

RECOMMENDATION FOR MARY LYNN BRYAN'S NOMINATION AS ROTARY TEACHER AWARD, 2004

By Linda Inlay, Director, River School

It is with great pleasure that I write this in support of Mary Lynn Bryan's nomination for Teacher of the Year.

In my opinion, there are two domains of being a master teacher: one encompasses the craft of teaching; the second the being-ness of person. At the River School, we call the first the *explicit curriculum* and the second, *the implicit curriculum* - the values being taught implicitly by who we are and the ways we behave. When Mary Lynn came to the River School six years ago, she was very competent in the explicit curriculum; and since then, she has grown tremendously in the particular *implicit curriculum* of our program.

In an *Educational Leadership* article with Peter Senge some years back, he was asked whether his notion of learning organizations could be applied to schools. As far as he could see at the time, very few schools could be considered learning organizations because the faculty in schools was not growing personally. At the River School, the staff is also encouraged to grow personally because, as models for our students, they are the most powerful examples of the quality of character education we teach. Mary Lynn, more than any other teacher on my staff, exemplifies the journey of continuing to reflect on self and intending to grow personally and professionally.

In regards to the *explicit curriculum* of teaching language arts and social studies over the past six years, Mary Lynn has become even more skilled in developing integrated curriculum that is personally meaningful to middle schoolers which accounts for her success with students. In 1998 when she first came to the River School, she was a good teacher and now she is a great teacher, excelling in her craft of not just teaching these disciplines but facilitating the process so that her students are empowered and active. These strategies include:

- Holding students accountable for their choices, without disrespecting their choice to learn or not learn.
- Following through on her word so that our students can count on the certainty of her support, both in following through on their assignments, but also in assisting them through difficult challenges. Since teaching the value of *responsibility* is foundational in our school, Mary Lynn's consistency supports our students in growing more accountable and, therefore, more confident of their own abilities.
- Working closely with parents so that parents trust her because they know she has their children's best interests at heart, even when she has to discipline them.
- Continuing to find ways to empower students through self-reflection and active engagements. For instance, when we were teaching students how to question, she led them through a process of defining, "What is a good question?" She employs self-reflective strategies in the evaluation process, having students create their own rubrics for assessing their work.
- Integrating curriculum in such a way to provide meaning for students, especially in social studies, where the history standards are so broad that students don't easily relate well with them. She knows that she is not teaching history; she is teaching human beings so unless she can find ways for them to relate to the material, they will not retain much of it in any meaningful way.

Here are some of the examples of her creativity in presenting engaging learning experiences:

- A Renaissance Tea where students come as historical figures and are interviewed regarding their place in history.
- Collaborating with other teachers to create a multi-grade simulation that combined astronomy and Manifest Destiny in American History to answer the question, "Who Owns Space?" 6th, 7th, and 8th

graders were combined on teams who had to leave Earth for one of the moons of Jupiter to establish a colony.

- Creating a unit on rivers, using the question, “How has the geography surrounding rivers impacted culture and how has culture impacted the ecology of rivers?” which focuses on the connectedness of the earth and, therefore, knowledge of the earth. One part of the unit involved students creating stencil phrases to prevent oil going into city drains. One of the stencils was selected by the city for stenciling on Napa drains which her students did in the neighborhoods nearby.
- As part our focus for the past two years on finding ways to connect our students to the outside world, last year, despite successfully working on her national certification, she began a new project called Global Challenge sponsored by the World Affairs Council. The theme was World Hunger which she used as part of a unit answering the year’s essential question, “What is our relationship to the Earth?” None of our teams placed last year but last year’s 7th graders returned as 8th graders to this year’s Global Challenge on Children’s Rights and swept the event with five awards: 1st and 2nd in Presentation Competition; 1st and 2nd in Poster Competition; and Overall Best.
- Because she has supported student writing, not just through the classroom but through the after school newspaper, *Rio POCO Loco*, her students have had opportunities to express themselves and their opinions. This is an important goal of our school by which students are engaged. Her students have improved on the District Writing Assessment each year. In addition, students were encouraged to write for the first Martin Luther King “I Also Have a Dream” context sponsored by Houghton Mifflin. One student, Amanda Conroy, won 1st place for the 8th grade, winning \$500 for herself and \$1000 for Mary Lynn.

