

Kimberly Oliver, 2006 National Teacher of the Year

Introduction

After only six years as a kindergarten teacher at Broad Acres Elementary School in Silver Spring, Maryland, Kimberly Oliver was named 2006 Maryland Teacher of the Year and 2006 National Teacher of the Year. She sums up this achievement by saying, "I believe my greatest contribution in education has been working as a teacher leader to build a professional learning community where collaboration is used to improve teaching and learning. When I arrived at Broad Acres Elementary...the school was in danger of being restructured by the state because of declining academic performance. Teachers were working independently and inefficiently, and student expectations were not clear." "I helped create and implement several collaborative structures to ensure consistency in curriculum, instruction and assessment, providing adequate support for teachers and ultimately increasing student achievement." She states that through her efforts and those of her colleagues, "In 2001, our school was the number one school in our school system for percentage increases in test scores." Ms. Oliver's students were also performing skills that had previously been accomplished in first grade. These great strides, which would be considered laudable anywhere, were made in a school where 90 percent of the students live in poverty, their rate of mobility is 30 percent and 75 percent have parents who do not speak English. As Montgomery County Superintendent of Schools Jerry D. West states it, "The success at Broad Acres dispelled the myth that students of poverty and limited English proficiency cannot achieve at high levels."

Ms. Oliver was inspired to become a kindergarten teacher by a cherished daycare teacher who showed genuine interest and concern for her when she was a child, and who not only taught her to read but conveyed a delight in reading and learning that contributed immeasurably to her subsequent academic success. Ms. Oliver wants to be that crucial, influential first teacher for her students.

Philosophy of Teaching

Because teaching is so much more than just providing basic skills and preparing students for the workforce, and includes promoting good citizenship, reinforcing values, nurturing students and cultivating their talents and abilities, Ms. Oliver believes that building relationships is an essential component of her profession. These relationships extend to her students, their families, her fellow educators and the community.

STUDENTS Ms. Oliver says, "I take the time to build a personal relationship with each of my students because I respect them as individuals and am concerned about their overall wellbeing, not just their academic success." She adds, "children learn and develop at different rates, and I base my instruction around this understanding." Further, she states, "Reduced class size allows teachers to focus instruction and differentiate to meet the needs of all students. I teach a class of 15 students, and I can meet their specific individual needs by providing small group instruction every day. I would not be able to do this if I had 30 students." She cites an example from her own classroom where she had two students with widely differing entry skills: one had no prior school experience and very little English, was unable to write her name, hold a pencil or recognize any letters of the alphabet; one had been in a year-long pre-kindergarten program, spoke English fluently, recognized all of the letters of the alphabet and some words. Thanks to reduced class size, Ms. Oliver was able to help each student realize goals appropriate to their respective needs.

PARENTS Ms. Oliver believes that establishing relationships with parents is an important means of better understanding her students and meeting their needs. The mutual regard and open

communication she enjoys with parents is summed up this way by a parent of two former students: “Even though I was nervous about volunteering at first, Ms. Oliver made me feel very comfortable. She asked me to help and she did it in a respectful way...I helped in the classroom...I went on field trips with the class, I worked with some children who were bilingual and I helped to translate for other parents...I learned that every parent, regardless of where they come from, what language they speak, or how much education they have themselves, can help their child and their school.”

PEERS As a mentor teacher, Ms. Oliver assists her fellow teachers in adjusting to the challenges of their ever-evolving profession. She cites this example: “...when I began teaching six years ago, the Montgomery County Public Schools began an early childhood initiative increasing the rigor of the kindergarten program. Many teachers were opposed to the changes and deemed them developmentally inappropriate even though new studies showed that younger children were capable of learning much more than had been expected of them in the past. I was able to implement the new curriculum in my classroom and host peer visits so that other teachers could see that the new curriculum worked and was appropriate for students. Watching a fairly new educator teach disadvantaged students how to acquire foundational skills in literacy and read a simple text was a powerful experience that changed the minds of many of my colleagues.”

Collaborative structures put in place by Ms. Oliver help her colleagues and her to plan and reflect as teams, evaluate expectations for students and share expertise so that students benefit from the strengths of the group.

COMMUNITY Ms. Oliver is not only a gifted teacher, she is an enthusiastic volunteer, and contributes to her community in areas related to two of her passions, reading and learning. A favorite event she helps sponsor is “Books and Supper Night,” held four times a year, when families visit the school, check out books from the library, and read to one another. Attending families receive free books to add to their personal libraries to encourage family reading at home, and enjoy a communal dinner where they can interact with and get to know their neighbors.

Throughout the year, Ms. Oliver coordinates family technology, literacy and math nights to teach parents how they can support the school curriculum at home, for example, by learning basic computer skills.

She adds, “I believe it is my duty to teach my students, the youngest community members, their civic role. I accomplish this through a thematic unit on communities and mini-lessons on various topics and such as littering, gardening and recycling.”

As National Teacher of the Year...

Kimberly Oliver pledged that if she were to win the National Teacher of the Year award, she would use it as a platform to emphasize the importance of early childhood education. In her words, “...investing in early childhood education has long-lasting benefits for students and society...As a result of attending a quality early childhood program, students develop better social, cognitive and verbal skills. They are less likely to be retained or need remedial or special education services. Students improve in long-term academic outcomes and are more likely to graduate.” She notes that “research shows that many disadvantaged children lag behind their counterparts when they enter kindergarten” and that those who begin behind have great difficulty ever catching up. *From her own life and classroom experience, Ms. Oliver knows that quality pre-kindergarten programs, full-day kindergarten and small class sizes can set the stage for a lifetime of academic success.*