



Finish the Year Strong

By Becky Ramsey, Public School Representative

When the first days of March roar into the school year like a lion, that growl is loud enough to wake up students' and teachers' thoughts about the end of the school year and summer break. The problem? There are at least three or four months still left, and everyone needs to finish the year strong. This is the time of the year when teachers should check the concepts they have introduced and reviewed to determine exactly where their students have deficiencies.

I do not believe that on day 132 of the year a teacher should always be on day 132 of the curriculum or beyond. A teacher never gets a full classroom of students who are exactly where they should be when they enter her room, nor do students always grasp concepts presented right away. However, I do believe that it is the responsibility of the teacher to be able to say where her students started and what they have accomplished. The teacher should know what concepts they need to introduce, review, and help students master during these last months of this school year to make sure the students are ready for the next year. March is the best time to start the end-of-the-year evaluations to prepare better for what will be next—to finish strong.

Standard-based Report Cards

Many schools are using standards-based report cards rather than A-B-C-D grades for subject matter to show parents what their children have mastered and what they still need to master. It

may be difficult for parents to understand what the standards-based report card is communicating. It has a different format from what a parent received in the past. However, knowing what skills your child needs to work on or has mastered is much more helpful to better prepare your child for what is ahead. Even if your school has letter grade report cards, developing a list of standards that children should master in each unit you cover is a good way to prepare students for end of the year achievement testing. And covering concepts that are definitely needed before going on to the next grade will benefit students. Additionally, using standard lists helps the teacher know how to plan for those last important months of the year.

Such information is helpful for parent/teacher conferences. Understanding what a student needs to master and documenting the student's progress toward mastery can defend a letter grade as well as help a parent see the student's level of proficiency before going on to the next grade. It helps a teacher know how to group students to review, what to emphasize before students take unit or achievement tests, and how to prepare both the students and the teacher to finish strong.

Concept Maps

I like to make visuals that look like a race, with concepts listed, so my students remember the concepts as they head toward a "finish line." Using a concept map with each child for the major subjects helps to identify our focus, group concepts for a unit, and organize the concepts into a hierarchy. If a child has not mastered a specific skill, I will discuss with the child what was accomplished but add the skill that still needs to be mastered for the next unit's "race."

An example is our class needed to master multiplication facts of twos through fives in a unit. As I review an individual child's map with the child, I would start with all the facts that I saw the child had mastered and praise the progress. Then I would add any remaining facts to the next unit's race. Knowing where my students are and where I want them to end up helps me aim towards the goal of accomplishing what is best for each child.

I have teamed up students who have not mastered each concept with students who have it. Students work together to help their friends master what they have learned. Classwork becomes teamwork to accomplish goals, not a competition to see who learned it first.

Finish Strong

The most important part of finishing strong each year is knowing what each student still needs to accomplish. Finishing is not just coming to the last day of school. It is striving to complete what is necessary. Finishing will be different for each child because each child has a different starting point. However, knowing each child's starting point when coming into the classroom and what each child has mastered while present in class can give each child a measure of success and a drive to keep striving.

If the goal is to finish strong, teachers can follow the example of the Apostle Paul. "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:7 NIV).

Becky Ramsey lives in Reynoldsburg, Ohio. She has taught in public and Christian schools. She retired at the end of the 2021-22 school but she continues to volunteer in a local school. You may contact Becky at ramseyfamily2771@gmail.com.