



UNLOCKING

HOW FIVE IRREPLACEABLE TEACHERS ENGAGE, CHALLENGE AND INSPIRE STUDENTS TO EXCELLENCE

STUDENT EFFORT

Essays by

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GREAT TEACHING GETS US GOING

That's why we founded the **Fishman Prize for Superlative Classroom Practice**, an annual award for the nation's best teachers in high-poverty public schools. Our goal is to shine a spotlight on great teaching and amplify the voices of some of the nation's best educators so that others can gain insight into their remarkable classrooms.

No more than five teachers are selected for the prize each year. In the first year, more than 1,600 teachers registered to apply, and more than 400 teachers from 39 states submitted full applications. We invited 50 to submit teaching videos and letters of reference, and a dozen were selected as finalists, each of whom was observed at work in the classroom by TNTP staff and interviewed by an expert panel of judges.

In addition to receiving \$25,000 – one of the country's largest monetary awards for practicing teachers – Fishman Prize winners collaborate with TNTP staff during a virtual summer residency. During this time, they reflect critically on their classroom practices, explore the larger issues that shape their profession, and contribute to TNTP's own efforts to help schools and teachers understand and support excellent instruction for all students.

The residency provides a platform for the nation's finest teachers to engage with one another deeply over a short period of time without removing them from the classrooms where they do their most important work. As part of this experience, we challenge the winners to capture in writing some essential elements of their practice and create a window into how they run their classrooms every day. This paper, the first in the Fishman Prize Series on Superlative Classroom Practice, includes the contributions of our 2012 winners.



2012

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THE SECRET TO UNLOCKING STUDENT EFFORT

What you'll find here are thought-provoking, often counterintuitive classroom narratives from teachers who are having breakthrough success in some of the most challenging school settings.

All teachers face reluctant learners from time to time. Most teachers have lost count of the number of times they have been asked, “Why do we have to know this?” or been told, “I’m just not good at this subject, I can’t do it” – or more bluntly, “I hate math.”

The best teachers consistently overcome this hesitation in their students. But how?

That’s the question the 2012 Fishman Prize winners chose to address as a group: How do effective teachers motivate and engage students in rigorous academic content?

In watching and listening to the Fishman Prize winners, one theme became immediately clear: They have total faith in their students and share an assumption that reluctance is usually due to fear and past failure rather than a lack of skill or interest. Students resist trying because they believe they will fail, and no one wants to fail.

This insight may seem obvious, but it has profound implications for how teachers approach their work. Each in their own way, the Fishman Prize winners remove fear from the equation. They inspire exceptional effort from their students, which translates into exceptional results.

There are as many differences as similarities in their techniques. But one bedrock characteristic they share is a refusal to accept even one student who doesn’t buy in. No matter what it takes, no matter how many tries it takes, the Fishman Prize winners treat engagement as an imperative. And they understand that engagement is earned, not commanded.

Other commonalities emerged as well. Each of these teachers builds investment in the classroom by personally connecting with individual students while also inspiring a class-wide sense of teamwork and interdependence. They strive and succeed together. Each of them also gives students a real sense of ownership in the classroom, with students tracking their own learning, choosing their own areas of focus and methods of expression, and holding themselves and their classmates accountable along the way. These are classrooms where kids are empowered and challenged every day.

What you’ll find here are thought-provoking, often counterintuitive classroom narratives from teachers who are having breakthrough success in some of the most challenging school settings. You will hear from practitioners in their own voices, writing about their own classrooms. Individually, they provide a glimpse into five incredible classrooms where students are achieving at high levels. Taken collectively, they offer a range of approaches and strategies that all teachers can use to help build and sustain student investment in their learning.

This paper shows us what’s possible in the classroom – any classroom – when teachers strive to get better lesson after lesson, year after year. We’re proud to introduce you to five of the best teachers in the country – and give you a look into what makes their teaching so powerful.



SHIRA FISHMAN

9th–11th GRADE MATHEMATICS

*McKinley Technology High School
Washington, DC*

The Fishman Prize is named after Shira Fishman, a math teacher at McKinley Technology High School in DC Public Schools. Shira was the district's 2011 Teacher of the Year, a 2011 Milken Educator Award winner, and the only teacher in the district to earn a perfect score in her official classroom observations under the district's rigorous IMPACT evaluation system.

A former mechanical engineer, Shira became a teacher through TNTP's highly selective DC Teaching Fellows program in 2004. She taught at Hine Junior High School for three years before moving to McKinley in 2007, where she has become the Math Department Chairperson.

We find it impossible to watch Shira teach and not be inspired. Her classroom is electric. Students tackle math challenges together, often stopping to assist a friend. When they find themselves stumped, they don't even think about giving up. That's just not how it works when Shira is your teacher. Her belief in her students and in the value of math creates an environment where the usual laws of being a teenager cease to apply.

In her essay, "**The First Five**," Shira describes how she sets the culture in her classroom during the first five minutes of each period. She meticulously orchestrates a type of organized chaos that sets an ambitious tone and allows her to have individualized interactions with every student. For her, those five minutes build a sense of urgency and community that are the foundation of her whole teaching strategy.



THE FIRST FIVE:

MAXIMIZING THE OPENING MINUTES OF CLASS

For me, the first five minutes aren't a throw away – they are the main event.

The beginning of a class is almost always the same. Almost every teacher, from a 20-year veteran down to a student-teacher finishing their first week, starts with a 'Do-Now'. The purpose of this opening activity is to get the students settled and working. As long as the class is busy, the thinking goes, it is a success.

In my classroom, I don't think of it that way. Those first five minutes are the most crucial stretch of the entire lesson. Making the most of them is the key to my strategy as a teacher.

The first five minutes set the tone for the class period. If you give teenagers an opportunity to slouch in their seats, take their time getting settled and be idle for any amount of time, they will often take you up on it – and you've set yourself up for a lethargic lesson together.

But if you can create an urgent classroom culture, where each student is busy from the moment they enter, that energy will be infectious and tends to remain high throughout the lesson. I want every student in my class to feel that urgency and I try to instill in them the belief that every minute in this classroom is precious.

These first five minutes are a chance to reinforce what it means to be in my class. I am not striving for order or busy-ness. I create organized chaos with several things happening at once, all built around a strong sense of urgency.

Things are getting done. By the time the warm-up is complete, my students have gathered their supplies, revisited key content from previous lessons and connected prior knowledge to the upcoming lesson, all while tackling a challenge problem in mixed-level learning groups. At the same time, I have evaluated how much knowledge my students have retained from previous lessons, taken attendance, checked homework, logged missing assignments and had a brief conversation with nearly every student.

For me, the first five minutes aren't a throw away – they are the main event.

Settling in Together

When students walk into my classroom, their first stop is the 'calculator rack' (really a shoe rack made to hang on a door, but graphing calculators fit perfectly!) to grab their TI-84s. Each one is numbered, with signs listing the calculator assigned to each student in every class. This gives them a sense of ownership over that particular tool and there is no wasted time distributing calculators or debating who is going to use which one.

Calculators in hand, the students take their assigned seats with a table of four 'teammates' whom I assign together based on data from pre-assessments and the previous year's standardized tests. Every team occupies a range of ability levels, with at least one advanced learner in each group that has a student who struggles. I encourage teamwork from the very first day when they introduce themselves. These 'teammates' are their support system and they will lean on each other throughout the year.

Teammates have special freedoms. They may ask questions, work through problems and collaborate with each other at many times during the period, and especially during the warm-up, when they must ask at least one teammate for assistance before they can ask me. While they are discussing the math, asking each other questions, and problem-solving together, they are 'team-building' without even realizing it.

I re-group the students every two months so they can work closely with a variety of classmates. Sure, I get the occasional teenage complaints like, "Kenny is getting on my nerves, I can't work with him," but my response is usually, "you're probably getting on Kenny's nerves, too" (unless of course Kenny is truly behaving problematically). I try to downplay their conflicts and keep things informal – if I can make a joke with them or give a flippant response, they know I'm listening but that the problem is theirs to solve. I remind them that they won't choose their co-workers when they get jobs, so they have to learn to work together.

*Teenagers love to prove adults wrong.
It becomes the class against me.*

And they do work together: kids perch on the side of the table, or manage to share one of those little seats, so that they can lean over their classmate, talking through problems step by step. I see the comfort level among my students expand exponentially when they use their classmates as resources every single day.

A Three-Dimensional Warm-Up

As the students grab calculators and join their teammates, the organized chaos begins. Every day, including the first and last days of school, the warm-up is waiting for them on the board. The first two problems typically cover material from previous lessons, and I consider them my ‘entrance tickets.’

Many teachers rely on ‘exit tickets’, but I find that those first two warm-up problems the next class period tell me even more about what my students mastered. It isn’t good enough for them to demonstrate their learning of a mathematical concept 30 minutes after I’ve taught it to them. If the understanding is not retained to the next class period, it might as well never have existed at all.

While the students are working, my job is to watch. I can usually measure the pulse of the class during the first two problems by listening to their conversations and looking at their posture. If anyone is off task, I certainly redirect them, but that

is not really what I am looking for. I’m watching a student dash from her table to help another group begin a problem, and listening to the questions a shy student asks of his teammate. And when I see Chante half-sitting, half-standing with her braids bouncing as she scribbles the solution to a Pythagorean Theorem problem, then I know we’re off to a good start!

The third problem on the warm-up is part of my ‘hook’ for the upcoming lesson. Often it incorporates some prior knowledge but requires students to take the solution a step further, perhaps even beyond what I have already taught them (see sidebar).

There are even times when the third problem is one that I don’t think they will be able to solve. When I challenge them by saying, “I don’t know that you are going to get through today’s #3. It may be too tough,” they work twice as hard to get it. I’m not offering candy or money, but rather pushing their buttons, and introducing some subtle competition.

Teenagers love to prove adults wrong. It becomes the class against me. I have laid down the gauntlet, told them they can’t solve it, and they have 24 classmates who are in the boat with them, with the ultimate goal of beating me. I hear things like “Oh we got this, c’mon guys, let’s show Ms. Fishman what’s up,” and see students leaning out of their seats, peering over each other’s work and shouting advice to another team across the room. More often than not, it is on the third problem of the warm-up where the students really appreciate the value of their ‘teammates.’

