

# IN THE MIDDLE

OHIO MIDDLE LEVEL ASSOCIATION



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OHIO MIDDLE LEVEL  
ASSOCIATION

**IN THE MIDDLE**

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*In the Middle* is the official newsletter of the Ohio Middle Level Association and is published three times per year. Submissions on topics relevant to middle level education are encouraged and should be submitted to newsletter co-editor kristen.lavric@gmail.com.

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## *President's Message*

**Jay Clark**

OMLA President

Principal, Van Buren Middle School



Our eighth grade students write a six-word memoir to start their year in language arts. Being a fan of Twitter-like conciseness, this is a favorite assignment of mine. I take time to really read to understand why students write what they do. These brief glimpses into young adolescents' thoughts often provide me a different perspective than a full-length autobiography might.

One student, who's had a difficult life, abandoned by adults and in trouble at a prior school wrote, "Haven't found the silver lining yet". When his teacher shared this memoir with me, knowing this young man's background, I was breathless for a moment. While it's an insightfully sad message, it also conveys hope that the silver lining is yet to come. What if we weren't aware of this student's family background? How might that change how we interpret his memoir? How can we help him find his strengths and passion?

Finally, one of my favorite memoirs mirrors our growth mindset perfectly: "Started out shaky, now a champion". This student struggled with anxiety, but with dedicated and compassionate teachers and family, he became a confident leader in his class. Isn't this sort of growth, fueled by self evaluation, the ultimate goal for all of our students?

Do yourself and your students a favor: Build relationships and seek to understand students' backgrounds and perspectives. Taking the time to do so will allow you more time to teach your content and students will give more effort in the long run.

I hope to see you at #OMLA2018 in October at Kalahari or sooner at an OMLA regional event or virtually via our monthly #OhioMLA chat! Think boldly and act courageously this school year!



# Transition Days

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Kristina Yako

Northeast Region

Cloverleaf Middle School

For many, school staff opened the school year with marching bands, balloons, red carpets, cheers, high fives and smiles as the students entered their new building for the first time. Everyone could feel the excitement of beginning at a new building. Many school districts had freshman first day or sixth grade first day to acclimate students transitioning from elementary school into the middle school or middle school into high school.

The purpose of the transition day is to reduce any worry students may have before they begin with the entire student body. For many, this was adjusting to their new schedule, meeting their teachers, practicing locker combinations, going on a scavenger hunt to locate key places throughout the building, learning about opportunities that the school offers and ways to become involved, as well as participating in pep rallies to immerse them in the school pride each building has.

Teachers, administrators, community members and student groups led these days to welcome the new groups as they transition into the next phase of their educational journey. As a part of the transition days, many districts had a motivational speaker talk to the students about character, acceptance and belonging.

At Cloverleaf Middle School we welcomed the sixth grade students, who are new to the building with our first ever “sixth grade first day.” The day consisted of all of the teachers, staff and building administrators working together to welcome students into our cafeteria where all of the students received their first Cloverleaf shirt and met with their team. Christopher Milo came to share the “13 Messages of Milo” and share important character attributes. Teachers dressed up to represent their different departments and meet the students. Throughout the day students rotated through stations in the gym to learn more about student groups they could become apart of, took a first day of school picture with Thunderbolt, the school mascot, and learned about their schedule. Student groups helped answer questions about middle school and assist the new sixth graders through the building. We ended the day with a pep rally and team building activities. The day helped to ease any anxiety the students had and helped them not only feel prepared, but that they now belonged to the Cloverleaf Middle School Family.

By the end of the day, students began to feel like they belonged in the school. They felt ready to begin the next day with the rest of the student body to begin their year without the worry of looking for a classroom or opening their lock but focusing on what is really important. Just as research states the importance of getting enough sleep or that breakfast in the most important meal of the day, research also emphasizes a sense of belonging before focus on content can begin.

The goal is simple: to welcome students with enthusiasm on the first day of school, and every day after. Students now know how to get to their classes and understand the school rules, but students should be reminded daily by their advocates in the building that we want them to be here, and that we will do everything in our power to help them be successful; not only on the first day but everyday.

# Back to School for Staff & Students

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Andrew Gibson

North Central Region

Amherst Junior High School

As the days begin to shorten and a crispness returns to the air, it's clear that another Ohio fall is just around the corner, culminating in students returning to school. The beginning of another school year is a time to celebrate and a time to put into action the new and fresh ideas that we have planned and grown more excited about as the summer has come to an end. The new school year is also an opportunity to grow as professionals and to build new relationships with the fresh faces that now fill our classrooms.

