

Taylor Delhagen, NYC—Tenth Grade Global History (Secondary)

Taylor Delhagen’s diagnostic assessments revealed that his students had virtually no prerequisite knowledge and low basic skills coming into his Global History course. They could not identify continents or oceans. Many of them were reading well below grade level; in fact, over a fifth of his students were reading at or below a fifth grade level. While it seemed clear that his students would need additional time to master this material, Taylor was charged with completing the two-year curriculum—covering history from the Neolithic Period to the Iraq War—in just one year. To make the challenge even more daunting, his students’ knowledge of that curriculum would be tested by the rigorous New York State Global Studies Regents exam, and if they didn’t do well enough, they would not be allowed to graduate.

While some might have called these challenges insurmountable, Taylor rolled up his sleeves. He recognized that first and foremost he must create a culture of high expectations and a sense of urgency in his students in order for them to be successful. As Taylor explains, “I was incredibly transparent about what was ahead. I told them that this was not going to be easy, but with hard work, dedication, and a ‘yes we can’ attitude, we would emerge as champions.”

Using a scrolling countdown on the wall to keep students focused on how little time they had to prepare for the exam, Taylor worked hard to invest his students in the idea that every single student would pass the Regents exam. He worked to equate success on the exam with success in college and life, creating a big goal for the class that included not only success on the exam but an ability to think, speak, and listen like world citizens. (Taylor uses a “World Citizen’s Rubric” that includes sections for accountability to knowledge, the learning community, and rigorous thinking.)

Taylor brings his classroom to life with learning. Dressing up as the historical figures the class is studying, he draws students into the minds of people from history, asking his students to consider the facts of the textbook from the perspective of someone living at that time. The class sings, dances, re-enacts, writes newspapers—whatever it takes to stay engaged and intensify students’ passion for learning. As a sign of that engagement, when an unexpected assembly would interrupt a class, Taylor asks those students to come after school to complete the lesson, and every single student shows up.

Of course, Taylor’s instructional leadership does not stop at the classroom door. In fact, he starts some days by riding his bike through the neighborhood around the school to “make stops at students’ homes to make sure they are going to be on time to first period and if possible, get a face-to-face check in with parents.” He gives students his cell phone number and they “know they can reach me 24/7—and they do!” He makes daily phone calls to students and their families, including positive phone calls to celebrate the little wins each student experiences in the course of the year. Last spring, he instituted Saturday school, serving breakfast (including pancakes he made and towed behind his bike). So many students showed up that he pulled in the English teacher so that they could rotate groups of students in two-hour shifts.

Key to Taylor's success is his careful planning and tracking of student progress in his classroom. His students literally cheer before the weekly "rituals"—weekly quizzes that he carefully aligns with the rigorous state standards so that students always know their progress toward their goal.

When the countdown calendar on the wall reached zero last year, all that hard work paid off. His students—a group previously known for discipline problems and lacking many fundamental skills coming into his classroom—achieved higher scores than the city average for students who took the same course over the traditional two years. His students out-performed every other class in the school taking any Regents exam. Fifty-five of his fifty-eight students passed the exam on their first attempt, with three students coming close to a perfect score. As an indicator of the culture and community that Taylor created in his classroom, students who passed the exam last June are now working after school with the three students who did not pass to ensure that they succeed this year.

Now, in his second year, Taylor is on track for similarly extraordinary results, this time with a group of students who started the year even farther behind. He has continued to improve his approach, raising his expectations and infusing reading instruction even more frequently into his history course.

In the words of Taylor's Program Director:

Quite honestly, to me, Taylor Delhagen is the embodiment of everything that a Teach For America corps member (or any teacher for that matter) should be. He is enthusiastic about teaching. He is passionate about social change and educational equality on a deep level. He is humble and grateful and positive. He is caring and deeply committed to each and every one of his students. He is kind and respectful and always has a kind word for and about everyone he encounters. He is relentless in his pursuit of academic gains with his students. He is creative and not afraid to take changes and make changes. In a word: extraordinary.