

Joseph Almeida, NYC—5th Grade

On the first day of school, Joseph handed each of his fifth-graders mock college acceptance letters while playing “Pomp and Circumstance,” driving home the year-long theme of the classroom: if these young learners work hard, they can do anything they want and succeed in college. As a first step on the path to college success, Joseph rallied his students around ambitious goals of 1.5 years of growth in reading for each student, 80% mastery of fifth grade mathematics, social studies and science content for each student and 80% of students writing grade-level appropriate essays by the end of the year.

Joseph instituted a variety of innovative strategies and learning tools to encourage his students to work hard to achieve those ambitious goals. With Joseph’s guidance, students monitored their progress towards, checking in with him every six weeks to celebrate and reset benchmarks regarding reading strengths and deficiencies. Joseph maintained focus on the objectives of every lesson, having students complete an “exit slip” after each lesson to determine whether or not they had mastered the objective of the day. Joseph incorporated rigorous writing expectations into his social studies and science classes. His students regularly wrote essays, performed at theatrical events, and conducted science experiments to demonstrate mastery.

Recognizing the incredible power that families have in their students’ achievement, Joseph has devoted tremendous energy to leveraging that influence toward his students’ goals. He established a monthly bilingual “Parents’ Learning Night” to preview all math content to families and he made approximately twenty calls per week to parents to celebrate their children’s progress and accomplishments.

Like so many teachers, Joseph quickly realized that the time and resources available to his students simply were not enough. Rather than despair, he set out to change that landscape. He persuaded his principal to purchase not only a laptop, but also a projector, an iMac and a SmartBoard for his classroom. (After seeing that a SmartBoard increased efficiency and learning in Joseph’s classroom, his school decided to purchase SmartBoards for other classrooms in the coming year. During both of his teaching years, his students used the iMac, and a video camera that Joseph purchased himself, to create a documentary of their year together.) As students came to appreciate Joseph’s insistence that there is just not enough time in the regularly scheduled school day to reach their ambitious goals, students knew that he was available during lunch periods, after school and during Saturday morning tutoring sessions to help them stay on track. To show his students that hard work can also be fun, Joseph hosted a weekly Hip Hop Institute, where students learned mathematical content through music and dance.

Joseph celebrated his students’ hard work during his first year by taking them bowling on Sundays, to Madison Square Garden for basketball games and to a jazz concert at the Apollo Theater. As a final reward, and to help his students visualize themselves achieving their long-term goal of attending college, Joseph and his students raised funds to travel from New York City to Washington, D.C. to tour his alma mater Georgetown University and the sites of the nation’s Capital.

Joseph's emphasis on hard work to achieve goals has paid off. During his first year, his students not only met or exceeded all of their big goals, but his students received the highest scores on the statewide mathematics test and second-highest English Language Arts scores in the school. One student, who moved to the United States the day before the first day of school and spoke only one English word —“no”— at the beginning of the year, was able to speak, read and write in English on par with his classmates by the end of the year. Despite the fact that only 7% of his entering students read on grade level at the beginning of his second year, by January 43% read at or above grade level, with an average of 1.1 years of growth by mid-year. His second-year students' math growth was also dramatic: his students began the year with an average 37% mastery of prerequisite skills and by mid-year have accomplished an average 87% mastery of fifth grade content. By mid-year his students averaged 95% mastery of social studies content and 97.5% mastery of science content.

Joseph's influence on his students' achievement will surely continue for years to come. As one parent wrote to Joseph:

For some time now, [my son] and I have been talking about college. He wants to attend Georgetown, I want him to stay closer to home...Going to Georgetown and seeing all the possibilities that lay ahead for my son has driven me to become a better parent. I promise that I will work even harder towards his educational success... If every teacher were like you the possibilities would be endless for every student.