

CONTROL WHAT YOU CAN

PRINCIPLE

2

Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.

—Frankl (1946) *Man’s Search for Meaning*

We cannot control the fact that there’s suffering in the world, but we can control whether we contribute to it or help alleviate it. Henderson (2013) correctly maintains, “Educators cannot eradicate poverty, remove neighborhood gangs, stop cultural violence, heal parental addictions, or prevent the myriad of other types of stress, risk, and trauma many students face daily.” Likewise, we cannot as individuals stop widespread abuse, neglect, lack of parental support, debilitating health and learning disorders, or any manner of large-scale cases of social injustice.

We cannot control which students come to our schools and which ones leave. We do not get to decide how school or district resources are allocated. We don’t even have the final say in what grade, discipline, or even what curriculum we teach. But there are some things we can control—that’s what this chapter is about.

Action Step 2.1

HOW MUCH CONTROL DO I HAVE IN MY JOB?

Scan QR Code 2.1 to read the *EducationWeek* article on teachers feeling disrespected and dissatisfied. Look at the chart for item #6 reporting how much control teachers feel they have in their jobs. Identify where you would fit on each of the seven categories.



Is it legitimate for teachers to feel they have little or no control over certain aspects of their teaching?

What You Can't Control

JOB PLACEMENT

Of course, part of our job placement is determined by our degree(s) earned, our area(s) of certification, and perhaps even our experience in a particular field. Schools are required to provide documentation to the state that we are qualified for the job assignment we have. In emergencies, such as the present teaching shortage, a teacher can teach out of field, but for the most part, certain certifications are required to teach in specific areas. We usually warn teacher candidates to be careful about the certifications they earn. If you have a certification to teach high school humanities and somewhere along the way you also acquired a certification in PreK–K instruction, your district can compel you to teach a kindergarten class (even if you'd rather have a root canal sans painkillers than teach those little *hyperactive petri dishes*). Even tenure normally only stipulates that you will have a job but not which job you will have. In some districts, teacher unions have negotiated a bit more individual power in job selection, but for the most part, when you are hired by a district, you have no legal right to say which school you prefer or what you will teach.

CURRICULUM

Today in some communities, there are heated discussions going on about what is taught in local classrooms. Sometimes, individual teachers are misinformed about who has the right to dictate curriculum. While teachers generally have the right to decide how they choose to present their subject matter, it is the constitutional right of the states to decide what they want to be taught in their schools. Sometimes, states allow individual districts to make decisions within the state framework, but it is basically the state's responsibility to oversee curriculum.

It is not a teacher’s right to decide what curriculum they are going to teach in their classrooms. Standards and essential ideas are determined outside the individual teacher’s responsibility level. Consequently, time spent wailing over curriculum choices to people who are not decision makers is wasted. There are appropriate long-term solutions in which a teacher can become involved (writing letters, volunteering to serve on committees, talking to decision makers), but for the most part, like job placement, the decisions are not ours to make. (See Chapter 4 for more ideas about how to become an educational proponent.)

It is our contention that while we support the states’ right to determine curriculum and establish standards, we wholeheartedly support the individual teacher’s right to determine how and when we teach the mandated curriculum. The point is that constantly wringing our hands over things we cannot change is a waste of time and one sure way to lose our optimism. There are many things we can control, and those are the areas in which we need to focus our positive energy and our resources. One of the most important factors in reclaiming our optimism is to acknowledge those things we cannot control and work around them.

WHAT YOU CAN’T CONTROL	WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL
Curriculum—usually decided by the state or local district	How you use the curriculum to engage students and lead them to success.
Job placement—guidelines provided by the local district	Learning everything you can about your assigned grade-level and subject matter to assure students achieve.
Colleagues’ attitudes—some are worn down, worn out, or just not meant to be in teaching	Keep yourself healthy and upbeat. Use encouragement instead of argument.
Student context—everything from neglected to over-protection	Make every day in your class a lesson in stability and thoughtful decision-making.
Parent expectations—the best for their child but sometimes unreasonable	Communicate with parents in every way possible. Build relationships.

