

PRESERVING AN OPPORTUNITY

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Vexation

I am a teacher. I have thought a lot over the past year about what I do and what I want to be doing in the future. Do I want to stay in the classroom? Should I become a principal? Becoming an academic has always been something that has appealed to me. Is that the right track? I still don't know the answer to any of these questions regarding my future, but through the process of pondering and reflection I have come to realize that teaching middle level science is the best situation for me to be in right now. I feel like I am making a difference in the world and that is why I started in this profession. It is incredibly fulfilling. I get to work with kids at a time in their life when they desperately need as many positive influences as they can possibly have. I work in a profession that allows me to continually improve my practice. The challenge is awesome I am excited by the realization that I am in the right situation at this point in time.

I love teaching. I really do. When the 2008 crossroads takes place I will be in my 7th year as a science teacher. One reason I enjoy my job is that I can look back on the things my teachers did for me and hope that I'm doing something similar for my students. My teachers made a difference for me by being individuals whom I could respect, by showing me respect, and by giving me confidence in myself. I can remember a specific incidence where a simple comment made by a teacher truly reached me. My eighth grade English teacher, Mrs. Tueller, told me she thought I could accomplish my goals in a way that continues to impact me to this day. Speaking to me after class one day she said, "I bet you can get A's when you want to." I responded that I could usually get an A if I really tried. She replied, "I can tell. I hope you decide to try in my class. I'd really like to see what you are capable of." I don't know why this simple comment made a difference for me but it did. I wonder how many other people have experienced a similar event, where someone they looked up to made a positive comment about them that quite literally changed their life. It is intimidating to me to say that I want to better the life of every student that I come into contact with but that is my goal.

I am in a unique situation as a teacher that I believe greatly improves my potential to influence lives. I have more freedom to teach in the best way I know how than I thought was possible and I have the resources to provide students with the materials and experiences that will magnify their learning. I have accepted a new job teaching science at the Salt Lake Center for Science Education (SLCSE). This is a dream job in every way I can think of. SLCSE is a middle level charter school/science center that is part of the Salt Lake City School District in partnership with the University of Utah. Students at SLCSE have the opportunity to take science related elective classes normally not offered in secondary schools such as engineering (taught by UofU staff) and museum science (taught by a naturalist from the Utah Museum of Natural History). I will be teaching one double period (110 minutes) of 7th grade science, one double period of 8th grade science and an astronomy elective class Monday through Thursday. On Fridays I'll team teach forensic science first semester and electronics second semester. I will have 70 total students (down from 200+) and a double preparation period each day (I haven't had a prep. in three years). The founders of the school are well connected and have gathered funding through business partnerships and grants, along with district support, that allows the staff of SLCSE to purchase classroom equipment that teachers normally just dream about (I had a \$5,000.00 budget for telescopes to enrich my astronomy class). The best part of my new job however, is the population of student with whom I get to work.

My new school is located in a culturally and ethnically diverse, low socioeconomic status area on Salt Lake City's west-side. The neighborhood kids who are attending SLCSE are crazy about science and truly grateful to be attending a science focused school. Many are faced with very difficult life situations and obstacles that are very difficult to overcome. I think our science center is the perfect place for them and providing a top quality learning experience for these disadvantaged kids is a very important part of the mission of SLCSE. This brings me to my vexation.

Charter schools in the State of Utah are open enrolment public schools. When more students apply to get into a school during the school's open enrollment period than the school's enrolment cap allows

admittance is handled through a lottery. Students who are not chosen through the lottery or who apply after open enrolment closes are placed on a waiting list. Many of the students at SLCSE followed their teachers from the local junior high and elementary schools and were accepted during open enrolment without the need for a lottery. Word spread about the school after open enrollment closed and the waiting list filled up. The majority of students on the waiting list were not neighborhood kids. Many came from affluent areas around the valley. It is my worry that without a previous connection to a teacher far fewer students from the traditional public schools in the area will apply and SLCSE will become a school for the entitled.

Venture

I want to find a way to stack our applicant pool with neighborhood kids and help this amazing school remain a place where disadvantaged students can thrive. I have to find a way to make connections between the Salt Lake Center for Science Education and teachers and students in the local elementary schools. I see this as one of the most important things I can do to insure the future success of my school. I'm not sure of the best way to accomplish this important task but I have a few ideas.

I want to get third through sixth grade students from the surrounding schools into our building so they can get a feel for the culture of caring and exploration that exist at SLCSE. I have thought a lot about educational experiences as a learner and why my teacher's comments have had such a lasting impact on me. I don't remember any of the specifics regarding the content these teachers taught me on the days the comments were made. The comments have stayed with me because they were made by people I admired. These simple statements helped me to see the impact that teachers can have if they use their influence appropriately and live to be someone that students can respect. Every teacher is a role model and mentor. It is part of the job; we don't have a choice. What we can choose is how effectively we use our position of influence to help students set goals that are worthy of their potential. It is a big part of a teacher's job to convince students of the limitless possibilities that lie before them and the teachers at SLCSE take that seriously. If primary students can get a taste for our school's commitment I believe that SLCSE will be the place they want to be.

In addition to getting elementary students into my school, I want to get my students into the local elementary schools. There are several areas of overlap in the Utah State Science Core Curriculum regarding what is taught at the middle level and what is taught in elementary school. I want to get my students into the elementary schools and have them interact with and mentor the younger kids. Having SLCSE students present content in primary schools will help my kids better grasp what I am trying to teach them, give them a sense of pride, and create a connection between the primary kids and SLCSE.

These ideas are very feasible from my end of things. There are three elementary schools within walking distance of SLCSE and I have my students for 2 hours a day. This provides ample time for students to get between schools. I'm worried about facing opposition from the elementary school teachers who look at the science center as a threat to their sixth grade enrolment. If we have 20 plus kids come to our school from a traditional elementary school, that school is going to lose a teacher. I do not know how to reduce this anxiety in teachers. I hope to get advice and mentoring regarding how to best accomplish my venture. The Salt Lake Center for Science Education could be considered a success in the eyes of some by way of becoming an elitist school where kids from affluent neighborhoods and homes come to take advantage of great facilities and teachers. If this happens it will be considered a failure by those who work there. I can not let that happen.