

# Teacher Interview: Mariel Sellers

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**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?**

One strategy that would be seen a lot in my classroom would be collaborative group work. In my class we have seven over-arching themes instead of having small, discrete units, and so when students start a new theme, they move to a new group, so that's their home group for the duration of that theme. We work in groups almost every day. We split up research; we share new ideas. We try to...we try to develop each theme or unit as we go. I try not to present them with a lot of information up front, but one way that I use collaborative group work is through a technique called white board meetings, so the students learn how to share out on the very first day of class, and they get accustomed to questioning one another's findings, and asking questions about each other's work, delving deeper for more information from their peers and their classmates rather than seeking all of their information from me.

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

Well, I'm pretty lucky because since I'm a biology teacher, I have the big slate tables, so my students are in home groups of six, and then they can easily divide into two smaller groups of three, or three smaller groups of two. I'm very thoughtful about where I place them at the beginning of each theme. I don't want any of the groups to be totally homogenous in terms of skills or ability level or even what they're comfortable with, so I try to match up, within a home group, I try to make sure that there are students who are comfortable learning in different ways, some students who are really good at art, some students who are better speakers, some who are better writers, and I try to match higher students, middle students and lower students in each group so that...so that nobody's doing all the work; nobody is...is left behind and everybody feels involved every day.

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

First of all, I take advantage of their relationships with other students in the class. I'm able to steer students together if I see an opportunity for a student who needs help to get the help that they need from one of their peers, so I strategically match students in my class a lot to maximize learning, but another, but another thing that I do is just constantly generating data with regards to their...their mastery of the objectives we're learning, so constant informal benchmarking and formal benchmarking, so that I can...I can pick out the students who need the most help, meet them where they are and come up with strategies to help them do better.

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

I know learning is taking place when students are asking authentic questions of one another about the subject that we're learning, and not asking questions of me, so I know that it's...it's a genuine, authentic, scientific process that's happening in my classroom. If I ever feel like learning's not taking place, it's important for me to take a step back and revise the plan, look at my instruction and my role as a facilitator in my classroom and see if there's something that I can change.

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

I think, especially when you have reluctant learners, it's really important to find something that they're interested in, whether it's sports or cars or some other hobby. I have a lot of kids who love to hunt and it's really easy for me to tie hunting and ecology into the biology curriculum, so it's really important to...to meet the kids where they are in every sense, academically and in terms of their interests so that you can make a real-world connection with your content area.

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

Well, the first thing that I would share is that there are going to be times when you...you feel like you have reached hurdles that you can't overcome and you can overcome them because I have been there and I think every new teacher has been there, so please, stick it out! It gets so much better. The rewards are maybe not...maybe materially teachers aren't rewarded as much as they should be, but the intrinsic rewards make it all worthwhile. Something else that I would share is to seek out help from veteran teachers. Veteran teachers really want to help you and sometimes maybe don't know exactly how you need help, so definitely seek out help from the people in your school; they can be a valuable resource for you.