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USA TODAY 2006 All-USA Teacher Team profile

It's all about respect – and science and technology

Environment plays key role in Nancy Elliott's classroom



This is part of an occasional series on members of the 2006 All-USA Teacher Team, USA TODAY's recognition program for outstanding K-12 teachers. Winners share \$2,500 awards with their schools.

To nominate a teacher for the 2007 team, visit allstars.usatoday.com.

By Linda Wiedmaier
Special for USA TODAY

CHILLICOTHE, Mo. — A woman of science, Nancy Elliott began a challenging experiment this fall. She and her teaching partner, Ellen Gott, initiated an alternative classroom at Chillicothe Middle School.

The procedure: Apply the same award-winning, hands-on and real-life simulation teaching methods she had used in her regular middle-school science classes.

The hypothesis: Students' academic and social skills will improve — even for those who have been diagnosed as emotionally disturbed or with attention deficit disorder.

On a fall afternoon, as the students used M&Ms to learn the basics of a simple homemade machine, the data gathered indicated her hypothesis might be supported. The first part of the lesson was stopped a few times until everyone settled down, but most of the students did get into the experiment

by charting how variables can change the outcomes.

After the class, Elliott, 53, asks rhetorically, "What are my options? Separate them and give them paperwork to keep them quiet? I choose the hands-on approach."

A former student says that approach, plus being taught skills in a fun way, helped her with science.

"We didn't just learn about weather from books. We became meteorologists and predicted and charted the weather," says Amanda Ireland, 17. "She wants you to know that what you're learning is real, not just textbook stuff."

Elliott's students also analyzed DNA as forensic scientists, designed blueprints as architects, mixed medications as pharmacists and diagnosed patients as doctors.

Then and now, Elliott bases many of her science lessons on the environment. The morning of the M&M-masher experiment, Elliott and Gott took their students to the Thompson River near Chillicothe to



By Christopher J. Cummings for USA TODAY

analyze the water quality.

"Environmental issues offer many real-world applications for (math and science)," Elliott says in an e-mail. "It's particularly beneficial when we are doing projects such as monitoring water quality, improving habitat, planting shrubs or making community presentations, and students see themselves making a valuable contribution."

Principal Bryan Prewitt points to Elliott's Quail Project as one that took on a life of its own. "What started with the idea to improve

the local natural quail habitat evolved into seventh- and eighth-graders doing DNA work on quail," Prewitt says.

The Quail Project included building a quail hatchery in the storage room of a science classroom, constructing a natural habitat for the quail and developing science fair experiments based on the quail the students raised.

"Students were doing amazing work beyond what they had ever done before," Prewitt says.

The principal and others also

Watch and learn: Nancy Elliott, science teacher at Chillicothe (Mo.) Middle School, works with students on scientific observation. Bryce Hill, one of Elliott's students, takes notes.

"If students respect others first and foremost, they can succeed in whatever they do."

technology to improve instruction. "The grant impacts 1,200 to 1,300 students, and yet she teaches only a handful of them," he says. "No way would we have come close to getting this technology and the training to use it without Nancy."

Beyond science and technology, the 20-year teaching veteran, who began her family before getting her degree, believes respect is as important as any academic subject. These tenets are posted on her and Gott's classroom wall:

- ▶ Respect yourself.
- ▶ Respect others.
- ▶ Respect property.

"If students respect others first and foremost, they can succeed in whatever they do," Elliott says.

Says Amanda: "We learned respect for people you don't know and respect for the environment from Mrs. Elliott. She taught us that other people always have something to teach you."

It's that variable that may change the lives of her new and challenging group of students.

"It's rewarding to see these kids doing things they've never done before, such as field trips, because their behavior caused them to miss out," Elliott says. "We have small successes every day."