The Home Stretch!
By Dr. Amy Noggle, Newsletter Editor

Congratulations! You have almost made it to the end of the school year. Whether you are a first, second or third-year teacher, you have survived your share of formal IEP meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and very likely even one or two field trips. Although there have been some bumps along the road, you have undoubtedly impacted your students and their parents in countless meaningful ways. We hope that the information found in this newsletter may inspire you to keep up the amazing work you do!

Voices from the Field:
Top 10 Strategies for Working with ELL Students
By Stephanie Harkins
Towson Class of 2015

1. Build background knowledge: The main thing that we must help our ELL students accomplish is to build new background knowledge. Often, when we have students who are from different countries, different schools settings, or even different neighborhoods. They may not have had the same experiences as other students or may have experienced things differently. It is our job as educators to help them bridge those gaps between what they do and do not know so they can make connections and make more meaning from any situation.

2. Pictures! Whoever said “a picture is worth a thousand words,” must have worked with ELL students! Often, when our students may be learning the vocabulary word for the first time or are reading about it in a new context, a picture can help them identify what the word means and help the student build new schema.

3. Gestures: Body language and movement is a powerful thing. We can often communicate so much without even speaking a single word. Adding gestures in when introducing or discussing a word or phrase can help the student visualize the meaning behind the word.
For example, if your students are learning the word “fall.” Showing them a picture of someone falling is great. But, if they see YOU actually fall to the ground, that example will make a greater connection for them because you’ll get them really paying attention!

4. Repetition: Try, try, and try again! The more exposure students have to a new word, the more they will become familiar and comfortable with it. They need repetition to make the words “stick” in their minds.

5. Wait time: Intentionally reflect on the time that you give students to think about a question that you have proposed. Do you immediately call on the first hand or two that you see? Our ELL students have to first hear the question you stated, understand the words in English, translate the question into their home language, think of their response, and then finally translate the response back into English. Thankfully the brain can do this quickly, but often our ELL students may need an additional few seconds to complete this process. Allowing that wait time will give all students the opportunity to respond.

6. Educate yourself in the culture: When working with either the student or their family, knowing where they may have come from can greatly help to increase the relationship that you have. Every culture has its own customs, traditions, and ways of thinking. Arming yourself with the knowledge of that culture, will better equip you in being more culturally responsive.

7. Try to learn some words in the student’s home language: Language is a powerful thing and it builds personal connections with others. Even if you just learn to say “hello,” that simple act will immediately tell the student or parent that you are invested in their future and that you care.

8. A smile says it all: If learning a little bit of the language may prove to be too difficult, a smile can normally convey a similar message. Remember body language is always key and different cultures interpret different movements with various meanings— but a smile is always universal!

9. Provide support with gentle corrections and praise. Learning the English language is hard! Think about how long it took you to learn it as a child. Even as we grow and mature, we continue to access new vocabulary and phrases. Your students who may be in the beginning phases of the English acquisition may need positive support as they embark on this crazy journey of learning a new language. They need to know that it’s okay to make mistakes and that you’ll be there to help them even when they fail or take a tumble.

10. Celebrate all diversity: In my classroom, I have the awesome opportunity to work with students who come from many different countries and cultures! I love to talk to my students about their home countries or give them time to share something personal from their own life experiences. Even as adults, it feels good to share about something that makes you happy, proud, or comfortable. To allow students the opportunity to share who they are, you are creating a classroom environment that celebrates differences. I love the chance to teach my students that everyone is different and unique in their own way.

Tiger Tech Talk:
Fast Formatives!
By Elizabeth Berquist, Ed.D.

Formative assessment is an ongoing process between students and teachers that provides feedback used to make instructional decisions. Formative assessment, often called “assessment for learning” should occur on a daily basis as part of instruction. Classroom assessment for student learning turns the classroom assessment process and its results into an instructional intervention designed to increase, not merely monitor, student confidence, motivation, and learning (Stiggins, 2008). Formative assessments are excellent tools for supporting learning during the instructional process,
while summative assessments measure what students have learned up to a certain point. Examples of formative assessments include questioning, reflections and observations and examples of summative assessments include tests, quizzes and state assessments. See Image 1 (created by MSDE) for additional information on formative vs summative assessments.

