

# JOSALYN TRESVANT

K-5th GRADE SPECIAL EDUCATION

*Knight Road Elementary School  
Memphis, Tenn.*

*A graduate of* Memphis City Schools, Josalyn Tresvant traded a burgeoning career in banking to return to the school system and become a special educator through TNTP's Memphis Teaching Fellows program in 2009.

Josalyn's students, who typically enter her classroom 3 to 4 years below grade level, regularly leave her class having gained 1.5 to 2 years of growth in reading and with proficient or advanced scores on their state assessments. She enlists students in their own learning by having them sign a document that articulates their main goals for the year and by having candid conversations with them about their progress.

Great teachers tend to have great ideas, and Josalyn's thoughtful use of technology for classroom purposes is years ahead of its time. Each year, she sets up a class website to serve as a "hub" for tracking academic progress, and her students explore various technology tools in their projects and presentations. In addition, she regularly videotapes and reviews her lessons to identify and correct missed learning opportunities. The message Josalyn puts forth is not only that students should push themselves to learn new tools, but that staying connected to growth is vital to their success.

"Josalyn has so much pride in her students and their abilities," Shira Fishman said. "She doesn't make excuses and doesn't allow them to make excuses, creating a classroom where the students set ambitious goals and stop at nothing to achieve them."

In her essay, "Banking on Students," Josalyn describes how she meticulously guides her special education students through a process of reflection and goal-tracking that helps them take ownership of the behaviors and academic objectives that will steer them toward their college goals.



## BANKING ON STUDENTS

*Ultimately, I seek for scholars to assume true ownership of their progress.*

If there's one thing I've learned since becoming a teacher, it's that students aren't all that different from bankers.

Before entering the classroom, I lived in the world of finance, managing a set of bank branches for a regional bank in Tennessee. Using data and regularly tracking progress toward annual goals was a way of life. Every morning, I would pull reports of sales and deposits for the branches in our region, analyzing what we would need to do to meet our goals and turn a profit. No matter how well or how poorly a branch had done the previous year, our focus was always on future growth.

These days, as an elementary school special education teacher, I work with students who have a range of abilities and challenges. Like branch managers, they each have unique circumstances and different starting points—and the distance to their goals can be daunting. They are often acutely aware that they're starting behind their peers and always want to know how they are doing. And in my classroom, they are empowered to answer this question for themselves.

Beginning the first day of class, I help students take ownership of their learning by reflecting on the past and setting new goals. Throughout the year, they will visually track the behaviors and learning objectives that will help them close the gap with their nondisabled peers.

Careful goal setting and tracking is hardly unusual in today's schools; what makes our approach different is that my students are responsible for nearly every part of the process, from defining their goals to physically moving the markers that track their progress. Their growth is literally in their hands. For students who have often felt isolated, unchallenged and out of control of their academic direction, this can be transformative.

Just as in banking, an important part of my work in the classroom is investing groups of people in a shared "Big Goal," and helping them understand how their personal effort contributes to the team. Here's how I do it.

### Scholars Share Out

As an elementary special education teacher, my scholars are typically 3 to 4 years below grade level in reading or math when they begin their Individualized Education Programs. They spend their days in general education classrooms, receiving support services to help them progress alongside their nondisabled peers.

Considering their academic levels, it can be daunting to help my students achieve growth throughout the year, but I am firm in my belief they can achieve with the right support—and a positive culture.

Developing that culture is an ongoing process. My first year teaching, I knew I had to have a Big Goal to invest my students in their daily learning, and I proudly unveiled it to them at the beginning of the school year. Yet they were not as invested as I was, because they had no hand in creating the goal.

That's why we now begin the year with a PowerPoint presentation that guides the class in reflection on their performance the previous year—and toward a new Big Goal for the year ahead. Some students watch from their pods, others gather on the carpet, and a note-taker jots our reflections on paper to help form commitments to our goal.

"Welcome back, scholars!" I say. "I am so excited for our learning journey this year. We accomplished a lot, but we want to top that success in a big way. Let's talk about what went well for you last year."

"I learned about volcanoes and how they erupt!" Xavier shares.

"I was proficient in Reading on TCAP!" Jamiah shares.

More and more hands go up. As we review results from last year, we write down our experiences on a two-column chart, Wins and Challenges. I want each scholar to share one success and revisit how that accomplishment made him or her feel.

This reflectiveness helps them see the connection between their positive behaviors and their academic success. Even for students who didn't meet their goal, it can be helpful to think about their behavior. Some challenges are beyond their

control—such as a broken family car that made it difficult to get to school—but even those challenges are useful for me to gain insight into their home life for the year ahead.

