

COMMENTS

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Community Update is published by the Office of Intergovernmental and Interagency Affairs, U.S. Department of Education.

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The Class That Taught the Teacher

By Anne Jolly, *Mobile, Alabama*

I'll always remember "The Class"—the one where kids came in thinking, "I don't like science. I don't like math. I don't see how any of this stuff relates to me."

My careful planning and preparation did nothing to change their minds. Neither did attempts to help these students experience success by praising their occasional progress. Worse, I kept hitting a blank wall as I struggled to build the vital student-teacher rapport so necessary to learning.

In desperation, I decided to try a radically different teaching approach with these eighth-graders. Our new school facility was causing environmental problems. Excessive sedimentation, coupled with runoff from the oversized asphalt parking lot, drained directly into a creek that fed Mobile Bay. I wondered what would happen if The Class tackled this real-life problem by building a wetland. Of course, I had no idea how to actually construct a wetland, but the community came to my rescue.

A local education foundation funded the wetland project. A forestry service employee provided advice on the kinds of plants to include. A civil engineering professor helped the class understand the impacts of the sedimentation and runoff, and the role of a wetland in addressing this problem. He led the students on a scouting expedition around the campus and helped them apply appropriate criteria to selecting a site for the wetland. Students from his engineering classes scouted out the situation and recommended a wetland design as my students shadowed them.

PTA parents provided plants for the wetland. Parents who normally

appeared at school only for discipline conferences brought materials and provided students with information about constructing a weir to back up water in the wetland. Chronically tardy students arrived before school with shovels, rakes, hoes, nails, hammers and other materials they needed to construct the weir, shape the wetland area and relocate plants.

School personnel also pitched in. Coaches allowed muddy students to track across the gym floor and use the showers in the locker rooms to clean up. Custodians mopped up the mud good-naturedly. The eighth-grade teaching team rearranged class schedules to accommodate the time needed to construct the wetland.

Somewhere along the way, those students and I connected. Most knew a lot about construction work and they willingly taught me what they knew. Previously labeled as "lazy," these teens worked together long hours in the blistering heat. The project foreman, a young man who had failed twice, interpreted the detailed schematic diagrams provided by the engineering class and kept the project on track. Uninterested math students seemed to understand exactly why they needed to calculate areas and angles to build the frame for the weir.

More important than constructing the wetland, these students finally experienced success. They learned science concepts and saw a reason for knowing these things. They applied math that previously had had no meaning for them. They had a reason to look forward to school. "The Class" taught me a lot about teaching science that year. I'll always be grateful to them.

Anne Jolly taught science in the Mobile County Public School System for 16 years and in 1994 was named the Alabama Teacher of the Year. Last year, she served as a member of the National Commission on Mathematics and Science Teaching for the 21st Century. She now works as an education program specialist for SERVE, a federally funded research and development laboratory covering the southeast states.

