Teachers Are the Center of Education:
Profiles of Eight Teachers

“Teaching is the profession that teaches all the other professions.” — Anonymous
The reasons for writing this report are simple:
To highlight the critical importance of teachers, salute their great work and recognize that they stand at the center of education.
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Project Description

This project was developed to highlight the importance of teachers and the quality of their work. It is a partnership between the College Board and Phi Delta Kappa. Teachers were nominated by College Board staff and members, and were selected to provide a diverse set of disciplines, locations, kinds of schools and student populations. All are committed to excellence in education. The stories of all eight teachers who were nominated are in the report. In each case, a writer spent a day at each school observing the teacher and then interviewing him or her and recording their conversation. A photographer visited each school. The final stories reflect only a small portion of the conversations and observations. School data in each profile were obtained from the National Center for Education Statistics (retrieved August 29, 2009, from http://nces.ed.gov/) and School Data Direct (retrieved August 29, 2009, from http://www.schooldatadirect.org/).

Acknowledgments

We want to thank the teachers who are profiled in this report. They could not have been more supportive in allowing us into their classrooms and in sharing their thoughts about their profession, their students and the future of education in America.

We would also like to thank the educators who put us in touch with such a distinguished group of teachers and who helped us in defining the shape and scope of this report: Lance Balla, Bellevue High School; Sue Denning, Washoe School District; Cathy McCoy, South Webster High School; Pam Paulson, Perpich Center for Arts Education; and Bridget Williams and Kristi Brown, Jones High School. Additionally, several College Board colleagues were instrumental in identifying teachers for this report. These individuals include Jesus Jara, James K. Lindsay, Patricia Renner and Helen Santiago.

This project was conceived and conducted by Stephen J. Handel, Alan Heaps and Maribel Solivan of the College Board. The report was written by Stephen J. Handel and Alan Heaps, with the editorial assistance of Maribel Solivan, Nancy Viggiano and Jan Stephens. Carol Balistreri and Beth Oliver of the College Board created the layout and design of the report.
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Preface

The College Board is proud of our nation’s teachers. We know they stand at the center of the educational enterprise.

I have had the privilege of seeing teachers in action for many years. As a father, I saw them teach my two sons. As governor of West Virginia, I visited their classrooms, seeking their advice on education. As president of the College Board, I now see teachers in action when I visit member institutions, including our own College Board schools; when I meet with Advanced Placement® and other teachers who help guide this membership organization; and when we present awards such as the Bob Costas Grants for the Teaching of Writing and the College Board Inspiration Awards to schools that represent the best in education.

When asked to identify one person other than a parent who most shaped their lives, people often name a teacher. But evidence of the importance of teachers goes beyond anecdotes and memories. Educators agree that teachers are far and away the most crucial force in learning. For example:

- A recent study of worldwide school systems concluded, “Above all, the top performing systems demonstrate that the quality of an education system depends ultimately on the quality of its teachers.”

- The College Board’s Center for Innovative Thought report, Teachers and the Uncertain American Future, stated, “The most successful school innovations rest on the time, talent and skill of teachers.”

- The National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality culled results from dozens of surveys conducted between 2000 and 2006. By a wide margin, the public and educators believe that the quality of the teacher is the most important element in student achievement, outranking other variables, including parental involvement and educational facilities.

But these are words, and we now have the opportunity to move to unparalleled action for teachers, to take advantage of this extraordinary time in education. We are in a period of syzygy, a term popularized by the late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan during the welfare reform debates of the 1980s, describing a rare alignment of the celestial bodies.

This period of opportunity is brought about by three factors: a president who is making education a national priority; a fiscal crisis that, for all the pain it causes, also brings with it a discussion of national priorities; and the knowledge and experience we now have from more than 25 years of school reform.

But as with all windows of opportunity, this one will remain open for only a limited period. We cannot miss this chance. If, in reading the stories of these eight teachers, you are touched by their professionalism, humanity and work effort, this report will have partly done its job. The rest is up to us. We must now all band together to give teachers the support they need to build on their already great work.

Gaston Caperton
President
The College Board
Preface

“From the moment students enter a school, the most important factor in their success is not the color of their skin or the income of their parents; it’s the person standing at the front of the classroom,” said President Barack Obama in a speech to the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce on March 10, 2009. And we know that Americans share his opinion of teachers.

For the last 40 years, Phi Delta Kappa International (PDK) has partnered with the Gallup organization in polling Americans about their perception of public schools. In these annual polls, Americans uniformly support the efforts of classroom teachers, and recognize their importance to our nation’s future. This is obvious when in this year’s poll, seven of 10 Americans say they would like a child of theirs to become a teacher.

On behalf of Phi Delta Kappa International’s 35,000 members, we’re delighted to support the College Board’s focus on great teachers in its report, Teachers Are the Center of Education: Profiles of Eight Teachers. Throughout human history, stories have been the definitive tool to pass knowledge from one generation to the next. PDK understands that stories capture powerful elements in the art of teaching and convey these elements in meaningful and concrete ways.

As I read the stories of Cathleen, Seth and others, I was reminded of the story I like to tell about Gerry Saunders. Gerry is now a retired Michigan high school English teacher. Early in his teaching career, Gerry confronted the challenge of motivating students to learn writing, speaking and listening by creating a radio and television course — one of the first of its kind.

There were no prerequisites for the class. Gerry accepted all students regardless of grade point average. As a young assistant principal, I visited Gerry’s classes, and they reminded me of the eclectic group of students portrayed in a wonderful movie, The Breakfast Club.

Gerry’s expectations for all his students were high, however. Often students would work in teams, and Gerry ensured that all contributed. They wrote radio and television scripts together, and the scripts had to be perfect. Not a single grammar error was allowed. These scripts then flowed into productions and, not surprisingly, the productions had to be flawless.

Thousands of students learned to write clearly and speak with passion because they were enrolled in Gerry Saunders’ radio and television classes. Student achievement was the norm. There are thousands of teachers like Gerry Saunders and the eight dedicated professionals featured in the next few pages of this report — teachers who made or continue to make a lasting impact on students, teachers who hold the students to high standards yet ensure their success.

Try this experiment. Ask a friend, an acquaintance or even a stranger if he or she had at least one teacher who made a significant impact on his or her life. Watch as that person thinks briefly and then suddenly smiles, acknowledging the wonderful memories of a teacher who made a difference. It’s a universal truth — great teachers change lives.

We thank the College Board for undertaking this project highlighting the exceptional efforts of eight outstanding teachers and for allowing Phi Delta Kappa International to assist. We know that the eight individuals are representative of thousands of teachers around the world who in their daily work shape the lives of our children — and the future.

William J. Bushaw
Executive Director
Phi Delta Kappa International
Foreword

It is an honor to be an educator. I say this as someone who has had the privilege of working in our nation's schools for almost 40 years: as a classroom teacher, as a principal and as superintendent of three major school districts. During these four decades, I have learned many lessons. One of the most important is that wishful thinking and good intentions, by themselves, do not bring better education to our students.

