

How St. Paul teacher Bonnie Laabs closed - City Pages (Minneapolis, MN) - September 2, 2016

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Hamline Elementary School in St. Paul's Hamline Midway neighborhood is one of two elementary schools in the area that have some of the lowest enrollment numbers in the entire district. Over the past several years as St. Paul Public Schools toyed with the idea of either closing or combining Hamline with its neighbor Galtier Elementary, Hamline's standardized test scores have fluctuated far below state averages.

In science, Hamline students have always hovered around 17 percent proficient. The state average is 61 percent.

When Bonnie Laabs interviewed for the position of science teacher, she said she could triple those scores. Other teachers were extremely skeptical, but Principal Bobbie Johnson took her up on the challenge.

She fulfilled the promise in one year, pushing her students all the way up to meet the statewide average of 61 percent, and closing the achievement gap.

According to Jodie Wilson, Hamline's testing coordinator, this tremendous jump is "extremely unheard of" in St. Paul Schools.

"As teachers in a building where everyone is always watching your test scores or potentially wanting to close your building because of low enrollment, everybody's always really aware of making sure that we're getting better gains," Wilson says, "because the better gains we get the more likely the district will think we're worthwhile to keep around."

It's been a stressful year, Wilson says, but the results that Laabs has achieved with a combination of her attitude with students and her personal teaching strategies give hope that more parents will think about enrolling their kids at Hamline.

Laabs, who has just earned a PhD in teaching kids with trauma, firstly devotes a lot of time to making sure the kids understand the science jargon that invariably dominates the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment – words like "inherited and acquired traits," "biotic and abiotic," "semiconductor and insulator."

To help them understand, Laabs keeps a menagerie of animals in her classroom, including Andre the potty-trained giant rabbit, Spike the iguana, Mr. Toddle the Russian tortoise, and Leo the bearded dragon. The kids learn about the differences between inherited and acquired traits, for example, by taking photos of the animals with their school-assigned iPads and labeling the animals' missing toes and scars as "acquired," long tails and big ears as "inherited."

With her fifth grade students, Laabs sits them down and shares her personal story.

"Growing up, I was expelled from school in the fifth grade," she says. "So I tell them, at your age I

was being escorted out of the school in handcuffs. I was just out of control, really rebellious. I'd faced a lot of trauma at home. I'd been physically abused, sexually abused."

Laabs spent some time in foster care, and was sent to juvenile corrections by seventh grade. She gives her students an idea of how she spiraled down, how as a teenager she began partying and hanging out in rough crowds. She doesn't include too many details.

But then she spins it, Laabs says, to explain why she gives the students homework every single day.

"They mumble and they complain and say, 'Why do you give us homework when we hate homework?' So I share my story and I say this is why I give you homework," she says.

"The only way out for me was through education. The teachers who believed in me, they kept pushing me to get my stuff down, get my grades in, go to college ... I believe in every one of you."

From then on, Laabs says she has a brand new relationship with the students, some of whom are encouraged to tell her bits and pieces of their lives. Kids who wouldn't even try, who say they don't have anyone at home to tutor them, will come in before school, after school, and during lunchtime to seek her help.

Hue Soo, mother of three children attending Jie Ming Academy – which is housed in the same building as Hamline and shares Laabs as a teacher – says Laabs goes beyond delivering science material to mentor her eldest son on being a good little citizen.

Soo's son was part of Lego League last year, a class outside of school tasked with the challenge of solving the world's problems using Legos. Her son was in charge of programming the robots his team built, and Laabs would take him aside and ask him how he would relay to the others what he had done.

"Because the others have to run it, even though he created the program," Soo says. "Sometimes he's in his own little world. She'll say there are other people here, they don't know what you're thinking in your head, so how can you help them understand?"

Jessica Kopp, a Hamline parent, says she's noticed the extra-academic life advice as well. When Kopp's daughter raves about Andre the giant rabbit, she explains the way that Laabs directs the entire class to sit in a circle on the floor with their knees touching so that Andre can hop around in the center.

"They have to work together to make sure that Andre is safe," Kopp explains. "I think that kind of thing fosters a great community in the classroom where all the kids are responsible, and they just love him. It's used as a reward for getting work done and stuff, like now we get time with Andre. They value that."

Additionally, Spike the iguana doesn't like loud noises, so the kids have to speak gently in the classroom so as not to terrify him.

"It creates a climate where learning is easier, more accessible," Kopp says. "The whole room is amazing. There's the Legos robotics in a corner, there's animals, everywhere you look there's a different way to be a scientist. I think it's really inspiring."

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