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# Effective Transitional Strategies for the First Grade Classroom

**Abstract**

Transitions take time in any classroom. First grade students make many transitions in a day. Students transition from activity to activity as well as moving from location to location. With a limited amount of instructional time, teachers strive to have their students engaged in learning and to increase the students' time on task. There are transitional strategies available that teachers utilize to decrease transition time and increase student-learning time. Two such strategies are visual cues, such as a timer; and auditory cues, like a song. The goal of this research study was to discover effective transition strategies for first grade students to increase time on-task behavior and decrease transition time. The study results revealed that both the use of a visual timer and the use of a musical transition did decrease transition time.

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Effective Transitional Strategies for the First Grade Classroom

by

Ashley Rose Perrin

B.A. Aquinas College, 2009

Action Research Report  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Education

Department of Education  
Dordt College  
Sioux Center, Iowa  
April 2014

Effective Transitional Strategies for the First Grade Classroom

by

Ashley Rose Perrin

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Director of Graduate Education

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Date

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### **Abstract**

Transitions take time in any classroom. First grade students make many transitions in a day. Students transition from activity to activity as well as moving from location to location. With a limited amount of instructional time, teachers strive to have their students engaged in learning and to increase the students' time on task. There are transitional strategies available that teachers utilize to decrease transition time and increase student-learning time. Two such strategies are visual cues, such as a timer; and auditory cues, like a song. The goal of this research study was to discover effective transition strategies for first grade students to increase time on-task behavior and decrease transition time. The study results revealed that both the use of a visual timer and the use of a musical transition did decrease transition time.



Classroom management is a multifaceted area of education. One aspect included under the umbrella of classroom management is transition time. Transition time encompasses moving from activity to activity within the classroom or school (Lee, 2006). Students could be transitioning between locations, such as going to lunch; or between subjects, such as math and writing. In many classrooms, it is during transition times that things get a little chaotic, possibly resulting in behavior problems that frustrate in the moment and spill over into the rest of the day. This chaotic transition time does not provide the best learning environment. Transitions during the day may not only result in a little chaos but also can be exceedingly time consuming, taking away precious student engaged learning time.

### **Problem Statement**

Throughout the school day, elementary students spend a great deal of time transitioning from one activity to the next. In first grade there can be as many as 20 transitions. Often the consequence of having numerous transitions is lost learning time because of off-task behavior. Specifically, students of a lower academic ability struggle with transitions, resulting in even more off-task behavior and less time working on their learning goals. The purpose of this study is to discover effective transition strategies for first grade students to increase time on-task behavior and to decrease transition time.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are effective transition strategies to increase first grade student on-task behavior and to decrease transition time?
2. Does implementing effective transition strategies make a significant difference with the on-task behavior of students of lower academic ability.

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this study, the following definitions will be used. The definitions are those of the author.

Active supervision – a proactive approach used in order to monitor students, ensure safety and reduce problem behaviors.

Classroom management – term used to describe the process of preventing disruptive behavior and ensuring classrooms run smoothly despite disruptive behavior.

Instructional time – the time spent by teachers working directly with students to help students meet their learning goals.

Learning time – the amount of time a student spends on an academic task.

Positive reinforcement – a behavior modification technique used by reinforcing desired behaviors.

Pre-corrections –reminders given to students directly before they are to do a task for how they are to perform the task.

Time on task – the time students are engaged in their learning task.

Transition – the process of changing from one activity to the next.

Transition time – the amount of time it takes for a transition to occur from beginning to end.

### **Literature Review**

Change is difficult for most human beings. In education there are many types of changes that affect students, parents, community members and teachers. In schools we see effects on children's behavior and engagement as we move them from one activity to the next (Smythe, 2002). A study done by Burts, Hart, Charlesworth, and Kirk, (1990) supports the concept that in

early childhood, specifically, these times of changing can be particularly challenging and stressful (Hemmeter, Ostrosky, Artman & Kinder, 2008).

In the educational field these changes are referred to as transitions. Transitions are considered a passing from one condition, form, stage, activity, place, etc. to another; a process which facilitates change (Smythe, 2002). Transitions occur between activities, such as moving from math to reading; as well as within an activity like turning the page in a math book.

