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The Not-So-Lazy Hazy Days of Summer: Planning for the New School Year

By Patricia J. Murphy | Jul 23, 2021

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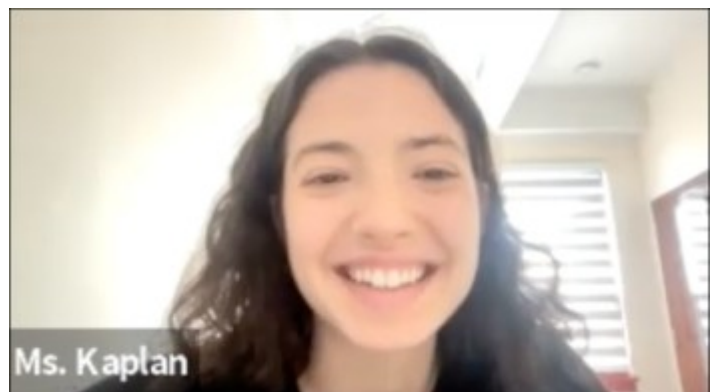


While most students are enjoying their summer vacation, many of their teachers and librarians are busy brainstorming ideas and making plans for the school year in their classrooms and libraries amid the continued uncertainty of the pandemic. *PW* spoke with five educators about some of their big plans and high hopes for the school year that's right around the corner.

Nicole Kaplan

Nicole Kaplan's upcoming school year at Achievement First Endeavor Middle School in Brooklyn, N.Y., will be her second year teaching—but her first in a classroom. She spent her rookie season teaching on Zoom from her bedroom. Since her classes ended on June 25, Kaplan took a little time for self-care (e.g. spending time with family and friends, exercising, etc.) before diving right back into school work.


For the remainder of the summer, Kaplan will be taking graduate courses towards her master's in education and a certificate in middle school and special education, participating in professional development, and reading widely. She is confident that all of the above will help her develop, and later apply, effective classroom management techniques, community building skills, and teaching strategies to differentiate her ELA instruction to meet her students' diverse learning needs.



Ms. Kaplan
Nicole Kaplan taught her first year by Zoom from her home in Brooklyn, N.Y.

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Terry “T.J.” Shay is a K-12 vocal music teacher at North Tama School in Traer, Iowa, and the brains behind International Dot Day, a day of creativity and connection that is now celebrated by nearly 20 million people in 194 countries, inspired by his friend Peter H. Reynolds, creator of the picture book *The Dot*.

After some serious bicycling (593 miles so far) and summer reading to recharge his batteries, Shay is gearing up for his 35th year of teaching. His focus will be on reviving and updating a musical history project for his sixth grade music classes, and expanding the reach of his school’s Dot Day, where it all began. “Because we started Dot Day, I think people look at what we are going to do. I’m planning on bigger things—including a whole-school celebration, and dreaming up more ways for my K–12 kids to connect on that day. The day is all about the themes in the book: hope, bravery, expressing yourself, and putting yourself out there.”

Shay puts himself out there for his students year after year, showing them through his encouraging words, actions, and famous “post-it” notes how much he cares. Before taking off two and a half weeks for a health issue this past year, Shay wrote reassuring notes to each of his 42 high school chorus kids, saying, “Mr. Shay loves me!”

“You might not think high school students care about these things, but I still see a lot of these post-its on the backs of their phone cases—because it *does* matter to them. But, it has to be real. They have to know from your actions that it’s the truth,” Shay said.

“I hope that all of the students I teach this upcoming year, and every year, leave my class feeling loved. A lot of them often come to school feeling insecure about connections and people, and carry around some heavy things that weigh them down. It’s important to me that they feel loved, safe, and that they matter. Because if they feel [those things], I believe they will flourish and learn more, and I’ll feel like I have succeeded as a teacher and a person.”



Rhonda Jenkins

Whether Rhonda Jenkins, library media center director at Kendall Elementary School in Naperville, Ill., is wearing a pirate outfit or dressed as a snow person, she will do anything to get books into kids’ hands; it’s her mission.

“Differentiation will be especially critical in my upcoming school year,” Kaplan said, “because students have had a variety of learning experiences in their 1.5 years of remote learning. While some have thrived, many others have struggled to stay focused, complete their work, and even follow along in class due to poor internet signals in their homes along with other distractions.”

Looking ahead, Kaplan has high expectations and hopes for her students and herself. “I hope to create a community in my classroom where I can help my students develop growth and asset based mindsets vs. fixed and deficit-based ones, recognize their strengths as readers/writers, experience school as a place of joy again, and reignite or spark a love of learning!”

Terry “T.J.” Shay



T.J. Shay is a K-12 vocal teacher and the founder of International Dot Day.



Rhonda Jenkins dresses in costume for special events, including her Scholastic Book Fairs.

Jenkins managed to keep up monthly distribution days from the school's gymnasium to feed a steady diet of books to her K-5 students, after she lost the use of most of her centrally located school library to increase social distancing. Returning to school, she faced these challenges head on. In fact, they emboldened her and helped inform her plans for the new school year.

"While June was my 'calming down' month—making tumblers and watercolor greeting cards—July is my 'gear up' month, and August will be my 'get into the library and get going' month. Right now, I'm reading the remainder of the AISLE Bluestem books for grades three to five. I was on the AISLE Monarch Committee (K-3), so I've already read all of those. I'm also coming up with ideas—and praying that I can initiate all of them— and planning my first in-person Scholastic Book Fair [she does three each year] since the

pandemic. And, soon, I'll be buying my outfits for the fairs [she wears costumes to match the themes] and creating my personalized parent communications once the fairs' themes are announced," Jenkins said.