Back to school is also an exciting time for students. Many of the new faces that will populate our classrooms and schools are rested and ready to get back to school - an environment that they can trust and rely on for engagement and excitement. School also provides students an opportunity to get back into a set routine that will provide them with stability and safety.

When thinking of this back to school excitement, you can't help but consider the many activities that will provide us the opportunity to form the bonds and relationships necessary for student growth. The significance of knowing our students and then also having our students know we care about them has been discussed at length by well respected educators such as John Hattie in *Visible Learning* and Weston Kieschnick in *Bold School*. Within these first few weeks, the activities we chose tell our students a lot about what's in store for the upcoming school year in our classrooms. Are students having fun? Are they engaged in learning from the first day or are they sitting statically in their seats while the teacher talks to them about homework, discipline, and classroom rules?

A great place to grow your PLN and also grab some really great back to school activities and ideas is Twitter! A quick search found a number of engaging exercises for you to use when welcoming students back to your classroom. One of the first that stood out was from @MarisaEThompson and included groups receiving eleven sheets of paper and nothing else. Students were then given fifteen minutes to build the tallest standing tower. Another fun idea making its rounds on Twitter is from *Teach Like A Pirate* in which Dave Burgess discusses using Play Doh to have students "sculpt" something that represents them. It's a fun and easy activity that goes a long way with students and hits a variety of senses. One of the popular activities at my school, Amherst Junior High, included the use of spaghetti noodles, marshmallows, string, tape and straws. Students then had to work together to construct the

tallest object that they could. Students had a blast trying different ways to build towers taller and modifying other students ideas to make taller structures themselves. You can do puzzles, escape room activities, take music requests, or participate in a four corners activity. The options are endless, and so are the benefits.

Back to school exercises aren't only for students either. They can be great for new administrators and for staffs that have been together for a while. It's always important to grow your culture through getting to know one another on a more personal level. Two activities that I have enjoyed as a staff member were "that's me" and "3 truths & 1 lie." In "that's me" staff tries to think about their personal history, a place they've gone, or something they've done that is unique. If anyone else in the room has shared the same experience they shout "that's me" after the person finished explaining what they have chosen. The best part of this activity is finding things you may have in common with other staff members that you didn't know. It opens doors to new conversations and deeper relationships. "3 truths and 1 lie" can really be any number of truths and one lie. People try to guess which is the lie, and this game is gratifying because again, you can hear funny facts about people that seem like they must be lies. It's another great team building game as you get to know more about your co-workers. It doesn't matter if you are a student, teacher, custodian, or principal, the back to school excitement bug has the potential to jump start all of us and fun, quick activities like the ones above are a great way to start the year! We here at OMLA hope you have a GREAT school year and look forward to seeing you at a regional or state event!

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# *Caring for Kids, Community, and Communication*

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Robb Gonda

Central Region

Hastings Middle School

During the waning moments of the summer season, a coordinated movement takes our nation by storm: the start of another academic school year. From school supply sales to putting the final details on schedules, this is a time for celebration as we look forward to the many events that will define our middle students' lives. To retain the momentum from the early weeks of school, there are three "C's" that every educator should keep in mind on daily basis: Caring, Community, and Communication.

**Caring-** Our middle school students need to feel a strong connection to the adults and school they attend. Whether it is through a formalized process such as advisory, or just a kind word everyone morning from a trusted adult, relationships matter. Kids need to know that someone at school cares about them on a daily basis. In my middle school, we will be using four guiding questions to anchor our discussions during a weekly advisory period. The goal of the activities is geared toward building connections and skills needed to be a successful student and citizen in our community. These questions are: Who am I? Who are you? Who are we? How might we change the world? Regardless if the approach is the use of guiding questions or a formalized program, being able to have meaningful conversations outside content areas will yield a caring atmosphere which will develop ownership in school and community.

**Community-** Regardless of the setting of a school, being able to relate, participate, and support community organizations and functions will shape perception. Much like students knowing that they have a caring place to learn and grow, a community needs to have that a similar sense. By going to events and engaging with a community's comings and goings, relationships will be built which could bare fruit later when school events need volunteers, speakers, or other support. One avenue I would advocate is having students participate in service learning activities. This is different than participating in a food drive or money collection for donation to an organization. A service learning project involves learning about the history and purpose of service about to be performed, performing the service task, and then reflecting on the service and making plans for the future. This is just one way to build and connect to the community but will be a great addition to any community outreach program.

