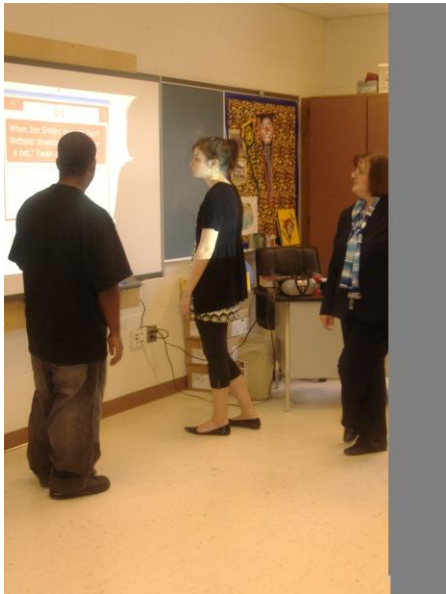


No Substitute for Ex-Substitute Teacher



There's a new breed of teachers rising in our public schools, and many thanks to what the Virginia Department of Education classifies as "Career Switchers", a statewide program developed in response to the critical teacher shortages throughout the Commonwealth.

These teachers did not take the typical route of pursuing their college degree in Education straight out of high school. They are bringing their years of work experience and maturity as additional tools to enrich our children's education.

EducateVA is Virginia's Community Colleges' answer to the task, and has placed hundreds of Career Switcher teachers into public school systems via their fast-track teacher licensure program since 2004. 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.

The EducateVA program is designed to allow candidates with a bachelor's degree and five years of work experience to receive their teaching license within sixteen weeks. EducateVA is a hybrid program using a combination of online and onsite instruction, and hedges the strength of the VCC's educational excellence and accessibility to campuses statewide.

What it produces are qualified teachers that are not only skilled in education, but who are prepared for all the various levels of teaching such as classroom management.

Patty LaRossa was unprepared for what was going to happen in her life, but became very prepared for teaching. LaRossa found herself in an unthinkable situation when she was going back to school to finish her BS in English at ODU. Her husband who had suffered from lung cancer for 2 years passed away, and Patty became a single Mom in addition to working on her degree.

"I had planned to go back to work as a technical writer and after my husband passed away, I didn't need to work but did need interaction and time with my daughter, then in 6th grade, so I decided to substitute teach," explained LaRossa. She volunteered at her daughter's school and ended up being at school 40 hours per week and learned she liked it.

“The two years I volunteered showed me that the public school system was where I was supposed to be. Teaching makes me feel that I’m doing something that matters.”

LaRossa worked previously as a U.S. Civil Service Electrician for Norfolk Naval Shipyard in Portsmouth in addition to teaching piano and substitute teaching. While the Technical Writing career is a thing of the past, achieving her 4 year degree allowed her to qualify for the EducateVA program and use her degree and knowledge to acquire her teaching license.

“I was afraid I wouldn’t be accepted as a teacher. I interviewed with the City of Chesapeake Public School System first, and then the individual school system before being hired by Oscar Smith High School.” LaRossa began teaching English 11 and Journalism 4 (yearbook) in the fall of 2007.

Still in her first year of teaching, at age 48 LaRossa found that she does have what it takes to not only be accepted, but to be really good at it.

LaRossa considers herself a ‘strict, tough teacher’ but when she overheard one of her more challenging students in the hall pointing her out to another student saying, “Man that’s my favorite teacher right there,” and she knew he didn’t intend for her to hear it, she knew she had made the grade.

This same student, an IEP student that has struggled with behavioral and learning issues, has been one of the rewards that LaRossa needed to confirm she was truly doing ‘something that matters’.

“The challenge is to energize and encourage students. Many have a sense of hopelessness because they feel they have failed or they are not good learners. A lot of the techniques I have learned through EducateVA are what I have used to get through to them.”

LaRossa knew she had her degree, knew there were alternative licensure programs available, and went after it. She found several universities that offered Career Switcher programs and talked with each of the Program Directors one on one, including EducateVA’s Program Director, Rebecca Waters.

“I liked what EducateVA offered and Rebecca was the most helpful. I wanted that additional support, plus I had gone to Tidewater Community College for my first two years while working on my BS and my experience with Virginia’s Community College System was very good.”

There are three primary factors that LaRossa attributes her preparedness for teaching in the public school system.

First, she recommends substitute teaching if you have any interest, and if your schedule allows.

Secondly, LaRossa recommends the EducateVA program for its strength in the Class Management segment of the program. “The Class Management segment has been invaluable and is one of EducateVA’s strongest points and is the most important. Class management sets the learning environment. If a class is not managed, then no one will learn anything.”

The other primary factor was the mentor that was assigned as part of the EducateVA program. LaRossa quickly added, “Julia Hollandsworth has been the best in the world – she’s wonderful!” Mentors are assigned as a ‘go-to’ aid for all teachers that complete the EducateVA program and are a valuable on-going tool and support system.

The students are the beneficiaries of a prepared teacher. LaRossa has seen improved behavior and increased focus in her students in her first year of teaching, especially the challenging IEP student. “I vary activities to meet the learning styles of different students,” she explained.

Her task is to keep them focused by using a varying lesson plan instead of, for example, constant lecturing. LaRossa introduced a ‘Smart Board’ in her class a month ago which is similar to a whiteboard but set up like a touch computer screen via her laptop and a screen projector. The entire operation is wireless and allows her to interject computer games into her lesson plan where students can use their hands to drag and drop a true or false question to get their results. “I like using the ‘Smart Board’ after we’ve finished reading about an author or specific literature. It’s a great way to review the material while varying the lesson plan, and the students really enjoy the huge applause when they drag and drop the correct answer.”

Patty LaRossa is infusing energy into the classroom and it shows. There’s definitely no substitute for being prepared.

If you’re interested in more information regarding Virginia’s Community Colleges Career Switcher Program visit a nearby community college or www.EducateVA.com. 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.