Having effective transitions is very important throughout the day. Making successful transitions has been shown to increase academic learning time and, therefore, student achievement (Ardion, Martens & Wolfe, 1999). According to research by Paine, Radicchi, Rosellini, Deutchman, and Darch (1983) these smooth transitions not only provide more time for academic instruction, they also reduce problem behavior (Lee, 2006).

The basic components of academic learning time include time allocated to instruction, engaged time and academic productivity. A study done by California State University professors Jez and Wassmer (2011) focusing on the impact of learning time on academic achievement has shown that there is a strong positive relationship between academic learning time and student achievement. One way to make sure to increase instructional time is by decreasing time associated with transitions. Time spent on transitions has been found to be as much as 25% of non-learning activities in the classroom (Coddling & Smyth, 2008). With the desire and goal of helping students be successful, increasing student time on task is paramount.

During transitions we demand a lot from students; we ask them to stop their current routine, perform some tasks, then initiate a new activity, all without breaking any rules (Hemmeter, Ostrosky, Artman & Kinder, 2008). Transitions can be difficult for all students; however, some students struggle more than others. Transitions can be particularly difficult for

students with Autism Spectrum Disorder, Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder and other behavioral disorders. (McIntosh, Herman & Sanford, 2004). Many students labeled with autism tend to perseverate on tasks, to resist requests to change activities, and to engage in stereotypical tantrum behaviors (Schmit, Alper & Raschka, 2000). Children with ADD/ADHD generally are easily distracted and overactive, which results in them often have difficulty monitoring, managing, and directing their own behavior to successfully move from one routine to the next, even with detailed multi-step directions (McIntosh, Herman & Sanford, 2004). Students labeled with autism, ADD/ADHD and other behavioral disorders will more often have problem behaviors during transitions which impacts not only their learning but teacher instruction and may disrupt other students' activities. Refusing to transition can also impact a student's academic progress, socialization, and independence (Banda, Grimmer & Hart, 2009).

There are many ways for a teacher to help make transitions well organized and more efficient. Successful transitions require careful planning, teaching, monitoring and feedback. Four techniques that promote smooth transitions are teaching routines, pre-corrections, positive reinforcement and active supervision. (McIntosh, Herman & Sanford, 2004).

Teaching transitions as behavioral routines is an effective method of promoting appropriate classroom behaviors while discouraging inappropriate behaviors. One specific transition strategy to support transitions for students with autism is the use of activity schedules, which are a visual support system that combines photographs, images, or drawings in a sequential formation to represent a targeted sequence of the student's day. Activity schedules provide predictability throughout the student's day and allow a student to anticipate changes in the daily routine. These are considered an evidence-based strategy that not only help students

transition but also teach on-task behaviors that can help students with ASD manage multiple tasks (Banda, Grimmert, & Hart, 2009).

Pre-corrections are quick reminders of how students are to perform skills and they are given directly before the opportunity to use them. This technique is especially helpful once the students have already learned a transitional routine but the teacher anticipates the student(s) may have a difficult time with the transition. Pre-corrections can be given to the whole class or to an individual student. An example of a pre-correction given to students lining up to leave the classroom might be statements such as, “Make sure to wait until I call you to line up;” or questions like “How much space should there be between you and the person in front of you?” These pre-corrections occur right before the students begin lining up (McIntosh, Herman & Sanford, 2004).

Positive reinforcement encourages students to transition appropriately and requires two skills, providing attention or other incentives for appropriate behavior and minimizing any reinforcement for inappropriate behavior. Some types of positive reinforcement could be verbal praise, good grades or extra recess. In general, the most powerful positive reinforcement is teacher attention. When using teacher praise as a positive reinforcement, giving specific praise can be even more effective in increasing correct behaviors. Specific praise tells students exactly what they are doing well and what they can do to earn positive teacher attention. An example of specific praise given to students could be, “Thank you for standing quietly with your hands at your sides” rather than general praise such as, “Good Job.” Giving positive reinforcement with specific praise also has the added benefit that other students will attempt to mimic that behavior to get positive teacher attention (McIntosh, Herman & Sanford, 2004).

Active supervision (scanning, moving, and interacting) is important to monitor students in transitions and is effective in both decreasing inappropriate behaviors and increasing appropriate ones. Scanning is done when teachers frequently look around the classroom and look for multiple opportunities to reward students behaving appropriately. Moving consists of walking around the setting and visiting problem areas frequently, and it is important to make the teacher's paths unpredictable so students do not know when the teacher will be coming to them. Interacting includes teaching behaviors, pre-corrections, and conversing informally with students which helps to build a positive relationship with students (McIntosh, Herman & Sanford, 2004).