Teachers across the state are working to incorporate additional methods for formative assessment into their instruction (see http://msde-fame.blogspot.com/ for details). There are countless ways to quickly embed formative assessment into instruction. Below, we share our five favorite FAST formative assessment strategies…. They are a mix of low and high tech tools that you can use immediately!

FIVE FAST FORMATIVE assessment options:

LOW TECH

WHAT: Dry Erase/Wipe Off boards and dry erase pens

HOW: Ask a question, give students the option of writing their response

LEARN MORE: If you don’t have access to white boards, you can make your own by laminating white card stock, placing plain paper inside of a sheet protector, or purchasing white panel board at a hardware store.

WHAT: Pinch cards

HOW: Ask a question, students pinch the answer while holding up the card.

LEARN MORE: Create using a large index card or card stock. Use one card for each student (can also be used for tables or groups). List multiple choice options along the edge of the card (1, 2, 3; A, B, C; YES, NO, MAYBE).

HIGH TECH

WHAT: Padlet (https://padlet.com)

HOW: Post a question on the digital bulletin board. Students can respond with text, video or images.

LEARN MORE: Padlet is free. You can customize your display and also download and save student responses.

WHAT: Poll Everywhere (http://www.polleverywhere.com/)

HOW: Display a question on projector, students respond using personal device

LEARN MORE: Poll everywhere is free up to 40 votes per poll. Students answer in real time using a mobile device, twitter or a web browser.

WHAT: Today’s Meet (https://todaysmeet.com)

HOW: Post a question for open-ended responses or open a back channel to encourage sharing.

LEARN MORE: This tool can be used to support learning activities such as socratic seminars, fishbowls and video debriefs. TM allows all students to share their thoughts.

Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I learn. Involve me and I will remember.

~ Benjamin Franklin
Classroom Corner:  
Brain-Based Teaching: Learners Creating Their Own Meaning  
By Darlene Fewster, Ed.D.

Learning comes in many forms. We learn implicit knowledge (basic things we just seem to know) from seeing information, hearing information, from doing an activity, and describing what we learn. It is important to remember that the brain thrives on meaningful, relevant information, not random information. What makes learning meaningful to our students’ brains?

1. Assembling disconnected pieces of information into a larger pattern to highlight relationships and connections.
2. Stimulating positive or negative emotions.
3. Impacting a learner’s background and personal life.

Teachers have real power in making information meaningful for all learners.

Tips for Teachers

✓ Provide time to discuss in small groups the relevance of new information.
✓ Use digital graphic organizers for students to record thoughts and feelings.
✓ Help learners to develop or select visual cues such as mnemonics to help learners remember a lot of new information.
✓ Purposely engage learner emotions during the process of learning by making material happy, sad, suspenseful, or dramatic.
✓ Use specific dates, music, debates, role-playing, or theatrics to evoke emotions.

✓ Ask learners to find 2-3 ways new information relates to their own lives.

After trying these tips, ask: Which tips did I try today? What were the results? What will I do differently?

Policy Notes:  
Update on ESSA  
By Liz O’Hanlon, Ph. D.

In December of 2015, President Obama signed The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) into law. The ESSA is the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the public education law first passed in 1965. The ESEA was last reauthorized in 2002 and named the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Although scheduled to be reauthorized in 2007, NCLB had requirements that many states and schools could not successfully meet, so the current administration called for an intensive public review to significantly adjust provisions (“ESSA”, 2016).

Primary changes include flexibility for states to implement their own accountability plans, rendering high standards policies into law, and reducing federal control in several areas (“ESSA”, 2016). Because the law allows for more state control and requires states to develop their own plans, the law will not take effect until the 2017-2018 school year (Burnette, 2016; “ESSA”, 2016).

