

Teachers Working in High Poverty Schools

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Teacher retention is a huge issue in education, particularly in high needs, high poverty schools. At the Center for Partnerships it is an area we wanted to investigate because of our focus on struggling schools and pre-service students. We interviewed three women, a new graduate, a recent graduate and an established teacher, all from the College of Charleston who plan to teach or teach in this educational setting.

The main problem has always been thought to be the recruitment of teachers to struggling schools. Marilyn Cochran-Smith thinks differently. Cochran-Smith (2006) believes “the problem in staffing the nation’s schools [is] teacher retention.” This issue is even greater in the high poverty schools. Cochran-Smith (2006) continues the problem with teacher retention is “46% of new teachers [are] leaving the profession by the end of five years.” Since the teachers do not have the tools, resources or background knowledge to teach in high poverty schools, they are quick to leave the profession altogether. “Many leavers are dissatisfied with their jobs because of low salaries, student discipline problems, lack of support, and little opportunity to participate in decision making” (Cochran-Smith, 2006). With a large percentage of teachers leaving and another large percentage transferring schools, “many students in high-poverty, urban public schools spend their academic careers watching a parade of new teachers pass through their classrooms on their way to ‘good schools’ with ‘good students’” (Ellsasser, 2008). Thus leading to “our least-served students are taught by our least-experienced teachers” (Ellsasser, 2008) who are just “paying their time” in high poverty schools until they can move to more affluent schools. There are so many difficult issues and different realities that are forcing these teachers to leave the under-resourced schools.

Different teacher education programs are trying to prepare students more for the high poverty school setting. They are trying to instill certain qualities in their teacher candidates that would allow them to understand the high poverty school setting, in hopes of providing their candidates with a teacher position, where they will remain for a long time. The schools of education reinforce and develop different factors in the teacher education program. These factors include a sense of mission, persistence, hard work, substantive preparation in both academia and practical application, teacher researching, the opportunity to change schools (but remain in the same district), and ongoing support from different professionals for the duration of their stay in the high poverty schools/careers. These different factors have given districts hope in the new teacher candidates (Freedman and Appleman, 2009). SERVE completed a teacher retention literature review and found similar qualities are necessary to continue working in a high poverty setting. It is imperative to retain quality teachers, instead of all teachers. They also found that a reason teachers stay deals with the intrinsic motivation, if a teacher feels like they are effective, they will stay. SERVE also found that a supportive environment and increased pay also improve teacher retention. Poor facilities, late hiring, lack of information, Alternative Certification Programs, teaching out-of-field and teaching high preparatory classes all lead to higher

retention rates. Therefore, to increase retention, teachers need to feel effective, work hard, have a sense of mission and support, and need to work in a good facility. They shouldn't be hired last minute and should be given information when requested. It was also found that those who went through Alternative Certification Programs were more likely to leave teaching.

Teaching in a high poverty school is becoming more and more difficult, especially for new teachers. There are many issues impinging on the quality of high poverty schools, which in turn, is affecting the quality of the teachers, as well as the retention. Charles Clotfelter et al. (2002) found that "most people agree that quality teachers and school principals are among the most important requirements for success," which are the two necessary components to help the disadvantaged students in high poverty schools. Clotfelter et al. (2002) also found that "the schools serving disadvantaged students would need to have more –or higher quality–resources than the other schools to compensate for the educational disadvantages that children from disadvantaged families typically bring to the classroom." However, most high poverty schools do not have highly qualified teachers and principals. Therefore, there are several problems with teaching in these high poverty schools.

College of Charleston Teacher Candidate Graduate Rates

Academic Year	Fall Semester	Spring Semester	Total
2008-2009	38	114	152
2009-2010	52	136	188

Future College of Charleston Teacher, Ellie Stephens, Wants to Help Impoverished Students



Ellie Stephens

Ellie Stephens, a recent 2010 early childhood education graduate from the College of Charleston, desires to work in a low-performing, high poverty school. Ellie moved here from Kentucky to partake in her undergraduate degree in a new city, which has inspired her to work in this new atmosphere. Ellie started her mentoring at Chicora Elementary School in North Charleston, during her sophomore year at college, as a community service activity for her sorority.

Revelation

During the first year of mentoring, Ellie realized that the students in this school needed good teachers and mentors because they were not getting the structure or necessary nurturing environment at home. It made her want to start teaching, specifically in a low-income, high poverty school. This experience made Ellie want to teach. It inspired her to see the needs of different children and realize all they need is a constant in their lives. Teachers are that constant.

Ellie found Dr. Kelley Mayer White to be her most influential professor at the College of Charleston because she was able to talk to Dr. Mayer White about her desire to work in a high poverty school. Dr. Mayer White saw Ellie teach lessons once a week, and was able to offer advice for being a better teacher. The difference between Dr. Mayer White and other professors is Dr. Mayer White had the opportunity to watch Ellie teach; her other professors didn't have this same opportunity.

