

## I-3: Leverage role models who embody hard work and success

### Who can be a role model?

<p><b>Fellow students in the class</b></p>	<p>Fellow classmates can serve as some of the most effective role models for their peers. Frequently celebrate both the top academic achievers in your class (to promote the message of academic success), as well as the students who have made the most improvement (to promote the message of persistence and hard work). Ask these students to share with their classmates specifically how hard work has led to their academic success.</p>
<p><b>Older students</b></p>	<p>Older students can be some of the most powerful (and readily available) role models for your students. Lower elementary school teachers have found success inviting 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> grade students into their classrooms to serve as reading buddies or academic tutors – read below about how Sara Egli ('05 Phoenix) has successfully instituted this in her 1<sup>st</sup> grade classroom. Middle school and junior high teachers have invited high school students into their classroom for similar purposes, while high school teachers have turned to local university students to serve as role models for their older students.</p>
<p><b>Family members</b></p>	<p>In many cases the most important role models in your students' lives will be their family members. Don't hesitate to invite parents or extended family members into your classroom to share with students stories illustrating how hard work and academic success have paid off in their lives. Consider instructing students to write about a family member for whom persistence and/or academic success has opened lots of doors.</p>
<p><b>Community members</b></p>	<p>Community members such as church leaders, business owners, and local politicians can be important role models for your students. Consider inviting community leaders to your classroom for a weekly mentoring/tutoring session after school with your students, or to share stories of how persistence and academic achievement have paid off in their lives. Read below about how Shannon Saunders ('03 Rio Grande Valley) used community members as role models in her classroom.</p>
<p><b>Teachers and faculty members</b></p>	<p>Adults in your school building are great potential role models for your students. Teachers frequently turn to colleagues, administrators, counselors, and coaches to inspire their students. Also, don't underestimate the role you play as a role model for your students: consider what stories from your personal history you can share with students to highlight the importance of hard work and persistence.</p>
<p><b>Historical figures</b></p>	<p>Consider using historical figures such as Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Cesar Chavez as role models in your classroom. You can present information to your students on the positive impact these figures had, and how their persistence, dedication, and academic success led to this – or you can direct students research this information on their own, and then present to the class. Some teachers have experienced success assigning a historical figure to each student based on their personal interests and identity.</p>

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<p><b>Athletes</b></p>	<p>Given the ubiquity of professional athlete adulation and general interest in sports in many of the schools Teach For America places in, athletes can serve as powerful role models for your students. While some teachers have taken the step to bring athletes to their classrooms as guest speakers - read below about how Tanesha Brewton ('06 Miami) used an NFL player to motivate her students – professional athletes can also be incorporated in your classroom in much less time-intensive ways. You can learn about the athletes that your students admire and research how hard work has been key to their successes. Similarly, assign students professional athletes aligned to their interests to research, directing them to focus on the importance of hard work and persistence in their athlete's success.</p>
<p><b>Fictional characters</b></p>	<p>An often-overlooked source of role models is the fictional characters that students frequently read about in class. For example, instruct your students to write about how important hard work and persistence were for Atticus Finch in <i>To Kill A Mockingbird</i>.</p>

### **Sara Egli ('05 Phoenix) on using older students as role models in her 1<sup>st</sup> grade classroom:**

I have my former students (now 2nd graders) come to speak to my 1<sup>st</sup> graders at various points throughout the school year. I try to use students who aren't too shy, and sometimes I'll try to invite siblings of current students. I also like using former students that started out the 1<sup>st</sup> grade lower, and then made significant progress through hard work (it's a big confidence boost and motivator for the 2nd graders, too). During the first week or two of school I'll invite the students I've selected (a good mix of both boys and girls) into my classroom to read a story, and discuss the importance of learning to read during 1<sup>st</sup> grade. I ask them to speak about the reading success they achieved as 1<sup>st</sup> graders. It's really important and highly motivating for my current students to hear that these 2<sup>nd</sup> graders also didn't know how to read before the 1<sup>st</sup> grade.

