

Teaching English to Tarzan

These winning teachers light up a Broadway star.



A few weeks into the school year, Fairfield, Connecticut, social studies teacher Penny Proskintopoulos was surprised to find that one of her students had a secret identity: Tarzan. By day, Alex Rutherford is an inspired student at Roger Ludlowe Middle School, but four nights a week, the 12-year-old heads to Broadway so he can swing across stage.

But it's his teachers' job to keep his feet on the ground. Ms. Proskintopoulos, as well as language arts teachers Donna Spigarolo and Matt Tomei, are experts at differentiation. And Alex is just one example of the reason why. In his words, the three teachers "figure out what each kid needs. They make school fun, but keep us learning."

How do you give a student Broadway-sized confidence? These three teachers agree that their success as educators grows from the rapport they develop with their students. They strive to build self-esteem by encouraging all of their students to enhance their strengths and work around their weaknesses—and they communicate this with a sense of humor. "We laugh a lot," says Ms. Proskintopoulos. She always makes sure to customize her teaching so that students can learn in ways that work for them. Her mantra: "Choice is voice." Mr. Tomei says that his classes thrive because his students "are comfortable being themselves."

Mrs. Spigarolo has been teaching for 24 years and loves "playing a part in the students' stories." Mr. Tomei is the son of two teachers, and he fondly recalls story-filled summers growing up with educators.

The quality of his teachers is not lost on Alex. When asked what he wants to be when he grows up, Alex says with admiration: "A teacher... or maybe an exotic car designer." □

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