

Gail Kreher Teaches that Success Is Very, Very Cool!



Kreher and her students take a moment to celebrate their yearbook and award from the American Scholastic Press Association.

When students with LD, ADHD, and Aspergers Syndrome step in Gail Kreher's high school English class, they have a "pocketful of defeat," says this 2004 Disney award winning teacher and member of the Georgia CEC.

But defeatism doesn't last long. With Kreher's unique blend of low pressure, high expectations, and laughter, students at Mill Springs Academy in Canton, Ga., learn they can do much more than they ever dreamed. Not only do they learn English, they also write and publish the 14-page, full-color school newspaper and the yearbook. The majority of Kreher's students also go on to college. And in the process they learn that "success is very, very cool!"

"Ms. Kreher's students end up being amazed at what they can do and are very confident," says Debbie Weaver, whose daughter, Amy, is in Kreher's class.

From Grammar to College Prep

Kreher believes students with disabilities must "come up to speed" to succeed in the real world." To get them there, she starts the writing process at each student's comfort zone, incorporates technology, relates projects to the real world, and teaches senior English like a college class.

Initially, Kreher helps students overcome their fear of writing, which means working with them at their level. She may accept bullets in an essay, have stu-

dents dictate their essay, or give a student permission to write simple sentences. Once students have reached success, she bumps them up another level.

Kreher's students also work with writing mentors, who can be a classmate, boy- or girlfriend, or parent. The mentors act as live proofreaders. This is much better than spell check or getting an essay back with errors marked, she says. The editors also help students take the next step in their writing.

To keep her students' interest high, Kreher relates assignments to the real world. If the students are reading 18th century literature, she finds something similar happening in the world today. Kreher also uses real-world events for writing assignments. She subscribes to the newspaper, which often serves as a catalyst for students' essay ideas. The newspaper also gives real-world writing experience. A goal for her students is to write and have published an editorial in the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*.

Kreher uses a wide variety of technologies in her classes, too. The students do most of their writing on computers. Dragon Naturally Speaking, software that allows students to dictate their essays into computers, is a helpful tool, as is a program that reads the students' writing back to them and helps them catch errors that would otherwise have gone unnoticed.

"A student may write a wonderful sentence, fix part of it, and never read the whole sentence again, which now has a problem with syntax or grammar," says Kreher.

To get her college prep students up to real-world speed, she runs her senior literature class like a college course. Students receive a syllabus on the first day of class. Kreher posts office hours, expects deadlines to be met by e-mail when a student is absent, and gives no credit for late assignments.

"It's tough on us all, but students stretch while they are still safe with

me," says Kreher.

Giving Students Ownership of Their Learning

Another key to Kreher's success is giving students ownership of their learning. A standard practice is to ask her students to evaluate the difficulty of their assignments. They decide if each is "too hard," "too easy," or "just right." Not only does this prevent Kreher from wasting students' time, it also lets her know when she needs to pull back or modify a lesson.

"Students with learning disabilities don't like easy work," Kreher explains. "They don't want to feel not up to the grade or that they are being babied. They want tough work because they hear their friends complaining about tough work."

Students also assume ownership of assignments when the group designs grading rubrics for projects and essays. Suddenly, getting a good grade isn't a "matter of magic but of making a plan, following it, and evaluating it honestly." Furthermore, through this process, Kreher sees students become effective self-advocates — they get good at negotiating for their strengths, whether they be grammar, writing complete sentences, or research skills.

Journal writing is an additional tactic Kreher uses to teach students that they have the power to foster their own success. Should a student come to class unprepared, Kreher has him or her write the excuse in a journal. This enables the student to see that he or she made a choice and find a solution to the problem. For example, a student realized he lost his agenda because he didn't put his name on it. He decided to switch to an electronic agenda, because he "never loses his computer."

"The students have to be part of the solution," says Kreher. "They've got to figure out how to make things happen."

That Confidence Thing

While all the strategies mentioned above boost students' confidence, Kreher makes it her mission to help stu-

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dents learn to respect themselves and their abilities. She begins by helping them believe they are capable, talented individuals.

"Ms. Kreher imparts to her students not just knowledge but a belief that they can accomplish what they want; and if, at times the students don't believe, Ms. Kreher is there to believe for them," says Joyce Kaplan, whose son had Kreher as a teacher.

First, Kreher lets students know that it is okay that they have a disability. They are wonderful in 10,000 other ways, and their disability need not get in the way of what they need to learn.

Second, positive reinforcement is on-going. Kreher finds students' strengths, which she praises and uses to help them overcome doubt. Kaplan says Kreher always told her son he had great ideas. And the words, "I know you can do it," is a continuous refrain in her room. Because Kreher is also a truth-teller — she doesn't hesitate to let her students know when they have done a poor job — they believe her words of encouragement.

Third, by finding jobs for students to do that are based on their strengths and interests, Kreher builds her students belief in themselves, and they find the courage to take on additional challenges. For instance, a student who had an interest in photography furthered his

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talents in that area and improved his writing by working on the yearbook.

Throughout all, Kreher asks her students to stretch, to do that which is most difficult, and keeps her expectations high. As one student said,

"Ms. Kreher has this annoying habit of expecting me to do something."

A Healthy Dose of Fun and Laughter

Kreher's contagious laugh and intrinsic joy for living permeates her teaching. Teaching doesn't compute if students aren't joining in the fun and learning, she says. Therefore, she makes sure she keeps her student's attention through jokes and a high energy level.

Making her classes fun also benefits Kreher. After all, she confesses, it's easy

to get "grumped out" about her profession. But who wants that? So she keeps motivated by communicating with other professionals, reading professional literature, and having a good time in the classroom. That may mean changing a lesson that isn't working mid-stream.

"After all, if I don't have fun, the students don't have fun, and that makes for a very long day," she says.

LD Kids Are the Best

But Kreher's determination to enjoy her job is only part of the equation. The fact is, she appreciates her students and the talents they bring to her classroom. One day Amy Weaver told her mother, with some awe,

"Ms. Kreher LOVES kids who are LD. She says LD kids are the best!" ■

Contact Kreher to learn more about her programs at gkreher@millsprings.org.