McCracken RJDC Teacher Receives Recognition from National Geographic for Innovative Civil Rights Curriculum

Last year at the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) Teaching and Learning Conference held in Washington, D.C., McCracken Regional Juvenile Detention Center social studies teacher Crystal Culp, decided to participate in a National Geographic Educator Certification Program. Ms. Culp, who is also a SACSSAA Outstanding Teacher Award winner in 2014, was among approximately 30 educators who participated in the beta group of this new program. This professional development program is founded on National Geographic’s Learning Framework that, “seeks to inspire teachers to teach students about the world in innovative and interdisciplinary ways,” and also provides teachers with recognition, development and connections to a community of like-minded educators.

As a part of the beta program, Ms. Culp was required to participate in a certification workshop to familiarize herself with National Geographic’s Learning Framework and the requirements of the program, then put her innovative lessons into practice in the classroom, and finally complete a capstone project that involved implementing one of the lessons on a deeper and more thorough level with students.

It was Ms. Culp’s capstone project, which was curriculum designed around the Civil Rights movement, that gained her recognition by National Geographic’s Educator of the Week blog this March. The “Bridge to Selma” activity, which she described as a culminating activity from her larger civil rights unit, was highlighted as innovative and personally-engaging for students. The activity—which is explained more in-depth in the National Geographic article on the next page—incorporates both geography, history, and personal writing that engages the student to relate his or her own circumstances to this historical event.

She explained that the Edmund Pettus bridge, which was the site of the famous Selma to Montgomery march in 1965, is designed in a way that makes it hard to see from one side to another. She relates this back to how students in a detention setting often can’t see what their future holds because of their circumstances and choices they’ve made. “I want my students to face the reality of their situation and have a plan to deal with what’s coming ahead in their lives,” Ms. Culp explained. With that philosophy in...
Dear Friends,

As many of you know we are in the final days of a legislative budget session. There is much uncertainty, a feeling of unease. The budget, as of this writing, isn’t finalized. It’s fair to say folks are uncomfortable. I certainly admit that I am. We have advocated for our children and youth. We have communicated the needs of our children and while legislators, advocates and partners alike understand the complexity of our children and youth, we all sit with baited breath for the final gavel to sound on this session.

While the confusion and uncertainty abound, we can all find comfort in the eyes, hearts and stories of the youth we serve. Throughout the last few months, with emotions high at every front, we can focus our work on supporting the students being served in our programs. I am reminded of a young lady being educated in one of our many programs who was and is dealing with the lasting impact of physical, emotional and sexual abuse at the hands of her father. She is a strong young lady. Stronger than most of us. Committed too. Ready to take on the world. Because of the circumstances that brought her into state care, you can imagine that she has many barriers: educationally, socially and emotionally. This, to me, is the beauty of our programs. That amazing space between the world of education and treatment where students can finally find their voice. Where they can find the ability to transform into the people they’ve dreamed of being. Through creative writing, taught by highly skilled English and language arts teachers, she has been able to communicate her needs in a way that is both freeing for her and captivating for those of us who get to learn and grow with her.

She isn’t caught up in politics. She isn’t even remotely concerned at this stage of her life with state budgets, or school calendars or assessments. She is simply learning to be comfortable in her own skin. Learning to balance the life she wants with the life she has been given. Certainly we all come into contact in our programs with young women just like this. We see their faces. We, many times, experience their pain. And, on occasion, we get to share in the magical transformation that a quality education, coupled with targeted treatment, can bring. While heated rhetoric is thrown all around us, let us stay focused on the issue at hand. Our students. Their needs. Our ability to bridge the gap between what they have and what they need. If we keep our attention on the important part of why we do the work we do, the rest will come together.

I commend our legislative leaders, our state partner agencies and our local school districts for keeping the focus on the students we serve. In the end, they are, after all, the only thing that really matters.
mind, she had students build personal bridges that depict their own lives as part of the activity. “They often don’t see their own resiliency, so I want to make sure they’re thinking about what’s in their future.”

Below is the article about Ms. Culp’s Bridge to Selma activity that was featured online at National Geographic’s education website, which gives an in-depth explanation of her activity and how she engages her students academically and personally.

