

Jennifer Rosenbaum, Metro DC—pre-K, 3 year olds

Research has shown that the achievement gap starts early: at age four, children who live below the poverty line are already 18 months below what is expected for their age group in terms of cognitive development. Jen Rosenbaum decided that she would do whatever it took to ensure that her young students would buck that trend.

Many of Jen’s pre-kindergarten three-year-old students came to school without any knowledge of letters or numbers and with limited reading comprehension, math, and social-emotional skills. Overall, they knew just 25% of letter names and no letter sounds. Most of her students were unable to recognize their own feelings and manage them appropriately, and many of them did not understand that it was inappropriate to shove or hit other students. Nonetheless, Jen was determined for her students to leave her classroom above grade level, so her goal was for them to master not only Pre-K 3 standards but also many Pre-k 4 standards and even some kindergarten standards.

She got to work. She learned as much as she could about early childhood pedagogy. She partnered with her students’ parents to learn how she could best support each child, and to give the parents ideas about how they could best support Jen’s efforts. Knowing the importance of structure for her young students, she developed systems and routines for everything imaginable. When she learned that the school library did not check books out, she began checking out a hundred books at a time from the public library because she knew how critical it is to surround young children with books that catch their interest.

Her students loved to shout the class motto of “I’m learning to, I’m learning to, I’m learning to... reeeaaaad!” The class did renditions of this motto before most whole and small group lessons, and to celebrate individual students’ progress, adjusting it to end with “read,” “write,” “do math,” or “play” as appropriate. These wild cheers were part of a mosaic of celebrations that kept students excited and eager to learn more—success was also met, for example, with an ecstatic flurry of high fives and praise, and with the privilege of moving balloons representing specific skills (for example, “Write my name”) up toward their individual cars on a roller coaster in the front of the class.

Because her students were so young, Jen focused heavily on thematic units and experiential learning, becoming completely immersed in themes ranging from “Living Together” to “Markets and Food” to “All About Washington, DC.” In addition, Jen poured tremendous energy into differentiating her instruction. To understand the individual needs and progress of each student, she took anecdotal notes on each student at least twice a week and regularly evaluated them on the rubric of the *Creative Curriculum Developmental Continuum*. Her constant awareness of where students are in relation to their goals enables her to make good instructional decisions—for example, to take advantage of a lunchtime conversation to talk about rhyming words, or to know exactly how much to intervene when helping two students resolve a conflict. Jen’s meticulous attention to detail is a function of her strong sense of urgency; in the words of her program director,

Every single nook and cranny of her classroom is purposeful. From the labels on the markers to the student-made number line, Jen has made sure that no matter where her students are in the classroom, they are exposed to something that pushes their thinking or reinforces a skill that they're learning. Jen knows that she has to use every spare minute with her students and that while they're with her, they have to learn as much as possible.

When eight new students joined her class during February, Jen had to completely rethink her classroom. The new students were significantly younger (each joined the class shortly after turning three), and had shorter attention spans than her other students. Three of them spoke only Spanish and two more spoke some English but were significantly more comfortable speaking Spanish. In order to meet the needs of all of the students in her class, she realized that she would need to make some substantial changes to the class's daily schedule and procedures and to her unit and lesson planning, and she spent many, many hours determining and implementing the appropriate changes.

As a result, the new students adjusted quickly and were able to make significant progress, and the "veteran" students "embraced their new roles as leaders in our classroom."

By the end of the year, all of Jen's hard work paid off. She describes her classroom at the end of the year:

My students work as part of a community; they are able to identify emotions in themselves and others, and use this knowledge to respond appropriately to a variety of circumstances. They are able to identify academic and social problems, think creatively about possible solutions to these problems, and systematically determine the best way to resolve the problem; essentially they are able to plan, execute, and reflect on their actions. Students understand the importance of learning and are intellectually curious.

In addition, her students grew an average of two levels (approximately equivalent to two years) on prioritized skills from the *Creative Curriculum* and far exceeded the Pre-k four-year-old literacy and math standards for Washington, DC—for example, the standards for four-year-olds is recognition of ten letters, but Jen's three-year-olds averaged recognition of 98% of letter names and 92% of letter sounds, both significant predictors of future reading success. In fact, several of her students had learned how to read. One student entered Jen's class on a two-year old level, recognizing seven letters and no letter sounds, but left her class two years later reading at a second grade level and testing directly into kindergarten, bypassing Pre-k 4 altogether.