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# End-of-Year Celebrations That Rock

## Educators share their rituals to close out the school year

By Patricia J. Murphy | Jun 26, 2023

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Alex Leith

Andrew Hacket reading a book to his students.

Over the last couple of years, we've highlighted teachers and librarians who do everything from leading stellar storytimes and activities and fighting for children's right to read, to creating welcoming spaces and helping meet the emotional needs of their students. With the end of the school year in sight, we spoke with three

educators about how they help their students look back on what they've learned—and forward to a summer of possibilities—with special end-of-year celebrations.

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**Andrew Hacket** is a children's author and a second grade teacher at Mayo Elementary in Holden, Mass. His end-of-year celebrations began as early as March. That's when he and his students paired up picture books that they'd read together throughout the year in a March Madness tournament of sorts. With each book pairing, they re-read, analyzed, discussed, and picked winners.

"The tournament created a great deal of engagement as a group, so we kept it going long past March," Hacket said. Soon after, they folded in different kinds of picture books and author studies. "We were able to talk about their favorite books and what they truly enjoyed about them." Hacket said that book engagement was initially a challenge for his kids, who spent their first years of school learning remotely.

To build upon his students' enthusiasm for reading, Hacket hung copies of the bracket's book covers on the wall. Many of his kids also kept track of the "winning" books in their journals, while others whose opinions differed with the class's results picked their own winners.

Hacket also created a questionnaire to help his students further categorize the books they read as "the funniest," "the saddest," "the ones where they felt more seen," and more. "This encouraged my students to *really* look at the books and to discover the power that books have to stay with us," he said.

Hacket also had his students review their writing portfolios as part of the end-of-year celebration and reflection. He had them look at their work chronologically—from the first piece they wrote in September to their current pieces—and compare them. "This helped them see the connection of putting hard work, time, and energy in their writing—and how they grew as a result," Hacket said.

The excitement continued when Hacket kicked off the "10-Day Countdown" to the end of the year, which came a lot later because of snow days. "Each day we had special surprises," Hacket said. "One day was a game day, another pajama day, and we also had a partner reading day." The daily surprises were designed specifically to celebrate the unique bond and culture that he and his students had created and enjoyed in their classroom.

Hacket hopes that all of their reflection and celebration will hold a special place in his students' hearts and minds. "My goal was to create a placeholder of what second grade meant to them, and to me—the successes, the relationships, the memories—and that can carry them on to third grade and beyond!"

**Josephine Cameron's** music classes' celebrations actually start at the beginning of the school year and culminate on the last day of her students' lessons. To kick off a yearlong Blues project, she had her K–8 students at her piano, guitar, and songwriting studio, Songwriting for Kids, learn about the musical genre through analyzing other musicians' songs, practice sessions, improvisations, and more.

"No matter what level the students are at," Cameron said, "the kids participate in lessons focused on a game called Become an Expert." As part of this game, each child chooses a Blues-related skill to work on and study throughout the year. "Then, at the





end of the year, all of the levels come together, and we pull together the different experts [e.g. everyone who has been working on baseline, etc.], and then get up and play around and improvise,” Cameron said.

Josephine Cameron leading a music class.

She will often switch things up and have kids from different grade levels play together. “We get to celebrate all of the hard work we’ve done, and also communicate and converse, and come up with all of these ideas. Everyone is feeling elated.”

When Cameron says “everyone” she means just her and her students. You won’t find the students’ parents at the end-of-year celebration, and she doesn’t hold recitals or competitions. She prefers to be more experiential in her teaching. “I was really shy as a kid, and the recitals were torture for me,” Cameron said. Because of this, her studio’s end-of-year celebrations put her students at ease. “Our celebrations make them feel proud, excited, and successful,” she said, “We are there to enjoy the work that we are creating in the moment.”

Cameron said that the best part is her students’ discovery of the synergy and joy of playing with others, and letting the music take them where they want to go. “They may walk into a situation with an idea in their mind, but then we add another musician working on a baseline, and another playing chords, and the music becomes something different than they could ever imagine—and they couldn’t do it by themselves!”

Cameron believes this is an important lesson for both music and life. “I think the more we practice appreciating other people’s ideas and the different skills that they bring to the table, the better off we’re all going to be,” she said.



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Faith Hvidas sharing summer reading recommendations.

**Faith Hvidas**, a media specialist at Collingswood and Oaklyn Public Schools in Collingswood and Oaklyn, N.J., partners with fellow educators to maximize their school’s end-of-year celebrations. Her part begins with promoting the possibilities of the summer ahead.

“To start, I work with the district literacy coach to pull together a summer reading program for our students that is fun, but optional, for kids and families,” Hvidas said. “We gather a lot of resources from the public libraries, and others that our teachers might have. It’s all about engaging readers. Our ultimate goal is not just for kids but for families to be reading together.”

These resources may include book tie-in activities, reading activities, bookish bingo cards with things to do all summer long, and the reading application Sora, which provides a variety of audio- and e-books to explore. “The app is easy to access for kids and families,” Hvidas said, “and there’s a reading incentive program on it called Sweet Reads.”

To make sure her students are aware of this program, she visits each classroom to read a book and talk about summer reading. “I do a little presentation with hand-outs that go home with the kids,” Hvidas said. “I encourage them to go to their public library, and I share our other summer reading information.” She also tailors her chats to different grades.

For younger grades, she reminds them to take care of their library books like they would at school. And for fifth graders, she talks about the books they will need to choose from for their summer novel assignment, “to get them excited about reading one of them over the vacation.”

But what really makes a splash before students dip their toes into summer reading is the school’s end-of-year music program, art night, and book fair, which are all rolled into one special event. “Families get to watch their students perform music, see their art hanging on the walls, and stop by the library to pick up some books for summer reading!” Hvisdas said. “This night works because our kids are interested in so many different things, and it offers a chance to celebrate their successes.”

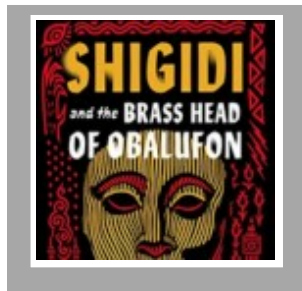
Hvisdas said these successes are not of the academic, behavior, or attendance award variety. “We’re celebrating all of the things that they liked about school,” she said, “like falling in love with art class, learning a new musical instrument, or finding a new series of books that they like.”

She has high hopes that their positive send-off will give students the confidence and tools that they need to see themselves and their reading in a new light. “I hope that they discover a book that helps them find things they like about reading, and that reading isn’t just a part of school. It becomes a part of their daily lives, too!”

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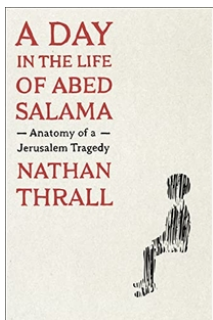
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