

Teacher Interview: Kathy Saunders

Imagine someone visited your class several times, what would they say the principal teaching strategies you use are? Could you talk about teaching strategies you use that are universal, and as well as strategies are somewhat unique to you and your personality?

If somebody visited my class several times, they would see students engaging in independence and autonomy at the same time. It's a very predictable environment. You would see the essentials enduring question; you would see learning targets established, and you would see structure in the classroom. I believe that to prepare students for the 21st century, they have to be able to think critically, be creative, communicate and collaborate, so that takes place every day in the classroom. But some of the things that are very unique to me as a teacher is that students have a very...I wouldn't say unique but that students enjoy is that students have a big voice in the classroom and the outcome of where things go. So even at the beginning of the year, we decided to do a year-long service project, and students were able to do research on what we would study over the course of the year, and they researched topics; they were able to vote as a class on the top five; we have a classroom wikispace, and then they continued to narrow that down and vote, and that tied to our studies for the year. So our informational text and our literature and what we did for our service learning project, and continue to do, are tied to what the students chose, so even as we study...for example, they chose the impact of poverty on education and homelessness, so the authors that we chose in American literature and the studies of American literature are tied to that. So when students have a stake in the outcome and when they have a choice what they do, they do better. I learn about them; they learn about me, and actually, they perform better inside and outside the classroom. So that is something that I believe is unique in my approach and I believe it relates to increased performance.

How do you organize your class to maximize learning opportunities for your students? How do you help them become better learners?

My class is organized in a way that is constantly changing based upon what we're doing. Good groups: the way students are grouped in the classroom; the seating chart is always changing, and it's changed based upon what we're doing. So the groups...the groupings are based on the activity, and so the way that it's...the way that it would be organized would be on the events, so again, it's based on choice and control as well, so students have opportunities to participate in different things. So as we study different challenging events, students have a choice in how they want to output. Some students are more creative; they may be more artistic, more musically inclined, so they always have the opportunity to shine in a variety of manners. So for example, we were studying the impact of homelessness on teens who run away, who are bullied, and we did that through a poetry activity, and one of the things that students could do was do research on it. Other students were more artistically inclined, and so we participated in decorating boxes for a local foundation for a fundraiser they were doing, so they were able to express themselves artistically that way. So students have choices in the classroom and there's typically a writing assignment that is tied to that as well, but I do believe in celebrating the differences

and the unique qualities of students and giving them the ability to show that in their work through choice and control.

How do you differentiate instruction to meet the needs of students with special needs (EC, ESL, AIG, etc.)?

I believe that students should understand what their strengths and weaknesses are and I don't think you should always play to your strengths; I think you need to understand as well where you need to grow as a student, so I strongly believe in what's called Assessment Capable Learning. So students need to be educated in where they need to go to get to their end goal, and you know, unfortunately, testing is part of what a student has to go through in their educational career. So right now I have honors English 3; I have inclusion English 3 and I have AP English 3. All of those are tested subjects, but students create a plan for themselves, a personalized plan, and they can speak about where they need to go, and so they track their own data; they take a look at it and through that, through that differentiation, they can say that they need to focus their attention in different areas and they can prove their performance to me by different types of products and output. But they also need to understand that after taking a certain type of test, we do need to focus on different directions so it's important that a student can have a conversation or discourse about strengths and weaknesses so that we can get there together, so it is important for a student to understand what their individual goals are and it's important for them to partner with the teacher and the parent as well to get them to their end goal, which is to do well, and that's the blessing as a teacher when you see a student actually feel that sense of accomplishment.

How do you know when learning is occurring and what do you do when you question whether learning is taking place in the classroom?

Learning is occurring when I see a student struggling. They're moving through the struggle of learning, and I tell them that. When you're feeling that struggle, that's a good thing. You're learning. When you're sitting there and it's all easy, that means we need to move on, you know, you've got it, but that struggle is a blessing. You've identified the area that we need to focus on. I know because we've tracked mastery. I know that we're able to move to the next step and that's another thing we can check off of our list. I know the blessing that occurs when a student is smiling, and I know that learning is occurring when we can move on to the next thing. So we're tracking our performance, but learning is occurring and it looks like so many different things; it's a smile, it's confidence; it's when the relief comes over a student's face; it's when I get more sentences than I asked for. You know, it's beyond proficiency; it's mastery, and it's excitement and enthusiasm; it's when a student shows up for class that doesn't always show up for class. You know, it's when...it's confidence is what learning looks like. It's confidence.

How do you "hook" a reluctant learner to your content?

You know, there's that...there's relevance, there's rigor and there's relationships. When you build a relationship with a student, you can choose what's relevant and then the rigor comes after that, and we do an activity at the very beginning of the year, Ten to Twenty Things about Me, and I start and I share mine and it's a digital learning activity and it builds 21st century skills. Students are willing to share more than anything during that time, and I can learn more about a student during that time, and it can build

relationships, and right now our service learning project is about poverty in education and we're also moving toward helping the homeless, and I've learned more about my students who are willing to speak out about their own homelessness, students who are willing to get up and present and share out, and other students who are just willing to help people, but our whole classroom, and all my classes are working together and that never happens, so all of a sudden, everything is relevant. And students are...they are connected to each other; they're connected to me. I feel connected to them, so that hook has become not an unintentional, not a false hook; it's just become this connection to each other, so when you have a relationship with a student, you know so much more about them. You can choose relevant material and I guess that's the hook when you're not really, you know, trying to hook them. The rigor, the rigor comes so easily once you've got the relevance and everything comes from relationships.

If you were to give advice to a new teacher in North Carolina, what 2-3 learnings would you share?

Be willing to enjoy the struggle. The struggle means that you're growing. Know that...I guess I would say know that every class has its own personality, and that every year is going to be different.