



Learning is fun: Steven Hicks team-teaches kindergartners, many of whom are learning English, at a charter school in South Central Los Angeles.

Their calling: Our kids



Communication is key: Brianna Watts, 10, gets a hug from Naples, Fla., teacher Melissa Rooney.

All-USA Teacher Team brings out the best in America's future

By Tracey Wong Briggs
USA TODAY

Be Janet Teng was airlifted out of Vietnam in 1975 with no family, one change of clothes and two dictionaries. The 20-year-old University of Saigon student hoped the dictionaries, one Chinese, one Chinese-English, would help her get a job as an educator.

But the Queen's English didn't help her understand American slang, and she wound up working as a cleaning woman and a nurse's aide.

Eventually, she did land a teaching job, but money was tight once she

married and had kids, so she took a higher-paying job managing a medical practice. Still, in 14 years away from the classroom, she never forgot her real passion. "The practice became very profitable, but I kept hearing this urge," she says. "That's why I came back to teach."

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Now at Hightower Elementary School in Plano, Texas, she is in her fifth year teaching English to 30 students who speak 10 different languages. Teng makes personalized books to help each one learn English, and she expands her role as an educator to her students' families, teaching them the ABC's of life in the USA.

► Meet the 25 members of the teacher team, 6-7D

Teng works tirelessly to help families get their bearings, helping them find everything from social services to ethnic groceries and places of worship. Many don't have any way of knowing that they can borrow books from the library or that they shouldn't use their middle finger to point. Sometimes, Teng has to tell parents tactfully that their children should shower more often and change clothes every day.

"Because of my life experiences as an immigrant, I know how hard it is for them to get to America. I extend myself beyond the classroom to make myself available to help them," she says. "ESOL (English for Speakers of

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Communication, hard work and a lot of fun unlock young minds

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Other Languages) students are the ones potentially left behind in many, many ways — not just academically.

For all that she does to make sure her students don't get left behind, Teng has been named to the 2003 All-USA Teacher Team. She is one of 20 winners — 16 individuals and four instructional teams, a total of 25 people — honored by USA TODAY as representatives of all outstanding teachers. The winners receive trophies and share \$2,500 cash awards with their schools. Each teacher gets \$500.

"We honor these teachers for the knowledge and skill they bring to what they teach. We also recognize the care they put into understanding each child and his or her learning needs," says USA TODAY editor Karen Jurgensen. "These teachers excel at reaching every student."

Winners were chosen from teachers nominated across the country. Judges considered how well teachers define and address students' needs and the impact they have on student learning.

The team members teach a variety of grade levels, subjects and populations, from Steven Hicks and Candace Baker, who team-teach kindergartners at The Accelerated School, a South Central Los Angeles charter school, to Charles Boucher of Harrisville, R.I., who has created 11 courses in subjects ranging from biotechnology to animation at his alma mater, Burrillville High.

These teachers unlock student minds in wide-ranging ways: ► A decade ago, Michael Corcor-

ran took over the science research program at Dickinson High in Jersey City to find that the students believed that the inner-city schools' reputation left them at a disadvantage at science fairs. In focusing the program, he changed the mind-set, and for the past eight years his students have won more than half of all medals at the regional science fair. Last year, two of them won the \$100,000 top team prize at the national Siemens-Westinghouse Competition.

► In Huntsville, Utah, in a country with one of the country's highest bankruptcy rates, the Valley Elementary School team of Michelle Evans, Shir Weight and Carolyn Hogge won a grant in 1999 to create a program called EconMe. Sixth-graders start businesses and hold jobs and elected office to earn EconMe bucks, to spend on goods or services. "If we don't work, we don't get paid," Evans says.

Kids sometimes learn the hard way that they need insurance, as tornadoes blow through and make desks disappear. The unit, incorporating math, budgeting and work ethic, has resulted in rising math scores and an 88% increase in family financial discussions, Evans says.

► Fifth-grade teacher Betty Brandenburg Yundt enlists the popular "Flat Stanley" project to help her students cope with the mobility and uncertainty of military life at Walker Intermediate School, a Department of Defense school at Fort Knox, Ky.

Yundt's students cut out paper dolls of "Flat Stanley," based on a storybook character who gets flattened and sent on world adventures. They mail the paper dolls to

family and friends and receive letters from around the world charting Flat Stanley's adventures.

Like many other teachers, Yundt uses the "Flat Stanley" correspondence to teach reading, writing, geography and math. But at Walker, Flat Stanley also gives students a vehicle to keep in touch when they move away mid-year. Parents, using Stanley's voice in their letters home from war zones, have used the project to articulate their concerns in a non-threatening way. "It helped the parents as much as it helped the kids," Yundt says.

Teaching 'the whole person'

Averaging their 17th year in the classroom, All-USA Teacher Team members are by any measure highly qualified. Eight are National Board certified, three have been named state teachers of the year, and two have doctorates. English teacher Anne MacLeod Cogard of Lincoln (Neb.) East High is a visiting professor at Nebraska Wesleyan who has authored academic papers with her daughters, both of whom also have doctoral degrees.

But All-USA Teacher Team members bring much more than credentials to their students. Many see teaching not so much as their profession as their calling.

Wendy Nelson Kauffman graduated from Dartmouth and Northwestern's Medill School of Journalism and landed a job in her dream field of TV journalism. But she found it unsatisfying to work long hours on 90-second stories and to never get to know her audience.

Teaching social studies at Bloomfield (Conn.) High, she has her students keep journals to

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sharpen their writing, thinking and awareness of themselves. The journals also help her connect with each one.

"I really wanted to teach because you're dealing with the whole person," she says.

That sense of purpose also drew Roy and Karen Adkins to start their collaborative classroom at Millard Elementary School in Pikeville, Ky., 10 years ago after funding Roy's special ed and Karen's multi-age students benefited from working together. Their class draws students with IQs from 44 to 144.

With laws mandating No Child Left Behind and special-needs children be taught in the least restrictive environment, the classroom has been held up as a model of inclusion. But their family-like

setting, with hands-on learning, tiered instruction, individual assessments and cooperative learning, can't be mandated from the top down, Karen says.

"There's a philosophy behind it. If you don't hold that philosophy, it's too hard," she says. "It's past hard; it's impossible."

That philosophy, based on John Dewey's belief that education should reflect society rather than prepare students for it, is something the Adkins came by the hard way.

Karen was a straight-A student who dropped out of high school at 16 to marry Roy, who was 20. They spent 12 years traveling and working low-wage jobs before realizing that education was the only way out of a life of bathing in the creek

and eating commodity cheese. But the couple, married 31 years in December, doesn't think those were wasted years.

"We learned a lot about life and how to treat people," Karen says. Those years also helped forge their beliefs that everyone has worth, that differences should be celebrated — and that their place in life is in the classroom, bringing the lessons of society home to children in the hills of Appalachia.

"I want them to find their place and purpose in life, as I struggled to find in mine," Karen says.

Contributing: Fred Bayles in Harrisville, R.I.; Jacqueline Blais in Bloomfield, Conn.; Marilyn Elias in Los Angeles; Jefferson Graham in Huntsville, Utah