

EDUCATION UPDATE

INSIDE

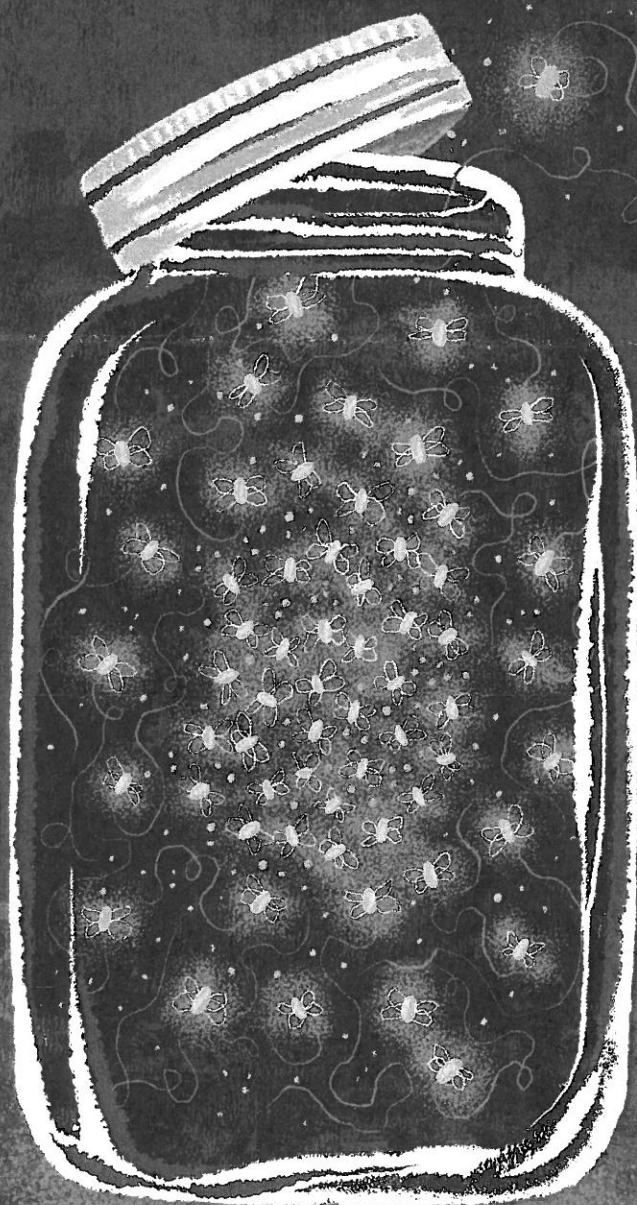
» 2

How Rural Districts
Are Turning the
Talent Tide

7

75 Years On,
ASCD Continues
Fight for Equity

8

Student Edcamps
Support Risk
Taking, Choice
ASCD
LEARN. TEACH. LEAD.


10 Ways to Get Your Mojo Back

Battling the October blues?
Break out of your slump
with these tips from the
2017 State and National
Teachers of the Year.

“October is a classic down month for teachers,” Mike Anderson, author of *The Well-Balanced Teacher*, said in a recent BAM! Radio podcast. “There’s so much positive energy at the beginning of the year. Teachers are excited and fired up, and students are eager to get back to school. And then, after five or six weeks, reality starts to crash in.”

Around this time, he explained, “student challenges might present themselves more prominently and the curriculum can start to feel overwhelming. I think it’s typical that everybody starts to lose their mojo just a little bit.”

When the October blues bear down, what can you do to keep the momentum going? We turned to the 2017 State and National Teachers of the Year, selected by the Council of Chief State School Officers, for advice.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4 →

GET YOUR MOJO BACK

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

1. Find Strength in Your Students

"By October, the kids have figured out that I really care about them," says Sia Kyriakakos, a 2017 National Teacher of the Year finalist from Maryland. "When I feel down and can't push through, they pick me up."

The high school visual arts teacher in inner-city Baltimore shares countless stories of inspiration. Just a few weeks into the school year, "my kids, being the kids that they are, figured out how to break into my classroom," she laughs. "I walked in [early one day] to find a dozen kids already drawing and giving each other feedback and helping each other."

This scene plays out almost every morning now. "Do you know how *amazing* that is? No matter how hard my night has been or if I feel sick or if I'm just tired, I walk in and find these kids already drawing. I'm ready to go! And you know what? I will show up for them every day," Kyriakakos promises.

"If you are not committed to loving your students, you will hit that rut and not get out."