Crystal Culp, this week’s Educator of the Week, makes learning personal by challenging students to make connections between an historical event and their own lives. Crystal is a social studies and history teacher for grades 7 through 12 at a juvenile detention center called McCracken Regional School in Paducah, Kentucky.

Activity: The Bridge to Selma  
Grade Level: 7-12  
Time Commitment: 4-5 hours or a few class periods

Putting History in Context
I began a lesson on the historic civil rights marches from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, by providing students with an unlabeled map of Alabama. I asked the students to identify the resource materials they’d need in order to label the map, and then to find the absolute location of Selma.

We then looked at a timeline of events from the Civil Rights Movement, labeling the events on the map so students could have a context in which to understand the Selma to Montgomery marches. To learn more about the marches, we watched a segment of the video “Civil Rights Martyrs” and the movie Selma.

Afterwards, we discussed the idea that we all face our own “Edmund Pettus Bridge” or difficult obstacle in life. The students created an art piece to represent their personal bridges. They also wrote a short accompanying essay to describe how they’d represented their life’s biggest obstacle with their artwork.

Was it hard for your students to connect the historical example to their own lives?
Especially because we’re in a juvenile detention center, I try to do personal activities as often as I can, so students can start taking ownership for their behavior and they don’t feel like victims anymore. There comes a point in everyone’s life when they have to realize that they’re responsible for their own actions, even though there may have been legitimate causes or influences in the past.

All of the students created a bridge that had a problem in some way because they were picturing their own lives in this bridge. One young man built the deck of his bridge very slanted. In his essay, he wrote that his dad was not a stable character in his life and he felt a lack of support from his family. The deck of his bridge represented the feeling that he may slide off at any moment. That’s a pretty powerful thing for a young man to be able to recognize, and it helped him see the history reflected in his own life.

How do you incorporate current events when studying history?
We read the newspaper and discuss current events every day. It’s easy to only think about one event and not acknowledge what else is going on in the country (or the world) at the time. I always try to put current events in a wider context.

When we consider all the layers that contribute to our current events, it serves as a helpful reminder that history was multifaceted as well. And the distinction between history and current events is blurrier than we often imagine.

For this particular lesson, I asked my students to consider a modern debate around the name of the Edmund Pettus Bridge because of its namesake’s history with the Ku Klux Klan. That inspired a conversation about how the South has changed and how it has not changed. Some of my students thought that the landmark should just be called “The Bridge in Selma” because the name “Selma” itself holds so much power and doesn’t have to be explained. They argued that this name would acknowledge everyone who was involved in the marches, rather than singling out one person or another.

What has been one of your most memorable “teachable moments”?
I’ve been teaching in juvenile detention for 14 years now. When I began teaching, I had a lot of sympathy for my students because of the situations they were currently in. But I would try to just forget their circumstances and be culturally blind when teaching them.

Then one day, I was having a discussion with my students about their goals, and there was one young lady who was avoiding eye contact so I called her over. She looked right at me and she said, “I just want to have a life like you have.” I was trying to figure out what she meant when she went on to say, “I want to have a job and a family and a home that I take care of.”

And that’s the moment that the sympathy I have for my students turned to empathy because for the first time, I could really see how she felt. That day, my teaching changed. My students became my focus. I held them accountable for their behavior now. I want them to own their mistakes—and their victories, too.

(You can read Ms. Culp’s spotlight at http://blog.education.nationalgeographic.com/2016/03/22/educator-spotlight-the-bridge-to-selma/)
Breathitt Residential Treatment Center Blends Learning and Therapy

Staff at the Breathitt Residential Treatment Center continually collaborate with Kentucky River Community Care (KRCC) therapists and staff to successfully transition the program’s students back to their general education environment and home life. In an effort to incorporate therapy into lessons, head teacher and school administrator Ronnie Combs created a Disney bulletin board exercise with the help from colleagues and students. It features Walt Disney characters and those characters’ quotes about making choices and life lessons. This relates back to the students because each school morning, Mr. Combs asks his students to write journal entries about their choices in life. He then has students choose a character and compare those quotes with their own personal experiences in their writing. Mr. Combs says the student response to the activity has been very positive and provides an insightful entry for therapists to read before meeting with a particular student. According to Mr. Combs, this positive impact of education and therapy provides many benefits to students. “I am very proud of my kids for their success,” said Mr. Combs.