There are various strategies being used by educators to decrease student transition time. One such strategy is the use of a timer. Starr (2007) suggested placing a timer in the classroom for all students to see during transition times. The timer is used by educators to help students that need a visual reinforcement to transition successfully.

Another transition strategy consists of using music. Buck (1999) conducted a survey of teachers that used music in their classrooms to help students transition. Of the 360 teachers surveyed, Buck found that 81 used music during transition times. Some teachers used the music as an indicator to students that a transition was approaching. Others played the music during the entire transition. Both of these strategies are being used by educators and recommended by teachers to help decrease student transition time. Buck (1999) found that teachers use the strategy because when utilizing it they have smoother classroom transitions.

Ideas for specific transition strategies are varied and plentiful; however, the implementation of teaching transitions should remain consistent and developmentally appropriate (Feldman, 1995). Change is a part of every-day life; it is necessary to have transitions. When transitional moves are applied regularly and routinely within lessons students

feel cared for and secure (Nicolucci, 2010). By having effective transition strategies in place, the outcome will lead to more successful student behaviors and increased learning time.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were first grade students in an urban public school district in the Midwest. The participant make-up was diverse in race, ethnicity and background. The students were generally first graders from low socioeconomic families. For the 2013-2014 school year, 29 participants were in this study.

### **Research Design**

The new transition strategies were implemented after observing and documenting students' current transition time between morning work and beginning carpet-learning time. Prior to the implementation of transition strategies, data was collected, documenting the transition time from activity A to activity B. As each strategy was introduced, data was again recorded, documenting the transition time from activity A to activity B. The duration of each treatment was ten days. Each strategy was then reviewed to see which type had the greatest improvement in decreasing student transition time.

The following variables were identified in this action research project: the independent variables were the transition strategies that were implemented. The dependent variable was the recorded amount of transition time from activity A to activity B.

### **Materials**

The materials necessary to carry out this research included what was needed for each transitional strategy, as well as, the researcher documentation materials. There were two different types of transition strategies being implemented. The first was based on music and for this the

materials needed were a CD player and song to be played lasting approximately 1 minute. The second strategy used was a timer. A visual timer was displayed on a projector.

For documenting the data, there were specific materials necessary. The chart was created for documenting the transition time. This chart consisted of a column for the date, students A-E, and start and end to the transition. Completed charts are located in Appendix A.

### **Procedure**

The researcher conducted the study at the same time each day, as well as had the same or similar activity precede the implemented transitional strategy. To conduct this study the researcher began the year without any set transition strategies before or after carpet learning time. The transitions were simply verbal directions given to students to put materials away and move to their carpets spot to begin the next learning activity.

To begin the study the students' amount of transition time was recorded over a five-day period. When recording the data, the researcher chose five students at random to record their start time and end time during the transition to carpet learning time. Each day there was a different combination of five students' transitional times recorded. When selecting the students, there were three average-to-high achieving students and two struggling students. The researcher used the student's current math and reading report card grades to determine if a student was at grade level or below. The researcher wrote the start time, meaning at which time she gave the direction to the students to end their current activity. The end time was then recorded, which was once a student had their new materials out, was sitting still, not talking and had their eyes looking at the teacher.

Following the collection of data prior to a transition strategy, the researcher then incorporated the transitional strategy based on music between activity A and coming to carpet



learning time, activity B. These strategies were in place for 10 school days. During the two weeks of implementing this strategy, the amount of time it took students to transition was recorded. The researcher then halted the musical transition strategies and introduced a visual timer transition strategy between activity A and activity B. During the next two weeks, this strategy was used and the transition time was recorded.

Following the implementation of the two transition strategies and recording the transition time, the researcher compared the data. The researcher looked at the change in amount of transition time before the music strategy was implemented and the time while using the music strategy. The researcher also looked at the change in amount of transition time before the timer strategy was implemented and the time while using the timer strategy. The researcher then analyzed the amount of transition time before any strategies were in place and during the use of the strategy. The researcher hoped to find that the implementation of the music and timer strategies would decrease the amount of transition time, thereby increasing the amount of student time on task.