Checking Homework

I am in motion from the moment the students begin the warm-up. If you ask one of my students, Zakia, she would say I am “being pressed, stamping homework and making the ones without homework feel guilty.”

I can’t say she is lying. I put a huge emphasis on homework because it is vital to mastering the content. Some teachers underplay homework because they think kids aren’t going to do it anyway. I disagree. I do not think it is possible to master high school math without a lot of practice. And there simply isn’t enough time to get all the practice in class.

Some teachers underplay homework because they think kids aren’t going to do it anyway. I disagree. I do not think it is possible to master high school math without a lot of practice.



Teammates talking through problems.

I stress this from the start of the school year, showing my students a graph of the data from the previous year's classes illustrating the direct correlation between homework grades and test grades. I go back to this data throughout the year, focusing on the relationship between their homework and their level of understanding of the content. I am constantly reminding them that they can succeed in this class, and completing their homework every day is a huge step towards that success.

Now I'm coming to every student's seat to stamp their homework, which they then file in a personal homework folder that I collect every two weeks. Every missing assignment means a student has to look me in the eye and admit to arriving empty-handed. The completion rate skyrockets. Many teachers use homework bins for students to drop their assignments on the way in the door, but it's a lot easier to slip past the bin empty-handed than to face the teacher.

When I do get to a student without homework, my disappointed look speaks volumes, but I also reemphasize the impact of that missing assignment and remind them that they now have a 'dot' on the attendance sheet for arriving without homework. If they ever get a second 'dot', they will have to call home and explain themselves.

I am not the one doing the calling. After all, as I point out to the students frequently, I am not the one who loses out by not doing the homework. When a student trudges to the doorway, phone in hand, to call their parents telling them they have missed two homework assignments, it resonates loud and clear to their classmates: missing homework will not be tolerated. Nobody wants to make that call, and very few students have ever made it more than once.

Connecting with the Kids

While I'm moving through the room, stamp in hand, I'm also able to take attendance, let Jason know that I better not hear him gossiping when he's got a warm-up to complete, and remind Sujen to sign the tardy log as she tries to slip in the door three minutes late. I am establishing my total awareness over the classroom.

While Zakia is right that I am serious about homework, I also use this time to assess how the students are faring on the warm-up and to have a quick moment with each of them. You'd be amazed at how much you can build rapport and get to know your kids with these brief conversations.

I talk trash about the Redskins to the Cowboys fans on a Monday after we beat them, compliment the fashion-conscious student on her new shoes, ask the athlete about her softball

Every missing assignment means a student has to look me in the eye and admit to arriving empty-handed.

A SAMPLE #3 WARM-UP PROBLEM

"If the perimeter of a right triangle is 60 inches and the sides are of lengths x , $2x + 4$, and $3x - 4$, what is the area of the triangle?"

I gave this problem during a unit on properties of triangles. At this point in the year, the students were already very familiar with perimeter and area of two-dimensional shapes, so at first glance, they were confident jumping right in. They were able to translate the problem into an equation where they added the side lengths and set that expression equal to the perimeter (60 inches). They had little difficulty solving for x , and then used the value for x to find the length of each side.

Then the conversations got interesting! They knew the equation for the area of the triangle is $A = \frac{1}{2}bh$, so they were trying to decide which sides to use as the base and the height. The question I kept getting was, "Ms. Fishman, does it matter which ones we use?" My response was, "You tell me, does it matter?" This was an easy lead-in to the lesson for that class period, on the relationship between the angle measures and the side lengths in a triangle.

game, or the poet about the weekend poetry slam. This is the time to see if one student is having a particularly bad day, or another is getting frustrated with a certain warm-up problem.

These conversations can last 10–30 seconds, and they don't take anything away from the learning taking place, but their effect can influence the rest of the school year. The students will become more invested in the content and more focused on the learning when they are comfortable in the classroom.

A huge part of that comfort comes from the students trusting me, as both a teacher and a person. They know I will push them academically but that I will also be there for them. Yes, I will talk trash about my basketball skills and give them challenge problems that frustrate them, but I will also get to know them, reassure them that it is okay to get a wrong answer, and work with them until they truly understand.

Ready to Begin

I've finished stamping the homework and there is a buzz in the room. Two of my stronger students are arguing about which one is closer to solving #3. Three others are waving their arms in the air, hoping I'm ready to take volunteers to present the warm-ups on the dry-erase boards. Malik is scampering to the bin on my desk to change out his calculator's batteries. Sujen is begging me to stamp her homework, pleading that she was "only late because the train was sooooo slow today." Another class period has begun. We're only five minutes in, but the stage has been set, urgency is in the air, and the students are ready to master some math.



Students are more invested in the content when they feel comfortable in the classroom.



JAMIE IRISH

8th GRADE MATHEMATICS

KIPP Central City Academy

New Orleans, LA

Jamie Irish began teaching in New York City in 2003, working in public schools in the Bronx. He went on to teach in Washington, D.C., before moving to New Orleans to help rebuild the devastated city's school system.

He now teaches at KIPP Central City Academy in New Orleans. Located in the vicinity of the Louisiana Superdome, the school enrolls 400 middle school students, 96 percent of whom are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Despite the challenges, Jamie's meticulously-planned, fast-paced lessons have led his students to achieve greater academic gains in math than all others within the KIPP network for two years in a row. In 2012, he was honored with KIPP's Harriet Ball Excellence in Teaching Award.

Jamie starts by challenging his students to outperform their peers at a more affluent, selective enrollment school just two miles away. His implicit message is that they can create their own futures by proving that they are every bit as talented and capable as any other students in the nation. His commitment to the big goal permeates everything, from the items on the walls to the beverages students drink before assessments. When students see total, unabashed investment from the teacher, they rise to the occasion. His essay "**Crush Lusher**" is a classic portrait of how he invests his students in something far beyond eighth grade math - he invests them in hope.

There are millions of teachers across the United States, but there are very few classrooms like Jamie's. When you are at KIPP Central City, it is clear you are witnessing something incredible. Every moment is purposeful. Every exercise is carefully selected. The energy level is always high. Some of it comes from Jamie. But as you'll learn, most of it comes from the students themselves, who are inspired by Jamie's vision for their future. No matter what challenges they face, you know that the students of Central City will not stop until they Crush Lusher.



CRUSH LUSHER:

INVESTING STUDENTS IN SOMETHING BIGGER THAN THEMSELVES

The color orange and, more specifically, the Crush can itself has become a symbol of excellence and a call to action for all my students.

Drinking Crush orange soda makes you better at math. It's absolutely true.

My 8th graders students drink Crush during every quiz, regional benchmark exam, and standardized test. I can tell when the test gets difficult because they all start taking bigger sips.

A visitor once inquired about the rules in my class. One student said, "Crush Crush Crush or get crushed," and then turned back to her work.

During class, if a student gets a few questions wrong, he or she is sent to drink Orange Crush-colored water from the water cooler. The student drinks one cup and, as if by magic, he or she never gets a question wrong for the remainder of class.

One day, Franquell brought a can of grape Crush, not orange, to morning homeroom. I stopped my announcements and said, "Franquell, you know that only the Orange Crush bestows magic math powers, right?" She sighed and said, "Mr. Irish, the corner store ran out. They always run out of the orange kind. Kids are buying it all up. They can't keep it in stock they said."

The obsession with Orange Crush is rooted in my students' desire to crush every low expectation prescribed to them and rise up to determine their own futures. Yes, there is an element of silliness. After all, I dress up in an orange "Dumb and Dumber" tuxedo and pass out Crush and take a team picture before a test.

But the color orange and, more specifically, the Crush can itself has become a symbol of excellence and a call to action for all my students. There is a mission attached to drinking orange soda that Franquell and the rest of my students come to believe in so strongly it becomes part of their identity.

Here is my key message to teachers: Investing students in rewards like candy or free time is not enough. Investing

students in you as their fun and understanding teacher is not enough. Even investing students in the content is only part of it. In order to truly have a transformational classroom, students need to be a part of something bigger than themselves. Here is how we do that.

We Set a Higher Bar

In Louisiana, 8th grade students take a high stakes test called the LEAP. There are five possible scores: Advanced (≈ 94 percent correct), Mastery (≈ 88 percent), Basic (≈ 60 percent), Approaching Basic (≈ 50 percent), and Unsatisfactory (less than ≈ 49 percent). Students need to get Basic on the math test and Approaching Basic on the ELA test, or vice versa, in order to pass on to 9th grade and to high school. So, one of my responsibilities as an 8th grade math teacher is to guarantee that all my students score at least a Basic on the LEAP.

However, as I discovered, only ensuring students pass and go to high school is unacceptable.

For the four years I've been at KIPP Central City, the culture amongst students is jubilation at passing to the next grade. They perceive a Basic score as a triumph and happily go into summer knowing they've passed while some of their peers did not. However, an article published in *The Times-Picayune* three years ago documented a study correlating 8th grade LEAP scores with ACT scores.¹ On the first day of school, my students and I read the article together and discuss the dire implications of receiving a score of Basic.

The article states that students who scored a Basic on the 8th grade math LEAP averaged a 18-19 on the ACT when they took the ACT three years later. For students to qualify for a scholarship that offers free tuition to in-state universities, they must score at least a 20 on the ACT. So even though scoring a Basic on the LEAP constitutes a passing grade, it does not put students on a path to college. The bar is too low.

In order for each of my students to be prepared for college, everyone must score Mastery or Advanced on the LEAP. There is no other option, especially for the students I teach and what they are up against.

¹Carr, Sarah. "Meaning of LEAP scores a mystery to most Louisiana parents." *The Times-Picayune*, July 6, 2010.

Basic is not good enough. We must CRUSH LUSHER.

My students come from a neighborhood in New Orleans called Central City, where the average household income is around \$15,000 per year. It is a notoriously crime-ridden neighborhood in a city with the nation's highest per capita murder rate, and has never had top-performing schools.

