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LEADS BACK TO THE SEA

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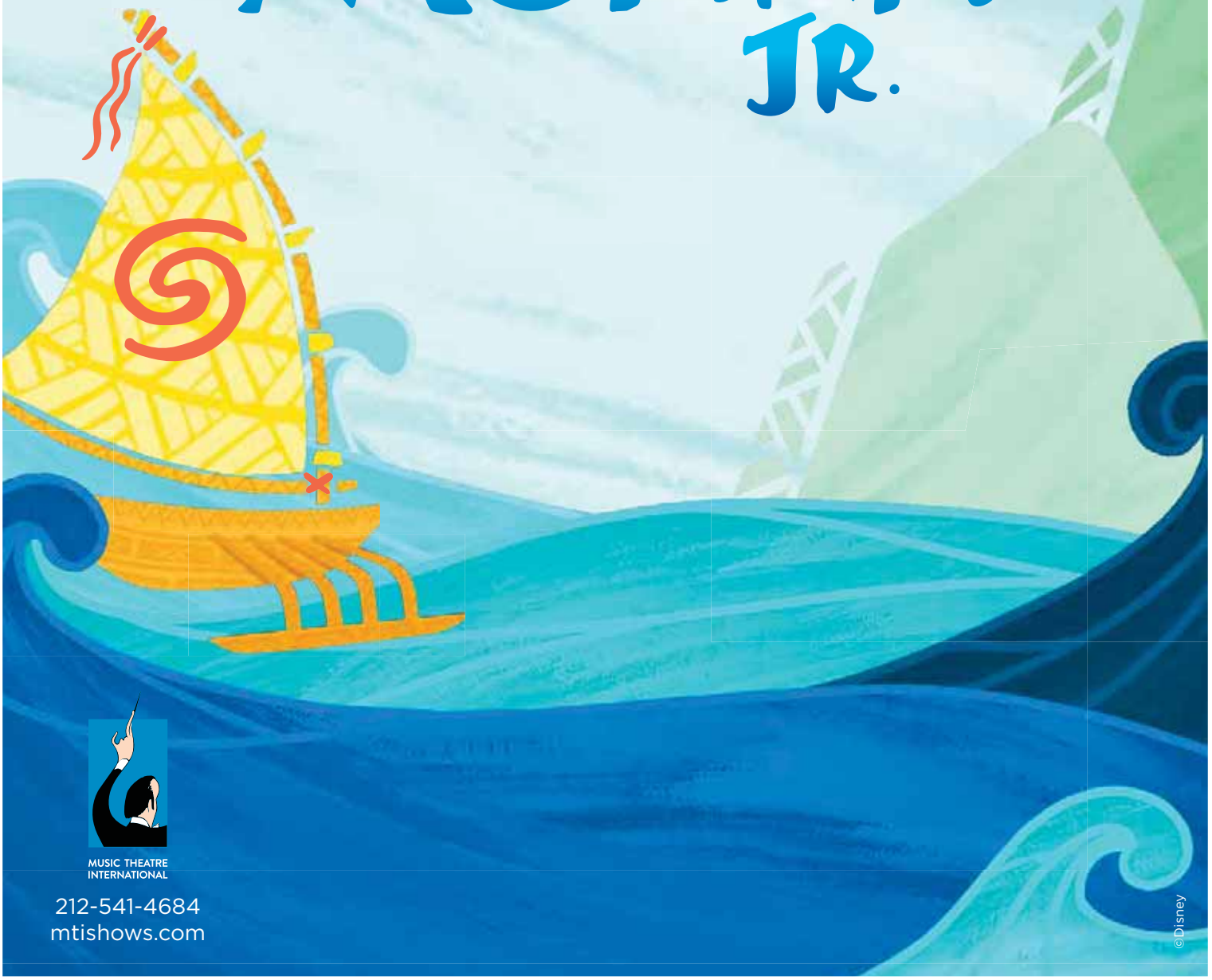

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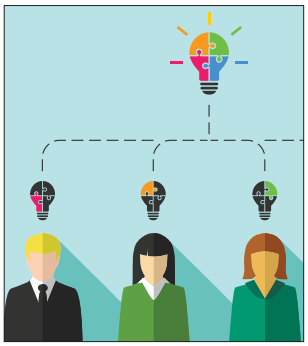

FEATURES

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Lead Learner

"If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more, you are a leader."
—John Quincy Adams

Being a leader often means embracing collaboration, celebrating different perspectives, and welcoming feedback. Whether you're a principal, teacher, counselor, or other school-based staff, your colleagues and your students benefit from your careful, purposeful attention to your own leadership development.

In this issue, Mike Muir, author of *Moving the Needle: Proven Strategies for Successfully Implementing School Change*, offers sage advice for assembling diverse teams, building buy-in, and getting out of the way while the team brainstorms. LaTasha Adams encourages us to model for students a focus on our own learning and gives us ideas for peer coaching/mentoring, including Teachers Tell All and Research Roundtable sessions and ideas for decreasing resistance and anxiety. Jason DeHart and Pauline Zdonek promote co-teaching as a means to connect school administrators to the role of instructional leader while getting to engage more with students and experience how school and district mandates affect classrooms.

In addition to leadership, a mini-theme seemed to emerge for this issue: read alouds. With her article focused on this topic, Kate Cimo touts read alouds as a means to boost conversation and connections, while Jessica Egbert finds that "sharing a great book with your students is like taking vitamins for your soul."

During this time of reduced face-to-face time, I can't think of a better way to feel united with classmates than to navigate together the emotions, drama, and adventures of a character you identify with or who intrigues you. I was mesmerized by a read aloud of *Flowers for Algernon* by Daniel Keyes when my sixth grade student teacher read the book to the class. I couldn't wait for this time at the end of every day and enjoyed the spirited, open discussion with my classmates after each reading. This activity stands out as a treasured part of my sixth grade year, and I'm heartened that read alouds continue to captivate and engage students in the same way today.

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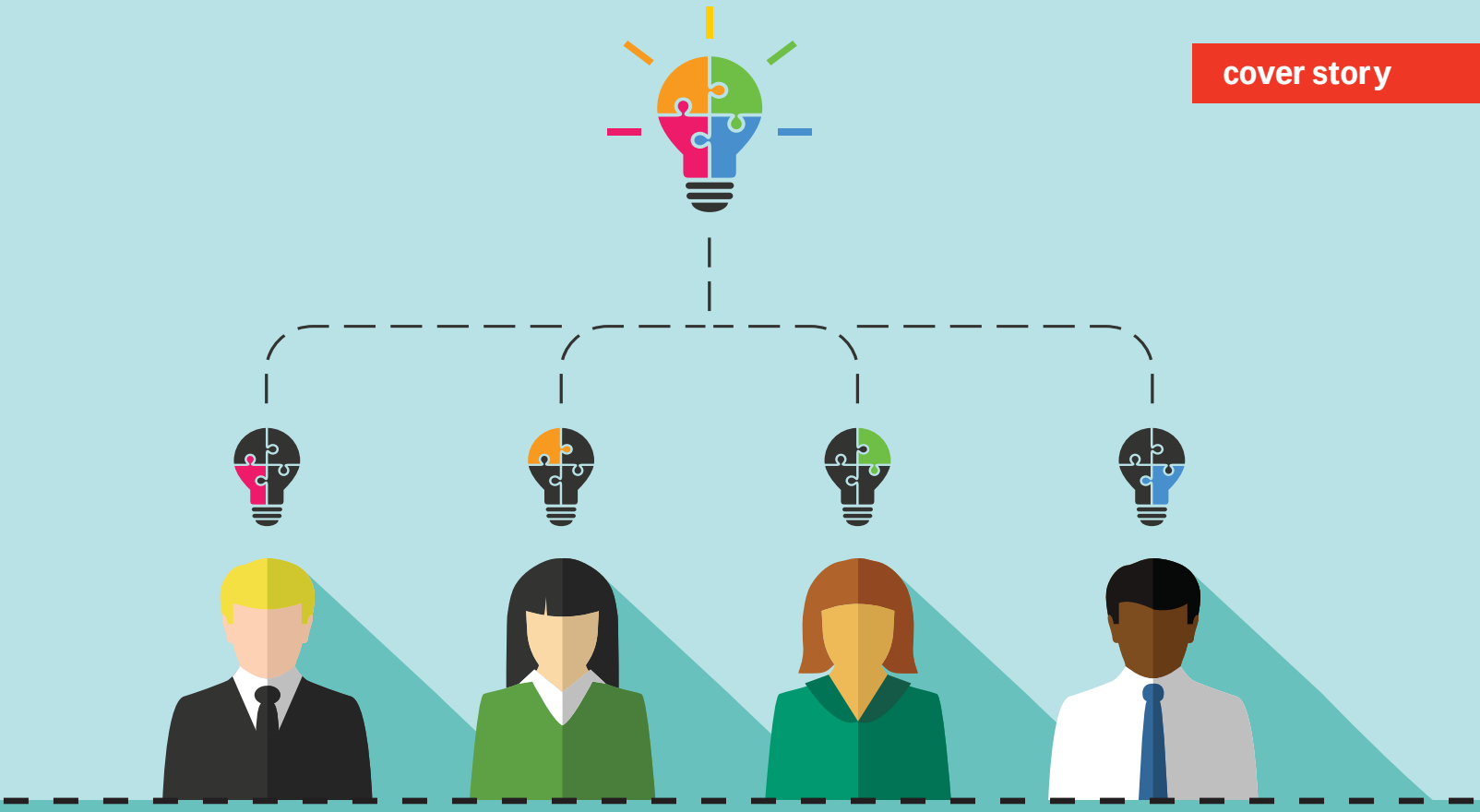


Leveraging Shared Leadership Teams for Better Learning Initiatives

Including diverse perspectives and avoiding sabotaging your own team

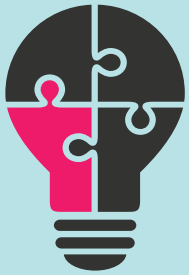
BY MIKE MUIR, ED.D.

If many hands make light work, many minds make smart work. Bette Manchester headed the nation's first statewide 1-to-1 learning with technology initiative, an important middle grades learning initiative. In 2001 and 2002, Bette established a leadership team to design how to launch MLTI (Maine Learning Technology Initiative), especially how we would help middle schools prepare for every seventh and eighth grade student and teacher in the state having laptops.

Bette taught me at the beginning of MLTI not only that leadership was everything, but that shared leadership teams performed better for an initiative than single leaders did. They are not simply an advisory group, but function as the decision making body. And by assembling a team that represents multiple perspectives, you can garner buy-in from diverse stakeholders and improve the quality and effectiveness of the plan.

The Power of Diverse Perspectives

Years later, I worked for a small, private, educational development organization. We created non-traditional schools for underachieving students in good sized cities. There were four of us. Two came from the



business world and understood the business side of education and how to work with executive-level decision-makers, such as superintendents and chief academic officers, in large districts. One was a former high school principal who had also worked in the corporate world as a vice president for education for a large, national cable TV and telecommunications company. He understood school leadership and administration, and how to build community and business partnerships. And there was me. I understood pedagogy, student motivation, and professional development.

We were strong personalities, passionate about the work, critiquing an idea or plan from our own perspectives and areas of expertise. To hear our conversations might make you think we were arguing, but actually we listened to each other and revised our ideas and plans with that input. We always ended up with a much stronger plan because it stood up to scrutiny from multiple perspectives.

Since then, whenever I've had an initiative or project to work on, I have started by putting together a shared leadership team. These teams are made up of a spectrum of shareholders: students, teachers, administrators, school committee members, parents, and community members. It's best to look for a diversity of positions, but also a diversity of perspectives. You do not want all "yes-men" on the team. While you might not want too many active blockers, you certainly want some of the folks who are looking critically at the work and coming to the table with their "yes, but" questions to be addressed.

The key learning about shared leadership teams: No one of us is as smart as all of us together. The secret is the power of diverse perspectives.

Shared Leadership Teams: What They Are and Aren't

Schools already have lots of groups that they call leadership teams. But many of them are what I would refer to as "management teams," teams that are leveraged to help share information between building administration and teams or departments, or to decide how and when to transition between terms or trimesters, or how to handle lunch on days with special events, or how to schedule fundraisers from various groups, etc. While management teams handle tasks related to the day to day running of the school, shared leadership teams focus on the strategic work of the school.

So shared leadership teams are not advisory groups, management teams, nor information dissemination groups (even if these are important tasks that need to be addressed). What shared leadership teams are is a driving force to assess where your educators are in the implementation process, identify timely next steps, assist in providing formative feedback to those educators, help troubleshoot and problem-solve the challenges of implementation, and facilitate the sharing of ideas. It's roll-up-your-sleeves strategic work.

Decisions are made by working toward consensus. Not everyone has to agree, but, as much as possible, everyone should be able to live with a decision. And lots can be learned by asking someone to clarify their dissenting point of view. I find that often they have some concern many of the rest of us haven't thought about, but that we should consider and plan for.

Keep in mind that lots of perspectives and shared decision-making does not mean letting folks do whatever they want. If you are the administrator, you still help set the non-negotiables and parameters of a decision. As a member of the team, your perspective is one of those shared in the discussions.

While working out the details and being nimbly responsive to the needs of your initiative are the vitally important functions of a design team, it is not their primary purpose. The most important role of a design team is building buy-in. It's important to recognize that most learning initiatives in schools don't fail because of lack of information (resources or training). It is because of lack of buy-in. Educators will be willing to try new strategies and put the time in getting good at them as their buy-in to the initiative improves. Your design team is a prime buy-in building strategy.

This is accomplished when you make sure the design team has broad membership representing lots of different stakeholder groups and perspectives

about the initiative, helping to ensure that the design team's decisions thoughtfully reflect those multiple perspectives Educators who are reluctant are likely to be a little less reluctant if they see people on the design team that they think are sort of like them: "We have to do what?! Well, if Judy is on the design team, then I guess it's ok."

Avoiding Unintentionally Sabotaging Your Shared Leadership Teams

If you are forming shared leadership teams for your initiative, you clearly want to reap the benefits that come from them: increased buy-in, soliciting stakeholder voice and choice, designing and planning strengthened by the power of multiple perspectives.

But some school leaders unintentionally sabotage their work by speaking about their ideas early. It happens naturally. As a leader, team members will defer to you, and when they don't jump in to share, you start to share your ideas. And suddenly you have one leader with 14 people around a table, not a shared leadership team with 15 stakeholders expressing their diverse perspectives.

You can tell if a school leader is unintentionally sabotaging the shared leadership team by paying attention to the percentage of the talk in the shared leadership team from the school leader (not counting the facilitation, just the real talk—sharing and examining ideas, designing components, developing plans). If the school leader is talking most of the time, you're in trouble and might not reap the benefits of shared leadership. In truth, school leaders have good ideas, and not sharing them is counterintuitive! But, in this case, it is also counterproductive.

So, what can you do to avoid the unintentional sabotage if you're the leader? You will have to shift your leadership hat from directing and sharing, to facilitating and soliciting wisdom from others with these strategies:

Wait time: Like teachers do, sometimes you need to pose your question or prompt and wait. And wait. And wait. Just look around the room expectantly, someone else will eventually break the silence. The more the group gets used to actually expressing their ideas, the shorter the wait will be.

Actively solicit others' ideas: The team might need nudging. You can turn to team members and say, "Stephanie, what do you think?" Maybe start with someone who has been quiet, but you know is likely to have a good idea. Maybe do a "round robin," where each person shares an idea in turn. Spend more time getting others to share their ideas than you spend sharing yours.

Save your list for later: It is likely that everyone is waiting for you to speak. Don't. Wait for others to share their ideas. Cross off any of your ideas as others say them. After lots of other members' ideas are on the table, then you can share ideas from your list, one at a time, with ideas coming from others in between.

Frame your ideas as questions, not suggestions: The way to get more team input is not to state your ideas, but to frame them as questions, "What do you think if we were to...?" This way, you are still soliciting members' ideas and opinions, but ideas and opinions about the ideas you share. It says you are actively seeking and value their input and voice.

