Vanessa Schoon –2007 Indiana Regional Future City Winning Teacher

Q: How long have you taught and what subject do you teach?

I’ve taught science and health for 6 years. The first two years were in a low socio-economic, inner-city school in Houston, TX with Teach for America (an AmeriCorps Program). The last four years have been at Riverview Middle School in Huntington, IN.

Q: What made you decide to participate in this event?

Another science teacher at my school, Deb Daugherty, has been a teacher mentor with Future City in the past. With her expertise, encouragement, and knowledge about Future City and my background in engineering (my undergraduate degree is in Genetic Engineering), we knew that it had the potential to be great combination for mentoring students.

Q: What were the notable rewards for you and the students?

I believe the biggest reward was seeing students learn such valuable communication and speaking skills. Other notable rewards include: learning to work as a team, sparking an interest in engineering, fostering friendships with students all over the U.S. and community leaders, and building math, science, and computer skills. Of course, the students and I loved the trip to Washington D.C. as well!

Q: How did you manage things like: time, deadlines, creating a positive team atmosphere, facilitating rapport between the students and your engineering mentor?

Managing deadlines is very tricky and I’ve learned to start EARLY. It always takes longer than you think. It does get easier each year though! This year, we began meeting in October and I posted ALL deadlines in my room beginning then. Students could see them everyday and this helped to meet them. At every meeting, we would begin by making a list of everything that needed to get done “today” and “later.” The students (with my help) would divide the tasks and conquer. At the end of every meeting, we would assess what we finished and decide which projects could be taken home, which needed to be finished at school, and which could be saved for later.

Creating a positive team atmosphere is something that we have strived for and it can be very difficult to achieve. To be honest, we have struggled with this in the past when we had 2-3 teams from Riverview. This year, I’ve discovered that having only ONE central team for the whole school works best for us. It takes away most of the competitiveness with other students and allows students to work toward a common goal. I’ve found that assigning/choosing certain jobs (example: computer game worker, essay writer, model creator, researcher, speaker, etc. etc.) helps each student to contribute. This year, I also had tryouts for speakers around early December. Any student could tryout and students appreciated the fairness of the process. Having tryouts two months after we began meeting, allowed me to get to know the students’ personalities, abilities, and work ethic before choosing our main speakers.
For numerous years, we have been so lucky to have a dedicated, knowledgeable engineer, Joel Holloway. He attended many of our meetings and worked with students on everything from building a scale model to answering judging questions related to water quality. He has a gift with middle school students, which is hard to find (and one of the necessary components of a good engineering mentor for this project)! Planning ahead and scheduling meeting times when the students and engineering mentor could work together was the key.

Q: What was the most difficult part of the program?

Good question! I would definitely say that, as a teacher mentor, the most difficult task is managing all of the components of the project—at one time. Once you find a system that works for you, it becomes much easier. In order for us to be successful, we learned that we needed to put in many, many hours of work. The time commitment is definitely a challenge as well. However, if you love what you are doing (and we all did!), it is such a fun experience.

Q: If you would recommend this to other teachers, can you explain why? And anything else you feel is important to say to new people just starting the program.

I would DEFINITELY recommend this to other teachers. I can honestly say that it is the most rewarding teaching activity I have ever done. Getting to know students outside the classroom environment is such a great thing for both students and teachers. Future City builds skills in every subject area. We have enlisted the help of Reading Teachers, Music Teachers, Art Teachers, Math Teachers, etc., etc. The great part about this program is that ANY student can participate depending on their interests and talents. I’ve had wonderful student artists help design backgrounds and the creative buildings.

To new teachers just starting the program, I would recommend attending all the workshops you possibly can, finding a middle-school friendly engineer, and asking for help when you need it. There are so many wonderful people involved in Future City that would be more than happy to help! New teachers are welcome to call me anytime for help!