2. Learn Something New

Teachers start the school year energized by their summer learning, having visited museums, attended conferences, traveled, or participated in other professional learning experiences, says Sydney Chaffee, the 2017 National Teacher of the Year. "We get to be learners in a way that [we often can't] during the busy school year."

"In September, we've got all these new ideas and we're ready to go," explains Chaffee, who teaches high school humanities in Boston, Massachusetts. "Then a month or so in, we start settling into our routines again. We're like, 'Oh, well, I teach this every year. I'm just going to pull out the stuff I always use.' But [it helps to] remind ourselves that there's always something new we can learn."

"It could be as simple as picking up a book or watching a documentary about the topic you're teaching," she notes. Those looking for something more formal might start a professional learning network or join a professional learning team with coworkers "to share new ideas and workshop things together," Chaffee suggests.

"Let your peers push you to learn and incorporate new stuff."

"Even after 20 years of teaching, when I feel like I just can't face one more paper or teach that lesson on fractions one more time, I turn to a trusted colleague for ideas and inspiration."

3. Pull Out All the Instructional Stops

"If the school year is becoming tiring for teachers, chances are students are fighting the same fatigue," says Darbie Valenti, the 2017 Missouri Teacher of the Year. "By anticipating road bumps, we can strategically plan for our most captivating lessons."

Besides October, spring can also be a particularly rough time in the classroom, she observes. "Algebra is the last thing my 5th graders are interested in. So instead of math lectures and PowerPoints, we complete inquiry-based lessons centered on golf. Students learn patterns and relationships of numbers by pitching a promotional idea to our local club pro from the golf course in town. They become so invested that they create extra promotional sales and graphs to analyze which sale would be better for the golf course. Students get excited about math, and I feed off their energy. These lessons turn the climate of our classroom back in the right direction."

Whatever the time of year, creating engaging and offbeat lessons can reinvigorate your students—and you.

4. Battle Your Boredom

Whoever said, "only boring people get bored," apparently never taught the discovery of America. In her Justice and Injustice course, Chaffee hit a curricular wall: "For seven years, I taught the same three big units: Christopher Columbus (relearning his encounter with indigenous people), the Haitian Revolution, and apartheid. I was bored. Kids were coming to me having already had the story of Columbus problematized in middle school, and I was starting to feel like this isn't novel anymore."

Chaffee asked her principal if she could shorten Columbus from two-and-a-half months to three weeks and use the extra time to build a new unit.

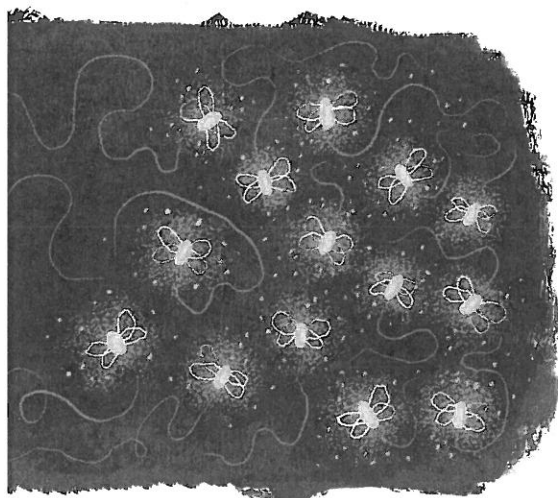
"I know not all teachers have that freedom," Chaffee admits, but she encourages teachers to consider ways to play with timing. "Can I give myself an extra day or two to put in something new or [lead] an interactive experience or a class debate? If there's something about it that's not firing me up, I'm not going to be able to excite kids, so how do I rediscover my passion around it?"

Chaffee also designed a new final project that asked students to complete a "source dissection" of a historical document (detecting bias and subjectivity). The process was exciting, she recalls, "because I got to learn, innovate, and experiment."

5. Find Your Tribe

"As a new year starts, I'm ready to tackle anything that comes my way," says Shelly Vroegh, the 2017 Iowa Teacher of the Year. "But then November hits: parent-teacher conferences, endless nights of planning and grading, and the holidays quickly approaching. That energy and pizzazz I had in August are nowhere in sight."

That's when Vroegh suggests teaming up. "The best thing to do in this situation is to find that one colleague who can pick you up when you're feeling overwhelmed—that person who sees the bright side in any situation, who listens, gives advice, or shares ideas for lessons. Even after 20 years of teaching, when I feel like I just can't face one more paper or teach that lesson on fractions one more time, I turn to a trusted colleague for ideas and inspiration."



"Find your tribe," advises Wendy Turner, the 2017 Delaware Teacher of the Year. "When you are frustrated by student behavior, difficult parents, new curriculum, or paperwork, make sure you find someone to talk to, whether that's someone on your team, in your building or district, or a supportive network on social media."

