

Style

Students weather final days of school, eagerly awaiting summer

By [Monica Hesse](#) June 20, 2012

Mr. Leonard has done what a man needs to do to fortify himself for what lies ahead. By 7:45 on Monday morning, he has shaken off the remnants of his Saturday night birthday celebration and driven 30 minutes from his house in [Prince George's County](#). He has purchased his customary oatmeal from the McDonald's a couple of blocks away. He has achieved a good parking spot on Jonquil Street, in the Washington neighborhood just across the Maryland border from Silver Spring.

Mr. Leonard is 42 years old, a compact man with unassuming facial hair, a practical red polo shirt over baggy jeans, a man for whom the word "unflappable" was invented, a man who cannot be flapped.

He is the educator of the children.

The children are 9 to 11 years old. They have 48 arms and 47 usable legs, the discrepancy belonging to the right ankle of SaAnkhessa, who broke her foot when she jumped off a rock during Field Day — an event that none of her friends realized had happened (lots of people had already jumped off the rock without incident) until she came back school with a hot-pink cast, which everyone immediately signed.

Mr. Leonard and the children are ready, in ways that are similar and different — in ways that can be both *compared* and *contrasted*, to use a reading comprehension lesson — for [summer vacation](#).

"Mr. Leonard," Shoa says. Shoa is the first student to arrive, a buoyant fashion hound with springy red braids. "Mr. Leonard, did you know that Imani and I were the first people in your class to go on the [new ride at Six Flags](#)?"

"I did not!"

"We did. This weekend. The Apocalypse. It has real fire."

They rode the Apocalypse, and then Shoa bought new sandals, sparkly silver jelly sandals, which would normally not be worn to class, but which are entirely appropriate for the *last week* of school.

Shoa understands a concept that is relatively advanced for her age and grade level. Shoa understands that school and summer are not discrete capsules of time. School and summer bleed into each other, overlap in a Venn diagram. Summer can actually start while school still persists. Shoa has already been to Six Flags. She has already put on the jelly sandals. She has already commenced outdoor swim practice every evening — a chlorinated, liberating experience that seems to mock the schoolwork she is still expected to do during the day.

Testing is over, grading is complete, but still the students must arrive at this school by 8:45 in the morning, not to be released until 3:15. The last week of school, and all of its attendant giddiness and sadness are the first experiences that children have with the concept that life may, in fact, be a novel written by Joseph Heller or Jean-Paul Sartre.

There is an exit. The exit will never come.

Monday morning

Room assessment: *Mr. Leonard's room, on the second floor of Shepherd Elementary School, is lined with computers and bookshelves. It smells like cinnamon-air-freshener trying to mask the smell of something else. It is stacked with cardboard boxes into which everything must be eventually be packed before everyone can eventually go home.*

“I got the [test] scores,” says Mr. Leonard, who, in another life, goes by the name Tim. “On the math? We blew it off the roof. But . . .”

“We didn’t do so good on the reading?” Christian asks. He saw this coming.

“We didn’t do so *well*. You think?”

Mr. Leonard instructs everyone to take out their copies of [Laurie Halse Anderson's](#) narrative of an 18th-century yellow fever epidemic, which, involving blood, history, gore and George Washington, is the perfect book for children of this age.

“We have to finish ‘Fever!’” he encourages them. “We don’t even know if Mom is dead or alive yet! I mean, I guess I could just *tell* you.”

“No!”

(Screams the counterfaction: “YES!”)

Mr. Leonard is not the kind of teacher to ignore learning opportunities. If they are scheduled to be in school until

noon Wednesday, then they will be learning, growing, practicing their reading skills until noon Wednesday.

This is the plan. The staticky intercom system has other plans.

“Good morning, Shepherd.” The announcer needs eight student volunteers to come set up for International Day.

“I need a risk taker to read the quote at the beginning” of the chapter, Mr. Leonard says.

“Good morning, Shepherd. I need Haiti to come to the office.”

“So, was Benjamin Rush a good doctor?”

“Good morning, Shepherd.”

A discussion begins about the use of the word “wounds.” Is Anderson referring to literal wounds? Or are they symbolic? What kind of emotional wounds did the yellow fever leave behind?

“Good morning, Shepherd.”

“Good morning, Shepherd.”

