



PRESENTS THE TEACHER OF THE MONTH



Michelle Nichols

Davis Elementary
School in Garland

Teacher's career change a "win-win" for school and students

The old adage, "when a door closes, a window opens" certainly has proven true for Michelle Nichols of Davis Elementary.

As a 1994 graduate from University of North Texas, Ms. Nichols looked forward to embarking on a career in marketing. The lesson she learned during her six years in the business world changed her life: what she really wanted to do was teach.

As a student at UNT, Ms. Nichols worked at the Denton Record-Chronicle, a newspaper that provided employees with the opportunity to work as volunteers in a school. Ms. Nichols loved her volunteer work, and considered changing her major, but felt she had gone too far toward her marketing degree to switch her major to education.

She graduated and pursued a career in marketing, but says she never felt happy with that decision. Finally, she took some time off and worked as a substitute teacher at Davis Elementary. Two teachers suggested she earn her certification and realize her true calling. She followed their advice, and the rest is history.

Well, almost. In the four years that Ms. Nichols has taught at Davis, she has made some history of her own, earning the respect and admiration of her peers and her principal in the process.

"Michelle is the perfect teacher, because she will take on any challenge, tackle it and complete it," says principal Kenda Willingham. "She single-handedly brought up our fifth-grade TAKS scores in science and math, and our school earned one of the area's highest rankings on that test."

In fact, Davis Elementary's fifth graders raised their TAKS scores in science from a 58 percent passing rate in 2003 to a 90 percent rate in 2004. Math scores were equally remarkable, going from 82 percent passing in 2003 to 97 percent in 2004. The Texas Education Association gave Davis an "exemplary" rating for the first time in its history, Ms. Willingham says.

Although Ms. Nichols is Davis's only fifth-

grade math and science teacher, she says the students' stellar achievement isn't her work alone.

"Darlene Hodgkins, our other fifth-grade teacher, and literacy specialist Glenda Stallings and I all worked hard together to motivate the students," she says. "We did a lot of hard work, offering tutoring after school and during recess, but beyond that, I really think it was our motivating them to believe in themselves, helping them see that they could do it. I showed them that I believed in them and had high expectations. It's amazing how they rise to that challenge."

The school principal agrees with the strategy of setting the bar high.

"Michelle sets very high expectations for her students, and that fits right in with our school's goals," says Ms. Willingham. We believe in meeting our students at their level, then working to take them where they need to be. Michelle's teaching style reflects that."

Ms. Nichols taught third grade for two years before Ms. Willingham tapped her to work with fifth graders and take on the TAKS challenge.

"I never thought of myself as a math or science person, but as I've gotten older, I feel I understand and appreciate those subjects more," says Ms. Nichols. "In science, we do lots of experiments and hands-on work, and I love to see the students' faces as they watch something happen that they never expected."

In addition to her classroom duties, Ms. Nichols serves as a conduit between the district and other members of the Davis faculty to nurture effective science teaching.

"Michelle's work as science liaison allows her to work with teachers in the lower grades so their students will be well prepared," Ms. Willingham says.

Both Ms. Willingham and Ms. Nichols have their sights set on continued TAKS success this year.

"I love what I do," she says. "I love the kids here, I love the environment. It feels like home."



Always there when you need us!

www.garlandpower-light.org