



# Making School Worth It

*A hopeful toolkit from*

**InspiredTeaching**

*for the 2021-2022  
school year*

## What do we need to do to make this year better for students, teachers, and parents?

As the new school year begins, parents, teachers, and students face challenges and concerns that have been omnipresent since March of 2020. It's difficult to apply creative thinking while operating in survival mode. But even within such constraints, we know a return to the old normal will not work. (Was it really working then?)

### So, how can we make school worth it in this new reality?

The pages of this toolkit contain ideas from Inspired Teaching's 26 years of work with teachers and schools. These ideas are framed in a series of articles written by Inspired Teaching Founder and President Aleta Margolis for [Hooray For Monday](#). The resources and activities found here are designed to bolster Intellect, Inquiry, Imagination, and Integrity and center student needs in all instructional, curricular, and social-emotional decisions.

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# 6 Ways to Make School Worth It This Year

## 1. Collect meaningful data.

Learning loss is real, but it shouldn't get all the airtime. If we focus solely on making up for things lost, we ignore the meaningful learning students and teachers engaged in last year and we lose out on the opportunity to build on the creativity and capacity for growth that students and teachers have shown. Before we set academic goals, we need to gather information about what our students have experienced this past year. This includes students who have thrived during online learning (How did you set up your home learning environment? What do you know now about yourself as a learner?) as well as those who have struggled (What do you need in order to feel comfortable and confident as a learner? What advice do you have for me, your teacher, to help me support you best?).

## 2. Prioritize relationship building.

Pre-pandemic, we understood the importance of [building relationships](#) in school – co-creating classroom and school expectations, putting routines and rituals in place, and building with our students a safe and engaging learning environment. As we re-enter the school building, it will be more important than ever to devote time to remodeling that learning environment together.

Making deliberate choices to create opportunities for students to [claim the classroom space](#) and [get to know one another](#) in new ways will go a long way in setting everyone up for success. And it will also be important to stay connected to the parents and guardians whose living rooms and kitchens were classrooms last year. [Scribe's Record](#) is a great way to put students in charge of capturing each day's learning in a format that can be shared with families.

## 3. Support student agency.

At Inspired Teaching, we meet every other week with dozens of high school students for [Speak Truth](#) – a student-led seminar in which young people discuss and debate current issues of their choice. Our students attend public, charter, and independent high schools. Most were remote for much of last year and struggled with that experience. However, students consistently told us they grew so much – independent of school. They pursued issues of interest via [Speak Truth](#), social media, chat groups, and their own curiosity, and became experts in their own personal curricula because they had the time and flexibility to follow their own intellectual curiosity.

If school is going to feel relevant at all for young people, students will need to be in the driver's seat. Thoughtful students will demand the opportunity to continue to learn with the flexibility and freedom they experienced this past year.

## 4. Teach critical media literacy.

While it's important to avoid overwhelming students with the barrage of news we've all been navigating during this time of pandemic and racial reckoning, it's also critical to be alert and responsive to the things we are reading about, watching, listening to, and experiencing. School offers a great opportunity to process what students have been watching, reading, hearing. Teach them to find reliable sources, to distinguish between real news and fake. Help them stand in a place of power by teaching them to [create their own news show](#). While it is important to keep discussions about news we find online developmentally appropriate, helping students discern fact from fiction is essential to their development as engaged citizens in a democracy.

## 5. Listen!

Proactively soliciting student feedback is a vital way of validating the lived experience of the young people in our care. Creating regular spaces in our day to really hear what our students are feeling, learning, appreciating, and needing reminds them that their voices and their experience are respected and valued. Active listening can take a variety of forms, ranging from informal daily check-ins to instituting a student advisory committee that is tasked with providing feedback to adults.

## 6. Take care of yourself.

Remember the rule of the airplane oxygen mask: you can't help others if you haven't secured yours first. Educate yourself about what you need to [stay healthy in your school](#). Build time into each week when you will turn off your school focus and do things to take care of yourself – like taking a walk, making a meal from scratch, watching a favorite TV show – hold that time sacred!

And find time to dream of a better tomorrow with like-minded colleagues. It's good for your brain to spend time thinking about what's possible, and it's even better to equip yourself with strategies to make school joyful and productive for yourself and your students.







# HOORAY FOR MONDAY

Hooray For Monday is a collection of resources we will share each week of the 2021-2022 academic year. These resources feature questions, ideas, reflections, and actions we can all take to remodel the school experience for students.

[Join our mailing list](#) to get a weekly Hooray For Monday publication sent straight to your inbox.

