

# PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

**A Message from Dr. Terri H. Mozingo,  
Chief Academic Officer**

Welcome to the thirty second edition of the *Pursuit of Excellence Newsletter*. This version will update you on the trends, focus areas, and priorities for the Department of Curriculum and Instruction: (1) Tips For Ensuring Success in Fine Arts; (2) Teachers: Your Voices Matter; (3) On the Spot Mindfulness Strategy; (4) Tips for Ensuring Success in Math and Literacy; (5) CivicTREK; and (6) Words Their Way trainings. It also includes a section on spring being the time for celebration!

**Thank you for your continued support! Have a great week!**

## Spring Is the Time to Celebrate Student Achievement and Our Growing Use of Effective Educational Practices!

It's hard to believe that once again, our clocks are one hour ahead, sunlight is accompanying us on our rides home, and apple and cherry blossoms are budding! **Spring is here** - a time for **celebration and recognition of the many forms of growth and renewal** we can observe in ourselves and in our work with the students of Alexandria City Public Schools (ACPS).

With your kind indulgence, I'd like to use this opportunity to **celebrate the truly outstanding achievements this year of our students, teachers, administrators, and Central Office staff**. Renewal and creative expression can be seen throughout our division. Here is a brief list of the kinds of **"buds and blossoms"** evident throughout our ACPS family and learning community. As you **celebrate your role in bringing these achievements to light**, please feel free to write me with your suggestions about other accomplishments worth sharing. Meanwhile, here's my list:

- A. Implementing the Teaching and Learning Instructional Framework**
- B. Utilizing all state resources when planning lessons**
- C. Using various data sources to guide instruction**
- D. Implementing MTSS for academics and behavior**
- E. Utilizing small-group instruction**
- F. Providing explicit time for students to engage in discourse and conversations**
- G. Ensuring that PLCs are using norms, analyzing data, sharing lessons, and focusing on standards-based outcomes**
- H. Implementing co-teaching models to differentiate and personalize learning for all**
- I. Consistently progress monitoring student and teacher progress**
- J. Expanding our assessment system to include performance-based and project-based learning**



### ACPS 2020 Strategic Plan Goals

1. **Academic Excellence and Educational Equity:** Every child will be academically successful and prepared for college, work and life.
2. **Family and Community Engagement:** ACPS will partner with families and the community in the education of Alexandria's youth.
3. **An Exemplary Staff:** ACPS will recruit, develop, support, and retain a staff that is best for Alexandria's students.
4. **Facilities and the Learning Environment:** ACPS will provide optimal and equitable learning environments.
5. **Health and Wellness:** ACPS will provide access and support that enables students to be healthy and ready to learn.
6. **Effective and Efficient Operations:** ACPS will be efficient, effective, and transparent in its business operations.

## Tips for Ensuring Success: Fine Arts

In the Alexandria City Public Schools, we are building a culture where *Every Student Succeeds*. But, **what does that mean in the arts?** Do we hope that every student with an interest in the arts wins a Tony or a Grammy? Is our measure of success a level of skill from our students where they can make paintings that look like photographs? Is this why the arts are important for our students? No. **The arts are for everyone, not just those that go on to make a living on them.** Humans paint, humans sing, humans tell stories. **It is integral to who and what we are.** Humans have been painting and playing instruments for at least **40,000 years!** Success in the arts reflects this fact. We want our students to learn to **develop their creativity and expressively communicate** with others.

### Nurturing Creativity

There are many ways to nurture creativity, some of which are specific to particular forms. However, most methods fall under the broad areas of offering space for voice and choice or designing creative constraints. Voice and choice broadly refer to allowing students to create art that reflects their beliefs and identity, or when performing the work of others, empowering the student to choose work that resonates with them. This means that in their original compositions, students should not be trying to mimic the work of others. In performances, the canon needs to be balanced with contemporary works and those that are reflective of student culture and interests. Creative constraints are specific expectations imposed on the student. This may seem to conflict with voice and choice, but in practice creative constraints balances it. Constraints allow students to have a jumping off point and keep them from staring at a blank piece of paper. These constraints don't limit creativity, they teach us to make the most of what we have and can inspire unconventional ideas. Specific constraints vary, they can be thematic or technical. They can even be based on the tools, time, or materials at hand. Constraints act as a structure for student choice, where they can delve into problem solving along with expressive elements of creativity.

