



# Education Quarterly Reviews

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**Koutsoukos, M., Mavropoulou, E., & Oikonomou, A. (2025). Finishing strong in May: Difficulties and Management Strategies at the End of the School Year. *Education Quarterly Reviews*, 8(1), 135-141.**

ISSN 2621-5799

DOI: 10.31014/aior.1993.08.01.560

The online version of this article can be found at:  
**<https://www.asianinstituteofresearch.org/>**

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Published by:  
The Asian Institute of Research

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# Finishing strong in May: Difficulties and Management Strategies at the End of the School Year

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## Abstract

This article investigates the crucial period of May in schools and the difficulties emerging in the learning process towards the end of the school year while recording certain strategies for managing this period. By studying a sample of secondary school teachers, the research shows that the most important difficulties teachers face during May, are psychological and mental fatigue, distraction of students, increased organizational and administrative obligations, emotional stress, and anxiety about the next school year. These difficulties can be eliminated or reduced by specific management strategies such as playful teaching and experiential activities, educational visits and excursions, preparations for school events and end-of-school celebrations, sports activities, competitions, tournaments, and a review of the year with feedback and discussion. Successfully implementing the above strategies depends on many factors and the specificities of each learning process.

**Keywords:** May, Secondary Education, School Year, Difficulties, Strategies

## 1. Introduction

The beginning of each school year is an important moment for students, parents, and teachers, as it marks a new beginning full of challenges, opportunities, and goals. It is when the foundations are laid for academic progress, personal growth, and the establishment of new relationships. As summer ends and the first school bell of the year is about to ring, excitement and anxiety can fill the air (Fareedi, 2024). For students, it is an opportunity to explore new areas of knowledge, discover their interests, and set goals for their progress. Parents have the opportunity to support their children and foster an environment that enhances learning and confidence. Finally, for teachers, the beginning of the school year is a time to inspire, guide, and build trusting relationships with their students. The importance of commencement is not limited to lessons alone. It is when habits are formed, discipline is reinforced and cooperation is developed (Park, 2024). With a positive attitude and organization, the beginning of the year can set the tone for a successful and creative school experience.

In the Greek education system, a typical school year for secondary education begins in September and ends in May. More specifically, each school year is divided into two semesters, with the first semester lasting from the beginning of classes until the end of January and the second semester from the beginning of February until the end

of classes, which is determined by a decision of the Ministry of Education and is usually determined towards the middle of May, depending on when the Easter holidays are each year.

In the flow of the school year, each month undoubtedly has its particular characteristics, which influence the development of the learning process. For example, September marks the beginning of the school year and the return of teachers and students to school after the summer holidays. This is the month when the timetable is drawn up and books are distributed to students. September is crucial for building relationships between students and teachers, as well as for creating a positive classroom climate. Students get to know their new classmates and teachers, influencing their interaction and learning (Fareedi, 2024; Park, 2024).

Gradually and up to October, everyone begins to adapt to the daily reality of school, with teachers starting to teach individual lessons and students organizing their reading. In the first month, it is very likely that there will still be changes to the school timetable, while October sees the first school celebration, the 28th of October, with school events, speeches, and parades. The first two months of the school year are critical, as they lay the foundations for the learning process and the learning climate begins to take shape, which will determine individual parameters for the following months.

In November, and as everyone has adjusted to the learning process as it unfolds, the first tests are administered to give teachers and students first feedback. The tests continue in December, the month towards the end of which there is a two-week Christmas holiday. In January, schools reopen, and everyone prepares for the end of the first quarter at the end of that month. Teachers have formed a picture of student performance and proceed with their assessment, as students receive written progress checks with grades in each subject in early February. At the same time, the second quarter begins and lessons, educational activities, various projects and educational visits to the daily life of the school unit continue.

In some subjects, teachers slowly complete the curriculum in March, while towards the end of the month, there is the national celebration of 25 March, with corresponding school celebrations and events. In April, the learning process continues, and as the curriculum prescribed by the syllabus is gradually completed, the first preparations are made for the examinations at the end of the year. In addition, improving weather conditions allows the planning and organization of school trips and educational visits. In addition, towards the middle or end of the month, depending on the calendar year, there is a two-week break for Easter. After the Easter holidays, teachers and students return to school, as May marks the end of classes and the beginning of examinations.

