

# **From Seed to Apple**

From Seed to Apple is a project of the Washington State Teacher of the Year program, which is administered by the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. The collection is edited by Susan Johnson and Hilary Seidel.

The opinions, beliefs and viewpoints expressed by the various authors in this volume do not necessarily reflect the opinions, beliefs and viewpoints of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction or official policies of the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction.

The names of all students featured in this volume have been changed unless permission for their use has been obtained.

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This collection is dedicated to our past, present and future students.  
You inspire us to do what we love to do every day: teach.

**A mind once stretched by a new idea  
never regains its original dimensions.**

Oliver Wendell Holmes

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# Foreword

So often we hear about what is needed in education. From funding to curriculum to evaluations, these seem to be the topics discussed the most.

However, there are far more important subjects to discuss.

What follows are the stories that matter.

Not of teachers, but of their students. They are stories that give us hope. They make us realize that for all that is needed to improve in education, there are far more things that are going right than we often realize.

Each and every day across our state more than 57,000 public education teachers, along with their support staff and administrators, are empowering and motivating the next generation of citizens. With the skills they have gained, these students will drive our economy, determine the path of our ever-changing culture, and become the new “us.”

These stories are not the exception. These stories are the reality of what education is like in Washington.

After reading through the next few pages, I hope you have the same reaction that I did. I wrote thank you notes to my most influential teachers, and I asked them to share their thoughts on education with me.

It is my hope that these stories will be the start of every conversation about education in our state. That they will keep our discussions grounded in what is most important.

After all, these stories are about our students, and they are what really matters.

Jeff Charbonneau  
2013 National and Washington State Teacher of the Year  
Zillah School District

# **At First Sight**

*A blind student surpasses her peers and reminds her teacher  
that sometimes encouragement is the best accommodation*

By Eric Samson, 2014 Olympic ESD 114 Regional Teacher of the Year  
Central Kitsap Junior High School, Central Kitsap School District

I first heard about Sara long before I taught her. She was a student at the elementary school that my sons attended, and some of the parents in the neighborhood were upset because the school had included her in the fifth grade Math Olympiad team.

The problem these parents had with Sara was that she was blind and had a speech impediment. They were convinced that the only reason Sara was on the team was that the school administrators felt sorry for her and wanted her to feel included. They were convinced that she had developmental issues that would make her a detriment to their team. Needless to say, Sara and her mother were deeply hurt by this lack of acceptance. The real irony in this: I would one day learn that Sara is a true mathematical genius.

The next time I heard about Sara was when she was about to enter the seventh grade at the junior high where I teach. Two teachers were discussing the difficulties posed by the new blind girl who would be arriving in the fall. I was appalled by the lack of compassion these teachers displayed, expressing only concern over how difficult it would be for them to accommodate a blind student and not about how important it would be to make this girl feel included and welcome in our school.

In all fairness, I should point out that my wife is blind, so I am acutely aware of how painful it is for blind people to feel excluded. In the end, neither of these teachers ended up with Sara in their classes, which is a shame, because if they had taught her, they would have found the experience to be extremely rewarding.

The summer before Sara's freshman year, I began thinking about how I was going to teach chemistry and physics concepts to a blind girl. Because my wife is blind, it was very important to me that I do a good job of adapting to Sara's needs, but I was stumped. How was I going to adapt my style of teaching to be inclusive to a student who couldn't see all the things I do?

My approach to teaching science is very visual – I do a lot of demonstrations, I draw a lot of stick figure diagrams on the white board, and I have kids make observations at their lab benches. Somehow I was going to have to be creative and adapt to her limitations. I decided that tactile representations of the concepts would be the best way to communicate science principles to Sara, so I got busy cutting felt and gluing spaghetti to poster board.

Then I met Sara and realized how much I had to learn.



The first thing she taught me was that tactile representations were not always the most efficient way of communicating concepts to Sara. It was hard for me to accept, but because Sara had never seen anything in her life, she didn't need for me to help her visualize things. She just wanted me to give her the data and she could take it from there. Fortunately she had a laptop-like braille machine that allowed her to read text files, so I spent time each afternoon preparing class notes and assignments for her in a format that she could read and then saving them to a memory stick.

It quickly became apparent that Sara was very, very smart. Of the thousands of students I've taught over the years, Sara is the only one that I felt was a true genius. All I had to do was find a way to communicate a science concept in a way that she could understand, and then she would take it and run with it. She impressed me constantly, but there is one day in particular that stands out in my mind.

I was teaching a lesson on how to draw Lewis structures of molecules, which is a completely visual process involving the geometric arrangement of atoms, the distribution of paired electrons, and the formation of covalent bonds. I had spent hours after school the day before preparing tactile examples for her, but even that seemed like a long shot, given how visual the whole process was. After a short lecture on the concept, I handed Sara her memory chip with the notes and assignment on it and told her to give me a few minutes to get the rest of the class going on the worksheet. It took me about ten minutes to get the rest of the class settled into the lesson, and I got out my tactile examples and went over to Sara's desk to teach her the concept.

"I think I've got it, Mr. Samson," she said as soon as I sat down next to her.

I told her that she would probably need some help with the concept, since even my smartest sighted students usually took half a period to get comfortable with the technique.

Her hands flew over her refreshable braille display. "Okay," she said, "does carbon dioxide have the carbon atom in the middle double bonded to an oxygen on each side?"

I was awestruck as she quickly rattled off the correct answers to even the most difficult problems. She was done with the worksheet, and the other students – sighted students – were still on the first problem, and most of them had their hands up for help.

Between us, Sara and I found a way to circumvent the disadvantage of her blindness for every lesson of the year, with one notable exception. Much of the information about the properties of individual elements on the periodic table (atomic size, ionization energy, ionic charge, etc.) can be gleaned from where the element is located on the table. This is the real power of the periodic table, and it didn't work for Sara. I searched the internet for a blind-friendly periodic table for her, but the only ones I could find included only the most basic information and were completely inadequate for the type of chemistry problems we were doing in class. Rather than give up in despair, Sara produced her own set of electronic blind-friendly periodic tables using data that her mother read to her off the table we used in class. She had to make a separate file for each property of an

element, but once she had the files, she could answer questions as fast as any of my sighted students.

Knowing that she had a product that would be very useful to other blind chemistry students, Sara set up her own internet business, marketing her tables to blind students in high schools and universities all over the world. She went on to major in Computer Science at Stanford University and now works at Google, where I am sure she stands out as one of the smartest people they have.

As much as I would like to share in the story of Sara's success, the truth is that she did most of it herself. All I did was to make sure that Sara was always included, encouraged and challenged. I am proud to have played some small part in shaping her life.

# The Small Victories

*The rewards of teaching may be a long time coming, but they are worth the wait*

By Laura Currie, 2014 ESD 113 Regional Teacher of the Year  
Centennial Elementary School, Olympia School District

Every day I go home tired, and at the end of each week I am exhausted. I get to work by 7:30, usually leave after 5:00, and often go into my classroom on the weekends. My job as a teacher can be incredibly difficult, frustrating, discouraging and underappreciated. Because of these challenges, I have learned over the years to look back and appreciate the small victories. What keeps me going even after forty-five years in education is the thought of my students and their successes—whether they be big, small, life-changing or subtle.

Sandi was the only girl in a family with five boys, and she was also the middle child. Having so many brothers who were all outgoing, athletic, and popular tended to overshadow Sandi's more private and guarded personality. She never caused me a moment's problem; she was an excellent student and a wonderfully clever and creative writer. Despite all of this, I was never sure if I was really connecting with her because she was not easy to read; she liked to please, but she was not demonstrative in any way.