Ellie has discovered the importance of meeting the needs of all of her students. She recalls a class she took at College of Charleston that has helped her the most, so far. This class, Meeting the Needs of Diverse Learners, helps Ellie in the classroom on a daily basis.

"There are so many diverse learners," Ellie says. "I can think back to what we learned and I can relate back to the class and try something new instead."

Throughout Ellie's college career, she has learned a very valuable lesson. Ellie has learned to do what she wants to do, and not let anyone else influence her. She learned the opinion of her family and friends and which career they think is suitable for Ellie should not be chosen just to make them happy. It is so important to make life-altering decisions because you want to, not because anyone else wants you to.

The Future

After graduation in May 2010, Ellie moved to Washington, D.C. to teach primary students. Even though D.C. is our nation's capital, there are many failing schools. The current Chancellor of DC schools, Michelle Rhee, is trying to change education. Ms. Rhee is not afraid to fire teachers or change policies. She is very innovative and wants to close the achievement gap between everywhere and our nation's capital.

Ellie thinks the most difficult aspect of her first year teaching will be behavior management. It will be especially hard in a high poverty school because the students do not have any structure at home. Therefore, it is hard to come to school and behave where there is structure, when students have no rules or guidelines at home.

“It will be an emotional year seeing where they come from,” remarks Ellie, “and to see their struggles. It will be motivating.”

This outlook on education fits in with exactly what interests Ellie. With a plan of continuing her education past her undergraduate degree, Ellie plans to study educational policy. Ellie plans to teach in a low-income, high poverty school, but she doesn't know if that will be her only stop. Ellie wants to eventually work in administration or with non-profit organizations that helps education.

College of Charleston Graduate, Lauren Buchowsky, Makes Difference in an International Setting



Lauren Buchowsky

As a 2007 special education graduate of the College of Charleston, Lauren Buckowsky works in a small school in New York City, serving low-income, disabled children of diverse backgrounds in her 3-4-5 year old class. Her thirteen students come from all over the world, many of which came to her barely speaking English. Her school, Association for the Help of Retarded Children's (AHRC) Astoria Blue Feather Head Start, is a federally funded program that “finds ability in disability.” They have created a school, where no one else would think to, in a basement of a housing project, in Queens, that is an 18 minute walk to the closest subway, and only two public buses have routes that are in the vicinity of the school, which is unheard of in New York City.

First Year (2008-2009)

Lauren started as a teacher in Thailand for six months, after spending a summer at The Children's Defense Fund Freedom School Summer Program at Burke Middle School. In Thailand, Lauren developed an appreciation for education in the United States, due to the lack of resources available in Thailand. “In Thailand, it was difficult to find enough paper or crayons,” shares Lauren. Now Lauren teaches in an integrated Alternate Interim Bilingual Placement (AIBP) classroom that is incredibly diverse. Always trying to find a new challenge, Lauren stepped out of what she knew and became a teacher in an area many could never imagine working in. With Queens being the most ethnically diverse county in the United States, over 130 languages are present in the 58 square mile borough. Spanish, Arabic, Urdu and Hindi are a few languages found at her school. The school is predominately Hispanic.

Lauren's first year teaching was not as overwhelming as she thought it would be, due to her time spent teaching in Thailand. Now, she has so many resources and materials that she finds teaching easier and more organized. Lauren herself is more organized. She has a whirlwind of students who have Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) that require vast amounts of evaluation and paperwork. She is required to make two house visits each year, to each of her 13 children.

Lauren's first classroom was very international in the fact that three of her students spoke Arabic, one spoke Bengali and the remaining nine spoke Spanish. Working with her students in the head start program are case workers, family coordinators, school psychologists and occupational/speech/physical therapists, who are all bilingual and speak various languages. Lauren has two assistants in her classroom to help her. One is a loving Muslim woman, from Morocco, who speaks Arabic, and the other is a Spanish-speaking woman from Ecuador. There are many people involved in the children's lives and well-being, working together to make their community a better place.

Understanding the Immigrant Families

All of Lauren's class parents are new to this country and they came to the US for more opportunities. They work to make ends meet and to provide for their children. These families often live in one room, in a building that is not up to code. Most of the families rent out just one room, and then they share a kitchen and bathroom with as many as five other families in the apartment. The children have Medicaid, but the parents often don't.