At 11 a.m., when still nobody knows whether Mom is dead or alive, the intercom summons the fifth-graders downstairs to International Day, at which students collect passport stamps by visiting the tables of various countries. (“Where is Europe?” an exhausted-looking teacher asks her passing colleague. Colleague: “It’s in the foyer.”)

The countries, in order of popularity are: 1) Jamaica 2) South Africa 3) India 4) Vietnam. The countries, in order of amount of food being passed out are: 1) Jamaica 2) South Africa 3) India 4) Vietnam.

A smiling girl holding a Dixie cup from Jamaica stops Mr. Leonard by poking his sleeve.

“Mr. Leonard, I’m not supposed to eat this.” She shovels another spoonful of jerk chicken into her mouth. “I’m a vegetarian.”

Monday afternoon

The spectre of vacation hangs just outside Shepherd Elementary, the way it hangs outside the entire D.C. region as the [Arlington](#) school system prepares, Friday, to be the last to finish its year. In this school, which ended last week, the students and staff could practically see their freedom, as if Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday existed on one side

of a plastic bubble and Thursday and Friday existed on another.

Everyone just has to make it through Wednesday, when school will end and the fifth-graders — including Mr. Leonard's class — will graduate and move on to Alice Deal Middle School where, as everyone knows, sixth-graders get their own lockers and the lasagna has more cheese.

In between now and then, Shoa will visit her grandfather in Grenada, Jumel will go to Ocean City with his family, Noah will go to a sports camp in Maryland, a couple kids will do a summer program at Sidwell Friends. Mr. Leonard will visit friends in Connecticut, Principal Miles will try to snatch a long weekend here or there, the school security guard will go to Montego Bay, Jamaica, to see her cousin renew his wedding vows, and Milton, the cheerful, grandfatherly crossing guard, will turn his attention to directing stadium traffic for the Nationals.

That will all happen. In two more days.

For now: The cafeteria menu, which normally lists a full meal plan, this week merely reads — ominously — “Manager's Choice.” Today it's fish sandwiches.

After lunch, there's a math game, a song rehearsal for Wednesday's graduation and there are many important things to discuss, such as the mystery of why Trinity won't close her mouth. Theories are put forth: She burned her tongue. She's just trying to be funny. She has a canker sore. Trinity, naturally, cannot explain what she is doing with her mouth open, because her open mouth makes it difficult to talk.

“Mr. Leonard, is a canker sore even a real thing?” asks one dubious boy.

“Why don't you look it up?”

An intrepid crew rushes to the Internet. They look up “canker sore.” They find pictures.

“Ewwwwww.”

Room assessment: *In an attempt to be helpful, the fifth graders have torn down the posters, the charts, the vocabulary words from the walls. The room looks like it has been lovingly attended to by a pack of wildebeests.*

Mr. Leonard, who arrived at 7:45 a.m., will not leave until 7:30 p.m, cleaning, organizing, reflecting.

Sometimes, when Mr. Leonard gets home, Mr. Leonard will be talking on the phone with his girlfriend and find himself interrupting her to say, “Can I have a minute?” He just needs one moment where no one is talking to him and he is talking to no one, and everything is silent.

There is a direct correlation between the immediacy of the final day of school and the number of times that a 10-year-old will ask to use the bathroom.

There is a rumor, entirely unsubstantiated, that the fifth-graders in Miss Ulba's class get to watch movies all day.

Tuesday

Behold, the contents of a fifth-grade boy's desk, excavated by the desk's owner and curator, Charles:

One student planner, two composition books, one Webster's New Dictionary, one Webster's American English Dictionary, one unopened packet of ring binder dividers, one copy of "[Diary of a Wimpy Kid](#)," four rocks, one pair of sunglasses, two pairs of scissors, two editions of the school newsletter, one three-ring binder — missing the aforementioned dividers — one miniature traffic cone, one ruler, seven colored pencils, one pencil sharpener, two empty water bottles, one stick and one Toby Gerhart football card, slightly creased around the edges.

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"Mr. Leonard. This was the worst morning ever." Jason swans into the room, executes an elaborate pirouette and then sinks into his desk. "I had a bloody nose last night, and it dried while I was sleeping, and when I woke up this morning it was all over my face."

"Jason. You have yellow fever."

At 9, Mr. Leonard becomes a DJ: "Name an artist you would like to hear today."

He will play anything within reason, but if the students suggest something with a bad word or a naughty reference, then it becomes Mr. Leonard's choice, and everyone knows that means nonstop [Beyonce](#).

