



Fort Hayes OPUS

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Teaching Students to Stay Focused

Kate Umstatter

It's important to deliberately stretch students' ability to focus—because without that ability, they'll find it harder and harder to feel the joy in learning, and harder and harder to do the rigorous work being asked of them in this age of the Common Core State Standards. So how can teachers help students build stamina for sustained focus? Over my ten years of teaching, I've found that the following strategies work well.

Teach What Staying Focused Looks Like

I make sure students know what staying focused looks, sounds, and feels like. Using Interactive Modeling, I teach and have students practice how to keep quiet, talking only when truly necessary. I model exactly what their eyes, mouths, hands, and feet should be doing when they're focused on a quiet independent task. I also teach "personal management"—for instance, how to take bathroom and water breaks if needed.

Relate Academic Stamina to Physical Stamina

I frequently use the analogy of marathon training when helping students build endurance for focusing. "Marathon runners can't run 26.2 miles on

Fort Hayes MEC

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day one. They build endurance day by day. Maybe they run three miles at first, then four, and so on. Eventually they build to twenty or more miles. This is similar to the way we'll build our reading stamina. First we'll begin with three minutes, then five minutes, and then ten. Our goal is to read on our own for twenty minutes by the end of the month."

Teach how to refocus

One important way to help students build stamina is to give them strategies for getting back on track when they lose focus. For example, I model breathing techniques (such as inhaling and exhaling slowly three times) and then students practice them. The goal is for students to have ways to take small breaks without disrupting their concentration or others'.

Use Visuals to Highlight Progress

Students are motivated by seeing their progress. My class uses a simple graph to show their progress in reading without distraction or teacher reminders from week to week (and eventually month to month).

“...deliberately stretch a students’ ability to focus...without it, they’ll find it harder and harder to feel the joy in learning...”

Dr. Ruffin and some of our amazing students help work the grill during our second annual Fort Rally during the first days of the 19-20 school year.



Avoid “One Size Fits All”

For various reasons, some students will be able to build endurance more quickly than others. Increasing stamina is our common goal, but I differentiate how I help individual students get there. For instance, an accommodation I'd make for a student who isn't yet able to sustain independent reading for as long as the rest of the class might involve reading for less time and then working silently on a related activity such as a word search.

Reflect Regularly

Students need time to reflect on what's working well and what's challenging about sustaining focus. Sometimes I have them reflect on their level of concentration by writing in their notebooks or sharing during closing circle. I encourage students to name what gets in the way of focusing (such as sitting near a friend, having worried thoughts, or being hungry) and to address those issues if they can. I've found that hearing their peers identify difficulties motivates the class to work together to overcome those challenges.

Planning interesting and appropriately challenging lessons is certainly important when it comes to academic engagement. But we must also teach students to build stamina for sustained focus so they can become immersed—and successful—in their learning.



Alumni Spotlight

“Miles Balfour personifies what it means to be an artist -- empathetic, creative, fearless discerning. He warms every room he enters and leaves everyone he encounters changed. Miles embraces the difficult and enduring questions, and, through his art, he fights for a better tomorrow. In all, Miles serves as a model, a shining light, of the transformation possible when passion meets purpose.”

Michael Saxon, Fort Hayes English Department Chair

Myles Balfour graduated from Fort Hayes Arts and Academics in 2019. He was recently commissioned to create a mixed-media tablecloth (pictured, left) for this year’s Big Table event (a community conversation) which took place on August 28. He was asked to “showcase his creative talent and his love for the Columbus community” through his work. Miles is currently attending Columbus College of Art and Design.

“When you focus on problems, you’ll have more problems. When you focus on possibilities, you’ll have more opportunities.”

Winston Churchill



“You can focus on things that are barriers or you can focus on scaling the wall or redefining the problem.”
- Tim Cook, industrial engineer



“Concentrate all your thoughts upon the work at hand. The sun’s rays do not burn until brought into focus.”
- Alexander Graham Bell, inventor



“You can’t depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus.”
- Mark Twain, author



“Focus on the positives and be grateful.”
- Katrina Bowden, actress



“If you just focus on the smallest details, you never get the big picture right.”
- Leroy Hood, biologist

September Events

September 2

Labor Day: No School

September 3

Parent Safety Meeting 6:00-8:00pm

September 9 through 27

Larry Hamill; “Stream of Consciousness” in the Shot Tower Gallery - Photographer Larry Hamill, known for his commercial and fine arts photography, presents his painting series of over 1200 paintings that he has created over the last twenty years. The work is presented as his “stream of consciousness” from earliest creation to last.

September 10

Fort Hayes MEC Open House 6:00-8:00pm

September 11

Early Release (at 1:00pm)

September 12

Thespian Induction Ceremony 6:00-7:00pm

September 27

Principal Show