And remember, your job as leader is to help set a framework for the work, or parameters for decisions. These are often valuable to share early. It's just during conversations about decisions and how to implement that framework where you should allow other voices to become comfortable speaking up. The good news is that once teachers, students, and other stakeholders start sharing their ideas, and see that those ideas are wanted, valued, and used, they will be much more willing to speak up.. AM

MIKE MUIR, ED.D. *has assisted schools for three decades around creating better learning experiences for all students and the school leadership strategies to make those changes happen. He is currently Learning Through Technology Director in SAD 44, Bethel, Maine. Mike is an AMLE past president and a past president of the Maine Association for Middle Level Education (MAMLE). See Dr. Muir's new book from AMLE,* Moving the Needle: Proven Strategies for Successfully Implementing School Change.

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We Are Family:

Comprehensive Leadership in Middle Schools

Leadership and learning for all members of the school community

BY LATASHA ADAMS, PH.D.

The middle school concept lends itself to the notion of family. With any family, giving roles and responsibility to each family member increases the family's connection and productivity. This article will discuss leadership and learning strategies I have used in various middle schools to create comprehensive leadership programs that promote culture and family. There are strategies discussed for enhancing teaching and learning with peer coaches and mentors, empowering teachers for instructional leadership, decreasing resistance and anxiety for new instructional practices, and modeling how to lead one's own learning within the context of a pandemic, distance learning, and racial/social inequity.

Peer Coaches and Mentors

Peer coaches and mentors are important members of the family that enhance teacher learning. Their role is important in the school because they provide leadership to the teacher leaders in the school. They are role models that share their experiences as they coach and mentor teachers. In developing teachers into leaders they can build relationships, show not tell, and provide parallel experiences.

Before mentors and coaches can lead teacher leaders, they must build relationships with the teachers they will support. Just like we train middle school teachers to build relationships with students, these leaders must build relationships. Relationship building can start with using these four steps:

1. Find commonalities and build upon them.
2. Trust that people are bringing their best selves to the relationship.
3. Find the good in experiences and note positivity.
4. Be trustworthy.

Coaches and mentors lead by example through modeling the leadership skills they would like the teachers to have. Mentees need strategies modeled to them in a teaching-learning environment, but also need strategies implemented side-by-side. For this strategy, it has worked well to have a mentee and mentor plan a lesson together then teach the lesson together. After teaching the lesson together, the pair can debrief to determine next steps. The key to using this strategy is to have the mentor show and demonstrate the strategies they are teaching their mentees. This support begins with more targeted, differentiated support and ends with mentors coaching with less direct support.

This type of targeted support can be given in a face-to-face or virtual environment. Virtually, the pair could plan together using online platforms for co-editing shared documents. The planning can happen synchronously or asynchronously. When the pair teaches together, they can share screens and share host responsibilities. This relationship can even be valuable to students as they work with differentiated groups/pods/channels in the online classroom. The virtual environment could mimic the face-to-face environment with the proper planning and attention to the virtual needs of all stakeholders.

Empowering Teachers for Instructional Leadership

Principals can expand instructional leadership by empowering teacher leaders in many ways. In my middle school we implemented two programs that allowed my teachers to use their skills to become teacher leaders: Teachers Tell All and Research Roundtable.

Teachers Tell All sessions are designed for teachers to share classroom challenges with a small cohort of teachers to receive feedback and support on possible solutions. The protocol for the sessions includes small groups of three or four in which each teacher takes 5 minutes to describe one challenge and gets feedback for 10 minutes. At the conclusion of the session, teachers should have strategies to use in their classrooms. This could be a standalone event, an event with several sessions in which the teacher provides feedback on using the suggested strategies, or it can be followed up by the Research Roundtable.

During Research Roundtable, teachers use action research to display findings from their own classrooms. Teachers select a challenge to investigate, collect data on possible solutions, then share the findings around a roundtable of their peers. This event is a powerful way for teachers to demonstrate the leadership skills they use within their classrooms. During professional development sessions with coaches, teachers first select a challenge based on conversations they have had in the Teachers Tell All sessions to connect the various learning experiences. Schools could also implement these programs independent of each other.

Both programs can be the training ground for how teachers will have controversial conversations in their classrooms. Middle grades students need opportunities to discuss the societal context to analyze and better understand how they fit in the world. For example, if the classroom teacher wanted to discuss police brutality or racial/social inequity, the protocols for the Teacher Tell All or the Research Roundtable could provide concrete strategies for how to approach courageous, controversial conversations with students.

Decreasing Resistance and Anxiety

New ideas for classroom instructional practices may bring resistance and anxiety. Three strategies I have used when implementing a new program in my middle school are leveraging relationships, holding morning meetings, and using data. After using these strategies, the entire school was on board with the new program, even if they were initially resistant and anxious.

Building relationships is an extremely effective strategy. We use it to connect with students in the classroom, and to connect with adults in a mentorship situation. When making connections, you find commonality by talking and asking questions. After you find commonality, you leverage what you have in common and go back to that in conversations. Remembering what is important to your mentee and mentioning that in conversations works well to decrease resistance. In a virtual situation, it may be more difficult to build relationships, but one-on-one meetings can still happen with virtual strategies. I have used scavenger hunts in which we find items in our home to share something about ourselves, such as a favorite item that gives us joy. These types of scavenger hunts work well to build community and relationships that can decrease resistance and anxiety.

Morning meetings are a strategy that many teachers use to build culture and to address social-

emotional learning in their classrooms. This same strategy can be used to build leadership capacity to counteract resistance and anxiety in schools. Morning meetings can be structured or unstructured but generally allow attendees time to self-reflect and share feelings with others. If the school has several structured programs, the morning meeting could be one strategy used for those who prefer a less structured experience. My middle school has used morning meetings to discuss issues like police brutality and action. The students use a timed portion at the beginning of advisory period or homeroom to discuss hot topics and what students can do about them. These meetings allow teachers to be leaders in their classrooms and to guide students towards being leaders in their communities.

Using data to demonstrate effectiveness of new strategies is paramount. Reluctant staff members don't want to read data from a national survey or a context that is different from your current population. Instead, use data that reflects your school's context. Even better, use data from your school after the new instructional strategies have been implemented. When some staff members weren't fully invested, I used the data we collected to note how the new instructional strategies/program was working. I used their peers and even their own data when it was available. In one example, we implemented a program to reduce suspensions. After two months of implementing this new program with fidelity, suspensions for all demographics decreased. I used this data to praise my teachers, but also to ease resistance and anxiety. By the end of the year, all teachers were on board and less anxious about the changes. This was due in part to leveraging relationships, implementing morning meetings, and analyzing the impact of data.

Leading One's Own Learning

Adults in the school should model for students the importance of leading their own learning. This can be done in several ways inside the classroom, school-wide, and in the community. The three strategies that help educators model leading one's own learning are classroom conferences, school-wide summits, and community classrooms.

Classroom conferences allow teachers and students alike the opportunity to demonstrate their learning. Think of this strategy as more than presentations completed by students, rather a class-wide learning experience in which each member of the classroom reflects on their learning and strategizes about their growth. Each member of the class, including the teacher, chooses a learning goal and a path to achieve this goal. They research how to reach their goal. With many middle schools having hybrid or 100% virtual instruction, this strategy could be helpful as each class has a whole-group meeting and small breakout rooms (like in a professional conference) where students could share their learning goals and gains.

School-wide summits are organized activities in which staff can model to students how they lead their own learning. Adults can give interactive presentations where they model to students how they plan, organize, and evaluate their own learning. The logistics of how your school sets up school-wide summits will be based on your context, but the content of modeling one's own learning will come from adults in the school who reflect on their process for learning while modeling to students how they can do this. The school-wide summits take the classroom conferences to the next level as students are able to make connections amongst school staff. This also allows students the opportunity to learn more about their preference for learning and how to master their own learning goals given their own learning styles.

The next phase of adults modeling to students how they take ownership in their own learning is the community classroom. In the community classroom, the school invites community members into the school to become learners along with the staff and students on various topics. After attending the community classrooms, adults can debrief these experiences with students in advisory periods. Students get the opportunity to learn with the adults in their schools while the community is brought into the school creating an extended family.

Schools are places where leaders are developed and learning is realized. The adults in the schools should model their learning for the students in the school. There are several ways that schools can accomplish this given the social context of a pandemic and virtual learning among racial and social inequities. This article provided several strategies for schools to enhance leadership both at the student level and at the adult level. These strategies can be used to create a culture of learning and a family within your middle school.

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Administrators... as Classroom Teachers?

Some considerations about the engagement of administrators in curriculum and instruction

BY JASON DEHART, PH.D.

As a teacher for almost ten years, I began my school life with apprehension about administrators entering my classroom. Somewhere along the way, probably following tenure, I began to enjoy frequent visits from administrators who just wanted to keep in touch with the life of the classroom. These visits were often friendly and full of humor as I added my administrators into the narrative of whatever writing my class was working on in ELA on any given day.

This experience in my career as an educator led to a few questions: What has been written about administrators remaining part of the classroom? Had my administrators stayed in the classroom a bit longer with me, what would the dynamic have been like?

To answer this question, I have done some reading and reflecting about this topic. Here, I will share what I have found and use these ideas, along with my experience in the classroom, to make some recommendations.

You Want Me to Do What?

Administrators in larger schools may balk at yet another item on their daily agenda, in addition to dealing with discipline problems, staff meetings, board meetings, parents with needs, problems with crumbling school infrastructure (including leaky ceilings and mold), as well as the demands of teacher evaluations. But connection to the classroom may be valuable for administrators to understand more completely the processes of teaching and to complete their daily routines with ongoing expertise practiced in learning situations with their students.

Acting as a historical voice on the topic, Ralph Tyler wrote, "The improvement of curriculum and instruction is the most important task of the school administrator" (from "Leadership Role of the School Administrator in Curriculum and Instruction," 1953). In our times, this role of curriculum is often shuffled off to another person at the district or school level, and often this person is an instructional coach who is focused on teaching ideas and practices.

While I believe the role of the coach is valuable, it also seems reasonable that administrators would have knowledge of curriculum and instruction and may themselves be continually practicing teachers. Keeping up with changing trends seems to imply being an active part of the teaching work.

Why Not?

Perhaps to no one's surprise, the research on administrators actually stepping into classroom environments as teachers seems to have a relative paucity. When branching this investigation out into administrator-focused reading groups for professional development as well as administrator-focused professional learning communities, the research also seemed relatively thin.

Former Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch stated that to effectively evaluate teachers and complete observations of classrooms, administrators "must be master teachers themselves." Researchers Dick Allington and Pat Cunningham also suggested that administrators should be experts in teaching, and reported about one school system in Rochester, New York where administrators remain active in teaching duties. According to this research, some administrators "became co-teachers in classrooms," while others "worked with a particular group of children before, during, or after school." Teachers traded responsibilities with administrators in some instances, allowing the teacher to step out of the classroom and participate in a leadership activity elsewhere in the school. This kind of approach might, in some ways, lead teachers into other opportunities and provide open doors for both administrators and teachers to act as a support to one another.

Benefits of this approach included giving administrators the ability "to talk with some greater sense of practice in team sessions," reduction of the tension between administrators and teachers in their respective roles, communication of the "high value of teaching" by administrators, and insight for principals into the teachers' perspectives on school issues. In this way, administrators seem to have stepped beyond the role of observing and describing removed experiences of instruction, and actually began to understand the teaching process more deeply and competently. Often, district demands result in mandates, and these mandates pass from the hands of administrators to teachers who either sustain them or comply until the next mandate arrives. Involving the administrator in classroom work might lead to a more practical, "rubber meets the road" sense of what these mandates really mean for middle school students.

In terms of completing meaningful evaluations, administrators might continue the practice of being lifelong learners as they make the most of classroom visits and teaching. This continuing practice may also help with insight into what works and what doesn't. I'm thinking back to my own evaluations and how the few moments an administrator spent observing the way a lesson worked would often issue into an equally brief and surface-level conversation. It was not until administrators stayed for a while and became part of the classroom conversation that evaluations would travel to deeper levels. Evaluation with a depth of knowledge entails having an administrator who is versed in content areas, beyond dependence on a state or district-created evaluation rubric.

Administrators as Instructional Experts

Stef Palaniuk in "Administrators in the Classroom: Where Else?" (*Education*, Spring 1987), suggested that elementary principals in particular remain active teachers in classrooms, saying, "increasing amounts of literature have provided encouragement for administrators to become more involved in the day to day operation of the school." The focus of this research mainly concerned the role of administrators in planning and implementing programs in their

schools, with the article calling for more development toward actual instructional involvement on the part of administrators. Perhaps part of this recommendation for administrators at elementary schools is related to the school size itself. The school I taught in had well over 1000 students. It's quite a task to ask an administrator to step away from managing that kind of environment to add another task—being part of the teaching process. Yet, I found administrators who seemed willing and even relished their brief opportunities to step into the classroom.

For Palaniuk, the chief question in this equation was time. The suggestion was made that principals consider delegating authority so that time could be freed for them to practice teaching, saying, "Competent secretaries are responsible and capable of doing a very effective job of handling the office." This approach may be most prominent in schools where the roles of secretaries and support staff have been considered carefully, closely defined with concrete expectations, and where one staff member serves as a receptionist, while another staff member serves as a dedicated assistant for administrators. The instructional role of administrators can include curriculum development in addition to teaching responsibilities in a classroom. This instructional involvement may lead to more active engagement and participation in professional learning communities, moving administrators from the role of passive observer to practicing teacher.

Part of the little that I know about leadership is the beauty of handing off some responsibilities in meaningful delegation. Perhaps that's part of the puzzle here.

Recommendations

In completing some reading and reflection, it seems that only a few voices in the literature specifically addressed maintaining administrators in some form of teaching role. A large part of my thinking about this topic is based on my brief observations with administrators and the powerful role they played when students had the opportunity to hear administrators' voices—not just as deliverers of discipline but as people who were also interested in reading and schoolwork.

According to Diane Ravitch, increasing testing and standards demands, emphasis on value-added, and pressure from outside sources have caused issues in schools in the past decade under both the No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top Initiatives. Yes, I have lived that truth. Involving administrators in the process of curriculum planning and development, as well as teaching itself, may provide insight for administrators into what quality teaching means in today's classrooms, with new sets of standards and expectations. The teaching role itself can be variable, as seen in the Rochester example, allowing administrators to take on one of several different roles.

As Stef Palaniuk wrote, "More effective principals take time to discover what is going on in the classroom, while their less effective peers spend most of their working days handling management or administrative tasks" (p. 275). Time may be especially difficult for principals in larger schools; to that end, an initiative of this kind may begin in smaller community schools.

Administrators are important voices in schools and can provide a valuable reference for why reading and schoolwork is important and relevant. So, why not keep the door open to the middle school classroom, even with other demands? It seems reasonable that the roles of administrators and teachers should not be mutually exclusive. We emphasize teams in middle school, after all, and what a better example to set for why teams really work well.

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In the Trenches:
Co-teaching as an Administrator

Maximizing the opportunity to reconnect in the classroom

BY PAULINE ZDONEK

The quality of a school's instructional leadership can have a significant impact on student achievement. Most administrators enter the position with the goal of delivering quality instructional leadership; they envision themselves being in classrooms, working side by side with teachers and students, and collaborating with team members around instruction, curriculum, and data. However, the obstacles they face once they enter the position often get in the way of fully realizing this goal. There are the practical obstacles, where short school hours are quickly filled with meetings, managerial tasks, and discipline issues. There are often perception obstacles, as many administrators left the classroom years ago and staff may not view them as knowledgeable in new curriculum, technology, strategies, and tools. And there are knowledge obstacles, as middle school administrators cannot possibly have the background and expertise of all content areas in a building. Considering these obstacles, how can administrators maintain credibility and maximize impact as instructional leaders?