For a while the class chills, riding the waves of [Drake](#) and [Justin Bieber](#) as they clean out their desks and pass back their art projects and listen to Devin practice his graduation speech, which talks about how Mr. Leonard is his favorite teacher and makes him a little teary. The emotion becomes contagious.

All of a sudden the week takes on a surreal quality: *Leaving? How can they be leaving? How can school be over? How did the year pass so fast? Why is it so hot in here? Isn't the air conditioner working? Who else is wearing a suit tomorrow? Where did Christian get the rainbow-colored clown wig he is now wearing on his head?*

Mr. Leonard has an idea. "We are going to go on a nostalgia walk," he says, "Does everyone remember what 'nostalgia' means?"

The nostalgia walk will take them through the far reaches of the school, through all of the classrooms they have inhabited during their time at Shepherd. The nostalgia walk will also take up one hour of time and conveniently lead them over to the side of the building where the air-conditioning is inexplicably at least five degrees cooler.

They visit the library. They visit Miss Johnson. They visit the art room. They finish in the chilled gymnasium, which might have smelled like paint in the beginning of the year but now smells, as does much of the school, like recirculated air and children's socks. (The cinnamon air freshener, explained.)

"What did you feel, walking through this school?" Mr. Leonard asks. Were there any rooms that made them feel a certain emotion or remember a certain memory?

"I felt a lot of memories of my childhood," Alex says. "A lot."

"The thing that got to me was the hallways," Christian observes philosophically. "I have a lot of memories of these hallways."

What Mr. Leonard wants, he explains, is for students to think about perspective shifts and about the cyclical nature of life. This is the end of the year. In a few months, a new year will begin again. Just as they walked in a circle around the school, so will their lives be circles of beginnings and endings, of returning where you started with fresh eyes and new context.

"I felt pain," SaAnkheesa says.

"You felt pain?" Mr. Leonard is concerned. "Tell us about that pain, SaAnkheesa."

"Pain." She points to the hot-pink cast. "In my foot."

There is a rumor, entirely unsubstantiated, that the fifth-graders in Miss Ulba's class got to order Chinese food and eat it in their classroom.

Wednesday morning

Room assessment: *Mr. Leonard's room is naked, scandalously so, with the floor swept, the glitter particles gone, the desks pushed to the side, the walls bare.*

All week long, everyone has been asking Mr. Leonard what he plans to wear to their graduation, and all week long, he has been telling them, "Jeans."

“But why?” they ask. “Aren’t you going to miss us?”

“Why would I miss you?”

He arrives to work in jeans, but, when all of the boys are distracted — the girls are primping with Miss Ulba down the hall — he ducks behind the wall of cabinets near his desk and emerges in a sleek tan suit. It’s sartorial evidence that he is going to miss them, all of them, and that he might even cry when they sing “One Moment in Time” for their parents downstairs.

Imani’s dress is short in front, but in the back it goes all the way to the floor, just like a princess’s.

The parents have been waiting in the gym, restless, preparing their iPhones and iPads and the other recording devices they have brought along to capture the events of the day. A hundred red “RECORDING” lights go on when the fifth-graders march through the back doors and file up the aisle to their seats at the front of the room.

It all goes fast, so fast — too fast, even while going too slow, even while the gymnasium is getting stuffy and someone’s toddler siblings are fussing in the back and the cake in the foyer is developing beads of sweat.

The [Whitney Houston](#) song that Mr. Leonard has been making them practice for weeks suddenly comes off without a hitch; the parts that nobody knew yesterday, suddenly everybody knows. Suddenly everybody remembers to join hands for the final chorus.

Devin’s speech makes him cry, but truthfully all the parents are crying, too, shoulders shaking. Tomorrow they will watch their iPad recordings and wonder why the screen is bobbling up and down.

Recognition is given to the basketball teams, the math club, the spelling bee participants.

Promotion certificates are handed out to each student. Hugs are exchanged. Cake is eaten.

For a while, nobody leaves, drawn to the gravitational pull of Shepherd Elementary, partly by early onset nostalgia and partly by the disbelief that they are really allowed to leave, now, in the middle of the day.

But one minivan finally pulls away, and then another, until the school is emptied of fifth-graders, and the sixth-graders are loosed into the wide expanse of summer, into the uninhabited territory of the future.

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