



Leadership, Not Magic

Steven Farr

Highly effective teachers show what it takes to close achievement gaps.

One of the recurring joys of my work is seeing the transformative, life-changing influence of teachers like Gillette Eckler. **When Gillette met her 5th graders on her first day as a teacher in New York City, they were reading, on average, at a 2nd grade level.** They were even further behind in math, unable to add and subtract numbers of more than one digit.

Outraged by the injustice of a system that gives low-income students like hers low odds of even graduating from high school, **Gillette determined that she would do everything in her power to change their academic trajectory.** She was convinced that her "scholars" had the same potential to achieve that students in higher-income communities did. She seized on the goal that they would gain access to the most prestigious middle schools in the city—schools that would put them on track to college.

Gillette began by building a classroom culture around hard work and hard-earned success. She established ambitious growth goals for each student and broke those goals into mini-goals with detailed plans for the order and pace of objectives. Using a system of individualized progress folders and a student-created "Super Scholars" wall display, Gillette rallied her students and their families to work hard toward their goals. As a culture of achievement took hold, students begged to be reassessed on their reading progress, competitively scrutinized other classes' progress, and helped one another so that the whole class could reach its monthly benchmarks.

Gillette went well beyond conventional parameters, stretching time and resources. She extended the school day, week, and year, as kids came before and after school for extra tutoring with Gillette, joined her for learning on Saturdays, and worked on summer assignments. She provided extra learning opportunities outside her classroom—for example, taking students on a trip to Ellis Island as part of their study of immigration.

Gillette had convinced her principal to let her loop with her 4th graders through 5th grade. At the beginning of her second year, she surprised her students by removing the desks from the classroom, requiring each student to "earn" a desk by demonstrating effort and progress on class assignments. By the spring of 5th grade, **Gillette's students had grown, on average, four and one-half years in reading in their two years with her.** Every individual student passed the state's English language arts exam, and, collectively, her students ended the year with an average mastery of 90 percent on state math objectives. With Gillette's help in navigating the sometimes dizzying application process, 13 of her 24 students were accepted into one of New York City's selective middle schools, and the rest headed into their neighborhood schools

with newfound self-confidence, resilience, and self-advocacy skills. I've had the opportunity to observe many teachers like Gillette.

Studying High-Performing Teachers

At Teach For America, we believe that teacher effectiveness is a key element of the quest to end educational inequity.

Our most effective teachers show that great teaching is leadership. Although excellent core knowledge, instructional strategies, content pedagogy, and classroom management are all essential to successful teaching, what most differentiates the great from the good are the leadership principles that govern how the teacher employs those skills.

(Since the early 1970s, scores of studies have demonstrated that retention does not have positive effects for most low-achieving students. Studies consistently show that grade retention does not improve students' chances for educational success. In fact, they indicate that retention often is harmful to scholastic development, especially if it occurs early. In order words, "holding students back" is more literal than figurative. Rather than grade retention, teacher leaders, who approach education with a value-added approach, can help their students close seemingly insurmountable gaps in learning. A student on a third-grade learning level in 7th grade can reach grade level with 2 years of growth with a teacher leader. The key is our approach.)

In every highly effective classroom we study, we find a teacher who, like any great leader, rallies team members (in this case, students and their families) around an ambitious vision of success. We find a teacher who plans purposefully and executes effectively to make sure students reach that vision, even as that teacher also continues to learn and improve. Without exception, these teachers define their role as doing whatever it takes to ensure their students' success. After studying hundreds of these teachers and contrasting their methods with those of teachers who produce less dramatic effects, we have identified six leadership actions that seem to correlate with exceptional student growth:

- **Setting Big Goals**
- **Getting Students Invested in Learning**
- **Planning Purposefully**
- **Executing Effectively— "On Your Feet" Adjustments.**
- **Continually Improving**
- **Working Relentlessly**

Endnote

¹ Tolstoy, L. (1967). On teaching the rudiments. In L. Weiner (Ed. & Trans.), *Tolstoy on Education* (p. 77). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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