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New Year, New You!: Teachers Gear Up for the School Year Ahead

By Patricia J. Murphy | Aug 22, 2022

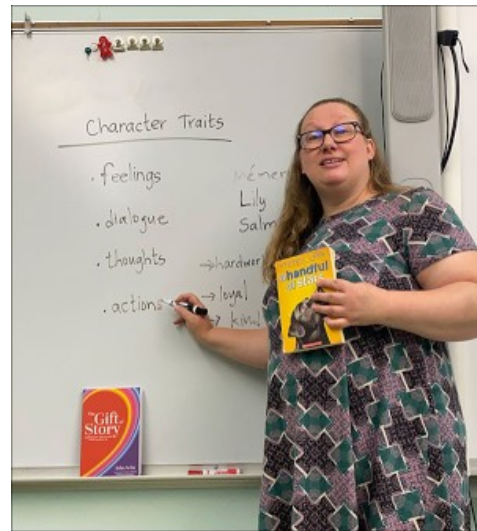
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With the new school year upon us, students aren't the only ones who have a parade of new things ahead—including new teachers, new classmates, and new subjects. Teachers and school librarians will be developing and teaching new curricula and sharing new books and new ideas with their new students from the first day of the new school year—and all year long. *PW* spoke with four educators about some of the new projects, processes, and programs they'll be implementing, and the new learning they can't wait to begin.

Little did **Destiny Love Lawyer's** parents know what impact sharing their love of literature and naming her after a poem Destiny's father wrote ("The Star of Destiny") would have on their first-born daughter. Lawyer, now a fifth and sixth grade ELA teacher at Windsor School in Windsor, Vt., will be entering her 23rd year teaching. This year, however, she will teach sixth grade language arts for half of the day, and the other half will be something new for her: reading intervention for grades four through six.

Because of this addition, Lawyer's summer plans included going back to school for a graduate course on the science of reading. Lawyer said, "As a middle school teacher, I haven't focused on the process of teaching children how to read. So, by learning about the process of how students become skillful readers, it will help me design instruction that will give my students a deeper understanding of their own reading." Lawyer also attended Kate Messner's Teachers Write 2022, a free online writing camp for teachers and librarians, to hone her writing tools so she can help her students sharpen theirs.



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Destiny Love Lawyer discussing story elements with her students.

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Aside from collecting new writing ideas and tips, Lawyer has been opening boxes of books in her new role as the local coordinator for the Children's Book Council and Every Child a Reader's Kids Book Choice Awards in her area. "With this new responsibility," Lawyer said, "I received a big order of books that I've had to house, sort, and will be distributing to the participating schools for their students to read and to choose their favorite books."

She's also been reading these books and many other new titles to consider for her classroom library, to integrate into her curriculum, and to share with her #bookposse—a Twitter group that reads and shares ARCs with fellow teachers and librarians.

“All of this new learning gets me excited and makes me look forward to the new school year a whole lot more,” Lawyer said. “And, if I’m excited, the students are, too!”

Melissa Thom, a teacher/librarian at Bristow Middle School in West Hartford, Conn., is always searching for new ways to fire up her readers, and hopefully change their lives. This past summer, Thom attended both the International School Librarian Conference in South Carolina and the ALA Annual Conference in Washington, D.C. for inspiration. At these conferences, she met with as many authors as she could fit in between keynotes and sessions to discuss possible school visits. She also grabbed as many ARCs that she could fit into her suitcase to help launch a new version of her student book review website, *Page Turner Kids: Reviews by Kids for Kids*.

“Pre-Covid, the site started gaining a little traction with some of our really prolific readers. I had some kids tell me about the books they read, and I’d jot their reviews down; and other students wrote pretty formal reviews,” Thom said. “I want to build off of that with the ARCs I got from the conferences and hit the ground running, reviewing books that will soon be published.”

The ARCs appear to be a big draw. “They’re kind of the carrot for them,” Thom said. “Lots of kids get excited to read and review books before they’re published. That’s how I promote it!”

Thom will also be promoting Banned Book Week, September 26–October 2, and over-seeing three volunteer book clubs with titles addressing book banning and libraries. “With everything going on, this week, and month, will mean more than ever,” Thom said. “We’ll be doing banned book-related clubs and activities.”