Two miles away from my school is Lusher Charter School, a selective-admission school that consistently ranks among the best schools in the state because almost all students score Mastery or Advanced on the LEAP. Most Lusher 8th grade students go on to attend top high schools and colleges. So I set a new bar. Basic is not good enough. We must CRUSH LUSHER.

I lead my class on a mission to Crush Lusher from day one. The goal of our conversation the first day is to expose the fallacy of the old paradigm ("Passing is okay") and the necessity of creating a new one ("Advanced is mine. I'm going to college. Let's Crush Lusher!"). I create tangible opposition (Lusher) and tangible reward (I can be on the path to getting free tuition to college), and students start believing that they can change the trajectory of their lives in my class. They are building a future, and it starts with Crushing Lusher.

Yet Crush Lusher is more than an individual pursuit for every student to achieve Mastery or Advanced; the real intention of Crush Lusher is for an entire class and school from Central City, an open enrollment school, to surpass a selective admission school like Lusher. This has never been done.

To successfully "Crush Lusher" would be a watershed moment for New Orleans education. I tell my students that this is their civil rights mission: to show everyone that, when given access to a great education, they can change the history of their city and prove what is possible for all students that come after them.

No matter where you teach, you too must find your "Lusher." You're the one who sets the bar and it must always be raised higher.

Branding Crush Lusher

Delivering a big speech on the first day is not enough. The message can't be like that poster from the teacher store that hangs in the corner and is never mentioned. The mission has to stick. It has to be at the forefront of students' minds at all times. So, I create visual and verbal anchors: a rally cry like "Crush Lusher" and branded symbols like the Crush can and by proxy, the color orange.

I do this because kids are bombarded with brands. They can draw what an X-Box symbol looks like and they know the font of the Twitter logo. A teacher must make learning and achievement equally cool to buy into. It must be as ever-present and ingrained in students' minds as the Nike Swoosh or the Apple symbol. In class, the Crush imagery is ubiquitous and kids are constantly reminded of our mission.

We Discuss the Values Needed to Crush Lusher

I imagined the ideal student, a true Crusher, who would score Mastery or Advanced on the LEAP. Well, I thought, true Crushers must not give up on hard problems (grit). True Crushers must help each other and work in teams and groups (team and family). True Crushers must be meticulous in showing work and correcting mistakes, and strive to get every question correct (excellence). These values – grit, team and family, and excellence – are three of our KIPP Central City school values, and the three pillars of success to Crushing Lusher.

At the beginning of the school year, I teach explicit lessons on each of the values. I introduce each value by (A) showing video of popular figures demonstrating the values and/or (B) telling anecdotes of past students or celebrities using the value and finding success and/or (C) giving a demonstration.

I begin the grit lesson by holding a superball and an egg. I say, "Are you a superball or an egg?"

For example, I begin the grit lesson by holding a superball and an egg. I say, "Are you a superball or an egg? What happens when a superball hits an obstacle?"

"It bounces back harder."

I throw it against the side wall and catch it a few times. "Yes, so what happens when an egg hits an obstacle?"

"It goes splat!"

"Yes." Then I throw the egg against the side wall.²

Next, I detail specific behaviors of "superball people" - they work through challenges, never give up, and try a multitude of strategies – and explain why each student must be a "superball person" in order to Crush Lusher: the LEAP test has difficult problems and if you are not practicing and getting them correct you cannot get Mastery or Advanced.

When students demonstrate these values in real time in class, they are rewarded with positive praise and Crush. This fosters

²I give the first row garbage bag ponchos before I begin as part of the hook. It's like a Gallagher comedy show.

the bridge between the extrinsic (the Crush Orange soda) and the intrinsic (the behaviors and mindset necessary to Crush Lusher).

For example, if a student helps his or her neighbor understand a concept, they both get Crush. If a student has perfect homework, he or she gets Crush. The message, explained to the entire class as I'm passing out a Crush can, is that perfect homework relates to our value of excellence and true Crushers who exemplify excellence are on two paths: (1) to change the perception of education in New Orleans; and (2) to go college to realize their dreams.

I explicitly make the connection between perfect homework, our class values, and our big goal. This helps students realize that small habits matter because they are a means to a bigger end. It makes students more likely to have perfect homework or walk in straight lines or sit up in class because not only do they earn Crush, they connect the Crush to values that are essential to achieving our big goal.

With repeated messaging and reinforcement, students begin to internalize the values and habits of success. They self-monitor more often and reminders lessen and instruction time increases. By the end of the year, the Crush can is an artifact that represents a mindset of "I am excellent. I can show grit through every difficult problem. My teammates are here to help and support me. I can Crush Lusher."

The Secret to How This Works

The overarching reason why this works lies in why I am a teacher in Central City. I truly believe that my students can and will Crush Lusher. It is the destiny they deserve.

Students realize when I talk about Crushing Lusher, I mean it. Every message throughout class is infused with Jon Saphier's three key messages: (1) This is important; (2) You can do it with effective effort; and (3) I will not give up on you. I constantly tell my students, "I care about you. I care about your education. I will explain this material as many times as possible until everyone masters it. We are all in this together. If one of you fails, we all fail. I fail too."

I believe in the students and they believe that, in my class, if they work hard, they can reach their goals. This underlying connection is the real reason why this investment strategy works. Crush is simply the conduit.

Our Secondary Theme: Football

To further reinforce the values of the collective mission to Crush Lusher, I adopted a secondary theme of football. The Saints are a symbol of hope in New Orleans and their pursuit of a Super Bowl championship captivates almost everyone in the city. So we are the KIPP Central City Lusher Crushers who play in Irish stadium (my last name is Irish).³

Each part of class adopts the complimentary theme of football. The Do Now becomes the Kick Off, the Mad Minute becomes the Blitz, the Introduction to New Material becomes 1st down, Guided practice becomes 2nd down, Independent Practice becomes 3rd down, the Summarizer⁴ becomes the Huddle before our Exit Quiz (4th and Inches)⁵, and homework is the Drills. Tests become Bowl Games⁶ and the LEAP becomes the Lusher Bowl.

Tracking Our Progress Towards Crushing Lusher

On the road to the Lusher Bowl, students must know if they are on track to win and Crush Lusher. They need consistent, actionable feedback and remediation daily. So, I employ three visible trackers: one for the grade, one for each homeroom, and one for exemplary individuals.

To track progress as a grade, I post Lusher's LEAP scores at the front of the room (which are percentages of students scoring at the Advanced, Mastery, Basic, Approaching Basic, and Unsatisfactory levels). I break down the results from each Bowl Game (test) into those achievement level percentages and display our Bowl Game scores vs. Lusher's LEAP scores.

I teach the students to evaluate their scores and set actionable goals for the next test. Students fill out graphic organizers and share. For example, Travilique: "I got a Basic, but I need to get a Mastery next time. I need to ask more questions in class." Or Devin: "I got an Advanced on the Bowl game, but my partner got an Approaching Basic. I need to make sure I'm watching and helping him when we are doing 2nd down and 3rd down."

This activity transfers ownership of learning from myself, the teacher, to the students. When analyzing data, students are faced with critical feedback on their progress and must build a sense of personal accountability to continued progress towards the goal.

³I know what you are thinking. What about that student in the back who doesn't like football? No one has ever voiced displeasure with the football theme and metaphors before. If anything, the novelty of it is interesting, I guess.

⁴Studies have shown that students remember the most from the first and last five minutes of class. Retention also increases when students are forced to synthesize their learning and communicate it verbally or in writing. Do a summarizer every day.

⁵Message of 4th and Inches/Exit Quiz: "We have worked hard the entire class and now we are one inch away from our goal of scoring a touchdown and winning the game. Together we all need to score mastery for that final push over the goal line."

⁶Bowl games/Test are all headed with unit titles such as: "Lusher Crushers vs. Rational Numbers," "Lusher Crushers vs. Probability," etc.



Crush is the visual and verbal anchor of Jamie's classroom culture.

Every 4th and Inches (exit ticket) is tracked on a scoreboard. Each homeroom has their score posted to encourage competition between classes. When students enter class, I direct their attention to how previous classes performed on the exit ticket: "Uh Oh, Columbia scored 89 percent on the 4th and Inches today. What are you going to do, Iowa?" The class with the highest average percentage on their 4th and Inches throughout the week is the winner. The class with the best wins and loss record throughout the month earns Crush as a reward for their (explicitly messaged again) excellence, grit, and team and family.

This activity transfers ownership of learning from myself, the teacher, to the students.

In the back of the classroom is a board titled "Heisman Hopefuls" with three subheadings: "All-American," "All-State," and "All-City." Students who score 100 percent on an assessment get their names posted underneath "All-American."

I tell the students: "I pull all my questions from the most rigorous materials available to any teacher across the country, so if you score 100 percent on one of my assessments, you are one of the most accomplished students in the nation. You are

an All-American." Students who score in the 90th percentile get their name under "All-State" (among the best students in the state) and those who score in the 80th percentile get their names under "All-City" (among the best students in the city).

Each tracking system must be in place to build investment and community towards the big goal. Students need to be celebrated for their growth and their excellence. But they also need to use the data to motivate themselves and each other to better performance on the next assessment. Devin, who consistently earns All-American honors, is responsible for getting someone not on the Heisman Hopeful board up there next time by tutoring him/her during lunch, sitting next to him/her in class and helping during partner and independent work. Destiny, who struggles, needs to feel confident that her hard work will manifest improvements, and that her teammates and I will ensure her success next time.

Once students devise their goals and next steps, they choose someone other than me to hold them accountable. We have frequent conversations about follow through on those next steps as we press on to the next Bowl Game and the Lusher Bowl.

THE LOCKER ROOM SPEECH

“All week long, teachers and friends have been asking me the same thing. They say, ‘Mr. Irish, what if your students don’t Crush Lusher? How are you going to tell them? Aren’t they going to be let down by this impossible goal?’ Why would all those people ask me that?”

“They don’t believe we can do it.”

“Yes, exactly. There are few people outside this room that believe we can Crush Lusher. But I believe and you believe. You know why?”

I then retrieve my three, three-inch binders full of worksheets and mad minutes and exit quizzes and tests (one copy each) that the students completed throughout the year. I stack the binders on a desk in front of me and then put a textbook next to it.

