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UR Student Teachers

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UR STUDENT TEACHERS

STORY BY RACHEL BRINGEWATT

“Take a moment and imagine your elementary school days...”
“I’ve been really surprised at how much I’ve gotten to know the other people in the building. You get to know your grade level team really well because you spend planning time, lunch time, and resource time with them...”

– Marianna Hilldrup

At University of Richmond, “Doing well, but super busy!” is a typical response to the common “How are you?” greeting.

Students find a multitude of ways to engage with the RVA community while furthering their academic and career goals. Internships, volunteer opportunities, and student organizations provide so many ways to get involved.

What isn’t as common is the commitment that five senior students take on while in the department of education’s Undergraduate Teacher Education program. These students spend an entire semester student teaching in order to earn their Virginia teaching license, receiving 4 units of academic credit, and continuing to be an invested member of the Richmond community.

Take a moment to imagine your elementary school years. Small groups of students are clustered around desks or larger tables, working together to complete worksheets as the teacher mills around the room observing and offering help when needed. Students sit quietly while reading. The classroom walls are liberally decorated with posters reminding students of classroom rules and some of the students’ best work. Near the door, a small sign outlines the school motto: “Be Respectful, Be Responsible, Be Safe.”

Three of the Richmond student teachers have been placed into this environment at Falling Creek Elementary School this semester. Falling Creek is one of 38 elementary schools in Chesterfield County, and the Richmond students placed here have integrated well into the community.

Senior Marianna Hilldrup explained, “I’ve been really surprised at how much I’ve gotten to know the other people in the building. You get to know your grade level team really well because you spend planning time, lunch time, and resource time with them, but I’ve also gotten to know other teachers in other grades, as well as administrators and other staff.”

The community support has helped Hilldrup feel comfortable in her new position as student teacher. Guidance from faculty members coupled with daily hands-on experience has led her to develop better lesson plans and teaching skills; and her lesson plans have improved considerably since the start of the year.

This learning curve is something that all students participating in the student teaching program can relate to. Teaching is rewarding, but not necessarily easy. Education courses help prepare students for teaching through assignments and community engagement portions.

Senior Katie Neatrour came in with a lot of prior experience and has worked in five different Richmond schools, and spent her past summer teaching in Newcastle, Australia. She worked as a classroom helper at Overby-Sheppard Elementary School, observed teachers at Pinchbeck Elementary School, and created a college awareness program for high school students as her Sophomore Scholars in Residence capstone project.

However, volunteering in a school, writing lesson plans for homework, and discussing disciplinary tactics is not the same as being in a real classroom. Falling Creek is a Title I school, which means many of its students are from low-income families, and academic achievement is low. Although Falling Creek has many specialists and interventionists hired to address students’ needs, there are a lot of challenges for students and teachers. Children with difficult situations at home struggle in the classroom, and student teachers have to figure out how to best meet the needs of all the children they interact with.

Senior Hallie Carroll also had a wealth of experience from working at Higher Achievement in Richmond and, as the single secondary-education student, has spent the fall semester teaching English at Midlothian Middle School.

Carroll explained some of her frustrations, “The overall structure of school systems is not an effective business model. There is a lot of bureaucracy that impedes the efficiency of adapting to a variety of student needs. There is a ton of pressure (especially in Title I schools) to meet the state required minimum on the SOL’s (Virginia Standards of Learning). The pressure to complete the tests diminishes the opportunity to seize ‘teachable moments’ or dwell on things that interest the class as a whole.”

Education faculty members help student teachers learn how to meet these challenges through a weekly seminar. This gives Richmond students the time and space to debrief about what they are experiencing in the classroom, while receiving guidance from experienced teachers.

Despite these difficulties, Richmond student teachers describe the experience as incredibly positive and valuable. Neatrour sums up what makes all the hours spent in the classroom worth it: “One of my fourth grade students has shown little motivation to learn. With my encouragement and constant communication with this student, I have seen a drastic improvement in this student’s academic success and engagement in the classroom. By showing this student that I care about him and his future, I have been able to make a difference in his life and future.”