Better education means more support for our almost four million elementary, middle and high school teachers. Our nation has done a poor job of providing them with the assistance they need despite acknowledging time and again that they create the foundation for success in our schools. In Philadelphia, where I currently serve as the superintendent of schools, I see the painful consequences of these poor policies. Our students, particularly those most in need, pay the price.

To improve the lot of teachers, and the students they teach, we cannot tinker around the edges, as we have done so many times in the past. We need to radically change the form, quality and quantity of our efforts on behalf of these critically important educators. And as we decide what course of action to take, we would do well to heed the challenge laid out for us by the late Ron Edmonds, founder of the effective schools movement. I remember his words every day. He said that we already know everything we need to know about how to educate all children well; the question is, do we have the will to do so?

The thoughtful committed voices heard in Teachers Are the Center of Education: Profiles of Eight Teachers both confirm what we already know and lay out a partial road map for changes in public policy. In words that we can all understand, these eight teachers, from different backgrounds teaching different subjects to different kinds of students under different circumstances, provide a human voice and real-life context for the policies we must work to implement. For example: Cathleen Cadigan makes mention of the lack of and unequal distribution of resources in our schools; Seth Mitchell, about the need to work more collaboratively with other teachers and the importance of parents and families; Sheryl Fontaine, about class size and the lack of professional respect for teachers; Bill Jeter, about the importance of cross-disciplinary work and the qualities needed to become a good teacher; Judy Ellsesser-Painter, about creating a community with those outside the school; Steve Crawford, about linking the classroom to the world that surrounds our students; Gloria Gonzalez, about unprepared students; and Juliet Lee, about training for the classroom.

These teachers echo ideas and recommendations raised in other reports published over the last few years. For example, in 2006, right after my years as superintendent of the San Francisco Unified School District, I was a member of the Center for Innovative Thought, a part of the College Board, when it produced a report to the nation entitled Teachers and the Uncertain American Future. It had six major policy recommendations:
• Provide salaries for the real world.
• Make teaching a preferred position (career ladders, mentoring, professional development and learning communities).
• Create multiple pathways into teaching.
• Close the diversity gap.
• Fix the math and science crisis.
• Invest for success now, rather than pay for failure later.

These recommendations are as pertinent today as they were when we wrote them. But little progress has been made in the intervening years. Now we must move with dispatch. We cannot continue with business as usual. Too much is at stake. And to make progress, it is imperative that we act immediately on two parallel and related fronts.

1. We need to develop a national movement to support our teachers in the same way we are creating national voluntary academic standards. We can no longer move as 50 states, more than 16,000 school districts and more than 130,000 schools. Led by states and school districts, we must agree on priorities, strategies and a timetable. This must be supported by a federal government that uses its bully pulpit and provides resources. All of us, educators and policymakers alike, need to explain to the public, particularly students and their families, what we are doing, why and how we can collaborate.

2. We need to develop priorities. Not everything can be done at once or in a short period of time. Our valuable resources — time, money, energy, influence — must be directed to those areas that are most important. There are three that stand out: better pre- and in-service professional development; closer cooperation and support among and between teachers and principals; and higher salaries (both base pay and differentiated pay for performance, disciplines and/or assignments). It is in these areas that we need to focus our attention.

Those with children in our schools, particularly those who are traditionally underserved, rarely argue that radical changes are not required, that we can improve slowly or that we can wait for others to join us in our quest for improvement. I urge all of us to act as if we were the families of children in our schools. I know that teachers already have. I hope the rest of the nation will take up this challenge.

Arlene C. Ackerman
Superintendent
School District of Philadelphia
“I cried like a baby … it was the best answer.”

Located in an affluent neighborhood in Dallas, Thomas Jefferson High School boasts more than 1,400 students. Large, ranch-style homes on sizable lots surround the school grounds. Also, within a few blocks are several private high schools with well-manicured grounds, modern school buildings and handsome sports facilities.

“It is a lovely neighborhood … the wealthiest district in Dallas is just down the street,” says Cathleen Cadigan, who teaches AP® U.S. History, AP U.S. Government and an elective course in Holocaust studies at Thomas Jefferson. “But there’s not a kid from this neighborhood that goes to this school.”
Thomas Jefferson High School was built in the 1950s and looks every bit its age. Additionally, the main hallways have surveillance cameras, and to reach the cafeteria, you must pass through a metal detector. The police department assigns an officer to the school.

Cadigan concedes that Thomas Jefferson has a “challenging reputation” and that she is sometimes asked if she wears a flak jacket to work.

“Are you kidding me? There is not a thug in this building. We have some who think they are. [There is no one] who wouldn’t say, ‘Miss Cadigan, can I carry that box for you? Can I hold the door for you?’ They are just as sweet as sweet can be … they are probably the most polite kids I have ever met.”

Cadigan has taught at Thomas Jefferson for 12 years. She is energetic, speaks rapidly and laughs often. She earned a master’s degree in “History of Ideas” at the University of Texas at Dallas and not long ago abandoned her pursuit of a Ph.D.

“I just recently became a college dropout,” Cadigan says, laughing.

Cadigan arrives at the school before 8 a.m., and though her last class is over before 4 p.m. (and her contract stipulates she is free to leave after 4:15), she almost never does. On this day, for instance, she will come back for a parent orientation in the evening.

Despite a decade’s worth of tenure at Thomas Jefferson High, Cadigan’s classroom is in a portable, trailer-like structure built for temporary use, but she’s learned to appreciate her teaching environment.

“I like it out here. Fewer people come out to bother me. And, on top of that, we finally got an Internet connection this year. So, why would I want to leave?”

With a student population that is 94 percent Hispanic, Thomas Jefferson High contends with issues that differ from some other schools. Many students are immigrants or first-generation American citizens. Many are also undocumented immigrants, which is a source of concern for Cadigan since even if they earn a college degree, federal law requires them to return to their native country for 10 years before they can reenter the U.S. and work legally.

“Sometimes I feel like a liar. I encourage my students to go to college, but there is little they can do with the degree after they graduate,” Cadigan laments, though she is pleased that Texas allows colleges and universities to charge undocumented students in-state tuition.
Cadigan’s first class of the day is AP U.S. History. As their year-end project, she asks her students to do a survey of major cultural, economic and political events within a specific decade of the 20th century. Students work in teams and take turns using the two computers in the classroom, but they are only allowed five minutes per team. The rest of the time, they must do their research using books and reference materials in the classroom.

At first, the students focus on music and clothes, and Cadigan has to remind them that the 1970s included more than disco and powder blue tuxedos.

Cadigan’s rapport with her students is both affectionate and steely. Every student in her class has a unique story, and Cadigan knows it. But she is not afraid of doling out detention, and her classroom is a study in discipline: She’s no fan of tardiness, nonschool-related chitchat or dress code violations. (Today she reminds almost every male to tuck in his shirt.)

Despite an effective teacher-training program, her classroom skills didn’t suddenly appear. Rather, “trial by fire” is how Cadigan describes her own learning process.

When asked about whether teachers in America are sufficiently rewarded and revered, Cadigan pauses before answering: “I have come to realize over the last couple of years how much people really do respect teachers.”