“Well, Okay Then . . .” The Story of Mrs. Touhy

There are people who are able to put things into perspective and continue toward their goals no matter what the obstacles. The movie, *The Blindside*, portrays the story of Michael Oher, a famous

football player who played for three NFL teams, including the 2013 Super Bowl-winning Baltimore Ravens. The movie chronicles his life as a young African American raised in poverty and neglect who eventually is embraced, then adopted by a conservative Caucasian family in Tennessee—the Touhys.

Predictable obstacles occur throughout the story, but one of the things that inspires us is the way Michael's new guardian, Leigh Anne Touhy, meets each one. She listens closely, considers the problem, and gives the same answer each time, "Well, okay then." In other words, she tells Michael that she understands the obstacles, she hears what he is saying, and now she's ready to regroup and try another route.

"Well, Okay Then . . ." **for Educators**

It seems to us that a majority of teachers have long embraced Leigh Anne Touhy's, "Well, okay then" philosophy. Despite budget cuts, incomprehensible mandates, solutions-du-jour program adoptions, students who arrive at school ill-prepared and sometimes ill-cared for, virtual and hybrid teaching, and countless other challenges we face daily, most teachers have always been able to evaluate the situation, consider all the factors, and start over with the attitude of Mrs. Touhy, "Well, okay then." It's not fun, and it's not happy. Perhaps the only way to sustain this kind of hopeful, down-to-business nature is to believe in the power of our influence, to trust in a larger purpose, and to have clearly defined long-term goals. Teachers must believe that what we do matters and what we accomplish has meaning beyond short-term data aggregation and subjective judgments from those who have little or no idea about the components of effective education.

What we are talking about is not a goal of continual thrill but rather an overarching hopefulness and confidence about the future successful outcomes of our efforts. The optimism we support is not some vague hope that eventually things will all work out but rather a positive, realistic conviction that we have control over certain aspects of our jobs and no control over others. Most of us have a lot more power than we realize, and all of us can choose how we react to those things we cannot control. We can throw up our hands and say, "I can't do this," or we can look a challenge in the eye and say, "Well, okay then, I'll try it another way."

Find Ways to Circumvent Barriers

An elementary science teacher is assigned to teach hands-on science to third- through fifth-grade students. Her room is a temporary building standing alone in the middle of the playground. She has no reasonable access to running water. She tells her administrator that she needs available water to provide students with the hands-on experiences she wants them to have. She is told there is no budget for plumbing her room for water, so she will just have to work around the problem. “Well, okay then.”

Action Step 2.2

BRAINSTORMING INNOVATIVE PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS

Imagine you are this teacher—what could you do? Think of as many practical solutions as you can. Be innovative. If you are in a book study group, stop here and brainstorm ideas before reading further. If you are reading this by yourself, stop just a minute and try to think of ideas before reading on. Seriously, stop reading until you have thought of at least three ideas.

BUT WHAT IF . . .

An ingenious teacher we know arranged with the school custodian to run a water hose with an attached spray nozzle from the closest outdoor spigot through one of her classroom windows and into a bucket in her classroom. On days she needed water, she turned on the outdoor faucet and left the nozzle closed until she needed water. She got a local store to donate large plastic tubs for basins, and all she had to do was squeeze the handle on the nozzle when she wanted to run water. Afterward, the students poured the non-contaminated water onto grass around the building. Both she and the students enjoyed having the water they needed to do the wonderfully messy activities she planned.

It would be easy to start picking this one solution apart. Sometimes negative people’s knee-jerk response to a creative solution is, “But what if . . . ?” Teachers in colder climates may ask what happens when it’s freezing outside? Those located on the second floor of a building might dismiss the idea as too impractical for them.

