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Reaching My Students through Social-Emotional Learning

By Mary (Mari) Mendoza-Ramirez, Eighth-Grade English Language Arts Teacher at Maria Saucedo Scholastic Academy

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never forget: *"Ms. Mendoza, you'll always remember us because we're the COVID kids."*

I told her not to call herself that, or let anyone else call her that, because she and her classmates were so much more. They were resilient. They were going to be the generation that takes the reins from us when we get ready to retire. And I was so proud of them.

Throughout the past year, that resilience hasn't always come naturally. I've been a teacher in CPS for 20 years, yet my stomach was still in knots in September because I didn't know if I was going to be able to pull it off. On top of that, I live in La Villita, the same neighborhood I teach in, and our community was getting hit hard by the pandemic. I was losing neighbor after neighbor and felt like death was knocking on my door.

Every teacher has a toolbox that they are constantly drawing from. With each new school year, you add a few new tools to this toolbox that help you refine your practice. I could have acted like this school year wasn't that different than any other year, but that would have been doing a disservice to my students. If I am not reaching them emotionally and responding to their cries for help, then I am not doing my job well.

This process started by being raw and transparent with my kids about how I was feeling and what I was going through day by day. Because I had worked hard to build trust with my students and give them ownership in the classroom, they felt comfortable, and their own stories of perseverance started flowing out.

"Ms. Mendoza, my parents are sick and now I feel like I'm the parent and they're the kids."

"Ms. Mendoza, I'm worried there won't be enough masks to go around because every time we go to the store we have to wait in a long line."

"Ms. Mendoza, both of my parents lost their jobs."

We were supporting each other and healing together. Other tools in my toolbox came from DonorsChoose grants that allowed me to incorporate mindfulness books and activities into the school day that helped my students open up even more.

Earlier this year, I shared a survey with all 113 of our eighth-graders and noticed a split in their responses. About half of them believed that their teacher knew what was going on with them and how they were feeling, and the other half did not. One of my colleagues on the TTC shared an awesome “emoji” resource with me that educators can use to gauge how their students are feeling on a daily basis.

These opportunities to grow remind me how supported I am to then be able to support my students and meet their academic and social-emotional needs. I have extremely collaborative colleagues and a wonderful administration that always asks me what I need to be successful. The relationships I have built at Saucedo make me excited to go on the journey of another school year once more—this time, with all of my students back in the classroom with me.

A symbol I love to use for my eighth-graders is a butterfly. I want to congratulate the Class of 2021 on earning their wings. And, for my incoming students, I want them to know that their final year in elementary school will require hard work, being centered, and having high standards for themselves. I will give them the best of me and expect the same in return.

Then, less than a year from now, they too will get their wings and fly off.

Ms. Mendoza-Ramirez’s mom was also a CPS teacher. Even though she initially planned to go to law school, she found her calling in the classroom after volunteering at her mom’s school. Learn more about the district’s Transformative Teaching Cohort ***here.***

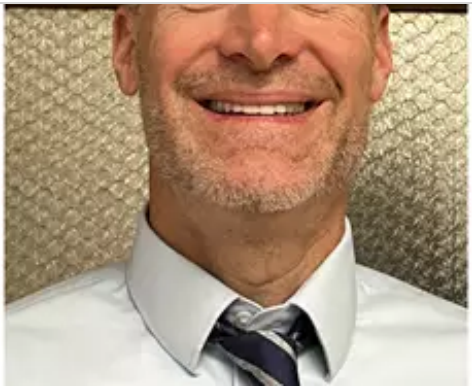
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42 W. Madison Street
Chicago, IL 60602
773-553-1000