This is especially true of her family. Cadigan’s brother often contributes his own money to support her class. Her parents are proud too — they send flowers every time Cadigan wins an award or earns some recognition.

Yet Cadigan knows that her situation is not the norm. She is concerned about disparity among schools, and she doesn’t refer to the matter of resources alone. (“I would love for every kid in our building to have a computer like they do at the private school down the street.”) But more significantly, she refers to a school’s expectation for student success. She believes that a teacher’s expectations permeate everything else in students’ lives, including how hard they will work and how creative they will be. While acknowledging that not every student can get a 5 on an AP Exam, Cadigan feels that all students benefit from being challenged and believes there is virtue in struggle.

“I definitely have some kids who are not at that level and that really struggle in my class … [but] I hate to see them leave.”

Although Cadigan is passionate about her teaching, she is equally committed to being a historian, something she believes nourishes her teaching and vice versa. She is one of only 25 educators in the nation who serves as a regional museum educator for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. In this role, she advises other school districts and teachers about how to prepare their curricula for teaching the Holocaust.
Today, during her Holocaust studies class, she has a guest speaker talk with the students. Mrs. Furst was one of the first children sent to Great Britain from Germany in the *Kindertransport* program immediately before the outbreak of World War II. The students are riveted to Furst’s description of life in Germany and Great Britain during this time.

Cadigan’s goal is to help her students see history as living and vital, and she works to engage them in issues that transcend a particular time frame.

Cadigan requires her students to conduct research on some aspect of the Holocaust and display their findings as a poster presentation, which is exhibited in the school library. One year, the *Dallas Morning News* covered the exhibit on the front page, and the turnout from the community was strong. At the end of the evening, however, one of Cadigan’s students, whose topic had been the Warsaw ghetto, was approached by a man who said that the ghetto’s residents died from illness — not because anyone tried to kill them.

Cadigan gets emotional when she thinks back on this and relates how her student responded.

“So, the kid says to the guy: ‘This historian tells me this and this historian tells me this and this historian tells me this … Where’s your historian?’”

“I cried like a baby. It was the best answer.”
"I love my job. I care about the kids rather deeply as individuals."

Lisbon High School, in the town of Lisbon (population 9,077), Maine, is about an hour’s drive from Portland and two hours from Boston. Seth Mitchell has taught English Language Arts at Lisbon for the past four years and spent four years teaching at another school.

The main building of Lisbon High School has weathered 60 Maine winters and is worn by any standard. Mitchell’s class, however, is located in a portable classroom next to the school. It is a large classroom, with desks forming a U-shape facing the whiteboard. Mitchell has packed his classroom with books from the 10th-grade curriculum, including multiple copies of *Old Man and the Sea, The Pearl, Animal Farm* and *Hamlet*.

The classroom bulletin boards are dotted with aphorisms (“The most violent element in society is ignorance.”), exhortations (“Read Maine Poets!”) and quotes (“Whenever you find yourself on
the side of the majority, it's time to pause and reflect.” — Mark Twain). Additionally, for those who believe that the language of Shakespeare does not speak to them, there is a poster titled, Shakespeare and the Art of Insults (e.g., “Go thou, and fill another room in hell.” Richard II, Act V).

Mitchell’s first class is a 10th-grade English course. Today’s discussion focuses on the play, 12 Angry Men, and Mitchell asks his students to identify the prejudices of the play’s jurors.

“Recall the comments of juror number 10 who repeatedly uses pronouns such as ‘them’ and ‘they’ in referring to specific minority groups,” Mitchell instructs. “What might we infer from his comments?”

The class breaks into small groups of twos and threes, and each group leader pulls a school laptop from a steel cabinet. The students use the laptop to write character profiles on a classroom Wiki (a website shared by their classmates). On a special Web page created for this assignment, Mitchell’s students write their responses and reactions as part of an online discussion with students in his other classes who are also analyzing 12 Angry Men.

“I think we need to give teachers more time to collaborate and integrate studies across the curriculum so that kids are solving real-world problems for authentic purposes. We are still trying to fit each class into a neat little box that does its own thing, but in the real world that doesn’t happen.”

Mitchell’s use of technology in his classroom is a result of work with the National Writing Project (NWP), a professional development network, whose mission is “to improve student achievement by improving the teaching of writing.” Mitchell has always loved writing and believes it is critical to learning in all subjects.

His work as a technology liaison in the National Writing Project focuses on integrating new technologies to teach writing. “What we are trying to do is find meaningful, purposeful ways to include technology in instruction and assessment because like it or not, that is the world we live in,” he says.

Mitchell is adamant that adding technology because it is “cool” is not worth the effort. But he believes that digital storytelling engages his students more effectively than having them respond with paper and pencil.

“I started incorporating digital storytelling, and I saw changes in my students. I saw that they were thinking in new ways and writing in new ways and enjoying it. That is when it really started to blossom for me.”

One student who is struggling with the character profile says she has “no clue” as to what Mitchell is asking her to do and complains that it is “hard to read a play.”
Mitchell agrees: “That’s the point of the assignment.” He tries to answer her questions, which are attempts to ferret out answers, by advising her to make an attempt at analysis rather than waiting for him to reveal the answers. “I would prefer that you take a risk and be wrong.”

During Mitchell’s second period class, a homeroom class for 10th-graders, announcements are made (“Baseball practice has been canceled due to rain”), and there is a short discussion about local events (the rock concert of the previous evening dominates the discussion in which one girl excitedly explains how she was in the front row and sweat from the lead singer fell on her).

He then instructs the class to begin their silent reading period.

At this time each day, everyone at Lisbon High stops what they’re doing, picks up a book (any book) and reads. In Mitchell’s class, *Twilight* is a popular selection, but a variety of Stephen King novels are also popular.

When asked who is responsible for devoting 25 minutes of daily instructional time to silent reading, Mitchell quips, “It was my fault.”

“[Many students] say they hate to read,” he explains. “But I believe that the right book hasn’t found them yet. So, I started the sustained silent reading program in my classroom. When the school formed a literacy committee, which I was on, the administration implemented silent reading schoolwide.”

Mitchell says that his students were ambivalent at first about the silent reading period. But several of the most vocal critics in his class — who professed that they would never read a novel — read several books this year.

Mitchell, a Maine native, did not start out wanting to be a teacher. He entered college to become an engineer but switched to English after two months. He has no regrets.

“I love my job. I care about the kids rather deeply as individuals.”

Mitchell admits to a few on-the-job frustrations, like paperwork, unsupportive parents (those who most need to support their children are least likely to come to the school functions) and kids who refuse to live up to their potential.

“I can’t pretend that I don’t go home some days and wring my hands and say what have I done to my life, but that is not an everyday occurrence … just natural workforce pressure.”
Mitchell would also like more opportunities to work collaboratively with his colleagues. For example, he would like to engage the Lisbon science faculty in developing a course on nonfiction and technical writing but appreciates that this is not possible given current workloads.

“We would have to spend a tremendous amount of time outside of class essentially designing a new curriculum and all of that is in addition to what we are already doing.”