## RECENT ISSUES



### **Where Does Your Confidence Come From?**

Tracking the path of our own confidence can be grounding for us, and for our students.



### **Is it OK to Hope?**

Hope isn't something to hold onto; it's something to build.



### **Collective Effervescence**

What happens to our joy when we gather together with purpose?



### **When the Opposite Is Also True**

Everything changes, and our ability to be resilient is closely tied to how well we can manage change.



# Fostering Strong Relationships

A number of years ago Inspired Teaching partnered with a school in Washington, DC that was striving to turn around its student achievement, and student and staff morale. While the work was significant and complex, we knew the place to start was with relationships. Many students were in crisis, having already experienced myriad traumas in their young lives, and we knew the research shows that having the support of a caring adult can make a big difference in how children navigate through trauma. So each student was assigned one adult in the school to check in on them a few times each week.

These adults had the job of engaging casually with the students on their list, greeting them in the halls, making sure the students were seen. The adults said hello in the morning, asked how family members were doing, asked students about their favorite subjects, discussed events in the community and the country, asked **“How are you doing today?”**

The one rule was that they could not ask questions like “Are you going to behave today?” or “Did you do your reading last night?” In other words, **the adults had the sole job of letting students know they were seen and valued.**

While we invested many hours over 3 years into our partnership with the school, this one initiative played a significant role in turning the school around. Children and adults began looking forward to seeing one another, looking forward to coming to school, because they knew they’d be appreciated when they got there.

By the end of our partnership, not only had student achievement gone from among the lowest in the city to among the highest, attendance and morale – for students and staff – had increased significantly.

According to an article in *Education Week*, [How to Build Relationships With Students During Covid-19](#), “A common feature among children who show resilience in the face of adverse childhood experiences is the presence of close and supportive relationships with adults.”

**Strong relationships are essential in the growth of children, and that’s ever more important now when their circles of relationships have grown smaller.**

## Three things teachers can do to deepen relationships with their students:

- Create opportunities for them to share who they are with you and classmates.
- Set up small group discussions where students can share more about who they are. Consider activities like, **2 truths and a lie**, a set of interesting questions that everyone answers, or an opportunity for each student to share an object that means something to them.
- Connect with families via a questionnaire / a phone call home / a letter from you explaining who you are and an invitation for them to send you back the same.

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# Relationship Building Resources



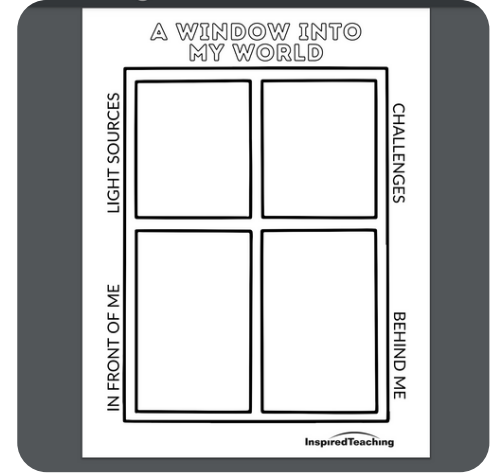
## What Will They Learn

Teachers ask their students what they have learned all the time throughout the year. Have you ever asked them what they want others to learn from them? In this Instigator of Thought Challenge, you will ask your students to reflect on what they want to teach their classmates throughout the year.



## A Museum of Me

This activity is designed to fuel conversation and creative thought about what objects represent, how we elevate them to the level of treasured artifacts, and what particular items best represent our own particular persona. Students create a museum display highlighting who they are.



## Window Into My World

It can be useful to pause and reflect on the challenges, opportunities, accomplishments, and aspirations in our lives. This simple handout can be a reflection tool for you, and/or your students and colleagues. Share what you've created as an opportunity to get to know each other better.

RADICALLY REIMAGINED  
RELATIONSHIPS:  
THE FOUNDATION OF  
ENGAGEMENT



## Radically Reimagined Relationships: The Foundation of Engagement

This report features what we learned about schools and school systems across the United States that are moving beyond conventional, standardized, compliance-based teaching, to create learning experiences that are student-centered and engagement-based. Through our research, we found that while these schools *looked* different from one another as far as location, status as public/private/charter, grade levels served, and demographics, they *felt* the same. This realization led to an exciting discovery: the primary element connecting these schools was a shared commitment to **radically reimagined relationships** among students, teachers, administrators, and families. While the schools had other elements in common, including authentic learning experiences and commitments to educational equity, **we found that the commitment to strong relationships was the core element upon which all others depended.** The report, which synthesizes the findings from this initiative, has exciting implications for all of us working to re-imagine education.