Sandi left my class at the end of the year, and I never heard anything more from her until years later when her mom stopped by my classroom and surprised me with a copy of Sandi's first published novel! When I went to Barnes and Noble and saw a display of her novel, I couldn't have been more proud. Later, when she came to my classroom and shared with my students some tips on becoming a successful author, she also shared with them the fact that one of the things she remembered the most about school was when Mrs. Currie would read aloud in class. I would have liked to feel I was somehow instrumental in her success, but I know she was one of those students who would have been successful in spite of me.

I am a believer that fifth graders must learn that the choices they make are their responsibility, so every year I begin the school year by giving my students "the talk," and when I do I always remember Gary. Despite having a very warm and caring heart, Gary was a Dennis the Menace-type of boy: he had red curly hair, he was athletic, rough and tumble, and he always pushed boundaries, both in the classroom and on the playground.

So when I had to take my students to outdoor school for five days, he was someone I knew I would need to keep my eye on. Now one of the things the teachers and principals have to do when at outdoor school is to make cabin checks in the middle of the night in order to make sure the students and their high-school counselors are both fine and are where they are supposed to be. One night while we were making the rounds of the

cabins, we could hear some of the boys planning a "raid" because the walls of the cabins were so thin we could hear everything. The discussion inside became very heated because one of the boys was refusing to participate despite all of the name-calling and bullying by his peers. All the boy kept saying was, "No, Mrs. Currie will kill me!" It was Gary, and that was all he kept repeating until the other boys finally gave up and went to bed. None of those boys ever knew that, right outside the door, listening to the entire conversation, the teachers and principal were listening to every word and that Mrs. Currie couldn't have been more proud of the choices Gary had made.

Now Annie was a baby who was born to a mother who abused alcohol. The biological mother had given her up for adoption, but the people who adopted her were never informed that the baby could have problems (this was before the concept of fetal alcohol syndrome became so mainstream). From the moment Annie entered the school system, she was a major behavior problem. She demanded immediate gratification, and she would not accept the word "no." When she didn't get her way, she would throw a tantrum, and as she got older the tantrums became more and more violent, so violent she would have to be barricaded in a room alone until she was done. So when I first got Annie in my class, I immediately sought help from special services; they were willing to help, but even they weren't sure what to do with her. After she barricaded herself on the school bus and held it hostage for half an hour, I finally realized that the answers to this problem were going to have to come from me.

The rest of that year I spent educating myself about her condition and how best to handle it. Every day I had to anticipate her triggers and solve her problems before they could happen. For example, Annie loved snacks and whenever treats were brought for the class she would want all the extras, and if she did not get them she would have a meltdown. After seeing that this was a trigger for her behavior, I learned that there could never be extra treats. For the rest of the year when there were treats for the class there was only just enough for everyone to have one treat; there were never any leftovers.

It was not always a pretty year, but Annie and I both made it, and I feel that when it was all said and done we had a good year. The number of tantrums decreased significantly and her school work steadily improved. I know after she left my class things did not get better, and she has had some very hard times, but whenever I see her around town she always comes over to visit and is genuinely happy to see me. When I think back on my time with her, I believe I was the one who did the most learning. Annie taught me that I needed to be more proactive when it came to my students, and that the help my students would need would have to come from me, not an outside source.

Mary was the student who always stayed in to visit with the teacher during recess. She was bright, articulate, and kind of an odd duck. She didn't really share any of the same interests with kids her own age; she was into photography, loved music, just not the type the other students enjoyed, and she would much rather help the teacher than play with students her own age. As the year progressed, Mary would share more and more about not only herself, but also her family. Mary seemed to come from a perfectly

normal family. Her parents were successful professionals who took an active role in their daughter's life and volunteered at school.

The only problem was when she would go home at night, she had to lock herself in the bathroom in order to escape her father's drunken rages. There were days that her homework was not complete or done as neatly as it should be, but maybe that was because it was not easy to stay focused or write in the bathtub. She made it through the year and things did get better. Though she was never really like the other students at school, she was an old soul, and she was able to find her niche because she knew someone at school cared. I still hear from Mary. She went to a prestigious college and graduated with honors. She often writes me and sends pictures, but perhaps that is because I was her best friend that year.

I knew the year was going to be the worst year ever! This was the year I got John. I had been hearing about John and his behavior issues ever since he entered our school. Both students and teachers would talk about his disruptive behavior and the mayhem he could cause. They all agreed that he wasn't mean-spirited, but teachers didn't like him because he was a constant distraction in the classroom, and students didn't like him because he always got them in trouble.

So before school started I had a good talk with myself, and I decided that I would make sure to give John a chance—that lasted about an hour into the first day. What I saw was a boy who did everything and anything to get attention, and the type of attention he got did not matter. His actions just screamed, "Look at me!" So I did, and I immediately started on a campaign to give him all the attention he could ever possibly want, but only for positive achievements. I would recognize and applaud his insect collection in front of the whole class; when students would ask for help on math problems, I would send them to John for help since he already knew how to do it, and if they needed help learning the Latin names for the botany project John was the one to see since he already had them all memorized. Each time I would recognize John or send students off to get help from him, I would always include the phrase, "Since John is the smartest student in the room." Of course none of my students ever seemed to pick up on the fact that I said this about every one of them.

Once the students, and that included John, could see that Mrs. Currie accepted John, then everyone accepted him. Students started to go to him for help all on their own, and John became my biggest volunteer and helper. As the year went on, he would sometimes decide to stay in at recess, and we would both sit there doing our work and just talk. It was during one of our "talks" that he shared with me that his mother had an alcohol problem and that at times she could be physically abusive. Later that same day he and I walked to the principal's office together to report the abuse and hopefully start the healing process. John has a special place in my heart; he still comes to visit and check in with me, he is still adding to his insect box, and just this week he rode his bike across town to get more pins. I am ever thankful that I didn't just listen to what other people had to say about him.

So when I have had a particularly rough day and I start to ask myself why I teach, I just have to think back on my students and all their small victories. I have to remind myself that a lot of what I do is subtle, and I might never see the actual results. It isn't just about test scores and academics; it is about teaching them about choices, responsibility, empathy, and caring. And if my students leave my class at the end of the year feeling like they have learned something and that Mrs. Currie cares about each one as a person, then I have won my biggest victory.

# How to be a Winner

*The secret to success is believing in yourself*

By Joshua Schlegel, 2014 ESD 105 Regional Teacher of the Year  
Harrison Middle School, Sunnyside School District

I reached to wipe tears that had begun to stream down my face and clenched my jaw as my eyes panned the room.

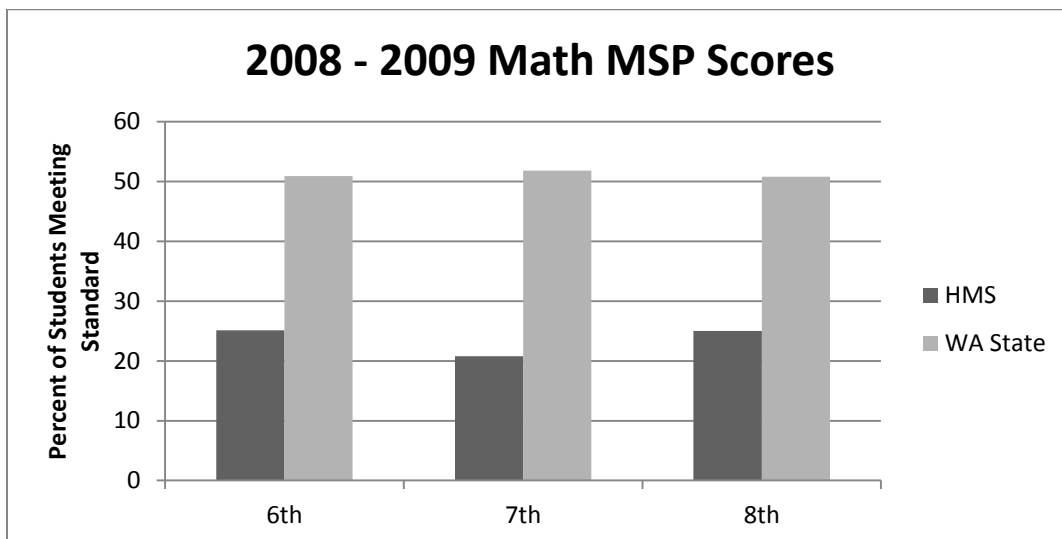
My fellow math teachers, and principal, now in tears as well, did the same. As we considered the news we had just received, there was an uncomfortable silence that had settled upon the room.