The best answer I have found? Teach… well, co-teach really. A few years ago, to improve our own instructional leadership and build credibility, my principal and I decided to start co-teaching each year with a staff member. The goal was multi-faceted. First, by actively and regularly teaching we were continuously improving our own instruction, strategies, and skills. We had a classroom to try out the

effectiveness of new ideas instead of simply passing them along. Second, by being "in the trenches," we earned credibility from staff. We dealt with behavior issues, juggled district requirements, and implemented new resources. We also gained knowledge of subject areas that were outside our expertise.

For these reasons and more, I recommend anyone who has moved out of the classroom full-time (building administration, curriculum specialist, etc.) to reconnect with the classroom. While the challenges to the co-teach strategy are real, if we hold instructional leadership as a core value, then we have to find a way to live it. To make the endeavor successful, here are some ideas on overcoming obstacles and maximizing this opportunity.

Be Transparent

Even in a building with the most positive climate and culture, the idea of having an administrator teach with you can make the most confident teachers a bit nervous. Having built strong relationships over the years with teachers made rolling out this process much easier and more accepted by staff. However, even the teachers that volunteered admitted they were nervous about the idea of the boss being in the room constantly. Being transparent about your goals, explaining what you can offer teachers, and modeling being a learner yourself can help alleviate many of these fears.

And remember, you might have a perfect co-teacher in mind, except that person has no desire to teach with you. Solicit volunteers for the experience and be open to the opportunities that may arise (or not arise). My first teacher volunteered because she wanted fresh ideas and believed my outside perspective could provide a new lens, and I saw an opportunity to deepen my knowledge in a subject I hadn't taught. When you roll out the idea of co-teaching, be open and explicit in your reasons behind it, and explain what you hope to get out of the experience.

While in the classroom, use this as a time to experiment. Try new things and be okay with failing. Use different co-teaching models so you can talk directly with co-teachers on how to implement them in their classrooms. Talk openly about your failures, and model for other staff the learning opportunities. Push yourself and your co-teacher to try something new. Ask others to come in and give you feedback. Co-teaching is the perfect vehicle to model yourself as the lead learner in the building. As you get ready to roll out the idea to staff, be able to answer these questions:

What do I hope to gain/learn from the experience?

What can I offer to teachers that will benefit them and their students?

How can I use this experience to better the school as a whole?

Be Consistent

One important benefit to co-teaching is the opportunity to build relationships with teachers and students. Yet the quickest way to lose credibility and trust is to say you're going to be somewhere and then not show up. As you begin the co-teaching journey, know the realities of your schedule and find a consistent time that will realistically work. I recommend once a week, as it keeps you regularly in the classroom without overwhelming your schedule and to-do list. I knew the days that always held meetings (Monday and Friday), and the blocks I was often called to handle discipline issues (3rd and 4th). With those in mind, meet with your co-teacher and find mutually agreeable times to teach together (for me it was Tuesdays 2nd block one year, Thursdays 1st block another).

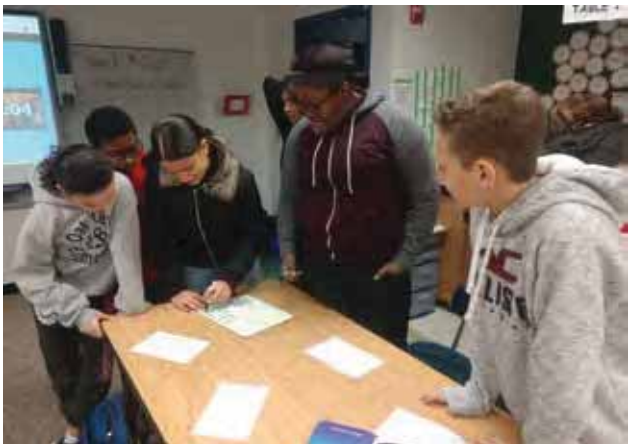
Once you both decide on a time, get it on your calendar for the entire year so nothing else gets scheduled during that time. However, remind your co-teacher you will need some flexibility, as conflicts will inevitably arise. When they do, reschedule. If you don't, it sends a message on the importance of your presence in the classroom. To aide in planning, answer these questions:

What times of day (periods, blocks, etc.) am I usually the most free?

What days of the week should I avoid?

How often is realistic?

When will we be able to plan?



Be Intentional

The first year I started co-teaching English language arts, my partner and I were teaching whatever plans happened to fall on the day I was in there. This led to disjointed planning, awkward lessons, and not true co-teaching (beyond one-teach, one-assist). At the end of the semester, we revised our plans. We decided to set aside the days I was co-teaching to utilize a specific resource that ELA teachers were expected to use weekly. This had two benefits. It allowed us to be intentional when planning co-taught lessons to maximize having two teachers in the room. It also allowed me to more deeply understand the ELA resource and how to use it effectively in the classroom.

With this experience, when other teachers in the building struggled with their implementation or data, I had concrete ideas that I had used and worked that I could share. This year, I openly recruited a math teacher because I was interested in getting hands-on experience with the new math curriculum. This experience has allowed me to be a much more effective resource to our math department and help overcome anxiety and resistance to the curriculum.

I also was intentional about the teacher I selected to teach with based on what we could learn from each other. One teacher had a great deal of content knowledge that I did not, and I looked forward to learning from her. One of my strengths has been building positive rapport with students, which I modeled throughout our year together. Another teacher brought great energy and creativity to the classroom, and I wanted to learn from his ideas. In return, I helped him use data in a way that improved student outcomes from the year before. As you plan, answer these questions:

In what subject/content area do you lack experience/knowledge?

Which staff or content resources do you want to learn more about?

Which staff member do you think you would complement?

Who might be able to learn from your strengths and vice versa?

In This E-Learning World

Recent events have thrown middle level education into uncharted waters. Uncertainty and e-learning should not scare you away from co-teaching. However, it may be helpful to keep a few extra pieces in mind.

- *Be understanding* – As this is a stressful time for everyone, understand if teachers are not jumping at the chance to co-teach right away. There are plenty of reasons teachers may be reluctant to sign up right now, and with all the stress people are under, it may be the furthest thing from their mind. Just be patient; people will come forward when they feel more secure.
- *Be helpful* – It might not be the co-teaching situation you had in mind, but helping your co-teacher lighten the load (leading online meetings, following up with students, providing feedback) may build the credibility you need as school returns to in-person instruction.
- *Be positive* – Co-teaching in an e-learning environment provides a great way for administrators to understand the work teachers are putting into this new venture, so remember the benefits as you engage. Help your co-teacher stay positive and focus on the impact you can have with students, even from a distance.

Conclusion

Becoming an effective instructional leader is a worthwhile goal, but one that requires time and commitment. Through co-teaching, administrators can develop and refine their instructional leadership. No professional development or book I've read has taught me as much as being both in the classroom and in the front office. AM

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All photos provided by author.

Discussing Race Issues: It's Not So Black and White

Activities using trade books to help students explore how the past impacts the present

BY NEFERTARI YANCIE, PH.D.

2020 has seen eruptions of violence and protests across the country due to racial injustice and the continued denial of basic human and civil rights to people of color. These events have forced many Americans to face an uncomfortable and discouraging realization: America has yet to live up to the legacy and promises of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement.

Too often, students view the Civil Rights Movement as a chapter in U.S. history that is far removed from their daily lives. The people and events of the 1950s and 1960s are snapshots in time that they have learned about in school and, for many, they hold no relevance to them. However, the riots and protests that center around the death of George Floyd have the potential to show students how the past connects to the present. Middle school social studies teachers can use current events to illustrate how certain issues from the past are unresolved and how the past—its people and events—has meaning in their daily lives.

Teachers may use trade books as a means to examine historical figures, events, and concepts in more depth (Schell & Fisher, 2006). Brimner's (2011) *Black and White: The Confrontation Between Reverend Fred L. Shuttlesworth and Eugene "Bull" Connor* focuses on how two men's paths were destined to clash and shape the future of civil rights in Birmingham, Alabama. Some of the most iconic moments in the Civil Rights Movement played out on the streets of downtown Birmingham. I provide two activities that utilize *Black and White* to provide students with the opportunity to analyze the perspectives of Shuttlesworth and Connor, the causes of pivotal events, and how the past impacts the present.

Shuttlesworth vs. Connor: Examining Their Perspectives

History is full of historical figures who engage in confrontations due to their polarizing views. For example, The opposing ideologies of Alexander Hamilton (a Federalist) and Aaron Burr (a Democratic-Republican) led to personal acrimonies and resulted in political and personal mudslinging and, finally, Burr's death at Hamilton's hands. Conflicts over divergent views are rarely simple or due to one reason. Graphic organizers aid students in comparing historical figures' views, values, and biases.

Graphic organizers are ideal for students to compare Shuttlesworth and Connor's views about civil rights. The teacher selects pages 83-85 as an excerpt from

Black and White (Brimner, 2011) that illustrates Shuttlesworth and Connor's views on equality, integration, and preservation of the South's segregation laws. Students read and annotate the text in pairs. They highlight and define words they do not know and summarize the text in their own words. The examples of each man's views on civil rights are underlined. By annotating, students look for main points, question the text, and think about their own thinking.

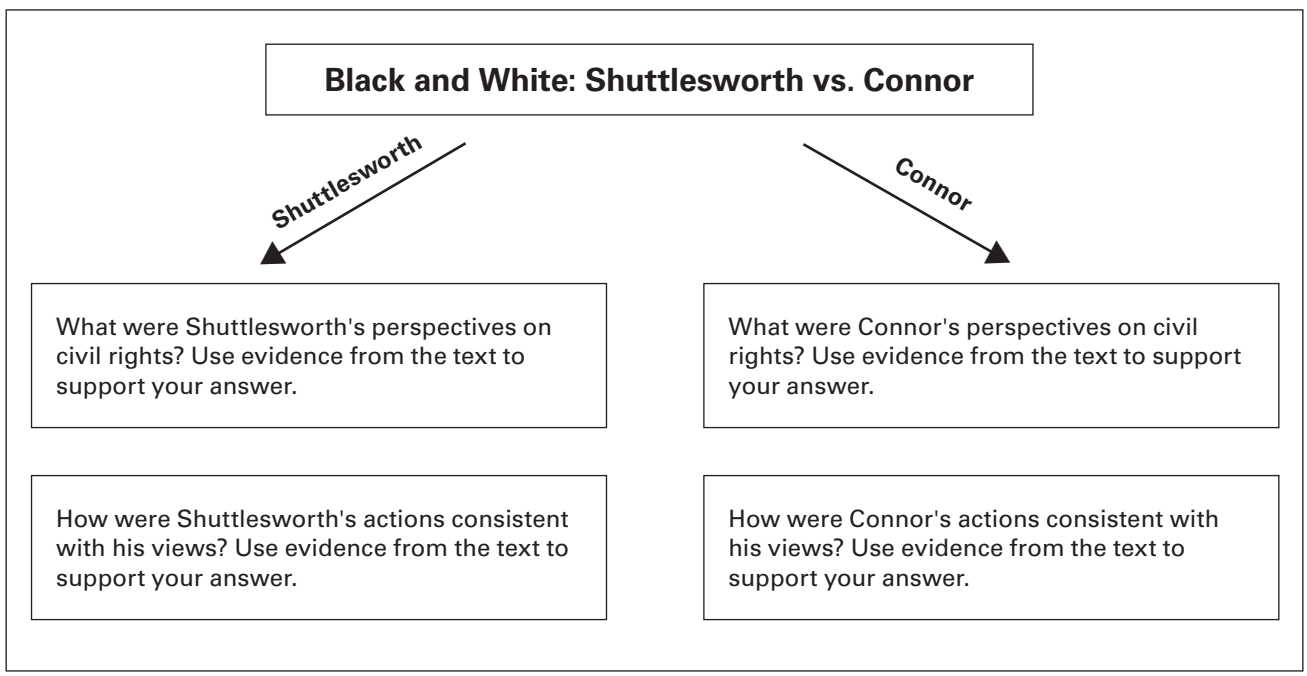
Graphic organizers allow students to organize information logically when writing a narrative or essay. This activity requires students to use the fully annotated text to complete a graphic organizer that helps to deconstruct the text (see figure 1 for a sample graphic organizer). Then, the teacher brings the students together to discuss their responses. This debrief is important because students share the rationale for their responses. The teacher may also ask guiding questions to encourage students to think deeper about the text. Example questions are "How might the culture and conditions in the South have impacted Shuttlesworth and Connor's perspectives?" and "What were Shuttlesworth and Connor's motives in staging and stopping protests in Birmingham, respectively?" The graphic organizer and subsequent discussion provide students with the opportunity to analyze the text in depth and understand how cultural, political, and geographical factors impact people's perspectives (Barton & Levstik, 2004).

Using Historical Monologues to Connect the Past and the Present

The eyes of the country have once again focused on Birmingham, Alabama, in 2020. In the wake of George Floyd's death, violent and peaceful protests have taken place on the same downtown Birmingham streets that were the sites of similar demonstrations during the 1960s. Teachers can use current events to show how then and now the streets of Birmingham have been ground zero in the African American struggle for identity, culture, and justice (Helfenbein, 2006). In the Civil Rights Movement and the recent uprisings after Floyd's death, protestors marched in downtown Birmingham over marginalization and the denial of a voice in a democratic society. Teaching students the "power of place" allows them to understand how historic places such as the streets of Birmingham, have the potential to reinforce the realities of the past and evoke emotions that students may find easy to relate to, especially when they see its relevance to their daily lives (National Park Service, 2015; Witherspoon et al., 2017). They may do this through the voice of a person who is emotionally, politically, socially, and/or culturally connected to historical figures or events under study.

In the following activity, I discuss the power of place and historical dialogues to show how issues such as racial injustice, and civil rights connect the past to the present. Historical monologues are a form

Figure 1 Graphic Organizer



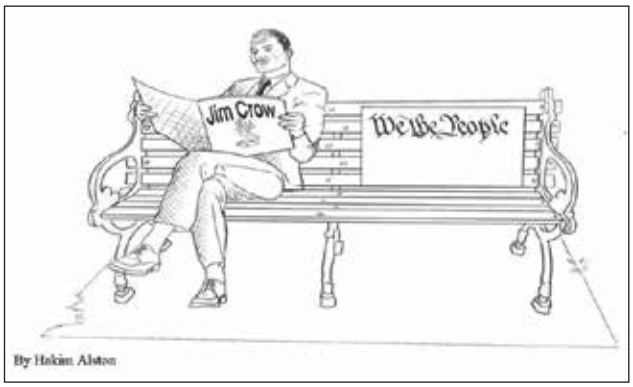
of perspective writing that allows students to express their understanding of historical figures and events by conveying one's innermost thoughts, feelings, and motivations. To write the monologue, they use a script format, including a name for the character, a setting, and time, and noting physical movements in parentheses. The prompt is provided below.

> *Pretend you are a member of the Birmingham Historical Committee. During the recent outbreak of violence in downtown Birmingham, the Confederate memorial was damaged. The Committee has drafted a new monument and is meeting to vote on the proposal. This monument shows Rev. Shuttlesworth sitting on a park bench reading the Jim Crow laws, with the U.S. Constitution next to him on the bench. Write a historical monologue that justifies your "yes" or "no" vote. Provide at least two reasons to support your vote. Explain how this monument may show past and present race issues in America. Use at least two details from the graphic organizer and evidence from the book* Black and White *(Brimner, 2011) to support your answer.*

This activity allows students to make connections between one historical era and another. For instance, while students may have a tendency to see the 1960s Civil Rights Movement as an isolated episode in history, this activity can show how the challenges people of color face today are connected to events from more than 50 years ago. Students can more easily see how certain issues develop and reoccur over time. Writing the historical monologue challenges students to examine the complexities of historical events and people. They explore differing perspectives and make informed decisions based on evidence.

