

Chrissie Coxon, NYC—3rd Grade

Chrissie's third graders came to her classroom struggling with basic first and second grade math skills like single-digit addition and subtraction, place value, telling time to the hour, and identifying coins. On average, they were reading a half a year below grade level, with three students (including one student who was making his third attempt to pass third grade) reading at a first grade level. Chrissie also encountered significant challenges with classroom management early on, at one point breaking up eleven fights in a single day.

Although she was troubled by her initial struggles, Chrissie remained determined to lead her students to achieve the ambitious goals of two full years' growth in reading levels and 80% mastery of math standards, and she committed herself to improving her classroom culture.

Chrissie's first year in the classroom was all about hard work and doing whatever was necessary to ensure her students' learning. Not only did she focus on maximizing her effectiveness during classroom time, but she also led lunchtime Wilson Phonics groups three times a week for her struggling students and stayed after school to provide additional instruction and academic support each day. She gradually changed the culture of her classroom, first establishing basic safety, then implementing morning meetings, values-based read-alouds, and other measures that incrementally increased the non-violence, respect, kindness, love and pursuit of excellence that my students demonstrated.

All that hard work paid off for Chrissie and her students. By the end of her first year of teaching, Chrissie's students had improved their reading skills by an average of over two grade levels and had achieved over 88% mastery of rigorous third grade math standards. The "three-peat" student made 2.42 years of growth in reading, going from reading *Henry and Mudge* to devouring 100-page biographies of civil rights leaders and bringing *New York Post* articles to share with his classmates at morning meeting. Another student went from a special education teacher's diagnosis that "[she] can't learn reading comprehension" to receiving one of the highest scores in the grade on the ELA state test. An eleven-year-old newly arrived boy from The Gambia who had not qualified for ESL services, but whose skills were too lacking to place him in an age-appropriate grade, went from 40% on the diagnostic of first and second grade standards to 92.5% mastery of third grade standards. Another student, who in September averaged 50.5% on the diagnostic and refused to speak during math workshop, moved to 93.8% mastery of third grade standards and became leader of the class's daily math meeting.

Chrissie obviously climbed a steep learning curve during her first year of teaching, a result of her insatiable desire for improvement in her teaching practice. To facilitate her growth as a teacher, she proactively engaged her program director, read all the helpful literature she could find, and attended as many of the workshops offered by organizations such as Uncommon Schools, KIPP and Achievement First. To help her develop her vision of what was possible for her students, she observed at several high-performing schools. She attributes these experiences to leading to many key changes in her own classroom, and notes that "these improvements, coupled with the spirit that I can and will be an incrementally more extraordinary teacher each day, have enabled more relaxation and joy in the school day and ensured a relentless focus on results."

Always focused on improvement, Chrissie did not rest on the laurels of her first-year success. She spent the next summer reflecting on the previous year and honing her skills by teaching first grade at Excellence Charter School's Summer Academy. And she developed a powerful overarching theme to use in her classroom the next year.

On the first day of her second year of teaching, Chrissie (a Stanford alum),

greeted my students in my Cardinal cap and gown, and before each was admitted to my line-up, they answered in the affirmative that yes indeed they were ready to go to college. Once in the classroom, backed by "Pomp and Circumstance," each member of the Stanford Class of 2022 was called to receive his or her provisional acceptance letter from Richard Shaw, Dean of Undergraduate Admission at Stanford University. Our first academic task was then a shared reading of that letter.

When Chrissie unveiled the class goals (this year adding fluency, writing and formal "community citizenship" goals to the reading and math goals), she explicitly tied them to her students' eventual success in college. She brought frequent Stanford-affiliated guest speakers to the classroom to discuss their careers, their experiences at Stanford, and the importance of hard work and perseverance in pursuing those careers. She infused their literacy block with information about Stanford, and paired students with recent Stanford graduate "e-pals." They worked toward their citizenship goals through biographical character education, studying "boundary breakers" such as Mohandas Gandhi, Rosa Parks, Dr. Martin Luther King, Wangari Maathai, Majora Carter, and Newark mayor Cory Booker (a Stanford alum), even getting one of them--Majora Carter, founder of Sustainable South Bronx—to visit their classroom.

The classroom visitors and e-pals were among the many ways that Chrissie worked to close the "experience gap" for her students. In addition, she raised money for a number of "field lessons" designed to "allow us to deepen our understandings of the content we learn in the classroom, and to see our creed values in action." She took them to a Broadway Show (fittingly, one about a Stanford student from a low-income community in New York City), to Washington, DC (where they met for two hours with Congressman John Lewis, one of the "boundary breakers" they had studied), to the U.S. Constitution Center and University of Pennsylvania Medical School (where they were hosted, of course, by a Stanford alum) in Philadelphia, to Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture, and to Hunts Point Riverside Park, where completed volunteer work on an ongoing basis.

Furthermore, she created an after-school club called "Boundary Breakers," which is designed primarily to strengthen students' academic skills but also to promote service. Participating students have planned and implemented a school-wide recycling system. A colleague who describes herself as "frankly in awe of [Chrissie's] skills as an educator" notes that Chrissie's impact at the school went beyond her students: "She has awakened the social consciousness of not only her students but her colleagues as well. She encourages her students to be 'boundary breakers' and champions for peace and the environment. On her own time, she has organized a recycling program at our school and has chided all of us to be a little more 'green.'"

This year, Chrissie’s students once again improved their reading levels by an average of more than two years, with every single one of them ending the year reading at or above grade level—and *over half* of them reading at a fifth or sixth grade level. In addition, they achieved well over 91% mastery of all third grade math standards, and conducting themselves as “community citizens.” A parent of one of Chrissie’s students attests to Chrissie’s impact on her students:

I am very happy that my daughter has a teacher who challenges her at every turn. Teachers are always telling kids, “You can do it.” Ms. Coxon goes beyond that. She shows them that they can. All my daughter has ever said is that if she goes to college she wants to be a veterinarian. Since she has been in Ms. Coxon’s class, she says when I go to college. She teaches our students to make an “I can’t” into an “I can,” an “I don’t know” into “I won’t be satisfied until I know”. . . . Ms. Coxon has spent time this year teaching our children about people who are boundary breakers and how they should strive to be one themselves. In my eyes, Ms. Coxon is a boundary breaker.