For further information and to follow Maryland’s development of the state regulations please refer to the following websites:

* U.S. Department of Education webpage about education laws:  
http://www2.ed.gov/policy/landing.jhtml?src=pn

* Maryland State Department of Education website  
http://www.marylandpublicschools.org/
Magnificent Mentoring: 
Teacher as Leader in ASD M. Ed. Program
By Kay Holman, Ph.D.

Graduates of the Teacher as Leader in ASD M.Ed. program are returning to fill a very important role as mentors to current Teacher as Leader in ASD graduate students through a new mentoring program funded by the Maryland State Department of Education. Dr. Kay Holman developed the mentoring program in response to the need for an extra layer of support for her graduate students who are currently teaching students with ASD in our schools.

Early this fall, the mentors met with their mentees and each developed an individualized action plan of how they would work together to address specific goals aimed at improving their teaching practice. Some of the goals have included improving the IEP process for families, improving implementation of evidence-based practices, such as Pivotal Response Teaching, developing family support programs, and creating and utilizing new data collection tools. The goals and action steps for how the mentors are supporting the mentees varies; however the program requires a minimum of three observations and reflective coaching sessions.

Current graduate students and mentees report that they are benefitting greatly from having “an additional set of eyes” and the chance to brainstorm possible solutions with their mentors. The mentors and mentees have also participated in an online professional learning community where they have shared advice and resources with everyone in the program. It is powerful to see the knowledge, skills and dispositions that are imparted in the Teacher as Leader in ASD graduate courses translated into practice in our schools. The program will culminate with a Teacher as Leader in ASD Mentoring Showcase in June where the mentoring pairs will share about their experiences and how they have benefitted from participating in the program.

Advice from the Experts: 
Results from New Teacher Poll
By Debi Gartland, Ph.D.

Our Special Education Department partners with the Howard County Public School System (HCPSS) to host one of our Elementary Education/Special Education (EESE) Professional Development Schools (PDS). Our upcoming May 2016 graduates represent the 14th year of collaboration of the TWIBS EESE PDS cohort, with anchor schools of Waterloo, Ilchester, and Bellows Spring elementary schools. I consulted the experts – 1st and 2nd year teachers who graduated from TWIBS – for some words of wisdom and advice for beginning teachers. Here are excerpts...

What surprised you the most about your first year of teaching?

From Allison Walls (TWIBS graduate, May 2015) – 2nd grade GenEd teacher, Waterloo Elementary, HCPSS:

Towson provided me with a strong education and unique internship experiences that allowed me to fully immerse myself in curriculum as well as the classroom responsibilities of an educator. With that, there were still certain things that surprised me the first year of teaching. I think what surprised me the most about my first year of teaching is how much collaboration occurs not only within the classroom but within the school throughout a school day. This could be meeting with someone to modify work for an individual student or quick conference with a teammate to draft an email to send to a parent. It is so important to seek out individuals who can help guide you and point you in the directions that will help you most successfully service and instruct your students. Develop positive relationships with coworkers early!

From Kirsten Reggie (TWIBS graduate, May 2015) – K & 2nd grade SPED teacher, Veterans Elementary, HCPSS:
I'm surprised at how much I'm learning and growing as an educator every day. My students have become my biggest source of knowledge and have really shaped my own teaching philosophy.

From Kathleen Seale (TWIBS graduate, May 2014) – 3rd, 4th, 5th grade SPED teacher, Jeffers Hill Elementary, HCPSS:

What was most surprising to me is that I had to work with thirteen students who had such a variety of abilities that I had to get to know and warm up to. I had a lot of students who recognized me [from interning], but also considered me to be a “new” person and therefore wanted to convince me that they couldn’t do certain tasks – like read or write.

What words of wisdom do you have to share with beginning teachers about balancing one’s professional and personal life?

