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Partner Spotlight



Vivian Hurwitz
AmeriCorps Fellow
Citizen Schools

This month, we had the pleasure of sitting down with Vivian Hurwitz. Vivian is a Citizen Schools AmeriCorps Fellow currently completing her service year at Shore Educational Collaborative. Shore's mission is to educate, enrich, and inspire children and adults with disabilities to reach their full potential. Their programs serve students from preschool to 22, with varied disabilities, strengths, and academic goals and provides a supportive learning environment where staff value and respect everyone's unique gifts.

As a Citizen Schools Fellow, Vivian supports educators in creating meaningful learning experiences, incorporating volunteer mentors into classrooms to support student projects with real-world applications. During our conversation, Vivian was energized, passionate and charismatic about her students and supporting educators in creating real world learning for them. She shares more about her previous work as a paraprofessional working with students who are neurodivergent or had behavioral issues, what her ideal learning environment would look like and the ways she hopes we can all support our educators.

What does Experiential Learning (EL) mean to you, and why is it important? What would it look like to truly learn experientially? To me, Experiential Learning means learning by doing, and learning by doing something you feel is important and meaningful. When they're doing something hands-on, students engage on a much deeper level, not just because it's physically hands-on, but because it has purpose and real-world ties to life experience and to things they might be interested in. Each student should feel like what they're doing is meaningful to them, and I think that's when we get great engagement and that is why it is important. I believe it is especially important for neurodivergent students and disengaged students, because when we give them that opportunity to create their own meaning in their learning, they're going to engage a lot more. There's a lot of chronic absenteeism and disengagement in schools and there's a lot of kids who will go to school and just be on their phone all day. I believe it's because this educational model of memorization and test taking doesn't resonate with them. A lot of students know what the world is like in a very interesting way because they went through the pandemic at an early age and they have access to the internet in an unfettered way which sometimes gives them, I think, a very cynical worldview, and they're not afraid to question things. It's important because they need to care, or they will disengage. Even the brightest students, even the most engaged students, are going to hit their breaking point where they can't do something anymore that they find boring.

So Experiential Learning is critical to engaging students. I think back to experiences that I had as a student learning experientially, because those are some of the best memories of grade school that I have, but unfortunately they were really short lived. First, I remember doing a project about bridges, where we got to build model bridges, and it was awesome. I remember learning about what shapes are best on a bridge and so every day I look at the Tobin Bridge and I think, wow, look at those triangles, that is a strong bridge! Then

we got to do this Mount Everest Expedition project where we thought about insulation. We made little houses that we insulated and put a thermometer inside, and ice on the outside and the winner was whoever's temperature changed the least. I don't remember the grade I got, what the house looked like or the exact temperature change. But years later I remember the material options were denim, nylon, cotton and wool and that layering them together was important. And I remember working with my friends and the teamwork of this project. Experiential Learning means tethering everything you do in the classroom to the real-world that these students are going to go into and already are in. We have to create experiences that mean something to students and that they feel will help them get to whatever their goals might be.

What do you believe is the best first step towards advancing the future of learning? What is necessary to make it successful? For me, what really stands out is a very broad investment in our educators. When you're teaching on an empty tank, you don't have the energy to organize an Experiential Learning project because you're teaching to the test and you are tired and burnt out. That is a tragic misstep to me, because teachers are truly the backbone of our society and of our future. They are supporting our learners and taking care of them for so many hours a day and we need to invest in and support them. There can't be any broad changes in the way that we structure schooling without this because educators are the ones implementing these changes.

Investing in educators means paying them better, but it also means training them meaningfully and appreciating them more, whether that's from a parent, student, administrator or political figure. We can't expect them to do it all without support so we need to give them time, energy, grace and mental capacity to implement new initiatives and to feel supported when they do and able to take risks.