Just make sure it's a "positive source of comfort and support," says Turner. "Stay away from negative hotspots in your building and those people who constantly complain or spin everything with a negative view. A great supporter will allow you to vent frustrations, affirm them, and offer advice for moving forward."

6. Hit Pause and Reflect

How often have you received a meaningful note only to toss it out? Dustin Weaver, the 2017 Ohio Teacher of the Year, recommends hanging on to anything sentimental. He keeps a "treasure chest" of items—like thank-you notes, emails, and artwork—he has collected from students, parents, and community members over the years. "Whenever I receive something expressing gratitude," Weaver says, "I store it in my treasure chest. Reading these notes of appreciation provides a vast amount of energy and inspiration!"

Set aside time for the 30,000-foot view, as well, says Megan Gross, a 2017 National Teacher of the Year finalist from California. "Take a step back and reflect on all that you've accomplished. Look back on where you started in August and how you've developed these relationships with kids, and celebrate the tiny successes that are going to lead up to where you want to be in May or June."

7. Never Let Your Flame Go Out

Chris Gleason, a music educator in Wisconsin and another 2017 National Teacher of the Year finalist, recalls the advice he once received: "A week before starting my first teaching job, my principal called me into his office and said, 'Get ready son . . . this career is going to challenge you in every way possible. It is in the struggle that you will find joy. *Never let your flame go out.*'"

Those words still resonate with Gleason 20 years later. "It is easy to get bogged down in procedures, paperwork, curriculum revisions, and other necessary but exhausting work. So how do we keep our flame burning brightly not just for the year, but for our entire career?" Through intrinsic motivation, he affirms.

"In *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, author Dan Pink suggests three things that create intrinsic motivation: autonomy, mastery, and purpose. Autonomy is our desire to be self-directed. Mastery is the urge to improve skills, while purpose is the desire to do meaningful and important work. I believe that teachers, like students, will be more productive and engaged if all three of these needs are met."

Intrinsic motivation pushes the veteran educator to hone his craft. For example, Gleason recently videotaped several lessons, noting his "pacing and communication." He found areas that needed to be addressed, observed master educators, and practiced applying new skills.

"I wasn't doing it because it was required or worth 'points' on Danielson's Framework," notes Gleason. "I did it because I felt it would help me to get better at something I love. A fire was burning inside me."

8. Take a Hike

At times, even the most passionate pedagogues will feel their energy depleting. "Make sure you engage in something to provide stress relief," suggests Turner. Take a five-minute walk during lunch or planning periods, do breathing exercises, or just sing in the car. "Find what works for you."

"Self-care is a must for me, so I build in time early in the morning (between 5:00 and 6:00 a.m.) for quiet reflection and exercise," says Turner. "After that critical investment in myself and my day, I feel like

I can tackle anything and really be there for my students, families, colleagues—and then my own family at the end of the day."

Getting fresh air can help, too. "I try to find a weekend where I have downtime," explains Gross, who teaches special education. "[That means] being more intentional about taking my kids to the beach or going for a hike—just something to clear my head—and then mentally making a plan for how I want the next three months to look."

9. Have Coffee with a Mentor

For new teachers, the October blues can hit especially hard. "I remember feeling so overwhelmed, like nothing I did was ever enough," says Gross. "I could have worked at school 24 hours a day and still had piles [of paper] on my desk."

Her mentors pulled her through the slump. "We met for breakfast every Thursday before going to school. I would listen to these veteran teachers' stories and hear their struggles and successes," Gross shares. "And I received support, as well. Those coffee dates were crucial to my mental health and professional development."

10. Resist the Isolation

"Sometimes new teachers don't have the perspective of knowing that this is normal; we go through this," says Chaffee. They're equally unprepared for the dip that can happen in February or March, or as she calls those months—the "dark days."

"I always tell my student teachers, 'Listen, the dark days are coming, but it's going to be OK. We're going to come out of it on the other side.'"

No matter when your mojo takes a hit, "know that whatever you're experiencing as a teacher is probably not that unique," relates Chaffee. "There may be many other people in your building feeling that way. So just *resist the isolation* and reach out to your colleagues. It doesn't mean that you're a bad teacher if you're having a hard time in October or if you're feeling like you're missing some of that spark."

"Reach out to people you trust in your building. Invite them into your classroom and go into theirs—it can inspire you and [serve as a] reminder that you're not doing this work alone. There's a community here and you can talk about what's going on." ■

Sarah McKibben (@editorbytrade) is the managing editor of Education Update.