PE teachers might object to having a garden hose running across a playing field. Maybe the windows at your school don't open. All of those are valid objections, but forward-thinking teachers focus less on what won't work and spend more time on what will. When we are hamstrung with the idea of how awful it is for a teacher to be put in that situation in the first place, we stop seeking solutions. Teachers are the most creative, innovative, resourceful people we know (mainly because we *have* to be), and we believe our challenge as realistic optimists is to find what works in our particular situations. Once we have the most clear, realistic view of perceived obstacles, we need to give ourselves permission to move on from things beyond our control (and there are many of those).

SPORADIC, CATASTROPHIC CIRCUMSTANCES

One beautiful Friday in August 2005, I (Debbie) worked in a school located in Harvey, a suburb of New Orleans. I led the teachers through a series of activities designed to foster a positive school environment. At lunch, the teachers and I made plans for how the staff could start turning the school around beginning the following Monday. I then caught a flight to the west coast to make another presentation. While leading a workshop for teachers in California on that Monday, I was informed that Hurricane Katrina had hit the coast of Louisiana and the levees had been breached. The school I had been in the Friday before was completely gutted. Teachers and students in Harvey lost homes, neighborhoods, and the complete infrastructure of their schools. I wept with shock and frustration when I learned of the horrific loss of lives and property, and I considered the irony of the timing on their well-intentioned school improvement plans.

In 2013, seven students at Plaza Towers Elementary were killed when a tornado ravaged their school in Moore, Oklahoma. Educators and community members were devastated by the incomprehensible loss of so much in such a short period of time. Schools in the United States and abroad are affected by overwhelming natural disasters, which though infrequent, are mind-numbing in their impact.

More frequent are the premature deaths of students, faculty, and school family members caused by disease, auto accidents, and freakish twists of fate. And of course, a growing problem is deaths by murder, gang wars, terrorists, and emotionally unbalanced students, which have wreaked havoc on school campuses across our nation and beyond. The impact of these outside negative forces can be felt at every level of newly implemented school safety policies and procedures. Because of the horror of the recent escalation in school shootings, some feel that their buildings are no longer safe places.

In March of 2020, our nation and much of the world responded to the COVID-19 pandemic with a shelter-in-place mandate. Teachers were tasked with shifting to new platforms for reaching and teaching students in turn-around periods between twenty-four hours to just over one week. Most were given very little direction or support as they struggled to learn new technology and shift instruction and assessment to online. The whole situation was unprecedented, uncharted, and more than a bit chaotic. Some teachers were unable to reach all their students and were left with a fear of what was happening to their “ghost pupils.”

While stories of such heartbreaking disasters try our souls, we know that teachers are usually among the first ones on the scene to help restore order and assist in instilling a sense of security for kids. We change course instantaneously to adapt to the needs of our students. There are indeed circumstances where life just gets in the way of even our best plans. And after the initial shock wears off, we say, “Well, okay then.” We know we must pick up the pieces and move forward with what we are able to control.

Positive Reframing

It is true that we cannot change some of our least favorite things about our circumstances, but we can always change the way we deal with our situations. We can't always control our thoughts and feelings, but we can control whether we attach to them, identify with them, or act on them. A powerful tool for dealing with the challenging times educators now face is called *positive reframing*.

Action Step 2.3

POSITIVE REFRAMING

Scan QR Code 2.3 to watch a 5-minute video on positive reframing. Think about something presently troubling you that might not be so disconcerting if you thought about it differently. Jot down some ways you might reframe the issue in a more positive light.



Positive reframing gives our minds a break from being worn down by negative events and thoughts. It involves thinking about a negative or challenging situation in a more positive way. This could involve thinking about a benefit or upside to a negative situation that you had not considered. Alternatively, it can involve identifying a lesson to be learned from a difficult situation.

Another form of positive reframing is finding something to be grateful for in a challenging situation. For example, your administrator, a much-loved member of your school, has been transferred to a struggling school across town. Rather than focusing on how much you will miss her and your fear of who her replacement will be, you could be grateful for the time you had with her and think about the systems she put in place at your school that will continue without her presence. You can look forward to working with a leader who may have innovative ideas and a fresh approach. You can be hopeful that the other school will benefit from your mentor's leadership as did your campus. You have no control over your administrator's transfer, but you do have control over how you react to it.