**Communication-** Caring for kids and community also need to be coupled with effective communication. Although it is not natural to promote or highlight the awesome happenings in the classroom and school, this should be a daily occurrence. Whether it is through social media such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, or YouTube videos, being able to tell a school's story to the widest audience possible builds trust and an understanding of the education students are receiving. A good rule of thumb in this area is to keep in mind the audience and tailor the message and its length to meet the demand of parents' busy lives. An easy place to start is to pick up the phone once a week and make a positive phone call to a family about their child. The phone call will take five minutes, but it will be something that is remembered and appreciated long after the call is completed.

We work in a dynamic environment that brings great joy and challenges to educators on a daily basis. Yet, by staying centered on what really matters, like the three C's, we can continue to learn and grow alongside of our students. Endeavor to try one of the suggestion from this article to help keep the excitement alive during the 2018-2019 school year.



# The Starbucks Classroom!

Tiffany Shaw

East Region

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The 2018-2019 school year marks a milestone in my career as a middle level educator. Why? This year I fully implemented a “Starbucks classroom,” otherwise known as flexible seating classroom. A flexible seating classroom is one in which traditional seating charts are replaced with seating arrangements that allow the students to sit where they choose. One of its principle objectives is to reduce the duration of sedentary periods of time, which research has identified as a danger to health.

However, I didn’t just implement due to health reasons. In fact, the research proved that flexible seating is critical to enhancing learning across all ages. Listed are the seven “critical” areas to assess before setting up your flexible seating classroom:

**Commitment to Learning!** While research on flexible seating is limited, it’s clear that learning environments can have a direct impact on student achievement.

A 2012 study from the University of Minnesota found that students participated 48 percent more in discussions in a classroom with collaborative group seating versus traditional lecture-style seating, and also improved their performance on standardized tests.

How does this connect with flexible seating? Kelly Almer, a long-time educator in Littleton Public Schools in CO, recently switched to flexible seating. She says creating more student control and less teacher control has improved student engagement.

“I have witnessed a change in their commitment to learning and behavior,” Almer explained. “By making the room ‘ours’ instead of ‘mine,’ the students have a sense of ownership that has made them more invested in their own education.”



Almer’s students choose where they want to sit daily. There is a variety of high, medium and low seating, and kids move to the furniture based on their needs. But Almer puts academics first. “Wherever they choose to sit, it has to help them be their best learning selves.”

**Choice!** Students feel empowered by having some degree of choice and control over their environment. Flexible seating allows students to choose where they work and with whom. It also allows them to change their location and positions as needed.

Kayla Delzer, is the author of the popular 2015 EdSurge story, “Why the 21st-Century Classroom May Remind You of Starbucks.” In a 2016

follow-up story on Edutopia, she says giving students choices about their physical classroom space teaches them higher-order thinking skills.

“Outside the windows of our classroom is a dynamic, fast-paced, and ever-changing world full of choices. How can we expect our students to solve problems and make choices independently if we constantly solve their problems and make their choices for them?”

### Condition of Health!

Children need to move. Flexible seating allows them to wobble, rock, bounce, lean or stand, which increases oxygen flow to the brain, blood flow and core strength. In turn, this burns more calories and increases metabolism. It also helps keep young minds more alert and focused.

It’s no surprise that physical activity is linked to higher academic performance, better health, and improved behavior. Matthew T. Mahar, et al, found that simple in-class activities can boost performance. Studies suggest that children who participate in short bouts of physical activity within the classroom have more on-task behavior, too.

In addition, many flexible seating options stimulate students’ sense of touch. This type of stimulation can help children focus and process information. Sensory input is especially helpful for students with ADHD and ASD.

**Comfort!** An uncomfortable student is a distracted and unproductive student. For example, picture a student who skipped or didn’t have access to breakfast. As the countdown to lunch approaches, the sound of his or her

growing stomach will make it impossibly hard to hear the teacher’s voice. A uncomfortable chair can have the same effect.

Flexible seating encourages students to find their best spot to stay calm, focused and productive. As one teacher said, “There is no better way to show your support for a student-centered classroom, than creating a classroom from a child’s point of

view.” In her opinion, comfortable students are engaged students.