From Sarah Callanan (TWIBS graduate, May 2014) – 1st & 2nd grade SPED regional teacher, Fulton Elementary, HCPSS:

This may be the HARDEST part of your new journey. I have a very Type A personality and it was extremely hard to “leave” or not finish my to-do list and go home after school. You will go in early, stay late, and still not get all of your work done; this is normal. To this day I still have to tell myself “It will be there tomorrow”. What has really helped me is a weekly schedule. I write down smaller tasks I need to do throughout the week and prioritize what needs to be done sooner rather than later. There will also be days where you walk in to teach and all your plans go down the tubes- again, this is normal. In these moments you have to be flexible and trust that you are a great teacher and know what you are doing. Through all the work, stress, and lack of time think about what matters most--- Your students. Always do what is best for your students and the rest will follow. With remembering that your work will always be there tomorrow, you have to take care of yourself also. If you are not healthy and dealing with your stress appropriately, you are no good for your students anyways. YOU come first THEN your students. Time is a killer but no matter what, you need to go to that happy hour, exercise, watch a movie. Making time for yourself is just as, if not more important than making time for work.

From Kathleen Seale (TWIBS graduate, May 2014) – 3rd, 4th, 5th grade SPED teacher, Jeffers Hill Elementary, HCPSS:

Time-management is crucial. I think that there is always work that needs to be done or you’ll feel like you have to do but that you have to remember you also need to have a life and do things that aren’t work related. It can be hard, but it’s important to remember that you need to have time for yourself.

From Bridie Condon (TWIBS graduate, May 2014) – 4th grade SPED teacher, Ilchester Elementary, HCPSS:

Set a rule for yourself! I was having such a stressful year that I told myself, “Okay, from now on, no more school work/don’t open your computer on Friday night-Sunday mid-day.” I learned that I couldn’t stress about school the entire time! I needed some time to enjoy myself, and you’ll never survive if you don’t do that! I still follow my same rule, even now in my 2nd year. I don’t do any school work Friday nights or all day Saturday. I even set a cut-off point during the week- usually 8 pm.

What are your top 3 pieces of advice for 1st year teachers?

From Dana Phillips (TWIBS graduate, May 2015) – 2nd grade SPED teacher, Stevens Forest Elementary, HCPSS:

1. Accept that you will make mistakes. No lesson is perfect. Sometimes, you will not plan a lesson that
meets your students’ needs. Sometimes, you will forget paperwork, or double book meetings. Do the best you can to not be upset by your mistakes, but learn from them. There are professionals in the building with years of experience who will make them as well!

2. Develop a relationship with your team. My grade level team and I are very close, and it has made the biggest difference in my year. I am able to talk to them about anything, whether it be professional concerns, or just life concerns. They are always there to help me and listen to me, and I am there for them. Working with people that you feel you can openly communicate with is a great feeling.

3. Love your students 🙂. Every student has a different background. I have learned that many behaviors are influenced by what they experience outside of the building. The student who never stops talking in class? He may spend majority of his time at home alone. Every student has battles that you may or may not know about, and I suggest learning to embrace them all, and making your students feel comfortable, loved and respected.

From Brittany DeVan (TWIBS graduate, May 2015) – HS SPED teacher, Cedar Lane School, HCPSS:

1. Get involved with other staff as much as possible (e.g., getting to know them, staff-only events, doing things outside of school).
2. Reorganize yourself once a week.
3. Set aside time for yourself every day so you don’t get overwhelmed.

From Kirsten Reggie (TWIBS graduate, May 2015) – K & 2nd grade SPED teacher, Veterans Elementary, HCPSS:

1. Ask questions and advocate for yourself. There are so many people out there who have great experience and knowledge to help -- math and literacy coaches/resource teachers, team leaders, instructional facilitators -- they are all there to help and will help you with whatever you need, as long as you ask.
2. Keep an open mind. I never imagined myself as a kindergarten special educator co-teaching in an inclusive classroom, and now I can’t imagine myself anywhere else!
3. Take it one day at a time. You won’t finish everything you want to in one day. Make to do lists, weekly schedules, or whatever will help you stay organized and make the most of your time.