A Fresh Look at an Ongoing Problem

Social studies teachers have the often-daunting task of showing students how important the past is to their daily lives. There may be a tendency to feel like history is relegated to the pages of history textbooks. However, 2020 has revealed to many people that America has persisting issues of racism that refuse to remain in the past and very much affect the present. Social studies classrooms are places where teachers can engage students in activities that encourage the examination and discussion of issues of racial discrimination and the denial of human and civil rights to people of color. These activities show how history is not only complex and multi-layered but allows students to see the legacies of the past in the present.



Drawing created by Hakim Alston

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The Power of a Read Aloud in the Middle Grades

Reading out loud offers chances for connection and conversation

BY KATE CIMO

Good stories are powerful. They have a way of seeping into our souls and lingering in the backs of our minds. For years, stories were the main way that knowledge was passed between generations. Reading to my sixth grade students or my own kids (ages 11 and 13) is one of my favorite parts of the day. There's something about sharing a story together that bonds us and makes us closer.

We see the benefits and get joy from reading to kids when they're little, but those times seem to end once a child is able to read independently. Once kids reach the age where they can read on their own, that tends to become their sole way of reading. I believe, though, that it's important to continue to read aloud to kids even when they're preteens and teenagers because it's a way to keep a connection with them. A read aloud is often at a level slightly higher than what a child would choose on their own, and it's beneficial for an adult to help a child process the emotions and ideas that come with a quality book. When children read independently they're obviously still learning and hopefully enjoying their books, but they're missing out on the special parts of a read aloud: the connection and discussion.

There is so much happening in the world now with the pandemic, Black Lives Matter, and subsequent concerns about mental health. Young people might not be talking about such stressful events, but they are still trying to process them, and a book can be an incredibly powerful way to help them do that. Middle grades students are at a particularly important stage in their lives since they are still developing their values and understanding of our world, but they also can comprehend so much more than they could a year or two earlier. This stage of development is also a time when we see kids open up more to friends than to their parents, so a read aloud can be a great way to keep a conversation open. Stereotypical complaints about this age group are that they're closed off emotionally, they won't talk about their feelings, and they're insensitive to others because they're too caught up in their own world. And, of course, there's the worry about how much time they spend on social media and what that might do to their developing psyches. That's why I love a good book; it allows us to have a shared experience we can talk about.

As a sixth grade English language arts teacher, I read aloud to my students every day. It's obviously a great way to model fluent reading and to explore

quality writing, but it's also my favorite way to connect with my students. Reading a book is like having a superpower; when else can you time travel, explore a new era and place, meet fantastical creatures, or see life through the eyes of someone of a different race, ethnicity, gender, or belief system? We use our read alouds to travel to other countries to learn how the people's lifestyle and culture is similar to or different from ours. We use them to gain a perspective on a situation we might not have understood when viewing it only through our own lens. We use read alouds to develop empathy, and we learn how we might become better people because of it. It might seem like a stretch that you could get all of those benefits from a book, but it's the truth.

During read aloud to my sixth graders, I've had a huge group of students spontaneously break out in applause when a character stood up to a bully to defend a classmate. I've had students ask how they can become activists or get more heavily involved in helping out after hearing about inequity, and I've even had kids get choked up from hearing about relationships that are hard. We have powerful discussions about why people act the way they do, how they're feeling, or how they could make a change to improve their relationships. We learn from the stories and then we share that knowledge with friends and family.

We also refer to those stories throughout the year as learning tools in our own lives. I can look back to how a character handled a situation and see if the student might try it. After reading *The Wednesday Wars*, for example, I might say to a student privately, "Remember how when Holling stopped making assumptions about people, he started making friends? Maybe it would help if you told your friend how you're feeling instead of assuming that they know. Could you try that?" When we read *Joey Pigza Swallowed a Key*, we had meaningful discussions about what it's like to have ADHD (something many students could relate to), and we could better see the importance of being patient and understanding. When we read *I am Malala* (a memoir by Malala Yousafzai, a young Pakistani woman who fights for all girls to be educated) and *A Long Walk to Water* (a hybrid nonfiction/fiction story that follows a young Sudanese boy who goes through a harrowing fight for asylum and grows up to create wells for people who do not have access to clean water), we realized how similar we are to people who come from such different cultures and we learned the importance of standing up for people and being kind. And from *One for the Murphys* (in which the main character is a foster child who has to learn how to trust love), we saw the power of giving people the benefit of the doubt because everyone has a story, and if we are strong enough to stick around to learn those stories, people can surprise us in the most wonderful ways. The teacher in that book purposefully paired his students with someone he did not think they got along with or knew well to force them into figuring out how to work together. At first this plan seemed disastrous, but eventually the characters came around and formed friendships where they least expected it. Since I change my students' desks every month to encourage bonding with people students wouldn't necessarily choose on their own, this book helped to reinforce that message. When we had class discussions about this scene, it was a nice segue into how working through differences in relationships is a vital life skill.

I also read aloud to my own kids. Usually I read a book to both of them at the same time, but sometimes I have a separate read aloud for my daughter and my son, depending on their interests. I like varying the pattern because it's nice to have that special time for the three of us and the discussions are better when we have all of our perspectives on the book, but it's also rewarding to have time alone with each of them. When kids might be feeling shy about opening up to parents about what's happening in their lives, a book can provide a safe topic; after all, we are just talking about a *character's* problem and how *they're* working on it, not their own problem!

When the protests about Black Lives Matter started happening, books were one of the main ways to start conversations with my children. Racism is hard and uncomfortable to talk about, and I found that books gave me a pathway to do that. (See figure 1 for a list of suggested titles for read alouds on the topics of racism and social equity.)

I like to change up what we're reading often, so if I look back at the last few read alouds I've done with my kids, I can see that each gave us an opportunity to grow our hearts, minds, and imaginations. We read *A Time Traveler's Theory of Relativity* and saw how powerful it is to grieve someone's death—especially when you feel like you caused it. This was a fantasy book, but its message was reinforced in our latest realistic fiction read aloud, *Sunny* (the third book in the Track Series), this time told from an African American point of view. We also read *Al Capone Does My Shirts*, which showed us how important it is to listen to people with Autism Spectrum Disorder and to trust their way of thinking.

Figure 1 Read Aloud Book Suggestions

Focus on Racism and Social Equity

I am Malala: How One Girl Stood Up for Education and Changed the World (Young Readers Edition) by Malala Yousafzai

Ghost by Jason Reynolds

A Long Walk to Water by Linda Sue Park

Piecing Me Together by Renee Watson

Brown Girl Dreaming by Jacqueline Woodson

Pink and Say by Patricia Polacco

The Crossover by Kwame Alexander

One Crazy Summer by Rita Williams-Garcia

The Green Bicycle by Haifaa Al Mansour

I Will Always Write Back by Caitlyn Alifirenka and Martin Ganda with Liz Welch

Blended by Sharon M. Draper

Betty Before X by Ilyasah Shabazz with Renee Watson

Inside Out & Back Again by Thannha Lai

Save Me a Seat by Sarah Weeks and Gita Varadarajan

Amina's Voice by Hena Khan

Front Desk by Kelly Yang

The Parker Inheritance by Varian Johnson

The Vanderbeekers of 141st Street by Karina Yan Glaser

Finding Langston by Lesa Cline-Ransome

Hurricane Child by Kacen Callender

Riding Chance by Christine Kendall

With the Might of Angels by Andrea Davis Pinkney

A Good Kind of Trouble by Lisa Moore Ramee

Ghost Boys by Jewell Parker Rhodes

As a teacher, I am always looking for ways to improve my library. I want books that are interesting and engaging for my students and I want them to explore the world and humanity through them even if they are at home on their own. I once watched a TED Talk on the dangers of "the single story," which emphasized the importance of listening to as many different stories as you can so you're not basing your views of people and cultures and beliefs on a single experience that the people being described might have gone through. It made me realize that in a lot of ways, I needed to broaden my library so I wasn't including just several versions of the same experience and was instead trying to include as many viewpoints and approaches as I could find.

For example, I noticed that I had lots of stories that included Black characters, but almost all of them were related to the Civil Rights' Movement, and it made me realize that I was limiting the Black voice to that one time period. Since then, I have added lots of books by Black authors or with Black characters that are set in different time periods and are in different genres. I try to do this at home, too, when I read to my own kids; I try to change up the genre, time period, style, and topic of the read aloud so we're seeing as much as we can. I want us to read books with our minds alert and our hearts open.

In closing, I challenge you to try this: find a book you think might engage your child or students (if you're not sure where to look, ask teachers or librarians!) and read it to them. I hope you discover a special time of bonding, talking, sharing, and learning from each other.

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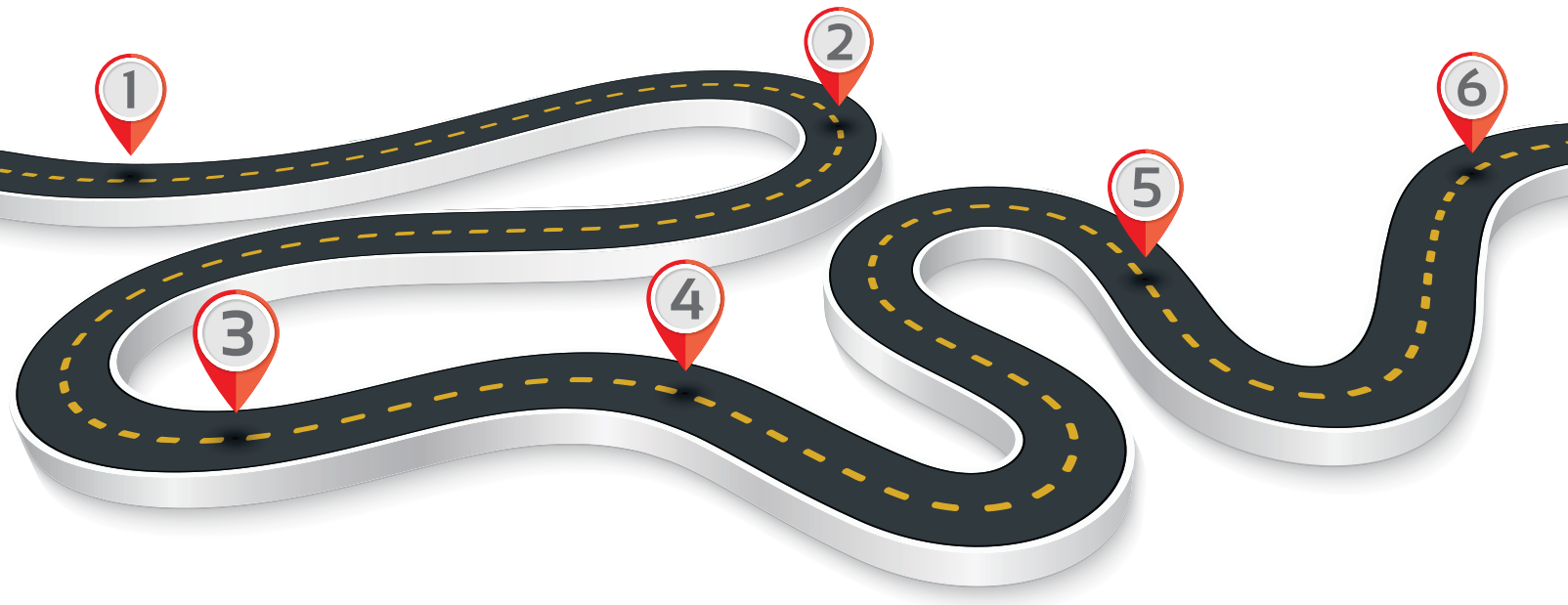
You're Doing Better Than You Think You Are



Six things I learned during my first year of teaching

BY JESSICA EGBERT

1 Cheer for the kids who are doing well. Cheer louder for the kids who aren't.

Think back to your own school years. You can probably still name some classmates that always seemed to excel in school. I know I can. Maybe *you* were that student who was always top of the class. The point here is that kids know it. They aren't oblivious to the fact that some of their classmates may be "smarter" than them. The students who are doing well in the classroom know that they are doing a good job. This doesn't mean that they shouldn't be praised, because they absolutely should, but what about the student who isn't getting straight As? What about the student who has to work twice as hard for a C as an excelling student does for an A? This year has taught me that I have the power to be a cheerleader for the underdog.

After students wrote their first multi paragraph essays for my class, I highlighted pieces of great writing from a few students who don't receive a lot of positive recognition at school. Upon being granted permission from these students, I read the highlighted portions of the essays to the class. Each time I read one of these examples of great citations, relevant evidence, fluid transitions, and strong conclusions, the entire class immediately began to guess which "smarty" in the class wrote it. They were stunned when I told them the actual essay writers, who were now beaming with pride. It wasn't that these students had A+ essays. Some of them had a tremendous amount of errors. To be honest, there were probably

some other essays that were better as a whole. What matters, though, is that I found one thing that they did well and pointed it out to them and their peers. I was thrilled when I noticed one of my high achieving students high-five one of my struggling students whose essay introduction was read to the class. I think she knew that this student was an underdog. I couldn't be more proud that she chose to cheer loud for the underdog, too.

2 Your praise matters, and not just for students.

Since the start of the year I have had a "Rockstar Shout-out" bulletin board. Each time I see a student working hard, lending a helping hand, thinking positively, or demonstrating a love for learning, I write the student a note of appreciation, fold it, write their name on the front, and pin it to that board. When students walk into my room and see that there is a new shout-out they are always eager to see if it is addressed to them. I started doing this as a way to motivate students and show that I value their efforts. The strategy did not disappoint. Some students taped these notes in their lockers all year. Some students came up to personally thank me for their notes. I had a parent tell me that her daughter was proud to hang one on their refrigerator. But, even after seeing those sweet reactions to some simple notes, I wholeheartedly believe that the one who benefited most was me. You see, after students leave at the end of each day, no matter how good, bad, or ugly my day is, I sit down at my desk and write little notes about the *good* things that happen each day. Even on a day when my perfect lesson plan turns into a total flop, or a day when I'm left swamped with my head spinning, there are still good things that happen. When I set aside time for praise at the end of my day, I get to go home thinking about the positive.

3 Read alouds are therapeutic, and not just for students.

I remember learning in college about the benefits of reading aloud to children. Reading aloud builds vocabulary, promotes empathy, ignites imagination, fosters a feeling of connection...I could go on and on. What I don't remember learning, however, is that sharing a great book with your students is like taking vitamins for your soul. I've never felt more connected with my class than when we are sharing a book we all love. There's something special about building a classroom community. There's also something special about being able to pause in a certain moment and just soak in the fact that moments like this are the reason you love your job.

This realization came to me on a particularly hard day. I had a meeting during my planning period that left me feeling inadequate and overstretched (likely a product of my hypersensitivity and tendency to be hard on myself). I remember holding back tears as I picked up my students from specials. I knew that when I brought them back to the classroom it would be our read aloud time, but I was so upset that I didn't want to stand in front of my class and read. *Just let it be lunchtime*. I thought to myself, wondering if anyone would care if I started recess early so that I could pull myself together. As my students walked into the classroom I heard a few of them saying "It's *Wonder* time!" excitedly. They knew that this was our special time to find out what would happen next to their beloved protagonist, Auggie Pullman. Just hearing the enthusiasm in their voices made me change my mind about skipping our read aloud. As I began to read I forgot about those feelings of self-doubt I was having before. For those 10 minutes I felt as if I were home. I lost myself in the feeling of unity that only sharing in a passion, like the love of a good book, can bring. I remember thinking as I was reading, with my students hanging on my every word, that this was one of the things I loved most about the career I chose. Sharing enthusiasm for a book about the power of kindness. It's moments like those that I live for.

4 Kids will write what they don't want to say.

Since the beginning of the year, each of my students has had a journal for writing about their weekends, telling me about the books they have been reading, and even for pondering the meaning of inspirational quotes I display on the board. One thing that I did not foresee these journals being used for was to open the lines of communication between my students and me when they are going through a tough time. It started one day when a student came into my classroom crying. I pulled her aside and asked what was wrong, but she was clearly too upset to answer me. I understood why she probably didn't want to voice her struggles, because I too have experienced what it's like to be so distraught that speaking about the problem only makes you cry harder.

