



Career Switcher Brings Global Experience to Teaching English as a Second Language and Heads a Non-Profit Traveling Opportunity for Students as a Way to Give Back

Manassas City -- Farnak Drake had no idea that when she traveled from Iran as a junior in high school to live with her Aunt in Maryland that she would end up teaching English as a Second Language, or the struggles that would accompany her venture.

Learning to speak English conversationally became a priority while Drake finished high school and prepared for college. She had taken English Grammar in Iran, speaks Farsi as her native language, and understands French and Spanish. But her global background and determination served her well and she was accepted by the University of Michigan pursuing a course of studies in Computer Programming.

Struggles continued however, as finances were an issue and Drake needed to finish college as quickly as possible. She transferred to Eastern Michigan University where she received her BS in Business Management with a minor in French.

Working as a Financial Advisor and Event Planner, in her mid-twenties Drake was studying again, but this time to get her teaching certificate. However, marriage to an Earth Science Teacher brought not only the joy of motherhood, but other responsibilities that prevented her from fulfilling her dream of teaching.

Drake finally entered the public school system at Loch Lomond Elementary School in Manassas, Virginia as a Computer Technologist. She knew she was in the right place, but this particular position didn't allow her to interact with the children the way she knew she wanted to. After five years in this position,

she left the school system to pursue other careers. But teaching called her back last year as she accepted a 12-week substitute teaching position for a teacher who was on maternity leave. “I had the 5th graders and fell in love with them and the art of teaching all over again,” explained Drake.

Drake found the EducateVA Career Switcher program provided by Virginia’s Community Colleges and again fell in love with the idea that she could take her 4 year degree, experience, and receive her teaching license through the program while she still had her job. “The biggest challenge for me to make the switch was taking the first step to get my paperwork in order. The rest all fell in place.”

At 48 years of age, Faranak is in her first year of teaching English as a Second Language at Loch Lomond Elementary School at the second grade level and knows she is ‘finally doing what she was meant to do’. “It brightens my day to see the kids and they have so much to tell me,” beamed Drake. “That helps with ESL conversation and the learning.”

Drake works with anywhere between 37 to 42 ESL students on a weekly basis. Many students were born in this country but were raised by parents who didn’t speak English as their primary language and as a result, the students do not either. Her class is predominantly composed of Hispanic speaking students from El Salvador, Mexico and Guatemala. There is one student from Vietnam and another from Egypt.

Drake loves her children. “My youngest son will be graduating this year and I feel very lucky to have my students to ease me into the ‘empty nester’ phase of my life. It is a joy to see my students’ faces every day and hear their stories.”

The children love Drake, too. Her most memorable teaching experience came from a student that was labeled ‘difficult’ by his teacher from the previous year, and she received warnings from other teachers in the school. Yet just last month, that same student gave Faranak Drake a big hug and said, “You are the best teacher in the world.”

After struggling to get to the United States, learning to speak the English language conversationally, paying for a college education and so forth, Faranak Drake wanted to give back. Ten years ago Drake and her family members started a non-profit traveling opportunity for children of non-affluent homes called the Global Citizenship Project. They have fully funded 4 students for trips so far and have traveled to Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, and Spain with the program.

Drake truly enjoys teaching. “If you have the compassion, are a positive person, and you enjoy being around young people, just do it! It is the best feeling in the world to be able to enrich a young person’s life.”

Changing careers is becoming a trend for many baby boomers, though the trend remains for teacher shortages even as Virginia’s Community Colleges strive to place more and more Career Switcher teachers into public school systems via their fast-track teacher licensure program, EducateVA.

This partnership began at the request of the Virginia Department of Education in 2004, based on the VCC’s 40-year track record of educational excellence and its proven ability to provide high quality accessible programs across the state of Virginia.

EducateVA is a hybrid program using a combination of online and onsite instruction and allowing candidates with a bachelor's degree and five years of work experience to receive their teaching license within sixteen weeks, all while maintaining their current job and responsibilities.

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The program has helped hundreds of teachers to become employed in school divisions across Virginia, and this academic year alone 135 individuals will obtain initial teaching licenses in the critical shortage areas of English as a Second Language, English, Foreign Language, Mathematics and Science at the middle or high school and secondary levels.

English as a Second Language has grown as a curriculum in Virginia's public schools as the Commonwealth embraced the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). This sweeping federal legislation requires states to demonstrate progress from year to year in raising the percentage of students who are proficient in reading and mathematics and in narrowing the achievement gap.

NCLB sets five performance standards of which one includes that all limited English proficient (LEP) students will become proficient in English and reach high academic standards, at a minimum attaining proficiency or better in reading/language arts and mathematics.

The number of LEP students continue to grow each year, with the Virginia Department of Education reporting a total of 84,344 LEP students statewide based on enrollment figures for fall 2007, growing by nearly 4 times over the past ten years (24,536 in 1997). Of the current 84,344 LEP students statewide, 63,534 are enrolled in what the VDOE classifies as Superintendent Region 4, which is comprised of 8 sectors in Northern Virginia.

Fairfax County Public Schools alone have 32,857 LEP students, and there are 13,404 in the Prince William County Public Schools where Faranak Drake teaches ESL.

Only 14% of students identified as LEP statewide were born in the United States. Spanish is spoken by 57%, though only 11% were born in Mexico.

For a complete list of critical teacher shortage areas contact your public school system or visit the Virginia Department of Education website at www.doe.virginia.gov. For more information regarding Virginia's Community Colleges Career Switcher Program visit a nearby community college or www.EducateVA.com.