Doing Away with Pretest Jitters

Picture this: A gymnasium filled with sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade students. Girls stand in front of the bleachers, leading chants and cheers. An eighth-grade boy rises from his seat, runs to the floor, and leads the students in a successful wave. Other students on the gym floor compete in a “mud and worm” (pudding and gummy worm) eating contest. What’s the occasion for this pep rally? The basketball sectionals or state finals? Homecoming?

The correct answer: Indiana’s Statewide Test for Educational Progress-Plus, otherwise known as ISTEP+.

We all know how stressful and monotonous a week of standardized testing can be for students and staff alike. We also know that testing isn’t exactly on young people’s list of top 10 activities. At Edinburgh Middle School this year, with the collaboration of energetic and creative staff members, we decided to do something different to alleviate the stress that can come with long hours of test-taking—something fun!

Getting In the Spirit

What we came up with was ISTEP+ Spirit Week. We started the week by having students paint the windows at each entrance of the school. We wrote announcements that were geared to boost enthusiasm each morning of the test and read them over the intercom to all classrooms. Local businesses cooperated by displaying posters with encouraging messages for the students.

We based Spirit Week around a Survivor-themed pep session, using the theme “Outthink, Outwrite, Outcome” that mimicked the Survivor theme of “Outthink, Outwit, Outlast.” Each student participating in the pep rally was given a colored puff that indicated the grade, or tribe, to which he or she belonged. The tribes then competed in various relay events before an audience that included the local media and the school superintendent.

Each grade had a scorecard that was posted on the wall outside the middle school office. The point system for the scorecards was designed to keep the tallies close and competitive so that no grade members would feel discouraged. For example, each grade earned points for attendance during the test week, for competitions won during the pep session, and for improvement in ISTEP+ scores. The grade that won earned an inexpensive prize (a candy bar for each student).

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Raising the Test Scores

We are pleased to report that our middle school improved as a whole on ISTEP+ scores in language arts, for which the students were rewarded with a dance. We realize, of course, that other factors contributed to the raised scores. For example, our teachers focus more on the state’s academic standards than in the past, and incorporate more research-based, high-yield teaching strategies in their classroom instruction to improve student learning. Also, students began tracking their ISTEP+ and Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) scores.

While all of the aforementioned deserve credit for raising test scores, we strongly believe that the events of ISTEP+ Spirit Week succeeded in boosting the students’ sense of the
test’s importance and relevance. They seemed to be more engaged during the testing and attendance was excellent, well above our normal average. The enthusiasm displayed during the pep session carried over to the test, and one teacher even quoted a girl who stated that ISTEP+ was fun this year!

Expanding the Spirit

Spirit Week was so successful that we intend to do it again next year, but will expand it as part of a schoolwide incentive program that will include not only ISTEP+ scores, but scores from NWEA, our other schoolwide testing instrument. As much as we’d like to think that improved test scores are an intrinsic motivator for students, we realize that the extrinsic rewards can help those students who may need that extra boost. We plan to have a greater reward for the grade that shows the most improvement. We also plan to extensively advertise the week’s events by working with the local newspapers and television station, and we will strive to reach out more to parents by inviting them to participate in the pep rally.

The possibilities are endless, but one thing is certain: excitement, fun, and relevance will be at the center of whatever we plan for test week next year and for many years in the future.

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