Again. Despite our best efforts, we had failed again.

As the secretary entered the room with pizza being delivered for lunch, her smile quickly disappeared, being replaced with a fretful expression. Obviously feeling uncomfortable, she hurriedly prepared our meal and disappeared, leaving us in the same silence she had found us.

The clicking of the latch in the door broke me from my trance. Now recapping the events leading up to this point in my mind, I thought of all the effort our students and we had put forth the previous year. All the time devoted to our students' learning. The hours spent working in grade-level teams and in before and after school tutoring. All the effort poured into giving our students the best possible chance of success. Surely our hard work had paid-off. Surely our scores would reflect our hard work. Surely we would no longer be a failing school!

As these hopeful thoughts settled in my mind it took one look at the slide projected on the wall to bring me back to what we had just been told was our reality.



The bar representing the 7th grade, the grade that I taught, cut the deepest.

"20%", I thought silently to myself. "20%! What?! HOW?! How could I have failed!"

I have failed. The phrase burned as I repeated it to myself silently, working-up a froth of discomfort, pain and sorrow.

After what seemed like hours had passed, Mary, a 6th grade math teacher, was the first to speak, stammering over her words, "We are doing everything they (consultants) are telling us to do and nothing is changing. I can't take another year of 25% when I am busting my butt and my kids are working so hard!"

Amy followed, lamenting, "Our scores have always looked like this. We have all done everything we can. No matter what we do they just aren't getting better. We actually did worse this year than we did last year!"

Amy's comment fell hard – summarizing what we were all thinking - "We tried harder. We worked longer. We gave 110% and, yet, we did worse. How?!"

Our team was bent.

Our team was battered.

Our team was broken.

After a long moment of reflection, our principal, Jackie, spoke, saying, "You all know that you are better than these scores, that your students are better than these scores. You all worked hard and it paid-off – it just isn't showing on this test. We need it to show on this test. Let's take a break for lunch and move to the next topic."

As we broke for lunch, my fellow teachers and I looked at each other with a knowing glance. Despite Jackie's effort to console us, we knew we had failed. We had failed repeatedly and we owned that failure, but we somehow knew that Jackie was right about one thing: Our students and we were better than those scores suggested.

This was a rough start to my first year as Math Coach for Harrison Middle School. More awkward was the fact that I was now the coach when just one year prior I had been part of a 7th grade team who earned the lowest math achievement scores our district had ever seen at the middle school level.

Who was I to lead a math improvement effort?

This self-doubt existed only for a moment before being replaced with a fervent belief that Jackie was right. We were better than those scores – our students were better than these scores - and this would be our year to prove it.

Alone in my office I sat, stewing on the Mary's words from our meeting earlier that week, "We are doing everything they (consultants) are telling us to do and nothing is changing." She was correct on both counts. We had become so beaten by year after year



of poor math scores that we had no faith in our own ability to increase student achievement. We were convinced that we were powerless, that we were incapable, and that we needed someone to fix us.

Reliving the past three years in my mind, I realized that our consultants took full advantage of this plea, taking every opportunity to remind us that, "The teacher is the greatest single contributing factor in student achievement. Your students aren't succeeding, and it is because your teaching practice needs to improve."

As a result of this belief, we worked hard to improve our practice; watching each-other teach, critiquing each-other's moves, and constantly trying to become what our consultants referred to as an effective teacher. For years, we had been told that we were ineffective teachers and for years we worked to become better; yet our scores continued to worsen.

Reflecting on years past, I committed that this year, my first year as math coach, would be different. I knew that we were good teachers; that our students were learning what we were teaching. I knew that we could improve our scores if we took control. With this mindset in place, I approached my principal with what would seem like a crazy proposal.

Jackie pondered the ideas I had just shared with her in silence, pinching her upper lip while she thought.

"You really think this will work?" she said in a questioning tone.

"I know it will." I replied.

Leaning forward, she examined my proposal for a second time, discussing the proposed actions with me. "So, you are suggesting that we stop working on pedagogy and work to write our own curriculum?" she asked again for clarification.

"Exactly." I replied. "Suppose that our best history teacher taught a unit on Desert Storm and then gave students a test on The Vietnam War. How would they do?"

"Terribly." she replied.

"That's my point." I said. "We have great teachers, and our students are learning what we are teaching. We just need to make sure that we are teaching the right stuff!"

"Our curriculum isn't the right stuff?" she asked.

"No." I replied. "We can do better. Our students deserve better."

After another moment of silence, Jackie spoke, saying, "Take it to the department and see what they want to do."

At the next department meeting, I shared the same proposal I had given to my principal. The reaction of the department was... Interesting...

The 6th and 8th grade both felt strongly that we were engaged in the right work, that we should continue to follow the consultant's lead; working to improve our teaching and follow the curriculum. Honoring their beliefs and choice, I granted the 6th and 8th grade the autonomy to continue down their path. The 7th grade, however, had different feelings...

In a separate meeting, both John and Susan (my replacement) shared that they felt that they were strong teachers and that writing our own curriculum was surely the route to improving student achievement.

"It will be a lot of work." I assured John and Susan.

This comment was met with a challenging look from John, who replied unwaveringly, "I want to hit it out of the park this year Josh, and if writing our own curriculum is what it takes, then that is what we will do."

Despite strong resistance from our consultants, the mountain of work involved, and the possibility that this effort would also fail, we began what would become a yearlong quest to author math materials that would exhibit what the department now calls 'deep alignment' to Washington State Standards.

During this time, countless hours were devoted to this cause, more often than not carrying long into the evening. The whole time, we were hopeful that this work would, work that we were pouring our heart and soul into, would not be in vain.

As the state test approached that year, our nervousness grew. Would the work pay off? Will what we did make a difference? Will our students finally realize the success they deserve? It was not until August of the following year that these questions would be answered.

August 2010: I was at a training being provided by our consultants when my phone began to buzz in my pocket. It was my principal, Jackie. "Something must be wrong." I thought to myself.

Anxiously, I excused myself from the training and went to the hall to return her call. The phone rang once, twice, and then came the somber voice on the other end of the phone. "Josh", said Jackie, "I need you to come to my office right now."

"Is everything okay?" I asked.

"I just need you to come to my office right now," she replied, hanging up the phone immediately.

I had never received a phone call like this before and, in a panic, ran from the high school library where our training was taking place to my car. Taking the fastest route from the high school to Harrison, I drove through the bus lane, pulled-up to the side entrance of the building and hurried to Jackie's office where I found both my principal Jackie and vice-principal, Olivia, waiting.

Their demeanor appeared somber and unsettling as I entered the room.

"Have a seat Josh," said Olivia.

Trying to appear calm, in spite of the sweat dripping from my face brought on by my excitement and the heat of the August sun, I asked, "What's up?"

"Take a look at this," replied Jackie, handing me a packet of papers.

As I studied what I had been given, I tried to make sense of the graphs and charts scattered about the pages – these were unlike any graphs I had seen before and, despite my math background, making sense of them was taking a moment.

Apparently taking notice of my confusion, Olivia spoke, saying, "Read the header."

I looked at the top of the page to find the words, "2010 Harrison Middle School MSP Scores." Now, more scattered than before, my eyes began darting about the page, searching for our math scores.