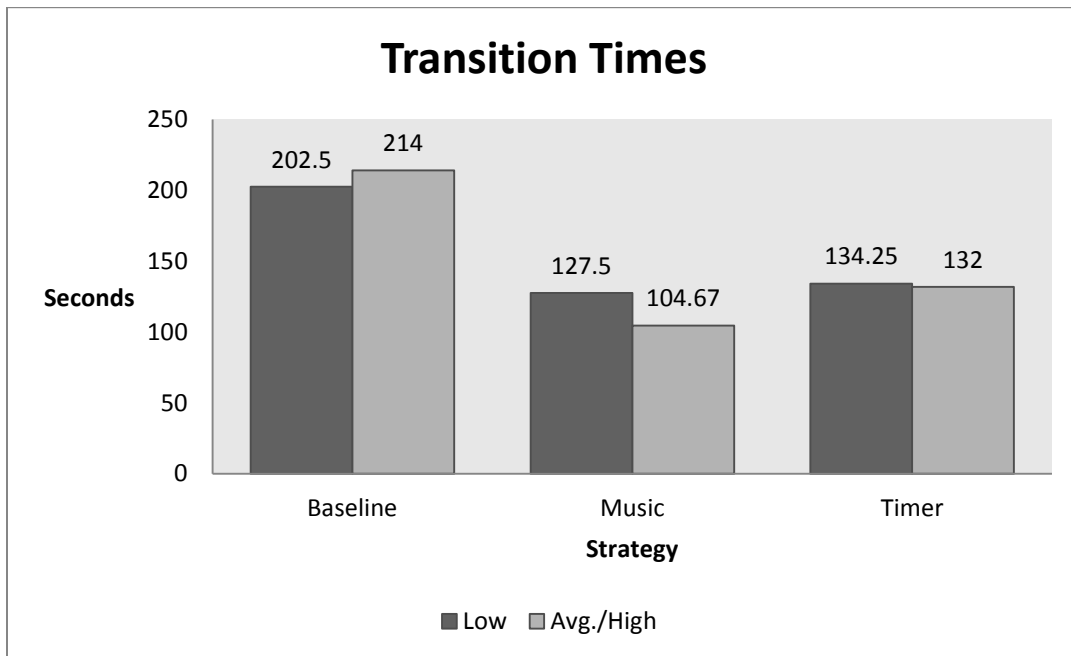
## **Results**

To determine the effectiveness of the transition strategies the students were timed on how long it took them to transition from their morning work to their carpet learning time. The baseline data, the time it took prior to the implementation of either strategy, was recorded and averaged in seconds. The average time it took an average/high academic student was 214 seconds (3 minutes 34 seconds). The average time it took a lower academic achieving student was 202.5 seconds (3 minutes 22.5 seconds). This data was collected with a random selection of students, from the corresponding academic achievement group, over five days. The next two school days were spent introducing the transitional strategy of using a one-minute piece of

music. For ten school days the transitional time data was collected during the use of the musical strategy. The average time it took an average/high academic achieving student to transition was 107.67 seconds (1minute 47.67 seconds). The average time it took a lower academic achieving student to transition was 127.5 seconds (2 minutes 7.5 seconds).

The next three school days were spent introducing the visual timer strategy. Then for ten school days the transitional time data was collected during the use of the visual timer strategy. The average time it took an average/high academic achieving student to transition was 132 seconds (2 minutes 12 seconds). The average time it took a lower academic achieving student to transition was 134.25 seconds (2 minutes 14.25 seconds). The comparison data shows an improvement from the baseline data to the musical strategy with a decrease of 109.33 seconds for high/average academic achievers and a decrease of 75 seconds for the lower academic achieving students. The comparison data shows an improvement from the baseline data to the visual timer strategy with a decrease of 82 seconds for the high/average academic achievers and a decrease of 68.25 seconds for the lower academic achieving students. Figure 1 illustrates this data.

Figure 1

*Results of Transition Times***Discussion**

The researcher attempted to discern what effective transition strategies increase first grade student on-task behavior and decrease transition time. The implementation of both strategies, music and visual timer, showed a reduction in average transition time. Both strategies decreased the amount of transition time by over a minute, in turn increasing the amount of learning time. The music strategy had the largest decrease of transition time for both the average/high academic achievers and the lower academic achievers. Based on the research data, implementing either strategy would decrease transition time, which increases the amount of student time on task for learning time. The researcher will continue using the musical strategy for this daily transition and will begin implementing the visual timer strategy for the transition into math learning time. The researcher presumes the musical strategy will continue to decrease

transition time going to carpet learning time and the visual transition will decrease transition time going to math learning time, which will then create even more time available for students to be on task during learning.

