

Significant Gains

CAITLIN STUART '07

It is a universal truth that if you have attended CMC, a college of “Leaders in the Making,” then you know who Peter Drucker is. One thing I remember from my leadership studies is Drucker’s statement that “Effective leadership is not about making speeches or being liked; leadership is defined by results not attributes.” A year into my commitment with Teach For America, I feel like I have found a way to apply this wisdom as a member of the South Louisiana Corps 2007.

I stepped onto Louisiana soil for the first time in June 2007. Louisiana is only 2000 miles from CMC, but it might as well be a foreign country to a born and raised California girl like myself. Although everything about the place was unfamiliar, I was convinced that I had made a good life-changing decision. The only foreseeable hang-up was that I had spent my education learning about government and literature, and here I was about to become a math teacher.

The next two months were a whirlwind of meeting other corps members, interviewing for a position, and attending Summer Institute in Houston (aka Teacher Boot Camp). Between learning how to write lesson plans and the finer elements of classroom management, the summer passed very quickly. As much as I learned at Institute about the mechanics of running a classroom, I did not know what to expect once I got settled in Louisiana.

My first few days as a teacher were quite possibly the hardest days of my life. There was little I could do to mentally prepare myself to be the leader of my classroom, capturing the attention of over 100 students per day. Each class period felt like the longest 52 minutes of my life as I worked to learn my curriculum, my student’s names and personalities, and the many school policies getting thrown my way. Very quickly I realized that I would have to be much more than merely my students’ math teacher to be successful.

Many people take for granted what it truly takes to be a teacher. To achieve what Teach For America refers to as significant gains, it takes a lot more than handing out worksheets and giving lectures. For me, being more than a teacher became a quest for creating opportunity for education outside of our math classroom. At a basic level, this involved tutoring my students after school in math and history. Later in the year I helped organize two field trips to Lafayette, only 20 miles away. Not only did my students get a chance to see a play and visit the local swamp, but for many it was the furthest they had ever been from home. Additionally, I was able to have a Grammy Award-winning zydeco musician, Terrance Simien, come to class as a guest instructor during Teach For America Week in April 2008. Students were able to learn a lot about their history and local Creole culture, much of which has become lost in recent years.



Caitlin Stuart, far right, with students.

One of the greatest opportunities I have tried to create was the chance for my students to see how math is used in the real world. After state testing I designed a research project so that my students could pick a career that they were interested in and find out how it used math. This opened up discussion about college, salary, the importance of education, and the applications of things my students were learning to their future.

Perhaps the most significant opportunity my students will receive is the library expansion project. Although our school has more than 500 students in seventh and eighth grade, our library is only half-stocked with books. However, this problem is about to change: through a partnership with my former elementary school, Opelousas Junior High is receiving hundreds of donated textbooks, reading books, and class sets to truly give my students a chance to discover reading.

It is not easy to make significant gains in a classroom, which is defined as closing the achievement gap for one’s students by at least 25 percent per year. When a child already knows that he or she is behind, it is an uphill battle to convince that child that he can go further and be more. This year, my students outscored their peers by an average of 34 percent on the state exam. But 34 percent is just a number. From a qualitative standpoint, I saw my students make significant gains as people: they learned how to be polite, how to help each other, how to be encouraging instead of calling each other names for getting the wrong answer. They learned how to explain their thought processes and connect ideas. At CMC we take for granted the fact that we were offered an excellent education. Far too many children will never come close to that opportunity based on the type of schools available to them from preschool onward.

“One day, all children in our nation will have the opportunity to attain an excellent education,” or so the TFA mission statement decrees. It is a possibility that I have seen and want to continue creating. But it takes leaders who seek results and will not stop until they have attained those results. I thought my education at CMC would be inapplicable to my new life as a math teacher; however, I have found that I apply what I learned about leadership daily. To truly create a country in which no child is left behind, Teach For America is going to need a lot more leaders—leaders like those shaped by CMC.