After finding and examining the data, I said, "The 6th and 8th grade scores are basically the same as they were last year, but where is 7th grade?" thumbing through the pages looking for the data.

"You're right," reinforced Jackie. "The 6th and 8th grade scores are basically the same. Almost no gain from last year."

Pining through the pages in front of me, in a panicked voice, I asked again, "What about 7th grade!"

Silently, Olivia reached out with a single sheet of paper that had been ripped from the packet, telling me to sit down before looking at it.

Taking a seat, I studied the graph for a moment, trying to be sure of what I was seeing. As my eyes rose back up to meet those of Jackie and Olivia, they were able to maintain their somber appearance for only a moment before screaming with excitement and literally jumping with joy!

"The 7th grade did it!" cried Jackie, tears of joy rather than sorrow streaming down her face this time.

"48%!" exclaimed Olivia.

"We did it!" I cried, unable to hold back the tears of joy myself. "We have to call John and Susan!"

Word of the 7th grade's success spread like wildfire throughout the department, building, and district; eventually being reported on by several local newspapers and television news programs.

News of the 7th grade's success was met by many with excitement and encouragement, although there was a faction who believed that these scores were indeed a fluke and that the following year the 7th grade math scores would surely be back where they had been for years; in the mid to low 20's.

At the same time, the 6th and 8th grade took notice of the 7th grade's success and made a commitment to replicate their work – working with me to author our own curriculum in hopes of realizing similar gains in student achievement.

What would happen over the course of the next few years? Was this spike in student achievement indeed a fluke? Could the poverty-stricken Hispanic community of Sunnyside, Washington really compete in mathematics at the state level?

What would happen over the course of the next few years was nothing short of extraordinary. Not only did the 7th grade maintain high levels of achievement, student success in the 7th grade rose to a high of 61%, exceeding that of the state average.

At the same time, student success in the 6th grade rose from 25.1% to a high of 58.7%, while the percent of students meeting standard in the 8th grade increased from 25% to a high of 48.3%.

These advancements in student math achievement were so dramatic, in fact, that Harrison Middle School's math performance rocketed from being among the bottom 14% in the State of Washington to the top 4% in only a 2-year period of time.

Jackie was right. Our students and we were better than our scores had suggested.

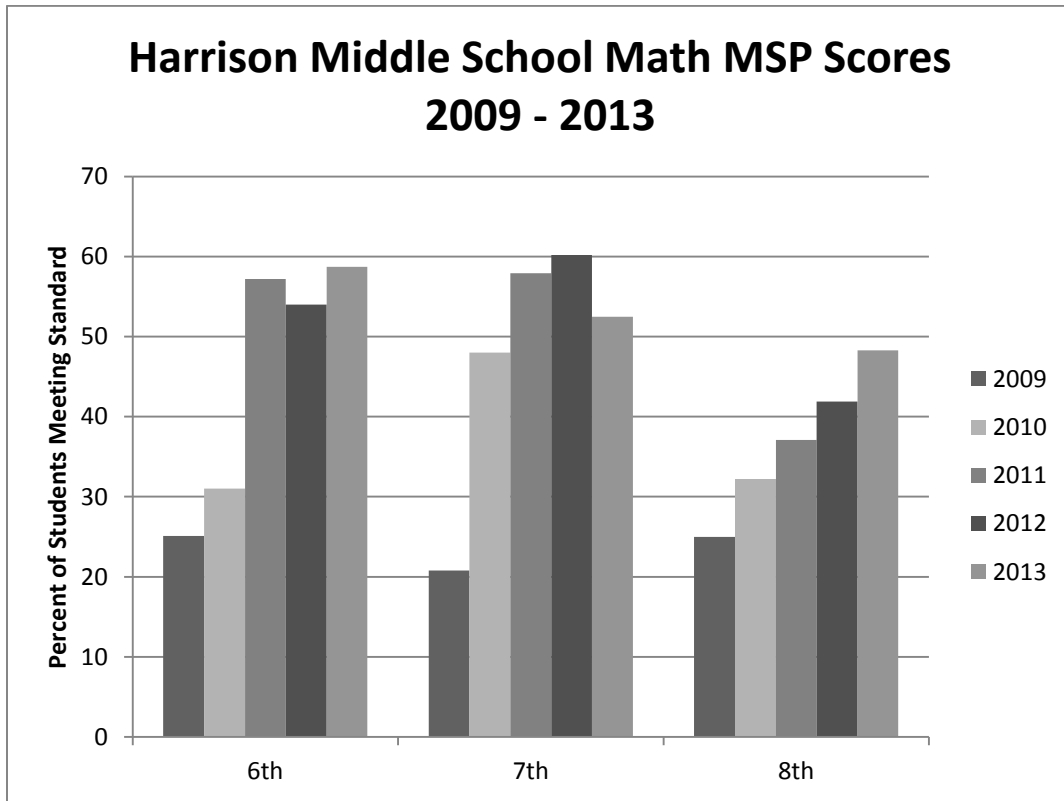
In a recent interview, Amy shared a statement much different than the one made at my first department meeting as math coach, saying, "We were good teachers. Our curriculum was the biggest contributing factor. If we had kept working on teaching, but were still teaching out of the book, it would not have worked. We would not have had the gains. Writing our own curriculum, it was crazy, but it is what made us a success – Yes!"

What made the difference? We realized that we do not need others to lead or guide our work. We realized that we are talented and creative enough to provide our students with a phenomenal education. We realized that we are truly unstoppable when set forth toward a common goal. We realized that together, we are champions.

The following excerpt from an email I sent to staff following the Teacher of the Year retreat summarizes the true meaning of my work:

I was not selected as the state Teacher of the Year, but I won. I won when I became part of the team we have here at Harrison. I won when our math scores went from the 20's to the 50's and 60's. I won when our statewide ranking in math went from the bottom 14% to the top 4%. I won when we proved that students in Sunnyside CAN and WILL be successful in math. I won when we proved that we are NOT a failing school. I won when I got to come back to Harrison.

Today, the slide projected on the wall is a far better picture than that of 2009.



# **If You Really Knew Me**

*Voices of Those Often Unheard*

By Katie Brown, 2014 Washington State Teacher of the Year  
Shuksan Middle School, Bellingham School District

*If you really knew me,*  
*You would know* that I only slept for three hours last night.  
I think the party ended at 4:00 AM?  
I'm still here.

*If you really knew me,*  
*You would know* that I was at the top of my class in China.  
I was ready for college.  
Will I graduate?

*If you really knew me,*  
*You would know* that I can't stay after school even though I need help.  
My mom has to go to work.  
I am responsible.  
My brother is only two:  
Dinner, bath, bedtime.  
I'm only eleven.

*If you really knew me,*  
*You would know* that I am from El Salvador, not Mexico.  
But you can keep calling me Mexican.  
I won't say anything.

*If you really knew me,*  
*You would know* that my earbuds are blasting Marvin Gaye.  
I'm a bit of a Romantic.  
What do you think I'm listening to?

*If you really knew me,*  
*You would know* that I share a room with five other people.  
Do I have a quiet space to do homework?  
I'm not sure what you mean.

*If you really knew me,*  
*You would know* that my dad was deported last night.  
I will stay strong for my mom.

I hope I see him again someday.

*If you really knew me,*  
*You would know* that I want to succeed.  
I can't act like it.  
I can't talk about it.  
I hope you can see through me.

*If you really knew me,*  
*You would know* that I'm writing a novel.  
When I seem to be in my own world, I am.  
I created it.  
You are welcome to visit any time.

*If you really knew me,*  
*You would know* that you are the most important adult in my life.  
I won't tell you that,  
But I will eat lunch in your room again tomorrow.

*If you really knew me,*  
*You would know* that I am the first one in my family to go to college.  
You keep telling me I can go if I choose.  
You keep telling me I can go if I want.  
You keep telling me.  
Ok.

