

Alaina Moonves, NYC—First and Second Grade Self-Contained (Special Education)

Alaina Moonves' students came to her classroom with unique social and emotional needs, but Alaina quickly realized that even more concerning were the low expectations that surrounded her students. Most people—including the students themselves—had virtually no hope for their success in school. Over and over, Alaina heard condolences for her teaching assignment and advice that she just teach her first graders “things like finger-painting and puppets” and that she work to “just keep them under control behaviorally.”

One student's introduction to her classroom was indicative, she recounts, of her students' experiences more generally. A few weeks into the year, the student was paraded before her classroom and introduced (in front of all the other students) as a “real problem.” He was cycling into his fifth classroom already, as other teachers had pushed him out because of his behavior. As Alaina got to know this student, she realized, however, that he was responding to deeply painful personal experiences in his life and that he had entirely given up on school because he saw that it had given up on him.

With a room full of students in similar situations, Alaina built her approach around high expectations, leading with a vision of academic success alongside emotional and social development, and unconditional love.

Alaina considers that first element—investing students and their influencers in high expectations and a vision of ambitious success—the most challenging part of her job. She started that task with an approach she terms “full disclosure.” Rather than shielding students from the reality of their academic needs, Alaina worked hard to be sure her students understood, in quantifiable and graphic representations, how far behind they were. She found that giving the students this baseline understanding of their status made revelations of progress much more inspiring.

Throughout her classes, she infuses opportunities to publicly celebrate incremental growth toward the students' individualized big goals, with a central focus on effort. As Alaina describes:

For each lesson, the students are informed which objective they are working towards, and reminded that if they achieve the objective, they will get to highlight their name under that objective on the board. If they do not pass the test on the objective, then they are literally applauded for their effort by the class, and reminded that they now have something that can work on during free time, and that they know they will get it soon.

Her students love her recurring metaphor of their brain as a muscle that they are exercising and growing; they ask her to feel their brain after they have been working hard on something to show her how big it is growing.

While students came to Alaina's classroom because of their emotional and social needs, she works hard to shift their focus to ambitious academic achievement, using that quest as the path to emotional and social growth. Using an entire suite of diagnostic tools, Alaina began the year

by investigating each student's specific levels and needs, and building individualized visions of success for her students. She followed up with writing, reading, and math evaluations once a month, and created systems by which students could graphically map their individual progress. Quickly, she began to see students' behavior challenges transforming into academic progress. As Alaina explains:

I teamed my behavioral supports with similar specialized academic plans for each student. I learned that far from needing pre-K academics, these students needed to be met exactly at their level, and to be constantly challenged. I chose to follow the grade-level curriculum and supplement it as needed. I decided that they deserved exposure to these skills, or they had no chance of catching up. And to my great pleasure, and theirs as well, they rose to the challenge.

In this context, Alaina's students bought into the idea that misbehavior was "trying to steal our precious learning time" and their academic growth began to accelerate.

Meanwhile, Alaina was going well beyond conventional expectations herself. Without sufficient classroom resources, she went out and found materials for her students:

I found old books other teachers in my school did not want; I used my personal money to buy books on grade level, and copied any materials that I could get my hands on... I have reached out to friends and family by creating wish lists of books and materials that my students need, and they have generously provided them.

Once the academic growth of her students became apparent, Alaina was able to use school resources to order grade-level materials.

The third, and foundational, element of her leadership strategy was to show students her unconditional love for them. For Alaina, that unconditional love manifests through consistent, "no excuses" application of clear, high behavioral expectations and consequences, paired with immediate personal forgiveness for breaches. Whether a student simply interrupted the lesson or physically assaulted her, she simply applied the agreed consequence and re-greeted them with a smile and fresh start.

Alaina's strategies have translated to significant academic achievement for her children. In her first year, her students transformed from being non-readers to being (and proudly identifying as) readers. They achieved over a year's worth of growth in reading and 85% mastery of first grade math standards in her first year. In her second year with the same students, she is on track for an average of an additional two years of academic growth with her students. Meanwhile, her students are exceeding their behavioral, emotional, and social goals.

As pleased as she is with those results, Alaina looks beyond them to her students' changed view of themselves and their prospects:

I am most proud of the change in perception of themselves that my students have exhibited. They are smiling and excited about learning. Their parents tell me that the same students, who used to fight them not to get up, now wake their parents up to go to school in the morning. These students, who began first grade drawing people being shot in the rain as their writing sample, are now writing stories about becoming pediatricians.