

Gillette Hughes, NYC—Fourth & Fifth Grade Generalist (Elementary)

When Gillette met her fourth graders on her first day as a teacher, they were reading, on average, on a second grade level. In math, her students were even further behind, unable to add and subtract numbers of more than one digit. Then, under her leadership, not only did Gillette Hughes' fourth graders grow an average of over two years in reading in just one year, and not only did every single student pass the English Language Arts New York State Exam, and not only did the students end the year with 90.08% mastery of state math objectives, but after she “looped” with her class to the fifth grade, her students are now applying and being accepted to some of the most prestigious middle schools in the city.

Early in her first year, Gillette realized that while dramatic academic growth was a critical element of broadening her students' choices in life, it would not be enough. She also recognized that her students and their families lacked basic access to the often complicated processes for being accepted to New York's highly successful charter, private, and magnet schools for visual art, theater, music, dance, technology, mathematics, science, and other specific studies. As Gillette explains:

My students deserve the best educational opportunities...I want my students to make educated choices about furthering their schooling. These schools provide my students with challenging, hard working, structured environments where they can pursue specific talents and interests or determine what those talents and interests are and be on the college-bound track in life. They provide extracurricular activities such as drama clubs, choirs, orchestras, sports teams such as running and soccer clubs, robotics, filmmaking, and so on to provide a well-rounded education that focuses on all aspects of student achievement. These are the schools that my students deserve to know about and have the chance to attend and the path on which they deserve to travel.

With that perspective in mind, Gillette set her sights on helping her students gain access to those schools — both by guiding them through the process and by increasing their academic skills dramatically enough to be competitive applicants.

Gillette responded to those challenges by building a classroom culture around hard work and hard-earned success. As a stark lesson in taking ownership of their education, Gillette starts all of her students in chairs on the rug, allowing them to “earn” their own desks once they have shown effort and progress on class assignments. Through the year, Gillette's students set and accomplish many of these “mini-goals”—both individual and class-wide—on their way to their ultimate growth goals. Her students' self-decorated “Super Scholars” display shows them marching up a set of bookshelves on the wall as their reading continues to improve. Gillette has students begging to be reassessed to show their reading progress, carefully watching other classes' progress out of a sense of competition, and helping each other so that the whole class can reach these monthly benchmarks.

Every student maintains individualized progress folders in which they gather Gillette's signature indicating their mastery of each objective. Gillette's clear progress-tracking systems are the cornerstone of her strong relationships with students' families as well. As she explains:

The parents of my students have come to expect these tracking methods for all of their conferences. They, like my students, have bought into these methods through repeated exposure to them. They want their students to “earn their signatures” or “jump their reading levels” as much as we want that in our class. It is exciting to hear parents of my students use the same phrasing and terminology that we use in the classroom. This shows my students that all of us—parents, students, and teacher—are working toward the same goals.

Gillette is a strong believer in empowering her students with ownership of their progress, behavior, and ultimate success. To that end, her students vote on a Class Council that helps manage and make class decisions. That structure gives students both an outlet for voicing frustrations about classroom systems or incidents and the responsibility for developing solutions to these issues. With Gillette's approval, the Council can listen and respond with changes to students' concerns.

For Gillette, infusing in her students a life-long love of learning has meant extending the school day, week, and year. To recalibrate her own vision of excellence, she worked over the summer at a high performing charter school, coming back reinvigorated and even more outraged about the opportunities her students were being denied by their lack of knowledge of and access to choices of excellent middle schools. She also started and still leads a Girls Scouts troupe at her school, giving the girls in her classes an opportunity to develop leadership skills. Further, she works hard to extend learning opportunities for all her students beyond the four walls of her classroom, taking her students on a trip to Ellis Island, for example, as part of their study of immigration.

As mentioned above, Gillette and her students' hard work has focused on increasing their choices of excellent middle schools so that they can enter a different academic track that leads to greater opportunities in life. This spring, Gillette has helped all her students cut through the bureaucracy of applying to schools, and her staunch advocacy has been called on repeatedly. Just a week before the application's printed due date, Gillette learned that the process had been changed and that the applications were due the next day. Gillette campaigned to get her students an extension, and now—because she has made the process accessible and because she has made her students' competitive candidates—many of her students and their families will have their choice of high performing middle schools.