questions to support students' exploration.

***Explain*** – The class comes together to discuss the problem and how different students solved it. The teacher facilitates the discussion, perhaps choosing a main focus based on what was observed during the work time, and provides direct instruction as needed.

***Elaborate/extend*** – For the rest of the class, the teacher gets students working on activities, math games, and small-group activities that deepen understanding of the concept and zeros in on students who seem confused or off track.

***Evaluate*** – Students solve a final task or participate in a discussion of concepts, allowing the teacher to assess learning and plan for future lessons.

"Supporting Opportunities for Productive Struggle: Implications for Planning Mathematics Lessons" by Drew Polly in *Teaching Children Mathematics*, April 2017 (Vol. 23, #8, p. 454-457), available for purchase at http://bit.ly/2pJ2jc7; Polly is at drewpolly@gmail.com.

## How Can We Help Struggling Students Build Strong Vocabularies?


"[T]he size of a person's vocabulary is one of the strongest predictors of his or her reading comprehension," say Tanya Wright (Michigan State University/East Lansing) and Gina Cervetti ((University of Michigan/Ann Arbor) in this article in *Reading Research Quarterly*. "Despite the consistency of this predictive relationship, there is evidence that schooling has a limited impact on students' vocabulary development." Students who enter school knowing fewer words are likely to continue with relatively small vocabularies and struggle with text comprehension throughout school. Students who start with larger vocabularies, on the other hand, have broader general knowledge, need to spend less time accessing memory of words (which frees up working memory to grasp the meaning of a text), read and enjoy their reading more, and build stronger vocabularies – a reciprocal relationship that tends to widen the achievement gap.

Are there ways to turn around these discouraging findings? Wright and Cervetti reviewed 36 studies of the impact of vocabulary instruction on reading comprehension and found:

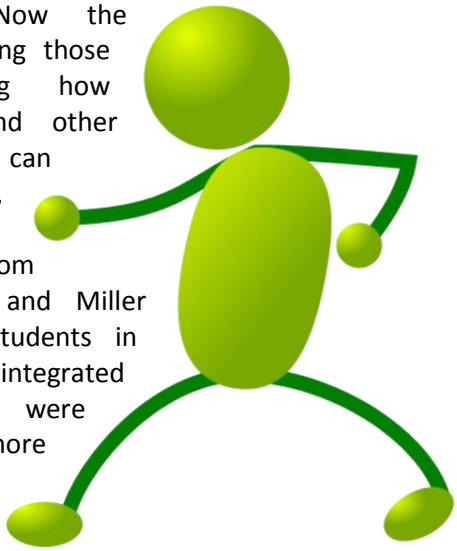

- ✓ Teaching word meanings almost always improved comprehension of texts containing the words taught.
- ✓ Teaching word meanings doesn't seem to improve comprehension of texts that don't contain the target words.
- ✓ Instruction involving students in some active processing was more effective than dictionary and definition work at improving comprehension of texts containing the words taught. One caveat: researchers don't know how much active processing is enough.

- ✓ Teaching one or two strategies (e.g., context clues or morphology) for solving word meanings doesn't seem to improve generalized reading comprehension.
- ✓ Having students actively monitor their understanding of vocabulary and having them use multiple, flexible strategies for solving word meanings "are promising areas for future research," conclude Wright and Cervetti.

"A Systematic Review of Research on Vocabulary Instruction That Impacts Text Comprehension" by Tanya Wright and Gina Cervetti in *Reading Research Quarterly*, April/ May/June 2017 (Vol. 52, #2, p. 203-226), http://bit.ly/2pJVret; Wright can be reached at tswright@msu.edu.

## Integrating Movement into Academic Classrooms

"Intuitively, many teachers have always known that physical activity plays an important role in student learning," say Suzanne Lindt and Stacia Miller (Midwestern State University/Wichita Falls) in this *Kappan* article. Now the research is confirming those intuitions, showing how dance, gesture, and other forms of movement can improve motivation, engagement, and learning. In classroom experiments, Lindt and Miller have found that students in classrooms that integrated movement were "significantly more excited by, engaged in, and focused on the lessons" than they were with conventional teaching methods. The authors suggest five strategies with examples of each:



**Dancing to memorize information** – Doing a dance skip-counting numbers (5, 10, 15, 20…) to the "Macarena."

**Applying movement to assessments** – To test knowledge of synonyms and antonyms, pairs of students jump straight up and down three times, then choose to land on either their right or left foot; if both land on the same foot, they must come up with synonyms for a word on the board; if they land on opposite feet, they must name antonyms.

**Moving among stations** – The teacher gives each group of students sets of fraction cards and they take turns moving to another group in search of equivalent fractions, bringing possible matches back to their group to see if they're correct.

**Forming lines, rows, or other groupings** – Each student gets a card with a punctuation mark or a word and students silently arrange themselves to form a complete sentence.

**Representing terms or ideas with actions** – After reading a book about emotions, students stand and act out *furious, satisfied, courageous*, and other words.

"Movement and Learning in Elementary School" by Suzanne Lindt and Stacia Miller in *Phi Delta Kappan*, April 2017 (Vol. 98, #7, p. 21-22), www.kappanmagazine.org; the authors can be reached at suzanne.lindt@mwsu.edu and stacia.miller@mwsu.edu.