**Community!** Traditional desks can make students territorial or possessive over their space and supplies. Flexible seating encourages students to share both. And, it encourages them to take turns in different locations and with different seating options.

“When preparing kids for the real world, we want students’ learning environment to reflect the environment of the real world,” said Manuel

Herrera, a district tech coordinator for the Affton School District in Missouri, as he reflected on the flexible seating movement that began in the workplace. “This [flexible seating] isn’t a fad. I



think it will eventually evolve into the way all classrooms look.”

**Collaboration!** Flexible seating allows students to quickly and easily pair up, work in small groups, or discuss as a whole class – without moving mountains of heavy desks to establish eye contact. Delzer agrees.

“The students we share our classrooms with don’t know life without constant connectivity, Wi-Fi, and a global audience. Our classroom environments should be conducive to open collaboration, communication, creativity, and critical thinking. This simply cannot be done when kids are sitting in rows of desks all day.”

**Communication!** No one is naive enough to believe that flexible seating simply happens. Up front, teacher must establish some new classroom management tools. That includes creating a system to make seating choice fair and no disruptive.

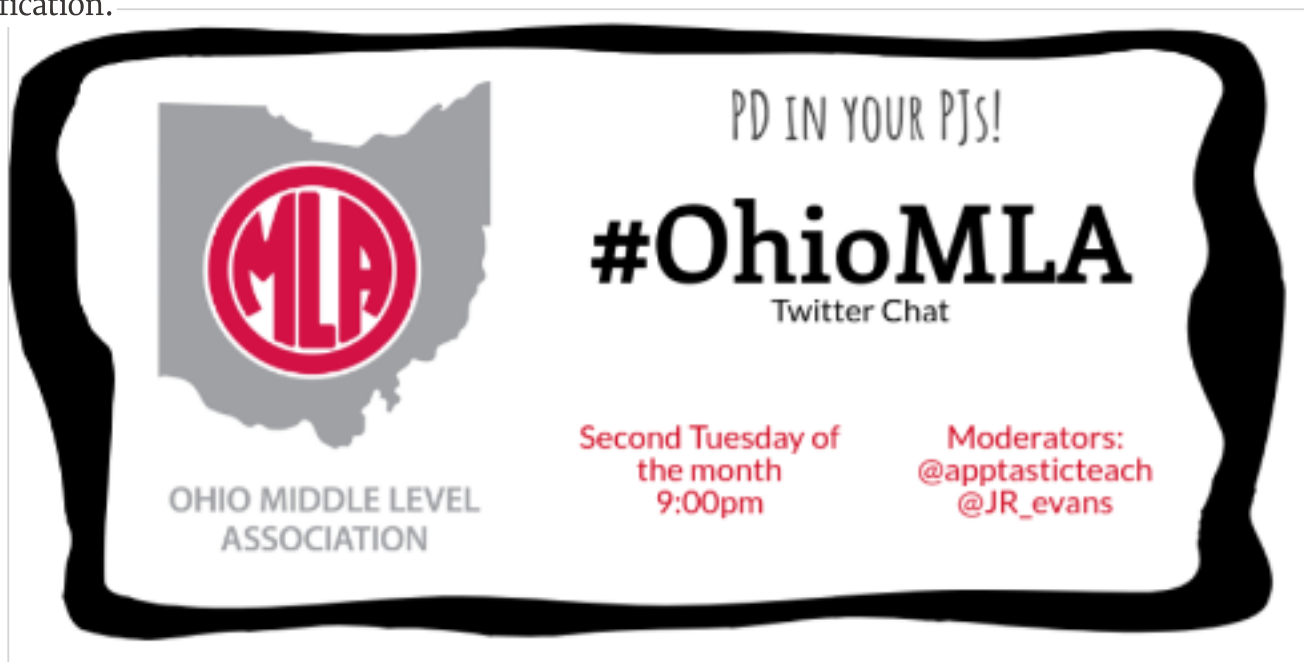
It also requires introducing higher-order thinking skills, like problem-solving and emotional skills, like conflict resolution. There’s also much value in fostering turn-taking and patience – especially for a generation of kids immersed in immediate gratification.

**Celebrate!** Flexible seating helps make learning fun and should be celebrated. The benefits far outweigh any negatives. I will never go back to traditional seating.

The results – a more active, engaged, enthusiastic, and relaxed room of students – are worth the effort.