“You see. You have done three times as much work and worked three times as hard as any student in Louisiana. On every assessment you’ve taken, you have shown you have mastered every objective that will be on the LEAP. And while you were crushing assessments, you have exemplified excellence, grit, and team and family, all the necessary values to become a true Crusher.

You are the best students in the state. There is no doubt in my mind and there should be no doubt in yours. We have a goal to achieve tomorrow, and everyone is looking to you to crush it, even though they tell you it is impossible. Everyone is waiting for us to wake them up to the fact that if you have a number 2 pencil and you drink a lot of Crush you can achieve anything.

You know from Social Studies class that this country was founded upon a promise that all citizens would get an equal education, but you know that’s not true. Many of you came from schools or have siblings or

friends in schools where, for whatever reason, students don’t learn. You are at a school and in class where students learn and are taught by great teachers. But people lump you in with every other student in this city because you are from Central City. So, this is about more than a test.

Look around you. You go to a charter school. New Orleans is mostly made up of charter schools. Other cities with failing schools are looking at New Orleans to see if this model of having all these charter schools is the right solution. And KIPP Central City is the charter school these cities are all looking at because it is best. People in charge will see your test results and decide whether to build other schools like this in New Orleans and other cities across the nation. They are looking to see if crushing a school like Lusher really is possible. And it is. And you will do it because this is about your life and your future and your family and those younger ones in this building.

Do you want to be known as the first group of students who crushed Lusher and proved everyone wrong and are now on the path to college? Imagine not only what you can do with your own lives but what next year’s class will be able to do. Once this barrier is broken, the floodgates will open for other classes to do the same, not only at this school but at schools across the city, state, and the country. You are the chosen ones. The time is now. I love all of you. Now go Crush.”⁷

⁷Right after, K’Lynn says, “Mr. Irish, you should record your speeches.”

Sentimentality aside, this silver lining is not acceptable. Each time, upon receiving the test results, I know there is a gap between our school and Lusher, and we did not close it.

Aftermath of Not Crushing Lusher

Each year, when the scores come back the last week of school, the students ask, “Mr. Irish, did we Crush Lusher?” The irony is my students haven’t Crushed Lusher yet. The last two years, our scores fell short. I put Lusher’s LEAP scores on the board and our scores underneath, and there is a palpable sense of disappointment in class. Students cry. Then I show the students how they are closing the gap between Central City and other selective admission and esteemed open enrollment schools around the state (see Fig. 1).

I ask, “Was it worth it to try to Crush Lusher even though it didn’t happen this year?” Students share their thoughts with their partners. The reflections in each class highlight the same realization that they would not have worked as hard, learned as much, or had as much fun without trying to Crush Lusher.

This is my most bittersweet moment as a teacher. We have not reached our goal and not every student is on the path to college. However, my hope is that all students forever embody

the values and mindset of a Crusher. And when former students return to my class in their high school uniforms drinking Crush, maybe they have.

Sentimentality aside, this silver lining is not acceptable. Each time, upon receiving the test results, I know there is a gap between our school and Lusher, and we did not close it. I vow each summer to improve my investment strategy and teaching repertoire. I read *The Skillful Teacher* again. I seek out advice from colleagues. I teach new teachNOLA teachers, which helps me examine my own pedagogical method. I research how to better implement transference, explore-based learning, blended learning, and problem solving into my class for next year.

My goal is to become the greatest teacher of all time because that is what my students deserve and what will ensure that every student has a transformational experience in my class. There is so much to learn and incorporate that I feel I’m only at 50 percent of what I can do for my students in my classroom.

A former 8th grader came by the other day with her mother to enroll her sibling in school, a small fifth grader. The parent asked me, “Hey Mr. Irish, did we Crush Lusher?” I thought about what to say to her and with a tone of shame said, “No.” She said, looking at her kids, “Well are you going to crush them next year?”

“We have to,” I said.

FIGURE 1: RANKING OF STATEWIDE 8TH GRADE LEAP SCORES

School Name	School Performance Score: 8th Grade Math	Students Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch
Patrick F. Taylor Science & Technology Academy	148.5	37%
Lusher Charter School	144.5	28%
Haynes Academy School for Advanced Studies	144.5	23%
Lake Forest Elementary Charter School	134.5	86%
L.W. Ruppel Academy for Advanced Studies	127.0	49%
Prairieville Middle School	126.0	25%
Natchitoches Magnet School	124.5	51%
Caddo Parish Middle Magnet School	122.0	20%
Sherwood Middle Academic Academy	118.0	56%
KIPP Central City Academy	118.0	95%

Source: LEAP 8th Grade Math School Performance Score and Student Enrollment data for SY 2010-11, Louisiana Department of Education



LESLIE ROSS

9th GRADE BIOLOGY

Ben L. Smith High School

Greensboro, NC

When Leslie Ross first heard of the Fishman Prize, she was scanning through a school newsletter in hopes of finding yet another grant that would allow her to buy lab equipment for her biology classroom at Ben L. Smith High School in Greensboro, NC, where basic supplies like beakers too often feel like luxuries.

Leslie has spent her entire 15-year career teaching in Greensboro, actively seeking out schools where the students need her most. Her current school is one of the nine lowest-performing schools in the county, yet in 2011, Leslie's biology students outscored other students on district-wide assessments by more than 25 percentage points on average. All told, 100 percent of her students passed their state-mandated end of course exams despite data from the state's predictive model suggesting that about a third would not.

We are in awe of Leslie, both as a person and an educator. Behind her reserved demeanor is extraordinary focus and resolve. When she says she believes every student can succeed, it isn't lip service. She fully intends to reach every single student in her class. And she does, with quiet determination. The greater the challenge, the happier it makes her. For all of us, there is a subject that was more difficult than the others - the one we just didn't get. We wish we were lucky enough to have biology be that subject, and to be assigned to Ms. Ross's class at Ben L. Smith High School.

In talking about her key to success, Leslie says, "If they say it can't be done, I sure would like to be the person to do it." In Leslie's paper "**Here We Grow Again,**" she describes how she imparts that same attitude in her students, carefully building a culture of teamwork and competition and investing them in a highly rigorous biology course in which not just some but 100 percent of her students succeed.



HERE WE GROW AGAIN:

BUILDING A WINNING TEAM IN THE CLASSROOM

*I need every one of you to be successful.
Can you help me?*

“Hey, can I get my schedule changed?” asks Fabian. “I think I’m in the wrong class. Did you say this is an Honors class?”

These are some of the first reactions I get as I begin laying out my expectations for my students. In my Honors Earth/Environmental Science course, every student is required to make an A or B to move on to the more prestigious Honors Biology course in the Spring Semester.

I ask them quite simply if they are up to the challenge. “Who thinks they are capable of making an A or B in the course?”

“I’ve got this, I’m an A student,” one student blurts out.

“Yes,” I say, refusing to take comfort in their confidence, “but can you help someone else get it, too? It’s not enough that you are successful. I need every one of you to be successful. Can you help me?”

Other students admit their uncertainty. It may necessitate more work than they are accustomed to doing.

“What if you are just lazy?” one student asks.

I respond with a smile, “Laziness is just a bad habit. We’ll break that!”

But not all students instantly believe or buy in. Chatter begins to well up and boil over. Markevon mumbles under his breath, “She stupid, I know I ain’t gonna make an A. I failed science last year.” Shaking his head in disbelief, he makes brief eye contact to be sure that I’ve heard.

This is my cue. As students are talking, I walk over to him, gently nudge him and whisper, “I will personally make sure you pass with at least a B.” He just smiles, which tells me that he is one step closer to believing it’s possible.

Students often decide whether or not they are going to like me during these initial conversations. I am always convinced that everyone will eventually come on board, but not always at the same time. It takes time to develop trust in the classroom setting. My goal is to earn the trust of every student eventually, but you can’t rush trust.

Now that we are talking, I remind them that they are in the presence of an awfully good teacher and I have the skills and expertise to take them to new heights if only they learn to trust me and each other. I explain that success is really easy in my carefully constructed “All-You-Have-To-Do-Is” speech.

I keep it simple: “All you have to do is have good attendance, make a noble attempt to complete all assignments, actively participate in all activities, and work as a team.”

I ask again, “Who thinks they are capable of making an A or B in this course?” If any students hesitate to raise their hands, I go a step further and I tell them that I know they can come to school most days (missing no more than three days in a quarter) because it is required to pass any course. With that, a few more students join in. But I am not done.

I continue, “I know you can try to answer every question on your assignments because I will personally help you.”

“Well, what if I still get every answer wrong?” asks Marcy.

“You get some credit for trying.”

More hands rise. The confidence of just a few students seems to spread like wildfire throughout the room as more students begin to affirm that they, too, are capable of accomplishing great things.

I push further. “I know you all can ask or answer questions to help everyone understand because I will guide you through the process. I know you can help someone else who needs your assistance because that is what teammates do. Who is willing to become part of this amazing team?”

I go on to explain that if they are willing to simply try to do those things they have what it takes to continue and be successful not just in this class, but in all classes.

Keneisha interjects, “What if I do all of that, and I still fail?”

“That’s never happened!” I assure her. “If you do all that I ask, then you won’t fail.” To date, no one has ever opted out of the class.

These early conversations are just the beginning of an ongoing effort to transform a classroom of individual students into a unified team that succeeds together. Over the years, I've found that spirit of team matters more than just about anything else. This is how I build it.

I work to clearly establish the expectation that all students will score an A/B in the course – that nothing less is acceptable.

