

Teaching Writing and Wrapping Up the School Year with David Staton in OH on *Teachers in America*

Podcast interview transcript

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Transcript

Noelle Morris: Welcome to *Teachers in America*, a production of HMH, where we celebrate teachers and recognize their triumphs, challenges, sacrifices, and dedication to students.

I am the Senior Director of Community Engagement, Noelle Morris. Each episode, I meet a new teacher friend to learn about the latest lessons and innovations from the classroom.

Today we are joined by David Staton, a second-grade teacher at Rosa Parks Elementary School in Middletown, Ohio.

Throughout his 6-year teaching career, David has made it his mission to create engaging learning opportunities for his students. Equally important to David is building a healthy classroom environment where students feel motivated to learn.

Last month, I sat in on David's class to observe a writing lesson. I saw firsthand how David cultivates a positive classroom community and how his class is creatively counting down the last days of school.

In this episode, David shares resources that have helped him personalize writing instruction and activities to wrap up the school year. Now let's get to the episode!

Noelle Morris: So welcome, David. I want to ask you to describe your teaching journey in three words.

David Staton: So when I think about my journey, I always think about how I got to teaching. So I think one word would be perseverance. For me, it was a long journey to get here. It was a tough journey being the first person in my family to go to college, learning how to get through it, how to register for classes. And while I was in school, I had a family. So having to work and go to school and student teach, sometimes it could be exhausting. So I think that is a good word to start the journey. And then when I think about after my first year of teaching, a few years in, I think of navigating the education.

Everything's changing year by year. Your curriculum could be different, strategies could be different. So you're always adapting and changing and navigating from thing to thing. And I think the last word, where I'm at now, I'm satisfied. I feel comfortable coming into my classroom. I'm at a point now where I realize that learning is obviously important, that's why we're here at school. But just as important is the relationships that we're building, motivating the kids. So I feel satisfied that I focus on my classroom climate just as much as I do the education part.

Noelle: When we were talking earlier, you said something that really touched my heart, which is, "I just want you to love being at school."

David: I think to be a good learner, you have to be motivated first. And to be motivated, you have to want to be somewhere. So that's why I think it's so important that you focus on the relationships in your classroom climate just as much as you do the learning part because equally, they're important and they play a role and affect each other.

Everything that I do, I think about how would I feel sitting here learning this. When I am in a professional development, I need it to be exciting. I need to be moving. I try to picture myself learning what they're learning so I know if I would be interested in it. Now, not everyone learns like I do, but I try to take that process to it.

Noelle: When you're lesson planning, do you maybe take risks?

David: So I take the approach of, I'm not worried about what anyone thinks about what I'm doing, whether it be fun or whether it be what are they learning from this. Obviously, I'm doing what's best for the students, but I want to make it as fun as possible too. But I feel more I go into things like, "If it doesn't work out, then we'll just change." Today, I'm a teacher and I spelled a word wrong and I was like, "Oh goodness, I can't believe I just did that." But it didn't bother me. So that's just the attitude I come with.

Noelle: Well, you started class today with bringing that feeling that it's okay to make an error, it's okay to maybe accidentally embarrass yourself like we're all going to get over it, but we're all in this together.

David: Yeah. I want them to always know that because I want them to have a voice. And if you're afraid to say something wrong, you might not participate as much and you're not going to have the same experience as everyone else is getting. So I just want to make sure that they all feel like they have a voice and they're confident enough to use it.

Noelle: During lessons, students were asking about the letters. You've been counting down the school days because we are meeting you nine days before school's out. So I'm shocked because I think y'all get out sooner than we do in Florida, but how are you ending the school year and what are you noticing? I definitely want you to tell our listeners your end-of-year and how now your students have bought into it.

David: So at 26 days of school left, my partner across the hallway, Mrs. Holbrook, shout out to her because she came up with most of this, she came to me and said, "Hey, let's do a countdown for the letters." And I was like, "Okay, that's awesome." So we spent a planning period coming up with activities for each letter. So the story I was telling you was yesterday was the letter O. So I built an obstacle course in the hallway.

It was close to two because it was close to our special time. So I just assumed that everyone was done testing, but we were a little loud, obviously, going under chairs, going around hula hoops, racing each other in a small hallway. So some teachers in the third-grade hallway, so I thought they were waving, but I talked to them later like, "Yeah, we were a little aggravated." I'm like, "Why? We were testing." I'm like, "Sorry, didn't know."