### *1.1 May's peculiarities*

May is a time with significant peculiarities and challenges for teachers and students, who experience various emotions as the school year draws to a close. The feelings at the end of the school year are complex, vary from person to person, and vary depending on the specifics of the particular situation, but generally manifest themselves as a combination of fatigue (mental and psychological), reduced willingness to learn, lack of mental focus, joy, relief, but also sadness and anxiety (Turner, 2024).

There is often a tendency, in the last lessons of the school year and as the weather conditions foreshadow the arrival of summer, for there to be a generalized relaxation, as a result of the accumulated fatigue of the whole year, which in some cases reaches the limits of "deregulation" (Boudreau, 2019). Stress and pressure are most pronounced at this time of year and create a feeling of fatigue and impatience for the end of the school year (Park, 2024). In addition, behavioral issues emerge as some students feel like they are done for the year and lose motivation (Watson, 2013).

In this context, teachers, as important factors in shaping the learning climate, are called upon to ensure the conditions that will allow the smooth and successful completion of lessons, preparing students as fully as possible for the upcoming examinations. Thus, teachers must limit any "deregulation" of the learning process as much as possible and maintain a positive learning climate until the end (Wang, Degol, Amemiya, Parr & Guo, 2020; Barksdale, Peters & Corrales, 2019; Sonnemann & Griffiths, 2017).

To achieve this, teachers can adopt several management strategies that will "break" the school routine and contribute to the smooth closure of the learning process. Students are more likely to act out when bored or disengaged, so teachers should keep them active and engaged in the classroom, through a variety of strategies and activities (Kay-Lewis, 2024). These strategies can be playful forms of teaching with activities inside and outside the classroom (knowledge quizzes, repetitive crosswords, interactive platforms, and educational applications using PCs or tablets), educational visits-tours, sports activities, hands-on projects, competitions, and tournaments, preparations for school events and closing celebrations, as well as organized discussions to review the school year to draw useful conclusions and provide feedback. These activities should be planned and implemented in a flexible framework adapted to students' needs, taking into consideration the specific characteristics, and the dynamics of each class.

At the same time, a framework of psychological support should be put in place to help students and teachers manage the intense emotions, stress, and psychological pressure of this period. School psychologists can also help in this direction, with the guidance of school psychologists, with whose advice support groups can be set up within the school where pupils and teachers can share experiences and strategies for dealing with stress and pressure. These groups can provide a safe environment for expressing feelings and sharing opinions and advice (Minshew, 2019; Sauber-Millaci, 2021). In addition, during this hectic time, school principals can organize colleague meetings and foster collaboration among teachers for support, whether it's brainstorming lesson ideas, sharing resources, or simply sharing strategies for managing end-of-year stress effectively (Black, 2023). The management of stress and fatigue can also be assisted by the use of social-emotional learning (SEL) strategies, which help students to identify and manage emotions, develop self-awareness and self-control, monitor changes in the learning environment, manage conflicts, enhance positive self-image and ultimately create a positive school climate.

Furthermore, in the psychological management of May's difficulties, the role of the student's family environment is also crucial. For this reason, the collaboration between teachers and parents should be encouraged to have an open communication channel and create a broader supportive framework (Hoferichter, Kulakow & Raufelder, 2022). Thus, frequent communication between teachers and parents and possibly organizing scheduled meetings, open conferences, and briefings can work as a supportive measure.

Moreover, this period, although demanding, is an opportunity for reflection and preparation for the next school year, to continuously improve the educational experience. Thus, at the end of the course, an evaluation of the whole school year can be carried out to provide feedback, draw useful conclusions, and highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the completed year. In this process, it is advisable to encourage students' active participation and use the educational discussion technique to express the opinions, assessments, and observations of as many students as possible. Undoubtedly, organization plays a critical role in this period and can make the transition into the new school year smoother and less stressful, as a well-organized school environment enhances productivity and reduces stress (Jorgensen, 2024).

At the same time, however, teachers in May are required to carry out several tasks as they complete the final assessment of students with exams and assignments and record in statements detailed scores and absences of students. School events such as graduation and closing ceremonies are also organized and held during this period. In many school units, an inventory is made of the materials and resources used during the school year and initial planning for the use of the material and technical infrastructure in the following school year. For their part, students are invited to study for the final examinations that determine their final grade and their transition to the next grade as well as to actively participate in the end-of-school-year events.