Instead of pushing her to tell me what was wrong, I handed this student her journal and told her that she was welcome to write about what was bothering her. When she willingly did this, I asked her if she would mind if I read it. She handed me the journal and nodded. Inside she had written about a situation that happened at home, and knowing this helped me support her by simply telling her that I cared. I was a bit surprised at first that this way of addressing the situation had worked so well, but when I tried it again with a boy who was upset in my classroom a couple of weeks later, it worked again. By now I have had multiple other similar situations, and out of all those cases, *not a single student* has refused to write about their feelings when they have been upset. It has become my go-to strategy when dealing with the big emotions of young people.

5 Don't invalidate the stresses and struggles of students (or anyone!)

We've all been there. After confiding in someone about our trials they say something along the lines of "it could be worse" or "here's how I have it worse than you" or my personal favorite "oh, you think that's rough? Just wait until…" If we're being honest with ourselves, we're all guilty of saying something like this to someone at one time or another. The thing is, when we make these condescending comments to others we aren't doing them any favors. We may think we're putting things into perspective for them, but in reality we're making them feel as though they don't have a right to their own emotions. It's easy for us as adults to forget that this holds true for kids as well. I would be lying if I said I wasn't annoyed when a student told me "I can't do homework because I have practice tonight." Part of me felt like rolling my eyes and telling the student about all the assignments I had to do in school on top of numerous extracurriculars, or about how last year I was in grad school, planning a wedding, building a house, and student teaching all at the same time. But who would that be helping? Sure, being an adult comes with more stresses and responsibilities than being a kid, but that doesn't take away from the fact that a kid is being introduced to new responsibilities and stresses too. We look back on fourth grade and think it's easy because we've been through harder things, but in their eyes the fourth grade is the hardest thing they've done in their lives! This fourth grader hadn't yet been equipped with the time management skills to deal with stress like an adult. So, instead of saying *too bad so sad*, I told him that being a student athlete isn't easy. I told him that it would take a lot of hard work, but that he would have to remember that schoolwork is his top priority. I encouraged him, saying that even though it can be difficult, I just knew he could do it.

6 You're doing better than you think you are.

Nobody enjoys feeling like they aren't doing enough. This fear is magnified in teaching, because it is the education of young people we care about that is at stake. *If my kids don't grow enough this year, that's on me alone.* I can't tell you how many times I've had this thought. I continuously told myself that I wasn't doing a good enough job and picked apart every decision I made as a teacher. The more I think about it though, the more certain I am that it takes a good teacher to recognize our own imperfections. I would rather be a teacher who can point out three things I would change about my lesson for next time than a teacher who thinks every lesson is perfect.

We can *always* do better.

I'm okay with driving home thinking about how I could have handled a behavior problem differently. I'm okay with asking coworkers for guidance and advice. I'm okay with thinking that there's always more that I can do. It doesn't make me a bad teacher to fail, or doubt myself, or to ask for help. This job is not a glamorous one. We don't go on fancy business trips, or get promotions, or earn extravagant pay raises for working hard. We deal with ignorant people—sometimes even loved ones—telling us that our job is easy,. But they do not know all we do. Ultimately, we have a choice between allowing belittling words to get the best of us, or we can march on, continuing to do the best we can. And if we're doing that, we're probably doing better than we think we are.

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Helping Girls Thrive in Uncertain Times

The impact of COVID-19 on teen girls and timely, responsive ideas for supporting them

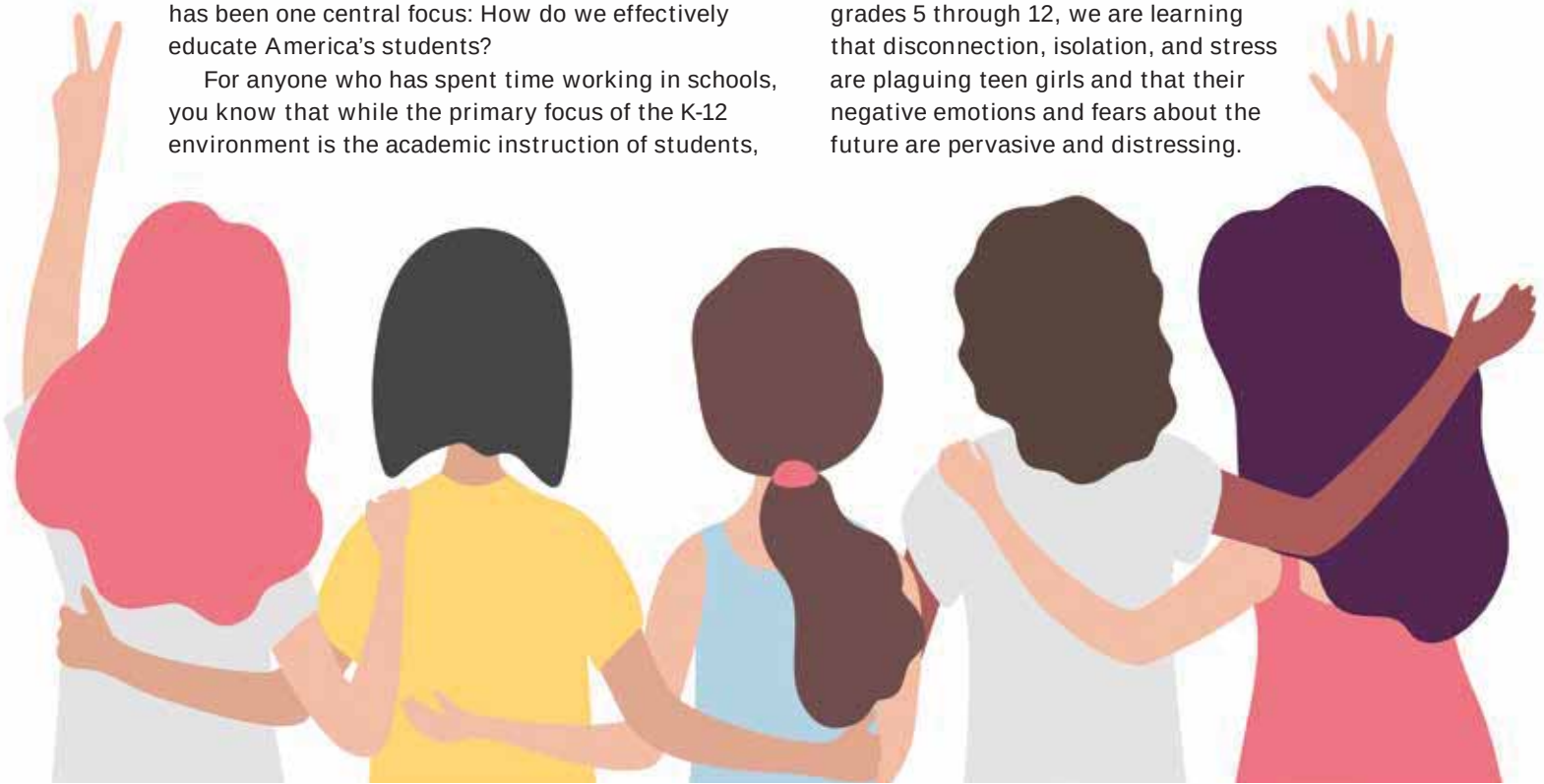
BY LISA HINKELMAN, PH.D.

Without a doubt, COVID-19 has upended our country, our economy, and our educational system in a way that none of us have ever experienced or could have imagined. From the immediate impact of stay-at-home orders that began in the spring, to the ongoing and persistent attempts to develop a sense of normalcy through social distancing and other efforts, the disruption to our families, systems, and communities has been swift and intense.

With an effective education infrastructure considered a cornerstone of a functioning society, the challenge COVID-19 has presented to schools, educators, families, and students has been beyond reproach. Local and national efforts for a return to education have been dramatically varied, but there has been one central focus: How do we effectively educate America's students?

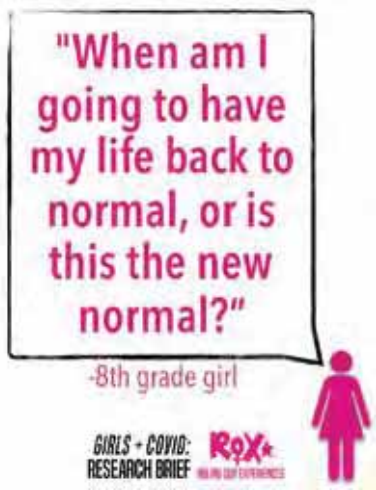
For anyone who has spent time working in schools, you know that while the primary focus of the K-12 environment is the academic instruction of students, a host of other student needs are addressed in schools. The work we do goes well beyond academic curriculum and concurrently addresses the social, emotional, interpersonal, and mental health needs of our students.

As we collectively traverse this new landscape, it is of critical importance that we understand how our students are faring and specifically what they need and want from the adults in their lives during these unprecedented times. As an educator and researcher with a specific focus on the lived experience of girls, I wanted to understand how girls are impacted by the pandemic and what we need to do to best support them. Through conducting and publishing a national survey with more than 1,200 girls in grades 5 through 12, we are learning that disconnection, isolation, and stress are plaguing teen girls and that their negative emotions and fears about the future are pervasive and distressing.

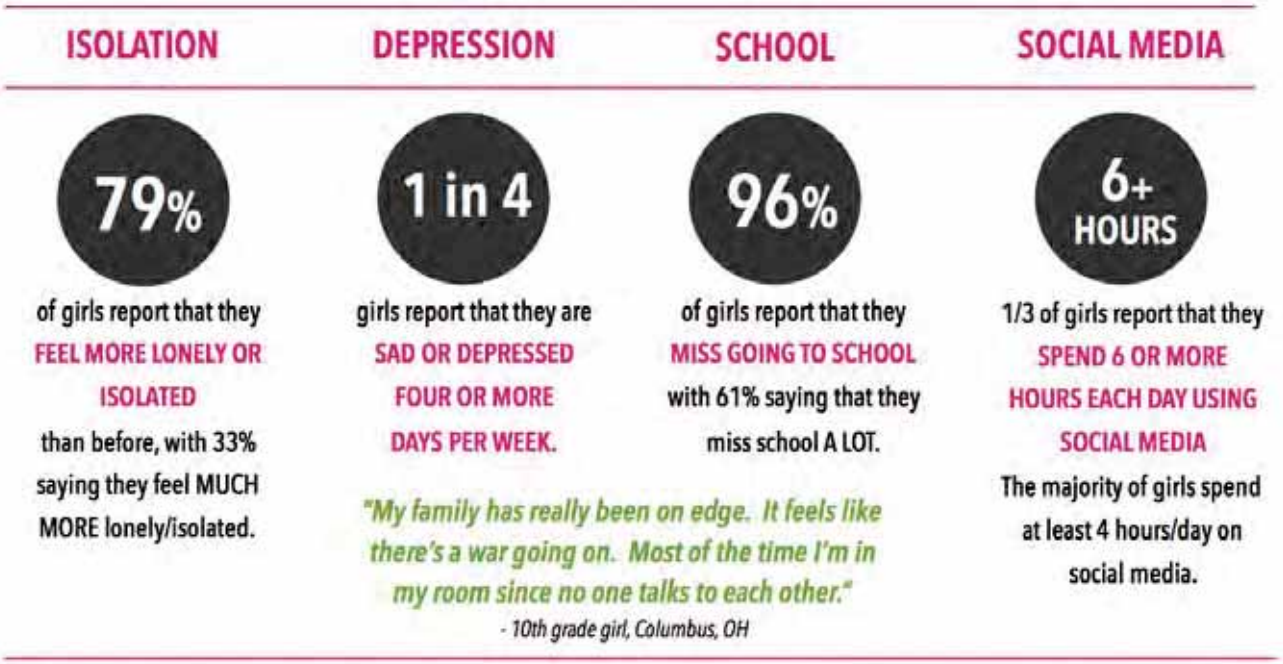


Nearly 80% of girls report that they are more lonely and isolated since the onset of COVID-19 and 58% are uncertain or scared about their future. Loneliness and isolation are concerning for all teens, however, they can be particularly distressing for girls. In general, girls more than boys tend to define themselves based on their relationships with others. Their connections, friendships, and relationships are critical to their identity development, and when isolated or disconnected, girls can become increasingly withdrawn, depressed, or anxious. With a pre-COVID diagnosis rate of depression and anxiety at 4:1 compared to boys, girls were already at an increased risk for experiencing negative interpersonal outcomes and mental health issues. Now, with limited opportunities for connection, disrupted school, minimal or no extracurricular and social activities, and no real end in sight to the pandemic, we must be diligent in our approach to providing support to all of our students, with a particular focus on those who are most vulnerable—including girls. As the response to the COVID-19 crisis continually changes based on new data, science and political conditions, the support we need to provide girls must be timely and responsive as well. Here are some ideas:

1. **Provide girls with opportunities for relationship building and connection through meaningful and safe in-person *and* virtual activities.** Throughout the duration of this pandemic, we must work diligently to ensure that virtual connections and communication between girls is not viewed as secondary, or less than, in-person interactions. Nearly 40% of girls report that since COVID-19 their relationships are harder than before and because girls likely have little control over whether or not they can spend time face-to-face with their peers, we must create real opportunities for them to socialize, have fun, explore, and create with their friends.



2. **Create innovative ways for girls to experience key developmental tasks, culminating activities and long-awaited milestones.** Over 50% of girls report that they are missing out on important things. Perhaps, rather than simply canceling all events and activities that typically take place in person, we can explore opportunities to create meaningful, fun, and safe substitutes. Obviously, this is not possible with all activities, but work with your girls to creatively explore ways that celebrations such as graduations, recitals, performances, birthdays, speeches, and science fairs can still take place through virtual platforms, socially distant events, and synchronous and asynchronous engagement opportunities.



3. **Increase individualized attention given to students, and screen students for signs of potential distress.** During a typical school year, it is difficult to ensure that each student gets adequate daily attention from their teachers, counselors, and administrators. This year it is going to be even more difficult to have meaningful one-on-one interactions with students. However, it is precisely these individual points of connection that can provide insights into potential student distress and can allow for appropriate intervention. Ensuring that schools have systems in place to "see" students on a regular basis and ascertain their engagement, mood, behavior, appearance, and performance can not only subvert potential negative outcomes but can also ensure that a caring and engaged adult is invested in each student in a substantive way.
4. **Ensure access for all students regardless of their family rules, circumstances, and responses to the virus.** As rules and expectations surrounding COVID-19 have evolved with the changing social conditions and political climate, some girls find themselves excluded from activities and events due to their family decisions and needs surrounding managing their family's health. It is imperative that we recognize that all family decisions are difficult at this time and that offering engagement opportunities in a variety of formats is critical. This allows girls to be included and involved whether or not they have an immune-compromised family member, parents who are front-line workers, or for any other reason are limited from full participation in social, academic, or extracurricular activities.