Noelle: That's something, in second grade, we're not there yet.

David: Yeah. So they deal with a lot more testing than I do, so I didn't know, but it all worked out.

Noelle: We cannot hold grudges here, right?

David: No, they're...

Noelle: Because they're already-

David: Yeah. They saw we were having fun, so they were good with it.

Noelle: All right. I'm curious about middle rising, or is it middle rising or-

David: Midi Rising.

Noelle: So Midi Rising, David, what does that mean at the district level, at the school level, teacher, and for your learners?

David: That we want to see growth in our schools so we want to see their learning grow and that we're committed. We talk a lot about 1.5 growth, so a year and a half of growth to make sure that we're trying to close the learning gaps for students who are behind. So I think it just means that you're committing the best instruction that you can to make sure that our students are rising up.

Noelle: How do you teach a seven-year-old, almost eight-year-old, to think about growth because some teachers might think, "Is that too young?" I think children growing up playing games, they're setting goals, they want to get to different levels. That gamification part is a natural entry point at kindergarten. But when it comes to academics, how are you approaching that with them so that they do internalize that and set their own goal?

David: I'll speak specifically to me, that we sit down and say, "Hey, this was your score on the test we just took." Talk about all the good things you did. "We're happy you did this." But next time, we take it like, "We're going to set a goal to where we get this right." I tell them, "You're going to get there because you're going to learn new high-frequency words. You're going to learn new vowel teams. Your reading's going to be better by the time we do it. So you're going to have the ability and you're going to have the skills to be able to answer more questions, and your score will obviously go up for that. And if you don't meet that goal, then we'll adjust it again from when you take it a third time."

So making sure that they know it's not the end of the world if you miss it, but also making sure that they know, "Hey, we're challenging you." It's going to be hard to get to this, that's why you call it a superhero goal. It's going to be hard to get here, but we think that you can do it and if you fall short, you fall short, right? We will refocus and set a new goal.

Noelle: That is awesome. One of the things we specifically saw today is a writing lesson. So I want to ask you, what writing exercise or activities do you do and what have you noticed about your students' writing progress that is mirroring and matching their reading development?

David: There's been three ways that our writing class has looked all year long because we're always looking for a routine. But at the beginning of the year, it was just about, "How do I put a sentence together?" It starts with a capital letter. How do we end a sentence? What kind of punctuation mark? The naming part, the action part. So much time was spent with just developing a sentence and then not even really focusing on spelling words correctly, "Hey, spell what you hear, spell phonetically. If we can read it, that's good enough." Eventually, you're going to learn enough high-frequency words or you're going to be able to get vowel teams and silent Es. So you're going to know why you hear the A sound. You can try those things to see if it looks right. You're going to learn more, so you're going to be able to spell better like in our spelling tests, our spelling words every week. You're going to learn how to spell more and more words.

So writing as we go will be easier. And then obviously, you don't want to rob them of grade-level content. So we talk about, for example, a narrative. What a narrative is. Now, we may not write an entire narrative. We may spend four days writing a beginning, but it's fine, as long as it's part by part. So it makes it a little tougher to keep up with the pacing, but writing class looks for us like what our students need. And we do a thing called, you ask about activities story builders. So they have four pictures and they have to use all four pictures and they have words in them like names in their sentences, and we'll give a limit like, "Hey, I want you to write at least four sentences of a good story using all of those words." So that's one of our favorites that we do.

Noelle: It seems like you're then bringing in the visualization into the writing where they can start to understand how writing is giving them that voice and someone else is going to read it and they need to be able to visualize what you're trying to convey. I want our listeners to know you're using our program, Into Reading. This is your first year. I would love for you to talk about from your unpacking to nine days left in school, what are you most excited about for ending the school year and getting a new start next year with your second year?

David: So unpacking looks like multiple boxes, your Start Right Readers, your teacher guides, which is a bunch of teacher guides. So automatically thinking, "Wow, there's a lot of parts to it." But as soon as you sit down and look at the teacher guides, it flows so well and it gives links on the teacher guides for the online component, which is, I think, the best part of it, to show everything that you need to show or every worksheet that you need to print off that you wanted.