## **2. Method**

In recent years, several studies and articles have been written on the particularities of the end of the school year, enriching the literature (Ferlazzo, 2024; Dene Poth, 2023; Williams, 2023). However, no extensive scientific research has been conducted on the difficulties faced by teachers during this period and the best strategies for managing the "special month of May." This fact was an additional motivation for the present study, for which qualitative and quantitative research using the purposive sampling method was used. More specifically, purposive

sampling was chosen for both the qualitative (interviews) and quantitative (questionnaire) research as it was deemed by the researchers to be the most appropriate method for this particular circumstance.

Purposive sampling presents specific advantages as it leverages the researchers' experience and network of contacts, selects cases typical to the topic under study, and saves time and costs during the implementation of the research (Campbell et al., 2020; Kelly, Bourgeault & Dingwall, 2010). On the other hand, purposive sampling also has some weak points and disadvantages, as it involves the subjective judgment of the researchers, and the results may not always be generalizable and representative (Robson, 2011).

In this case, a purposive sample of Secondary school teachers was used and initially, as part of the qualitative research, 5 semi-structured interviews were conducted in May 2024. These interviews were a first record of opinions and assessments while preparing the groundwork for the design of the questionnaire to be used in a second phase, during the quantitative research. Thus, considering the conclusions of the interviews and based on the objectives of the study, the questionnaire was designed, which was intended to be simple in its structure but also comprehensive, so as not to "tire" the research participants. More specifically, the questionnaire contained closed-ended Likert scale questions and was sent via Google Forms by email at the beginning of June 2024 to a sample of 54 teachers, of whom 50 responded, with a response rate of 92.6%.

### 3. Results

Recording the results of the quantitative research, of the 50 teachers who responded to the questionnaire, 28 were female (56%) and 22 were male (44%). Regarding the respondents' age, at the time of the research, 14 of them were aged between 31-40 (28%), 23 between 41-50 years (46%), 9 between 51-60 years (18%) and 4 over 60 years (8%) (Table 1). Moreover, an important parameter in teachers' profiles is their years of experience in the field. Of the participants, 8 had 1-5 years of experience (16%), 13 had 6-10 years (26%), 16 had 11-15 years (32%) and 13 had more than 15 years of experience (26%) (Table 1). Regarding postgraduate studies, 22 of the participants held a postgraduate degree (44%) while 28 of them had no postgraduate studies at the time of the survey (Table 1).

Table 1: The profile of the teachers who participated in the research

| Sex                          | Men: 22 (44%) Women: 28 (56%) |                   |                   |                 | Total: 50 |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-----------------|-----------|
| Age (years)                  | 31-40<br>14 (28%)             | 41-50<br>23 (46%) | 51-60<br>9 (18%)  | >60<br>4 (8%)   | Total: 50 |
| Years of teaching experience | 1-5<br>8 (16%)                | 6-10<br>13 (26%)  | 11-15<br>16 (32%) | >15<br>13 (26%) | Total: 50 |
| Postgraduate studies         | Yes: 26 (52%) No: 24 (48%)    |                   |                   |                 | Total: 50 |

The research then focused on the difficulties that teachers face in the last days of the school year, during May. Considering the findings of the interviews conducted during the qualitative research stage and the relevant literature [8], [9], [10], the quantitative research participants were asked to rate the importance of each difficulty on a five-point scale (5 = very important, 4 = important, 3 = moderately important, 2 = somewhat important, 1 = not at all important). As can be seen from the responses (Table 2), the top five most important difficulties in May were: psychological and mental fatigue (4.96), student distraction (4.88), increased organizational and administrative responsibilities (4.35), emotional stress (4.01), and anxiety about the next school year (3.09).

Table 2: Difficulties faced by teachers in May in the learning process

| Difficulty  | Mean Score |
|---|------------|
| Psychological and mental fatigue                        | 4.96       |
| Student distraction                                     | 4.88       |
| Increased organizational and administrative obligations | 4.35       |
| Emotional stress  | 4.01       |
| Stress for the next school year                         | 3.09       |

The difficulties above, which are very much present in May, and the particularities that occur at the end of the school year, make it necessary to adopt specific strategies for teachers to manage the whole situation effectively. Based on the relevant literature [21], [16], [22], as well as the interviews conducted during the qualitative research, five specific management strategies were selected and the teachers participating in the research were asked to rate the effectiveness of each of them on a five-point scale (5 = very much, 4 = very much, 3 = moderately, 2 = a little, 1 = not at all). As demonstrated in Table 3, according to the teachers interviewed, an effective management strategy for May's difficulties is the implementation of playful forms of teaching and related activities (4.94). Also, some other strategies are educational visits-trips (4.87), sports activities-competitions-tournaments (4.45), preparation for school events-end of-year celebrations (4.39), and reviewing the year with feedback discussion (Table 3).