*If you really knew me,*  
*You would know* that  
My name is Angelica.  
My name is Jin.  
My name is Thanh.  
My name is David.  
My name is Jose.  
My name is Eddie.  
My name is Antonia.  
My name is Mario.  
My name is Katrina.  
My name is Devin.  
My name is Parjinder.

# **A Basket Full Of Apples**

*A life changed for the better is this veteran teacher's greatest treasure*

By Bernice Hanan, 2014 ESD 123 Regional Teacher of the Year  
Chiawana High School, Pasco School District

In my years of teaching I have received many apples: red apples, yellow apples, big apples and little apples. One time even a full box of premium Fuji apples. I saw these apples as tokens of love and affection, brought by students with little hands and big hearts.

These apples have come in many colors and sizes. As the years have gone by and I reflect on my many students, I realize that the most precious, most valuable, the most enriching "apples" I have received are the stories of lives that have been touched and changed by their experiences in my classroom.

For many years I taught in a Dual Language Immersion kindergarten where only Spanish was spoken. Annie, an English only speaker entered my classroom as a quiet and shy kindergartener. As the year progressed, Annie blossomed in a classroom filled with a language where she didn't understand anything the teacher was saying. I watched as she began to pick up cues from the Spanish-speaking children that helped her make meaning of daily routines and move from bewilderment to understanding. By the end of that year, Annie could understand a lot and speak a few phrases of Spanish.

Two years later Annie's mother came to my classroom to share this story. She and Annie were in a local grocery store. In the check-out line a woman was having difficulty explaining something to the clerk. She didn't speak English, and the clerk didn't speak Spanish. Annie's mother asked her if she understood what the woman wanted. Annie said, "Yes." With a little urging from Mom, Annie translated for the Spanish-speaking woman. She was grateful for the help, and people were amazed that this little towheaded second grader could provide the needed translation. Annie's apple to me was the feeling of gratitude that came from being able to give her the skills needed to touch someone's life in a tangible way.

While teaching in a small, rural high school in central Oregon, I realized children had limited exposure to cultural and geographic differences. I wanted to give them an opportunity to use their language of study and also get a glimpse of another culture- a glimpse of what the lives of people outside of their city, even their country, was like. I wanted them to see both how different and how alike we are and how we all make up our world community.

With this in mind, I put together a program to take junior and senior high school students on a trip to a Spanish-speaking country. Not only would they have the



opportunity to use the language that they were studying, but they also would have a chance to learn another culture and make a contribution to it.

Our first trip was to build a school in a little town outside of Mexico City. Christina, with a bubbly personality and limited life experiences, could not envision what direction her life would take. Upon her arrival, she whole-heartedly engaged in opportunities to interact and speak with the nationals. She embraced the new culture with an openness to learn. She was so enthralled by the experience that she begged to be allowed to go on the school trip again the next year. As a result of these experiences, her life direction became clear. Upon graduating from college, she began a career as a coordinator for many World Vision projects. I received an apple from Christina when she sent a note saying how grateful she was for the experience that ignited the vision for her life work.

I received another apple just a week ago as I was shopping for shoes at a local department store. A young clerk turned to me and asked, "Mrs. Hanan, do you remember me? I was in your kindergarten class thirteen years ago, and I remember you telling us that we all needed to graduate. Well, I have graduated and am now in my first year of college." When I heard that, I felt grateful that he remembered those words of encouragement through the years. I have no doubt that with this determination he will continue his education and graduate from college. He will accomplish his goal.

As I reflect on my thirty years as an educator, I feel blessed. I am reminded that my teaching encompasses more than teaching a new language. It involves sharing life experiences, expanding students' vision and helping them gain a broader perspective of life. Little hands grow larger, hearts expand to encompass greater diversity and my basket of "apples" is over-flowing.

# Everybody is a Genius

*How we measure students will affect how they measure themselves*

By Amy Abrams, 2014 Puget Sound ESD 121 Regional Teacher of the Year  
Northwood Middle School, Kent School District

It had been a quiet year with Mason. This brilliant boy with Asperger's spent eight of his ten months with me trying to hide. He would tuck his head in his hands every time I walked by his desk in hopes that I would quickly pass by. I didn't.

"What are you thinking, Mason?"

"I don't know," seemed to be our daily exchange.

But I didn't, I wouldn't, actually, I couldn't, give up. Each morning I would greet him at the door. My "Good morning Mason" was often greeted by a look of "Please dear God make her go away." But I didn't. You see behind the quiet, "Leave me alone" exterior was a mind that I wanted to connect with. Eventually Mason realized that I wasn't going away. He found out that when he said "I don't know," I would plop myself right next to him and not budge until he would give me an answer.

Months passed by and I could tell that Mason was starting to trust me. He stopped hiding under his hood and actually pulled out his homework when I walked towards him. He even started to tell a few jokes. "Mrs. Abrams, orange you glad I'm here today?"

"Very punny, Mason." It took him awhile, but he came to the conclusion that he couldn't escape me. Despite the fact that Mason was brilliant, he was failing my class. He was like a computer that wasn't hooked up to a printer. I knew his grades didn't reflect his abilities and that frustrated me. I had to take action. Little did I know what a huge impact that one small action would have.

With four weeks of school left, I approached my principal and school counselor with an out-of-the-box idea regarding Mason. After getting their blessing, I told Mason I had a proposition for him. I informed him that the end-of-the-year project was one that reflected on ALL of the learning we had done throughout the year. I told him that whatever he earned on the project, he would earn for the semester.

Mason looked up, half expecting to see Ashton Kutcher. "Am I being punked?" left out of Mason's mouth.

"No Mason, I wouldn't do that to you." I noticed a flicker of something I can't quite describe in Mason's eyes. I don't know if it was relief or the comfort of being accepted for who he was.

"Thanks," was all Mason could say.

The next day we had a Socratic Seminar, a text-based, student-driven discussion that focuses the inquiry on a non-competitive search for truth. The focus for today's conversation was Charlie Gordon, the protagonist in Daniels Keys' "Flowers for Algernon." In the four prior seminars we had that year, Mason hadn't said one word. Today, I was going to stretch him a bit. Right in the middle of seminar I asked this unsuspecting young man a question.

Mason's ears turned Rudolph red. He started to fidget, but he answered. He looked me straight in the eyes and answered.

I almost cried. I met with his parents the day after and told them about the accommodations I was going to make in regards to Mason's semester grade. I thought they were going to cry. That one small act of thinking outside of the box changed everything. Mason now greeted me at the door, and he was turning in his assignments. He was making an effort. I was thrilled. It seemed that my efforts to get to know Mason, the real Mason, the funny, deep thinking, misunderstood Mason had paid off, but nothing could prepare me for what was about to happen.

On May 31, 2013, Mason's morning greeting surprised me! He looked at me and said, "The king has arrived." This was the most animated Mason had ever been in class. I thought he might be nervous as another Socratic Seminar was planned for the day. This one was more complex than the last and focused on the ethics of using Charlie Gordon, a mentally challenged thirty-seven-year-old, as a test subject for an operation that would triple his IQ. Just like in the last seminar, I asked Mason a question. This time there were no red ears, no fidgeting, just a deep breath and the following response. "What happened to Charlie Gordon would be the same as giving a young child a piece of candy and then taking it out of his mouth. He knew what it tasted like and wanted more but he couldn't have any more. He remembered the taste and was sad that he could never taste that candy again. That's both unethical and mean." The whole class sat in stunned silence.

I responded, "Class, let me introduce you to the brilliant Mason Beckler." The classroom erupted in applause. When I shared Mason's metaphor with my other classes, the response was the same, jaws dropped and then applause.

Every child can succeed. I know it, I live it and I try to pass this truth on to my colleagues, parents and students. Mason and all of my scholars are the embodiment of Einstein's famous quote: "Everybody is a genius. But, if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will spend its whole life believing it is stupid." For me the question isn't *if* my scholars can succeed, it's how am I going to inspire them to succeed.

