

REBECCA HATHAWAY, NBCT

Rebecca Hathaway, a third-grade teacher in the White River School District, wants to “paint a realistic picture of education, tempered with humor and grounded in the love I have for children.” A parent of two teenagers, she facilitates online courses in reading education for teachers through Grand Canyon University in Phoenix, Arizona.

Missing a Day of School ... Missing More Than You Think?

I see the note clutched in Jenny’s hand long before she reaches my desk. “Guess what! I get to ride on a plane!” she announces as she bounds into the classroom with a huge smile. “My mommy surprised me last night!” I smile at the sparkle in my young student’s eyes as I reach for the note.

The message is a familiar one:

... Jenny will not be in school next week. Please send home any work she will miss while she is gone ...

Behind the note is a conscientious parent, concerned that her child stay caught up with her school work. However, the note also reflects a common misunderstanding. What Jenny will miss, by not being a participant in my classroom for five days, is not something she can make up in the form of homework. As well, when she returns to the classroom, no attempt at getting her caught up will duplicate the classroom experience she has missed.

Sicknesses and family emergencies will necessitate that your child miss some school. In addition, there is great value to family time, and a vacation can provide an outstanding cultural experience. As an educator who is also a parent, I have had to make this decision

myself, and I realize it is one that must be weighed carefully. A parent's decision to take a child out of school should be an informed decision based on a realistic understanding of the learning opportunities that occur in the classroom setting. To better understand what a student will miss while absent from just one day of school, let's return to Jenny and follow her through her day.

Jenny's Day

It's Monday morning, and students are writing about their weekends. While writing a weekend story is a part of our regular Monday routine, this assignment is not just an opportunity to practice a learned skill. Today I introduce multiple paragraphing. Moving from one paragraph to several paragraphs within a story is a complicated skill for third graders, and one that requires careful instruction. After introducing the concept and questioning my students to determine the degree of background knowledge they have on the skill, I spend approximately 30 minutes modeling the process. Today I use my laptop and the projector to write my own weekend story, talking to my students about the thought processes involved in writing as I keyboard the story and it appears on the screen. Jenny hears me say, "Hmm. I want to say that I went to the mall, but I'm not sure if that would fit into this paragraph or if I should start a new paragraph for that idea." I question individual students to determine their level of understand-

ing. Jenny is asked, "Jenny, where would you start a new paragraph in this group of sentences?" Interaction occurs, and together we create a story of multiple paragraphs describing my weekend. Determining that my students are ready to practice the process on their own, I instruct them to get out paper and begin their stories. Along with her classmates, Jenny practices the skill I modeled. She has my assistance as I circulate around the room. Later, I ask students to pair up with a partner to read their stories and receive feedback. Jenny and her partner compare stories and explain their paragraphing. During this process, I observe to evaluate my students' level of understanding. I make note of students who need more individual attention. Jenny appears confused as do many other students. Consequently, I decide to call the class to the front, and I reteach the skill, based on the specific errors I have observed.

This takes us up to our specialist time. Students turn in their papers, and we head out the door for a bathroom break and a half hour of music instruction. As I return to the classroom to take a closer look at the weekend stories, our music teacher engages the students in today's focus, percussion instruments. In his typical hands-on style, students are provided the opportunity to try many different instruments, experimenting with sound and rhythm. Thirty minutes later when I return, Jenny is happily making music with a tambourine, clearly enjoying the process.

We head back to class for reading instruction. While some students follow me, others head into other classrooms for small group instruction with our resource room instructors and instructional assistants. There they receive specialized, individualized instruction in the reading skills they are struggling with. Jenny and the other students who join me in the classroom go immediately to their desks and pull out their books. We have been reading novels around the theme of early Americans. Students self-selected their books to fit their own interests and reading levels. I allow students to read a few minutes before pulling the group to the carpet up front to teach a short lesson on comprehension. Today my focus is on using context clues to determine the meaning of unknown words. I read five or six examples I have selected ahead of time, asking students to share with the person sitting next to them what they think the word means, using clues from the sentences surrounding the word. Jenny and her classmates share their ideas with each other before raising their hands to share them with the class. Later, students are sent back to their seats to find examples of context clues in their novels. Jenny identifies three examples in her novel, *Sarah Plain and Tall*, and she marks them with her sticky notes. While students work, I begin calling individuals over to read for me. When it's Jenny's turn, I listen to her read and make note of the types of errors she is making. I coach her on deciphering difficult words, question her to assess her comprehension, and ask

her to explain her reading strategies. Toward the end of our reading time, I divide students into small groups to share their context clue examples with their classmates. Soon the big hand reaches the 12, and it's time for lunch! Students now have a break until they return from recess at 12:45.

Following a 15-minute silent reading time, I challenge students with some mental math. *What is twice as many as 8 minus 3?* Students share their answers with a partner and explain in their own words how they solved the problem. When Jenny says she figured it out by adding 5 and 5, I challenge her to explain how she knew to add those two numbers.

