

Newsletter 08-06 Feb

Recently I found myself in a 1st grade classroom at the end the day. Three things struck me: 1) I wish some professional football coaches could see how to develop a complex game plan that leads to a successful end, 2) better than a television sit-com, dismissal time in the first grade is quite entertaining and humorous, and 3) I could not believe the size, weight and contents of the backpacks. I was convinced several of our students were going to tip over, and if they did, they certainly would not be able to get up. I learned from several how to pack for travel and really get the proverbial 10 pounds of “stuff” in a 5-pound bag. I asked one student why he had so much in the pack and if it was real heavy. His responses were “I gotta lot to do” and “you get used to it.” (I am sure he has a lot to do, but the battle for pack space between snow pants and the daily folder of work was going to the snow pants. I wondered if Mom and Dad would ever find the papers being jammed to the bottom of the pack.)

This made me think about our teachers and staff this year. I am not talking about their snow pants. I am talking about their backpacks, their professional backpacks to be more precise. Without question, their backpacks are full, maybe overflowing. In addition to their typical drive to do a great job in their classrooms, we have introduced improvement initiatives in writing, math, science and social studies at the elementary schools and active literacy, math, writing, creative thinking and greater challenge to the curriculum at the middle school. These initiatives are over-and-above school based initiatives and school improvement action plans that also have a substantial learning component for staff.

Want to know what is happening during ILAP days and what this translates into for our staff? I urge you to look at the schedules for the full professional development days and the ILAP days located on our web site at: <http://www.sudbury.k12.ma.us/professional-development.html>. Here you will find the type of work we are engaged in this year and how it ties to the district goals. It is quite amazing to see all that Assistant Superintendent Bob Milley, the curriculum specialists, and teachers have planned and put together to help us learn to do our jobs better and to help our students learn.

An obvious question is why such an ambitious program? Because “we gotta lot to do.” We are doing a good job; I would argue a “great” job. I am extremely proud of our teachers and staff. However, we recognize there are places where we need to improve, places where we need to be more consistent across grade levels and schools, and where our teaching strategies need to be more in line with what is expected of our students.

It is the nature of schools that we often add to our “to-do” list, but never seem to create a “to-not-do” list. When all the state and federal mandates and compliance requirements are added to the high expectations we have of ourselves, the workload gets significant and the backpacks fill up.

I have observed that the same dedication to quality that teachers expect of themselves in the classroom, they expect of themselves in their own learning. Our full-days of professional development and the regular ILAP Wednesdays provide time for this hard work, but from the staff perspective this time, in some ways, has added to their workload. I have not had a complaint about the work, but I do recognize that for our teachers, like our 1st graders, their backpacks are full. I am not implying that we will not keep working hard, but I do believe we need to take some time to ensure that what is already on our agenda is done well before major new initiatives are considered. This does not take things out of our backpacks, but it means that we will not try to cram more in and cause our current efforts to get jammed.

Thank you for your support with our ILAP and full days of professional development. We take this time seriously and appreciate the impact this has had on families. We have engaged a team of Harvard doctoral students this year to assess our own effectiveness in these endeavors. It has been wonderful having consistent time for our own learning. We still firmly believe that ultimately our students are the beneficiaries of our time and effort. We will carry our full backpacks without tipping over because “we gotta lot to do” and because “we’re used to it.”