# Saying Yes

*A piece of "junk mail" opens the door of possibility*

By Matthew Brewer, 2014 North Central ESD 171 Regional Teacher of the Year  
Soap Lake Middle & High School, Soap Lake School District

I'm often surprised at how it's the little choices in life that can lead to great big things. Like most of my colleagues, I became a teacher to change the lives of my students. What I didn't realize when I started this job is that most of the moments that my students remember and carry with them outside of my classroom would be nondescript and unplanned. I slave over lesson plans trying to create interesting and relevant learning experiences for my students. I stay up at night worrying whether or not I'm truly helping my students gain the skills and experiences that will help them lead fulfilling lives. I'm driven by the many successes and failures that I experience as a teacher every day. While I try to be as intentional as possible when I teach, the amazing thing about my job is that the most powerful moments can come from completely off-the-cuff moments.

One of the experiences that I've had as a teacher that I'm the most proud of happened very much in this way. It was a simple choice that led to a major change in how I teach.

As a teacher, I get tons of junk mail. Almost every day I get flyers for field trips, educational experiences and other offers of questionable value. I usually give them a cursory glance and send them on their merry way to the recycling plant. On this day, I found a flyer for something called ORCA Bowl. I scanned enough of it to learn that it was a "quiz-bowl" type competition based on oceanography. My school is located in a virtual desert over three hundred miles from the Pacific Ocean. Most of my students have never seen the ocean, and I couldn't imagine that they'd be interested in oceanography. However, for a reason that escapes me, I didn't throw it away. Instead, I put it on my desk and promptly forgot about it.

Later that day I was talking with a student and he noticed the flyer. He picked it up, read it and asked me if I was planning on taking kids to it. Before I could tell him no I saw the look in his eyes. I'm not sure why, but I found myself saying, "Yes, we're starting a team and the first practice is Tuesday." By the time Tuesday rolled around, I had convinced enough students to start practicing. For the next two months, the kids and I gave up our lunches to study oceanography together. I had just as little experience in this subject as my kids, so I struggled to stay just a little bit ahead of them. They drank up what they were learning like thirsty people drink water in the middle of a desert.

By the time the competition rolled around, I was able to take eight kids to the University of Washington (their first time visiting a major university). We were the only team from our side of the Cascades, and we were by far the poorest and smallest school in the competition. Nevertheless, the kids did very well and finished just a whisker short of the

trophy round. At the end of the competition, the kids were already talking about the practice schedule for the next years' competition.

At the competition there was a poster advertising a program where high school teachers could apply to teach oceanography for college credit in their schools. I read the poster and immediately dismissed it as impossible for me. I promptly put it out of my mind and moved on to other things.

At the next year's competition, a student, eyeing that same poster, asked me why we weren't teaching oceanography at Soap Lake. I started telling him all the reasons why it would be impossible.

He interrupted me and said, "Mr. Brewer, how will you know unless you ask?" Abashed, I went to the guy stationed at the poster and discovered that not only was it not impossible, but, given a little bit of training and work on my end, I'd be qualified to bring a university-level science class to my school!

Two small decisions, prompted by student questions and interest, led to major change in my classroom. I now teach two different university-level classes for college credit, and I helped our English teacher bring in two college-credit classes through the same program. Our ORCA bowl team has more than twenty kids (about 20% of the whole student population), we've branched out to Knowledge Bowl, and several of my kids have told me they plan on pursuing oceanography as a career after high school.

I'd like to take credit for all this, but I didn't plan any of it. I simply answered their questions and allowed them to pursue their passions. This is what is so great about being a teacher: I don't know where my kids are going to lead me. If I can get out of their way, they'll take me to amazing places and we'll go much further than even I can imagine.

# The ABCs

*A veteran teacher shares secrets to a career filled with joy*

By Sheila Stuhlsatz, ESD 112 Regional Teacher of the Year  
Kalama Middle & High School, Kalama School District

I am a teacher. ¡Maestra! I take young people under my wing and support them in discovering something new. I push, pull and encourage them to be the best they can be every day and to never, ever give up, no matter what the challenge. I have learned something every day in this amazing and joy-filled career that has spanned almost three decades and has included all grade levels, dual languages, specialist positions and administration. I get back from my students, peers and families as much or even more than I have given. So, I'm going to give you the ABC's of teaching, according to Maestra:

**Attitude:** If you expect greatness, you will get it. It can be hard to keep a positive attitude when we struggle with money, technology, and quality of support services, but using what you have to the best of your abilities will take you and your students farther than you can imagine. Starting every day fresh with eyes open to the possibilities is the attitude I have adopted.

**BEST:** The state's Beginning Educator Support Team (BEST). It is our responsibility as a profession to support and mentor the newest to the profession as well as assist those with experience to expand their abilities. A new teacher doesn't have a couple years to learn our profession. We expect them to jump in and keep students moving forward. Experienced teachers are given new mandates and curriculum changes, but little time to understand and implement them.

Collaborative time for teachers to meet within departments, grade levels and across grade level teams is a basic need for the continued growth of our profession and schools. With support, students in classrooms with beginning teachers continue to grow, and experienced teachers can work together to meet the needs of previously underserved populations. We must make this a priority. All districts, regardless of size, should be afforded coaches and mentors to focus on building the capacity of all teachers.

**Children:** Everyone who walks through my door is someone's child. I may see 150 students in a day, but I have to remember that each one is special in the eyes of their parent. When there is a challenge or special need, I need to make sure every child can come in and feel, "yes, I'm in class and I'm going to learn something today."

**Dos and don'ts:** Don't expect your day to be perfect or that you will know it all. There is so much to learn. From the moment you open the door in September to the moment you close it in June, you have to think on your feet. Do expect to be surprised by what happens each day, and use those surprises to build tomorrow's lesson. Don't be afraid to ask for help. Remember, "Two heads are better than one." Do take care of your secretaries and custodians. They are the roots of the school, the strength that holds everything together and truly the eyes and ears of the place.

**Enthusiasm:** When I meet a young student who says to me, “Maestra, I can’t wait to take your class!” I know the enthusiasm I feel for teaching truly is contagious. Making students feel that today is going to be their “BEST DAY EVER!” can make even the most daunting grammatical instruction seem fun.

**Favoritos:** I call every class my favorite, because they are. As humans we tend to dwell on the negative. When a student comes in to my class and “brags” about how they are the worst class Mr. or Mrs. Teacher has, I know it affects their learning. Kids behave in ways that we may not understand culturally or due to circumstances beyond their control. They may just be doing what comes naturally and testing the limits. By imagining each class and each student as my favorite, I can look upon them with a positive attitude every day, no matter what.

**Grades:** Grades are not the target. Learning is. Helping students look at what we are learning and why it’s important allows them to reflect on their attainment of the day’s learning targets. Are they able to use the target language, understand the grammatical structure, and compare the culture to their own? Are the standards clear and specific enough that students can use them to self-assess? Keep your grades updated. If you can’t grade it, think about using alternate type assessments or practice. If it’s important enough for you to have them do it, it’s important enough for them to receive prompt feedback.

**Have an IHABD (I Had a Bad Day) Folder:** Have an actual folder where you put the positive e-mails, notes and reflections of an especially great day. We all need to remind ourselves, when things don’t go the way we had hoped, that there really is more positive than negative in this profession. Read these when you have a bad day.

I have an e-mail from a student who nominated me for a radio station teacher of the week; notes from parents; recognition from my administration or others for the work I do outside the classroom; and thank you cards from student teachers and interns. I even have autographed pictures of an astronaut, a WNBA athlete, a film producer and a kindergarten teacher - all previous students.