# 2021-2022 Inspired Teaching Institutes

Using Improvisation to Teach Through the Unknown

## A Year of Learning for Parents & Teachers

Yes!  
And...

### SEPTEMBER

Outdoors 9/18 • 10 AM ET  
Online 9/22 • 7 PM ET

When The  
Opposite Is  
Also True...

### OCTOBER

Outdoors 10/16 • 10 AM ET  
Online 10/13 • 7 PM ET

The Art of  
Storytelling

### NOVEMBER

Outdoors 11/13 • 10 AM ET  
Online 11/10 • 7 PM ET

Finding  
Laughter

### DECEMBER

Outdoors 12/11 • 10 AM ET  
Online 12/8 • 7 PM ET

All Ideas  
Count

### JANUARY

Outdoors 1/12 • 10 AM ET  
Online 1/8 • 7 PM ET

The HeART  
of Discipline

### FEBRUARY

Outdoors 2/12 • 10 AM ET  
Online 2/9 • 7 PM ET

Each of these Institutes is FREE and held either online or outdoors. Click the links to learn more about each session and register for one, or all!

*The Washington Teachers' Union is offering DC Public School Teachers PLUs for participation in each session.*

What Else  
Might Be  
Possible?

### MARCH

Outdoors 3/12 • 10 AM ET  
Online 3/9 • 7 PM ET

Unboxing  
Joy

### APRIL

Outdoors 4/9 • 10 AM ET  
Online 4/13 • 7 PM ET

What Are  
You Doing?

### MAY

Outdoors 5/14 • 10 AM ET  
Online 5/11 • 7 PM ET

The Power  
of Reflection

### JUNE

Outdoors 6/11 • 10 AM ET  
Online 6/8 • 7 PM ET

Trusting  
Yourself

### JULY

Outdoors 7/9 • 10 AM ET  
Online 7/6 • 7 PM ET

# Meeting Student Needs

**When we try to solve a problem without identifying its root, the solutions we arrive at are unlikely to achieve long term success. So when it comes to navigating the challenges of working with and teaching others, it's helpful to begin by observing and identifying needs. This works with others as well as ourselves.**

## Understanding Unmet Needs

Autonomy. Belonging. Competence. Developmental Appropriateness. Engagement. Fun.

It's hard to be fully present as a learner when any of these needs is not being met. And it's harder to meet these needs in our current environment when we're working with a different or limited toolkit based on our teaching circumstances. But if, for example, you note that students are feeling alienated from each other due to a year of disrupted learning, focusing on the need for belonging may offer new ideas for collaborative learning experiences that bring students together in more meaningful ways.

## The Power of Reflection

A tool like the [ABCDE framework](#) works well when paired with reflection. As we sharpen our ability to identify student needs, we can understand academic and behavioral challenges through an asset-based lens. We can respond to students who are struggling or acting out by looking to identify and address the unmet need they are expressing.

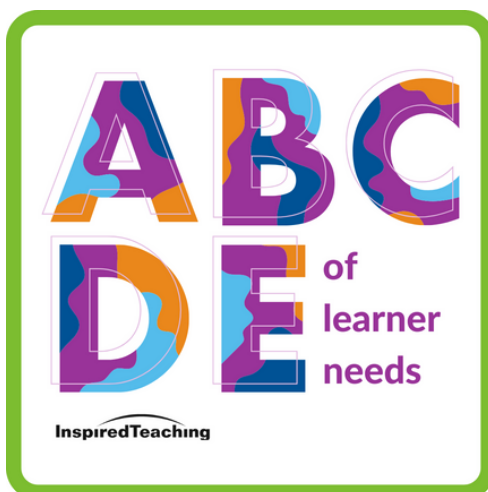
We can even do this for our colleagues, and for ourselves.

This works better when we intentionally take time to pause. Whether you choose to be guided by a meditation app or online yoga class, or gather with a few teaching colleagues to discuss your practice, or go for a walk on your own and consider what you've learned so far this school year, remember the power of reflection. It's a tool for healing, for acknowledging all you have accomplished so far this year as well as all you still wish to accomplish. And **if you choose to tell your students about your own process for engaging in reflection, you will be modeling a practice that can influence them positively.**

Sharing these prompts with students can strengthen academic and social learning. When teachers respond as well, students see us modeling an articulation of our own needs.

- What is one thing our classroom community can do to support you right now?
- What is one thing you can do to support our classroom community right now?