From Bridie Condon (TWIBS graduate, May 2014) – 4th grade SPED teacher, Ilchester Elementary, HCPSS:

1. You will be overwhelmed, so ASK QUESTIONS! People will only get mad at you when you don’t ask any 😐 It’s okay to need help and it’s okay to rely on many people your first year! They get it!

2. Be confident!!!! Some people (either parents or even other teachers) will probably question you and your decisions, but be confident in yourself and trust your instincts! If you think you should try something new, go for it! Don’t get bogged down in the mindset of “This is how it’s always been done, so we’ll just keep doing it this way.”

3. Make connections! Definitely say hi to the ladies in the front office (you never know the things they might share with the principal!) 😊 Make conversations, connect, and joke around with people in the school. This is your home for at least the next year, so make it a meaningful, happy, and memorable one!

From Left to Right, Front Row: Alli Walls, Tiffany Chan, Katie Czulewicz, Dana Phillips, Sam Magness, and Back: Paige Vane, Brittany DeVan, Chelsea Ingram, Kelsey Gibbons
Finding The Balance: Advice From a First Year Teacher
By Kaitlyn Macray
Towson Class of 2015

Remember when you were little and you thought teachers lived at school? Well, for the first half of the school year, I basically did. I would arrive at 6:30 every morning and stay till at least 9:30 each evening. I forgot what it was like to eat dinner with my family and got lost in my paperwork. I brought my stress home with me, and those closest to me quickly retreated from my presence at the mention of school. One night, I remember texting my boyfriend and starting our conversation off with my now regular, “ugh!” This is what our conversations had evolved into. I would continually complain about how I would never catch up and he would listen ever faithfully while I went on and on. It was then I realized what had happened. I had become unbalanced.

As every first year teacher should, I had expected to stay after late and put many hours into my work. That was not a surprise. The surprise was my attitude. I couldn’t shake this constant feeling of anxiety to get in grades, data points, service hours, lesson plans, and every other requirement. Instead of reflecting on how to change my routine to become more effective, my routine had become complaining. What happened to all the passion I had just graduated with only 6 months ago? Even with all the accomplishments that I had made in my first year with a tough caseload, I complained. Without realizing it, I had become the Grinch (minus the green fur). I had nothing to look forward to, but paperwork because I set no limits. While I started this job thinking about the kids and how I would put all my effort into it, I forgot about the ones that I effected at home.

As a teacher, your mood affects your students more than you can ever imagine. When I came back from Christmas break, I started to think about my mood more than my lesson plans. And while I’m not directing you to not do your lesson plans, you have to realize that what is not in your plans is sometimes most important. Beginning my first week back from break, I chose 2-3 nights a week to stay “late” and by late, I mean when the sun goes down, I go home. Also, I started going back to the gym. It is so easy to lose yourself in the constant stress of school that you will never be able to take back the whole bag of candy you finished off just grading one subject’s worth of papers or finishing one IEP. At home, I focused on bringing up the good things, or steering clear of school altogether. Unless it was burning a hole in my brain and I just had to talk about it, there was no reason to bring everyone else down around me. I found a person who I can talk to school about, one I can talk to home about, and the rest get the bits and pieces in the middle. Overall, I balanced myself a little better.

While I am nowhere close to having it all figured out, I feel so much better about my attitude and myself. Teaching requires your constant effort, but it also reminds you how important it is to focus on being a healthy learner. I could not tell you how many times I have had to talk to my students about how important it is to have a full night’s sleep, while I’m staying up till 1 o’clock in the morning then waking up at five. How can I learn from them when I cannot even fully function because I didn’t sleep? Being a teacher is as much about teaching as it is learning.

To most first year teachers, especially, teaching becomes more than just a job, and you forget what life has to offer outside of it besides more stress. While teaching is way more than a nine to five job, you have to remember to find your balance so you can enjoy all that your job and life offers. Balancing life and school is a full time job. And unfortunately, there’s not a class that is offered to help you with that. You just have to learn, and sometimes it’s the hard way. Just like you will learn to adapt to the 50 million different scenarios that happen each and every day in your classroom, you will find the balance. You just have to keep on swimming.