### Expressive Communication

While creativity may be at the heart of the arts, it is not why most art is created. Art is made to communicate; to express. The arts allow us to manifest our ideas—sharing our feelings, dreams, and vulnerabilities. They give us a way to have a dialogue with those around us and create empathy and understanding in our audience. Nurturing expressive communication starts with creativity, but it also requires students to understand how their audience receives and interprets their work. This can be taught by critiquing the work of others and self-reflection. Looking at a wide variety of works by others helps students to understand how these artists connect to audiences and develop their own ability to empathize. Examining the works through the lens of formal critique gives students tools to look at their own work as well. Self-reflection and peer critique help students to focus their own vision and understand how other relate to it. Every artist succeeds when they creatively engage their audience. Every student succeeds when they harness the arts to improve their ability to innovate, communicate, and relate to others.

For more information, please contact Andrew Watson via email ([andrew.watson@acps.k12.va.us](mailto:andrew.watson@acps.k12.va.us)) or at 703-619-8047.



### Teachers: Your Voices Matter

In July 2018, the **Data Analysis, Interpretation, and Resources Team**, led by Dr. Mozingo, was formed during the **reorganization of the Office of Curriculum Design and Instructional Services**. Currently comprised of representatives from Curriculum, English Learner (EL), Specialized Instruction, Accountability, Instructional Technology, and a school-based principal and instructional coach, this **cross-functional team** focuses on what it means for school leaders and teachers to use **data to enhance the teaching and learning process efficiently and effectively**. Our current work includes **identifying the different types of data** collected through a variety of programs currently in use in ACPS, and **analyzing how those data sources are used** to inform instructional practices. As such, **we are asking principals to nominate one teacher from each school that would be interested in serving on this team**. Additional information will be forthcoming in April.

For more information, please contact **Dr. Anne Booth** at 703-212-4917.

### On the Spot Mindfulness Strategy

Mindfulness at work on the spot tools and techniques  
*When you are feeling under pressure or overwhelmed apply...*

#### The RAIN model

**Non-Identification**  
Awareness which comes from not identifying with the thoughts and emotions associated with the event

**Recognise**  
What's going on

**Investigate**  
with openness and a sense of curiosity

**Allow**  
the experience to be just as it is in this moment



\*Adapted from the RAIN model developed by Michelle McDonald



Submitted by Arnecia Moody, Lead Social Worker



## Tips for Ensuring Success in Mathematics through Productive Struggle

It's uncomfortable to struggle, but struggling is an important part of learning. Productive struggle is not about being frustrated. Students need to develop critical thinking skills and perseverance to be able to take on a challenging problem through different strategies and approaches. Students need to know that it is okay to not know the answer and be willing to participate in the inquiry process to uncover strategies to solve a problem.

One way to support students in productive struggle is by building a mathematical mindset community. Here are the components of a Mathematical Mindset Community from youcubed at Stanford University:

- Teachers and students believe everyone can learn math at HIGH LEVELS.
- The math is VISUAL.
- The environment is filled with wonder and curiosity.
- Communication and connections are valued.
- The math is OPEN.
- The classroom is a risk-taking, mistake-valuing environment.

A second way to support students in productive struggle is by having students engage in learning activities that are challenging and promote inquiry. Desmos has developed guiding principles for developing great math activities. Below are a few of those guiding principles:

### Create an intellectual need for new mathematical skills:

- Ask yourself, "Why did a mathematician invent the skill I'm trying to help students learn? What problem were they trying to solve? How did this skill make their intellectual life easier?" Then ask yourself, "How can I help students experience that need?"