Students can respond in a simple Google sheet, adding their names or keeping responses anonymous. For upper elementary or older, a student or two can have the job of organizing responses and sharing them, first with the teacher, then with the class as a whole. Then the student-organizers (or even a self-selected small group) can make recommendations for action steps based on the responses.



Building on the work of educational psychologist William Glasser, Inspired Teaching created the [ABCDEs of Learner Needs](#), a simple, downloadable tool to support teachers in identifying student needs so they can focus on how to meet them.

# Resources To Meet Student Needs

## WELLNESS CHECK UP

Draw a line to indicate how full you feel in each of these areas:



Safety



Connectedness



Hope

Whom will I connect with today?

How am I caring for myself today?

How will I get outside today?

What am I grateful for today?

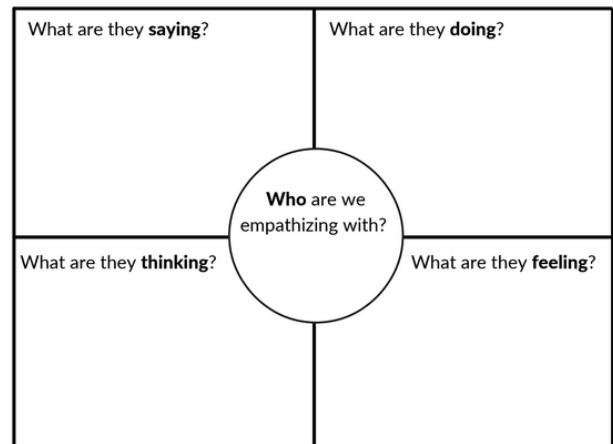
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## Wellness Check-Up

As teachers, we give much of ourselves to our students. But you cannot pour from an empty cup. This wellness checkup provides a simple visual way to reflect on what you have to give and what you need to fill you up. It can be helpful for teachers and students.

## Empathy Map

As you gather data from students about their experiences this year, an empathy map can help you analyze and organize what you hear. Noticing what they are saying, doing, thinking, and feeling in the stories they share can help you see connections between experiences, and define shared challenges. This [article from Edutopia](#) offers an approach to using empathy maps in middle school that can be adapted to all grades.



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## What would make you look forward to coming to school?

Too often we expect students to dislike going to school; and in many instances school does a good job of meeting that expectation. But from a very young age, children know what interests them. They understand the drive to investigate what intrigues them, and they know how to feed that curiosity. Usually, students do all this outside of school because schools regulate the who, what, where, when, why, and how of the curriculum. As a result, too many students - and teachers - feel they have to muddle through the curriculum and accept boredom as a necessary part of the school experience.

**But what if that weren't the case? Where could we turn as teachers to figure out what students might like to learn? How about the students themselves?**

This [#Inspired2Learn activity](#) offers a framework for starting with student interests to craft engaging learning experiences.



# REAL WORLD HISTORY



## Applications Are Open For 21-22 Real World History Course

Inspired Teaching's groundbreaking year-long afterschool course for high school students enters its eighth year this fall. If you know a student looking for hands-on learning about the Great Migration, opportunities to intern in DC museums, and the chance to think like historians through amazing projects, encourage them to sign up!

Students complete a **100-hour internship** at a historic site or museum. Each site provides students with the opportunity to contribute to ongoing projects in meaningful ways while learning about public history, thereby gaining authentic work experience and exposure to a field that is rarely introduced to high school students.

**Internship sites have included:**  
Anacostia Community Museum  
Ford's Theatre  
Library of Congress  
The Phillips Collection  
President Lincoln's Cottage  
Smithsonian Asian Pacific  
American Center  
Tudor Place  
United States Capitol  
Historical Society

Learn more about the program in [this video](#).

Read this [article](#) in the *Washington Post* about the program's oral history project.

**LEARN MORE.**

# Prioritizing Joy

**What does it look like when a student is motivated by joy? Joy in learning – fueled by curiosity or fascination or determination – happens all the time in young people’s lives:**

- A toddler figuring out how to walk, joyfully and determinedly tests her balance with each step, and pulls herself back up to her feet after each fall to her bottom.
- A child learning to ride a bike, finds his way with each push of the pedal, persevering through skinned knees and falls in order to experience the excitement of staying upright and racing forward.
- A teenager designing the switches and levers to make a redstone machine in Minecraft, or writing a campaign speech to run for class president, finds that moment of flow when all their hard work congeals into a finished product.

