DELAWARE OFFICE OF EARLY LEARNING
Great Tomorrows Begin Today

Young Learners Inspire Teach For America Corps Members

Impacting students' lives as early as possible has been proven to help them make greater gains in school and throughout their lives. What they learn from birth to five-years-old is critical, and both Teach for America and the state of Delaware recognize that.

Teach For America is a nonprofit organization that places highly qualified recent college graduates and professionals into low-income classrooms and commit to teach for two years. In general, TFA places corps members in K-12 classrooms. For myself, a 2012 TFA Delaware corps member, that's exactly what I thought, and, what I got. This is my second year teaching 4th grade at Thomas Edison Charter School in Wilmington, and I've loved it.

Not only have I learned a lot about myself, but I've also learned so much about the Delaware education system and how much of an impact we can have on driving it in the right direction. However, because the birth to five age is so important in sending students down the right path from the beginning, TFA Delaware partnered with the state of Delaware to place corps members in preschools and early learning centers around the state.

Two corps members, Stephanie Salazar and Shakira Perez, are both 2013 corps members who teach at the Latin American Community Center, teaching one-year-olds and two-year-olds, respectively.

Salazar, like many ECE teachers, didn't originally see herself teaching one-year-olds, but now, can't imagine not teaching them.

"This is definitely not something that I pictured myself doing," Salazar said, "Nothing can compare to my first day in the classroom. It was like being thrown into a tub of ice water."

Upon meeting her students and getting to know them, she remarked, "I had no idea they could learn so much so fast."

Salazar said even though they are only one-year-old, they have a very structured day, every moment filled with learning activities. They start off the day by washing hands and eating breakfast, followed by outside time and diaper changing.

"Everything is a learning exercise," Salazar said. "We're even learning during diaper changing time."

They also do a lot of activities with water, showing students how to drink it, its properties and even using food coloring to point out different things in the room that are the same color as the water.

Salazar said it's not just her students who are opening her eyes to the infant and toddler world. She also has had many professional development sessions in the past six months in an effort to learn as much as possible.

Salazar said she is looking forward to future professional development sessions to keep learning, as also language to use when talking about her job.

“I’m excited to receive more PD to learn and share knowledge with people so they know that one-year-olds can learn and it’s serious,” she said. “I do not work at a day care, I work at an early development center.”

Shakira Perez is another 2013 TFA corps member working at the LACC who teaches in the two-year-old classroom. Perez said she specifically wanted to work in a place like the LACC due to her background in, and passion for the Latino community.

“What happens in the first five years of a child’s life stays with them for a lifetime,” Perez said in an email. “As I began this journey, I became interested in being in a position where I can expose my students to the capital they may not be exposed to outside of the school setting.”

Perez said her 12 two-year-olds are the only inspiration she needs to get out of bed in the morning. She goes into work every day for them, and her passion for the work that she is doing is evident.

“I go in every day to let them know that I truly care for them and that they have someone who believes in them and challenges them because she believes in their potential,” Perez said.

Amidst their everyday routine, Perez said she tries to expose her students to everything from proper greetings to solving puzzles to potty training and nutrition. The more they can learn now, the better off they will be, she said.

Said Perez, “I’m just trying to set them on a path to success for the future because I am setting the foundation for the rest of their lives.”

By Heather Wentz