

Time-saving solutions to help you shorten your December to-do list.

Between holiday concerts and grades due, finding perfect (or close-enough) presents and the rush to fit in required lessons, the few weeks before break can seem like a season of suffering rather than a season of cheer. But not this year. We tracked down expert advice on all of your time-hogging tasks this month. With these solutions at hand, you'll go from grinch to grinning in no time at all.

THE TIME CRUNCH:

Thirty-one report cards to write and houseguests on their way.

Last year it seems like you spent all of break working on report cards—and you still had to pull a college-style all-nighter to finish them by the due date.

→ **THE TIMESAVING SOLUTION:** First, hand over as much grading as you can to your students. This isn't just a time-saver: Self-monitoring allows kids to feel more invested in their work, says Susan Stackhouse, a middle-school teacher in Warminster, Pennsylvania. Her students graph their progress in math, writing, and spelling. Every now and then Stackhouse checks their work to make sure they're on track. And don't worry, you needn't have started this system in August. Students can spend some time going through their own spelling tests—or check a class set against a key. It's a great review for end-of-term assessment.

For comments, try to write one or two report cards each night. Keep a list of helpful phrases at hand—we like the ones at www.teachnet.com and in *Just the Right Words: 201 Report Card Comments* (Scholastic, 2004).



HOW CAN I GET IT ALL DONE?



THE TIME CRUNCH:

No room on the calendar for that holiday party.

With state tests looming in the spring, there's just too much material to cover. You can't seem to justify spending an afternoon on a party.

→**THE TIMESAVING SOLUTION:** Holiday parties don't have to be straight-up festivities and fruit punch. Think about how you can

combine your learning goals with your celebration. (You may be required to do so by your district anyway). Take your inspiration from

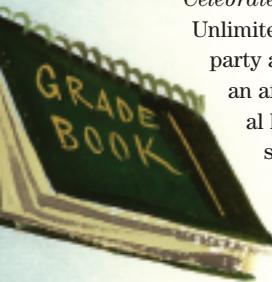
Rosanne J. Blass' new

Celebrate With Books (Libraries Unlimited, 2005). Give your party a reading theme. Host an afternoon of multicultural

holiday stories and snacks. (See our list of the newest holiday books on page 10.)

You'll be meeting social studies and lan-

guage arts standards, while still taking part in the excitement of the season.



THE TIME CRUNCH:

The planning book is empty for 2006.

It happens every year: You spend the summer months thinking about September, but there's never enough time to fully flesh out spring semester's lessons.

→**THE TIMESAVING SOLUTION:**

First, you're not alone. Congratulate yourself on all the hard work you put into your teaching this semester and know that 62 percent of teachers worry about "lack of time to prepare lessons." It is a top cause of teacher stress, say Sara Bubb and Peter Early, authors of *Managing Teacher Workload* (Paul Chapman, 2004).

Then set a plan you can live with. Life coach Sarah Cowling recommends setting aside even 45 minutes to get a project like semester planning off the ground. "The most important thing is to start today," says Cowling, "and don't lose momentum."

Start by thinking about your end-of-year goals for the children, then work backwards, says Carolyn Orange, author of *44 Smart Strategies for Avoiding Classroom Mistakes* (Corwin Press, 2005). This helps focus your planning. Teacher Erika Dhen of Philadelphia swears by this method. Start by collecting notes, lessons, and reproducibles into folders by month, then later, sort monthly folders into ones for each week.

THE TIME CRUNCH:

Your teaching friends have fallen to the bottom of the list.

You had such high hopes. Back in September, you planned to host a stunning holiday party; by October you'd downgraded that plan to a lunch out. Now, you wish you'd never even heard of "Secret Santa."

→**THE TIMESAVING SOLUTION:** "Simplify the holidays," says Betsy Taylor, author of *What Kids Really Want that Money Can't Buy* (WarnerBooks, 2003), and you'll reduce stress and increase personal fulfillment. She suggests "gifts of time, and gifts of your experience, talent, or expertise." So bake holiday cookies if you love to bake, but don't if you don't! If you love to decorate, offer to do a bulletin board. If you have the SmartBoard down cold, teach a friend for an hour. If everyone shares a talent, from knitting to photography, scrapbooking to golf, it could be the richest holiday ever.

THE TIME CRUNCH:

Holiday crafts: Where's Martha Stewart when you need her?

Last year, Mrs. Jones' students down the hall brought home beautiful candles (handmade during their pioneer unit) as

holiday gifts. Your class wrote construction-paper greeting cards one Friday afternoon. This year, you're not sure you have the supplies or energy to do *that*.

→**THE TIMESAVING SOLUTION:** We've got a low-cost present parents will love, plus it connects to the standards. Have children write poems about a perfect winter day. Then create an mp3 of each child reading his or her poem aloud. This is easier than it sounds. All you need is a microphone and sound recording software, which comes standard on most computers. Track down a tech-savvy colleague or classroom parent to help you. Make a compilation of the students reading their poems by burning the mp3s onto a CD for each family. (30 blank CDs cost a wallet-happy \$12 at www.staples.com.) Presto: instant heirloom!

THE TIME CRUNCH:

You can't remember when you last had a few minutes of peace.

There's no doubt about it—'tis the season for a fried-out Palm Pilot. It can be tough to take the time out to appreciate how much progress your kids have made since August, the beauty of (and your students' wonder at) the first snowfall, and the good things you have going in your life, in your career, and beyond.

→**THE TIMESAVING SOLUTION:** Take a deep breath. You'll be modeling a different approach to the holiday harriedness your kids may be accustomed to seeing around them. "Teachers often create an atmosphere that says never taking a breath is the way to be in the world," says Dory Adams, a leadership coach and former librarian in Silver Spring, Maryland. "To the extent that you can create something else, do it!" Adams suggests asking children for their input on how to spend five minutes in the morning, five minutes at midday, and five minutes at the end of the day to have a peaceful moment. Then follow through on their ideas. It may be the best time you spend all season. □

—By Dana Truby and Hannah Trierweiler