The way you frame (look at) an event or situation will influence the way you feel about it. Negative thinking patterns affect our feelings, our reactions, our decision making, and ultimately our lives. It is not easy, but it is essential for optimism that we learn to control the way we view things.

Action Step 2.4

REFRAMING UNHELPFUL THOUGHTS

Scan QR Code 2.4 to watch a 1.5-minute video, *Reframe Unhelpful Thoughts*. The video gives a quick, concise overview of changing negative thought patterns.



Seligman and Deliberate Optimism

Most of us are familiar with the term “learned helplessness.” It is a sociological expression generally used in education to refer to students who are not only reluctant learners but who believe there is no way they can improve their circumstances. They think bad things happen to them through misfortune and not because of logical consequences of their choices. Unfortunately, those students often grow up to be helpless, hopeless, bitter adults who are caught in a cycle of failure because their beliefs create actions that create circumstances that reinforce their original beliefs. In every sense, they have learned to be helpless.

In studying learned helplessness, Dr. Seligman and Maier (1967) conditioned a group of dogs by punishing them with electrical shocks. The dogs learned they had no control over when the shocks started or stopped. Later, the researchers put the conditioned dogs

in a double-sided shuttle box that had a shocking side and a non-shocking side. A low-retaining barrier separated the two chambers. Though placed on the shock side, dogs were free to step over the low barrier to the non-shock side. However, the dogs did not attempt to step over the barrier to the shock-free zone. They simply lay down on top of the shocking coils and howled. They were inches away from relief, but they made no attempt to help themselves. From his observations Seligman derived the term, “learned optimism.”

Later, Dr. Seligman decided to try to teach learned helplessness to humans. Thankfully, he did not use a shocking mechanism on people. Instead, he used loud sound to provide an irritant to members of the control group. He was surprised to find that unlike with dogs, he could not always condition people to be helpless. Many subjects refused to feel powerless. Even though he attempted to condition them to believe they could not control the loud noise, several subjects refused to stop trying. They seemed to draw from an inner strength and would not accept that they were doomed to accepting the loud noise. Since those early experiments, he has continued to study and write about what factors are important for building resiliency and tenacity in people. When he was president of the American Psychiatric Association, he challenged his colleagues to quit focusing on why people have psychological problems and start working on how to help them live better lives. He believes that humans can learn to be optimistic by *unlearning* nonproductive thought patterns.

Nonproductive Thought Patterns Include

- Taking everything personally
- Downplaying positive events
- Feeling like a victim who is helpless
- Expecting the worst
- Focusing on the negatives
- All or nothing thinking
- Believing that feelings are facts
- Drawing big conclusions with little or no evidence

Seligman originated a plan he calls the “ABC Method.” He believes that if you want to lead an optimistic life, you must learn to argue with yourself in a non-negative way. In his book, *Learned Optimism: How to Change Your Mind and Your Life* (Seligman, 2006), he describes how we can learn to lead ourselves into hope and action instead of despair.

The ABC Model

Adversity: The bad event or challenge you face.

Belief: Your default thinking or belief about the bad event or challenge. It’s your explanation and interpretation of why things have gone wrong.

Consequences: The impact of your beliefs. It’s what you feel and what you do because of your belief or interpretation of what happened.

Our four principles of deliberate optimism parallel Seligman’s ABC Model in that both ask participants to describe accurately the source of their angst, to examine more than one assumed motive for the cause, and to consider the long-term effect of our selected actions.

As an example, let’s say your principal just informed you that next year instead of teaching the sixth-grade physical science classes you have taught for the past seven years, he is reassigning you to teach eighth-grade earth science classes. You are appalled. You already have done years of work gathering resources and preparing the lessons you use in teaching physical science. You assume you are being punished for some transgression, and you cannot believe you will no longer be teaching your favorite age group and preferred content. You just know that you will be stuck teaching eighth grade from now on, and you don’t even like earth science. You are inconsolable about this change in your career; everyone knows how much you love teaching sixth grade, so this must be some kind of personal vendetta. Let’s apply the ABC Method to this scenario.