McCracken RJDC Students Enter Engineering Designs in Annual Fluor Challenge

Students at McCracken Regional Juvenile Detention Center recently participated in the annual Fluor Engineering Challenge, which according to their website, is designed to help students experience how real-life engineers design solutions and to show students first-hand how fun engineering can be. Every year, in partnership with Science Buddies, Fluor transforms one of its own internal employee engineering challenges into a student-centric challenge. The challenge is launched in time for Engineers Week so that teachers and after-school organizations can use the challenge with their students. The challenge is open to all students around the globe with prizes awarded in a more limited geography.

This year’s challenge revolved around creating automatic marble sorting machines powered only by gravity and using only the materials of popsicle sticks, paper, solo cups, tape and glue. These machines would need to sort two different size marbles, similar to how a coin sorting machine works. The prompt and website for the challenge guides students to use the Engineering Design Process, including reading background research provided, defining the problem, brainstorming solutions and testing their prototypes. The McCracken RJDC students formed teams and followed this process to design and construct their machines. Once they finished and evaluated their machines, each team submitted their results to the challenge website. All submissions have been entered into a drawing for one of three $1,000 prizes. School Administrator Lucinda Mills says regardless of the outcome it was beneficial and fun for the students. “Even if we’re not chosen for a prize, the students learned a lot about the design process and how to troubleshoot any problems that came up.”
On March 9, the Shelby County Education Center at Cropper (SCEC) hosted a rock climbing field trip for a second grade class at Clear Creek Elementary School in Shelby County. The field trip was the culmination of an ongoing Project Based Learning unit which placed SCEC students as mentors to the elementary students. Three SCEC students were chosen as mentors due to their ability to work well with younger children, for meeting the requirements for certain field trip and internship privileges, and for being on a good standing in the program’s tiered behavioral system.

SCEC students were taught how to climb and work with the rock wall at the program from two certified instructors in the school, Mr. Dan Edelen and guidance counselor Mr. Jody Kendall. Student mentors learned the safety guidelines associated with rock climbing such as harnessing properly, seeking permission to approach the wall, and proper attire, who then instructed the second graders.

Student mentors began working with the elementary students in February, and before they were allowed to climb each child had to demonstrate in a writing piece that they fully understood the safety requirements. The student mentors were supervised by instructors and helped fit the children into harnesses, and helped them practice climbing commands as well. Once approved, the children then got to tackle the rock climbing first hand with mentors and instructors spotting and supervising. It was clear that everyone involved, not just the climbers, were having a great time while also learning valuable educational skills.

“Watching our students grow into mentors who took great pride in their relationships with those students has been one of the best days I have ever had in education,” SCEC Administrator Phillip Conder said.

This activity was incorporated into the second grade curriculum since they have been working all year on writing to an authentic audience in order to see the true value and purpose for writing, and student mentors served as another authentic audience. This activity was beneficial to SCEC students since the district Strategic Leadership Plan calls for personalized learning, and through this mentorship students had an extraordinary amount of ownership in their learning. As a result, two students have requested and earned internships at Clear Creek Elementary for the remainder of the year.
CLEP Cadets Speak to Local School Students About Decisions and Consequences

On February 24, Cadet Leadership and Education Program (CLEP) Cadets C. Peake and J. Searcy, traveled with Counselor Dewayne Deaton, and Treatment Director Kendra Chapman, to Rockcastle County Middle School (RCMS). The Cadets were invited by the school’s Youth Service Center to talk to 6th and 7th graders about substance abuse, decision-making, and consequences. Cadets Peake and Searcy spoke to nearly 300 students including all the Rockcastle County alternative school students. The two young men presented their personal life histories, and spoke of how poor decision-making and involvement with drugs and alcohol from an early age lead to discipline, educational, and legal problems, for which they are now involved with the Department of Juvenile Justice. The Cadets offered positive and encouraging advice to students about correcting problems early and seeking help from trusted adults. CLEP administrator said RCMS staff were very welcoming to the cadets and they appreciated the opportunity to speak to the students.