Mitchell recognized early in his career that the daily demands of being a teacher were greater than he anticipated. After working three jobs to support himself while he was in college, Mitchell says, “I was a bit alarmed when I found out I was working harder in my first year of teaching.”

Mitchell laments the thinking of people who believe teachers have an easy ride because they get summers off.

“I hear that all the time,” he says. “I have never taken a summer off. I don’t even know what [taking the summer off] looks like. I am taking courses or I am working for the Southern Maine Writing Project. I am involved professionally all summer and I am preparing for the next year.”

At the moment, at least, Mitchell is content to remain a classroom teacher. He has no ambition to become a school administrator, although several colleagues have said he would make a good one.

“I can’t imagine leaving my kids. I just can’t.”

“What we are trying to do is find meaningful, purposeful ways to include technology in instruction and assessment because like it or not, that is the world we live in.”
“Class, we have a genuine periodic table emergency!”

Located in Sparks, Nev., within sight of Reno's high-rise casinos and the eastern slopes of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, Reed High School is a comprehensive high school with more than 2,400 students. It is the largest high school in the Washoe School District, an area that includes a variety of townships at the edge of the Nevada desert.

Despite being built more than three decades ago, Reed High School is in good shape with clean hallways and new paint. Posters on the walls announce the upcoming junior prom, that afternoon’s drama club meeting and other events.

Sheryl Fontaine teaches AP and honors chemistry. Her classroom is crowded with 30 desks and six lab stations, but it is well equipped and maintained. Fontaine recalls that during her first year at Reed, she did not have a classroom of her own and was forced to wheel a cart from room to
room. “It’s difficult to prep for class with a cart full of beakers.”

Fontaine’s first class has 29 students, and she begins by reviewing homework and distributing a short problem set. While the students are at work on the problems, she asks them to open their composition books so that she can review their homework. In addition to allowing her to determine if the work was completed, she can also offer individual attention to students who struggled with it or have questions. Even in a relatively large class, Fontaine works to provide individual consultations.

“I appreciate it when people treat me as an individual,” she says. “Because our classes are so big, students do get treated like a number a lot of the time. So a little bit of individual attention goes a long way for them. I don’t do it with every kid every day, but I do try to do it often enough that they remember that I know that they’re there.”

Squinting to read one student’s homework, Fontaine says, “Can you read your homework? I can’t.” The student smiles and says quietly, “I can read it.” Fontaine offers the following advice: “If you take AP Chemistry with me next year, the people who grade your AP Exam will need to understand your handwriting.” The student nods.

Sometimes Fontaine’s reaction to an individual involves the whole class in ways both humorous and instructive. When a student confesses she was unable to complete her homework because she misplaced her periodic table of the elements — the chemistry class equivalent of “my dog ate it” — Fontaine, in mock horror, announces to everyone, “Class, we have a genuine periodic table emergency! Can someone loan Janet their table?”

After the students have completed their problem sets and Fontaine has reviewed the answers with them, she asks the class to rate their confidence levels.

“Give yourself a one if you haven’t been paying attention for the last three weeks; two if you are confident, but need a bit more practice; and three if you are on top of everything and ready for whatever comes next.”

None of the students rate themselves as a one; most ratings are twos and threes. One says he is a “2.49.” Fontaine disagrees, saying he’s a three. He smiles.

Fontaine has been teaching at Reed for five years. Her first two years were spent teaching middle school, but she quickly realized that she wanted to teach older students. “I can carry on a conversation with a high school student,” she laughs.
Fontaine talks about the frustrations of teaching in a large high school, including students who come to class unprepared. “But what really frustrates me is that it’s not their fault. Usually there’s a lack of support at home.”

She stresses that the interests of a teenage subculture focusing on social competition detracts from school.

“Kids have a lot of things going on that I think adults tend to forget about. Not only the hormones, but also popularity issues, and things that don’t matter as much to us, but that are crucial to these kids. It’s really hard to compete as a teacher with that,” she says.

Fontaine also believes that the public sometimes misunderstands the work of teachers. “Teaching is an important job. [But] it doesn’t feel important a lot of the time,” she says. “It feels a little like we’re the low person on the totem pole. I don’t need more money, but more respect would be nice.”

Fontaine’s next class is even larger than the first. There are not enough desks for all of the students, so a few sit at the lab stations. She notes that next year, Reed may lose six teachers to budget cuts — even though the total school population is likely to increase — which will create even larger class sizes.

She would forgo a salary raise so that students are able to receive at least the current level of individual attention.

During the lunch period, Fontaine’s classroom has nine students participating in an impromptu study session. During this time, she entertains questions, answers e-mails and grades papers. Fontaine rarely leaves her classroom during the day, except to stand at the doorway when students are moving from one class to the next. “I enjoy seeing the students, and it also gives me a chance to see a few adults as well.”

Fontaine’s teaching style is low key but engaging. She answers students’ questions with questions of her own, rarely providing a direct answer but supplying important clues. She is fond of using real-world examples in her classes to explain some basic chemical concepts.

“When I met my in-laws for the first time, I was shocked by how much sugar they put in their coffee …” This begins a story to the class in which Fontaine is able to introduce the solubility of certain compounds in liquids of varying temperatures.

Fontaine is a geologist by training but decided to become a teacher while serving as a teaching assistant in graduate school. Yet overseeing lab sections with college students is different from running a high school class. Did she feel prepared after earning her secondary school credentials?
“I don’t think there’s a school out there that can prepare you for teaching because it’s so individual,” Fontaine says. “You can know your content inside and out, but no one can prepare you for the students because they’re individuals. What works for you won’t work for someone else.”

Nonetheless, Fontaine appreciates the opportunity to guide some of the most highly motivated students at Reed.

“I am fortunate in that most of my students are highly motivated and trying … to give their best effort.”

Still, she knows that other teachers at Reed and elsewhere have it tougher. Even though all of Fontaine’s classes approach 30 students or more, she emphasizes her AP and honors courses do not represent Reed High School.

“My classes are somewhat smaller than the average class here. There are teachers in this school with 40 students or more,” she says. “Even great teachers have a hard time with that. It’s an injustice to the students and the teacher.”

Fontaine’s advice to new teachers working in large, urban high schools is simple: “If you don’t have fun in this job, then you shouldn’t be here because it’s hard.”
Bill Jeter
Visual Arts
Perpich Center for Arts Education, Golden Valley, Minn.

No. of Students: 273
Ethnicity of Student Body: American Indian, 2.6%; African American, 7.7%; Asian American/Pacific Islander, 2.6%; Hispanic, 3.7%; White, 83.5%
Students Eligible for Free/Reduced Lunch: 9.2%
State Examination Passage Rate (2008): Reading, N/A; Mathematics, 37.1%

“Art brings humanity to things ... It's the closest we get to magic.”

Bill Jeter is a teacher and a working artist. In addition to serving on the faculty at Perpich Center for Arts Education in Minnesota for 17 years, he has been involved in the arts most of his adult life.

“The things I do as an artist informs what I do as a teacher. I think it makes me a better teacher,” he says, adding that being a good teacher is also an art in itself.