Adversity: You are being switched from teaching sixth-grade physical science to eighth-grade earth science.

Belief: You believe this decision was made to punish you in some way and that you will be stuck with teaching your least favorite science for the rest of your time at that school. Teaching earth science will never be as much fun as teaching physical science.

Consequences: You are hurt, angry, and fearful. You would like to get even with whoever made this decision. You know you are going to hate teaching earth science and you are not too crazy about teaching eighth graders. You decide you will let everyone know how unhappy you are and will stop doing all the many extras you do to help around the school.

It is easy to get caught up in our protected *teaching terrains*. Teachers are some of the most territorial mammals on this planet. How many of us write our names on every piece of furniture, equipment, material, and piece of flotsam in our proximity? Many of us like to take ownership of a particular subject area, seat in the lounge, or even our favorite place to park. Defaulting to the **They** versus **Us** mentality is sometimes an automatic reaction when we perceive that someone is trying to take something that is ours. But does it help us long term to feel victimized and offended? *Personalizing* adversity only makes it worse as does viewing obstacles as permanent and pervasive. Perhaps we need to do a better job of trying to argue ourselves out of these perceptions.

THE ABCD MODEL

Disputation

Seligman refers to arguing with our thoughts as *disputation*. It's a key practice for building optimism. It works by countering our negative thoughts with deliberation and reflection. To dispute our negative thoughts, we can practice with his ABCD method.

First, we must identify the adversity, our beliefs, and the likely consequences of those beliefs. Next, we must dispute our beliefs and be aware of how different perceptions change the consequences. For example, if we originally explained our adversity with beliefs that are permanent, personal, and pervasive, we feel paralyzed and defeated. Alternately, if we explain our beliefs as temporary, external, and specific, we create hope, which leads to action.

Four Ways to Improve Your Disputation

According to Seligman, there are four ways you can dispute your beliefs more effectively:

Evidence: Ask yourself, "What's the evidence you have for and against the belief?" (*My principal isn't known for making arbitrary decisions. I know that he respects me as a teacher. There have been concerns about the lack of active learning in eighth grade. Perhaps I am being moved there to be a model for the other eighth-grade teachers.*)

Alternatives: Ask yourself, “Is there another way to look at the adversity?” (*If I am totally honest with myself, I’ve grown a little complacent about my sixth-grade class. I could almost teach physical science in my sleep. Moving to a new area is probably going to help me stay challenged, and I have always performed better when I’m challenged.*)

Implications: Ask yourself, “What’s the impact?” Assuming that your negative explanation is right, check whether you are making mountains out of molehills. (*I’m probably not going to like teaching eighth grade as much as I do sixth grade, but I guess at least I will still be teaching middle school science. My first love is middle school, and my second love is science, so this really isn’t the end of the world.*)

Usefulness: Ask yourself, “Is this the best time for me to be thinking about this problem?” If now is not the time, then either do something physically distracting, schedule another time with yourself to think things over, or write the negative thoughts down and deal with them when you’re ready. (*This assignment change could not have come at a worse time. I have got to have knee surgery in a couple of weeks, I’m trying to study for finals in my graduate courses, and I’ve got to put my car in the shop this Friday. This is not the best time for me to be thinking about all the changes I will have to make next year. I think I’ll put those thoughts on hold for a few weeks until the rest of my life settles down a bit.*)

Other Strategies for Disputation Include

- Reminding yourself that **thoughts aren’t facts**
- Identifying **extreme language** (e.g., I will always feel this way; things will never get better) and rephrasing with less extreme words
- **Questioning the assumptions** or biases that led to your interpretation
- Taking on **someone else’s perspective** (e.g., If you told someone else about the situation, would they interpret it the same way?)

Disputing your negative thoughts might help you change your perception and influence the consequences of your altered thoughts as follows:

Adversity: You are being switched from teaching sixth-grade physical science to eighth-grade earth science.

