



Leadership in Creativity

Mary Ann Hoffman

In this era of education accountability, it has been a challenge to advocate for creativity and problem solving. Yet, the world is in need of creative ways to solve its problems.

As lower school principal, I decided that if I were going to keep creativity in my students' lives, I would need to find a way to make this happen. For 14 years at Heathwood Hall Episcopal School in Columbia, S.C., and now in my first year at St. Luke's School in New York City, I developed a creative problem-solving program for students in grades 1–4.

Skills Last a Lifetime

In my 13-week program, I teach 30-minute classes to each section of each grade every other week. I use commercial programs, such as creative thinking expert Edward de Bono's Six Thinking Hats and his CoRT Thinking Skills programs. For example, Six Thinking Hats teaches children to view a problem from six different perspectives—facts, emotions, ideas, positives, challenges, and metacognitive aspects. I find these programs valuable because they give children lifetime skills to think better and solve problems.

I also developed my own lessons using the children's book *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*, by Chris Van Allsburg. His book has open-ended possibilities that allow children to use their imaginations. To promote fluency in generating ideas, I read the story to the children, then have them brainstorm ideas for stories based on the pictures in his book. Next, the classroom teacher continues with a creative writing lesson, the art teacher teaches a lesson on the black-and-white drawing technique used by Van Allsburg, and finally the librarian leads a lesson about the author himself.

The students learn divergent, convergent, and elaborative thinking skills. They learn how to generate ideas fluently in two ways:

- Brainstorming—picturing ideas and connections through mind map graphic organizers.
- SCAMPER—improving on or changing ideas through **S**ubstituting, **C**ombining, **A**ddjusting, **M**odifying/magnifying/"minifying", **P**utting to other uses, **E**liminating, and **R**eversing or rearranging.

Lessons are often open-ended to allow students to extend their thinking. Last year, our 4th graders used their creative problem-solving skills for an invention convention based on the Invent America program, a U.S. Patent and Trademark Office Foundation contest that guides

students step-by-step in developing inventions that arise from problems they observe in their daily lives or in the wider world.

Creativity is often viewed as a "soft" subject that cannot be evaluated. However, for two consecutive years, Heathwood had two students place first in the Invent America competition, which involves thousands of children. After learning that wild animals had a higher survival rate than humans in the 2004 Southeast Asia tsunami, the first winner, a 4th grade boy, devised an Early Tsunami Warning System tied to the satellite tracking of monkeys who move to safe ground long before a disaster hits. The second winner, a 4th grade girl whose grandmother frequently misplaced her hearing aid, proposed adding a flickering light to the device to allow hearing impaired users to quickly locate it.

Principals can support competitions such as Odyssey of the Mind, Destination Imagination, Word Masters, and Future Problem Solving, each of which sets up intriguing problems for students to solve. Teachers need release time to work on these thinking skills competitions and compensation for their time and talents.

Go Whole School

Joseph Renzulli, an expert on gifted students, has developed various models of a whole school enrichment program that sets aside time for all students to explore speciality classes with their teachers. At Heathwood, we conducted a nine-week program where teachers, associates, specialists, and the principal developed 40-minute weekly classes for small groups of students to investigate areas of interest, such as nature study and drawing, ancient civilizations, or the physics of kite flying. The classes were extensions of disciplines within the curriculum and were often integrated into current lessons.

Through teaching creativity and problem solving, and being involved in enrichment programs and competitions, I was able to view my students in different ways and help them find special talents that otherwise may have remained hidden. We made learning fun, and the students got to see their principal in a teaching role. Time is always an issue for principals, but if you schedule classes as part of your week, you can make the time.

The new 21st century skills movement advocates for creativity as well as the core basics. I think both can be done, but it will take leadership to find the best balance. As education leaders, we have to start by being the creative ones.

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