"Home visits are also most gratifying, I have a secret key or extra clues as to why the children are the way they are," Lauren states. "One kid might be so active because there is nowhere to play, TV is the new babysitter." When Lauren makes her home visits in the beginning of the year, one question that is always asked regards if the children have any siblings. Most of the parent said yes, but the siblings are in another country. Therefore, the family basically chose to have this child born in the US here, and their siblings are in their home country being raised by an aunt, grandma, or any other family member, with the dream that the parents will be able to bring their children and have the entire family in the United States.

"The sacrifices these families make for the American dream is pretty unreal," remarks Lauren.

It just so happened that in her second year Lauren has a class of predominantly Ecuadorian children after spending her past summer traveling through Ecuador. Lauren completes culture studies in her classroom to honor the different families and cultures of the students. The parents make food, bring in things from their country, and share stories with the class.

Lessons Learned

As a graduate in 2007, Lauren spent her four years on the special education major track. Her most influential professors, on this journey, include Bonnie Springer, a Special Education professor, and Zeff Bjerken, a Buddhist religion professor. In Bjerken's class, Lauren learned the importance of being in charge of her own happiness. In Springer's class, Lauren learned about different way to approach

emotional disabilities. Lauren also enjoyed Dennis Keyes' class on mental retardation. These and other education, art and history classes were very beneficial for Lauren's future.

The most important thing that Lauren learned at the College of Charleston still holds true today. Lauren learned that quality of life should come before everything. It is important to surround yourself with beautiful, wonderful people who open your eyes to new experiences and challenge your thinking.. Another important lesson learned is to not store all of your eggs in one basket. It is important to be diverse, and well-rounded, and not just in your education.

Self-Challenger

The most difficult thing about teaching for Lauren is being a role model in everything she says and does. She says she has to be her best self. Another difficulty is adhering to all of the goals and addressing all of the students needs. This is difficult with six different IEPs in one class. It is hard to get everything done in one day. Lauren did learn the importance of staying on top of the paperwork during her first year teaching. Her mentor teacher was on maternity leave for eight months of Lauren's first year teaching. She was on her own.

Lauren liked that she had to do most of her first year on her own. Lauren made friends with one of the other first year teachers, who is bilingual. They were in it together. They both had no idea what was going on. They were able to have fun and explore new concepts, new tools in the classroom. They messed up together and took field trips together. Their friendship still stands strong. Lauren and the other first year teacher have more experience now. However, even with more experience, Lauren still wants the child to laugh, be happy and enjoy being at school.

"I am a part of the first year of a long journey," says Lauren. "I want the journey to be fun, silly, etc...it's through self-discovery. It allows for creativity."

Lauren always tries to challenge herself. She went to Thailand upon graduation to teach for six months. She then traveled for an additional six months. She ended up teaching in this non-traditional school in New York City, where she challenges herself to be the best teacher for her students, and her best self, every day. Lauren is building relationships with her students and still visits those from last year.

Lauren plans to continue working in low-income, high poverty schools. She said, "I could never validate moving somewhere like a hoity-toity prep school."

College of Charleston Graduate, Porcher Kirkland, Learns the Difference Between Being a Teacher and a Social Worker



Porcher Kirkland

As a 2003 graduate of the College of Charleston, Porcher Kirkland started her teaching career in a Title I, inner-city school in downtown Charleston, South Carolina. With a Bachelor's of Arts in studio art and a minor in art history, Kirkland did not imagine the path she would take to eventually become a teacher.

Early Years

While Porcher was finding her true calling in life, she started in the educational field as an art director of an after school program, Safe Haven, on the east side of Charleston. The program served the downtown, inner-city population of District 20. Kirkland later became the program specialist. She worked with alcohol and drug education and intervention, educational tutoring and intervention, as well as conducted environmental programs within schools and the community.

Kirkland has been involved in education for a total of fourteen years. She volunteered for three years in various afterschool programs before landing the art director position at Safe Haven. She decided teaching was her calling, and returned to the College of Charleston to receive her Master's degree in teaching. She finally graduated with a degree in what she wanted to do, teach.

Lessons Learned

As an undergraduate student at the College of Charleston, Kirkland took an education course to fill an elective in her studio art major. The course, taught by Dr. mutindi ndunda, got her really interested in education. Kirkland had been trying to decide what to pursue as her area of interest for her master's degree, and thought with a master's degree in teaching, she could become an art therapist. While in the Master's program, Kirkland admired the philosophy in education and principles of Dr. Diane Cudahy. She found Cudahy's holistic approach to teaching was much like what she wanted in her classroom.

Kirkland found her practicum experiences to be the most beneficial class at College of Charleston, because she gained hands-on experience that would be beneficial to her future career. She was at a variety of schools, including inner-city Mitchell Elementary, Mt. Pleasant's Moultrie Middle School and diverse Hunley Park Elementary. With a liberal arts practicum experience, Kirkland visited three schools

and three different grade levels. In some aspects, she had an adequate view of teaching through the three semester-long experiences.