Belief: You have no idea why you are being switched, but you feel confident it has nothing to do with you personally. You have really enjoyed teaching sixth-grade physical science, but you are a good teacher and you believe you can learn to do an effective job teaching earth science, too. You have no idea how long this assignment will last, so if you don't like teaching eighth-grade science, you will take steps to get moved back to teaching sixth-grade science.

Consequences: You are curious about why this decision was made and are anxious to speak with your administrator about why you are being moved. You know that you are a team player and will try to accommodate whatever works best for all concerned. You hope you'll learn to like teaching eighth-grade earth science as much as you do sixth-grade physical science. You are already thinking of some resources you can tap to help you get started.

You may be thinking, "Well, it's easy to list all those steps, but can we really control our thoughts that way?" We believe we can all control our thoughts. It's not always an easy or even a smooth process, but with practice, it can become a habit. We can start reclaiming our joy in teaching by becoming aware of the power we have to control our reactions.

Action Step 2.5

LEARN HOW TO REFRAME ANY SITUATION

Fran Excell's website, *How to Reframe Any Situation*, offers a 13.5-minute podcast or YouTube video (your choice) with more on the topic of changing the way we look at things. Scan QR Code 2.5 for further explanation and examples.



Competence

One's optimism is largely determined by the degree to which a person feels able to influence desired outcomes. Part of self-determination theory deals with *competence*. The more competent an individual feels, the more likely they are to enjoy their job.

*Self-belief does not necessarily ensure success, but
self-disbelief assuredly spawns failure.*

—Bandura (1997, p. 77).

In many ways, the opposite of learned helplessness is what Albert Bandura calls *self-efficacy*. Bandura (1989) refers to competence and self-belief as *self-efficacy*. Perceived self-efficacy refers to one's impression of what one is capable of doing. Self-efficacy comes from a variety of sources, such as personal accomplishments and failures, watching others who are similar to oneself, and verbal persuasion from valued others. Bandura is quick to point out that verbal persuasion may temporarily convince us that we should try or should avoid some tasks, but in the final analysis, it is our direct or vicarious experience with success or failure that will most strongly influence our self-efficacy. For example, a beginning of the year Rah-Rah Conclave may temporarily inspire teachers, but their enthusiasm will be short-lived if their job requirements are completely beyond their ability or their perceived beliefs that they can do well.

Bandura explains how important it is to focus on the two things over which each of us always has control—**our choices** and **our efforts**. He maintains that those two concepts are the keys to earned success. When we believe that through our efforts, we can get markedly better at anything we deliberately practice and that our circumstances are largely determined by the choices we make, we become acutely aware of the amount of power we have over our destiny.

People with high-perceived self-efficacy try more, accomplish more, and persist longer at a task than people with low-perceived self-efficacy. Bandura (1986) speculates that this is because people with high-perceived self-efficacy tend to feel they have more control over their environment and, therefore, experience less uncertainty.

So how do we go about increasing our self-efficacy? Part of the answer lies in the research done by attribution theorists. In examining why people think they either were or were not successful in achieving their goals, researchers found that all the rationales and explanations people offered basically fell into four categories. Subjects believed their success or lack of it was mainly dependent one of these four things:

- The difficulty of the task
- The innate ability or talent of the participant

- The luck or fate involved
- The effort extended

Look again at these factors. One of them is different from the others in an important way. Do you see which one? Three of these have to do with external forces, things over which individuals have no control. People cannot control the difficulty of their life challenges. They did not get to pick which or how much natural talent and ability they were born with. And despite what compulsive gamblers believe, no one controls luck. The only one among the four factors over which a person has direct influence is **effort**.

It is both disconcerting and empowering to realize that most of our present situations are shaped by the choices we made and the amount of focused effort we were willing to put forth. People with a high degree of self-efficacy have developed the ability required to implement Seligman's ABCD Model. They are less likely to personalize adversity or see it as permanent or pervasive. Self-efficacy helps us to view challenges as temporary and surmountable; it helps us focus on action rather than on blame.

