

**“If I had tables and chairs, I could create a home for my students while at school.”**

*“Every child deserves a champion; an adult who will never give up on them, who understands the power of connection and insists that they become the best they can possibly be.” -Rita Pierson*

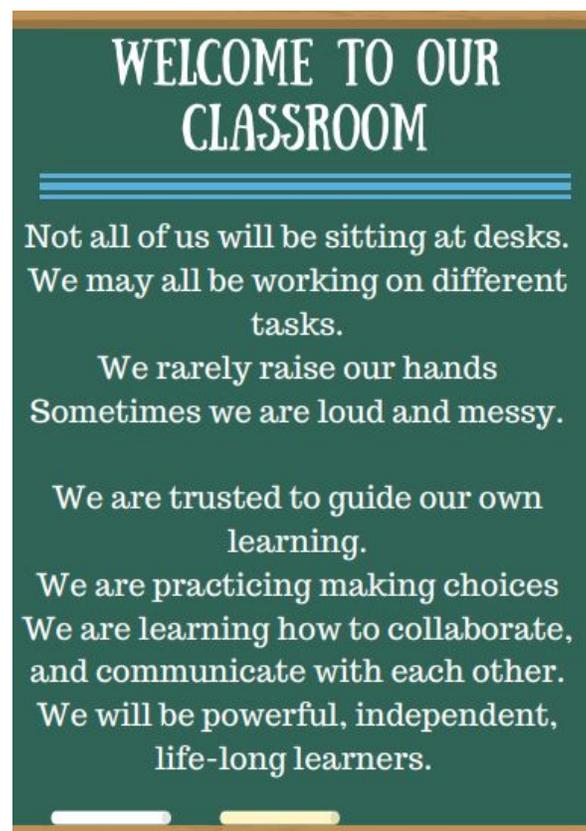
In our diverse society, students face many challenges, some even more daunting than anything we may have faced ourselves. Initially in my career, I worked to maintain not only a clear separation, but a hard separation between my students and I. I was reluctant to share much about myself, sometimes using a “politician’s” answer to avoid being authentic. My views changed when I watched Rita Pierson’s TED talk. The quote at the beginning of this essay stayed with me long after I digested Pierson’s inspirational stories. Every child deserves a champion, and I was not my students’ champion. My students, who are sometimes facing homelessness, hunger, family breakups, opioid issues, did not have me as their champion. That was a serious problem. They needed a champion, an advocate, that would consistently work towards their success, safety, and well-being, even if they already had one or several champions in their corner. From this point forward, I knew that I had to become a fierce advocate that my students would immediately know that I was in their corner and would continue to push for their success and safety, even after they were no longer enrolled in class.

Over the past summer, I worked to imagine, develop, and create a classroom environment that was conducive to the entire student, including their physical, emotional, and mental well-being. I spent the summer reading various professional development books, including *Teach Like a Pirate*, *Shift This*, *Fair Is Not Always Equal*, and *Ditch That Textbook*. These texts were proponents of classroom strategies, routines, ideas, and lessons that were student-centered. I approached each decision with the consideration as to what impact it would have on my students and how would they benefit. Little did I know that this journey had already begun in the previous school year. At the end of the school year, I had asked for their feedback and it was amazing how insightful they were to not only their concerns or suggestions, but also the solutions. One of the biggest pieces I received was the limited choice in seating. Previously I had an industrial-style classroom, complete with a 30 student desks (with chair connected) and a teacher’s desk. Sometimes these desks would have parts broken, leaving jagged edges and sometimes injuring my students. One of the first actions I implemented was to rid my room of as many desks as possible and provide students with different seating opportunities. I purchased a futon, several saucer chairs, and executive chairs, placing them throughout my classroom. I then scoured the school building for tables and chairs, receiving 4 tables and chairs to accompany them. Gone were 16 desks that left my students with pinched and (sometimes) bleeding legs.

Besides purchasing new classroom furniture, I wanted to create an atmosphere that resembled a coffeehouse environment. My ninth grade students eat as early as 10am and some of them are not hungry at that time. I opened my classroom up to food and drink, providing my students the opportunity to use a microwave and coffee maker for hot food and beverages. As I sometime would eat throughout the day, I felt my students should have the opportunity to do so as well and I trusted them that they would be responsible and clean up after themselves. It was a great sight to see--my students almost seemed to relax even further. They were not timid about bringing snacks and drinks into the classroom. My students could move throughout the room, engaging in the content at their own pace, using the food and beverage area, and collaborating and creating with the Chromebooks, laptops, and iPads that I utilize in classroom instruction.

The feedback was immensely positive. The students have taken well to the different privileges and changes in shifting the classroom environment to being student centered. Sometimes they would describe it as a home, because there is everything that a student would need to sleep, eat, and relax. These changes have only inspired me to further shift my classroom into a space not only student-centered, but student created.

Outside of my classroom, there is a sign adapted from Joy Kirr, the author of *Shift This*. It says the following:



In my classroom, I want my students to be independent, responsible thinkers, consumers, and innovators. I want them to learn how to manage their time, to make mistakes and possibly fail, and to feel empowered to grow from those mistakes and failures. I want to be my students' champion and to help them be successful in any way that I can, even if it is something as providing flexible seating or cater to their interests. In a world that can ask so much of our students, I want to create a space that they feel they can come to whenever they need to. Having classroom furniture that provides students the ability to still be a student, but also develop into future leaders and future professionals. By having access to new classroom furniture, the students can only benefit from increased flexible seating. In time, I am hoping that this will show to students, faculty, administrators, and visitors, that this classroom is created by students, for students, and because of students.