

Monday, October 19, 2015



Thought of the Week

“Be more concerned with your character than your reputation, because your character is what you really are, while your reputation is merely what others think you are.”

John Wooden

Tip of the Week

Linda Fisher Thornton, founder and CEO of *Leading in Context*, believes that leaders need to be asking themselves the questions of leadership – about motivation, authenticity and ethics. “Continually asking ourselves these questions keeps us sharp, focused and aware of our greater impact on others, organizations and society,” the award-winning author says. In a recent blog Thornton includes a list of questions that leaders may wrestle with, noting that knowing the answers can keep one aligned with the greater mission. Each item on the list includes a link to a related blog post exploring the question. [Check it out here.](#)

Williams Staying Busy

Commissioner of Education Michael Williams has been busy since announcing his plans to step down. On Friday, [he notified school districts and charters](#) that the TEA will reduce the length of the STAAR in grades 3–8 for the 2016 spring administrations. The agency had announced earlier in the year it would be impossible to shorten the exams because of the need for more extensive field testing of questions. [But House Bill 743](#), passed in the last Legislative session, requires STAAR assessments be designed so 85% of students can complete the grades 3–5 assessments in two

hours and 85% of students can complete the grades 6–8 assessments in three hours. “The steps I’m announcing for the coming school year are merely the first as TEA works to meet the legislative requirements while also balancing the validity and reliability of each assessment,” Williams noted. On Saturday, in his first public remarks since announcing his resignation, Williams said that [the biggest threat to Texas schools is the state's teacher shortage](#). In an interview with Dan Rather at The Texas Tribune Festival, Williams said it's crucial that Texas expand the state's teacher pool and get them the training they need.

Spotlight on Region 10 Schools

Wylie ISD reached out to thank a reporter for a job well done, [and earned recognition for the journalist and themselves](#). The *Dallas Morning News* set out last school year to help readers understand the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness and in the process named Wylie “The Star of the STAAR.” The lead reporter on the series of articles on the measure and its impact on teachers, students and parents was Jeffrey Weiss who the district nominated for the 2015 F.L. Elder Award for Outstanding Reporting in Education. Texas ASCD presents the annual award to a reporter who “explained complex educational issues leading to a better public understanding of education” and “examined effective educational practices in schools and school districts.” Wylie ISD will proudly join Weiss for the award presentation next month in Austin. You can still read his story on STAAR success in Wylie ISD at [the Dallas Morning News website](#).

Plano ISD is proud, and rightfully so, of its [three educators named best in the state](#) in their respective teaching fields. [Greg Shields](#), Plano Senior High School Foreign Language Department Chair, is the 2015 Texas Spanish Teacher of the Year as selected by the Texas Foreign Language Association. [Rebecca Grant](#), Haggard Middle School seventh and eighth grade math teacher, was advised by State Commissioner of Education Michael Williams that she is among 10 teachers from across Texas to have been named finalists for the 2015 Presidential Awards for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching. [Ben Pirillo](#), Hughston Elementary School physical education teacher, has earned the accolade of 2015 Physical Education Teacher of the Year for the Texas Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance. Quite an accomplishment for the teachers, the district and the region.

Second graders assigned to Room 217 at Terrell ISD’s John F. Kennedy Elementary School this year were pleasantly surprised on the first day to see a familiar face at the front of the classroom. Teacher Nicole Rincon wasn’t new to the school, but the kids were used to seeing her in another role. During the 2014-2015 school year she was the front office receptionist and attendance clerk, and got to know many students in a different setting. But it was enough to encourage her to pursue the career she always dreamed about. Rincon enrolled in online classes during the winter semester and was able to complete her observation hours at JFK Elementary during her lunch breaks. She recently completed her first six-week cycle of the school year, and while she says the job is “eye opening,” she is finally doing what she is passionate about. [Read more](#).

Scanning the News

After a group of suburban Chicago parents complained about the commercialism of McTeacher’s Nights, the National Education Association has joined with other groups [to ask McDonald’s to end the fundraising practice](#). During McTeacher’s Nights, teachers stand behind the counter at McDonald’s, serving up food to their students who come in. At the end of the event, the school gets a cut of the night’s sales. In [a letter to company officials](#), the NEA and watchdog group Corporate Accountability International, wrote “It is wrong to enlist teachers to sell kids on a brand like McDonald’s, whose core products are burgers, fries and soda.” Other critics who have signed on to the letter argue that McDonald’s benefits from these fundraisers more than the schools. A statement from the restaurant chain said that school organizations have told them that “in addition to the extra financial support

these events provide for their schools, they have a great time connecting with their students and neighbors in meaningful ways."

