

Getting Ready for the Spring Assessments

Every spring teachers feel the pressure of getting their students ready for the “big spring assessments”. Whether it’s another benchmark, quarterly assessment or state mandated testing the pressure is on and most teachers and students feel the burn-out, swelling within. How do we handle the pressure without blowing like Mt. Vesuvius? Here are 10 tips for making it through testing time every spring.

1. Pace yourself

Even if you haven’t done this from the beginning of the school year; there is no time like the present. At the end of the school day give yourself a precise time you will leave. If your work day ends at 3:00 p.m., plan on leaving at 3:05 p.m. The world will not stop if you leave something unfinished until tomorrow. Plan for more than you need and then teach what the students need. Don’t rush yourself just to meet curriculum guidelines. Some schools have a very strict curriculum guideline that all topics must be covered in a given amount of time and on specific weeks. You may have to bend this rule to survive! Not all students are going to learn everything on the same week it was scheduled by the administration so take a deep breath, plan quality lessons and work at a pace that is realistic for both you and your students.

2. Don’t take work home....

Or if you must; take home only what you really think you can accomplish in an hour at home. You have a life outside of teaching. It is your blessing in life to have something besides teaching. Thinking about teaching all the time will just stress you out even more and the students will feel your stress...so chill out and relax when you leave school. Leave school at school. Make one day of the week the day you grade papers and than plan that time into your personal schedule if you must take it home. I have a young girl from my church come over once a week to help me grade papers. She is in Jr. High school so she is capable of following my instructions and can use the handy grade-wheel to find the score for tests. I give her the answer keys and she simply has to grade the papers. That leaves more time for me to grade the things she can’t like writing papers and essays.

3. Plan to stay late no more than one day per week

If you must stay late, plan on doing this no more than once per week. I stay late on the same day we have faculty meetings. When there is no meeting, I stay late for a maximum of 2 hours after school. That is enough time to accomplish what I need to do without interruptions. That way you know you will be home on time to your family 4 out of 5 days per week.

4. Review prior assessment tests

For most states you can access previous year's assessment tests online. If you haven't already looked at them and taken a few for practice and familiarity, then do it now. Become familiar with what your state will actually expect the students to know at testing time. It is amazing how much you are teaching them day-to-day and find out that only a small portion of that will really be tested. Give your students an opportunity to practice previous years tests in your classroom so they will understand the "test taking" skills to answer to their best both in knowledge, choice elimination and best guess answers.

5. Give your students daily practice without pressure

Each day review a little bit of the strategies they will need for testing. For example if you are focusing on Reading skills you might work on Comprehension skills one day, vocabulary the next and so on. For Math do centers to review the skills rather than seat work and worksheets. You will be surprised how the change of pace daily keeps the students interested.

6. Give the students some distractions

Try giving your students some weekly distractions. Fun Friday is a half hour when my students get to have freetime. They must earn this privilege during the week but most will not want to miss it. Their free time is time on the computer, playing board games, drawing on the board, doing subject centers, or otherwise doing non-instructional activity. Structured Recess activities like kickball, dodgeball or soccer help the students relax from the stress of the daily schoolwork. Be sure you are playing with your students. I am almost 50 and I still play kickball with my students. Give no excuses because there aren't any!

7. Give the kids an end-of-year incentive

My fourth grade class has been participating in our Trucker Buddy project. Some friends of mine are truckers and they have been writing to my class all year about the places they have been and what they do. They send pictures and postcards and letters all the time. We write about what we are doing in the classroom, what we are learning, sent them Christmas and valentine cards and at the end of the year they will visit us with their "big rig" for a end-of-year party celebration.

8. Try not to blame others for how you feel

One of the easiest things to do is to blame others for how we feel. If the administration gives us more work that falls under "and all other duties as assigned" we have to remember that someone probably assigned it to them as well. I find it easy to blame my administration for all the annoying things we end up doing because there isn't enough time in a day to get it all done

without feeling the stress. Next time you feel like blaming others remember you signed the contract and you know it is part of your job whether you like it or not. So you can suck it up and deal with it to get the job done or you can change jobs. We don't have to like all the parts of our job but we have to do them so take responsibility for what you are asked to do and do it.

9. Evaluate yourself at the end of each day

Keep a journal. You don't have to write in it each day but do it once in a while to see how you are doing as a teacher. Try to understand teaching from the student's point of view, from your principal's point of view and your own point of view. You will see how different they all are. At least at the end of each day review your day to see what you did right and ways to improve tomorrow.

10. Practice S.T.A.R.

Stop, Take a Breath and Relax. When you feel stressed stop, take a breath and relax. Find a hobby outside of teaching and pursue it in your personal time. I like to walk my dogs everyday and I love to read. I don't read the same things I teach in school. I read things that really exercise my brain. Do this for yourself and enjoy what you do. When the weather is good take up gardening or running. Help a neighbor, volunteer in the community or in your church. Be a positive contribution to other people's lives outside of school and you will feel less stress and more satisfaction.

I can talk about all these steps to endure the spring assessment and while I have been great at doing some of them; I certainly haven't been perfect at all of them. If you really love teaching you have to come to terms with the reality of it. It is not just 6.5 hours a day with perfect, well-behaved, eager learners; it is often riddled with 4.5 hours of behavior modification, administrative paperwork and less than eager learners. The reality of teaching is you do it because you believe you can make a difference in the lives of children. You never know whose life you will touch but you will touch someone's just by being there. Remember....the Butterfly effect!