**Influence:** I have a lot of influence on each student, and there is great power in what I say. I am careful with that power. The smallest comment can make the difference in a student’s life. I want any comment I make to be memorable in a positive way. It still shocks me when a kiddo comes back and shares something I said that challenged them, changed their life, or made them feel better.

**Just Do It:** Put aside all your anxieties, fears and presuppositions and just get in there and do it!

**Know Thyself:** Understand how your learning style influences your teaching style. It is important, to meet the needs of all, to spend time making sure that all learning styles are addressed. I do this in my planning for each week. With Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences “Cheat Sheet” on my side, I make sure that the week’s plans address each of the intelligences in some way. Vocabulary learning focuses on allowing the students to

acquire that knowledge through their own style. Flashcards may work for some, drawings for others. The songs I make up are loved by some and really, who doesn't like dancing the Macarena while reciting the months of the year? Well, if you don't, you can be assured that during this week you will learn something in a way that honors your learning style.

**Little Terrorists:** As I stated before, be careful what you say because you never know what students will remember the most. In our school we run an advisory program where we help students prepare for life after high school. I had a group of students that encouraged me to try a variety of techniques to engage them in the activities we needed to do so they could meet all the graduation requirements. Much of the class period was spent encouraging them to accomplish these tasks.

ONE DAY, I repeat, only one time, did I say, "OK, c'mon you terroristas, let's focus on this one task and get this done." One year after their graduation, they came to visit, brought me a picture of the advisory class and underneath was the label, "Maestra's Little Terrorists." Although they looked at the label with love (there was a reason I had this group of kiddos), it reminded me of the power of everything that comes out of my mouth.

**Maestra:** It **is** the "Maestra Show" every day. I have important things for the students to learn linguistically and culturally. I stay caught up in the latest trends in language acquisition and seek out collegial opportunities to improve my instruction. The ideas I have garnered (OK, stolen) from my peers keeps my daily instruction diversified to meet the needs of all the learners in my classes.

**Never, ever give up:** Every child is teachable; I just have to figure out what they need to make learning happen. Developing a good learning relationship with my students is just as important as the curriculum I'm teaching. I don't get to choose who comes through my door, nor am I in control of what has happened in their lives. What I can do is make sure I'm ready to take them where they are and encourage, cajole and push them into learning. Each lesson has to include enough challenge for the advanced student, enough practice for the one who needs it, and a many ways to assist students in reaching the target for that day. Knowing that for 50 minutes each day they will be in a positive learning environment that respects their individual differences can be the one thing that keeps someone moving forward.

**Opportunities:** Be on the lookout for great opportunities to let your students experience the curriculum outside of class. We have been pen pals with elementary bilingual students and Department of Defense Spanish language learners in Cuba. Trips to see culturally significant plays like "Evita," "In the Heights" and "West Side Story" expose students to musical theater. Attending World Languages Day at the University of Washington gives them a chance to attend classes in any language they are interested in. Speakers from the community talk about jobs that involve bilingualism as well as opportunities for overseas travel and bring new ideas to the students. Even though our



district does not have the funds for field trips, we have been able to participate by students paying their own way and choosing to go on non-school days.

**Parents and the Public:** Open your doors to parents and the public so they can witness firsthand what is going on. Each year my first year students put together Quinceañera projects that we display to parents. They not only research and plan their own Quinceañera, but participate in many of the traditions. After teaching all students how to waltz, it is not uncommon to see sons and mothers or daughters and fathers dancing together at the program presentation.

We cook in class every month, trying out a recipe from one of the Spanish speaking countries of the world. Parents come in and help with the activity and see how their students perform in the target language. When a parent tells me how excited they were that their student came home and cooked empanadas or buñuelos, I know they are bringing home what they learn and sharing it with others.

**Quiet Time:** Taking time at the end of every day to quietly reflect allows me to go home ready to be with my family. Every day I end with these thoughts: Today was AWESOME because . . . I could do better by . . . Tomorrow is going to be a great day because . . . These three phrases allow me to celebrate my successes, acknowledge my failures and prepare myself for the surprises the next day will bring.

**Remember:** You were a teenager once, too. Some of us just recently, others LONG ago! Part of being a teenager is learning to separate yourself so you can become an independent adult. There is so much going on in their heads that we may have to remind them often of expectations. But think back to your high school career. A very smart man (Eric Samson from Olympic ESD 114) said during our Teacher of the Year retreat, "The students don't really remember what I taught them, but how they felt in my room while I was teaching them." Thank you, Eric, for that. I want each student that comes through my door to remember they are special, unique and important.

**Sing:** Every teacher has to maintain a classroom environment where all kids can learn, and that means that we must sometimes hold them accountable for behaviors that distract from others' learning. I do this by making up songs. If you are texting in class, I'll sing to you the "sorrow" song. Not on task and disturbing someone else? You'll hear "If you were a student." And late students hear everyone's favorite, "He is a tardy boy" or "She is a tardy girl." Lightening the mood leaves little room for argument, and we can continue with instruction. Even if you cannot carry a tune, when you make up a song they don't know that -plus you have a captive audience! In language instruction, songs are also useful for memorizing grammar structures. Sing!

**Telephone:** An indispensable tool and very handy when students are chronically absent or tardy. Above my phone in the classroom I put up phone numbers of students who have missed five days. After that, every time they are out I personally call their cell phone and/or house phone. I have woken up a few families, but I think deep down the students appreciate the follow up. Kids who have a hard time getting up and moving in

the morning respond to a cheery “good morning”, and “it’s hard to have class without you. Come to school.” Just three minutes reduces a lot of absences.

**Use your resources:** Be collegial. Share ideas and work together. We cannot survive in this profession by isolating ourselves. Find ways to open your door to others, and seek out professional advice. If I’m having trouble with a student, I’ll first seek out other teachers and often find out personal information that affects the way that student is performing. I’ll find out techniques that work for other teachers to engage that student.

Staying connected with parents is an important tool. Sending home a monthly newsletter (yes, even in high school) describing our month’s activities lets parents know what is going on. The more parents know, the more they can support you. I strive to contact every parent once during the first two months of school and share something positive that their student is doing in class. This first time positive connection makes parents more comfortable if I call when their student is struggling.

**Vote:** Make sure you know who is representing you. Take time to get to know your representatives and what they stand for. Vote every time you can. It doesn’t matter who you vote for, but exercise your right as a US citizen to be involved in the decision making process.

Read and remember: your legislators want to hear from you. They are people too, and they may not know everything about an issue. Who better to help them understand educational issues than teachers? Take advantage of this amazing freedom we call democracy and play an active role. Invite your representatives to visit your classroom, so they can see what is happening in our schools.

**Walk in their shoes:** We don’t know what has happened in the lives of others. Look at everything through a lens of tolerance. This goes for students, parents, the public and peers. A positive work environment requires a positive presupposition about the actions and behaviors of others. Teach tolerance by modeling tolerance.

**X-out any bullying behaviors:** Address issues as they come up. Developing a classroom of learners who respect each other - even in jest - is important. In a small school where students have known each other since kindergarten a lot of bullying is described as “playing around.” I have zero tolerance. This is a classroom where everyone is treated with respect, no matter what. That also goes for self-deprecating talk. If it is not truthful, kind, helpful, or positive, it is not to be spoken out loud.

**YES!:** Sí se puede. We can and should hold our heads high. We are a profession that contributes to the greatness of our state and country. All professionals spent time in a classroom, and it was teachers who gave them their start. It was teachers who encouraged the reluctant, pushed the gifted and provided equal opportunities for all to succeed.

**Zero is NOT acceptable:** No excuses, no blame. If there is a zero in the grade book it means I need to work harder. I need to modify instruction, incorporate resources to

reach the student, or analyze my assignment. No student gets to sit back and “earn” nothing. By holding them to rigor and standards, every one of them can achieve. Don’t give up! Sí se puede.