The second research question attempted to determine if effective transition strategies make a significant difference in the on-task behavior of students of lower academic ability. The implementation of these transition strategies did make a significant difference with students of lower academic ability, as well as, with students of average and high academic ability.

### **Recommendations**

The researcher recommends implementing transition strategies in a classroom in order to increase student time-on-task. The music transition was proven to reduce transition time by the largest margin, therefore implementing the music transition strategy first is recommended. The visual timer strategy was also proven effective, therefore implementing this strategy will also be beneficial in decreasing transition time, increasing student time-on-task.

### **Limitations**

There were limitations involved in the study. Students were not exactly the same, student academic ability was used to determine the study groups; however, student behavior was not a factor in determining research groups. One student in the classroom had many mental health concerns, which impacted the behavior of the rest of the students. This student often inflicted self-harm, made threats and was physically aggressive toward other students, which impacted the behaviors of the researcher, as well as, the other students. Non-school days were another limitation, because of holidays, snow days and sick days, many of the research days were not consecutive, which could have caused students to forget how a transition works, or caused it to be new and exciting. Daily happenings in the school were yet another limitation, such as students

being pulled in groups for vision screening, parent volunteers interacting with students, announcements over the intercom and other classroom disruptions, all of which may have impacted the students' behavior in addition to the transition strategies.

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## Appendix A Recording Sheets