“I see teaching as a kind of art form. You have to be willing to approach it just like you do an art subject to really excel at it.”
The Perpich Center for Arts Education is three miles west of Minneapolis in the town of Golden Valley. It is a public magnet school and serves 11th- and 12th-graders, focusing on dance, music, theatre, media, and literary and visual arts. Its students are selected from throughout the state of Minnesota. Its campus, which includes a two-story classroom building and a dormitory, is located on 33 acres that used to be Golden Valley Lutheran College. Of the nearly 300 students that attend Perpich, approximately half board at the school.

Jeter teaches graphic design and printmaking in the classroom building, which houses large studios with high ceilings, exposed pipes and ventilation, and large windows overlooking the campus lawns. In the center of the building is a gallery that is the width of the structure. Currently on display is the senior retrospective, where each of the 40 visual art students exhibits 10 to 15 pieces, including paintings, sculpture, drawings, dress designs and jewelry. A sign on one teacher’s door reminds students to keep their natural flair for the dramatic in check: “The fact that no one understands you does not make you an artist.”

The day begins with a trip to the Minneapolis College of Art and Design to pick up materials for his classes. On this day Jeter purchases copper and wood for his printmaking classes. After the purchase, he takes the materials to a workshop and cuts them to the requisite size.

Jeter’s first class is his Contextual Images course that “explores relationships between text and image” and involves both work in the studio, like computer graphics, and traditional academic tasks, such as essay writing. This course characterizes Perpich’s mission to fuse the arts with academics in ways that illuminate both.

About a dozen students sit around one of the worktables. There is a relaxed atmosphere, and the students call Jeter by his first name. Today’s class is a discussion about a movie titled *Rize* set in South Central Los Angeles, which focuses on “krumping,” a dance form whose roots are found in hip-hop, and “clowning,” which involves the use of face paint and other kinds of makeup. Jeter wants his students to respond to the film in ways both artistic and academic. To express their reactions to the movie, their assignment is to write a series of questions and to enhance, either digitally or through painting, a photo of themselves. During class, the students take turns voicing their questions and sharing their pictures.

As the students speak, Jeter prompts the conversation through further questions: What questions does the movie raise? Did the movie juxtapose krumping with traditional African dancing? What kinds of images does your picture evoke? How is this assignment tied to your personal experiences? Would krumping and clowning be possible for all socioeconomic and racial/ethnic groups?

“If you want to see what people really value in education … look at where wealthy people send their children. In the private schools, they don’t cut out arts and they don’t cut out sports and they don’t cut out languages.”
The resulting discussion highlights the influence of subcultures within American society and the importance placed on images, symbols and colors not only in art but also in daily life.

In his long tenure as an educator, Jeter describes three broad aspects to being a good teacher. The first is appreciating one’s limitations and being open to what the students are teaching the teacher.

“You’ve got to be confident even when you’re not. Not only are you teaching a subject, but you’re learning from an experience at the same time.”

The second aspect, Jeter stresses, is content knowledge. Teachers must also do their homework, he says.

The third is that teachers must believe that every student has the capacity to learn and even excel.

“You’ve got to believe that the kid who absolutely doesn’t look like they could ever do anything can do something. And that’s not always easy.”

Jeter’s next class is Senior Advanced Printmaking, which meets five times a week and has 12 students who are required to produce five print series by the end of the quarter. Today, they meet in one of the downstairs galleries, the students all sitting on the floor. Each student pins up his or her first version and explains both the content and the process of the work. The other students add comments and the conversation becomes lively. They are appreciative of each other’s work and, at the end of each presentation, the students applaud.

Jeter asks questions throughout the session: Is there any symbolism associated with the print? How do the images represent you? Where did the images come from? What was successful and not successful in the production process?

In addition to creating a print, each student prepares a written critique of his or her work. They also will select two of their classmates’ work to critique anonymously. Jeter often requires written work along with the hands-on practice, believing it serves as a “dialogue with oneself,” helping students think deeply about what they want to create.

“Art is a process and the artist needs to record it,” Jeter says. He believes that art is as much process as it is outcome, and it is important to record its many stages. Not only will this record be useful as a learning tool, but also the raw form of the products may be used as inspiration at some time in the future.
As for why the arts are often the first to suffer under budget cuts, Jeter theorizes it’s the intangibility of art that makes it vulnerable. Because it can’t be quantified, it is labeled as ineffectual and therefore shunted aside. But this mentality ignores what the arts do for the spirit and how the spirit inspires pursuits of great significance, he adds.

“The problem is that [art] is unique in its approach and its expression. I don’t think it’s always measurable,” Jeter says.

Jeter is convinced that art and the practice of art bring students something that no other subjects can.

“I think an art student is not only aware but confident in his or her curiosity,” Jeter says. “I think that having an artistic intuitive kind of thing, especially if you’re allowed to develop it, makes you more aware about yourself. That you are an intuitive person; that you have a kind of experience, a kind of intelligence that is really great, that is needed and that you develop a confidence in that.”

And the practice of arts education?

“It brings humanity to things. I think it’s the closest we get to magic that’s real magic, not like trickery, but transformation. I think it’s a very precious thing.”
“Everybody teaches; everybody learns.”

Encompassing 1.3 square miles with a population of 764, South Webster, Ohio, is unmistakably rural. Located near the Kentucky border, South Webster is a two-hour drive from its nearest large city, Columbus.

The southern Ohio landscape is hilly, and the countryside is dotted with homes and small farms. The roads are two lane and except for a school bus on its way to South Webster High School, there isn’t much traffic. The bus makes half a dozen stops within two miles of the school, picking up eight students and almost leaving one boy who rushes out of his house, lugging books in one hand and holding up his pants with the other.

South Webster High School serves students from as far away as 15 miles. While there is little racial diversity at South Webster — the school is almost 100 percent white — the Northern Midland dialect of many students indicates that they live in the Appalachian region of Southern Ohio.
It is 7:30 a.m. and students arrive in Ellsesser-Painter’s AP English Language and Composition class. Several talk about yesterday’s AP Government test.

Ellsesser-Painter’s class is preparing for its own AP Exam next week, and she distributes an extensive study guide that she has developed for the exam.

A poem by Emily Dickinson is on the cover:

We never know how high we are
Till we are called to rise;
And then, if we are true to plan,
Our statures touch the skies —
The Heroism we recite
Would be a daily thing,
Did not ourselves the Cubits warp
For fear to be a King —

“What is a Cubit?” she asks the class.

One student ventures a guess: “Is it some kind of measure?”

“That’s right. And what does ‘Cubits warp for fear to be a King’ mean?”

A female student offers, “We can be as successful as we want — but we must make the effort —?” Her answer ends as a question.

“Very good.” Ellsesser-Painter reminds the class that the AP Exam will be challenging, but she is confident that all of them will rise to the occasion. Below the Dickinson poem, she has written: “I know you can do this. I believe in you.”

Ellsesser-Painter lives 40 miles from South Webster and is on the road by 6:40 each morning. In addition to teaching a full slate of high school classes, she helps develop new courses at South Webster, writes new curricula (she is currently designing an entirely new 10th-grade curriculum for online delivery) and teaches freshmen composition at two local universities (Shawnee State and Rio Grande). Asked why she loads her plate, she responds, “If you stop you die.”