Take ownership of what goes on in your classroom. If you blame others, nothing will ever change. If it's your problem, you can solve it. Taking charge of your classroom is empowering because it allows you to move forward toward solutions.

—Julia Thompson (as cited by Ferlazzo, 2013)

The Myth of Multitasking

Unfortunately, some educators base their self-efficacy on their ability to perform myriad duties concurrently over long periods of time. We educators take great pride in being able to do more than one thing at a time. We boast that we can take roll, write today's objectives on the board, sign absentee slips, provide hall passes, sell cheerleader ribbons, take up homework, email a parent, text a colleague, fill out an office form, swirl a cup of coffee, find a lost textbook, settle a student dispute, take up lunch money, feed the class iguana, focus the LCD projector, check for dress code violations, monitor the hallway, and prepare our anticipatory set for first period simultaneously during the five minutes of homeroom. New teachers are often overwhelmed by the number of menial tasks that must be completed before the first class even begins. They watch veteran teachers seemingly handle dozens of tasks without even breaking stride and wonder if they will ever be able

to manage all they have to do. How do they do so many things all at once? The truth is—they don't. Almost no one can effectively and productively manage multiple tasks at the same time.

Research in the past few years clearly indicates that when we attempt to *multitask*, we do our work less effectively and less efficiently. Massachusetts-based psychiatrist, Dr. Hallowell (2007), who specializes in the treatment of attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, wrote the book, *Crazy Busy*. In it he calls multitasking a “mythical activity in which people believe they can perform two or more tasks simultaneously.” He argues that rather than multitasking, individuals are, in fact, multi-switching among undertakings. He explains that the more the brain has to think about and make decisions about a task, the harder it is to make the switch. Several studies have found that multitasking can actually result in us wasting around 20 to 40 percent of our time, depending on what we're trying to do.

LAYERING

Time management consultants often recommend that people use *layering* to get more done in less time. Understand that layering and multitasking are not usually the same thing. If you start your printer printing a lengthy hand-out, set the filter on the fish tank to self-clean for the next thirty minutes, and begin filing papers while you have your phone on hold waiting for a parent to pick up, you are layering and not multitasking. You are getting more than one thing done at a time, but once you hit “print” on the computer, press “clean” on the filter, and have dialed the parent's number, you are getting more than one thing done at a time. However, you are *attentively focusing* only on filing papers. Layering also applies to grouping similar tasks or planning errands to the same location so that you don't lose time retrieving and putting away the same needed supplies or traveling around randomly each time you need something from the office. Layering applies to tasks that are mostly automatic (sharpening pencils, erasing the board, straightening desks, cutting out shapes, etc.) and don't need your conscious attention.

Rubenstein et al. (2001) believe the simple reason that multitasking doesn't work is because we can't focus on more than one task at a time. But we think we can—so we multitask to try and get more done. Imagine trying to write an email to a parent while mediating a dispute between two students. Both tasks involve mental concentration. You cannot clearly focus on both tasks at the same time, so your mind gets overloaded as you switch between the two.

Another major downside to multitasking is the effect it has on our stress levels. Dealing with multiple things at once can cause the brain to produce adrenaline and other stress hormones that make us feel “on edge.” Over time, the result of this overstimulation can leave us feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, and disoriented. One of the best ways we can help ourselves feel competent and positive is to take control over the way we do the things we are required to do.

Suggestions for *Single-Tasking* at School

1. When you are with students, be fully present with them. Turn off personal email, tweets, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, Snapchat, and texts. Limit *teacher drama* and save personal matters for another time. Try to leave your home life at home.
2. Clear your workstations of clutter. You don't have to be the King or Queen of Organization, but your life will be easier to manage if you can find the things you need.
3. Learn to delegate jobs to students. You don't have to feed the iguana, sell the cheerleader ribbons, focus the LCD projector, or even write your objectives on the board. Kids can be taught to do those and other tasks (and some of them love to help).
4. Keep a running list of things to do later. You can capture random thoughts on your electronic device or on a pad of paper, but jotting things down allows you to move them out of your present thoughts and concentrate on the task at hand. (Just be sure to check your list at a designated later time.)
5. Try to finish one task before beginning another. The positive momentum of completing a job is energizing, and you will end up saving time.