Baseline Data											
Date	Start Time	End Time	Start time	End Time	Start Time	End Time	Start Time	End Time	Start Time	End Time	
13-Jan	Student 1		Student 2		Student 3		Student 4		Student 5		
	8:58:30	9:00:30	8:58:30	9:04:15	8:58:30	8:59:15	8:58:30	9:03:45	8:58:30	9:03:15	
14-Jan	Student 1		Student 2		Student 3		Student 4		Student 5		
	8:59:15	9:02:15	8:59:15	9:04:30	8:59:15	9:03:00	8:59:15	9:02:30	8:59:15	9:01:15	
15-Jan	Student 1		Student 2		Student 3		Student 4		Student 5		
	8:55:45	8:58:45	8:55:45	8:59:30	8:55:45	9:02:30	8:55:45	8:57:45	8:55:45	8:59:30	
16-Jan	Student 1		Student 2		Student 3		Student 4		Student 5		
	9:00:30	9:02:45	9:00:30	9:02:15	9:00:30	9:03:15	9:00:30	9:02:15	9:00:30	9:04:30	
17-Jan	Student 1		Student 2		Student 3		Student 4		Student 5		
	8:59:00	9:04:45	8:59:00	9:03:15	8:59:00	9:02:15	8:59:00	9:02:00	8:59:00	9:03:00	
Music Transition Data											
Date	Start Time	End Time	Start time	End Time	Start Time	End Time	Start Time	End Time	Start Time	End Time	
21-Jan	Student 1		Student 2		Student 3		Student 4		Student 5		
	8:58:15	9:00:30	8:58:15	9:00:15	8:58:15	9:01:15	8:58:15	9:01:15	8:58:15	9:02:00	
22-Jan	Student 1		Student 2		Student 3		Student 4		Student 5		
	9:00:00	9:01:45	9:00:00	9:01:15	9:00:00	9:02:00	9:00:00	9:02:45	9:00:00	9:02:15	
23-Jan	Student 1		Student 2		Student 3		Student 4		Student 5		
	8:54:30	8:55:45	8:54:30	8:55:45	8:54:30	8:56:15	8:54:30	8:55:45	8:54:30	8:56:45	
27-Jan	Student 1		Student 2		Student 3		Student 4		Student 5		
	8:57:15	8:59:45	8:57:15	8:59:45	8:57:15	8:58:45	8:57:15	8:59:15	8:57:15	9:00:15	
29-Jan	Student 1		Student 2		Student 3		Student 4		Student 5		
	9:02:30	9:04:45	9:02:30	9:04:15	9:02:30	9:04:45	9:02:30	9:05:00	9:02:30	9:04:15	
30-Jan	Student 1		Student 2		Student 3		Student 4		Student 5		
	8:58:00	9:01:15	8:58:00	8:59:15	8:58:00	8:59:45	8:58:00	9:00:00	8:58:00	8:59:30	
31-Jan	Student 1		Student 2		Student 3		Student 4		Student 5		
	9:05:30	9:08:15	9:05:30	9:07:45	9:05:30	9:08:00	9:05:30	9:07:45	9:05:30	9:07:00	
3-Feb	Student 1		Student 2		Student 3		Student 4		Student 5		
	9:01:45	9:03:00	9:01:45	9:03:30	9:01:45	9:02:45	9:01:45	9:04:00	9:01:45	9:03:45	
4-Feb	Student 1		Student 2		Student 3		Student 4		Student 5		
	8:57:00	8:59:30	8:57:00	8:58:30	8:57:00	8:59:15	8:57:00	8:58:45	8:57:00	8:59:30	
5-Feb	Student 1		Student 2		Student 3		Student 4		Student 5		
	8:55:15	8:56:45	8:55:15	8:57:00	8:55:15	8:56:45	8:55:15	8:57:30	8:55:15	8:57:15	
Visual Timer Data											
Date	Start Time	End Time	Start time	End Time	Start Time	End Time	Start Time	End Time	Start Time	End Time	
18-Feb	Student 1		Student 2		Student 3		Student 4		Student 5		
	9:00:00	9:02:30	9:00:00	9:03:00	9:00:00	9:02:45	9:00:00	9:01:30	9:00:00	9:01:30	
19-Feb	Student 1		Student 2		Student 3		Student 4		Student 5		
	9:03:30	9:05:30	9:03:30	9:05:15	9:03:30	9:05:00	9:03:30	9:05:30	9:03:30	9:05:15	
20-Feb	Student 1		Student 2		Student 3		Student 4		Student 5		
	8:57:00	9:00:30	8:57:00	9:00:00	8:57:00	9:01:15	8:57:00	8:59:45	8:57:00	9:00:00	
21-Feb	Student 1		Student 2		Student 3		Student 4		Student 5		
	8:56:45	8:58:15	8:56:45	8:58:00	8:56:45	8:57:45	8:56:45	8:58:00	8:56:45	8:59:30	
24-Feb	Student 1		Student 2		Student 3		Student 4		Student 5		
	8:59:15	9:02:30	8:59:15	9:01:45	8:59:15	9:02:00	8:59:15	9:03:45	8:59:15	9:01:30	
25-Feb	Student 1		Student 2		Student 3		Student 4		Student 5		
	8:58:30	9:01:00	8:58:30	9:00:45	8:58:30	9:00:15	8:58:30	9:01:00	8:58:30	9:01:15	
26-Feb	Student 1		Student 2		Student 3		Student 4		Student 5		
	9:02:15	9:04:45	9:02:15	9:04:00	9:02:15	9:03:45	9:02:15	9:03:45	9:02:15	9:04:00	
27-Feb	Student 1		Student 2		Student 3		Student 4		Student 5		
	9:00:45	9:02:00	9:00:45	9:02:30	9:00:45	9:01:45	9:00:45	9:03:45	9:00:45	9:01:45	
28-Feb	Student 1		Student 2		Student 3		Student 4		Student 5		
	8:57:00	8:59:30	8:57:00	8:58:45	8:57:00	9:00:45	8:57:00	8:59:30	8:57:00	8:58:30	
3-Mar	Student 1		Student 2		Student 3		Student 4		Student 5		
	8:58:30	9:00:30	8:58:30	8:59:45	8:58:30	9:01:15	8:58:30	9:00:15	8:58:30	8:59:45	



**Vita**

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**EDUCATION**

M.A. Teacher Leadership, Dordt College (2014)

B.A. Elementary Education, Language Arts & Early Childhood, Aquinas College (2009)

**ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT**

Softball Coach, South Redford School District, MI (2012-Present)

Teacher (1) Jefferson Elementary, South Redford School District, MI (2012- Present)

Teacher (6-8) Pierce Middle School, South Redford School District, MI (2011-2012)

Teacher (Kdg.) Jefferson Elementary, South Redford School District, MI (2009-2011)

**AWARDS**

Aquinas College Leadership Scholarship Award 2004-2008

Aquinas College Dean's List 2004-2008

Outstanding Senior at Aquinas College 2008

Who's Who Among Students in American Colleges and Universities 2008

Monsignor Bukowski Award Finalist 2008

Girl Scout Gold Award Recipient 2004