Ellsesser-Painter didn’t set out to be a teacher. Her mother, an English teacher herself, discouraged her from joining the profession because of low pay and insufficient support from school administrators. Training as a speech and hearing therapist, Ellsesser-Painter spent time in a classroom and was swayed by the students’ enthusiasm and the ways in which the teacher interacted with them.

“To have people this involved in learning and education, this is the way you need to live your life: Always involved in discovery.”

For the last 28 years, Ellsesser-Painter has been teaching English in some form; she’s spent 17 years at South Webster. While she clearly loves teaching now, Ellsesser-Painter admits it was hard in the beginning.
“No, I was not prepared at all.”

She knew the content but was not ready for students whose primary purpose was to “clown around.” With time, she grew more comfortable and today is an advocate of on-the-job-training, applauding the current trend of increasing the amount of classroom time required of student teachers. She also believes that today’s teachers know more about the process of learning than in her mother’s day, which makes the job of teaching more satisfying.

The zeal that Ellsesser-Painter brings to her teaching does not allow much room for slacking — from students or teachers.

“I think my biggest frustration is the kids who refuse to do the work. They’re capable; they understand it; they know the material, but they refuse to turn in the work.”

She does not lower the bar for fellow teachers, either, and says she gets frustrated with teachers who approach their responsibilities as “just a job.”

That is not the case with her South Webster colleagues, however, whom she describes as “focused on student learning” and “exceptionally well prepared.” Additionally, “the administration supports the teachers to the nth degree.”

In addition to AP and college-prep English, Ellsesser-Painter teaches four other English classes to students with widely varying aptitudes and goals. Some are preparing for college; others are trying to pass Ohio’s high school exit exam. In all cases, she is known for setting high expectations.

In a less advanced class, she asks the class to write a cinquain-style poem.

“I’m sure I can’t do that,” says one student.

“I’m sure that you can,” Ellsesser-Painter responds.

In another class with six boys who plan to transfer to a nearby vocational school for their junior and senior years of high school, Ellsesser-Painter meets with each of them individually to assess their efforts.

“Are you ready to turn in your poem? Are you happy with it?” she asks one.

“Not really, but it’s close enough.”

She reads it and says, “It’s not bad, but I know you can do better.”

Ellsesser-Painter admits to being a disciplinarian, but the interaction between teacher and student is lively and engaging. She encourages this by arranging her classroom as a large square. No
fan of teachers who stand behind a podium and expound all day, she recognizes richness in the exchange between students and their teacher. She talks about the role of teacher and student and how she, herself, learns from her students. Teachers who can put themselves in the position of their pupils will be successful, she says. Those who cannot simply will not reach as many.

“… It’s when they suddenly view themselves as no longer the learner but just the expounder of wisdom or the pontificator or whatever, I think it’s over.”

Additionally, collaboration among teachers breeds success, noting that she and her colleagues e-mail and text message on weekends.

“The key to a successful school is when your teachers … feel comfortable enough with each other to share what they’re doing.”

And a rural environment helps foster strong communication, Ellsesser-Painter observes.

“There is communal closeness, I think, that you don’t see in a lot of larger cities, especially where people go hither and yon when they’re going home at night. We’re part of our kids’ community. We see them in the community.”

Though she laments that some parents do not encourage their children to go away to college or to move from the area, she appreciates the attachment that these families have to the region.

Still, she thinks that many students benefit by leaving for some period and then coming home with a new and broader perspective.

For Ellsesser-Painter, the joy of the job is “building a community of learners, knowing that [she is] right beside them, learning along with them.”

Asked if she had to do it all over again, would she still become a teacher?

“In a heartbeat.”
At 7 a.m. in early spring, it is still dark and rainy in Bellevue, Wash. But from its bluff perch overlooking the city, Bellevue High School is fully awake. The parking lot is filling up, and the glow of lights from the main building confirms the school's staff and students are already at work.

Steven Crawford, one of four Bellevue Spanish teachers, arrives before 7 each morning. There is wet rain gear on the classroom heater from his daily 11-mile bike ride to school.

“While I don’t much care for exercise, I need to get to work,” he says.

Crawford has been teaching at this school for six years. It is his first teaching job, started just after he and his wife returned from Paraguay on a Peace Corps mission. Despite being one of the youngest teachers in the Spanish department, this school year he is the department chair.
Crawford’s classroom is roomy and welcoming. There are posters of Spain and South America on the walls, and he plays music from a Spanish radio station while students settle into their seats. A sign announces, “No se permite inglés en la clase de español.” Everyone must speak Spanish in Crawford’s classroom.

Crawford’s goal with his students is to establish *El arte de la conversación*, or the art of conversation. Such a feat is difficult enough in English, especially for teenagers whose mantra “*sí*” and “*no*” often constitutes the extent of their conversation with most adults. Crawford believes, however, that this is the best way to engage students in the structure and rhythm of the language.

Students arrive in Crawford’s AP Spanish class at 7:30 a.m. They are mostly juniors and seniors. “The first class is sometimes a little quiet,” he says. “But today is the last day before spring break, so I don’t know what we’ll get.”

Crawford calls the class to order and asks students to pair up for the dialogues they will conduct with one another today.

“What will you do on spring break?” he asks the class, in Spanish. (Disneyland seems to be the most popular destination.) “Will you be traveling with friends or family?” he asks a student.

In Spanish, the boy answers, “No one.”

“Remember,” Crawford says, “We are practicing ‘*El arte de la conversación*.’” The student laughs and answers again, this time with more detail.

Crawford’s second period class is Spanish 2. “It is not as difficult as the AP course,” Crawford says. Still Crawford emphasizes that he very much enjoys teaching students who are beginning their study of Spanish and watching their progress throughout the school year.

“At the end of the year they are not great conversationalists,” he concedes, “but they are able to throw around some ideas; they’re able to talk about their life; they’re able to talk about what they like to do, what they do on the weekends and what they’re going to do in the future. So it’s kind of magical to see kids go from nothing to something.”

In this class, he asks students to talk about what they would do if they were the president of the United States. The responses, though simple, fulfill the conversational requirement. One student, however, simply says, “*No sé.*” (I don’t know.) “Crawford walks completely around the student, looking above and below the student’s desk. Crawford then asks, ¿*Dónde está tu imaginación*? (Where is your imagination?) The laughter from the student reveals that he understands the question — and Crawford’s underlying lesson: *El arte de la conversación.*

“I think that the folks who become teachers usually come in with a very clear heart.”
Walking from his class to the auditorium to attend a school assembly, former and current students wave to Crawford: “Hola, Sr. Crawford. ¿Cómo estás?”

“Estoy bien. ¿Y tú?” Crawford responds with enthusiasm.

He is proud of the students who have completed his classes. “I also really enjoy the kids who, once they get to the upper levels, are there because they’re interested in the language and the culture.”

