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Plan now for fall

Welcoming back students and staff after summer break is always a special occasion, but this year it feels like a blowout celebration is in order. When students return to school, make it a day to remember. Or better yet, plan rolling festivities that extend over several days.

After school ended so abruptly last spring, students will need to celebrate not only being back in school, but also some of the important milestones that didn't get recognized last year.

End-of-year award assemblies. "Fly up" to the next grade ceremonies. Concerts and plays. Field days. Those did not happen last spring for most students. It's important, as part of the process of moving forward, to honor the achievements of last year and set the stage for a successful coming year.

While it's probably not realistic to recreate each of those activities this fall, you could plan a few special events that highlight some of those achievements. Some possibilities:

- **Welcome back barbecue or ice cream social.** Invite parents and students to an outdoor event the week before classes resume. Ask the parent club to help serve burgers and hot dogs or ice cream. Have a ceremony to hand out any awards that couldn't be given out in the spring, such as students of the month.
- **First day assembly.** Celebrate being back together. Produce a slideshow or video with highlights of last year. Have staff create a fun parody of how they conducted staff meetings and planning over Zoom and other video platforms. Set the stage for the new year by setting high expectations, but acknowledge the learning that was missed and assure students that teachers will be working to bring everyone up to speed.
- **Classroom activities.** Ask each class to create posters and murals for the hallways to show the things students are most looking forward to this school year.
- **Stay in touch with families over the summer.** Students' worlds — and everyone else's — were upended with the coronavirus pandemic, and they feel a lot of uncertainty. Don't wait for the back-to-school letter to communicate with families this summer. Send a letter or email two or three times over the summer to let them know how teachers are preparing for their return. Most importantly, assure them that things will be returning to at least some level of normalcy.

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One of the challenges for staff will be dealing with a push to make up for lost time and bring students up to benchmarks as soon as possible. A study by Northwest Evaluation Association showed that students are likely to start school in the fall equipped with only about 70% of expected gains in reading and writing skills and 50% or less of expected math skills. There will definitely be work to do. Schools will need clear catch-up strategies to help students who have been unable to keep up their studies at home.

(Over)

It would be nice if we could get schools back in full swing and students up to speed with the ease of turning on a light switch. But after being closed for several months, schools need to allow for some transition time as they help students make up for lost learning. Volunteers will be crucial. Extra adults are needed to conduct small reading groups or tutor individually in math and other subjects. Volunteers can help correct papers and create bulletin boards and help supervise recess. There's an endless list of tasks that volunteers can take on that relieve a teacher to work directly with students.

Even before COVID-19 forced a break from classes, schools felt enormous pressure to focus on academics and cut out activities, like assemblies and guest speakers, that take time away from the basics. But a key to moving forward will be to encourage a sense of "we're all in this together." The transition will be smoothest if students, staff and parents understand that they must work together to make the needed gains. And that will require time for occasional special activities that build teamwork and camaraderie.

There are so many unknowns entering this new school year, but one certainty is that it will be good to have students back in school and learning together. Perhaps one of the takeaways from the past several months is that gathering together to share and celebrate is a needed part of our lives and helps provide the balance needed to move forward successfully.

Contributed by Connie Potter, communications consultant