Starting Strong

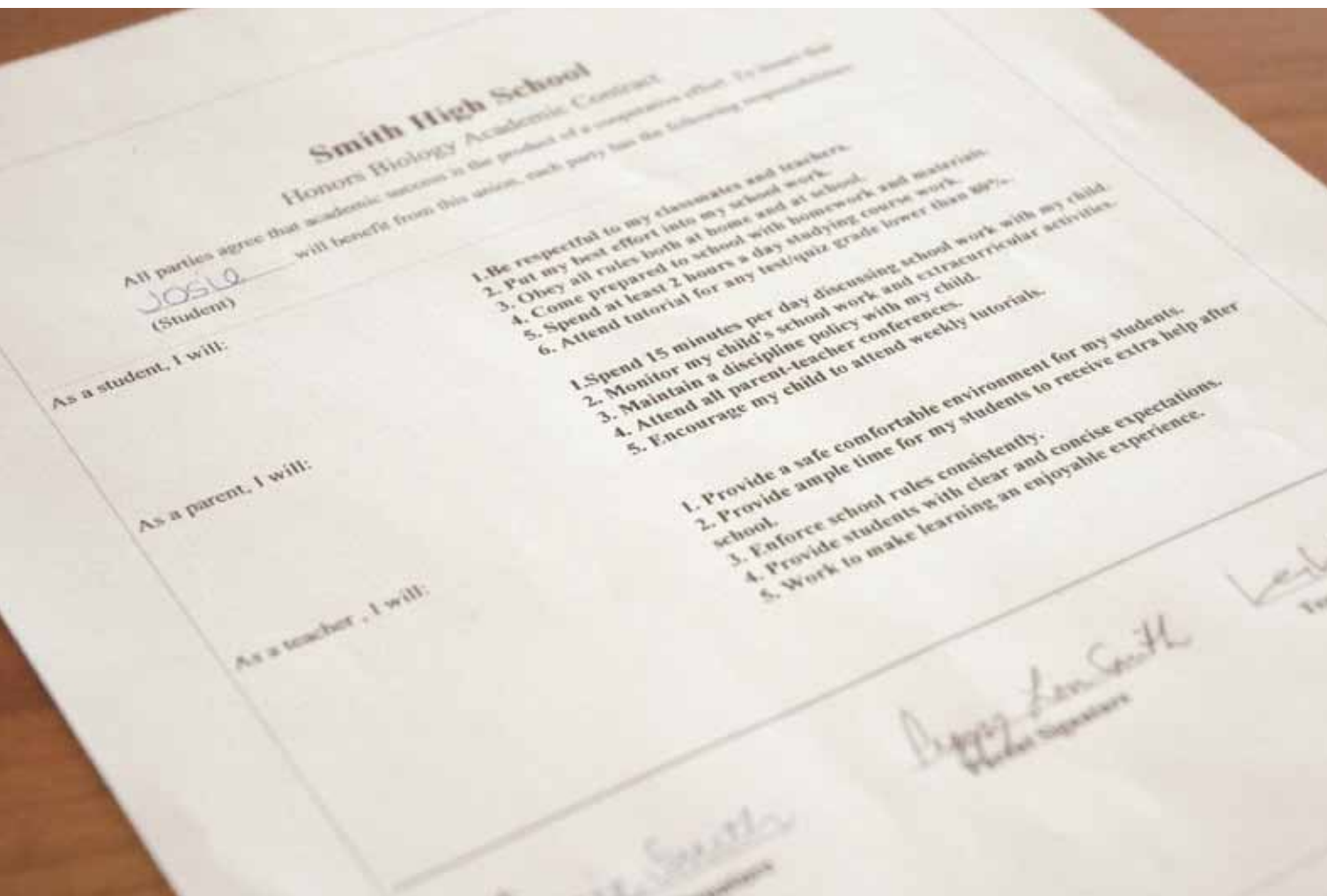
At the start of the year, my job is to build my students' confidence while maintaining the rigor of the material. Some students admit that they have never made an A or B grade in any course. I need to remove their reservations.

The process starts with that first-day conversation, but I also have other strategies. For example, I make certain that the initial assignments are tasks that all students can perform successfully. The first three to four assignments are graded

based on completion and generally assess prior knowledge. Students are now able to begin the course with a strong average and a running start. As assignments become more rigorous, they have these grades to cushion the grade book and ensure greater success down the road.

At the same time, I begin a set of delicate negotiations with students and parents. Those negotiations are often so subtle that they go unnoticed. In small ways and large, I work to clearly establish the expectation that all students will score an A/B in the course – that nothing less is acceptable.

To ensure that everyone in my class clearly understands my expectations, I have all students sign an academic contract at the beginning of the biology course. The contract outlines what they will do to ensure their success. This includes participation in class, required attendance, and mandatory weekly tutorials if they score less than 85 percent on any major quiz or test. Parents also sign the contract, stating that they will support and encourage their student, review notes, attend conferences, and support me as the teacher. I sign the contract too, stating



Sample academic contract

that I will provide a safe, nurturing learning environment, work to ensure the success of each child, keep parents informed of progress, and offer tutorials.

This document helps keep students, parents, and myself on track. It clearly defines each stakeholder's role and extends the classroom culture to the home front. Most importantly, it lets parents know they play an integral role in their child's success. The home-school partnership must be developed as part of the class culture. Even parents and guardians are part of our team.

Getting to Know the Team

The process for building an effective team begins with putting ourselves out there for one another. We need to let down our guard. The first step is called Me Bags.

A Me Bag is simply a brown paper lunch bag with a small note attached that reads... My Favorite Snack, Picture of Someone Important To Me, Something I Collect, Something I Found, Something I Enjoy Doing, and Something No One Knows About Me. Students put one item in the bag for each topic.

I am the first to go, deliberately modeling the expectation for sharing a Me Bag. As each item is revealed I share an important fact or the story associated with it. I show a small light bulb and explain my fear of the dark is something no one knows about me. I pass around the corn-cob pipe that I found in my Grandpa's attic when I bought his old house from the city, before they could demolish it. Students learn who I am and what is important to me.

As they present their own "Me Bags" to the class, I make notes about each student based on their presentations, referencing the positive things they share as often as I can to validate just how important they are to me. They learn quickly that I listen to what they say and it truly matters – so much so that I never forget.

Luis reveals a wrinkled picture of an older lady wearing traditional South American attire – his grandmother who he hasn't seen in more than ten years because he can't return home due to his undocumented status. "You remembered my grandma?" he asks later in the year when we made a postcard with his "Highest Benchmark Average" picture on it to send to her.

"How could I forget her? She was beautiful!"

Through the Me Bag activity, I learned that Marcy collects Smurfs. She had all of them except the chef so when I found

him, weeks later, in my Happy Meal, I saved him and delivered him to her with the enthusiasm of a Publisher's Clearing House Prize. She screamed, ran to me and grabbed the one Smurf who would complete her collection.

Additionally, I take a picture of each student and put it on a bulletin board so that all students can start to put names to the faces and if someone does something great in First Period (Cohort 1), I can point them out on the board and now the entire team knows who they are.

The notion that you are your Brother's Keeper resonates with the students.

Building Teamwork through Study Buddies

Now that everyone in the class knows something about each other, I ask them to write the names of two people whom they'd like to have as a Study Buddy.¹ Study Buddies work together regularly, building on each other's strengths and weaknesses.

Study Buddies are seated next to each other in class. They exchange phone numbers, share materials, compete for prizes and awards, and serve as personal cheerleaders for each other. I encourage them to share their test scores and overall progress.

A quick high-five or chest bump always indicates that both buddies are on track and satisfied with each other's work. They are responsible for each other's success. I often hear buddies encouraging each other with a firm "Make sure you study, call me if you need help or meet me at lunch and we can quiz each other." They also push each other. "If you don't do your share of the work, I will make sure Mrs. Ross knows that you didn't help!"

I take a very firm stance on team effort from buddies. I tell them quite frankly, "If you score 100 on your test and your partner fails, you have collectively failed."

The notion that you are your Brother's Keeper resonates with the students. Strong students tutor their partners who may struggle, and buddies call each other to make sure assignments are completed by the assigned due dates. They know when and why their partners are absent and prepare make up packets for each other. They hold each other accountable in ways that I cannot. From this evolves a quiet spirit of competition between study buddy groups.

¹Occasionally, students will express a strong desire not to have to work with an assigned partner. When students share that they don't like a particular partner, I explain to them that they must work together until they reach some common ground and can work together successfully. As students begin to show they are truly committed to trying to resolve differences, they actually form more lasting bonds – so much so that I rarely have to assign new buddies.

Lab Groups, Class Cohorts, and Friendly Competition

As relationships between buddies are growing, I merge the pairs together to form more cohesive lab groups. In each class there are 4–6 lab groups. Collectively, those lab groups form a Cohort. This merger increases their network and capacity for learning from their peers. Lab groups work to complete research projects, inquiry-based labs, and team projects.

These more diverse groups compete with each other, expanding the level of competition. While students are learning to lean on each other, take an active role in their learning, and work to meet goals, I begin to increase the level of competition by introducing whole class incentives.

Students learn to prepare for and take assessments and calculate their class averages. I use their class average to compare them to the other cohorts. The cohort with the highest average earns ice cream parties, candy treats, lunch with the teacher, Friday Movie incentives, and bragging rights. The notion that your success will always be acknowledged and rewarded resonates with students.

Cohort averages are posted in class using large bar graphs with a heading that reads, Here We Grow Again. Students flock to our classroom the day after an assessment, checking the data charts to see how their cohort compares. “We did it! We earned the prize!” Their emotions range from excitement to extreme disappointment as they congratulate winners and begin to develop strategies to ensure future success. “If we can just get everyone in our class to come to school, our scores will improve,” suggests Marcy.

In addition to assessment data, cohorts can earn incentives for class attendance, homework participation, overall team effort, and tutorial participation. As each cohort earns daily points for these activities, students quickly learn that their cohort doesn’t have to be the best in academics; they simply have to be committed to striving for excellence. As a result, we also see improved school attendance, greater participation in afterschool tutorials, better homework completion, and students who are eager to participate in class.

An incredible dynamic emerges as no one wants to be the weak link. Students apologize to their teammates for being absent from school, whisper to a partner that they need assistance when they realize that they have the lowest score, and volunteer to attend tutorial sessions to assure their teammates that they are indeed committed. Despite intense competition, students buy into the fact that we are in this together. The spirit of team runs rampant.

Students buy into the fact that we are in this together. The spirit of team runs rampant.

Here We Grow Again

From day one, I establish high expectations in my course – not just for individual students, but for the entire class. Over the years, I’ve found that it is vital to take the extra time to develop this team culture. Our collective success hinges on it. Students grow to realize that every member of their team experienced measurable success and they each played an integral role in that accomplishment.