In addition to these wonderful learning opportunities, she has also contributed greatly to developing a sense of community in our school which is also an important goal in our school because students then feel safe to be themselves and confident to take risks in learning. She was the energy behind the collaboration of three outdoor education projects for a three-year cycle:

- Last year, **The Amazing Race** - teams of 6th, 7th, and 8th graders participated in a scavenger hunt in San Francisco to find places of interest, using all public transportation, beginning with the ferry in Vallejo. Students learned how to read maps, organize their search, and use cable cars, electric buses, and Bart. This was HUGE coordination effort, involving over forty parents, including a roving parent who picked up any student who broke the trip rules and a time-out area at the San Francisco Library.
- This year, **C-Cubed: Camping, Community, and Connecting** - involved multi-grade teams camping at the KAO in Petaluma, taking trips to skating, Safari West, Pumpkin Patch, and Point Reyes.
- Next year, five-day traditional outdoor ed experience in a camp near Fresno. While this one is planned by the camp staff, Mary Lynn with help of a parent searched the entire Bay Area to find a quality outdoor education experience to hold all of our students. This wasn’t easy because there are not many camps that hold 250 students. Mary Lynn organized two fundraising efforts this year: a/ selling Costa Rican coffee that not only helps indigenous farmers but also helps restore native habitats; b/ selling seed packets for spring.

Oftentimes, someone like Mary Lynn on a staff is a one-man show, meaning that the teacher may not work well with other teachers. That is not the case with Mary Lynn. Because of our school’s systems orientation to how we organize the school, teachers have to work together as teams and as collaborators in developing integrated units, modeling the value of working cooperatively and collaboratively. She has trained several new teachers as their assigned coach and mentor to support them in learning our program. She has supported teachers and me personally, by being a good listener as well as offering tangible help like giving up a weekend to help a fellow teacher with her application to Columbia University. This year she is the coach to three new, young teachers and I know that she will be a great coach and friend to them.

In addition, her relationships with parents are outstanding. They count on her as a friend, not just a teacher of their child, often inviting her to dinner. She is learning to become more adept at dealing with “upset” parents, practicing the active listening we practice throughout the school, so that parents feel heard even in the midst of conflict.

Learning the *implicit curriculum*, the hidden curriculum of values that every school has, is a lot more challenging. At our school, since our vision of the student is one who has a strong sense of self, and since to accomplish this means teaching the character education goals of responsibility, respect, resourcefulness, and responsiveness, it is the modeling by the teachers that is the most effective in transmitting these values and behaviors. Teachers try their best to “walk the talk.” Mary Lynn has grown in this work on “self.” She recognizes that that has been the hardest part of being a teacher at the River School because as she said, “I have to look at myself when I’m in struggle with a student.” Like any other teacher, she gets “plugged into” a power struggle with certain students. She is not perfect. But what is admirable is that she has been willing to look at herself, to reflect on what are her buttons that she is allowing that student to press, and has slowly learned to un-plug. She does less and less blaming and more and more taking responsibility for herself. I value this greatly in Mary Lynn because I see her modeling the personal power that human beings have to transform themselves and this is something I would like our students to realize.

Finally, I speak to what is the most important part of this recommendation. She has had a powerful impact on so many students. Many count on her as friend, and not just teacher. They know that she cares about who they are. Her sense of humor and joy in teaching is evident. Her respect of students in trusting that they are capable is reflected in how they respond to a sub when she is gone. They are able to function independently. When a new student asked Mary Lynn, “How will you know that we’re doing the work?” His seatmate said, “She trusts us” and as a result, her students thrive.

The first Friday after school started brought many of her “friends” back to the River School from high school to visit. And this happens throughout the year as many of her students come back to keep in touch.

It is fitting to end with a quote from one of the speeches of an 8th grader at promotion that sums up what Mary Lynn is to many of her students:

“She does everything in a way that makes us want to learn. If I were to reach a goal of just being half of what she is now, I will feel successful in my life. . . I love you so much Mary Lynn and I don’t know what I would have done without you. You have given everyone here a different look on life and taught them so much.”