

## **2016 NCTE Outstanding Middle Level Educator Award Nominee Narrative: Kristine Shurina**

First, I just want to say what an honor it is to be nominated for this prestigious literacy award!

Literacy skills are essential to success in higher education, crucial in the workforce and also valuable in students' personal lives, to be nominated for an award in a field I am so passionately dedicated to warms my heart.

Literacy matters. What students learn in eighth grade English can help them have an easier time in college, enjoy more successful careers, and even understand the world at a deeper level. When students learn to love reading and become articulate writers, they can achieve anything. Despite a harried home life or an impoverished background, with literacy skills students will have opportunities.

There are no failures in my classes because I do my research. I research and understand what my students need to learn, I research how to best teach adolescent learners, and I research each of my students to learn their currency and what will motivate them to succeed. Then I take what I have learned and I put it into practice. My students succeed because I am a researcher, a dedicated practitioner and a reflective thinker.

All students can learn and benefit from high expectations. Early in the year, I get to know my students as readers, writers and people. I have my students complete writing samples, inventories and baseline assessments so I can determine their strengths, the areas where they need to develop and what will motivate them. I work hard finding the right material and creating assignments to ensure that all of my students make large gains in eighth grade as readers and writers. All students no matter how high their previous grades or standardized test scores need to be challenged, and all students no matter how low their previous grades or standardized test scores can succeed.

Students want to learn, and it is rewarding to read their reflections throughout the year about how they value learning and appreciate being challenged. I am fortunate to work in a middle school English department with a curriculum that focuses on an essential question: How is our perception of self created and influenced by the world around us? This question lends itself to reading diverse texts and encourages reflective thinking. Some of the texts we read as a whole class include the work of Anne Frank, Walter Dean Myers, Charles Dickens, S.E. Hinton, John Steinbeck, William Shakespeare,

Amy Tan and Sandra Cisneros and Langston Hughes. We read novels, short stories, poems, memoirs, and informational texts and watch multimedia clips, movies and documentaries to help answer the question throughout the year. As a way of answering this question, we consider how what we read impacts our identities.

Over the years through reading research and putting it into practice, I have learned that writing instruction is more meaningful and powerful when assignments are authentic and have an audience. All of my students participate in National Novel Writing Month in November where they draft their own novels. Each student has an individual word count goal based on previous writing assignments. They work all month to craft stories with literary elements while reaching their goals. Then in December with the help of National Honor Society Students from our own high school, we revise and edit them. Then in January the students take their work through the publishing process, we send them off to be bound, and in April, the local public library holds an annual publication celebration where my students bring their families and we celebrate their work. Finally, the library displays their work for the month April.

Another project we complete each year is to create picture books for local preschool students. Students work in groups to research preschool students, early literacy and the art of picture books, then the group is assigned an individual child to create a book for. The eighth graders think about how what the preschoolers read impacts their identities. Parents complete a profile for their child, and the students work to write an illustrated, personalized book using the child's name. I've seen parents cry when they read the books, and I've seen the eighth graders beam of accomplishment when my students see pictures of their preschoolers holding the new books. Having students see themselves as writers is one of the highlights of my year. It is rewarding, to say the least, when students take ownership of their work and demonstrate visceral pride in their accomplishments.

In addition, one of my passions as an English teacher is helping students to love reading. Research shows that students who are engaged readers can overcome learning deficits and also have far more academic success than other students from the same socio-economic background. Reading engagement can change the entire trajectory of a student's education. Because of this, I integrate best

practices for reading engagement in my instruction, assess students' reading engagement and then reflect on what I can do to help them improve. In order for students to become engaged readers they need instruction that includes literary elements and comprehension strategies, facilitates focused socialization and finally is motivating. To motivate my students, I work with our local county librarians, our school media specialist and grade level intervention specialist to find titles to share with students. I have also obtained grants to purchase books for my students, and in the classroom, I incorporate content based games and active group work.

As a literacy teacher, the rewards are emails from students who used to dread reading but have fallen in love with it because of the right book, and those moments in class where students have insightful student-led discussions and even arguments over challenging texts.

As an educator, I feel it is important to keep learning and share what I am learning with others.

Currently, I have earned two master's degrees, four professional certifications and a doctorate. I am currently pursuing reading specialist certification. I have taught over a dozen different literacy and technology staff development courses, presented across the state of New Jersey and even at the national level, and I teach graduate courses on middle grades literacy instruction.

I care about my students as people, as readers, as writers and future leaders. I want the best for them and our community. Each day, I think about how fortunate I am to have the opportunity to teach middle students and help them find and develop their voices. Being a middle school English teacher is a privilege that I strive to honor by reflecting, collaborating and continuing to learn.