As educators, we have an opportunity to ensure that our students are supported, protected, and insulated, to the best of our ability, from the potential devastating effects of this current crisis. Together, we can take small steps to ensure that no student falls through the cracks and that no girl is left behind. AM

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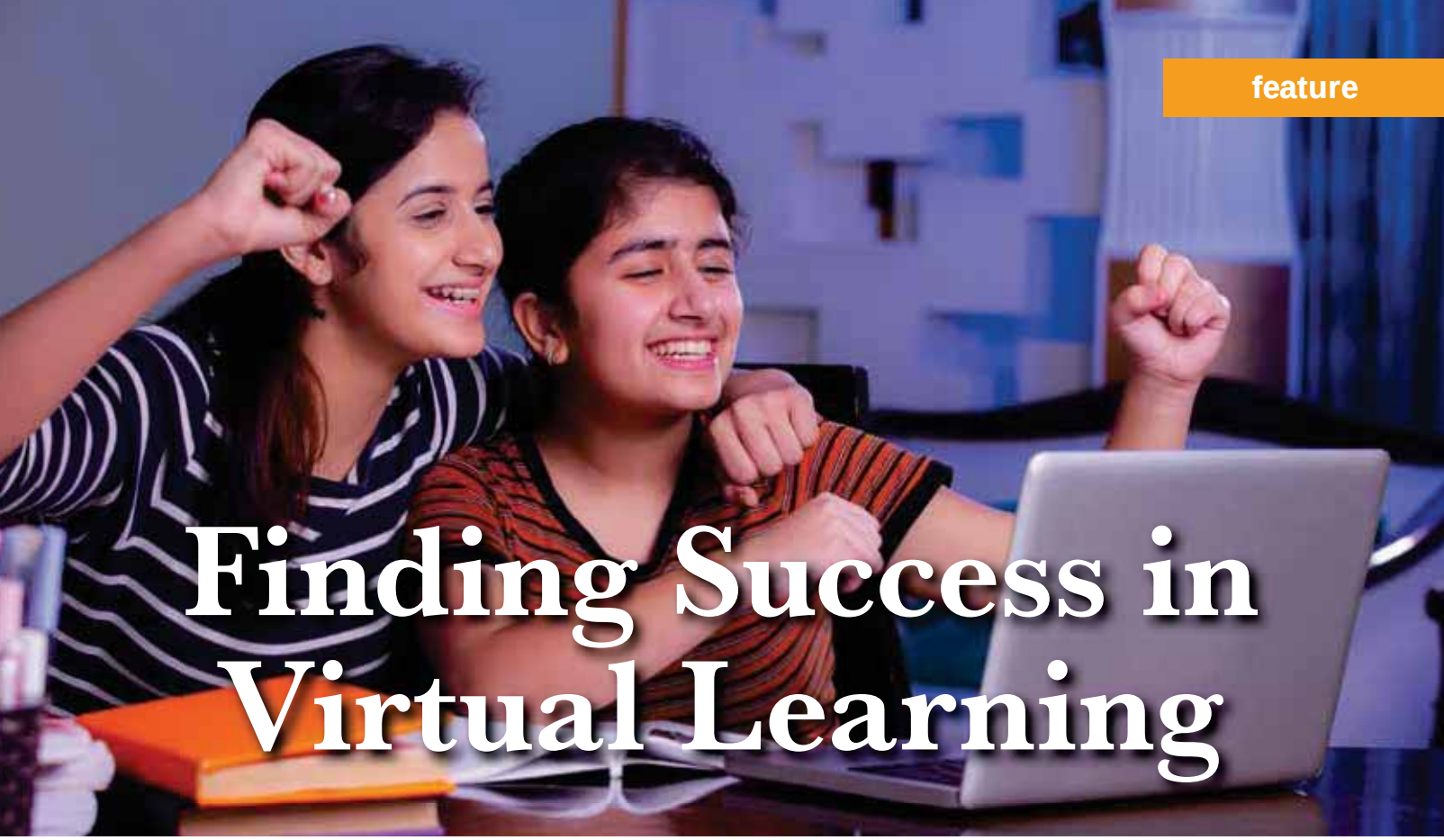


Finding Success in Virtual Learning

Meeting students' needs by building relationships, identifying learning intentions, and creating success criteria

BY NICHOLAS J. LEONARDI

Even the most experienced educators find teaching to be a challenge. The flexibility required to solve unexpected issues; the immediacy of meeting the needs of each individual student; staying current with changing curriculum, technology, and content; and developing relationships with each child makes the profession exciting yet difficult. Swiftly shifting to an online curriculum in the midst of a pandemic does not make educating America's youth any less stressful! While some teachers are well-versed in current technological trends, not every teacher feels confident implementing these tools and resources, especially with little to no training and during a short period of time. Despite the challenge, educators can meet the needs of students by focusing on social and emotional needs, teacher clarity, and timely feedback.

Students First

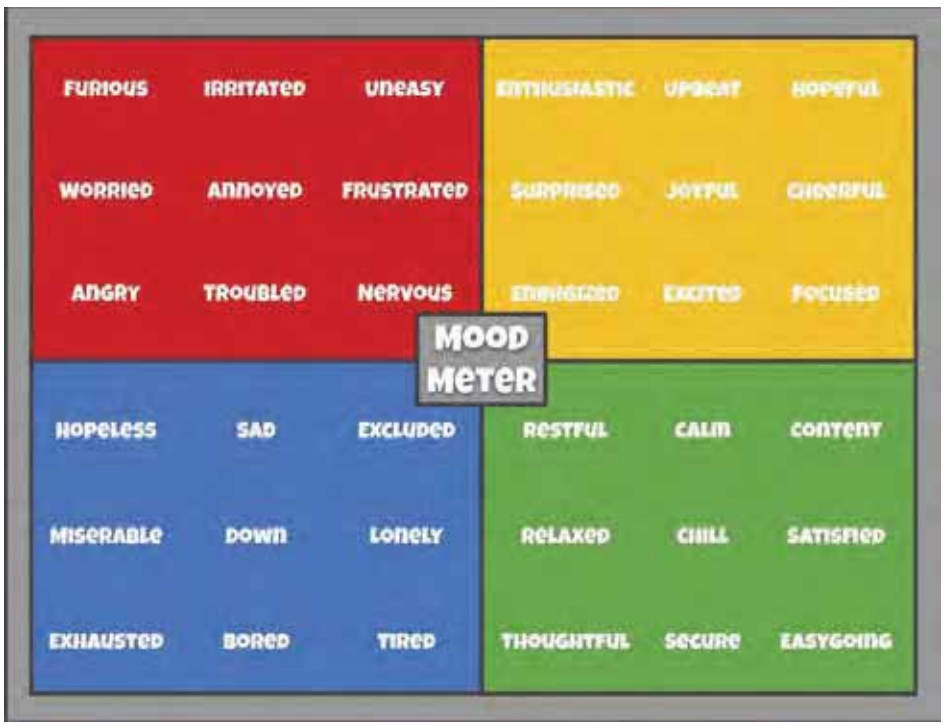
Focusing on school connectedness is often a way in which educators and administrators can help students feel cared for and supported, which reduces many health risks and increases a student's ability to thrive. According to one study, youth who felt connected at school and at home were "found to be as much as 66% less likely to experience health risk behaviors related to sexual health, substance use, violence, and mental health in adulthood" (Steiner, Sheremenko, Lesesne, Dittus, Sieving, Ethier, 2019). The possibility of remote learning or socially distanced in-person instruction raises the question of how to create a supportive school environment when classroom discourse, in-school programming, and extracurricular activities are greatly reduced.

Without prioritizing student well-being, students will not be able to focus and engage with the planned activities, and no learning will occur. To combat this issue, it is crucial that teachers create and implement a tool that fosters healthy student-teacher relationships. According to John Hattie, "without students' sense that there is a reasonable degree of 'control', sense of safety to learn, and sense of respect and fairness that learning is going to take place, there

is little chance that much positive is going to occur" (Hattie, 2012). To create this environment in a virtual format or in a socially-distanced atmosphere, teachers can create a survey to check in daily with students.

When creating a survey it is important to select a platform that will be easy for students to access on their own so they are more likely to engage. When I created a quick survey to implement with my students while remote learning during the coronavirus pandemic, I developed a short Google form, and posted in my Google classroom accounts for my students to easily access. To incorporate a research-based social and emotional learning approach in my survey, I based my form on the RULER Mood Meter developed at Yale University. Figure 1 shows the mood meter I developed based on Yale University's tool. I placed this image at the top of my survey with directions for students to select one term that describes how they were feeling that day. After selecting one of the terms, students explained why they chose that word and then indicated whether they'd like a follow up with me. If so, I sent a personalized email to students with a compliment and asked if there was anything else they'd like to discuss. By keeping the survey short and providing an opportunity for a follow up conversation, I was able to keep in contact with students, ensure that they were doing well, and support them as much as possible.

Figure 1 RULER Mood Meter



Make it Clear

It can be difficult for students to engage on their own if they feel they can't be successful or don't have the support they need to experience that success. This is where teacher clarity comes into play. According to John Hattie, "The more transparent the teacher makes the learning goals, the more likely the student is to engage in the work needed to meet the goal. Also, the more the student is aware of the criteria for success, the more the student can see and appreciate the specific actions that are needed to attain these criteria" (Hattie, 2012). Now more than ever, students need to know why they are learning what they are, how they can learn it, and what they are to know and be able to do.

To establish clarity, teachers need to provide their students with learning intentions and success criteria. Good learning intentions, "are those that make clear to the students the type or level of performance that they need to attain, so that they understand where and when to invest energies, strategies, and thinking, and where they are positioned along the trajectory towards successful learning" (Hattie, 2012). These statements are viewed as the long-term targets that are directly pulled from standards and can be written in student-friendly language. Success criteria on the other hand, can be viewed as short-term goals and as a checklist for students to determine when they have accomplished what they are supposed to. When establishing success criteria, it is important to remember that "we must not make the mistake of making success criteria relate merely to completing the activity or a lesson having been engaging and enjoyable; instead, the major role is to get the students engaged in and enjoying the challenge of learning" (Hattie, 2012). Students need to understand the importance of the learning journey and be able to envision themselvesp meeting the learning intention.

Figure 2 is an example of a Google slide displaying the learning intention and success criteria for a science

Figure 2 Google Slide

lesson. While remote learning, each daily assignment started with a slide containing the learning intention and success criteria. Making these accessible and achievable ensured that students would view them and feel that they could reach the intended goal.

Timely Feedback

Students should have access to a plethora of formative assessments where they receive information about their progress toward an intended goal. These should not count toward the final course grade, as they are meant to update students on their current knowledge and skill acquisition trajectory. Students who are on the path to mastery of the learning intention should be notified that they are making adequate progress, and students who need additional support should be provided that as well. John Hattie argues that to make feedback effective, "teachers must have a good understanding of where the students are, and where they are meant to be—and the more transparent they make this status for the students, the more students can help to get themselves from the points at which they are to the success points, and thus enjoy the fruits of feedback" (Hattie, 2012). While all teachers would agree that feedback is an important aspect of learning, it is often diminished due to the lack of time available, particularly in a remote environment. To address this concern, a rubric should be created for assessments so teachers can provide more timely feedback in an efficient manner.

The rubric should be available for students to see, and it should be standards-based so the provided feedback focuses on students' learning and current understanding as opposed to a specific score. This way, students are more likely to pay attention to the statements and understand if they need to make changes or if they are on the path to mastery. I like to include a category that extends learning for students so instruction can be differentiated, and students who wish to attempt learning beyond mastery can do so. By utilizing formative assessments and feedback as a tool for improvement, students have opportunities to make changes before completing a graded summative assessment.

Concluding Thoughts

Despite the obvious challenges of remote learning and socially distanced in-person instruction, teachers have the ability to make the best of an incredibly difficult situation. Creating clarity by providing detailed learning intentions and success criteria ensures that students can see themselves succeeding. Providing timely and efficient feedback through standards-based rubrics guarantees that students understand where they are in their learning and where they are in relation to the learning intention. This also allows them to make the necessary changes before demonstrating their knowledge for a grade on a summative assessment. Of course, all of this can only be accomplished if we first tend to our students' most basic needs and continue to create and foster strong relationships. While teaching through a pandemic isn't easy, educators still have the power to help their students.

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An Interview with Jean Eddy

President & CEO, American Student Assistance (ASA)

Tell us about ASA and what makes it unique.

American Student Assistance (ASA) is a national nonprofit that is committed to helping students make informed choices to achieve their education and career goals. We want to help all students—starting in middle school—discover their interests and skills, explore education and careers, experiment through hands-on opportunities, and execute a plan for life after high school.

We are unique in our approach. In addition to reaching students in classrooms and community-based organizations and through partnerships, we connect with young people *directly*—on their phones and through social media. By making tools and resources available where students are already spending their time, we're enabling them to direct their own journeys on their own terms.

Why do you feel it's important to start career exploration in the middle grades?

The case for starting career exploration and self-discovery earlier than high school is well-documented, although not widely practiced. In addition to improved school engagement and motivation, some of the benefits of starting the career exploration process in the middle grades include:

Younger students are more curious and open-minded about the possibilities ahead of them. *The optimism of youth can yield earnest conversations about a student's true passions before cost or time considerations become an issue.*

Middle school students want to start career exploration early! *Research shows that middle school students are driven by relevance in their learning. They become increasingly motivated in their studies when they can understand how their lessons relate to the real world. Connecting their learning to real life feeds their hunger for opportunities to start exploring options and planning for the future.*

High school is stressful and involves weighty decisions. *As students rapidly approach life in the "real world" and shoulder more responsibility, they have little room to think about their own interests and identity in planning for their futures. Starting career exploration in middle school gives them time to form their own opinions about what should come next before additional pressures set in.*

What role does ASA play in the career exploration arena for middle school students?

One way we're impacting students is by providing grants to fund career and interest exploration curriculum in middle schools. We love to see students uncover passions that may lead to career pathways, or even when they find subjects they have no interest in! We see either outcome as a win because they're learning about themselves with plenty of time to adjust before committing to a field of study or a specific career path.

In addition to grant funding, we have a strong network of partners, including associations like AMLE, community-based organizations, businesses, and nonprofits, to scale solutions and broaden our student reach and impact.

We also conduct research to gain first-hand insights into Gen Z and to assess what parents,

teachers, and school counselors think about career exploration. We also advocate at the state and federal level to promote policies that empower young people to explore their options and get hands-on experience that can translate into practical and affordable plans for life after high school. Finally, we take a digital approach to help young people start thinking about their futures, including our newest mobile experience, ASA Futurescape, which enables young people to explore thousands of education and career paths.

Can ASA's programs be beneficial in a virtual learning environment?

Yes! We know that digital is now and the future, so ASA is investing in ways to bring career exploration to students wherever they are. As I mentioned, ASA Futurescape is our mobile platform for middle and high school students, enabling them to explore thousands of education and career paths on their smart phones. In the first four months since we launched Futurescape, we've surpassed one million users across the country—representing every state and nearly every major city. We encourage educators and administrators to share this platform with students to help them take control of their exploration process and discover their options.

Additionally, we support piloting programs using the Nepris career exploration virtual platform, which helps students connect with and learn about careers from industry professionals. When students make connections—in person or virtually—they build important social capital and learn critical information about career paths and the type of education they need to fulfill their dreams.

How can ASA be a resource to principals, administrators, and teachers?

We want to support educators and administrators by serving as a convener to share best practices and lessons learned about implementing career exploration programs at the middle school level. Our current and past grant recipients are now serving as an informal advisory council, and the information they provide to us and to each other is extremely valuable and timely.

How would ASA interact with and benefit AMLE members?

ASA and AMLE's members share similar values when it comes to ensuring students have meaningful learning experiences in middle school. AMLE and its members value integrity, collaboration, and future-thinking, which align with ASA's approach to creating career exploration opportunities for students. Through our grant-making efforts, we're supporting in-school experiences like our collaboration with World of Work and the Cajon Valley Union School District in California. Our team is also working with nearly a dozen schools across Massachusetts in their efforts to promote in-person and virtual learning opportunities through field trips, new career exploration curriculum, and experiential learning programs like Project Lead the Way.

Our hope is that more educators and schools will be inspired by these efforts and engage with us in thinking about how to create new programs and models that can blend classroom learning with hands-on career exploration. We encourage AMLE members to share their ideas and good thinking with us.

