

An Inspirational Message from Ryan Mitchell 2022 Burroughs Wellcome Fund Western Region Teacher of the Year

First, I want to thank each of you for the work you are doing every day. Being an educator is not easy, but you continue to show up for children. That is what makes you not only an educator but a bridge builder and trajectory changer.

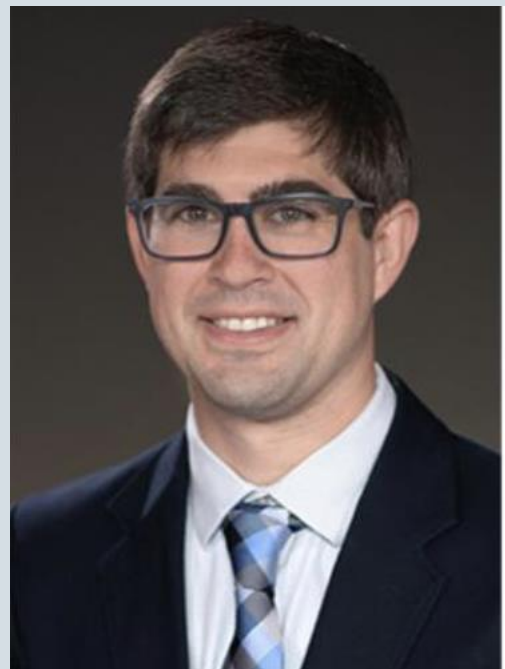
Finish Strong

“Starting strong is good. Finishing strong is epic.”
~Robin Sharma

The end is in sight - sort of. We are in the midst of Spring Breaks, warm weather, and the time of year when you are almost finished! To many, this time of year is a long stretch. During my journey as a public-school student, when this time of year would come around my thoughts would begin to drift to the outside world and the adventures that my friends and I could be getting into. I would dream of beach outings, baseball games, and exploring the woods. All of these daydreams would result in a variety of distractions in the classroom. Each year my father would remind me daily to “finish strong”. As a child, I thought, “Dad wants me to do really well on my tests”. Now as an adult, I realize he meant something entirely different. Have you ever heard a track coach giving instructions to a sprinter about how to finish a race? If you have, you have probably heard them say something close to “run through the finish line”. This type of finishing strong is what my father was referring to. He wasn't asking me to stay focused in class to get excellent results on an exam. He wanted me to engage in the process and give continued and sustained effort.

I have taken these words and applied them to myself now as an educator. But, what does that mean or even look like? In education, there is a lot of emphasis put on the first several weeks of school when it comes to establishing procedures, routines and building relationships with your students. So, finishing strong in those areas means having that same intentionality about building your classroom community in the last weeks of the school year or semester as we did in the first several weeks. It means to continue to actively engage in the process of growing and evolving. Finishing strong as an educator isn't easy with the daily juggling act that we must complete but it is important for student success. The best way to finish strong in your classroom this year is to continue to focus on the whole child.

The reason I became an educator is deeply rooted in relationships. I truly enjoy getting to teach science, social studies, reading, writing, and math in my second-grade classroom, but ultimately, I use all of those content areas as a vehicle to help children realize their potential as people. I use those curriculum-based lessons to intertwine opportunities to form connections and relationships with my students all-year long. Maybe some like math better than reading, maybe others have a vast schema about a reading topic they can share with me and the class, and maybe there are a few who need the extra support in their instruction but ultimately, they just need that attention to feel supported and cared for. Doing this is an all-year thing, but a priority at the end of the year just as much as it is at the beginning. We can finish strong by continuing to build and strengthen relationships with our students. And in turn, that can create an



immeasurable impact. Relationship building is not a one-and-done task, but a continuum that we can consistently build on as we go through the year. This concept of finishing strong within your classroom climate can fall back onto practices you have established and taking opportunities in your day to make it a priority. Some of those ways are:

1. Social-emotional and mental health check-ins.

Kids, just like adults, have a lot going on in their personal lives and they are learning to deal with those emotions and navigate school. Creating a space and time where you can support students through life will not only bolster your classroom community but will certainly allow students to focus on academics after they process their own emotions.

2. End-of-year journals where students can write how they are feeling and share with you.

Students can be afraid to be vulnerable when sharing out loud (Adults too, right?!) Give students a chance to write about what is going on in their life. This powerful activity can strengthen your relationships with individual students and give you valuable information about your students.

3. 1:1 conferences with students about academics.

Goal setting and having asset-minded conferences with students as young as kindergarten will allow students to have a clear vision of how you believe in them and are a support for their academic and non-academic future. It also gives them an opportunity to talk with you individually and feel valued and seen.

4. Morning meetings where students can share what is important or valuable to them.

Carving out the first section of a class period to allow students to discuss their thoughts, feelings, and well-being will give them the opportunity to build empathy for one another. This empathy will build a tight-knit community in your classroom. This time allows students to see that they are seen and heard by their classmates and you.

5. Read Alouds

Read alouds are not just for elementary students. They are a vital part of the emotional development of all children. Reading aloud builds empathy, creates a classroom community, shows diverse perspectives, increases problem-solving skills, and increases vocabulary. Reading books aloud gives your classroom community a chance to bond over a good book!

I'll leave you with this Aristotle quote that I live by: "Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all." We must teach not just the subjects but teach the whole child in order to reach them and make a difference in their education. I encourage you to continue to be the bridge builder and trajectory changer that I know you all are. Thank you for dedicating yourself to the art of teaching and to the students that you serve. Thank you for the year you have given your students so far and remember to finish strong.

BT PD Corner

Fluency is found within the foundational skills in the English/Language Arts Standard Course of Study. The parallel use of reading rate, accuracy, prosody, and comprehension is a critical step when fostering students' oral and silent reading fluency of increasingly complex texts (RF.1-5.5). While the secondary standards do not specifically address fluency, some students in grades 6-12 may need fluency support. Access ready to use resources for fluency for all grade levels in ELA's March Newsletter here: https://bit.ly/NCDPI_BTNL_March.