So getting more comfortable with that and then putting all the parts together throughout the year to get nine days away, it feels a lot better than I did when I started because I understand how it works, for the most part, not an expert, but I feel like I've got a pretty good idea of how it flows. So I'm excited about next year when I know how to do it and I'm not making sure it's perfect. I know what it's like now, so I don't have to spend so much time rehearsing the lessons because I've had a year experience and super excited to have students who have been through a year of HMH, the Into Reading because they'll have more experience and they'll know more of what I'm talking about to begin the year.

Noelle: Yeah, those routines. What about differentiating? How are you using Waggle to differentiate and other technology resources to support personalizing?

David: So we use Waggle, the auto-assign. So it's auto-assigned on Waggle, which is differentiated for them because on the HMH website, the growth measure test. So they take that data and the Waggle program auto-assigns lessons that a student needs. And there are some students that I teacher assign based on what I know that they need and what I've seen that they need.

Noelle: What is your process for that and how are your students self-managing that type of digital resource?

David: So we spent a lot of time learning how to get to Waggle. Obviously, that's the biggest part, just showing them through a student computer how it works. And they actually do it really well. So it's not as stressful or as hard as you think it would be. They just figure it out. And here at Middletown, we use Clever, which makes it super easy, a one-stop shop to just click a button. And then they just have to know where Waggle is. So they know when they get on Waggle, they need to click the blue button and there's their work that they need to do. And they also know that it's adaptive. It's going to give them what they need the most or what they're struggling with. And they're trying their best because they're trying to earn things for their little avatar, which they love. Sometimes you have to say, "Hey, we're not messing with our avatar. I want you to do lessons."

Noelle: It's like, "Okay, you've had enough time accessorizing." How do your students encourage you to celebrate their growth both on Map and Waggle? Because I'm wondering if at the beginning of the year, did you need to do more of that prompting, and now they're like, "Hey, Mr. Staton, we've made progress."

David: So they know when they're doing well and for good reason, a lot of them want to see praise. So they'll come and be like, "Hey, Mr. Staton, look, I did this." So they're looking for that praise. And for Map goals, they won't know that we're setting goals until we get closer to the winter part of it. They just take it in the spring or in the summer like, "Hey, I need to take this test." And then I let them know, "Hey, this is what you can earn." And I don't know if you noticed, at the end of the day, they're like, "When's our ice cream party?" Because that's one of their goals. If you hit your superhero goal, you're getting an ice cream party. There's just multiple things that you could have earned just to make sure that everyone's being celebrated for whatever growth that they had.

Noelle: This is a special podcast because this is the first podcast I've gotten to do after getting to watch a class in action. So, I'm seeing so much, and I'm just so grateful for you to let us into your classroom nine days before school's out. That is not an easy time to let anybody in, I understand that. But I want to ask you what I ask every teacher, what is your walkup song? You are at the top of your game, you're pulling into the parking lot, you got to put your headphones on, come in and be ready.

David: I love the Livin' On A Prayer song.

Noelle: Oh, that is Bon Jovi. 1987.

David: No idea who sings it. Yeah.

Noelle: I lived that song, David.

David: Used to be my ringtone. I don't know why. And it's just that part, the Livin' On A Prayer part that I love and it's always with me. I love that song.

Noelle: I love that because it comes back to your perseverance, your navigate, and satisfied, and your ability to be like, "Hey, I'm going to try it. If it works, it works. And if I accidentally aggravate you, you'll forgive me tomorrow."

David: Yeah, someone will tell me.

Noelle: I think any of our listeners will pick up some great ideas and great thoughts. And I appreciate you.

David: I appreciate you. It's truly an honor. Thank you.

Noelle: Thanks for joining us on the podcast today. If you or someone you know would like to be a guest on the *Teachers in America* podcast, please email us at shaped@hnhco.com. Be the first to hear new episodes of *Teachers in America* by subscribing on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you listen to podcasts. If you enjoy today's show, please rate, review, and share it with your network. You can find the transcript of this episode on our *Shaped* blog by visiting hnhco.com/shaped. The link is in the show notes. *Teachers in America* is produced by HMH. Until next time, your friend, Noelle.

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Thanks again for listening!