

Tara Harrington, Charlotte —High School Biology

The year before she arrived, the high school where Tara Harrington taught high school biology had the dubious distinction of performing dead last on the state-mandated end-of-course assessment in biology, with a pass rate of just 31%. Two years before, only 17% of the school's students had passed the test.

Dismayed by those numbers, Ms. Harrington set out to understand the knowledge and skills students were bringing to the classroom. She found that, on average, her tenth-grade students were reading on a sixth-grade level, they were reading graphs with only 20% accuracy and were, on average, interpreting, conducting and calculating measurements on a middle school level with 30% proficiency. She also learned that the state's formula of predictive data suggested that only 10% of her students were predicted to pass.

Tara decided to change things. As she got to know her students, she saw that their test scores were not at all reflecting their potential. She stepped back and set an ambitious goal. Ms. Harrington determined that her students would achieve at the same level as the highest-performing school in her district. That goal was daunting, but she was sure it was doable. She determined that 100% of students would earn a 3 or 4 (passing scores) and that all of her students would earn at least an 80% on all assessments of mastery.

Tara put countless hours into carefully developing rigorous, engaging lessons promoting higher-level thinking skills, developing “an interactive system in which students . . . worked towards a high level of engaging conversation about the objective throughout the lesson. . . . I employed labs, demonstrations and activities that allowed true science investigation to unfold. I was certainly invested in transforming the classroom into a place where students develop and explore their own questions.”

In order to motivate her students to put forth the tremendous effort and perseverance that her rigorous plans would require, Tara worked tirelessly to invest her students and their families in the goal. Because she found that students and their influencers were motivated by seeing their own progress, she created for each student a Personal Tracking Booklet that listed all objectives by unit and charted student improvement on those objectives as they moved from Starting Points Quizzes to interim Mastery Quizzes to culminating Summative Assessments. Her students found it intensely motivating to see how they had improved over time and to know exactly which objectives they had mastered and which they needed to review.

Furthermore, she tapped into her students' natural competitiveness by posting all classes' mastery data and encouraging classes to try to best one another. Her students eagerly anticipated the outcome of each new assessment, and they worked harder and harder to ensure that they would excel. In addition, she fostered personal responsibility and reflective practice by having each of her students complete a Reflective Guide after each unit, in which they identified two action steps to improve their future achievement, then requiring them to present their action steps to at least two influential people in their lives and ask for their support.

She pushed her students hard, but they (and their families) always knew she was there for them. “I never stop,” she says, “I never stop caring. I never stop believing, pushing, pursuing or guiding. I am my students’ teacher, a leader in their life, every minute of every day. . . . I want my students to have daily reminders that I care about them.” She sent frequent e-mails and makes frequent phone calls of praise and encouragement to students and their parents. She wrote personalized notes to each of her 84 students before a holiday or after a snow day. Each day before school, she made phone calls to the students who had trouble making it to her first period class, and after school she called each student who had been absent that day. She placed encouraging Post-Its on students’ desks as she moves around the room during a lesson. She periodically wrote personalized letters home to each student’s family. Three weeks before the culminating End of Course exam, she handed students hand-written inspirational quotes on strips of paper.

Tara’s limitless care and support translated to students being supportive of one another. In her words, “My classroom has been transformed into a group of people that care about one another, care about their success, and, jointly, care about the success of one another.”

All of Tara’s hard work paid off. At end of the year, 93% of her students passed the North Carolina End of Course Exam in Biology. Just one year after her school ranked dead last in the district on the exam, her students—who had failed most of their past End of Course exams, and only 10% of whom were expected to pass this exam—achieved the highest pass rate in the entire district. The next year, they did even better, passing at a 95% clip.

Tara’s program director has this to say about Tara:

I have never met someone with a higher sense of possibility than Tara. No matter the challenge, she believes she and her students can overcome it. Even when her students were not yet performing at the level needed, she never tried to redirect blame or even mentioned the chance that students wouldn’t get there in the end. Her faith in her students is complete and unwavering. Her love of her work and her kids keeps me grounded and focused, rather than the other way around.