

June 27, 2008

Dear Friend,

So I understand you are contemplating teaching in Oakland? Let me tell you, teaching in Oakland is wonderful. For me, it has been a truly humbling yet remarkable experience. While it is true that Oakland Unified is known as a messy district nestled in the center of a city plagued with crime and violence, standing up in front of a classroom gazing out at a sea of hopeful faces so in need of guidance, starved for strength and thirsty for learning, these challenges are seemingly nonexistent. You will find that Oakland teachers are a proud group of individuals, as it is their passion for teaching young people, social ethics, and assertiveness for learning that drives them through the often tumultuous roads. Just the opportunity to collaborate with these individuals is reason enough to teach in Oakland. Also, Oakland offers a uniquely diverse population. Every day is different, and every moment a brief shimmer of excitement. I am proud to be an Oakland teacher.

Oakland youth are often struggling. Many students are products of the streets and know and understand only this way of living. Hustlin', rappin', dealin' and swaggerin' are not mere terms, but actual tools of survival. For a number of these kids, school has been a holding pen, a mere attempt to baby-sit for six hours. Being passed from one teacher to the next, each unable to understand or communicate effectively, these students have become part of an institution that is slowly failing them. And with no support or structure from above, there is no visible change within the classroom. In actuality, many may argue that things are getting worse.

However, underneath the grillz and rags, these are kids. Kids. And despite the personal journeys they have been on, it is possible, if you look hard enough, to catch a quick glimpse of that one last flicker of innocence left. Imagine what you can do with that? Ponder the possibility. Be the one who does understand them. Be the person who does communicate. Be the adult who leads by example and opens doors that were once locked. Be the teacher.

I once turned on a student to the writings of Richard Wright. A young African-American male, he was headed toward being a statistic. Unruly and obnoxious, he seemed unmanageable. However, once in a while, engaging topics and class discussions would fuel him, and he would spout opinions and antics, drawing every student in the room in. Leadership. A flicker. Jeff* became my class manager. Jeff became the leader in debates. And Jeff was given *Rite of Passage* by Richard Wright. It was when Jeff came to me a week later in private and told me it was the best book he had ever read that I saw that flicker turn into a small flame. And when I gave Jeff *Native Son* and saw him working through it day after day, that small flame grew. When Jeff's mother came to see me and thanked me and told me that she, too, loved Richard Wright and they were reading it together the flame grew even more. And when I saw Ken*, Jeff's "partna'," reading *Rite of Passage*, there was a fire.

Oakland is a multi-cultural melting pot. Being an Oakland teacher means you are constantly learning from and engaging in cultural practices you never knew existed. There is constant excitement and inquiry, whether it is hearing from a student sharing his grandmother's memory of seeing Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, learning a traditional Native American rain song, listening to the beautiful rhythm of a student reading her poem in Spanish, tasting authentic Korean cuisine, or drawing Japanese symbols, no one student is the same. This diversity is an education in and of itself. And being an Oakland teacher means you get to take this course for free.

But what about other urban cities, you ask? Isn't San Francisco as diverse as Oakland? The answer is no. Walk around Oakland and it is hard to miss the rich history and strong cultural elements. Beautiful graffiti illustrates one wall, while across the road a five-star restaurant sits. Around the corner Asian markets line the streets, creating a crowded marketplace rich in culture. Yet still, a few blocks away, a beautiful shoreline with fancy restaurants, jazz music and a Sunday Farmer's Market resides. One block to the next offers something unique and different, and each of these differences is represented inside the classroom.

* Names have been changed

Being an Oakland teacher is not for the weak. An Oakland teacher must be assertive and daring. Honest and devoted. Passionate. An Oakland teacher will never show defeat amidst an ocean of obstacles. We are warriors. Warriors for social change, working to right the societal injustices plaguing the nation. We see the social inequities before us and believe that education is the foundation for change. We see a broken system and instead of running from it, we dedicate ourselves to trying to fix it. From the ground up. Oakland teachers truly believe that their students will rise up and lead a new generation to change. Our youth will right the wrongs of decades past and invigorate a new nation. Collaborating with these warriors is an honor. Being part of a movement bigger than oneself is humbling. Nowhere else can an educator find a group of teachers more passionate about social change, the power of education and the endless possibilities for young people.

It is true that teaching in Oakland is demanding. It will challenge your ethics and remove you from your comfort zone. It will test your patience. There will be nights when you don't sleep and days when you don't eat. You will fall. Your bank account will be empty. Your leaders from above will show incompetence, if they even show anything at all. There is no map to follow, no GPS. You are your own guide. Your students will be troubled, as they will be dealing with the effects of living in a city littered with bloodshed, hatred and drugs. Downtown will expect you to work magic, pulling rabbits out of hats. You will want to save every one. You will cry.

But you will laugh. You will smile. You will see growth. You will learn. You will find passion and strength. You will teach. And you will walk with your head held high, proud of the fulfillment in your soul and honored to be part of something greater than you ever thought you could. You will be an Oakland teacher.

Truly,
Stephanie