For more information about ASA and ASA Futurescape, a mobile experience that helps students explore thousands of education and career paths, visit **www.asa.org/about-us asafuturescape.org/**


By Rick Wormeli & LeAnn Nickelsen

Key to Motivation: Student Agency

Keeping learning relevant and engaging by putting middle school students in charge

Note: Student Agency is a HUGE part of middle school identity and success. For this issue's column, I've asked education expert, LeAnn Nickelsen, to join me in presenting the case for elevating its importance in our teaching during the pandemic, and for practical tips on how to build it with our students. – RCW

The concerns grew louder in early September of this year as many schools switched suddenly from in-person teaching to full-time, remote instruction due to a local COVID-19 surge: *Students just don't care about attending online sessions, and they aren't turning in their assignments.* Upon closer reflection, however, it wasn't so much a matter of students being irresponsible in their studies as it was a reflection of their sudden reality amidst the unrelenting coronavirus storm.

Not only were teachers battling the decline in student participation that began during last year's emergency teaching and the typical proficiency slumps of summer, but their students were facing continued trauma with forced social distancing, evictions, canceled rituals/sports/performances/clubs, exacerbated inequities in access to schooling, illness and death of loved ones, parents' job loss, and for some, newly abusive family life, increased opioid addictions, insufficient sleep, increased anxiety and depression, and a very real sense that those they trust

to help them through all this were just as lost as they were. Teachers did the best they could, and did even better than they thought they could, but it still wasn't enough for some.

Yes, we can expect a "COVID slide" in student achievement this year and in the years to come. In fact, "preliminary COVID slide estimates suggest students will return in the fall of 2020 with roughly 70% of the learning gains in reading relative to a typical school year. In mathematics, however, students are likely to show much smaller learning gains, returning with less than 50% of the learning gains and in some grades, nearly a full year behind what we would observe in normal conditions" (Kuhfield & Tarasawa, 2020).

Last year and now in the new year, teachers have responded heroically and creatively to these concerns, taking up the steep challenges of teaching students who are learning from their homes. They've created unique projects, re-vamped their instructional designs, collaborated on redesigning curriculum, provided students with materials, scheduled virtual learning lessons throughout the day, delivered meals along with lessons of the week, called students daily, taught lessons via online platforms while parenting their own children, added humor to learning experiences to create community, retaught content as needed, provided feedback in a variety of helpful ways, and some have installed MIFI (mobile Wi-Fi units) in neighborhoods and apartment complexes or driven buses into these locations so students could have Wi-Fi access for the school year. Of course, high-poverty districts have even deeper challenges due to lack of supplies, food, medical care, and access to technology while also having more truancy issues and intense trauma generated by existing inequities. These same issues can be found in rural and urban communities as well (EdWeek Research Center Survey, 2020). Against the odds, educators have worked hard to meet their students' needs, and they continue to do an amazing job.

Today, and for at least the next two years, there will likely be a need for remote instruction for some or all of our students who cannot attend in-person schooling due to lack of a viable vaccine and antibody tests, or who have suppressed immune systems, family issues caused by the pandemic, or other challenges. Teachers may not be able to be in their own classrooms themselves due to similar issues. The negative impact on the teaching-learning dynamic is stark and unsettling, and among the most concerning: the lack of student engagement with their own learning.

Many of us rely on time spent physically together, especially at the beginning of the year, to get know each other, create connections, and commit to one another's success. And being together regularly, we adjust our interactions as we learn more about our students in order to ensure continued success and connection. With new students in each physically distanced school year, however, we are left adrift, as those opportunities are gone. Urgently, then, we look for insight on how to engage students in learning when we are so regrettably detached from them. Going forward, we suggest one of the most effective responses is proactive student agency.

What is Student Agency?

Student agency is when students self-initiate and persevere in their own learning through partnership with others and empowerment. To do this, they co-design goals, tasks/methods, and criteria for success for resolving challenges and accomplishing identified learning goals. Critical to these processes are self-reflection and feedback from peers and teachers, all helping students monitor their own progress and guiding the next steps in learning.

Agency, then, is not one event or factor, but rather a continuous cycle of growing and learning based on students' interests, background knowledge/experiences, and what they perceive is meaningful to them. There is a passion, flow, and initiative to keep learning until goals are met or new ones are formed, even when confronted with serious hurdles along the way.

Teachers affect student agency significantly by questioning teacher-centered instruction and by planning instruction in such a way that elicits student voice, choice, and empowerment to act upon what is learned and valued. We've known for years that motivation is not something we do to students but rather something we create with them. When we partner with our students in their learning, both our instruction and their personal investment in learning improve.

In her 2018 article, "Part 1: What Do You Mean When You Say 'Student Agency'?" Jennifer Davis Poon states how important it is to student agency to make sure goals are, "advantageous to the student," continuing with the pointed concern that this, "calls into question what gets counted as a worthwhile goal and who gets to make that determination." In addition, she reminds us that, "Once a direction is set, students don't just gaze out the window of the bus. They drive. This…invokes existential concepts such as voice, choice, free will, freedom, individual volition, self-influence, and self-initiation."

Figure 1 Sample of Theory and Research Studies for Motivational Elements Key to Student Agency

Theory/Research	Explanation
Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development and Well-Being (Deci and Ryan, 1985).	• Researchers from University of Rochester found that humans have the innate need to grow. Growth is determined by the need to be competent and master skills; the need to connect and relate to others and have a sense of belonging; and the need for autonomy or a sense of control over goals and behaviors.
Self-Efficacy Theory (SET) (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997) and D. H. Schunk (1989)	• Students show up to our learning environments with self-images of their competence levels with implicit and explicit messages their parents, siblings, caregivers, friends, culture, etc. have given to them. Others' beliefs about them affect their own beliefs and motivational levels to accomplish tasks.
Attribution Theory (Weiner, 1974, 1980) and Internal Locus of Control which led to Growth Mindset theory by Dr. Carol Dweck (2006)	• "Causal attributions determine affective reactions to success and failure" (Weiner, 1980). Our locus of control, internal or external, greatly affect the quality of our motivation. • "In a **fixed mindset**, children believe their basic abilities, their intelligence, and their talents are just fixed traits. They have a certain amount and there is no more. Their goal is to look smart all the time and never look dumb. In a **growth mindset**, children understand that their talents and abilities can be developed through effort, good teaching, and persistence. They don't necessarily think everyone's the same or anyone can be Einstein, but they believe everyone can get smarter if they work at it" (Dweck, 2006).
Student Self-Assessment, Student Self-Reported Grades, Student Expectations, Assessment-Capable Learners, or Student Visible Learners (He has several labels for this concept) has an effect size of 1.44 (very significant impact on student achievement) (Meta-Analyses from John Hattie, 2012)	• To achieve 1.44 effect size, students must set a goal, receive tools to assess how they are doing towards that goal, be given time and tools to reflect on their progress toward that goal, and then be given time and feedback to correct and change their understanding, their thinking, and/or their work to get closer or exceed that goal.
Research cited in *Power of Voice in Schools* by Russ Quaglia, Kristine Fox, Lisa Lande and Deborah Young, "Chapter 1: Hindsight Helps Us Move Forward," ASCD, 2020	• Harvard study indicates student agency important for developing basic skills (Ferguson, Phillips, Rowley, & Friedlander, 2015). • Connection between student voice and engagement (Fisher, Frey, Quaglia, Smith, & Lande, 2018; Mitra, 2008; Rudduck, 2007) • "Consulting students about teaching and learning results in (1) a stronger sense of membership (the organizational dimension) so students feel more positive about school and (2) a stronger sense of respect and self-worth (the personal dimension) so students feel positive about themselves." – (Michael Fielding & Jean Rudduck, 2002).
Daniel Pink in his famous work, *Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us* (2009).	• Pink synthesizes over 50 years of research about intrinsic motivation. He found the following three components to motivate people for lasting results: autonomy (people desire to control their work); mastery (people want to improve and eventually master what they are doing); and purpose (people have a strong desire to be part of something bigger than they are).
Cognitive Science – Dopamine Many researchers (one listed below) Di Domenico, Stefano and Ryan, Richard M. (2017, March). The emerging neuroscience of intrinsic motivation: A new frontier in self-determination research. *Front. Human Neurosci.,* 24 March 2017 https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2017.00145	• When the nucleus accumbens and central striatum areas in the brain (along the medial prefrontal cortex) are stimulated electronically, then a chemical release can occur that brings on feelings and behaviors of seeking, expecting, wondering, and ultimately, motivating us to respond. One chemical that is released is called dopamine and has the nickname, The Motivational Neurotransmitter. • Researchers found that when we reflect on success and point out the steps of that success, the brain secretes dopamine, which yields moderate euphoria and acuity, thus motivating the brain to want to do that again. • Choice increases students' levels of intrinsic motivation, which supports effort and perseverance in academic task (Willis, 2019).

The positive motivational impact of developing student agency involves multiple elements, each with a significant theory and research base, let alone anecdotal evidence. A very brief sample of these studies are included in Figure 1.

The Bottom Line: Providing and designing opportunities of ownership for students as well as self-assessment, autonomy, celebration, descriptive feedback, knowing the why of learning, creating competence and multiple paths to mastery, and challenging our beliefs all contribute to intrinsic motivation. Bundled together, these components yield student agency.

Developing Student Agency, Especially in a Remote Instruction World

In his 2015 piece, "10 Tips for Developing Student Agency," Tom Vander Ark, includes suggestions for teachers as they develop student agency, including caring for students' emotional well-being but not so much as to coddle them, including their lives and perspectives in lessons while keeping students focused on learning goals, making instructional experiences interesting, facilitating cogent content, helping students with long-term memory processing, coaching students in their own self-monitoring, pushing students to think flexibly and substantively, and helping them see the connection between their efforts and achieving things they value.

We propose a BOSS framework for partnering with students to create their agency in learning. We want the students to be in charge (the BOSS) of their own learning while we partner, facilitate, and coach them toward authentic learning experiences. Student agency grows while we help students foster beliefs and mindsets that elicit ownership, feedback, reflection, and success celebrations with next step action plans.

Beliefs: Cultivate self-efficacy and growth mindset. Since mindsets drive our behaviors all day long, this is where we start. It's not so much a specific step, however, as it is an ongoing, constantly changing effort based on interactions with others, our subjects, our knowledge of students' developmental processes and how they find meaning, and students' attitudes about the subject. Beliefs and mindsets drive the rest of the student agency elements.

Ownership: Co-design goals that are challenging and needed, including criteria for success, and plans for achieving those goals through coaching. There is maximum emphasis here on the student's voice and choice. The more that students co-design their lessons, learning tasks, and criteria for success, the more they take interest and engage in learning. We invite their ideas, interests, cultures, and ultimately, their voice and plans for accomplishing mediated goals, which becomes a partnership for helping students monitor progress, solve problems, and move their work forward. Dr. Russ Quaglia, founder of Quaglia for School Voice and Aspirations, synthesized valuable research about student voice value and their motivation levels (2016): He found that when students believe they have a voice in their school, they are seven times more likely to be academically motivated than students who don't believe they have a voice.

We've compiled a list of ways to ensure students' voices are heard throughout our schools and classrooms. Please see the specific practices for cultivating student voice and choice in the next section.

Self, Peer, and Teacher Feedback & Reflection: Provide co-designed clear criteria with students, modeling how to self-reflect and peer assess using that criteria. Provide time and techniques to guide students toward more reliable self-feedback and reflection that invokes thoughtful analysis of progress thus far, which then leads to helpful next steps in learning and growth, not comparison, status, or defensiveness. For specific principles and techniques on effective feedback, watch "Descriptive Feedback Techniques," Part 1 and part 2 created by Rick on YouTube and available at www.rickwormeli.com, and see the work of Susan Brookhart, Bill Ferriter, Starr Sackstein, Garnet Hillman, Mandy Stalets, Shirley Clarke, John Hattie, Connie Moss, Douglas Fisher, Nancy Frey, Joe Hirsch, James and Jill Nottingham.

Success Celebrations and/or Next Steps Action Plan: With dopamine's help, success breeds success. So, let's model how to reflect on success, even celebrate it, and find meaning in every step—both large and small—towards achieving our goals. Let's make progress visible, denoting milestones achieved. We can also model how to respond when any one or more steps were not successful. Here we promote the oft-shared interpretation of F.A.I.L. as, "First Attempt in Learning," and see mistakes as stepping stones to success, not inescapable pits. As we positively affirm student progress and encourage students to do the same, they drop their singular focus on their weaker areas as a statement of their permanent plight, and instead, they see themselves as capable problem-solvers and goal attainers.

To move into a mindset that facilitates student choice and voice in their learning, focus on intentionality: Be ready at any moment to listen to students and expect to learn something from them. Plan information processing points, discussions, and sharing times throughout every lesson and take care to really notice what students say and do. Then, give their words, concerns, and questions serious consideration and react in a way that demonstrates that their voice merits response from those who care for them. This is deeply validating.

As we move through our lessons, whether they be done remotely or in person, we can invite student voice and choice, implementing practices that give students a stake in their own learning environment, topics of learning, and progression.

Classroom Management Tools that Invite Choice and Voice

When students experience voice opportunities, they are more likely to experience value and self-worth which in turn builds self-regulation and behavior management (Quaglia & Corso, 2014). When teachers give multiple opportunities for voice, they are declaring that they have enough respect for students that they want to know what they are thinking. It takes time, effort, and intentionality to build trusting relationships with mutual respect. Here are a few ideas:

- Give weekly proof that you know them as individuals and honor what they bring to learning's table. This includes spending time getting to know them outside of the basic interactions in our lessons and integrating what we know of their lives and culture into our lessons. It's worth the extra effort here.
- Empower students with specific roles in learning and classroom management, including responsibility for materials management, work updates, curating web content, committees for improvement, community service, resolving conflicts as they arise, and arranging for guest speakers/ trainers to do presentations for the class.
- Constantly invite students to design and take social and emotional climate surveys to improve the school and classroom.
- Provide learning experiences in which students "try on" different voices as they explore this growing element to their identity. Allow them to change their voice if they feel what they are doing isn't their genuine selves or is a little too revealing. For example, they might initially explain a science concept using scholarly words and phrasing that sounds like a newscaster, but it doesn't really sound like them, so invite them to describe the concept as if explaining it to their younger brother, using familiar words and comparisons. In some projects, they can make responses based on specific models of writing, thinking, and art, and in other projects, use different models in those same areas. Eventually, they outgrow these models and start using in their own voice the elements of those models that resonate most with how they'd like to be perceived.
- Ask them to create their own Learning Profiles to determine their interests within upcoming units, their learning preferences, how life is going, etc. When you take the time to care and truly want to understand how they are doing (personally and in school), student agency forms.
- Allow students opportunities for flexible seating, standing when they need to stand, or moving to a better location to see or hear the learning. As we teach our students about their brains and how important blood flow to the brain is, we hope they can take care of their movements without distracting others (yes, there will need to be parameters around these opportunities).
- Explicitly teach leadership skills so students can be better decision makers to solve community, school, and classroom problems.
- Consider using restorative justice techniques for classroom discipline. See https://edut.to/3jJidiH and https://bit.ly/358ghwe
- Build executive function skills. For more on this, see, "Looking at Executive Function," (*AMLE Magazine*, August 2013), located here: https://bit.ly/3jKMI7Q

Content Acquisition and Processing Ideas

When schools increase the amount of student voice in changing curriculum and instruction, research found that student learning improves (Oldfather, 1995; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). There are many ways to improve student voice while planning lessons, units of studies, and assessments, and when determining the criteria for successful learning:

- Invite students to choose topics of personal interest with which you can integrate your subject standards.