These learners are motivated by the task itself, by the skill they wish to acquire, and the new opportunities it will afford them. Certainly fear is present—the new walker and bike rider may be motivated in part by fear of falling, the candidate for class president may be motivated in part by fear of looking foolish in front of their peers or losing the election—but the primary motivation in these cases stems from **joy: that beautiful feeling of growing, and the tremendous satisfaction that comes from success in learning something new.**

**All children, all human beings, are hardwired to experience curiosity, interest, and a deep desire to learn.**

And yet school tends to be set up based on the assumption that children don’t want to learn, that we have to create an unpleasant, fear-based set of motivations in order to get them to learn.

**So how do we make the shift from fear to joy?**

**Change your role from traffic cop to Instigator of Thought.**

**A joy-based approach is rooted in the assumption that children are innately interested in learning and sets students up for focused hard work and forward momentum.** This means making the learning relevant and offering plenty of choices so learners are driving their own discoveries. In the role of **Instigator of Thought**, a teacher can fuel students’ learning, instead of playing the traffic cop who’ll spend the year giving citations for bad behavior.

**Shift your mindset from “You have to do it!” to “You can do it!”**

This shift from a deficit to an asset-based approach has the added value of influencing the ways we as teachers see our work. “*You can do it*” conveys a belief in students’ abilities, confidence in their capacity, and confidence in our own ability to create the right conditions for their success. **It puts the student at the center of the learning rather than the teacher.**

**Redefine what joy means.**

We tend to think of joy as smiles, laughter, exuberance, even frivolity. It can and sometimes it does mean these things, but consider the Merriam Webster definition: *The emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires.* Consider what it looks like when that thing our students desire is learning, knowledge, new skills. Look at your curriculum through this lens.

**Search for the joy.**

Teaching right now is hard. Educators are on the front lines carrying our youth through the biggest health crisis in a century. It can be a rough time to default to joy. Sometimes “It has to get done so I have to do it” is the cold, hard reality that motivates us to get out of bed, head into the classroom, and dive into geometry or Spanish or Chaucer. **But it is also true that we feed off the energy of those around us. If you find ways to put joy at the center of your teaching, your students are more likely to reflect it back. In this way, it might just be a little easier to get through tomorrow and the day after that.**



# Resources to Inspire Joy



## Automatic Writing

One way to stimulate our imaginations and awaken joy is to relax and let our minds flow uninterrupted. Automatic writing gives our minds the space to do just that by offering a series of prompts that guide us through a line of thinking that is entirely unexpected. When you do this activity with your students, think through and simplify your explanatory language (as much as possible) so the creation process is free to flow. The goal of these prompts is to see where they lead us. As a follow-up activity, you can show students how to build on this to learn about other elements of a story such as structure or plot or action.



## Seven Bikes

The more you “think outside the box” the better you get at doing so in other contexts. You see challenges from different angles, you find solutions that are not obvious, and you are more likely to embrace the difficulty of solving problems with joy and optimism than with fear of the unknown. This activity is designed to do just that by presenting students with a prompt and structure for playing with language that can get them talking and dreaming together.



## Laughing and Letting Go

Explore the power of laughter, and more specifically - laughing at yourself. In a school year that promises to be filled with plenty of unpredictable twists and turns, laughter may very well be the secret to making our way through. Consider the list of things to try if you're looking for more ways to laugh. Ever explored laughter yoga? Ever shared an embarrassing yet funny moment with your students? Maybe it's time to try! Laughter reminds us of our humanity, our fallibility, and our capacity to experience joy.



# SPEAK TRUTH



"Speak Truth reminds students that communities of young people have diversities of opinion, there's power in their opinions, and their discussions can be a launch point for action."

- Cosby Hunt  
Director of Youth Programming

**Speak Truth is a bi-weekly honest and respectful discussion about contemporary social issues – by students, for students.**

Each discussion brings high school students together from public, public charter, and private schools to engage in a dialogue that exposes them to a diverse array of perspectives. These thought-provoking conversations teach students to defend their stances on myriad issues and help them to develop and recognize the power of their own voices. As a national model for civic discourse among young people, Speak Truth seminars have the power to shape a generation of socially conscious future leaders and citizens who will be responsible for building a better future.

**Speak Truth Seminars for 2021-2022 will occur online at 6 PM ET via Zoom:**

2021	2022
September 2 and 23	January 6 and 20*
October 7 and 21*	February 3 and 17
November 4 and 18	March 3 and 17
December 2 and 16	April 7 and 21*
	May 5 and 19
	June 2 and 16

*\*Teachers can learn how to implement Speak Truth starting at 5:30 PM for these sessions.*

**LEARN MORE**



**Special thanks to the funders who made this toolkit and the programs it describes possible.**

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