

Wednesday, April 30, 2008

Professional Self-Development

"Do's" and "Do Not's" to Wind Down the School Year

May is the "home stretch," the "last inning," the "two minute warning time" of the school year. May is the time when you "make or break" all your efforts for the entire year. And this does not have anything to do with the high-stakes test that interfered (to a lesser or greater extent) with your instruction during the last month or so.

Every minute that you spend with your class in May is a "Midas Touch" golden opportunity for learning. (But, like Midas, you have to be careful!)

The items that you have to attend to as school closes down are urgent. Make sure that these chores and distractions don't interfere with teaching and learning. Final Checkout Leave final checkout tasks until it is time, but, prepare a checklist ahead of time, and in spare moments (you should be so lucky) take care of them with your students' help.

For example: The librarian or media specialist may collect A/V equipment. Tag equipment as you use it this month, and send any broken equipment in early

Textbooks may be collected early. Find out how many days that you will be without textbooks, and schedule lessons and assignments for each of those days. Copy text materials, Internet resources and worksheets as though you were developing a separate lesson plan. (In fact, that is what you are doing. You don't want to be stressed in preparing lessons without resources those last days. Take care of this, a little at a time at the beginning of the month.)

Get all assignments and papers graded. Even bring in papers and have students check work as part of a math class. (A social studies class can vote on answers as students correct the papers, a science class can discuss the "scientific method" as it applies to each answer that they correct, etc.) Take the first week of the month to ensure that your paper grading is up to date. If one or two peripheral assignments end up "lost in the trash at home (not school)" who can complain? If any student notices, give them an "A" for observation and diligence.

Save copies of lessons that were creative, functional and productive. Throw away any marginal materials. You will never have time to correct the flaws or figure out how to salvage those materials next year. (Of course this does not apply to materials that you have written or created yourself. You can always fix and improve those.)

Prepare your purge files early, maybe a few students or a class per day. No student work should remain anywhere except official files. Everything else should evaporate by the first day of the Summer Break

Schedule a culminating activity for every class. And, build preparation and participation for each of these. Allow students to manage and produce as much of the proceeding as possible. And, assign students with the lowest social rank to take key roles

Ensure that the district's Central Office has summer pay information if anything is changing. You want to get paid during the summer, and you don't want to wait until the "last day's rush" and hope that your information makes it through with the flood of other papers that the personnel clerks receive. Send your information early when those clerks have nothing else to do

Prepare a "take home folder, or folders" for yourself. This is everything that you will need for the start of the upcoming school year. Otherwise, you will find yourself returning to school two weeks early (unpaid) to get ready. Your goal is to prepare a package so that you have a cushion of at least one week (maybe two weeks) of assignments and lessons.

Your goal, at the start of the next year: walk in, spend four hours decorating and be ready to teach your first class
Sidebar Classroom Toolkit provides a strategy of classroom project planning and modular materials that make this possible. The idea is to build a library of generic materials that can be used with any assignment. In this way, you create a few generic assessments, build lessons with materials (such as Graphic Organizers) that you can use with multiple assignments, and you teach students procedures for projects and assignment that will be in play for the entire year. The start of school the following year will be relaxed and stress-free if you lay the groundwork ahead of time. Spending a few minutes here and there from the start of the month will pay huge dividends in days retrieved during the days that you might ordinarily have to waste coming back to clean up once school is out
Maximize Learning At the same (parallel) time that you are gearing down with all the non-essential, but urgent trivia, you can maximize student learning

The last month of school is the most productive time of the year. Use it to your students' advantage.

Schedule higher-order thinking skills projects, assignments that you were not free to pursue earlier because the "limited-thinking, high-stakes tests" were in the way. Be creative, reward student thinking and creativity. Allow art and artistic expression, integrate knowledge with lots of journal writing assignments and "reflection-response" time.

May is the time when you can revisit your own ideals, especially the ones concerning the reasons that prompted you to migrate into teaching. Recapture your idealism, and put some of that energy into practice during instruction. Take Cues from your Students And, May is the perfect time to engage students in decision-making, in democratic choice-making, and in collaborative assignment development.

Trust your students to know what they need to study. Connect curriculum goals with students' interests and watch meaning and relevance blossom among the facts and figures of the content-area curriculum.

And, pay attention because you can start the next school year on the same note (conduct a symphony of collaborative, cooperative learning, enjoy the melody of engaged learning), before the high-stakes threat pressurized your learning environment and you are shoved back into the rut of "teaching to the test."

Follow just a few of these suggestions, and you will be at the mall or on the beach days before your colleagues, and they will be back in school days ahead of you while you soak up a bit more sun and lounge next to the pool.

May is the culminating month of a school year of success and achievement. A little focus in the right areas can magnify the benefits of this month for you and your students.

Posted by Classroom Toolkit Newsletter in Professional Self- Development at 02:00