As for the specific books that she’ll be using, Thom has chosen titles from her state’s Nutmeg Awards list, including *Suggested Reading* by Dave Connis. “It’s about a high school where books are disappearing, and a group of students go to great lengths to get the books to kids who really need them,” Thom said. “I’ll be reading this title with my eighth graders and planning a virtual visit with the author.” With her seventh graders, she’ll be reading *Property of the Rebel Librarian* by Allison Varnes. And for sixth grade she’s chosen *Ban This Book* by Alan Gratz.

Thom hopes that these book choices and others throughout the year will provide new mirrors, windows, and sliding doors for her readers. “When you pick up a book, you may not expect to understand something new—and/or change the way you think,” Thom said. “You start to think differently, and you think of something that you’ve never thought before, or you understand a person or a group of people in ways you didn’t before. You ask questions. It can be motivating—and life-changing. It can change the world.”



© Alexis Boyd

Cheryl Bair with a student.

notebook and their computer portals—for their schedules, homework assignments, and whatever else they might need.

“We’ve found that more and more fifth graders are nervous and anxious at the start of the school year. A lot of it has to do with the fact that they haven’t had normal school years for the last few years with the pandemic,” Bair said. “This camp’s our way of helping prepare them—and put them on a path towards success.”

Bair has also been re-evaluating her book list for her novel approach instruction for the new school year, and how she will pace them. “Last year, we slowed down, and we didn’t get to one of the novels—it took some stress off. We may do that again this year,” Bair said.

After Camp 5, Bair said she’s going to let her kids drive the curriculum more, giving them more choice. “I plan to ask for suggestions from students for the second book club of year, and what they’d like to learn, so I can better meet them where they are—and take them as far as they can go!” Bair said.



© Barb Thom

Melissa Thom.

This journey will include Bair's keen awareness of her students' growing minds, changing bodies, and increasing anxieties. "What's really important is to keep on building those relationships, and letting them know that they are loved and what they're doing is fine."

Lauren Bercuson is a lawyer turned school librarian at the Rambam Day School in Miami, Fla., and is always thinking up something new. She transitioned from law to literature when her youngest son had health complications at birth. "Reading to him at night calmed and centered him, and was the most calming part of our day," Bercuson said.

Their love for books inspired her to create her website, Happily Ever Elephants, to share their favorite books. It was this website, her passion for books, and her research background that landed her at one of the largest Jewish day schools in the country. Gearing up for her sixth year as school librarian, she continues to use her passion to come up with new ideas and to champion young readers.

This summer, she has been revamping her novel studies to reflect more diverse voices for the new year. Her tall TBR pile helped her identify additional books with diverse characters and written by diverse authors. She's also identified more books that children can choose from for independent reading and for teachers to select for their lessons.

"I've been encouraging the Language Arts teachers to do book groups and to offer more choice in the classroom," Bercuson said, "because if a teacher only offers one book to read, and a child doesn't like it—you could lose that kid for six weeks."

Bercuson believes the winning combination is to find books for her teachers and students that will enliven book discussions and help launch lifelong reading. She's also committed to further integrating reading and writing in the school with a new book review blog for students.

"I believe this will help students think more deeply about what they're reading, and work on their writing," Bercuson said. "Since I already blog about books with *Happily Ever Elephants*, I'm figuring out the best way to do this with our school community."

On top of this, Bercuson will work to "un-Dewey" her library to increase accessibility and interest in nonfiction books. "The way many nonfiction books are classified with the Dewey Decimal System, they aren't being read," Bercuson said. "So, I'm taking them out of this system and putting them together in my own way. This will require ongoing research throughout the school year."

Bercuson said that her ultimate mission is to raise and help create what Donalyn Miller calls "wild readers." Bercuson added, "I want my students to read, fall in love, talk about, and share books today—and long after they leave the halls of school. So we have to make it fun and go beyond the norm, because books change lives, allowing us to learn new things and to feel less alone."



© Courtney Ortiz

Lauren Bercuson reading with her sons. The name of her blog, Happily Ever Elephants, comes from her oldest son's version of the phrase "happily ever after."

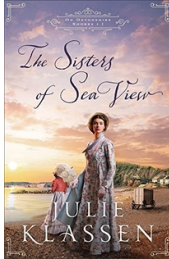
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