We calculate because calculations offer more certainty than estimations. We use variables so we don't have to run the same calculation over and over again. We prove because we want to settle some doubt. Before we offer the aspirin, we need to make sure students are experiencing a headache.

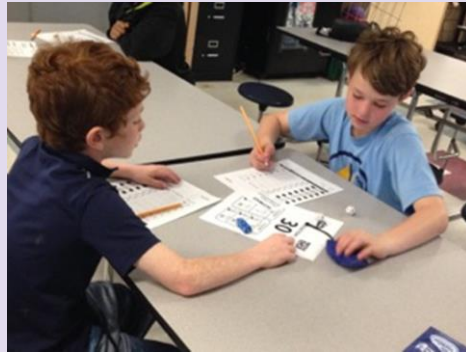
### Create problematic activities:

- A problematic activity feels focused while a problem-free activity meanders. A problem free activity picks at a piece of mathematics and asks lots of small questions about it, but the larger frame for those smaller questions aren't apparent. A problem-free task gives students a parabola and then asks questions about its vertex, its line of symmetry, and its intercepts, simply because it can ask those questions, not because it must. Don't create an activity with lots of small pieces of analysis at the start that are only clarified by some larger problem later. Help us understand why we're here. Give us the larger problem now.

### Connect representations:

- Understanding the connections between representations of a situation – tables, equations, graphs, and contexts – helps students understand the representations themselves. In a typical word problem, the student converts the context into a table, equation, or graph, and then translates between those three formats, leaving the context behind. Re-connect the math to the context.

For more information, please contact [Julia Neuffer](#) at 703-619-8020.



## Tips for Ensuring Success: Literacy

### Five ELA Classroom Lookfors

<b>1. Set a purpose for reading:</b>	Provide students with a specific purpose or goal for what they are being asked to read. What is the skill, information, or concept you want the students to practice or glean from the reading? Why are they reading this chapter, article, passage, etc.?
<b>2. Set clear (reading and/or writing) expectations, goals, and outcomes for students:</b>	Students need to know where they are headed and what they are expected to do, especially in connection with skills and standards. Formative assessments can support the expectations and goals and knowing if students learned what they were expected to learn.
<b>3. Interact with text both individually and collaboratively:</b>	Students comprehend best when they are annotating, questioning, and/or discussing the texts they read as they read. Set an action each time students read such as writing down a question, highlighting key words, or underlining arguments.
<b>4. Summarize text or learning:</b>	Taking ownership of information by putting it into your own words is a powerful way of processing what is learned. This should occur periodically throughout the lesson and not only at the end of a class.
<b>5. Embed writing with reading and reading with writing:</b>	There is a strong connection between writing instruction and reading comprehension. Thoughtful, purposeful writing supports mastering difficult concepts as well as reading comprehension. Writing about what was read provides students an opportunity to think deeply about content in the reading selection. Using mentor texts also provides a way for reading to support writing in various genres.

For more information, please contact Kimberly Schell via email ([kimberly.schell@acps.k12.va.us](mailto:kimberly.schell@acps.k12.va.us)) or at 703-619-8020.

## Apply Now for CivicTREK

How can students build academic skills by identifying and solving problems in their school, community, or world? How can ACPS educators build a collaborative network to help them incorporate academic content, 21st century skills, and civic action into their teaching? CivicTREK helps teachers in grades K-12 to develop student-centered, authentic, and relevant learning experiences that empower students to solve real-world problems in their communities. Participants will gain a deep understanding of principles of project-based service learning, how it connects to the ACPS mission and curriculum goals, and how to implement it in the classroom. During the year, teachers will participate in additional learning and receive personalized coaching and support as they implement a service-learning experience with students.

