

Tips for Teachers

A Service of ELMLE

- December: a time for giving

An all school Read In? A Disney Day? Carols around a tree? End of term tests to ensure that no student leaves school early? What do you do at your school as things wind down prior to the festive holiday season? What *may* be lost instructional days due to families leaving early need not be lost community days, or so says Christian Decker, fifth grade science teacher at the **American School of the Hague** whose innovative ‘last day’ program has kids clamoring not to be taken out early. School is just too much fun!

Come December, thoughts turn to snowballs, the giving and receiving of gifts, and trips home to visit friends and family. Christmas, Weinachten, Noel, or La Navidad, and Chanukah. Although not everyone celebrates, “Christmas” has largely become a tree-laden, Santa-driven, chestnuts and holly affair that is universally used to promote commerce, firesides, and visits back home. Like the Christmas stolen by the Grinch, the season provides a warm feeling devoid of and removed from its Christian origins, which themselves are rooted in Germanic and Roman solstice observances. Whether we celebrate or not, we are certainly glad of the chance to take a break to recharge our batteries.

Airlines notoriously use the run-up to the winter holiday as an opportunity to raise their prices. So some school families are tempted to leave just that little bit early in order to save what can be a considerable amount of money. This can mean that classes in international schools begin emptying up to a week before the break. Teachers have to plan, therefore, for those who stick it out to the very end, and for those whose families take them out early.

What do you do to recoup lost instructional time? How does your school celebrate the winter holiday? What does it do to provide academic and other stimuli for students who wait until the official break to take their

family holiday? Do you allow/require early leavers to do make-up work? Do you teach to the bitter end, or do you offer a chance for seasonal mirth and community enjoyment?

On the last day before break at **The American School of Warsaw**, middle school teachers and students get together in small groups to learn new crafts or to work together on a project. This change of pace allows teachers to offer practical lessons in various art forms, such as sewing or Polish paper cutting, or to teach new games or mini-lessons in something of interest to them. It gives students a chance to explore something new, and gives a lift to the end of term.

The American International School of Vienna enjoys a middle school talent show the last two periods before the holiday. Two teachers volunteer to organize the event. Students sign up in early November. "Talents" are viewed for appropriateness and length. Each entry is about three minutes long. "We have had students sing, dance, act out skits, play instruments, tell jokes and even demonstrate Karate moves (not to be tried at home!). The faculty usually pulls a funny lip-sync act. It is low key yet full of energy and good spirit!" says humanities teacher Connie Miller of AIS. They also enjoy an All School Read-In on the last day. Everybody brings a book to read. In addition each member of the community brings a wrapped book to give away. Potential exists for book swaps, games, and other exchanges.

Revels at the **American School in London** are not so much communal as contained within the various grade levels, with some going bowling, some watching a film and eating a special festive lunch while others carry on as usual. But an important tradition is the Farewell Assembly when the entire middle school gathers to say a formal goodbye to the considerable number of students who are leaving permanently at the break. Leavers come up by grade level to say where they are moving, and are presented with an ASL baseball cap which they use to collect friends' signatures. School's out at noon, and then the faculty and staff get together for a holiday meal, with entertainment by the collegiate choir.

Disney Day at the **American School of the Hague** mixes students in all four middle school grades who then rotate through a special schedule for 'goofy lessons'. Teachers plan short activities such as tower building, cartooning, weaving and other things out of the ordinary. Chris Decker who teaches science at ASH maintains that Disney Day has 'changed attendance on the last day of school. Now kids don't want to leave! A lost instructional day need not be a lost community day.' And, working

in mixed groups of up to twenty, fifth graders learn that their eighth grade peers are not nearly as big and frightening as they once seemed on the playground.

Take a look at these WWW sites for inspiring pre-holiday activities at your school, some of which can be used for filling in the gap created by early leavers, some of which can be used to integrate local customs into your curricular teaching.

<http://school.discovery.com> offers activities for year-round holiday celebration, with links to other sites.