Table 3: Management strategies for the last days of the school year

| Management strategy                                      | Mean Score |
|--|------------|
| Playful forms of teaching-activities                     | 4.94       |
| Educational field trips-study visits                     | 4.87       |
| Sports activities-competitions-tournaments               | 4.45       |
| Preparing for school events - end-of-school celebrations | 4.39       |
| Review of the year with feedback discussion              | 4.31       |

The above strategies can be used in schools, to facilitate the smooth closure of the school year. The effectiveness of each strategy depends on several factors depending on the particularities of each situation. Each school has its own distinct identity, to which the strategies adopted should be adapted and obviously these strategies can be changed and adapted to the learning situation.

#### 4. Discussion

The end of each school year is critical as it completes an eight-month learning process, which starts in September and lasts until May. In the flow of the school year, each month has its particularities and activities that determine the course of the school year from its beginning to its end. Undoubtedly, May has many important features, as it is the month that concludes the lessons, which is the last image of the learning process and the one that remains in the minds of teachers and students.

As the school year draws to a close, the difficulties emerging in May are various and particular, making the closure of the learning process "heavy" and making teachers' work more difficult. Sometimes, disruptive student behavior is associated with negative outcomes, including poor grades, low achievement scores, dropout, lost teaching time, and teacher burnout (Zoromski, 2021).

The feeling of fatigue that overwhelms students and teachers alike can harm the learning climate, to some extent demolishing what has been built up throughout the school year. Thus, careful management by teachers and the adoption of specific strategies that can reduce the difficulties and contribute to the smooth closure of the school year, are needed. Apart from the management strategies depicted in this study, several other strategies can be applied, depending on the interests of the students as well as on the creativity, imagination, and scientific expertise of the teachers (Mulvahill, 2024). In any case, there is no "perfect" strategy, something that may work effectively in one situation may not work effectively in another, as different parameters are involved each time. Either way, however, students' active participation and involvement in planning and implementing activities is a key factor for a 'strong' end to the school year (Blackwell, 2019; Wilkey Oh, 2022). After all, students are at the heart of the educational process and their involvement is essential in every case. Keeping students engaged at the end of the year can be challenging, but it's crucial, as engagement boosts student motivation and promotes active learning (Dene Poth, 2023).

This particular period requires teachers to be observant, flexible, and adaptive, ensuring that the management strategies they implement effectively support the learning process (Love, 2013) and establish a positive learning environment (Tak & Shing, 2008; Weis, 2017; Rusticus, Pashootan & Mah, 2023; Banks, 2014). Obviously, in

managing May's particularities, the proper preparation that has already been carried out in the previous months also plays an important role (Desautels, 2016). Many of the difficulties of May can be avoided or managed effectively if teachers and students establish a positive framework in the school unit from the beginning of the year. It is no exaggeration to say that the school year's closing reflects the work done throughout the previous months.

This study contributes to the enrichment of the relevant literature as it deals with an issue that has not been the subject of extensive scientific research. However, it is of great concern to teachers every year. The findings can be useful to all those involved in school life: teachers, students, parents of students, and school principals, as the school year's end, can become a time of mixed feelings, sometimes including stress and anxiety. Thus, this research can contribute to the debate on how to manage more effectively the difficulties that arise towards the end of a school year.

Concerning the generalizability of the research's findings, there are limitations arising from the use of purposive sampling, but careful sample selection makes the results applicable to a wider population. Regarding suggestions for further research, it would be interesting to conduct similar research in other regions of Greece, studying other samples of teachers. Also, similar case studies could be conducted in schools in different countries and internationally to record opinions and compare research data. Moreover, in addition to teachers' views on the subject, it would be of research interest to examine students' views as well. After all, students are an integral part of the educational process and their views on the difficulties and strategies for managing the special month of May should also be considered. It would also be interesting to conduct similar research in the future to compare the results with those of the present study and to see if there are any changes in teachers' trends and assessments of the "special" month of May in the school unit.

**Author Contributions:** All authors contributed equally to this research

**Funding:** This research received no external funding

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest

**Informed Consent Statement/Ethics approval:** Not applicable

**Acknowledgments:** The authors would like to thank the Secondary Education teachers who participated in this research for their cooperation. In addition, the authors are grateful to the editor and the reviewers of this Journal for their valuable feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript.

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