You can feel the energy in the air, almost like a pep rally. This conversation starts the culture of achievement and success—framed with the positive thinking that is essential to our success in the classroom. The students are starting to think about what they will do together as a group as much as what they will achieve as individuals, and they're seeing that everyone is striving toward something.

As strange as it may seem, it's essentially the same conversation I used to have when I worked in banking. During our first quarter check-ins with branch managers, we would reflect on their goals—what budgets they met, and what goals they

fell short on—recalling the strategies and efforts that helped them achieve and identifying what efforts need to be carried on to the next year. We unpacked challenges like staffing issues or unfamiliar projects, and we thought through how those challenges could be overcome.

Now and then a branch manager might say something was impossible. Their neighborhood wasn't growing, for example; they couldn't just pick up and physically move the entire branch.

Just as I do with my students now, I encouraged those managers to look past what they thought was impossible. Focus on what's under your control—and keep your eye on the goal.

### Scholars' Self-Check

Once I hear each student share his or her success, I have them think about what they could have done the previous year that would have improved that success. This step is tricky. I want them to be honest, but this is not a time to lay guilt trips. To set the example of the kind of reflection I'm seeking, I share one thing that I could have done better as their teacher.

"I wish I had planned more lunch learning sessions," I say. "That extra time may have helped some of you come closer to your goals."

This shows that I am reflecting and that even their teacher should always strive to improve. Last year's success should not end our journey.

Once I have revealed something more I could have done to help them learn, they consider what actions they could have taken—or stopped—to support more success in the previous year, writing down the most important one in the Challenges section of their chart. Next, I share some of the points and ask the scholars if they would like to explain how this behavior might have helped them even more the previous year.

"I could practice more on reading," I say, sharing one student's example. "How could this have helped someone come closer to their goal?"

"Then I would have become a better reader," the student says.

I share another student's goal: " 'Stop getting in trouble.' How did this impact your learning?"

"It made me miss things in class I needed to know," the student says.

Many special education students struggle with behavior issues that affect their progress, yet as most teachers know, discipline is a challenge for regular education students as well. The key is helping all students focus on how those behaviors connect to learning. That's the link we're trying to make together.



Tracking progress with a paw.

Soon we shift to creating a class goal that will help everyone come closer to improving their progress in the general curriculum. Based on the previous year and the current academic levels of my students, I facilitate a conversation that leads to us setting a Big Goal of 100 percent of students improving their reading and math skills by two grade levels by the end of the school year.

If it's difficult to invest students in their own success, it can be even more challenging to help them see how their success connects to the entire class. I stress the idea of teamwork, thinking of our class achievement like a relay race in which each person on the team needs to run a strong leg for the entire team to win. As we review the previous year's results, I make a point of celebrating the groups who did achieve 100 percent, hoping to foster a little friendly competition.

Big Goals build energy, focus and a sense of shared accountability. But just as I learned in banking, the real key is to invest people in these goals by making it personal to each individual. That means we have to take it a step further.

### **Individual Scholar Folders**

Once we have established our common Big Goal, I conduct individual conferences with my students to assess where they are and what two years of growth will look like for them specifically. This is vital because it helps them connect their personal growth with our Big Goal and understand how much they matter in this process.

During our individual conference, we review each child's Scholar Folder, the personal tracker they will use to follow their progress. This tracker includes space to record scores on assessments that relate to specific academic objectives. Just as importantly, it tracks personal behaviors that support individual growth, such as homework completion, class participation and conduct.

The tracker includes key milestones for the general curriculum, as well as other more personal objectives. For example, if a child's reading is at a first-grade level but he or she is in third grade, tracking to improve fluency and recognition of words that they could not read previously is added. This level of personalization goes beyond simply tracking for grade-level objectives and gives the scholar uniquely tailored goals.

This is a sensitive process that can expose students' insecurities. As Carlos once told me, "I don't want everybody in my business." That's why we close this initial conference with me assuring all students that their Scholar Folders are strictly private—for our conferences and their knowledge to help them track how they are doing. The Scholar Folder is a personal call

*"Hey, why is your paw not moving?" one student asks another after one of our celebrations. "We need your paw to move so we can make our goal."*

to action. We'll save our public celebrations for our progress toward the Big Goal.

### **Where is Your Paw?**

In our classroom, we have adopted the mindset that all of the knowledge we acquire and apply will help us successfully get into and complete college. At the beginning of the year, each student selects the college from which they will graduate in the future. They symbolize that commitment with a "Tiger Paw," a paw-shaped marker in their chosen college's color, representing a step on their path toward their two years of growth—and a future as a college graduate.

