

Get a Running Start on the Second Leg of the Achievement Race

By Dr. Raymond J. Huntington

For most Washington area students, December brought at least two weeks of respite from the rigors of schoolwork at the midpoint of the academic year. But this midpoint is also a good time for both parents and children to take stock of the accomplishments and challenges of those first two quarters. By looking at four key indicators, you can develop a good sense of your child's preparedness for the semester that lies ahead.

Indicator #1: Grades and teacher conferences

Begin by taking a look at your child's overall grades during the first half of the year. Good grades are usually a reliable indicator that your child has mastered subject matter and is performing at grade level. Poor grades should be a trigger for determining exactly which factors have hindered your child's progress. Listening, following directions, putting forth enough effort and completing classwork neatly and on-time all have an impact on grades. Conferences with teachers are a good way to determine your child's performance in all of these areas, and a mid-year conference is a good way to determine how to sustain the progress that your child has made.

When you meet with your child's teachers, ask for suggestions of specific activities you can undertake at home to support efforts at school. It's also important to tell the teacher about any issues that may affect your child's academic success. Family tension, financial concerns, health issues or marital problems directly impact a child's ability to concentrate in school. When parents share this information, teachers are often able to take measures that can reduce stress for the student. Creating a partnership

between school and home is a responsibility that both parents and teachers share.

Indicator #2: Standardized test results

In recent years, parents and students have paid the most attention to standardized tests during the spring – when many states and districts administer exams that now determine a student's ability to graduate or move on to the next grade. But you can get a good idea of which skills should be strengthened in advance of these tests by taking a second look at the results of other standardized exams that may have been given during the fall. This is particularly true in school districts that administer tests at the beginning of the year and then again at the end of the year to measure students' progress. If your child scored less than satisfactorily in reading or mathematics at the beginning of the year, for example, you might pay particular attention to these areas as he or she prepares for the high stakes tests that will be given in just a few months.

Indicator #3: Homework

For most students, homework is vital for fully mastering lessons that begin in the classroom. And while some students tend to complete homework successfully all year, many may have fallen out of the "homework habit" as the December holidays approached. After a long break, January is a good time to ramp up for the coming months by re-establishing important routines, such as setting time aside for homework each afternoon or evening and maintaining a specific area of your house or apartment specifically for homework.

Indicator #4: The Work/Life Balance

While sports, clubs and other school-related leisure activities can make the educational experience much more well-rounded and rewarding, they should never become more important than academic progress. It's therefore important to find the right balance between leisure and learning time. Take a look at your child's academic success during the first half of the year and weigh it against all of the extracurricular activities that filled his or her schedule. Were there enough hours in a typical day last semester to keep up with schoolwork while enjoying every activity? Working collaboratively, parents and students should prioritize activities that are most important, and create a schedule that strikes the right balance.

While all of these interrelated factors are related to a student's day-to-day achievement, the middle of the school year – commonly referred to as the "make-or-break" point for students who are struggling – is an especially good time for review. Recognizing that upcoming assignments will build on progress so far, it's important to address any problems that may have arisen during the first semester right now. It's also a good time to recognize the achievements that have driven students' success, and thereby build confidence for the challenges to come.

Dr. Raymond J. Huntington is co-founder of Huntington Learning Center, which has helped children achieve success in school for 26 years. For more information about how Huntington can help your child, call 1 800 CAN LEARN.