

CHALK TALK: Never Say Never

By LAUREN MATTONE

Published in print: October 15, 2019

“I’m never going to teach sixth grade.” I told myself that for a long time, even as I prepared to take the exams that would allow me to add a first through sixth grade certification to my current preschool to third grade credentials.

Sixth graders come with a certain reputation as being difficult, and smelly, as they simultaneously reach the beginnings of puberty and the pinnacle of status as the “rulers of the school.” The transition to middle school is right around the corner. They know the teachers, they know how the game is played.

So, I got my new certification, but I was never going to be a sixth-grade teacher. Until my principal asked the question, “What do you think about teaching sixth grade?” Before I could answer, he added the magic words, “You would teach Language Arts to your homeroom students, and math to all of the sixth graders.”

Which meant that, yes, I **WOULD** be teaching sixth grade. Because, as any one of my former elementary school students will tell you, I **LOVE** teaching math.

Reactions to my new assignment ranged from “Are you really **SURE** you want sixth grade,” to “Are you happy with the assignment?” to “You’re going to be **AWESOME**.”

That was last spring. I began teaching sixth grade with the new school year, and I can answer at least two of the questions in the affirmative. I do want to teach sixth grade, because I don’t want to be doing the same thing year after year. Taking the General Curriculum, Math subtest and Foundations of Literacy tests were a challenge. I like challenges.

I’d taught preschool for 12 years, then kindergarten for six years, a stint in first grade on my way to being a second-grade teacher for 11 years. I’d added adults to my roster as I began teaching both undergrads and graduate students at local colleges.

Some teachers take comfort in knowing their age group, creating and instructing them with passion and dedication for many years. I admire these teachers. But my teaching career has been one of diversity, and I revel in the challenge of moving on, as well as using what I’ve learned over the years with different student populations.



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Am I happy with the assignment? Absolutely. I am working with students on subjects I love in ways I find challenging and rewarding. I am part of a team of teachers who are thoughtful, kind and supportive of the newbie. I continue to be part of a school community that values treating every student as if they were your very own student.

I am working with students I've taught before, and can assure teachers at younger grades — “Yes, they DO grow up. Quite nicely.” I'm flattered that my principal thought I would be able to make a three year leap in the students I teach, and learn brand new curricula.

But really, what I've discovered, is for me — I love teaching. The grade has very little to do with my enjoyment of the job. All of my experience as a preschool teacher, all of my experience in early elementary, all of my experience in undergraduate and graduate classrooms has prepared me to look at my students for whom they are.

Whether they are 4 years old or 12 or 30, they want to know if they're doing the “right” thing. They want to be respected for whom they are, for what they bring to the classroom. They want to believe that their ideas are important and valued. Those qualities are present in every student I've ever met.

Will I be awesome? I don't know. What I can say is that I have been blessed with many awesome students over the years. I believe down to my very soul that to be an awesome teacher, you have to have awesome students. Without a doubt, the current class is awesome. I am looking forward to many more.

And if you ask me, “Would you teach middle school,” I'll probably answer, “I will NEVER teach middle school.” But I've been wrong before.

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