From that moment on, everything we do focuses on moving their Tiger Paws toward our Big Goal of two years of academic growth. Each student's paw goes on our class tracker, a long road with four time markers—6 months, 1 year, 1.5 years and 2 years—which serve as checkpoints to see where we are in relation to our goal.

At the end of each grading period (our school has four), scholars move their Tiger Paw to denote how much growth they have made. Their paws start at zero, and stay there until they have achieved at least 6 months of growth, at which point they leap to the first milestone. This helps set a rigorous tone for the year and shows students that dramatic improvement is possible with hard work. It often gives them some momentum in the form of an early win, as these first six months of growth are generally the easiest to achieve. At the end of subsequent assessment periods, they can move their Tiger Paws in smaller monthly increments.

These are always days of celebration. I unveil everyone's growth with a dramatic PowerPoint presentation that flashes students' names and faces along with their progress, which is always met by a round of applause, hoorahs and chants. The pride they feel when they can go to the tracker and move their Tiger Paw is evident on their faces. They can own that feeling of moving themselves on the tracker while simultaneously moving their academic progress. It matters to them for two reasons. Not only do they get to move their personal tracker, they are helping bring the class one step closer to its ultimate goal.

## *Hard work deserves to be recognized, whether you're in a bank or in the classroom.*

I reference our class tracker before each lesson as a reminder of why everyone must work so hard. It's not all that different from the charts or thermometers some of my branch managers used to measure their goals, or the charts they posted in the break room, highlighting sales staff achievements from the previous week. Hard work deserves to be recognized, whether you're in a bank or in a classroom.

### **Keeping Scholars on Track**

I strive to keep all of my scholars on track throughout the year, yet as in most classrooms, students progress at different rates. That's why it's important for us to connect regularly to celebrate successes or see why progress has stalled. I do that through weekly strategy check-ins with each student.

These check-ins are a lot like the regular conference calls I had with branch managers to share weekly sales updates and discuss successful strategies. In some cases, where branches were struggling, the area manager would schedule an in-depth strategy session with a branch manager to help build a sense of urgency.

In my classroom, the check-in is an informal conference that involves my briefly meeting with scholars to ensure they are tracking their scores and addressing any areas of concern. It can be a time-consuming process, but I structure the instructional flow of my classroom to build in flexibility, using time during project-based lessons or group work to meet for quick updates. Sometimes we have them at lunch, if needed.

These conferences tend to be long at the beginning of the year, but they soon evolve to quick check-ins to see if students are noticing trends in their performance or any behaviors that are affecting their progress. For students who are struggling, it can be a time to schedule more in-depth support in the future—or even set up a meeting with parents.

Ultimately, I seek for scholars to assume true ownership of their progress. I know this is happening when they begin to steer the conversation, guided by their tracker. The check-ins give them a chance to reflect on their progress, even if only for a few minutes. When scholars see the connection between their actions and their growth, it helps them feel a sense of responsibility for their learning.

I knew Derrick assumed this ownership when he took responsibility for his own Tiger Paw at a time when he was falling off track.

"I noticed you had several scores missing on last week's tracker," I said at the beginning of our check-in.

"I was sick and I couldn't come to school," he explained. "Can I make up the work? Then maybe I'll do better so I can move my paw."

### **Sharing Goals, Sharing Success**

"Hey, why is your paw not moving?" one student asks another after one of our celebrations. "We need your paw to move so we can make our goal."

This is always music to my ears, the result of constantly referencing our goal, celebrating accomplishments and making small wins feel like big deals. We celebrate when a student passes a quiz or assignment. We cheer when a scholar is able to decode unfamiliar words in a text they could not read at the beginning of grading period. Our Big Goal is the lifeblood of our classroom culture, and each move of a Tiger Paw is a major investment that each of my students deposit toward their future success.

When I hear my scholars noticing trends of their peers and seeing how that affects our 100 percent target, I know that we have a shared vision of achieving our Big Goal. In my banking experience, we fostered this sense of shared accountability and motivation to reach branch goals. Branch managers used these goals to motivate their staff, and area managers used their own goals with their branch managers. Goals even channeled up to the regional level, where different bank regions competed to see who could exceed expectations and help the entire institution reach its annual goals.

If everyone has a clear goal in mind, and everyone understands how their individual behavior contributes to that goal, powerful things can happen. In the classroom, reaching our goals doesn't result in some big incentive payout that was common in the banking world—it results in something even more enticing. It allows my scholars to start closing the achievement gap that exists between them and their nondisabled peers. That accomplishment is priceless. It empowers my scholars to see how they can drive their success and keep their paw moving, step by step, year by year, until the impossible suddenly seems possible.