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# Building Young Leaders One Leadership Summit at a Time

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Compiled by Tom Burton, Jen Bicknell, Andrea Kaercher, and Dave Slammer  
Southwest Region

Middle school is riddled with decisions: What should I wear today? Should I complete my homework? I wonder if he likes me? That teacher hates me?!? Did I put deodorant on today? Every young mind is not only stressed with decisions but impacted by hundreds of influences daily. As a middle school teacher myself, I'd like to think that my students hold me to the highest regard—super cool, greatest role model ever! Reality check: many middle school students idolize *less- than*-admirable role models who ultimately influence the numerous decisions these young minds are making.

Easy access to social media provides ample opportunity for students to idolize a multitude of celebrities and “role models.” Like it or not, we are competing with the entire world as we try to help young minds make good decisions. Leaders from across the globe are impacting the youth within our buildings. Our buildings are filled with young leaders, both positive and negative, all with great influence. As educators, we have the opportunity to help students identify and emulate positive leadership skills. Helping students understand why people follow leaders—whether positive or negative—is a pivotal first step.

Together, the Southwest OMLA and YMCA Camp Kern Leadership Department will present a program designed to assist middle school students in building positive peer relationships, effective communication, recognizing commonalities/similarities among people, understanding differences, developing leadership skills and identifying conflict resolution strategies through group work and team building activities. OMLA strongly believes in providing opportunities to develop young leaders.

The Student Leadership Summit is one of our largest events in the Southwest Region. Last year's Summit included ten schools from across our region. A total of one-hundred fifty-nine students and staff members took part in our 2018 Student Leadership Summit. The Leadership Summit brings together the diversity of middle schools throughout Southwest Ohio. Twelve 7th grade students from each building are placed in small family groups with students from across the area. Together, the family groups engage in activities designed to foster discussion and thoughts revolving around leadership. Despite the varying backgrounds, students quickly find the commonalities from school to school which helps foster a sense of camaraderie. Students are challenged to “Pay It Forward” when they return to their school and share the leadership message. We are looking forward to seeing the growth of Student leaders at our conference this year. This year's Summit will be on Tuesday, May 14, 2019.

Other Southwest Regional Events: 2018-19 Year:

- Thursday, September 27, 2018: Principal's Breakfast/ Featuring Administrative Assistants
- Friday, February 22, 2018: Southwest Regional Conference
- OMLA State Conference is October 25 & 26, 2018: Hope to see you there!

# *So Fresh and So Clean: Starting a New Year*

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Kristen Lavric

Southeast Region

New Lexington Middle School

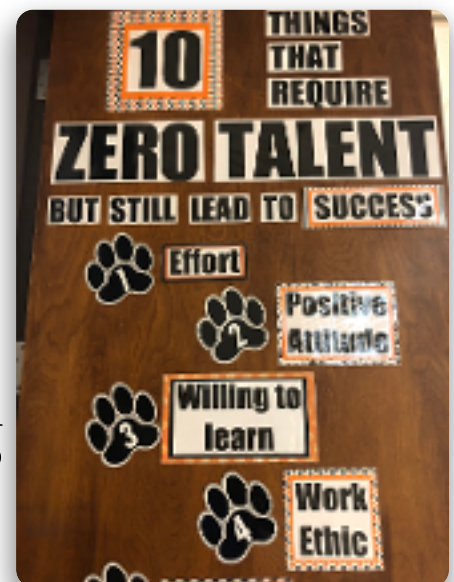
As teachers, and especially middle school teachers, we know how important it is to collaborate with other professionals. Starting with fresh ideas every school year is no different. In the midst of the hustle and bustle of Fall, I decided to seek feedback from my colleagues at New Lexington Middle School. I wanted to find out how they engage students at the beginning of a school year or even a new unit, topic, or theme. Perhaps unsurprisingly no two teachers use the same strategy to kick-start their class. Despite the variation in methods, one theme was clear. Every teacher wanted to build relationships with students, helping them feel welcomed and valued.

Here is a snapshot of how the staff in New Lex starts each year “so fresh and so clean!”:

Charity Smith, 6th grade language arts: “We do ice breakers at the beginning of the year, like the M&M game. Who doesn't get excited about chocolate right? For a new unit or topic, I tend to do interactive methods like Kahoot or watch a short video clip. I like to also incorporate humor.”