Crawford’s teaching philosophy is to supply students with the language at every opportunity. That’s why all the students who enroll in his AP course must be prepared to converse in Spanish — at whatever level they are able — when they enter his classroom.

“Merely talking about talking in a foreign language just won’t do it,” he emphasizes. Reading Spanish dialogues (“Hola Paco. ¿Qué tal?”) and correcting students’ pronunciations also are unlikely to produce any lasting effects, he says. That’s because students do not yet have a sophisticated understanding of the language; there is no organizing principle upon which errors can be used as sustained and helpful learning tools, he explains.

Crawford wants to provide students not simply with a new language, but a new way of viewing the world. Learning a new language is not a rote process of translating English words into Spanish words, he says. “It’s actually a whole different mode of communication.”

He gives an example highlighting the difference in syntax and sentence structure between languages: “In Spanish, we don’t say ‘I like Spanish class.’ We say ‘Spanish class pleases me.’ There’s a little semantic difference there. I like the kids to understand that people think differently. They don’t just speak with different words for the exact same things.”

Even at the lunch hour, Crawford is helping students. Questions about homework and an upcoming exam dominate the discussion.

“Most of the time, I am teaching to ‘the middle,’” Crawford says, adding that some students practically teach themselves. “After one lesson they get it.”

Yet other students struggle and need far more attention. Crawford also notes that some of his students have learning disabilities, such as ADD, so keeping them engaged and focused is often a challenge.

A Seattle native, Crawford went away to college and has lived abroad and enjoyed the experience, he says, but notes that Seattle is where he feels most at home.

“There’s just so much pressure on teachers … and it is relentless. I feel it is similar to delivering the mail. I do the best job I can possibly do. But I come back the next day and I have all this mail to deliver again.”
“Wherever I go, I always think about Seattle. Even with all the rain, the puddles and the splashing cars — even with all that, Seattle is always in my mind.”

Crawford believes he was trained well for the job, though he acknowledges that he lacked what every new teacher lacks: experience. Moreover, teaching Spanish has its own unique aspects.

“It is necessarily a teacher-centered activity, because the teacher is the one with the language and the students don’t have it. So, there is a lot of being on stage as a Spanish teacher.”

Still, Crawford believes that every teacher brings a set of individual talents to the classroom. What distinguishes good teachers from average ones is the extent to which they can apply these talents effectively in the classroom. He emphasizes that good teachers develop the confidence to stand in front of a class and lead it.

“I feel like it’s just having a center of yourself and an understanding of who you are in front of the kids and who they need you to be.”

At the end of the day, Crawford is grading papers, responding to e-mails and starting three students on a make-up exam, all at the same time. He is the definition of multitasking — in two different languages.
"The life of the teacher is very rich in experience."

Gloria Gonzalez’s classroom sparkles with the artistic creations of her students. Paintings and drawings cover the walls. Mobiles and streamers hang from the ceiling. There is an entire wall devoted to African-style masks. Chairs are painted in rainbow colors and decorated with strips of colored paper, serving as both sculpture and furniture.

Gonzalez is a fine arts instructor at Jones High School in Orlando, Fla., where she teaches art, drawing and AP Studio Art. She has been teaching for 33 years, the last 18 at Jones High School in the center of the city. Sitting in the shadow of the Florida Citrus Bowl, Jones is in the Parramore/Lorna Doone neighborhood, where houses are modest and built mostly of stucco and clapboard.
The school is 95 percent African American and takes pride in its history. It was established in 1895 as the city’s first high school for African Americans.

Recently, alumni established a museum on the school grounds — the only one of its kind in the United States. With memorabilia collected over the years, the museum shows Jones’ importance to Orlando and highlights its distinguished alumni and teachers. Although the best-known alumnus is actor Wesley Snipes, he only gets a supporting credit here, where he competes against dozens of other local celebrities including judges, principals, philanthropic leaders and entrepreneurs.

Built in 2005, the current facility looks and feels like a small college campus. There are separate buildings for social studies, science, technology and the humanities, all of which cluster around open-air courtyards that take advantage of the Florida sunshine.

Despite the shiny new classrooms and an impressive history, Jones High School has struggled. Early in this decade, the Florida Department of Education gave Jones an “F” for five consecutive years, based on student scores on the statewide comprehensive assessment test.

Because Orlando is still under a federal desegregation order that allows African American families to transfer their children out of the district, many of the area’s best-prepared students have gone to schools in the suburbs. As recently as 2006, Jones offered five AP courses, with only four instructors certified to teach them.

But in 2006, things began to change for Jones, starting with a new administration. Today, Jones offers 22 AP courses and has certified 40 AP teachers. Half of the 1,000 students will complete one or more AP Exams this year. Jones also offers the International Baccalaureate diploma program. And in 2007, Newsweek ranked Jones one of the 1,000 most successful public high schools in America.

Gonzalez is pleased with the direction of the school but believes Florida’s “F” ranking compromised Jones and its students, ultimately undermining already fragile confidences.

“The [kids] are not ‘F’ students.”

Despite her issues with the state-imposed label and the problems Jones has faced, Gonzalez says she’s committed to the cause.

“I can do more good here,” she says. “God puts me where he needs me, and I treasure my kids.”

For Gonzalez, art is a daily engagement with everything, like family, school and work.

“Art should be connected to daily life,” she instructs. “There is beauty in everything,”
And everything can be made beautiful, she insists. While she teaches her students the fundamentals of drawing and painting, her students also create from milk cartons, cardboard boxes, paper towels, buttons, old magazines and Styrofoam. Because she never knows what she’ll need for the next creation, Gonzalez collects everything, using many throwaway items, which reflect the reality of teaching in a less-than-affluent public school system.

Working to encourage academic rigor, Gonzalez urges her students to use the knowledge they gained in other courses to advance their artistic work. For example, what they’ve learned in geometry can help them with two- and three-point perspective drawing. In connecting her courses to the rest of the curriculum, Gonzalez works to strengthen students’ problem-solving skills while also guiding them to see art as part of a larger academic tradition — not a talent that only some people possess. It builds their confidence to “do” art, she says.

Her office is papered with photographs of her students, their art and the awards they’ve won from local competitions. Such competitions, Gonzalez believes, are an opportunity for students to gain confidence in their work and to show the community that Jones produces students with talent and perseverance.

Her biggest frustration is when students do not demonstrate that perseverance, an attitude she believes is especially destructive for students from underserved groups. As a result, Gonzalez pushes her students so that they’ll be ready to take advantage of opportunities when they do come. Students lacking educational opportunities may be intimidated when choices are available, she says, adding that many students would apply themselves more seriously if they could connect their efforts here to the world outside the boundaries of school.

In her more than 33 years as a teacher, Gonzalez has seen educational reforms come and go, but she is especially concerned about the current state of education in the United States. In recent years, some students have arrived in her classroom without being able to read. She calls it “child abuse.” And while she admits that she is not a perfect teacher, Gonzalez nonetheless calls into question the integrity of schools that advance students who are illiterate.

“When they come into high school, they feel ashamed,” she says. “If we want to improve [our] society … we need to take care of our human resources … we’re losing so much talent.”