When Markevon finished the biology course with an A average and one of the highest EOC scores, he hugged me and said, “I couldn’t have done this without you.” He then faced his classmates and shouted, “You know what, I couldn’t have done this without all of y’all!”

In addition to mastering content, they’ve learned that none of us is as great as all of us. So as I close out one year and begin another, I say to myself, “Here we grow again.”



KATIE LYONS

6th–8th GRADE LITERACY & SOCIAL STUDIES

National Teachers Academy

Chicago, IL

Since 2008, Katie Lyons has taught middle school students and coached new teachers at National Teachers Academy, a 97 percent low-income school near Chicago's Chinatown neighborhood.

Her teaching career began in 2005 with DC Public Schools, where she won Ward 5's "Outstanding Teacher of the Year" award after just her second year as a DC Teaching Fellow. Soon after, she took on mentorship positions in addition to her work teaching students. By the time Katie moved to Chicago, she had developed a passion for teaching and for preparing new teachers to be effective in high-need schools.

Katie literally goes the extra mile for her students; in 2011, after winning a fellowship to explore the ancient cultures of Mexico, she took her students along virtually through daily video lessons, blog posts and photographs of her journey. Last year, her students achieved an average of two years of growth in reading proficiency and she was honored as a "Teacher of Distinction" by the Golden Apple Foundation.

We love Katie because her appetite for becoming a better teacher is bottomless. She absorbs new techniques constantly and shares them with new teachers whom she is mentoring. As far as we can tell, her only frustration seems to be running out of fresh problems to solve. She turns Chicago's Chinatown neighborhood into the center of the world and hands her students the key.

In her paper, "**You Are Here**," Katie describes how she engages students in rigorous historical material by connecting it to their own lives and the rich, diverse neighborhood around them. She blurs the lines between past and present, distant and local. Her students love social studies because they are learning their own story whenever they are learning the story of others.



“YOU ARE HERE”:

INSPIRING CURIOSITY BY MAKING CONTENT PERSONAL

I get my students hooked by showing them that history is not finished and helping them locate themselves within it.

It’s 10 AM on a cold December morning, but the 125 young researchers exploring the Chicago History Museum aren’t worried about the weather. They have been challenged to identify a topic for their inquiry-based research project. As they enter the first exhibit, many immediately jump aboard an ‘L’ car while others head over to lounge in a recreation of an historic Chicago blues club. Several head over to the gallery, City in Crisis, eager to narrow down their topic.

“Have you ever heard of the Haymarket Riot? I’m totally going to research that topic.”

“That’s interesting, but I’m more into learning about the 1919 Race Riots or maybe what happened during the Eastland Disaster. I really can’t decide!”

Their enthusiasm is overwhelming. For all but 1 of the 125 students, this is their first time at the Museum. It’s also the first time most of them have ever completed a major research project. But despite the fact that they have a limited personal understanding of the process, they are truly engaging in that crucial first step of curiosity and exploration. They are each finding their own way in.

One student in particular spends her whole day reading all of the exhibits in the Social Activism gallery. When I ask her about her topic choice, Miracle tells me that she would like to conduct research on the Illinois Mothers’ Pension Fund, an extremely challenging topic for a 6th grader. Miracle adds that she is interested in learning more about how Julia Lathrop helped provide aid for women and children.

For Miracle, this story was not merely historical but personal as well. Her mom is raising her and her brother and sister by herself with government assistance. It is at this moment that Miracle reaffirmed for me the importance of providing opportunities for students to see how history is relevant to their real life experiences today.

But how did my students like Miracle get to this level of historical curiosity? It was only by making history personal for my students, offering them many different ways to connect to the content and validating their voices from the very beginning of the year. As the maps in the museum say, “You are here.” I get my students hooked by showing them that history is not finished and by helping them locate themselves within it.

Make Students’ Personal Stories Matter

It’s hard to get students curious about history – or any subject – when it seems so distant and disconnected from their daily lives. That’s why I start each year with an exercise that encourages my students to think about how their own experiences have shaped their perspectives. I do this by asking them to develop personal narratives around a broad central question such as, “What issues affect adolescents today?”

My students reflect on their own experiences and narrow down the issue that they find most relevant and important to them. Brenda focused on the issue of family struggles because she has, “A daddy that left me behind.” Brittney, a quieter student who struggles with low self-esteem, chose the issue of peer pressure, asking, “Why should I believe that you are better than me because you smoke and drink, don’t we bleed the same red blood?” And Roderick chose to focus on unsafe communities and gang violence because of his firsthand experiences and frustration with “the danger in the streets that stops kids from growing up and changing the world and being someone.”

Through this exercise, I help my students see themselves as part of a larger world and understand that their personal stories are important. It enhances their sense of self and motivates them to take action towards changing the issues that affect them.

I further validate my students’ stories by encouraging them to create a product that showcases their narrative; for example, by transforming their written narratives into videos that they show to their peers. This public audience strengthens students’ sense of having a voice and an ability to influence their world, which helps transform their understanding of “history” from a static series of events to an active, social concept in which they play an integral role.

Show Them What's Possible

Just as my beginning of the year personal narrative unit focuses on bridging the gap between my students' life experiences and the larger social and historical issues that shape those experiences, I consistently reinforce their sense of possibility by showing them concrete examples of former students' work. This way, my students build confidence in seeing how other kids like them have been able to illustrate their learning and create impressive projects. It also opens up their options, giving them a variety of ways to get into the content.

This public audience strengthens students' sense of having a voice and an ability to influence their world, which helps transform their understanding of "history" from a static series of events to an active, social concept in which they play an integral role.

When I share examples of student work, my students are still not completely aware of the process but they realize that success is attainable and they know what a final product looks like. For example, before Miracle and the rest of my students explored the Chicago History Museum, I played student-produced documentaries and performances, displayed exhibits that former students developed, navigated student-created websites with my students, and shared papers that students had authored.

Each one of my students was exposed to these five mediums with the understanding that they too would be responsible for creating a similar product after an intensive research process. While viewing the other students' products, they gained a sense of possibility. They got excited to pick the medium that they would use to display their final product and they began using the other students' examples as models for their own work. And when we traveled to the Museum, my students looked at the exhibits and watched the videos in the galleries through a producer's lens – they were not only eager to learn about the content but they were excited to observe more examples that they could possibly replicate in their own final product.

Bring Students Close to the Content

Making content personal and creating a sense of possibility in my classroom are both ways that I strive to get my students engaged and eager to learn. I also strive to make history real and immediate by giving them as much firsthand exposure to it as I can. I transform my students' thinking about what it

means to study history by helping them understand that it's more than reading out of a textbook; it is the active process of conducting research, analyzing evidence, evaluating multiple perspectives, and developing their own interpretations.

The message to my students is that history is a part of their story, and the way that they interpret historical content is through the personal lens of their unique life experiences. To this end, I provide a variety of source material for each topic we study and then I allow them to dig into it in an unfiltered way. I try to give them a sense of exploration and discovery.

For example, when exploring the theme of a person's "universe of obligation" and how it relates to the Holocaust, my students analyzed a variety of documents including a Proclamation that explained what would happen to non-Jews who helped Jews, a photograph of what happened to a non-Jew who sold merchandise to a Jew, and survivors' and rescuers' testimonies.

In facing the source materials, my students were forced to grapple with the difficult concept of how their personal value system and universe of obligation would have contributed to their own choice of action during this time. We then connected this larger concept to personal issues shared during the unit on personal narratives such as whether it is just to take on the role of bystander to the gang issues in their own neighborhoods. By exposing my students to historical content and then by making it personal, I enable them to see how their own story is interconnected with "history."

By exposing my students to historical content and then by making it personal, I enable them to see how their own story is interconnected with "history."

I also bring my students close to the content by virtually bringing the content to them. During a research fellowship, I traveled throughout central and coastal Mexico and explored the ancient cultures of the Nahua, Aztec, Olmec, Toltec, and Mayan civilizations. At each historical site and museum I visited, I recorded an educational video that I uploaded to my blog (katielyonsnta.wordpress.com).

My students virtually traveled the path I took by watching my videos, reading my blog posts, and working in class to analyze nonfiction sources about the content. They also participated in online discussions by responding to my blog posts and those of their classmates.

By participating in this process, they not only sharpened their analytic and evaluative skills but also helped to produce a secondary work of history in the form of a collective blog. They were able to see how they could publically contribute to an academic discussion and, because of their newly obtained content knowledge, have a voice in conversations about historical content.

Some of the most authentic learning took place when my students viewed my videos and responded with questions about the content that demonstrated their genuine curiosity with the subject. After viewing a video that I made while in Palenque, Donesha was enthralled with the fact that the city, after 900 CE, was abandoned and overgrown. She wanted to know more about how the archaeologists uncovered the ancient sculptures and temples. Donesha was so excited in her quest for knowledge that she conducted her own research online to learn more about the work of archaeologists.



Shayla and Kaela at the South Side Community Art Center.

Another student, Mahogany, who loves to dance, wanted to know more about the origins of Ballet Folklorico after watching a video I took in Veracruz. She commented, “their culture and dances are different from what I see with hip hop and R&B artists, but their style is mature and wonderful.” Mahogany then set off to conduct research about whether this type of traditional dance has influenced modern dance.

These types of personal connections with the content provided the hook for my students. They have a strong desire to learn more about topics that they view as relevant to their own lives. My job is to provide a variety of high quality sources so that my students can satisfy their curiosity while also being exposed to historical content.

We highlight the research “find of the week” and celebrate a student(s) who finds an obscure fact or a piece of evidence that really influences the path of their project.

Celebrate the Process

Whether my students are analyzing several documents and using their interpretations to debate the concept of justice or whether they are engaging in historical research, they understand that there is as much value to the process of learning as there is with the product of it. At first, this is a challenging concept for them to understand but there are steps that I take to facilitate this.

For example, during difficult units that focus on project-based learning, such as my students’ research on their history project, I publicly celebrate the small successes throughout the process. In the classroom, we highlight the research “find of the week” and celebrate a student(s) who finds an obscure fact or a piece of evidence that really influences the path of their project. For example, when Kiara, who was extremely interested in WWII, came across an article about the Double V Campaign, she finally found a narrow focus for her project. This article became our “find of the week,” which celebrated Kiara’s research efforts and contributed a sense of excitement that was felt throughout the class.

