

Ashley Gilmore: A Student of Teaching



Ashley Gilmore, a second year Chicago Public School teacher, is a graduate of the **Academy for Urban School Leadership**. AUSL prepares teachers through a full-year apprenticeship that combines graduate level university coursework and side-by-side classroom work with a skilled mentor teacher. President Obama and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan have shined a bright light on AUSL as a model for raising teacher quality and turning around low-performing schools. AUSL operates 14 Chicago public schools: six training academies that prepare teachers and eight turnaround schools – chronically low-performing schools that go through a complete overhaul. Ashley currently teaches at one of these turnarounds – Howe School of Excellence.

“I know the classroom is where I am meant to be.” Ashley Gilmore’s epiphany about her career path emerged after several education-related post-graduate experiences. She volunteered as a teacher at a Catholic school on Chicago’s South Side and served as assistant director of a youth program, but a research project that put her in close contact with teachers re-ignited her passion for teaching.

Ashley knew that a traditional teacher preparation program with just 16 weeks in the classroom would not be enough to prepare her well. She was drawn to AUSL’s model of having a mentor teacher and being in a classroom on a daily basis for a full year. The teaching stipend from AUSL was also crucial for her to be able to support herself during her training year.

Ashley’s residency was split between two AUSL training academies with strikingly different student populations. Dodge Renaissance Academy was 100% African American. The students had many challenges – high levels of poverty, incidents of violence, parents who were struggling. But, Dodge stayed focused on academic rigor. “The culture at Dodge was strict,” Ashley observed. “There were high expectations of students and they responded.” The second half of Ashley’s residency was at Chicago Academy. Most of the students came from two-parent homes; behavioral issues were about attitude rather than trauma; and the majority was at grade level or higher. These distinct experiences prepared Ashley to teach at a turnaround school. She was invited to join the staff of Howe, an AUSL school in its first year of transformation as a turnaround.

Ashley’s first goal at Howe was to win her students’ trust and respect. They had experienced a parade of substitute teachers. Their skills were very low; some of her third graders were at kindergarten and first grade level. “They needed to feel safe and loved before they could start learning,” noted Ashley. “The students don’t automatically respect you. You have to earn their respect because many of the adults in their lives have not treated them respectfully.” Ashley credits her residency year with teaching her about discipline and reward. She learned how to quiet her students, how to engage them and keep them on task, and how to establish classroom culture and climate so she could move on to academically-focused strategies. Support from an AUSL induction coach who observed in her classroom every week was immensely helpful. Ashley noted that the coach came “not to judge but to help me think about my teaching.” The coach also videotaped Ashley teaching and together, they dissected her practice and how it could be improved. This coach along with the AUSL peer network and high quality professional development were instrumental in her education as a student of teaching.

Ashley believed in herself as a teacher, but upon reflection, she was surprised by what she was able to achieve with her students. “I didn’t know what an impact I would have on my kids. I wasn’t prepared for how attached I would get to them. Good teaching is all about the relationships you have with your students.” Ashley looks forward to meeting her new class of

third graders this fall and with one year under her belt, she knows she can be more methodical about what she teaches when. The commitment and shared philosophy among teachers and administrators at Howe give her confidence about the school's continued progress toward academic success. For herself, Ashley aspires to become a National Board-certified teacher, a mentor for other residents, and a continuing force in the classroom.