Jerimiah Schluep, 8th grade math and social studies: “At the beginning of the year, I ask the students to write a short essay on a song that motivates them and why it motivates them. Then, I play their songs at the beginning of math class.”

Kim Mautz, 6th grade math: “Math is such a frustrating subject for kids due to previous difficulties and parents having problems with the “new” math. When the kids enter my classroom at the beginning of the year, I don't bog them down with pretests because I know that they don't really know any of the concepts, and it just causes them more frustration. I don't want them to feel frustrated from the get-go. What I do is start them off on Khan Academy. I have them begin at Kindergarten and work their way up to 6th grade. This allows them to experience success along with what I really want them to see, that math is a stair step subject. You need to master every step in order to climb them easily. So instead of 6th grade pretests, I have them master each grade level to build their staircase to 6th grade math.”



Shannon George, 7th grade math and science: “At the start of a new year, I build excitement by providing hands on opportunities for students to create, collaborate, and problem solve. I allow them to choose peers to work with and be creative when solving open-ended problems. At the start of a new unit I try to grab students attention by incorporating student interests such as food, games, or both.”



# Back to School Excitement

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Maggie Davis

West Region

“If you could only sense how important you are to the lives of those you meet; how important you can be to the people you may never even dream of. There is something of yourself that you leave at every meeting with another person.” - Fred Rogers.

When I think about the beginning of the school year my brain spins with ideas of decorating my classroom, organizing my classroom supplies and materials, gathering fun activities and lessons, meetings with my team, my building staff, my district staff, professional development - the list could go on! And even though these responsibilities can feel exciting and overwhelming at times, I remember the above quote from Mr. Rogers. The biggest thing I look forward to at the beginning of the school year is meeting my students.

In my district, one major focus we have is to integrate social-emotional learning into all that we do, and to be very intentional at the beginning of the school year setting up classroom routines, procedures, and expectations with the students. Involving students in these discussions makes sure students feel safe, comfortable, and ready to learn when they come to school. One book that has guided that process for me is, *The First Six Weeks of School* by Denton Paula and Roxann Kriete. This book has many great ideas for building classroom community, student autonomy, and social-emotional learning.

Another resource that has inspired the activities I do in the beginning of the school year is a TED Talk called, “The Danger of a Single Story” by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. This TED Talk discusses the dangers of generalizing people and the importance to know the many stories of one single person. In my 5th grade classroom, one activity I had students complete was a simple twist on show and tell. Students had to bring in somewhere between 5 and 7 items they wanted to share with the class but they also had to share how that item represented a story of their life. Many items that were brought in not only showed students hobbies and interests, but also showed their culture, their family, and their beliefs.

When reflecting on the teaching profession and all the roles and responsibilities we have, it’s important for us to remember the excitement we feel at the beginning of the school year when we meet our students. Teachers have a prominent role in the lives of their students. Greeting them in the morning with a smile, finding activities to build a strong classroom culture, and continually striving to know and understand the multidimensional lives of our students should be at the forefront of our minds, so we don’t overlook the impact we can make on their lives.

# Reality from the Other Side of the Teacher's Desk

Melissa Stanton

Northwest Region

Liberty Benton Middle School

When most articles are written for back to school the focus tends to be on getting families back into the routine or just on the students themselves. Every year before the school year begins, teachers are working whether it be at home or in their schools.

Let's be real. The weeks and days leading up to the school year are always the hardest— not just for my family, but for myself. While I love my summers, they are hard. I crave the routine, the interactions with my students and colleagues, and yes all of the nuances of work. Back to school time is a different kind of hard; it causes all types of struggles for me. I get overwhelmed filling in the calendar with all of the dates that get thrown at me. . .add in the kids, events, and there is not a single day with nothing on it. I struggle with the image of a perfect classroom (not only in looks but also in function), fitting in with the people I

work with and the anxiety of sitting through PD and staff meetings in which I have no interest. But yet, I love every minute of it.

I am the teacher who is excited for the year to begin. With all the technology in my world, I spend an afternoon sitting there with favorite pencil and planner filling in all the great events I get to see my kids shine. I get giddy buying school supplies. I am the one who has my room ready for the first day of meetings, not because I want to, but because I need the piece of mind that one thing is done. I spend time planning those perfect first day of school outfit and the first hours with our kids. I sit through my staff meeting and PD with a large sweet tea and realize everything will be great because I am back at home. Here is to another fabulous great school year.



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