

### Vanessa Muller, NYC—Third Grade Inclusion (Special Education)

At the beginning of the year, standards-aligned diagnostic assessments revealed that Vanessa Muller’s third-graders were already between one and three years behind in both reading and math skills. Some of her students struggled with basic number concepts like counting, or understanding that two is more than one.

While some teachers might have viewed those numbers as intractable realities of teaching students with special needs, Vanessa brought to her classroom—and infused in her students—an absolute conviction that learning differently must not be a rationalization for a lack of learning. In Vanessa’s words,

*My first and foremost strategy is to constantly have the highest expectations for my students and myself. I have approached both of these years never questioning whether or not my students would achieve significant academic gains, but simply trying to figure out what was needed to make that happen. While I love all of my students deeply and recognize that they are all children, many of whom have lived and are living through trying ordeals, I also have to recognize the fact that I need to set them up for success in life. The world isn’t always going to take the time to get to know them and understand what they have suffered or what they need. It is my responsibility to help them develop ways to support themselves so that they can continue being successful.*

Translating those high expectations to tangible action, Vanessa first inspired every one of her students with personally customized goals—both for academic and social ambitions. She spent, in her words, “a huge amount of energy” at the beginning of the year building community, setting expectations and investing students in understanding their own needs and capacity for academic growth. Early in the year, some of her students “struggled so much with math and were so angry with it that they simply refused to work . . . often ripping up papers, storming out of the room, or just crying.” After only a few months in Vanessa’s supportive classroom, a group of students were monitoring their own progress on challenging objectives with a system of charts and stickers.

Vanessa describes some of her key strategies as fostering independence, differentiating instruction and using data to drive instructional decisions. Even as she trained a co-teacher and paraprofessional to work with small groups of students, Vanessa invested those colleagues in ensuring that nothing they did would squelch students’ sense of control over their education. To foster differentiated instruction, Vanessa secured a grant to acquire a full library of books for her students that targeted their individual needs. With that library, students were able to exercise independence and still choose books that met their particular reading skills. In light of her students’ vastly varying needs, she joined forces with two other Teach For America teachers to restructure the thirty-five self-contained special education students’ classes, regrouping students to better serve their individual needs.

Vanessa also believes that a large part of the academic growth she saw in her students was built on relationship-broadening and enlightening activities outside the classroom. She took her students on trips to museums, parks and restaurants. Her students studied genres of writing at Barnes and Noble and they examined their own recycling program by comparing it with one they saw firsthand at the Hudson River festival. She and her students hunted Easter eggs, saw the tree in Rockefeller Center and picked pumpkins in Central Park. She combined excursions with teachers and students from other schools, trying to broaden her student's horizons and perspectives. Vanessa even took her students to her family's home outside of New York City.

Needless to say, all of these opportunities grew from extraordinary support from her students' families—support that Vanessa deliberately built over time with daily communication and open invitations for families to come to class. Her students' siblings often joined the class's educational excursions and her students' families came to view Vanessa as a helpful resource for their children.

Vanessa is the first to say that all of these strategies were exhausting. A huge challenge was simply the limited minutes in the day and resources available. She tackled those problems head-on, gathering donated supplies and personal items (like glasses) from friends, family and her church and instituting Saturday school and enrichment trips.

But Vanessa says that the biggest challenge of all was her students' lack of belief in their own abilities. Vanessa fought those doubts with unwavering high expectations—high expectations that her students began to accept for themselves.

“Last year, they entered my classroom convinced that they were failures,” she explains. “They couldn't read and they accepted that. They had gone through three years in the school labeled as ‘that class’ and they knew it. . . Before my students were going to be able to accomplish anything, they had to believe they were capable of it. No matter how many times their doubts tried to battle my faith in their ability, I refused to back down and expect less.”

Vanessa admits that she also finds herself struggling to maintain her own high expectations. She expressly reminds herself, she says, that she will make mistakes and that not everything will work. She set up support groups for herself and began to spread the impact of her high expectations and self-critical improvement to others. “Halfway through this year I was feeling very low about my job for a number of reasons. One day I finally woke up and just made the decision that instead of simply feeling unhappy about it, I was going to work to fix things” she recalls. Since then, Vanessa rallied her colleagues to observe and learn from each other, to contribute to a best practices binder that shares ideas among teachers and to share support systems. Due in part to the success of her students—both in academics and social skills—the entire school will be moving to a more inclusion-based model next year.

The primary beneficiaries of Vanessa's leadership, of course, are her students. Those same students who could not read—and did not believe they could learn to read—have responded to all of Vanessa's persistence with both amazing growth and self-driven ownership of their own education. Vanessa's students achieved, on average, 96% mastery of the school-wide math



program's first grade objectives and a number of students grew into second grade skills as well. Several students' math skills grew from a pre-K level to a second grade level in that single year. Similarly, in reading, her students grew, on average, 1.83 grade levels in that single year.