



TEACHER SPOTLIGHT



NICOLE WILLIAMS

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Oak Ridge, TN

3rd grade

Favorite emojis 🍌🍌

"LIFE IS HARD, I AM JUST PREPARING YOU FOR IT."

Teacher Spotlight

Nicole Williams

What inspired you to choose teaching as your career? My love for children and my personal experiences growing up. When I became an aunt at 10 years old, I developed a deep love for kids—taking care of my nephews made me realize how much I enjoy guiding and supporting young minds. I came from a difficult home life, and I often felt unnoticed by those around me, slipping through the cracks. I recognized how many other kids might be silently going through similar struggles. It's my mission to not only teach but to notice each child, understand their unique challenges, and help them break cycles. I want every student to know they're seen, valued, and capable.

What do you find most rewarding about being an educator? Seeing my students grow - not just academically, but also in their mindset of how they tackle challenges or concepts. In the beginning of the year, students believe failures are reflective of their intelligence or ability, but as the year goes on, they learn that their intelligence is directly related to the effort they put in. They learn about the power of YET and use their failures to inspire true learning. Creating resilient learners in my classroom is something I am extremely passionate about.

What signs tell you that your students are truly connecting with and understanding what you're teaching? When they want to read just ONE MORE CHAPTER of a novel we are studying or when the bell rings and they cannot believe it is the end of the day already because they've been so invested in what we are doing.

In your opinion, what is the biggest gap in education today, and how can we begin to address it? Unequal access to resources. Students in low-income or rural areas often lack the same quality of educational tools, technology, and support systems as those in wealthier districts. To address this, we must invest more in education infrastructure, especially in underfunded schools, by providing equal access to technology, internet, and well-trained educators. Governments, private organizations, and local communities need to collaborate to ensure every student, regardless of their background, has the tools they need to succeed.

When you're actively engaging with students, how do you recognize those magical aha moments when the light bulb turns on? I can spot them when a student's face lights up or they suddenly become more animated and excited to share their thoughts. It's the forehead wrinkles that smiles for me.

When your students think of you in 20 years, or as adults, what is the one thing you hope they remember about you? I hope that in 20 years, my students remember me as someone who genuinely cared about them—not just as learners, but as individuals. I want them to think back and remember that I always believed in their potential, encouraged them to push through challenges, and taught them the value of resilience and self-belief. More than anything, I want them to feel that they were seen, heard, and supported, and that I helped them grow not just academically, but personally.

What has been your proudest moment as a teacher? Seeing my students grow up. Many of my 5th graders from my first years of teaching are in college or have graduated. They are doing big things! I love how they WANT to keep in touch and I love following their journeys.



Students: "THIS IS HARD!!!"

Me: "LIFE IS HARD, I AM JUST PREPARING YOU FOR IT."

What do you think is the most important lesson students can learn beyond academics? I believe the most important lesson students can learn beyond academics is how to be resilient and adaptable in the face of challenges. Learning how to manage setbacks, ask for help when needed, and keep trying even when things get tough are lessons that will serve them throughout their lives, long after they leave the classroom.

What is one innovative teaching method or strategy you've found particularly effective in the classroom?

One innovative teaching method I've found particularly effective is transforming the classroom environment to immerse students in real-world contexts. For example, I've turned the classroom into a pizzeria to teach fractions or a construction site to teach measurement. When teaching fractions, I set up a 'pizzeria' where students had to divide pizzas into equal slices, comparing fractions and equivalence as they worked. Another time, I transformed the room into a 'construction site,' where students had to use measurement tools to calculate dimensions to find the area, perimeter and volume to build structures. These transformations make learning hands-on, fun, and relatable, helping students see the practical applications of math in everyday life. It encourages collaboration and problem-solving while making abstract concepts feel tangible.