<http://www.apples4theteacher.com/creativearts.html> provides ideas in six academic disciplines for elementary and younger middle school students, along with tips for teachers and parents.

www.direct.gov.uk/EducationAndLearning/Schools offers ideas for family activities in the United Kingdom during the holidays themselves when school is out and mom and dad are in charge again.

<http://712educators.about.com/cs/winterholidays> presents an article on winter holiday activities for middle and high school students including holiday haiku, Christmas trees and stories, and displaying student work.

www.surfnetkids.com/games/Christmas tells how to play a number of Christmas and Chanukah games, gives holiday sweets word searches and teaches you Christmas juggling, but you have to wade through a mountain of advertising before you get to the good stuff.

However you celebrate the winter solstice – skiing in the Alps, visiting Aunt Mildred back in Peoria, sunning on a Kenyan safari, or crooning carols at midnight – your ELMLE team wishes you a refreshing break that puts you in the spirit for a fabulous three-day conference in Zurich from Thursday January 25, 2007. It is not too late to register, but fees did go up from December 1. Visit www.elmle.org to learn more about your European League for Middle Level Education.

January **Tips for Teachers** will reach you in time to help you pack your bags for Zurich and the luxurious Renaissance Hotel. Sue Swaim, immediate past president of the National Middle Schools Association, will be on hand to welcome you. Meanwhile, you *must* have a Tip that you would like to share with other ELMLE colleagues. Send it to alan_heath@asl.org for inspiring others in 2007; he'll put it right here on the next

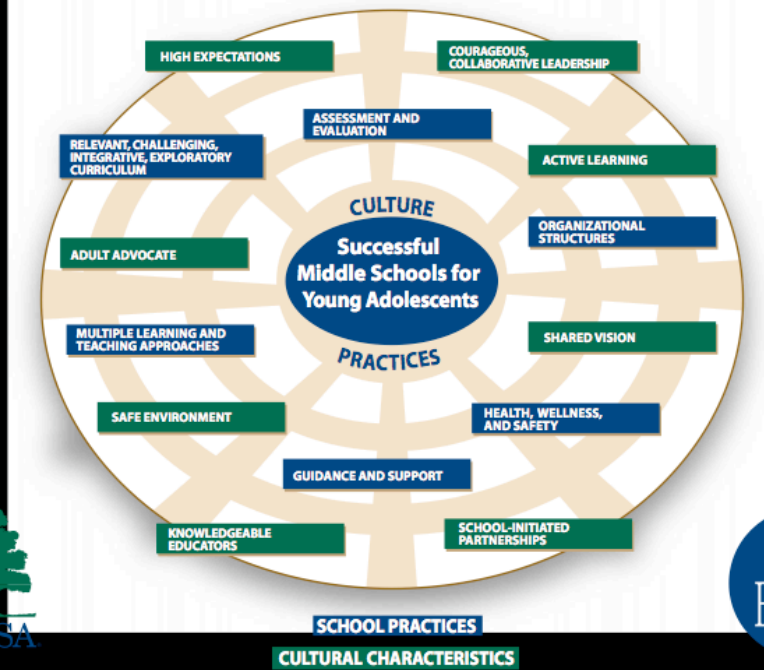
Tips for Teachers.

The National Middle Schools Association, of which ELMLE is a most active affiliate, has identified fourteen practices and cultural characteristics that, when consistently integrated and fully implemented, create successful middle schools for young adolescents. Which of the fourteen practices and characteristics do these pre-holiday community activities fulfill? Shared vision? Active learning? Exploratory curriculum? Multiple learning and teaching approaches?

If my pdf file has been successful, there is a chart following this article which outlines what Successful Middle Schools for Young Adolescents are like. It provides a handy reference for evaluating your own practices in your school.

SUCCESSFUL MIDDLE SCHOOLS FOR YOUNG ADOLESCENTS

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- Dr. Howard "Roberts to Work"

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