

Educator Spotlight: Monique Taylor-Gibbs shares her experience teaching in high-needs schools



For the past 15 years, Monique Taylor-Gibbs has taught fourth and fifth grade at Red Clay's Warner Elementary School, a building that – like other high-need, city school – has struggled to retain teachers.

“Each year, I ended up staying for the next group of students. Every year that I considered leaving, there was a group coming up whose parents reached out to me and asked, ‘Can you stay one more year?’” she said.

She considers her greatest accomplishment to be the authentic relationships she has built with her students, many of which continue after she has them in her classroom.

“It’s going to the football games, going to the house. It’s seeing them out in public and giving them a hug. It’s being called ‘Mom’ 17 times a day accidentally,” she said. “I don’t strive toward a title. I’m very big on the legacy and memory I leave in my students’ minds.”

Working in a high-need school is challenging, but often the rewards outweigh the challenges, said Taylor-Gibbs.

“If you can make it at Warner, you can make it anywhere. I have always called it the ‘Broadway of Education’. It takes a special kind of person to work in a high-need school,” Taylor-Gibbs said.

“That person has to drop their ego and shed all fixed mindsets. A teacher must understand the difference between a moment a child may have – it is not about you personally – and keep pressing. The students are children. They are products of their environment, which we have no locus of control over. Teachers must remember that students come to you just as they are, and you have to be able to navigate around that basic premise.

“High-need schools are not schools where you have the idea of, ‘You are going to respect me because I am the adult.’ That is not the societal norm that these children receive,” she said. Many students are parentified at an early age and are always in fight or flight mode due to the specific forms of trauma they have endured.”

Taylor-Gibbs also recommends educators working in high-need schools maintain a “slight bit of transparency. Be stern but loving. You can speak loudly without yelling. You also have to recognize your place, address your level of cultural competency, and understand what is acceptable for one teacher may not be acceptable for your toolkit based on your level of relationship with particular students.

“These are very intelligent students. They are very savvy. You have to be very creative in getting them to see their awesomeness and figure how to pull the genius out of them,” Taylor-Gibbs said.

Often working in high-poverty schools, “teachers have an ‘I must save them’ mentality and that quickly leads to burn out. You can’t save them – you simply have to educate them. They need to be equipped with opportunities that lead to choices to save themselves,” Taylor-Gibbs said.

Sometimes the turnover in a high-need school is acceptable if those working there are not the right fit, she said. “I would rather a teacher say, ‘This is not for me,’ and leave than stay and be a detriment to the population.”

Though challenging, working in a high-need school has its special rewards, too.

“On the flip side, there are more moments of laughter, of fun, of authenticity,” she said.

“These are children. They will tell you about yourself, and they will drive you nuts one moment and the next love you all the same. You have to be authentic.”

To better retain teachers in schools such as hers, there also needs to be an emphasis on teachers taking care of themselves, she said.

“When you work in a school that has a high incidence of trauma, teachers also get traumatized,” she said.

This fall, Taylor-Gibbs, who will turn 40 years old in March, has taken on a new challenge: moving to A.I. duPont Middle School to teach eighth grade English Language Arts.

“As educators, we have a tendency to get comfortable, complacent and just boring. Things were becoming too easy. I needed a new challenge, as well as a chance to grow myself professionally,” she said.

She is excited about working with a new group of students and the ability to influence more children, including encouraging them to follow her career path.

“As an educator of color, I also want to be at A.I. because there are not a lot of teachers there who resemble the population of the students. At Warner, students can look in many classrooms and see a face that looks like them,” she said. “The higher up you go (in school grade levels), students don’t see people who look like them in the classroom. I wish to change that. I am excited about bringing my talents to a new setting.

“Teaching is my gift. Enriching the lives of students – well, that is my passion.”