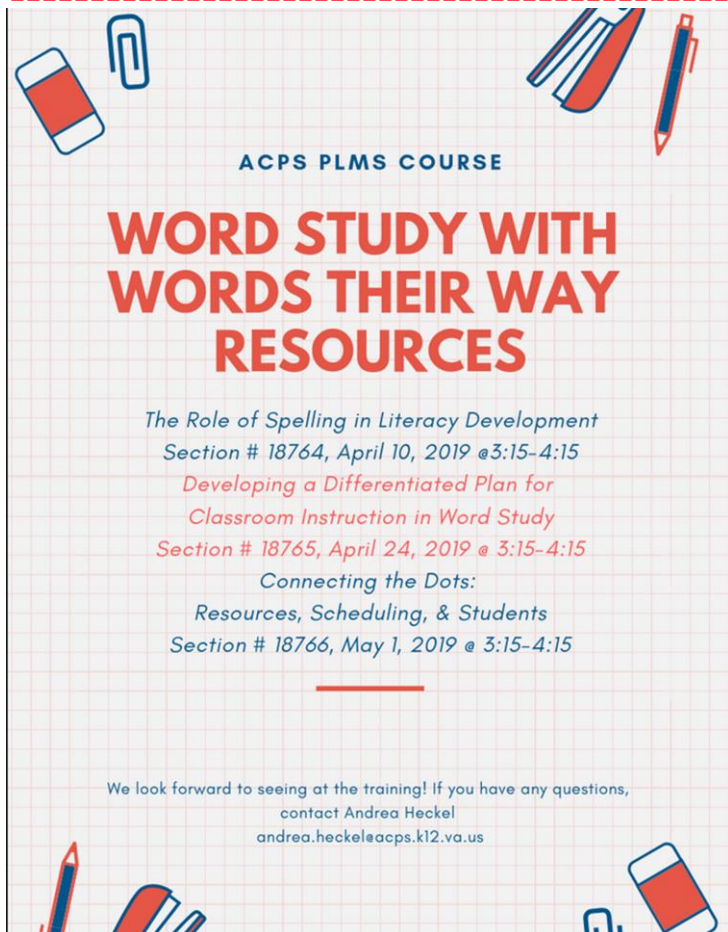


### Participants will:

1. Develop an understanding of project-based learning and the service-learning cycle; 2. Align academic goals and outcomes to service-learning; 3. Evaluate and reflect on service-learning outcomes; and 4. Contribute to a cohort of colleagues engaged in reflective practice to improve student engagement and achievement. Participants who complete the cohort earn 60 re-certification points.

- Here are links to the flyer: [bit.ly/CT19flyer](http://bit.ly/CT19flyer)
- Here is the link to application: : <http://bit.ly/CTApp19>

For more information, please contact Sarah Whelan via email ([sarah.whelan@acps.k12.va.us](mailto:sarah.whelan@acps.k12.va.us)) or at 703-619-8328.



### Word Study with Words Their Way Resources

***Why should I use word study? How do I use these Words Their Way resources in my classroom?***

There has been request from teachers through TAC to offer some additional literacy training. I am delighted to share an invaluable resource with you to pass along to each of your staff. Attached, you will find a flyer with information related to the **Words Their Way (WTW)** training. The hour-long training will address: **Why should I use word study? How do I use the Words Their Way resources in my classroom?** Teachers can attend one of the hour-long workshops of three sessions. In each of the three sessions, they will *gain insight on the five stages of literacy development and will learn to recognize characteristics of readers, writers, and spellers at each of the stages. They will also learn how to use these resources to group students based on their levels of spelling development and have opportunities for practical applications as they work individually and in teams. Lastly, the teachers will develop a plan of action for differentiated spelling instruction.*

If you have any questions, please feel free to email Andrea Heckel ([andrea.heckel@acps.k12.va.us](mailto:andrea.heckel@acps.k12.va.us)).

### Your Feedback is Valued!

Do you have any topics of interest that you want featured in the Pursuit of Excellence? If so, please email [Sahar Wiltshire](mailto:Sahar.Wiltshire).

\*Please note: all Pursuit of Excellence newsletters are posted on [Canvas](#). Log in with your ACPS Google ID to access these newsletters.