On March 18, CLEP was also invited to speak to Breathitt County’s LBJ Elementary School’s 6th grade students. Cadets J. Searcy, K. Russell, and T. Sewell, accompanied by Treatment Director Kendra Chapman, Youth Services Program Supervisor (YSPS) Jason Jett, and Youth Worker II Jeremy Rice, addressed the students about behavior and real world consequences. The cadets shared personal stories and positive advice, discussed CLEP’s program rules and expectations, described their daily schedule, and demonstrated physical training exercises. LBJ’s students and staff were very attentive and CLEP staff and Cadets appreciated the opportunity to speak to the 6th graders.

Warren RJDC Celebrates Black History Month and Exceptional Teachers

To celebrate Black History Month in February, Warren Regional Juvenile Detention Center (WRJDC) invited Dr. John Hardin to speak students. Dr. Hardin is the author of two books, several major articles, and numerous book reviews on Kentucky African American history. He has taught at Kentucky State University and Eastern Washington University. During his visit, he discussed his latest work The Kentucky African American Encyclopedia, which features editors Gerald L. Smith and Karen Cotton McDaniel. The book gives a brief history of the black experience in the Commonwealth and covers politicians and community leaders, as well as pioneers in art, science, and industry. His insight and experience was very beneficial and educational for WRJDC students.

On March 16, Dr. Rebecca Painter, a science teacher at WRJDC received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Bowling Green Human Rights Commission at their 24th Annual Women of Achievement banquet. The banquet was held at the Augenstein Alumni Center, just off the campus of Western Kentucky University (WKU). She has been with Bowling Green Independent Schools for more than 27 years, and employed at WRJDC for the past 16. During this time, she was instrumental in establishing a scholarship fund at WKU for students of WRJDC. She says her greatest accomplishment is giving at-risk students hope through education, which she continually strives to do. Congratulations to Ms. Painter on this accomplishment!
Lexington Day Treatment Student’s Essay Incorporating Humor and Hot Dogs Gains Recognition

Carl Garner Jr., a student at Lexington Day Treatment recently wrote an essay answering the question, “Is a hotdog a sandwich?” His essay was so convincing that a hot dog is definitely NOT a sandwich, that he was featured on a national weekly humor podcast and in the Lexington Herald-Leader. Read the Herald-Leader’s article below which featured Garner and his humorous prose.

Carl Garner Jr. was one of the quieter students at the Lexington Day Treatment Center, and he didn’t often take part in class in the public school program for those who learn while receiving treatment and counseling.

But then teacher Eric Little posed the question, “Is a hotdog a sandwich?” and saw that “a light kind of flickered” in Carl, igniting a passionate response — asserting that it isn’t.

Little got the assignment idea from the national weekly comedy podcast Judge John Hodgman, emceed by humorist John Hodgman, who is known in part for his work as a correspondent on Comedy Central’s Daily Show.

Carl, 17, a junior, wrote an essay answering the question in the form of a letter that was so persuasive that Little emailed Hodgman. With Carl’s permission, Hodgman shared the essay on his Jan. 7 podcast.

“A sandwich is two pieces of bread,” Carl wrote. “In between those pieces of bread might be some mayonnaise, some tomatoes, some lettuce, and some baloney. It’s like someone trying to say that you’re making a baloney sandwich without lettuce and mayo. It would still be a sandwich because that’s what it’s been called for years and years. We can’t change history.”

As for hotdogs, Carl wrote, “Even the Hotdog and Sausage Council states that a hotdog is not a sandwich. These are experts in the area of hotdogs, and if there is a higher hotdog authority, I don’t know what it is. ... Hotdog buns specifically state that they are for hotdogs only.”

Little said in the email to Hodgman that you never know what’s going to spark interest in young people. “Turns out he feels passionately about sandwiches and hot dogs.”

Getting praise for his essay was good for Carl, said his mother, Luwana Waller. “I think it gave him confidence. He felt important.”

Waller said her son could have left the day treatment center and gone back to a regular classroom, but he is doing so well there that she decided he should finish out this academic year there.

Carl, meanwhile, said the attention he has received has inspired him: “I’ll write more.”

(Article by Valarie Honeycutt Spears)