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Basically, what we are saying is that each of us has the power over our choices and our efforts. We can work to change our thoughts, and we can help those around us learn to be positive and optimistic. Optimism is a learned thought pattern that is not inherent, is not simple, and is not easy. But optimism is achievable, and it is important for us as educators to consciously develop our autonomy, our competence, and our relatedness. Read more on relatedness in Chapter 7: Building a Positive Shared School Community.

●●● DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

1. Do you agree with the authors that people learn to be helpless?
Do you think helplessness can be *unlearned*? Give examples to support your beliefs.
2. What's the one thing you can do differently today to let go of control of something that is presently causing you way too much stress?
3. How willing are you to accept responsibility for your circumstances? Give one or two examples of when you were able to attribute your success or failure to something over which you had direct control. How did that affect your next step?
4. Give examples of each of these negative thought patterns you see in yourself or in others.

Nonproductive thought patterns include the following:

- a. Taking everything personally
 - b. Downplaying positive events
 - c. Feeling like a victim who is helpless
 - d. Expecting the worst
 - e. Focusing on the negatives
 - f. All-or-nothing thinking
 - g. Believing that feelings are facts
 - h. Drawing big conclusions with little or no evidence
5. Think of a recent issue that was upsetting to you as a teacher. Apply Seligman's ABCD Model to what happened. Discuss how this model could be helpful to you or to other teachers.
 6. Explain any research you have read about multitasking. Do you agree that multitasking on anything except noncognitive tasks is impossible? Why or why not?
 7. Describe a situation in which you were multitasking to the nth degree. How did you feel while it was going on? How effectively did you

complete each task? Do you think you saved time in the long run doing more than one thing at a time? Why or why not?

8. Make an argument for *single-tasking* when students are present in the classroom. How is layering different?
9. List three uncontrollable issues affecting your school that bother you. Estimate the amount of time you and others at your school worry or talk about them weekly. What are some ways you can *go around* the issues and keep moving forward?

Action Steps for School Leaders

1. If your staff wants to learn more about how to combat “learned helplessness” in students and the power of mindsets on learning, you and your staff can do a book study on Silver’s (2021) book, *Fall Down 7 Times, Get Up 8: Raising and Teaching Self-Motivated Learners, K–12*.
2. With your staff, brainstorm an ABCD Model of dealing with a current school issue.
3. Show one of the videos in this chapter about reframing and lead a discussion on how that might look for your school.
4. Surprise your teachers by taking something off their plates instead of adding to them. Find something teachers are required to do that is not really that important or a program that hasn’t been all that successful and announce that you are striking that procedure or program. They will love you for it.
5. Do everything within your power to accommodate a teacher’s request for adjusting the temperature in their room. Telling them, “There’s no way you can be hot,” doesn’t help. An exceedingly uncomfortable room temperature (hot or cold) is stressful and makes the person feel helpless.
6. Encourage staff to dress professionally but give them latitude on their choice of attire. Give them permission to wear comfortable shoes (even athletic shoes). Nothing is so tiring as wearing dressy, uncomfortable clothing and shoes all day.
7. When speaking informally with teachers, ask them the same set of questions (i.e., “Where do you want our school to be in five

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years?" "What is the most frustrating part of being a staff member in this school?"). Compare and contrast answers to look for larger concerns.

8. At every opportunity, demonstrate how much you value your teachers' time. Keep meetings sparse and short. Allow adequate time for teachers to plan and prep at the beginning of the year as well as between grading periods.
9. Don't hesitate to empathize with teachers as you emphasize the things that are beyond your power to control. Let them know you would change things if you could and you will work with them on ways to reframe their thinking as well as circumvent officious state and district mandates.
10. Until proven otherwise, always assume a positive intent on behalf of your teachers and staff.