Approaching her 24th year of teaching—and her ninth in the library—Jenkins is especially looking forward to reclaiming her library space, setting up her new displays, and getting the new books facing out on the shelves. "Nobody reads spines!" she insists.

And she cannot wait to welcome her kids back into the library again at last. When she does, Jenkins will be clutching her camera. "One of my best tools is my camera! I love taking candid photos, with parental permission of course, of the kids picking out books, reading books, and talking about books. They're truly mini-commercials for reading."

Active on Twitter to give and get book recommendations, Jenkins posts the students' pictures and their thoughts about books, using the hashtag #KendallStudentsSpeak to spread more love for books. "I make sure their tweets are grammatically correct, and kind, and I tag the books' authors," she says. "And, when the kids get responses back from the authors, they get so excited, and their hearts explode!"

Katie Schiyer

Throughout her 36 years of teaching, Everett Elementary School librarian Katie Schiyer has talked about books, talked to kids about books, and the books even "talk" to her. (More about this later.) This year, Schiyer is turning a page on her esteemed career: it will be her last year of teaching in Lake Forest School District #67 in Lake Forest, IL, where she began teaching upon graduating from college, and she's determined to make it her best.

Schiyer is off to a running start. Like every summer preceding each school year, Schiyer is busily catching up on her TBR pile (titles she didn't have the chance to read during the hectic school year, and titles on her state book lists), curating lists of books and resources to order for the following year, listening to podcasts and reading reviews to learn about new titles, as well as creating activities and lessons, and writing questions to help prepare students for the [Battle of the Books, a voluntary reading incentive program for students in grades 3-12.

But this year, Schiyer is learning how to use the district's new Virtual Reality headsets and with an eye towards implementing them into the curriculum. "I'm excited to train teachers and put students in



Katie Schiyer celebrates International Dot Day.

places like a coral reef or outer space to gain information for their research,” Schiyer said.

She’s equally excited to put her teachers and students in touch with the new books they missed out on reading while learning remotely, and with the limited access to the library when they did return to school. To do this, Schiyer is creating a “100 Picture Book Challenge” that will include her curated lists of fiction, nonfiction, and diverse books tied to each grade level’s curriculum, beginning from week one.

“I’m going to kick off the challenge by telling my teachers and students, ‘The books have been waiting for you—and can’t wait for you to open them!’” Schiyer said. “I may even run around the school saying, ‘Did you hear that? The books are saying, ‘READ ME!’ ”

Schiyer said that she’s still working on the lists for each grade, thinking about how teachers will keep track of the books they will be reading, how they might tie in math with the challenge, and what prizes she’ll give. “I might offer extra recesses or new books for their classroom libraries. I’m still noodling about it. I’m not sure just yet.”

But Schiyer is certain of how she’ll welcome everyone once again into the library space. “I’ve always tried to make our library the heart of the school—where everyone feels comfortable. I think that’s what libraries are for: to make everyone feel good and free to read whatever they want, and to be a happy place for all students and teachers,” she said. “Whether they come in to learn about new titles to check out, to spend time in the Maker Space, to chat, or to take a break, it just makes me happy!”



Chris Salerno with his readers.

Chris Salerno

Teacher librarian Chris Salerno is the first to admit that he’s done less preparation for the upcoming school year (his 16th year teaching and eighth in the library) at K.D. Markley Elementary School, in Malvern, Penn., thus far than for any year before. That’s because he and his wife, Melissa, brought a new baby and future reader into the world.

Understandably, Salerno has spent as much time as he can with his new family, because “you can’t get any of that time back!” he said.

So, Salerno is taking baby steps to get back to work. For starters, he has met with fellow librarians to brainstorm ways to make their Reading Olympics program more interactive and appealing to a wider circle of readers. “We’re looking at ways to make RO more like a field day, with literacy,” Salerno said. He believes this will encourage more kids to join who might not consider themselves readers, or “great” readers.

“I let my students know I’m not a fast reader, and that just because you’re not extremely fluid or fast at reading doesn’t mean you’re not good at it. I think some kids see those who join RO, who are straight A kids and plow through a book a week—but that doesn’t have to be *everybody*,” he said. “It’s for [all] kids who enjoy reading!”

Salerno’s also enjoying catching up on books on his TBR list, and tweeting about others as a member of the #BookPosse group on Twitter. But once he receives his schedule, he’ll head back into the library to plan his lessons and other offerings.

“My schedule helps me determine what options I can give my teachers and students—and how best I can serve them. We offer a great deal of exposure to concepts of ‘story,’ and ‘library’ for the younger grades, and to ‘media literacy,’ ‘digital citizenship,’ and ‘research’ for the upper grades.”

And, for movie-loving fifth graders, Salerno hosts an after-school video club called Script to Screen. He takes many of his favorite movies from childhood and writes parodies of them based in the school setting. Then, his fifth graders either shoot or star in them, Salerno edits the movies, and the whole school enjoys a fancy school premiere. Some of the titles they've done include *The Goonies*, *Home Alone*, and *Back to the Future*.

As for the future school year, Salerno hopes to “get back to something closely resembling ‘normal.’ We’ve all had to pivot and adjust so much over the past year and a half,” he said. “It’ll be nice to experience the little things that we probably took for granted before 2020.”

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