Additionally, I post photographs both in the classroom and publicly in the hallway to draw attention to the process of learning. For example, Shayla and Kaela, who chose to research the South Side Community Art Center because of their own passion for performance art, spent hours at libraries and in the archives examining newspapers, photographs,

By letting them choose their own medium, the learning process ends as it began: organic, personal and self-motivated.

brochures, and invitations to fundraising events for the Art Center. I displayed photographs of them at the archives digging in with their sources and interviewing the Art Center's curator.

Not only do these celebrations of the learning process highlight the small successes along the way, but they place the students at the center of inspired learning in which they share their knowledge with each other. This reinforces the message that the process of learning and encouraging future learning is what matters, not just the outcome.

Keep Students Engaged through Public Accountability

I try to give my students an audience for their personal narrative at the beginning of the year, and again at the end of major projects when they are required to share their work publicly. When I first introduced the historical research project, I told the class that each student would publicly present their final product to an audience of peers and judges at the school-wide history fair.

This introduced a measure of accountability that was beyond the class and beyond me; they understood that they were conducting research and writing about the past for an authentic audience. It elevated the importance they placed on their project and helped to maintain their motivation throughout the learning process. The students were even more motivated once they learned that ten projects would advance from the school-wide history fair to the city-wide fair.

Just as I provided my students with the element of choice in picking their topic, I also maintained their investment with the research process by allowing them to choose from one of five ways to communicate their learning: website, exhibit, paper, documentary, or performance. By letting them choose their own medium, the learning process ends as it began: organic, personal and self-motivated.

Most students were excited by the opportunity to use technology to create their final presentations. Only about 10 percent of my students have access to computers at home, so being able to use computers in school to showcase their learning in an interactive way was both motivating to them – and a way for me to enhance their 21st century skills. But students were also motivated by the fact that the websites and

documentaries would be published and accessible to anyone with internet access. This authentic audience created a sense of engagement that made the website category the medium of choice.

The emphasis that I place on encouraging all students to showcase their learning in a public forum creates a classroom community where their voices are valued. Just as in-class and online discussions through my blog initially taught my students how to articulate their thinking, presenting and being able to justify their final product increased their investment and allowed me to place them at the center of learning.

Practicing Real Democracy

As Miracle's project emerged, she began to take on the voice of Julia Lathrop. In her final performance piece at the state History Fair in Springfield, Illinois, Miracle channeled the spirit of Lathrop, declaring, "We cannot help the world toward democracy if we despise democracy at home; and it is despised when mothers or children die needlessly. It is despised in the person of every child who is left to grow up ignorant, weak, unskilled, unhappy, no matter what his race or color." These words echoed the heart of the historical work that my students created and the reasons I'm drawn to teaching.

Real democracy in the classroom means not only that students are allowed the space to create their own work but that they have the tools at their disposal to accomplish this task. If we as teachers do not provide a space where students have a say in their work but are held to high standards then we are not practicing real democracy.

Throughout the research process, I was able to encourage my students to engage with historical content that enhanced their content knowledge as well as their perspectives about how events in the past are connected and shape the present. By allowing my students to interact authentically with historical topics that they choose and felt connected to as opposed to a pre-packaged program, I saw a dramatic transformation in their motivation with challenging literacy tasks and I witnessed a major transformation with their critical thinking skills.

Knowledge is not produced or accessed in a void. Regardless of students' social economic status, they deserve access to high-quality resources and rigorous content-based instruction. As such, it is the duty of the teacher to bridge the knowledge chasms that young learners encounter every day.

On one cold day in December, in the archive of all places, I witnessed the democratization of knowledge. I think Miracle would agree.



WHITNEY HENDERSON

7th GRADE WRITING
KIPP Central City Academy
New Orleans, LA

Whitney Henderson started her teaching career in 2007 through TNTP's teachNOLA program and currently teaches 7th Grade Writing and serves as the 7th Grade Team Leader at KIPP Central City Academy in New Orleans.

Like fellow KIPP Central City teacher and Fishman Prize winner Jamie Irish, Whitney has been able to lead her students and school to extraordinary success; last year her 6th graders attained no less than 3.6 years of growth in writing in one year, and beat district and state averages in 6th grade English Language Arts scores.

Whitney is the teacher we all wish we could be. She has more than a sixth sense. She has near-perfect instincts, honed by years in the classroom and a passion for moving her students beyond what they thought was possible. We could watch her teach all day long. She embodies the spirit of post-Katrina New Orleans: showing the world that the city can rebuild itself better than ever.

For Whitney, investing students in content means showing them exactly how it applies to what and who they hope to be in the future. Her paper, "**All the World's Their Stage**," describes how she creates custom groups and tailored assessments based on students' individual career aspirations to make sure they connect content to the futures they dream of – and deserve.



ALL THE WORLD'S THEIR STAGE: CONNECTING CONTENT TO STUDENTS' FUTURES

I wish we had paid as much attention to Ricky's dreams of being a police officer as we did to his writing.

When approached with tough new material, students often ask the dreaded question: “Why are we learning this?”

I heard this question my first month of teaching, when I made the assumption that if All-American teacher and founder of Westside Preparatory School in Chicago, Marva Collins, could teach her primary students to study Shakespeare, then I could surely teach my seventh graders, too. Several pages into Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, I was asked that infuriating question, and I had no rebuttal.

It's hard not to feel irritated with this question. But, let's be honest. When a student asks it, it's because they don't see how the content applies to the life they want to lead. In truth, it's a wake-up call to us, their teachers. Our job is help them connect what they're learning to the real world around them and the lives they will lead. If they are asking that question, it means we missed a step.

This idea of fostering real-world application of content became even more apparent and pressing for me this year. In a city like New Orleans, where words like “poverty,” “under-served,” and “high-needs” are so frequently tossed around to describe students, they become code for a stereotype of the lives my students live daily. It's a bleak, one-dimensional portrait.

Don't buy it. That's not my kids. My kids are truly resilient individuals who rise above the disparity that is so often handed to them. One of those students was Ricky Summers.

Ricky came to our school as a fifth-grader who was reading on a first grade level. In an early writing assignment that I usually give during the first week of school, I asked Ricky to write about what he wanted to be when he grew up. He wrote that he wanted to be “a polis offiser so that I can get bad people out of my nayberhood.” After reading his paper, I disregarded Ricky's desire to go into the much-needed work of law-enforcement and went straight into an action plan to correct his primary-level writing.

Over time, Ricky's reading and writing skills improved. By the time he made it to eighth grade, he was on grade-level in nearly every subject, mainly because he had a burning desire to succeed and did just about everything we asked of him.

But now, I wish we had paid as much attention to Ricky's dreams of being a police officer as we did to his writing. We never assessed Ricky's life, nor his aspirations, nor his other hierarchies of needs. We never connected what we taught him to those bigger hopes. And in March of 2012, Ricky was found shot in the back behind an abandoned house in our neighborhood, with a copy of *The Giver* in his back pocket. Even in that tragic moment, he held close to the idea that “knowledge is power” and could transform the brutal ills that plague our society.

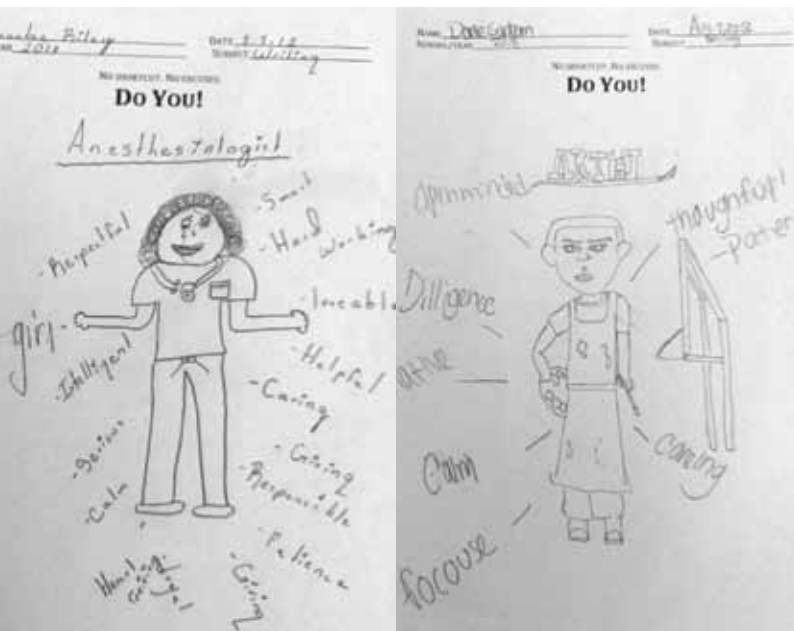
Maybe nothing could have saved Ricky. But he wanted to be a police officer, and had I and my fellow teachers shown him how police officers utilize math, science, history, writing, and reading skills every day, maybe it would have given him even more of a reason to do police-like things. Maybe it would have made him a better judge of character that night and kept him alive.

My point is, we have to be a little more deliberate in making connections between the content we teach and the lives and dreams of our students. Each should strengthen the other. This is the difference between schooling and education, and we cannot fall into the trap of institutionalizing students with schooling – they have their whole lives for that.

Knowing the Players

I teach writing. But teaching writing is not really about the technical elements. Those come easily – once the students decide they want to write. The key step is convincing them that writing is something worth doing. They need to believe that they can tell a powerful story about themselves, and writing is the key.

I begin by getting to know my students on a more individual level and creating a counter-narrative to the stories often told about their lives. Like many other teachers, I start with a survey. But mine is a little bit different.



“Do You” exercises from Whitney’s students.

Typical student-interest surveys traditionally ask a lot of generic questions like, “What is your favorite book? Who is your favorite teacher? How do you spend your free time?” Blah, blah, blah! And what do we actually do with the surveys afterwards? Nothing! If asked, we probably couldn’t recall little Jamal’s favorite teacher or what he even liked about him or her – traits that we probably could emulate in order to foster the type of relationship that that teacher had work so hard to build.

