



4T's PRODUCTIONS

Redefining the Classroom Walls for Professional Growth **By Megan Allen**

Teaching is a roller coaster, full of highs and lows. There are moments when you feel like you are on top of the world because you know you are making a difference in the life of a child. At other times, you may be tempted to crawl underneath your desk, feeling like half the teacher you should be for your students. Both the highs and lows happen to nearly all of us.

I experienced one of those lows last year. I loved my students so much it still makes me smile to think of them. We cherished learning together—and I gave them everything I could. But by the end of the year, I was feeling beat up, empty, and uninspired. Had I done enough? Had I been able to fill the class with creativity, despite the increasing constraints on that creativity?

I couldn't put my finger on what had made the year so difficult. It could have been the paperwork, or the massive reforms and legislation effecting educators. Maybe one too many of my special education students had been involuntarily committed to a mental health facility. Maybe I had to make one too many calls to the Department of Children and Families. Or maybe I just forgot to put on my safety harness—and didn't seek the right supports at the right moments.

Whatever the case, I knew I needed a change. This year, I am working as the Educator in Residence at the University of Central Florida. I am teaching. I am coordinating pre-service teachers who are interns in local schools. I am creating programs to engage them in reflection and dialogue on our craft as teachers. Every day, I wake up excited to interact and learn with my pre-service teachers, knowing that our work together will have a significant impact on the thousands of students they will teach in the future.

It's challenging work, but I am allowed creative freedom. I am treated like a professional. And with every program that gets rolling, with every student who sits down with me to talk about teaching, with every moment I find myself drawing on years of classroom practice to help a novice, I feel I am growing and thriving.

In short, I am inspired again—just when I feared burnout had gotten the best of me. Even accomplished teachers need room to grow, to spread our wings, to absorb new strategies, to try new things. We need flexibility to emerge as leaders, in and out of the traditional classroom.



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Two Angles of Impact

It leaves me scratching my head. Why aren't accomplished educators encouraged to experience education from different angles? To work outside the typical definition of a classroom, to impact students in other ways? To experience new challenges that will help us better serve our students? To draw upon our expertise to help improve teaching and learning beyond the students we directly serve?

For example, what could happen if our best K-12 teachers spent half their time with their students and half their time working with pre-service teachers? I can see this force of super-teachers in my head: impacting education from two angles at once. Imagine!

So many people have said to me, "Wow. So you left the classroom." My answer? No, I've still got my sleeves rolled up. My classroom now is just much bigger. And this new experience is giving me the jumpstart I needed to reignite my passion for education.

And now I know what made last year so difficult and what will continue to trouble those who pursue teaching as a profession. It's time to redefine exactly what our "classroom walls" can be—for our own professional growth and also (more importantly) for the good of our students.

*Megan Allen is a National Board Certified Teacher in Tampa, Fla., and the 2010 Florida Department of Education/Macy's Teacher of the Year. She is a seven-year veteran teacher, currently serving as an Educator in Residence at the University of Central Florida. A member of the **Teacher Leaders Network** and **Hillsborough County New Millennium Initiative**, Megan is proud to spend her days advocating for Florida's teachers and, most importantly, students.*