When I talk about investing in our educators, I'm of course talking about our teachers who are formally trained to be educators in school but I'm also talking about all the staff at schools who help facilitate formal learning. I'm talking about the community at large that is involved in education, whether that's parents or people who employ youth at a grocery store. It is community members who see students every day out in the world and may be able to support their classroom learning and share the responsibility that our formal educators have. This would change how we think of education and make it more holistic, and tie in so many different aspects of society, really creating a more well rounded model of what schooling means for our students. Educators are constantly having to brush up on skills without being compensated or appreciated for that and putting in extra hours. It should be easier for them. If instead the whole community was coming together and it was an expectation that as a professional in whatever field you are in you head to your local schools and teach a lesson on something you specialize in, it would support our teachers tremendously.

Who is the most influential mentor you have had throughout your life? What qualities did they impart that you continue to embody in your work? I have had some really influential relationships with teachers and professors that have influenced me greatly. The first person I think of is my high school biology teacher, Mr. A. I loved science at the time, but I was bored in school, just doing the work and then starting to cause trouble because I was bored. He found ways to harness my mental energy in those moments that made me think so much more deeply not just about biology but about life in general. He never discounted a crazy question that I had. I remember his patience with me as I tried to articulate things that I didn't quite understand and he continuously challenged my thoughts and pushed me to think deeper about something. This really ignited my curiosity in a way that school had not been igniting for me and really got me thinking. I would go home and research different things and come back to him with a new question. And then I remember his humility as a great element of his mentorship. He would be honest and say that he didn't know about all of the things I was asking about which made me more comfortable to ask questions and created mutual respect. He made me feel like it was okay to think differently, and I had struggled with that in school. I had struggled with feeling like the way that I came up with answers was not okay, or the way that I needed to stimulate my brain with weird questions and random thoughts was not okay but to him, it was always okay.

The next one that comes to mind is my college professor, Professor Wells. She is a communication professor

at Boston College, but she taught me for a class that was part of a program on global education and justice. She was again one of those people that took my questions seriously and understood me in a way that I don't think I could articulate. She would try to help me understand by asking questions, listening, being humble with me and inspiring me to go find the answer. She would say, "your teacher doesn't know everything. Go figure it out and come back to me. We'll talk about this". She gave me the space to ask questions and share my broadest thoughts about what the world could be. She taught me I may not always have my questions answered, and to sit with that discomfort.

Both of them were great, amazing educators, but not just because they're teaching curriculum well. Great educators because of the respect they had for their students and great educators because of the space they allowed for questioning and investigating. To me that is what made them great mentors, and what kept me talking to them after I left their classes, and kept going back asking for advice.

What drew you to your organization's mission? What drives you to activate this vision? AmeriCorps has always been in my mind because doing a year of service is something that resonated with me. After I graduated from Boston College I took a job as a paraprofessional at an alternative school in Central Massachusetts. This school specialized in students who had behavioral issues, often due to poor home situations, mental health issues, or the intersection of the two. Most students had been transferred to the school after their local schools determined they couldn't properly support their needs. Treating the students with empathy and working around the things that gave them difficulty allowed me to build really rewarding relationships with these kids. It was there that I realized there is so much that we can be doing for students who are neurodivergent or have behavioral issues and there's so many opportunities to help them. Then I saw this opportunity come up and it was an AmeriCorps fellowship working with students who are similar to the ones I was currently working with, and wanted to continue working with. It really felt like this moment of things coming together, and it was the perfect next step for me. The teachers I am paired with were relieved that I had experience as a para and also I'm bringing a fresh perspective to think of new ideas. The unique position of this Citizen Schools fellowship is that I have the opportunity to support the educators by participating in an administrative capacity and creative capacity, where I am able to take what I know and implement changes.

AmeriCorps is what drew me to my position and then I learned more about the Citizen Schools approach. I didn't really know what to expect, but it sounded cool to bring students in Boston or Chelsea mentors and bring them hands-on experiences. But again, it was the type of students I would be working with that made me realize this was the right position for me. Working with those oppositional behaviors, with those students who don't want to engage, who want to yell at you, or maybe who love you, but have no structure in their lives, and all these complex issues that they come to you with. So I knew about the students and the CS support but didn't know exactly what I would be doing but I think that's where the creativity comes in with a year of service. As fellows we get this assignment description that each of us gets to mold in our own way to help our host site as much as possible. And that is where the room for being creative and room for critical thinking, problem solving, all the things that my brain loves to do.