
Cures for the Overwhelmed Teacher

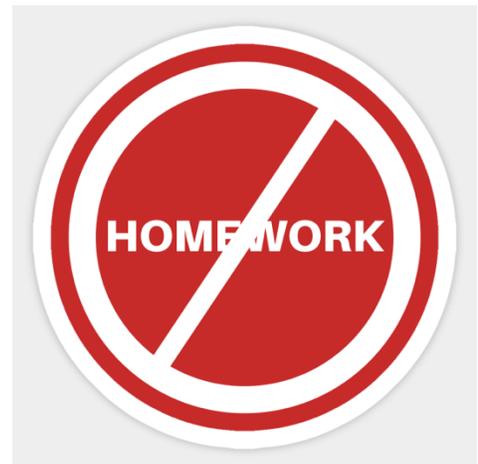
“Do Less, But Do It Better”

Let’s be real. This year was supposed to be easier, but it hasn’t been. We’re stressed, we’re overworked, and we’re running on empty. We’re fighting the myth of “learning loss.” We’re battling the negative impacts of pandemic-induced trauma on our students’ brains, to say nothing of how it’s affecting our brains. But what can we realistically do about it? Here are 4 simple and practical things you can try that will make the rest of your year easier – for both you and your students.

1. Eliminate Homework

Eliminate, or significantly reduce, all homework for the rest of this school year.

According to much of the latest research, homework has no positive academic impact on students at the elementary level. Even at the secondary level the evidence supporting the academic benefits of homework is tenuous at best. More importantly, though, the small and debatably benefits of homework are outweighed by its negative social, emotional, and physical impacts on students, families, and teachers, especially those of color, those living in poverty, and those experiencing any kind of trauma. When it comes to homework, we strongly suggest embracing your inner Disney princess, Elsa, and just “Let It Go.” It doesn’t have to be forever. It can just be for the remainder of this school year. Think of it as an experiment or action-research. If you feel like parents or your administration would not be on board with this, or if you are not on board with it, check out some additional research, anecdotal studies, and equitable homework policy alternatives here: <https://www.consciousteaching.com/wp-content/uploads/Newsletter.homework.all-pages.archive.pdf>



2. Reduce Content



Cut out half of what you would normally teach for the rest of this school year.

At first glance this may seem impossible and unrealistic because everything we teach is essential, right? Wrong. No matter what grade or subject you teach, there are some skills, content, lessons, or units that simply aren't as essential as others. There are things that could be cut without hamstringing

students academically, you just have to be willing to prioritize. One thing that can help is talking with the teachers at the grade level above you to get input on which skills will be most important to help foster success for your students next year.

What about "learning loss," you ask? It is true that most students were negatively impacted academically by distance learning last year. But it is not true that addressing "learning loss" this year means you need do more, go faster, or cover twice as much content. Doing these things actually impedes learning by increasing learning stress and overwhelm. When the brain is under this kind of stress, attention, concentration, and memory formation are impaired. In other words, the faster you go, and the more you try to cover, the less students learn.

It may seem counterintuitive, but the best way to make up for any losses from last year, perceived or real, is to go slower and do less... but do it better. If we focus on creating *depth* learning instead of *breadth* learning, in an environment that is nurturing and low stress, we set our students up for the greatest possible academic and emotional success. Narrow down your focus to fewer but more vital skills. Take the time to make sure students are understanding, practicing, and applying these new skills in various and creative ways.

- For a discussion of depth vs. breadth, we recommend this article: <https://samuelryderacademy.wordpress.com/2015/03/25/depth-vs-breadth/>
- For research on the effects of depth-based vs. breadth-based instruction, we recommend this study: https://education.virginia.edu/sites/default/files/uploads/resourceLibrary/depth_versus_breadth.pdf

3. Add Mindfulness

Incorporate 5-10 minutes of mindfulness into your school day. We know, we know. You're ready to chuck your laptop at the next person who tells you to make time for self-care. But it is important. We're all living through this time of pandemic-trauma together. Taking a few minutes to build resiliency – both your own and your students' – can increase your brain's ability to focus, learn, and regulate your emotions. Here are three simple, quick things you can do by yourself or with your classes to help reset, refocus, and reenergize daily at school.



MOVE. Any kind of movement increases circulation. Any increase in circulation reduces anxiety and increases focus. Take just 5-minutes to stretch, dance, or move your body each day at school. Not sure where to start? Try www.gonoodle.com (they have videos for all grade levels) or do a YouTube search for 5-minute stretch or yoga videos. Feeling shy? Try this easy 3-minute "stretch-at-your-desk" routine: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KBaSGF6kYqw>



WALK. Take a 10-minute mindful walk. A mindful walk is simply a walk with a purpose. During your school day take a silent walk alone or with a friend/colleague. Choose a focus - something to notice - as you walk, such as sounds you can hear, things you can see that are green or round, smells in the environment, or your own breathing. Get off campus if you can. At lunch or on your prep just cross to the other side of the street from your school for a mini mindful walk. You will be amazed how much lighter you feel the moment you step off campus!



BREATHE. Taking the time to breathe mindfully has been proven to have many physical and mental benefits. Just a few of these include reducing stress and depression, lowering blood pressure, managing chronic pain, and staving off feelings of burnout. (Need we say more?). Guided breathing can be as simple as closing your eyes, setting a 5-minute timer, and noticing your own breath. That's it. No special type of breathing required. Just pay attention to the in and out of your own breath for a few minutes every day.

Want more structure? Here are some great starting places for you and/or your students to take a moment to relax, refocus, and reap the benefits of guided breathing:

- Quick and easy mindful breathing: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aNXKjGFUIMs&t=17s>
- 4-7-8 Breathing to reduce anxiety: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MJ7VSirHuQA>
- Structured 3-minute breathing meditation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SEfs5TJZ6Nk>

4. Alter Your Expectations

Change your definition of success. Everyone's on the struggle bus right now. Us, our students, their families... you name it. Part of the reason we're struggling is because we are trying to keep calm and carry on like things are normal, but they're not. If we adjust our definition of success, re-define what is normal, and cut ourselves (and our students) a break, we will all be better for it.



Our students are not "behind." They are where they are. Pretty much all kids everywhere are in the same place. Regaining our sanity starts with accepting this, instead of continuing to compare what is currently so with what once was and then judging ourselves and our students as coming up short.

Life is simply different now. Kids are different, classrooms are different, the world is different, and what successful teaching and learning looks like is going to be different too. Find whatever peace you can in that. Give yourself permission to do less, because then you'll be able to do it better. Smaller steps = faster progress. Be kind to yourself. You deserve it. And if you survive this year and you still want to teach next year, then we are going to call that success.