- Create a pre-assessment, interest survey, or idea contributor before you start the unit in order to know students' background knowledge, their passions within the unit's topic, questions that intrigue them, and ideas that would make the unit more relevant and fun.
- Prime their brain before units or lessons begin so that when you activate prior knowledge at the beginning of your lesson, all students will have something to activate. Activating prior knowledge also sends the message of respecting what they know and what they want to learn. It allows teachers to personalize the learning.
- Invite students to choose a favored technology to investigate and express their learning as long as it allows for clear representation of evidence of the standard.
- Ask students to moderate online discussions or curate Google docs and similar artifacts.
- Teach descriptive feedback techniques that they can use for themselves and with one another. Ask students, for example, to write a letter to you describing where their effort on a particular assignment matches the exemplar provided and where it differs. Place a dot at the end of a line of students' writing or next to a mistake in a math problem (or use a simple highlighting swipe), to indicate a mistake is present, but don't identify what the issue is. Ask students to identify and correct the mistake(s) made. You can also ask students to create item analysis charts they can use to reflect on their test performance, they can respond to the three basic questions of feedback: *What is my learning target? Where am I now (or, what progress have I made so far?), and what do I need to do now to achieve my goal?*, and they can see the fruits of their labor and their capacity to grow via the classic reflection on a newly learned school topic: *I used to think…, but now I think….*
- Ask students for proposals for the products they will create to demonstrate their mastery of a topic and accept those alternative products as long as they demonstrate the required evidence of learning.
- Let students decide which method or assignment to use to practice the newly learned content between now and the next class meeting.
- Help students build and maintain portfolios (e-portfolios) of their work over time, including reflections on each piece.
- As you include access to knowledge and sense-making in your lessons, ensure processing knowledge and meaning-making as well. It's not just about memorizing the five protections under the First Amendment; it's knowing our rights and our responsibilities when we're stopped by a police officer for a traffic violation.
- Invite students to research a question of interest directly or tangentially related to the subject of your course right now. Let students co-teach, or actually teach, the full lesson or a sub-section such as vocabulary terms to classmates (with your facilitation, of course).
- Let them help design the criteria for success (the qualities of the formative assessment that ensure mastery of the learning target) for a project or learning task.
- Build a cause meaningful to students into the curriculum–something for which they'd like to advocate in their own lives or communities.
- Provide an audience for student demonstrations of learning other than you or students' parents. Younger students make a great audience for older student's efforts, as do community organizations, publishing/displaying students' creative content, and recorded performances.
- Let students choose a contemporary novel for your novel studies or as a companion text to the assigned reading
- Give students two sticky notes before the lesson begins and invite them to write two questions that pop into their minds during the lesson (this activity can be done before, during, and/or after the learning). Depending on student age, sort the questions into broader categories and design a plan to answer these valuable questions.
- Ask students to connect with a professional in the field in the subject area of your course and explore how course content is applied.
- Co-create Likert scales to see where students are with the learning tasks.
- Let students start out processing information or demonstrating learning one way and have the option to go a different direction if they get a better idea while working.
- Implement and maintain a robust exploratory program, inviting students to try new and different topics of interest over the year to get a sense

of them and discover previously unrecognized interests and talents.

- Invite students to generate metaphors for the science, math, writing, engineering, art, music, health, government, legal, media, or philosophical concept you're teaching and one of their favorite sports, hobbies, or passions. Alternatively, ask students to portray abstract ideas via physically constructed models.
- Ask students to add their own voice to projects and assignments: If we left their name off the project, would we know who created it?
- Teach students empowerment tools and encourage their application in their studies. For example, teach students about debate, deductive/inductive reasoning, and logical fallacies, then ask them to conduct debates and write argumentative papers incorporating those tools. Teach them how to paraphrase others' work, memorize text/information, how to capture gist (summarize) cogently, and how to think divergently and analytically using Webb's Depth of Knowledge, Frank Williams' Taxonomy of Creative Thinking, David Hyerle's Thinking Maps, and Sketch-noting. *Summarization in any Subject*, 2nd Edition (ASCD 2019) by Rick Wormeli and Dedra Stafford is a great place to start, as is teaching students logical fallacies, which can be found here: https://bit.ly/3hEAgoC and here: https://bit.ly/3hIenFe

Let's help middle school students be in charge of their learning to every degree we can so it is as relevant and engaging as possible. Student agency is built through our daily student partnerships, not by yanking students from afar on tattered ropes to which they cling and watching them bounce and skid along harsh pavement toward an anxious future. Distress, which many of us feel right now, is really chronic stress in which we feel out of control of our lives and learning. Facilitating student agency gives some of that control back to students, and hence, distress is mitigated and engagement resumes.

Teachers find students' rising agency exciting as well. Heck, it's a big reason we entered the profession in the first place: To watch students discover their own talents and soar. So, invite them in. William Blake (1757-1827) reminds us, "No bird soars too high, if he soars with his own wings." Middle school is exactly the right place to build sturdy wings, launch bravely into the new breeze, and find hope in what's to come. AM

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By Amber Chandler

We're All First Year Teachers

Stop trying to be the "perfect teacher" and just be yourself

Every fall I teach a differentiated instruction class at Canisius College for teachers who are pursuing their master's degree in differentiation. I LOVE this class because they are my people: they get the need for differentiated instruction and differentiated behavior expectations, and they embrace the idea that every student really deserves their own educational plan. However, at some point in the semester, I have to have "the talk."

"The talk" happens when one of my student's lives goes off the rails. We begin each class with what I have dubbed a "coffee break" because every single student walks in with their caffeine fix to get them through a second shift of school, having already taught all day, and now getting to be with me for several hours. It's informal, but it allows us to check-in with each other. Inevitably, after weeks of developing trust, someone's had a tough day and bursts into tears.

At some point, the teacher who had a terrible-horrible-no good-very-bad-day says something like this, "I'm just not cut out for this. Everyone else is so calm. The teachers at my school are better than me." Or, "My observation is going to be horrible. And of course, I'm right after Little Ms. Perfect." This is when I interject with "the talk," which I will share here, as I believe all of us are back to being those first-year teachers who question ourselves.

You're all here because you believe that everyone deserves to be treated as an individual who is worthy and important. It doesn't matter what talents and strengths, weaknesses and faults, our students bring to the table, we accept them, encourage them, and value them. You have to give yourself the same treatment. Sure, you might not be the teacher who has the best tech integration, or the Pinterest classroom, but you have the passions that you bring with you, your philosophies about the value of our students, and you do what is best for kiddos. Teddy Roosevelt said, "Comparison is the thief of joy," and that sentiment should be the mantra of our times. The perfect Facebook Family, the staged Instagram selfies, the calculated tweet—we are all guilty of trying to be perfect, but none of us will achieve it. Don't let comparison steal your joy.

For all of us veteran yet new teachers out there, I'd add that you don't have to have a Bitmoji Classroom, but it is totally cool if you do. You don't have to do read alouds in your jammies, unless that's you, which is awesome. You don't have to be anyone but you, the teacher who does what's best for your kiddos. AM

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By Phyllis Fagell

How to Build a Resilient School Community

Three ways to preserve relationships so we emerge stronger together

Right before my son started college, the dean, Kathryn Lively, shared a story with the first-year students. A few years earlier, she had attended a silent meditation retreat where one of the other participants was continuously disruptive. Lively was angry and told the retreat host that the woman was ruining her experience. The host "nodded the way wise people do and walked me back to my mat, then said, Kathryn, she is your experience," she recalled. At the time, she had no idea what he meant. In retrospect, she realized that the lesson was exactly what he had said. She wasn't getting the experience she wanted, which was to sit in silence. The experience she got, however, was "learning to make peace with unmet expectations and to take the lesson that it's always up to me."

This is not the year educators, middle schoolers, or their parents and caregivers imagined. But it's the experience we've got, and we can either use this time to grieve what we've lost, or to learn to sit with discomfort and adapt. Students will do as well as the adults who raise and educate them. Here are three ways we can work together to create a more resilient school community.

Reframe the pandemic as a hero's journey.

Most of us will experience three to five lifequakes, or massive transitions with aftershocks that last for years, says Bruce Feiler, author of "Life is in the Transitions." In order to manage those traumas, he told me, it helps to understand that no one's narrative is linear, and the main character in a story isn't the hero. "It's the wolf, the tornado, the pandemic," he explained. The hero emerges because of the villain. He was referencing the hero's journey, something I do when I'm counseling a child who has been bullied. I draw from stories such as the Harry Potter series and *Wonder* to demonstrate that all heroes go on an adventure, face conflict and adversity, and emerge changed. What's unusual right now is that we're all getting pummeled at the exact same time.

To build your own resilience, reflect on family members' oscillating narratives—the grandmother who survived the Holocaust or the parent who was the first in your family to go to college. In the classroom, share biographies and examples from history that underscore that people can be strengthened by adversity, and encourage your students to journal about their own ups and downs.

Boost everyone's sense of competency.

When people are stretched thin and forced to leave their comfort zone, they're more likely to unravel. We know that plenty of parents feel ill-equipped to supervise their children's remote learning, and that teachers feel tremendous pressure to rapidly transform their practice. Administrators feel the burden of weighing competing mediocre options while buoying their staff. Students are trying to learn new technologies and ways of interacting with peers at an age when they're painfully aware of how they stack up to others. No one signed up for this, and many people are having a crisis of confidence. During a Zoom town hall meeting just before school started, one parent asked my head of school, "How will you be assessing us parents as teachers?" The administrator looked startled. "If you're asking what I *think* you're asking," she told them, "we won't be assessing you as teachers at *all*. We don't expect you to have the same skill set as our teachers!"

When people feel competent, they're less on edge, more forgiving and more self-compassionate. To that end, schools can expand parent education programming, offering sessions on topics such as coping strategies, social media wellness, technology and logistics, and the developmental phase. They can provide teachers with relevant and timely training, too, and make them aware of all the ways they can access emotional support. Educators can set students up for success as well. That doesn't mean lowering expectations, which would have the opposite effect. Rather, we can play to kids' strengths, offer flexibility in how we let them demonstrate learning, hold them accountable without being punitive, and work with them to establish reasonable and attainable goals.

We also can double down on spreading positive feedback throughout the community. Teachers can alert parents when children take academic risks or do something kind for a classmate. Parents and administrators can make an extra effort to notice when teachers inspire students or forge strong connections. Teachers can reassure parents that they're doing just fine and let them know that they appreciate their collaboration. This also is a time to encourage leaders within the community—whether it's the principal, the head of the PTSA, a department chair, a counselor, a teacher, or a staff development specialist—to help kick off a positive cycle and discourage a culture of complaining. As researchers reported in American Behavioral Scientist (Losada & Heaphy, 2004), everyone is more motivated if the ratio of positive to negative feedback approaches six to one.

Focus on connection and common goals.

No matter what schools do, some people will be dissatisfied with decisions related to everything from reopening plans to scheduling logistics. Add in uncertainty, anguish about the state of the world, and individual concerns about health, safety, and financial security, and it's unlikely that everyone will be on their best behavior. Fear breeds anxiety, which in turn can breed impatience, judgment, and anger. But if members of a community turn on one another instead of focusing on connection, they'll only erode trust. Many teachers already are reeling from the hostility that's been unleashed on them in recent months, and no one benefits when teachers experience a drop in morale.

It's harder to get different stakeholders on the same page when they can't meet or resolve disputes in person, but ironically, that means people are likely to damage relationships right when they need them the most. To boost everyone's empathy during social distancing, schools need to devise creative ways to bring their community together. School counselors and other mental health professionals can facilitate drop-in virtual support groups for parents and educators. Administrators can provide frequent opportunities

for Zoom meet-and-greets. Schools can host parent-educator book clubs. Students can spearhead events, such as food drives or fundraisers, that unite people around a common cause.

In times of crisis, everyone's wellness is inextricably entwined. Research shows that emotions spread across a social network, and we need to take care of one another if we want children to feel centered. Some educators might find themselves temporarily loosening boundaries and helping parents in more targeted or consistent ways. After all, we're Zooming into students' kitchens and living rooms and are literally guests in their homes. To balance out the extra demands, teachers may need to tighten other boundaries, such as the time they start or end their workday.

Recently, I addressed a group of parents at my own school. I shared Lively's retreat anecdote, explaining that it's a story of radical acceptance—of deciding to stop resisting what you can't change. We can't alter our current reality, but we can recognize that it's temporary and situational, and choose to preserve our optimism and relationships and emerge stronger together.

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Teachers change lives.

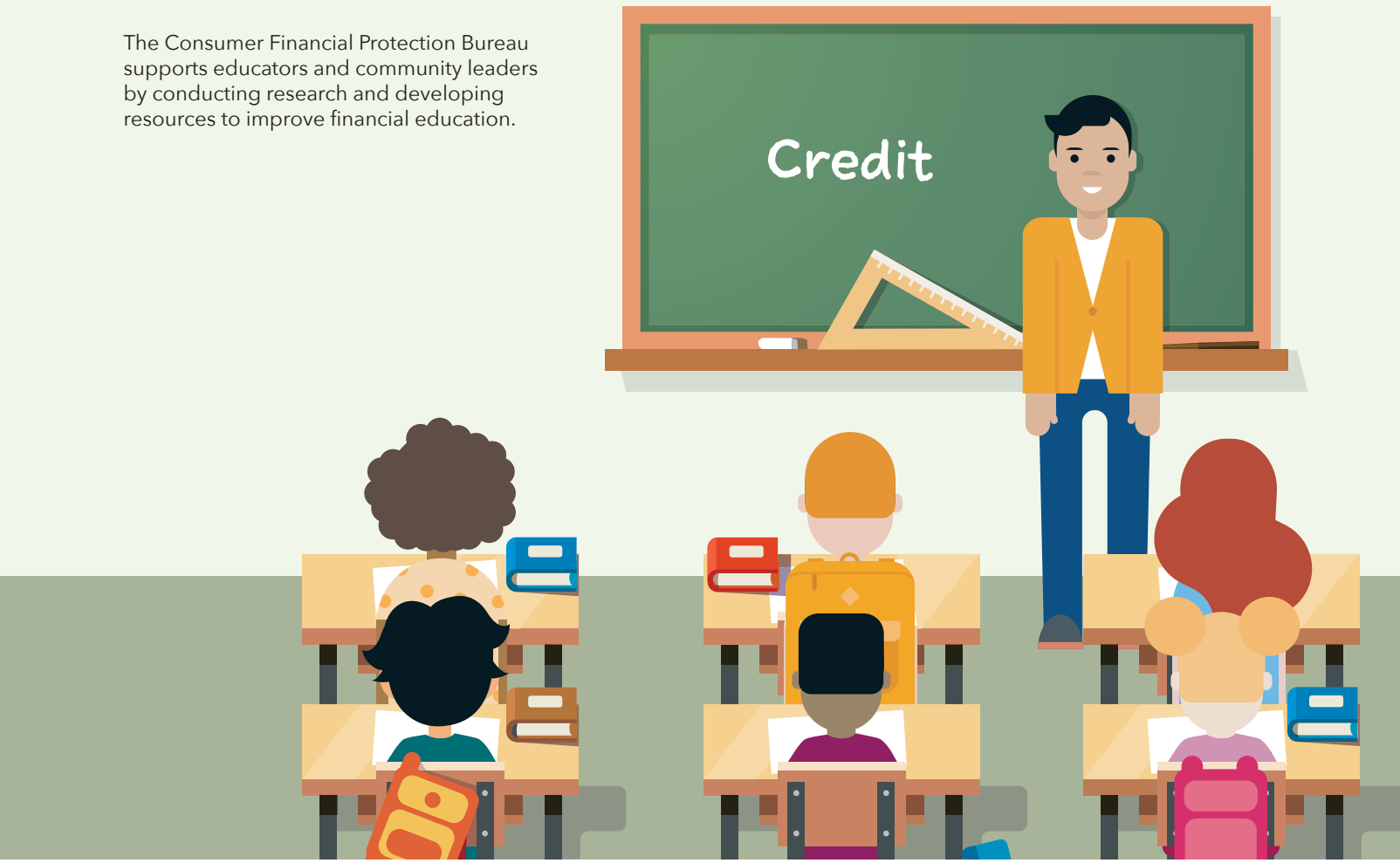
So does financial literacy.

Research shows that adult financial well-being is the result of young people developing financial capability over time. That's why the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau created a website for teachers of all subjects to help incorporate financial education into more classrooms.

Access free, stand-alone activities – designed specifically for middle school – to support students in developing the building blocks of financial capability.

Go to: **www.cfpb.gov/youth-financial-education**

The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau supports educators and community leaders by conducting research and developing resources to improve financial education.



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