

Chalkboard

By

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'Tis the season to be jolly! That is what the song says; right? As you read this, Father Time will have already have flipped the page of the calendar to December. Another semester of school will be riding the Polar Express rapidly toward the way station otherwise known as the Christmas Holidays. Some more politically correct types have renamed this occasion as the mid-year or mid-winter break but I prefer the traditional nomenclature.

Around the "school house" the task of staying focused on the organization's mission, that of learning, becomes more difficult as each day draws closer to December 17, the last day of the first semester and the last day students will go to school in 2004. Students and staff alike suffer that malady of concentration.

It would be easy to loose focus. Basketball is in a full court press after a great football season ended. Various levels of choir and band students are preparing for concerts. Some younger minds may already be thinking of that special gift they want to see under the tree (if not, heads will roll in the marketing department). The weatherman keeps teasing us with the prospect of snow.

Nevertheless, it is very important to stay on task until the very last realistic moment. **Thirteen** instructional days exist from December 1st to that last day. The last two days, December 16 and December 17 will be shortened, as we have done for the last few years, to accommodate extended length periods for semester testing at the middle and high schools. Barring a blizzard, the elementary schools may have some not so instructional activities planned for at least some of that last day.

The need to stay focused on teaching/learning is not a "Bah, Humbug" attitude; it's strictly business. The school will be closed during the break from December 18 through January 2, 2005. That's 16 calendar days of non-instructional time. Were teachers to get slack now regarding good, well-planned classroom instruction and attention to task, the district's students could have an entire month of "down time". I suspect that would be unacceptable at Tyson, Peterson, McKee, SWEPCO, Wal-Mart or any other business anywhere. It takes no real leap to understand it is unacceptable here also.

Ensuring that learning continues to happen is not as easy as counting cookies or kilowatts. Fortunately, the staff members at Gentry are professionals. Your child's teacher or teachers understand that each day must "made the most of". The last legislative session saw an increased attention on accountability. Everyone working in education understands, for the good or the bad, that wasting time in the classroom would be like wasting time in any other business.

Christmas is indeed a blessed time, and yes, we are working with children not cookies. Nobody on Gentry's staff wants to take away any of the joy of the holidays for any student or any staff person. On the flip side, everyone wants to have joy also when the next round of assessment results come back after spring testing.