I also like to have my former students show their "Big Goal Folders" and "Big Goals Graphs" to reinforce the progress that can be made during first grade. I instruct them to explain to my students exactly *how* to go about making that progress, and to explain in kid terms what that actually means. They show my students their fluency graphs from last year, and they discuss how much they improved and what they did to improve. It is often times hard to make goals meaningful to 1<sup>st</sup> graders early in the year, and bringing in former students in this way helps tremendously. Seeing 2<sup>nd</sup> graders who started out lower show the progress they made during 1<sup>st</sup> grade gives my students something to work towards, and it really helps to invest them in hard work. Every time we discuss goals throughout the school year, I'll ask my students if they can remember what Angel and Maria taught them. My kids also get SUPER excited to see the 2nd graders out and about.

I incorporate role models into my classroom in various other ways through the school year. I invite a former student in during the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter when I begin having my students run calendar math to model this process for them. Former students are also responsible for teaching my students how to complete the various "class jobs" during morning work time - pencil sharpening, computer log in, etc. I also bring 6<sup>th</sup> grade reading buddies into my classroom 3 times per week to read 1-on-1 with each 1<sup>st</sup> grader. They are paired up in August, and each 6<sup>th</sup> grader reads with the same 7-8 students each week. The program begins with an interview of the 6<sup>th</sup> graders in front of my students during which they discuss the importance of both reading and being a leader in school. The 6<sup>th</sup> graders have become huge role models for these younger students – almost like celebrities! It has also been a great way to build community at our school.

I recently invited a 5<sup>th</sup> grade honors math class to help us kick off our unit on graphing. I knew the 5<sup>th</sup> graders had just completed a graphing project, and I asked them to discuss with my students the importance of being able to graph, and how graphing applies to life. As a result, my students were highly invested in the unit and were immediately able to make the connection between classroom learning and life beyond the walls of the school.

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### **Tanesha Brewton ('06 Miami) on using an NFL player as a role model in her classroom:**

This year I was privileged to have a NFL player come out and speak to the students about achieving their goals by working hard. He is from Miami, and attended local schools that my students knew about. Many of my students want to be professional football or basketball players. I went out and recruited a NFL player, with a story that was truly inspiring and motivating. He is not a major star, and before entering the class many of my students had never heard of him. He spoke with the students about the fact that he was not a stand out football player, and while in college he received few playing minutes. He told the students that playing football was not and still is not his ultimate goal in life. He told them that his first goal was to be the first person in his family to graduate from high school. He related with them using his own experiences of growing up in a single family home and the fact that his mother was heavily involved in drugs, and how he used this circumstance to motivate him to be the first in his family to graduate from high school, and once he reached that goal he wanted to go to college, and be the first in his family to receive a college degree. He shared with the students the fact that he was in a class for students with learning disabilities, and my students were amazed with the stories he shared about how his classmates treated him because he was in special classes, but how he continued to persevere and work even harder in school. He showed them his jersey, helmet, and Super Bowl ring he won as a member of the Indianapolis Colts. My students were enthralled to see these things, but the most amazing thing was the fact that he told them that even though he is in the NFL, and has a Super Bowl ring earning his college degree means more to him. His big goal is to use the degree that he earned in criminology to become a police detective. He informed them that hard work and discipline were the driving factors behind his success. He told them that in order to compete they must work hard and he painted a picture of reality around the fact that in order to achieve their goals they must be willing to work harder than those competing for the same opportunities. I sat back and listened as my students asked him questions and continued to be inspired. He has reached out to me about remaining in contact with the class in the form of writing letters like "pen pals." My students still speak of what he talked about to them, and they use it as a tool to stay on track because as they me, "if he did it, then I know I can do it too."

### **Shannon Saunders ('03 Rio Grande Valley) on using community leaders as role models in her classroom:**

Whether it was a lawyer, accountant, or local business leader who came to speak with my students, there were always a few individuals who would think, "Hey, what that person does is interesting." Suddenly, you'd hear kids start to talk about life after college and the jobs they would get. But I remember, the most influential visitor was General Ricardo Sanchez, a commanding officer in Iraq. General Sanchez grew up in the community and he talked about what that was like and how he rose to his position. After that, whenever A.J. would complain that he didn't have to work because they were poor and so it didn't matter what they did, the other students would snap at him and point out that General Sanchez was poor and now everyone knows who he is. Somehow, he made all these intangible things that I talked about real to my students—because he was a real person, from *their* community who rose above poverty. And as they saw this, over and over, their buy-in really improved.