Biggest fears coming true

A future teacher's biggest fear is not feeling prepared his/her first year teaching. The apple didn't fall too far from the tree for Porcher Kirkland's first year either. There are many reasons why a teacher feels unprepared, leaving a liberal arts college and stepping into a new environment, with twenty to thirty students to educate. Kirkland's biggest setback was pacing.

"Pacing is how to teach, what to teach, when to teach it," says Kirkland. "You don't know how to pace all subject areas and all liberal minded aspects of it. It is overwhelming."

Kirkland found she did not feel prepared until about her third year teaching. She also says, "[she's] not sure a college will be able to prepare you for that, it comes with experience."

Along with not understanding the pacing, Kirkland also finds that truly understanding the curriculum is a very big challenge for a first year teacher. It is the transferring of reading what is supposed to be taught, and knowing how and what to actually teach, that is the biggest difficulty for first year teachers, along with time management and other necessary skills. Kirkland already had these necessary skills, as well as the opportunity to know some of the students and the teachers due to her position as director of the after school program. She found this as a huge benefit. Another great benefit for first year teachers is an amazing mentor teacher. Porcher was also blessed in this aspect of her first year teaching, with a mentor teacher right down the hall.

"She was phenomenal," Porcher continues, "the tidbits and information she gave me still resonates with me today."

Another aspect of the first year teaching that Kirkland found particularly difficult to deal with is also feeling prepared to understand the fact that you are a teacher and not a social worker. This is a big issue to learn to deal with, especially in schools like Kirkland's first. Her first school was a low income, all minority school that had a lot of discipline problems. There were conflicts between the administration and teaching staff, due to the cultural differences.

"There is a difference in how you delineate [being a teacher and social worker] that comes with experience and a strong mentor teacher," Kirkland says. "You want to give breaks for kids because you feel sorry for them. It doesn't benefit them or teach them any skills."

Moving schools

As a five-year veteran teacher, Kirkland still finds behavior to be the most difficult part of teaching. On a brighter note, Kirkland finds student excitement in learning to be the most gratifying.

"When they really want to learn and explore the material," says Kirkland, "then there is no end to what you can do."

Kirkland also finds that many students, especially in inner-city schools, come to school with a chip on their shoulder. This prevents them from doing anything. It is one of the reasons why Kirkland changed schools, and switched to Gifted and Talented Education (GATE). The desire to learn can be found in inner-city kids; however, inner-city students have many other issues to deal with on a daily basis, like where they will find food, shelter and safety which is instant gratification. The pressing social needs force the students to misunderstand the importance of a classroom education, which would provide long term satisfaction to the students.

“The behavior, admin[istration], paper work roadblocks really get in the way of the organic feel of exploring something in order to find out why it works,” says Kirkland, regarding the reason she moved to a suburban school.

The biggest change between the inner-city school and the suburban resonates in the parental involvement. Kirkland emails her parents on a daily basis. They volunteer and chaperone field trips. They are more hands-on, and like inner-city parents, work is not an excuse for not being involved. Kirkland believes the suburban parents understand the concept and see the importance of being involved in their child’s education, whereas the inner-city parents deal with poverty and pressing social needs, which often result in overlooking the rewards of a structured academic education. They meet with Kirkland at least four times a year. As a teacher, Kirkland is sure to express parental involvement as a high expectation. Parents are aware that if their child is in her class, they are expected to participate, and attend the conferences.

“They need to meet with me four times a year, whether 7 pm at night or not,” says Kirkland. “It’s a priority to be involved and meet with me.”

With Kirkland’s innovative ideas and vast experiences, she has embarked on a career that will allow her to utilize her past experiences in order to help all of her students succeed in their future. As a lifelong learner, Kirkland has continued her education, become Gifted and Talented certified, as well as behavior-specialty certified. She believes in differentiated instruction and uses all avenues to teach her students. Kirkland took a long path to be where she is today, but the end result was worth the long journey.

Conclusion:

With a common home of the College of Charleston, graduates Ellie, Lauren and Porcher all thrive on challenges and decided teaching in a high poverty school would fulfill their needs. Their school situations are very different, despite them all being in low income schools. Their stories show that each school is unique for their student body, location, but also in their structures and settings. Lauren and Porcher found mentor teachers to be the most advantageous resource for a first year teacher. They feel that teaching in a high needs school helps them every day to feel challenged.

Ellie, Lauren and Porcher all discussed their most influential professors. Their favorites all achieved this title because they are caring, empathetic and instilled a sense of belonging in each of the three women. These professors gave Ellie, Lauren and Porcher all the opportunity to see their strengths and abilities to

achieve their many successes. They will continue to represent the College of Charleston School of Education, Health, and Human Performance well in the field of education.