

## Nylah Wahem, Baltimore—Kindergarten

Unlike many children in the suburbs, most of Nylah Wahem's inner-city Baltimore kindergarten students entered her classroom without a strong foundation for learning to read. They could not recognize all their letters, much less a single word, and they had virtually no understanding of sound-letter correspondence. Their math skills were similarly basic. Nylah, refusing to be discouraged by where her students were starting, was driven to set ambitious learning goals for her students by one stark fact; that only 1/8 of students who were below grade-level in first grade would ever attain on-grade level success. Nylah refused to accept that her children would perpetuate that statistic.

By the end of her first year, her students knew an average of 91 sight words, knew 100% of their letters, knew 97.6% of the letter-sound correspondences, demonstrated 91% mastery of Kindergarten math objectives and even obtained 64% mastery of first grade objectives. That is, her students left her classroom not just ready for first grade, but on some measures ready for second. Nylah turned that 1 in 8 statistic on its head. Now in her second year, her students are on track to surpass her even more ambitious goals for them.

This dramatic academic growth is the result of Nylah's hard work and persistence, and the diverse learning environment that she has created. In her words:

*My teaching strategies are multi-dimensional, multi-sensory, individualized and differentiated for the varying multiple intelligences of learning. Not only do I teach facts and processes, but I engage students in extending and refining these facts and processes in order to develop their critical and creative thinking skills and higher order skills that will be crucial to their success in school as they progress through the grades.*

Nylah designed her diverse classroom instruction based on the individual needs of her students—needs that she constantly assesses and monitors with detailed tracking sheets that make clear which letters, sounds, words and math concepts her students mastered. She then used that data to design and update her lesson plans. Nylah supplemented her curriculum's math assessments with her own because they allowed her to hear and see her students' mathematical thought processes. She could then easily and immediately identify the root of any student's misunderstanding and plan subsequent instruction to target that. To ensure that her students truly mastered content and had a lasting knowledge base with which to enter first grade, she often re-tested them on knowledge that they had previously mastered, and she re-taught words, letters or math concepts that her students had subsequently forgotten.

To engage and challenge students who learn in varying styles, a typical day in Nylah's classroom included song-and-dance, games, drawing pictures, whole-group instruction, small-group and one-on-one sessions, hands-on experiences, science investigations and much more, all focused on increasing her students' academic skills.

In addition to using these creative teaching methods to keep students engaged, Nylah used a number of strategies to build and maintain students' investment in their own learning. Her students' classroom experience included regular lunch parties, prize auctions and congratulatory cheers that celebrate academic progress. Her very young scholars loved to track their own progress towards their learning goals by coloring in and displaying pictorial charts that showed which letters and words they had mastered. Her students were so excited about filling in their charts that they frequently asked Nylah to assess their progress.

Nylah's determination to lead her students to academic success was embodied by her approach to some of her most struggling students. When she asked one of those low-performing student's pre-K teacher about her strategies for teaching this student, the pre-K teacher replied this student just couldn't learn. Refusing to accept that view for any of her students, Nylah talked to other pre-K teachers, other educators, family members, social workers and psychologists in order to develop an understanding of the factors leading to each child's low performance. She created a plan for proper strategies to bolster their achievement. Armed with all the information she could gather, Nylah created and individualized students' incentive plans. She collaborated with parents and other teachers in the school to develop new strategies for individual students. When her strategies still didn't result in achievement, Nylah incorporated one-on-one instruction with students in need. With Nylah's persistence, some of her previously lowest performing students' mastery surpassed standards by the end of the year.

Nylah accomplished these gains with her students as the only Kindergarten teacher in her school. She had no easily-accessible grade-level resource to help her develop ideas for instructional improvement or behavior management, and she has compensated for that need by forging a lasting relationship with a Kindergarten teacher in one of Baltimore's highest-performing private schools.