A new rule that threatens to negatively impact dual-enrollment programs in 19 states has created widespread objections from educators who fear it could undermine students' chances of going to college. A [ruling by the Higher Learning Commission](#), a group that accredits colleges and universities in portions of the West and the Midwest, requires high school teachers of dual-credit courses to have a master's degree. If that advanced degree isn't in the subject they're teaching, teachers must have earned 18 graduate credits in that subject. District leaders, who knew little about the ruling until it was published in final form on Oct. 1, are worried that some of their high school teachers may not qualify to teach dual-enrollment classes that are soaring in popularity. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, which oversees higher education accreditation in 11 states including Texas, has a similar rule.

A *USA Today* commentary last week [focused on the growing trend of districts scheduling online learning on school days impacted by extreme weather](#). Author Thomas M. Kostigen concluded that since kids already function well in a wired world that technology and advancements in education via e-learning platforms need to be further embraced by school systems. But the idea is not going over well for some parents in an Alabama district which is using a new wrinkle. The Jefferson County Schools have scheduled [two eDays to take the place of makeup days in advance](#), the first one was held Friday. Parents say the requirement puts an undue burden on them to stay home with their children those days, potentially missing work.

Items of Interest

While worried parents may take comfort in new statistics that show smoking among American teenagers has dropped 64% in recent years, [plenty of youngsters still light up](#). A full 30% of teens smoked cigarettes, cigars or marijuana in 2013, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report. Also disturbing is the same report shows that marijuana use has doubled. The CDC report, which tracks teen smoking rates from 1997 to 2013, indicates the proportion of students who were exclusive marijuana users more than doubled from 4.2% to 10.2%. Among cigarette or cigar users, marijuana use also increased, with considerable jumps identified among black and Hispanic students toward the end of the study period. Officials conclude that policy and programmatic efforts might benefit from integrated approaches that focus on reducing the use of tobacco and marijuana among youths. [See the report here](#).

Two new studies—one on the *National Assessment of Educational Progress* in 8th grade math, the other on 15-year-olds' math performance on the *Program for International Student Assessment*—both find that achievement gaps within schools account for more of the overall achievement disparities among students of different races or economic backgrounds than do gaps between schools. On NAEP, [within-school differences in achievement](#) accounted for 16 score points of the 31-point gap in math scores between nearly 100,000 white and black 8th graders in 2011. By contrast, the study attributed only 5 points of the gap to disparities from school to school. In the [PISA study](#), disparities within schools also accounted for a larger portion of the gap between wealthy and impoverished students in English-speaking countries, and in the United States, the within-school disparities were worse than the overall average.

Many districts have attempted to supplement their communication programs through the use of volunteer contacts at each school. But as the Arlington (VA) Public Schools realized after pursuing a similar model for a decade, it was time for a new approach. That's when the superintendent agreed to pay a small stipend for a PR liaison at each school. The APS communications team supports the liaisons with a kickoff training, iPad minis, quarterly meetings and weekly emails to suggest hashtags to use and campaigns to promote. [The results from the new effort have been astounding](#), earning a Golden Achievement Award from the National School Public Relations Association. An overview of the effort is the subject [a recent NSPRA Social School PR blog post](#) by Delaina McCormack, APS public relations specialist.

Looking Ahead

Providing parents and teachers with timely, helpful information they can put to good use for children is a challenge all schools face. Those looking for workable ideas on the subject will want to peruse [a recent Education Week article](#) about a California district's quest to provide teachers and parents with understandable, usable information. A partnership between San Francisco, Stanford University and several foundations, has produced several successful strategies. One, a well-publicized program called [Ready4K!](#), uses text messaging to deliver tips to the parents of preschoolers, suggesting fun and easy ways that they can support their children's early literacy development at home. The other strategy centers on getting actionable information to teachers in the form of a new kindergarten-readiness measure with related easy-to-use reports. Both initiatives are detailed in [a recent New America case study](#).

Resource Bank

Social media sites have become powerful tools in promoting business, schools and other organizations. But they also present numerous pitfalls. And despite all the warnings and cautionary tales, the faux pas continue. PR executive Marsha Friedman recently asked her social media team to offer some tips on avoiding some of the more common mistakes. She included their advice in a recent edition of her blog. ["5 Biggest Mistakes People Make with Social Media"](#) is today's [Resource Bank](#) item.



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