# **The Grace of Harley's Voice**

*An unconventional student steps into the spotlight*

By Jeffrey Dunn, 2014 Northeast ESD 101 Regional Teacher of the Year  
Deer Park High School, Deer Park School District

. . . My words are not heard . . .  
Because I'm the little homeless girl  
Just so sick and disgusted  
With her own little meager world.  
Now, I'll remember 'til the day I die  
The hookers who always helped us by.  
The drug dealers who gave me a birthday  
When we had no money.  
But I guess you all laugh  
And think that this is funny.  
Remember, that I'm the homeless girl.  
Lost again,  
Without a clue.  
But I've got some friends.  
Just me, my family, and my old man.  
Doing things that we can.  
Yeah, because this is my thing.  
My little depression ring.  
And together this will be our own  
Little homeless thing.

I first encountered Harley, the future 2011 Spokane Teen Poetry Slam champion, in my afterschool creative writing workshop, an endeavor I have facilitated for the past twenty-five years under the name Erratics, a name I chose to suggest the whimsy of massive stones dropped by ice age processes. I must admit that Harley made a striking first impression. It wasn't her demeanor, although she was shy and self-effacing by nature, and it wasn't her appearance, somewhat round, pale-complected, and raven-haired; no, it was her drawings and her poetry which left a very strong impression.

Her drawings were what first caught my eye. She liked to work in black pen on white paper. Her subjects were remarkable: arms with exquisite scars, human figures with intricate tattoos, and feminine heads gagged to remain silent. It was hard to look away because her drawings cried out for a viewer's attention, and I must admit her drawings caught and held my gaze. Clearly this young lady had talent.

Toward the end of our workshop, the Erratics group always had time for students to occupy the author's chair to share their work and to receive constructive feedback from

the group. Harley, the drawer of exquisite subjects, shyly volunteered to walk to the author's chair, in this case a stool my father had bought me twenty years ago, and read a poem of her own composing. She haltingly started, once, twice, and then the third time her voice slowly built strength. Like her drawings, her poem had compelling imagery. Unlike her demeanor, her voice carried a razor's challenge. Against our rural, mostly white expectations, her poem was a rap. With the reading of this poem, Harley Bates had announced herself to the group, and we took notice.

What then for a teacher like me to do? Before she left our workshop, I asked Harley about herself. She said she was new to Deer Park and was enrolled in the alternative school. When I asked why the alternative school, she replied that she didn't do school very well, a confession which belied her present performance. I couldn't resist the urge to wonder out loud to her if she would like to join my Eastern Washington University, college-in-the-high-school, English 101 class. She thought that would be an interesting idea, and after communicating with the alternative school director and high school counselor, Harley showed up in my classroom the next morning as shy and precocious as she had been the previous afternoon.

The experience of the next few weeks proved that Harley was right and I was wrong; she did not do school very well. It's not that each of us didn't try. Harley tried to respond to vocabulary activities and produce brainstorm and draft versions of argumentative essays. I tried to encourage her to give it a go and offer feedback for revisions. Yet, scheme as we might, Harley always gravitated to a spot on the floor near my teacher desk where she would ink her exquisite drawings and poems. Clearly in the context of EWU 101, both Harley and I were failing, and by semester's end, she was back in the alternative school full-time.

Here I was again, what then for a teacher like me to do? So many thoughts and feelings welled up: pretty sure the apple doesn't fall far from the tree; must have had some pretty bad teachers and been in some pretty bad schools; can't be held accountable for a child who was left behind long ago, and finally the words that put students on the trash heap of society, goodness she is lazy, lazy, lazy . . .

And here was when Harley one afternoon brought grace into my classroom and rescued me from the trash heap of my profession—me, lying among the bone-phrases of dead teacher-student relationships. Here was when Harley the teenager, Harley the survivor, Harley the artist, came back to our after school Erratics workshop with a fistful of drawings and a throat full of poetry, and our work began preparing for the Spokane Teen Poetry Slam.

We all wrote, critiqued, and revised poems. We all recited, delivered, critiqued, and recited poems again. Truth be told, some of Harley's mates were dazzled by her output. A few were jealous. Harley, as the epigraph attests and to her credit, had more life experience than anyone in the room and yet dealt with her peers with a charming, self-effacing innocence. Clearly she had learned to expect nothing from life and simply appreciated being included in our little band of artists.

Finally came the night of the Teen Poetry Slam. Eighteen students and three adults piled into the yellow school bus for our forty-minute trip into the big city. We carried with us our price of admission, canned goods for local food banks. Piling out of the bus, we headed down the sidewalk past nattily attired Nordstrom shoppers, secretaries carrying their heels, and the sometimes-chattering-with-mental-illness homeless. We walked through the glass doors of the Riverpark Square Mall, over the mosaic map of Spokane area lakes, up the escalator, past the food court, and into the Kress Gallery. There was a buzz about the venue as eight of our students, including Harley, got in line. The rest of us found our seats and milled about, some taking in new surroundings and others renewing acquaintances from past Teen Poetry Slams.

The first round of the slam called each one of the fourteen contestants to recite a poem of three minutes or less to a panel of five judges, each an MFA creative writing graduate student at Eastern Washington University. When Harley's name was called, she walked to the stage a bit flustered by the mic, the lights, and the audience, but when the first word of her poem "Own Little Thing" came out of her mouth, she owned the stage and audience. There was none of the shy, self-effacing Harley we Erratics workshop participants knew so well. Clearly tonight was to be Harley's debut, and the oohs and finger snaps from the audience attested to the impact she made.

Scoring at Poetry Slam is borrowed from Olympic scoring, and when Harley finished taking her audience on a journey through her past homeless life on the streets of Las Vegas, the scores came in: 9.6 ("yeah!" from the audience), 9.8 ("yay!" from the audience), 9.3 ("ooh!" from the audience), 9.9 ("yay!!!") from the audience), and 8.9 ("boo!" from the audience). Previously the master of ceremonies had explained that the top and bottom scores were dropped and the middle three scores were added together, and after a few moments a judge yelled that Harley's total was 28.7, eliciting a cheer from the audience because we knew that this score would certainly place Harley in the final eight for the second, and final, round of the competition.

Round two came soon enough, and for the second time Harley took and owned the stage, this time reciting from memory her rap about her erotic connection with redheads. At poetry readings, audiences are attracted to writing and performance which they perceive as fresh, honest, edgy, and brave, and Harley had checked off each criterion. It came as no surprise to anyone but Harley that she was first called to stage as one of the top three contestants and next named 2011 winner of the Spokane Teen Poetry Slam. The audience stood and applauded the "little homeless girl" whose "words are not heard." The audience clearly had heard, appreciated, and included her into the world of poets and artists which for her had previously existed only as a place on a classroom floor tucked behind the teacher desk.

And that would be enough, except that as part of her prize, Harley was invited to open for feminist folk-rock musician Ani DiFranco at the Bing Crosby Theater that weekend. Apparently some harmonic convergence was at work for one Harley Bates. First, her mom found the money to buy her daughter a new dress (no easy feat). Second, Ani DiFranco was the sort who had turned being female, fresh, honest, edgy and brave into

her own record label. Needless to say the night Harley opened for Ani DiFranco was a night to remember. The Bing was sold out, filled with kindred spirits. The lights were bright and the mic was loud. Harley's recitation of "Own Little Thing" delighted the audience who connected with a young lady who knew that America wasn't as just and didn't love its children as much as it often preached. Harley's night can best be described as one of her favorite words, "magical." It would be trite to say that Harley came to the Bing a Cinderella, because her life had been much harder and her prospects were even less than Cinderella's. Yet, like Cinderella, she could not have dreamed a better evening.

Even more importantly, Harley, the one-no-one-heard, was listened to. And maybe, if we teachers are quiet long enough to listen, our students will continue to give us the grace of their voices.