Next, I turn on the overhead and project the following problem onto the board: *Working with a partner, design a survey to find out what kind of pets your classmates have. Use the survey to collect your data. Present your data in the form of a graph. Explain the process in writing.* Jenny and Anna become partners, and they enthusiastically begin the process. Having had experience with graphing, students are mostly reviewing the skill; however, this lesson challenges students to apply their known skills in a new situation. I circulate and offer assistance where needed. Jenny and Anna become confused when the time comes to place their data on a graph, and they ask for help. Rather than answer their question, I challenge them to discover the answer

on their own. “What graphs have we made that represented this kind of data? What did they look like? How would you organize this information so that someone could look and see how many more people in our class had dogs than cats?” Finally, I suggest that Jenny and Anna walk around the room and see what their classmates are doing.

Our math session ends with an opportunity for students to share their graphs and read what they wrote about the process. Jenny raises her hand and challenges a classmate, “Where is your key that shows what your pictures mean?” It’s a good question and a reminder to the team to go back and add a key to their picture graph.

It’s almost time to go home, but before we go, students come once again to the front of the room, this time to hear a story about Ruby Bridges. It’s African American month, and we are reading stories about famous African Americans. Our story today generates a lot of discussion about prejudice. Students appear particularly intrigued with the differences between our integrated school and the segregated schools described in the book. I recognize a teachable moment and tell students that tomorrow we will create a Venn Diagram, a graphic organizer used to compare information, to compare and contrast our school with the Southern schools of Ruby’s day. Just before students are dismissed for the day, Jenny raises her hand. “Ms. Hathaway, are there any more stories like that? I like to read about real people.” I

suggest that she come with me to the library at recess tomorrow so I can show her the biography section.

Jenny and her classmates call out their goodbyes as they head out to the buses. I head to my desk to make plan for tomorrow, based on the successes and struggles of today.

The Homework Challenge

Clearly, were Jenny to have missed the school day described above, she would have missed out on multiple learning opportunities. In this one day, Jenny participated in interactive instruction, observed modeled writing, read orally, participated in class discussions, asked relevant questions, answered thought-provoking questions, collaborated with her classmates, and received assistance with all of her work. It’s hard to imagine what assignments could be sent home to duplicate this learning experience. While I could easily ask Jenny to write a weekend story, I would be hard-pressed to recreate the instruction to help her understand the process of paragraphing. I could assign some reading in her novel, but how could I effectively help her understand the comprehension strategy her classmates learned through modeling and sharing? Finally, while Jenny could easily create a graph on her own, how could she gather data that represented her classmates, and who would she collaborate with when she struggled to represent the data on paper?

What's a Parent to Do?

While requesting homework ahead of time is a noble attempt at helping your child stay caught up while away from school, the reality is that your child will miss the classroom experience while he is gone. When he returns, his teacher will make every effort to help him get caught up. However, typically the child feels left behind, and the longer the absence, the greater the transition back to a comfortable reality.

When faced with a decision that will result in your child missing school, you may find these suggestions helpful.

1. Spend time in your child's classroom. If you are familiar with your child's classroom environment and her teacher's style of instruction, you will have a better understanding of what she will miss when she is not there.
2. If at all possible, plan your vacations to coincide with school vacations. While this is not always practical, avoiding an absence altogether is the best way to avoid the consequences of missing school.
3. Before planning an absence, talk with your child's teacher regarding which dates might be better choices for your child to miss. A typical comment from students, and one I've heard from my own child is, "I won't miss anything. We don't do anything important

on Fridays." Likely you will hear a different story from your child's teacher. For example, if a teacher is planning a major project, it would be best for your child not to miss the day it is introduced.

4. Realizing that you cannot duplicate the school setting, do talk with your child's teacher about the best way to help minimize the loss of instruction while your child is away. If a teacher knows that you are sincere about your desire to work with your child, she may be more willing to take the time to give you specific help in keeping your child up to speed. Remember that many teachers will not know specifically ahead of time what material they will be covering, since good instruction is based on the progress of the learners. Consequently, some teachers may wish to wait until your child returns to determine what homework will help your child get caught up.
5. In addition to making up for lost time, talk with your child's teacher about how to use the time away as an educational experience. In Jenny's case, her first ride on an airplane might provide an opportunity for her to write about her experience, linking with a recent class unit on descriptive paragraphs.
6. Whenever possible, schedule medical appointments when your child is not in school. While it cannot always be avoided, it is disruptive to the learning process occurring in a classroom when a child

is pulled out in the middle of the day. In addition to the disruption, even a short segment of missed class time can be significant.

7. Inform the school office of the planned absence. Most schools have a form that must be filled out by parents and approved by administration before planned absences will be excused.

I believe that most parents care deeply about the decisions they make for their children. As a parent myself, I have struggled with this very issue. I admit to having made the decision to exchange a day of school for what I determined to be a valuable experience for my child. Other times, I have altered my plans to avoid my children's missing school. Because I know these decisions reflect what I value, I try to make them carefully and intelligently. By being well-informed about your child's school experience, you are better equipped to make these difficult choices.