Student-interest surveys are important, but the questions have to be meaningful. And for me, the most significant question is the one that could give you answers that span from being a ninja turtle to a cryptozoologist, and that is: What and who do you want to be in life?

Yes, that really is a two-part question. The “what” is the label or title that society offers: a police officer, a doctor, a clothing designer. I add the “who” because it prompts students to think more critically about the actions and traits it takes to be the people they want to be. In essence, it allows them the opportunity to engineer their moral code.

I give them a blank sheet of paper and allow them to set the stage with an exercise I call “Do You.” They start by drawing a picture of the “what” in the center of the page. One by one, student stick-figures emerge on blank pages, outfitted with the tools and fashion my students associate with each profession.

On one end of the room, there’s a security guard who is shown with his protruding muscles and all-important flashlight. On the other end of the room, Brevin asks, “Ms. Henderson, what do poets wear?” My response: “I’ve never really thought about it, Brevin, but I would imagine they’d wear clothing that reflected

The most significant question is the one that could give you answers that span from being a ninja turtle to a cryptozoologist.

the tone of their message. So if a poet’s poem had an edgy, provocative undertone, think acid-washed skinny-leg jeans with an oversized sweatshirt with a bold statement on the front.” He nods his head and reaches for the lime-green colored pencil.

Once they’ve exercised their creativity and gotten comfortable, the critical thinking begins. I tell them to draw hash lines from their two-dimensional selves and begin to think about the “who.” What identity will you own? What qualities does this person have? As they begin to write words such as “honest,” “loyal,” “persistent,” “courageous,” “understanding,” and others on their paper, they begin to understand that it’s the character and actions of a person that define the true “who.”

Setting the Stage

Once students have completed the “Do You” by the end of the week, I use that first weekend of school to aggregate groups of no more than five students who have similar career aspirations so that they can work together on assignments throughout the year.

Now, many educators would say that students need to be grouped heterogeneously based on ability because it challenges higher performers and grants remediation to lower performers. Yet I have found that student motivation deteriorates over time due to entitlement from the top tier and lack of self-confidence from the lower tier. When kids are grouped by future interest instead, one thing is certain – no one in the group is there yet. The playing field is leveled.

So, over that first weekend of school, for each of my four classes, I spread their papers all over my dining room table as Moscato and random M&Ms linger in between, and I begin listing the titles of what my students have placed in the center of their papers: attorney, dancer, chemist, hairdresser, nurse, homicide detective, physical therapist, and others.

After analyzing the list, I create groups based on the similarities of their choices. From the sample list above, for example, three groups emerge: Law Enforcement, Creative Arts, and Health and Wellness. When students arrive to class on Monday, they are puzzled to see that their desks have been rearranged into clusters, and they struggle to find out why some are sitting next to their arch nemesis and why others are sitting next to the girl they’ve never spoken to. This is when I begin to narrate my rationale:

In my classroom, we write. We don't write to complete prompts; we write to solve problems, to analyze our lives more deeply, and to understand others' viewpoints while helping them understand our own.

*We write for a real audience, not just for me and a red pen grade. Our audience this year will be everyone from the commissioner of *NORD* (the *New Orleans Recreational Department*) to the General Manager of our local grocery stores. We write to real people because we need to promote real change.*

The groups that you are in are based on the "who and what" that you said you wanted to be. Together this year, you will often work together in these groups and learn to think like these professionals, develop a common language, and learn to have empathy and appreciation towards the grit it takes to be effective in these roles. Most importantly, you will exercise the traits that you wrote out last week not only to ensure your success in my class, but in real life.

Now, let's get to work!

Once students understand this seemingly terrifying process, there is implied but no verbal push-back. I immediately sense the tension as Kalya fidgets in her chair as if her bladder is about to explode and as Tyrik stares into a trance with his dry tongue half-way out of his mouth, absently twisting a single dreadlock that seems to hang on from one strand.

They are terrified because, for the first time, no one can hide behind their intelligence or past failures. They aren't the smart kids or the lazy kids or the troublemakers anymore, but students who all want to be something. They feel vulnerable and exposed with their aspirations revealed. They begin to see that learning and becoming are one and the same. And that's when we're really ready to get started.

In my classroom, we write. We don't write to complete prompts; we write to solve problems.

Rehearsing and Performing

For every single writing unit from then on, I require my students to write both academically and authentically. For example, as part of a unit on writing expository essays on the writer's craft of using evidence to support a claim, I give two summative assessments, one of which requires students to write "academically" and the other of which asks them to write "authentically."

The academic prompt comes first. After my students finish reading Elie Weisel's *Night*, for example, they might be asked:

"The prisoners of the holocaust were not known to revolt against their captors. Even when they became aware of their probable fate, they did not gather to start a new revolution or try to escape en masse. What do you believe was their reasoning?"

I use this assessment to gauge whether or not students have mastered the craft of supporting a claim with evidence, and students are not necessarily grouped by aspiration for these assignments.

On the other hand, the second, more authentic assessment serves the same purpose but hits closer to home for students, while giving them the opportunity to collaborate. The groups mentioned earlier, Law Enforcement, Creative Arts, and Health and Wellness, take shape into their clusters, and the performance task is issued. For example, if the skill being mastered is still *using evidence to support a claim*, then the authentic assessment may ask students to do just that about an issue or problem that pertains to their lives and prospective careers.

Students get together in their groups and discuss the issues surrounding their fields of interest, repeating things they've heard from outspoken parents, watched on the evening news, or read in other classes. Brodericka, an aspiring Navy Seal in the Law Enforcement group who was always reluctant to participate in class, is one of the students now leading the conversation. "Did y'all see that article in *The Times-Picayune* this morning that said that Louisiana is number one in incarceration and funding jails? Our state puts more people in jails than any other place in the world! They got jails that look way better than schools. That's a shame!" Other kids nod in agreement and join in.

They continue this first stage of the writing process, gathering ideas and pre-writing, by researching articles online and developing a written claim. The claims could range from how capitalism is causing over-crowding in jails (for my students who have interest in criminal justice) to how chocolate may cause acne (for students with an eye on a career in health and wellness).

After my approval of the text for rigor, they begin the second stage of the writing process by gathering the contextual evidence necessary for supporting that claim. Although they each go through the writing process independently, their groups give them a common language centered around their topics and thought partners who can help them navigate unfamiliar contexts and offer feedback.

The authors get an audience, as well as the implicit message that their opinions and perspective matter and are worth hearing.

Exits and Entrances: The Play

When the entire writing process is complete, students get the opportunity to share their composition on our days for “Author’s Chair.” This is the day when class is transformed into a stage, every chair facing another until, finally, a main stage emerges – the one that belongs to select authors who get the opportunity to share the manifestations of their hard work with all group members. Students enjoy this day most, as it grants them an audience. This is extremely motivating to children who often feel they do not have a voice.

Group by group, an author reads while others prepare their feedback by stating what they like and what could be changed. The music to my ear is when a student asks another student, “Why did you CHOOSE to learn this?” and the author can justify every single written intent.

The authors get an audience, as well as the implicit message that their opinions and perspective matter and are worth hearing. The audience receives a platform to question the authors about their thought processes and topics. Students appreciate their classmates’ work and often comment on the very character traits that they didn’t even know each other had outlined in the first weeks of school – the manifestation of true transformation.

Once all authors in a group have shared, I allow them all to decide which members of their groups have mastered our targeted craft for the unit, and those authors now get the privilege of reading their work to the entire class. This not only celebrates the authors’ hard work, but also gives the other students exposure to how the craft looks in many contexts and settings of actual life.

This day is also an exercise in active listening and embracing the type of vulnerability that is created when a child opens up to being critiqued by the people whose perceptions of them means so much to them – their peers. Every five minutes the room explodes with applause, and my students exercise the audacity of hope, and the implications it could have on their futures.

This is a transformative lesson for life now. Through it they see the many ways that using evidence to support a claim strengthens their assertions and can be useful to them in the



Whitney’s students are grouped based on common career aspirations.

future, from advocating for themselves when a landlord refuses to make repairs to writing a cover letter for a job at a bank arguing why their B.A. in Literature clearly gives them an advantage over people who have degrees in business, finance, or even economics.

The Final Curtain

Although I was never able to appropriately answer why we were learning Shakespeare that day or even if my students got anything out of it at all, I did learn something. I realized that my students are merely players, and they have their exits and entrances, and I must be the best stage director that they would ever encounter because all the world’s not just “a” stage – it’s their stage!

In memory of (Officer) Ricky Summers and other students whose lives have been cut too short and who would have made outstanding contributions to our society as police officers, teachers, nurses and other agents of change.



MORE GREAT TEACHING

Our 2012 Fishman Prize winners represent just a small sampling of the amazing teachers nationwide who are committed to constant improvement throughout their careers. There are thousands of educators doing similarly great work across the country – each with a story to tell. We'd like to extend our thanks to the hundreds of teachers who took the time, thought, and effort to apply for the Fishman Prize in its first year, and especially to our accomplished finalists. Learn more about them at www.tntp.org/fishmanprize/2012.

ABOUT TNTP

TNTP strives to end the injustice of educational inequality by providing excellent teachers to the students who need them most and by advancing policies and practices that ensure effective teaching in every classroom. A national nonprofit organization founded by teachers, TNTP is driven by the knowledge that effective teachers have a greater impact on student achievement than any other school factor. In response, TNTP develops customized programs and policy interventions that enable education leaders to find, develop and keep great teachers. Since its inception in 1997, TNTP has recruited or trained approximately 49,000 teachers – mainly through its highly selective Teaching Fellows programs – benefiting an estimated 8 million students. TNTP has also released a series of acclaimed studies of the policies and practices that affect the quality of the nation's teacher workforce, including *The Widget Effect* (2009) and *The Irreplaceables* (2012). Today TNTP is active in more than 25 cities, including 10 of the nation's 15 largest.

For more information, please visit www.tntp.org.



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The 2012 Fishman Prize winners represent the first cohort in what we hope will be a long tradition of excellent teachers who will share their insights on great teaching, making the Fishman Prize Series on Superlative Classroom Practice an annual resource for what's best – and current – about classroom practice. That starts with next year's winners.

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