Gonzalez’s own talent was nurtured by parents who supported her wish and that of her siblings to work in the arts. She studied fine arts at the Institute of Puerto
Rican Culture, taking classes in, among others, ceramics, drawing, painting and sculpture. Seeking an outlet for her artistic sensibility, Gonzalez later trained to be a teacher at the University of Puerto Rico.

Gonzalez speaks with special pride about her daughter who has followed her example. “She’s a great teacher. I feel very proud of her. We sit down and talk about educational issues all the time, and it’s very interesting to see [her] point of view.”

But the truth is that every teacher has a perspective because “every teacher has a story,” she says as she thinks back on her 33 years in the classroom.

“The life of the teacher, in my personal opinion, is very rich in experience,” she says. “You go back in your mind and remember [your] students and you remember particular moments. That really makes your life complete.”

“You can’t [teach] just for the money. [There has to be] something inside of you that you’re going to make a difference in these human beings.”
“You’re building a community in your classroom.”

South Bronx Prep is a New York City public school housed in a four-story yellow brick building that takes up an entire block.

Begun in 2004 as a partnership among the College Board, the Gates Foundation and the New York City Department of Education to establish small schools in major cities, the school includes grades six–12 and currently enrolls approximately 500 students. An “open-door institution” with no admission requirements, South Bronx Prep draws most of its students from the surrounding neighborhoods, with a majority coming from the Mott Haven, Patterson and Mitchell housing projects. This year, in its first graduating class, 98 percent of the students applied and were accepted to college.
Juliet Lee is a sixth-grade math and homeroom teacher now in her third year. This is her first teaching assignment and she claims that, while her friends and family always knew she was going to be a teacher, she did not come to the realization until about five years ago. Lee planned to be a counselor, but halfway through her master’s degree program realized she really wanted to work in a classroom.

She transferred to a teacher-preparation program, choosing math as her subject because she was “always good at it and enjoyed it.” A year later, she was recruited to teach at South Bronx Prep.

Lee believes that in addition to knowing her subject matter, a good teacher creates an environment where students can be successful.

“You’re building a community in your classroom where students feel safe, and they can learn and be as successful as they can be.”

This is especially important in math because so many students approach the subject with fear and apprehension. Lee’s goal is to show students what they can achieve.

“I think what I’m good at is motivating them and showing them what they can do.” she says. “A lot of them come in with [math] anxiety, and so seeing them every day and seeing them excited to do the material, and then guess what, the students who don’t want to have anything to do with math — they become the ones that call out ‘this is so easy.’”

Lee arrives at South Bronx Prep at 6:15 each morning from her home in Queens, the borough in which she was born and raised, and uses the early morning time to prepare for class and deal with administrative issues. She rarely leaves before 5 p.m., and two days a week stays until 6 p.m. to manage the chess club.

As the clock nears 8 a.m., students trickle in, all wearing the dress-code requisite white South Bronx Prep polo shirt.

Lee welcomes all of her students by name, and they collect their notebooks and seat themselves around the small tables, positioned on the floor around carefully laid pieces of tape. While there is some mingling, boys seem more likely to sit with boys and girls with girls.

Today’s class is on probability, and Lee asks them to read the six questions written on the whiteboard, referring to a circle divided into eight equal sections, each containing a number. Lee asks for volunteers. More than half the students raise their hands and she invites six to come to the front of the class to record their answers.
She asks the rest of the class to write down their own responses. After Lee has reviewed the answers on the board and asked for explanations from each of the participants — all of which are correct — she asks the class to give a “thumbs-up” or “thumbs-down” on their own responses. Most give a thumbs-up.

Lee then asks the students to pair up and gives each duo a pair of dice, telling them to roll them 40 times and record the total number thrown in each instance. Their assignment is to record if the number three or the number seven comes up more often and to explain the outcome.

The volume of noise increases dramatically. For the most part, the students focus on their work, but a few of the pairs (usually the boys) lose control of the dice, which skitter off their desks and across the floor.

During this assignment, Lee moves from table to table to check on progress, answer questions and offer encouragement. On several occasions, “Ms. Lee” warns pairs that this is “not a social hour” so they should talk less and work more. One girl momentarily refuses to do the assignment, but the matter is resolved after a private conversation with Lee.

Her theory on unruly students is: “You try to use them. If there’s one student who’s particularly loud, maybe pair him with a quieter student and balance it out a little bit. It depends. Again, you get to know them. You develop strategies that you know will work. Some of them, you can call them out on it and they’ll respond. Some of them you pull aside and have a one-on-one conversation. It depends. You learn from each other.”

Lee sounds the five-minute warning to finish the assignment and students make their last rolls and record the outcomes before turning in their work. The assignment will be reviewed the next day.

Lee will give this class three more times today (in addition to three other classes). Later sessions are similar but interspersed with minor variations and disturbances, including a boy who puts the dice up his nose. When Lee tells him to stop, he denies the deed, claiming that he put the dice “on his nose, not in his nose.”

Lee believes that graduate school trained her well to be a teacher, but she would have liked more classroom time as a student.

“If I could go back and train other people, it would be for them to spend more time in the classroom under another teacher and to get that experience,” admitting that while her first day on the job was “nerve racking,” few teachers are fully prepared when they go solo for the first time.
When asked why so many teachers leave the profession, Lee responds: “It’s just the school that you’re in. We’re supported. I’m supported. There may be day-to-day things that may drive you nuts, like one student out of hand or a few students out of hand, that’s not enough to drive me out of the profession altogether. Those situations — if I can’t handle them myself, I know that there are people who will support me and handle those situations. I can understand how people leave because they may be in situations where they’re not supported, and that would be horrible.”

When asked whether she will continue to be a teacher, Lee responds, “My family thinks that it’s wonderful that I am a teacher. My parents and my aunts and uncles were from China. Education is a big deal in China. It’s difficult to get into college there. It’s a privilege for me to be in that field. My friends, I think some of the stories I tell them, they think I’m crazy. In the end, they just know that it’s what I was supposed to be doing. They knew it beforehand.”

“If I could go back and train other people, it would be for them to spend more time in the classroom under another teacher.”
Notes


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PDK
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PDK is one of the largest education associations and has more than 35,000 members, including teachers, principals, superintendents, and higher education faculty and administrators. PDK publishes the highly regarded Phi Delta Kappan, the No. 1 education policy magazine, and sponsors the annual PDK/Gallup Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools.

PDK is the sole sponsor of the Future Educators Association (FEA), the only national and international professional organization that provides students who are interested in education-related careers with activities and materials that allow them to explore the teaching profession in a variety of ways.

More than 250 local PDK chapters — most located on college campuses — give PDK members a unique opportunity to network with other like-minded educators.

PDK’s mission is to support education, particularly public education, as the cornerstone of democracy. Its vision is to be the experts in cultivating great educators for tomorrow while continuing to ensure high-quality education for today.
Advocacy is central to the work of the College Board. Working with members, policymakers and the education community, we promote programs, policies and practices that increase college access and success for all students. In a world of growing complexity and competing demands, we advocate to ensure that education comes first. www.collegeboard.com/advocacy