

# REFLECTIONS ON TRANSITIONING TO A TO SPECIAL POPULATIONS HIGH SCHOOL

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From K-8 to K-12; Reflections on Transitioning to a Special Population High School

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# From K-8 to K-12; Reflections on Transitioning to a Special Population High School

There had been rumblings at my little K-8 school about expanding our scope to serve students aged differently than the students we were currently serving at Martin Luther School. I was certain that we would add early education well before applying to run a high school program. I learned I couldn't have been more wrong when my school director asked me to write a high school curriculum... in just a weekend. Two days later, I had put together Ceramics I and II, Drawing I and II, Introduction to Art and Visual Culture, Two-Dimensional Design, and Three-Dimensional Design. We were approved.

And, quite honestly, we really did need to provide a high school program for our students here at MLS. Historically, students would complete 8th grade and then be thrust into an unfamiliar school that was much larger than ours, without the student supports and trauma-informed care, and unique approach to pedagogy. So- next year we would add 9th grade and continue adding a high school grade each year.

When the school year began, our 9th-grade students learned that they could select either Music or Art courses. The Music teacher and I spent the first weeks meeting with students and 'pitching' our courses. I really wanted my high school students to feel like they were special and wanted to treat them as the young adults they now saw themselves to be. In the first weeks of Art class (I ran Drawing I), students were given a hard-bound sketchbook. If they brought the sketchbook back to the next class, they then received a Dick Blick pencil bag full of drawing pencils and pens of their own. This was a great idea in theory. Some students were very good at bringing their books and supplies to class, while others... not so much. One thing I did put into place was giving an "All Access VIP Pass" to every high school Art student. I had the passes laminated and put each on a lanyard. They were thrilled to learn that A., they could come to the Art room any time they were able, and B., that they were the only ones with the special passes.

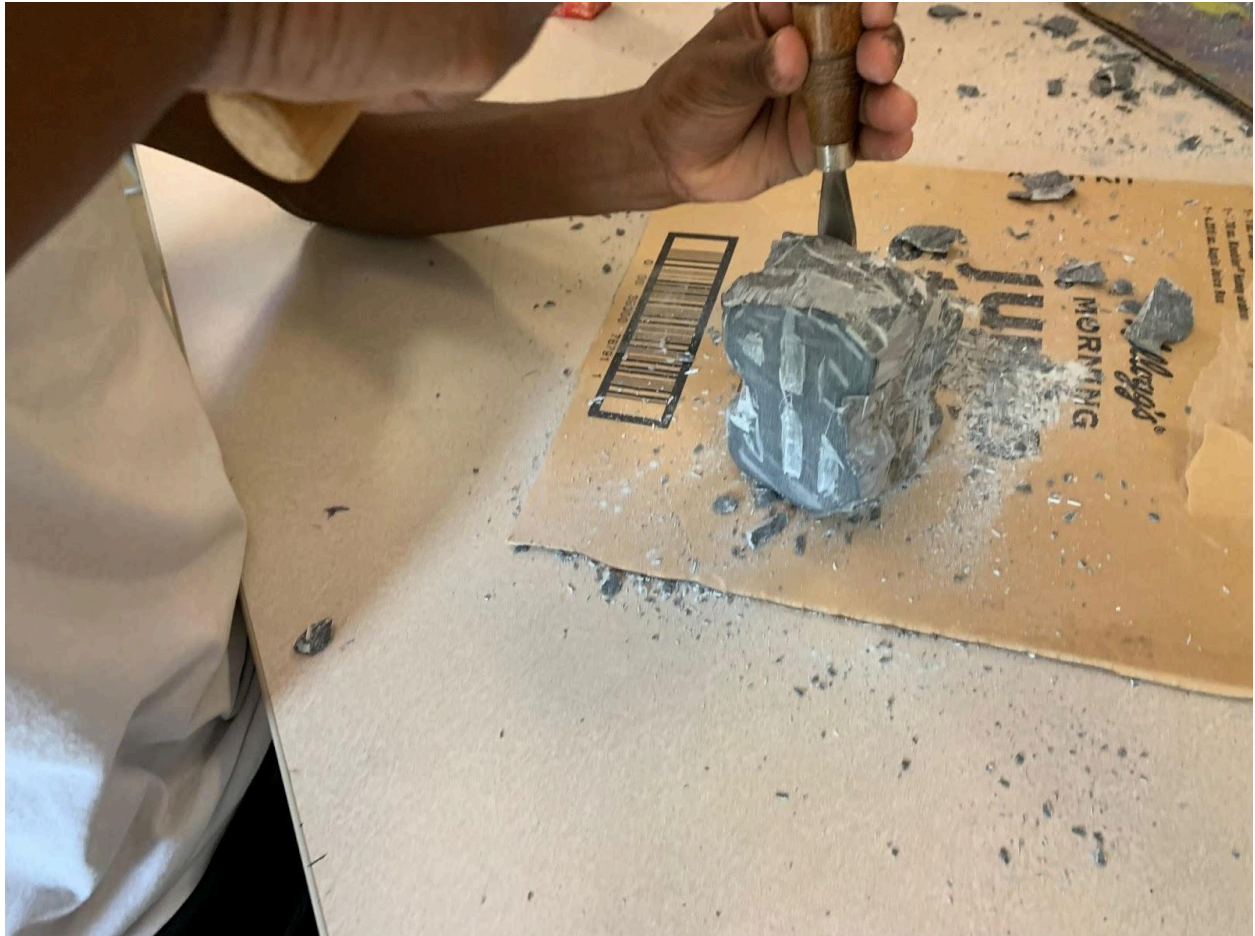
What also worked was building relationships with my students, letting them feel that they were seen and respected as young adults. I was able to let go of waiting that minute or two for students to reset at the door. They knew the expectations and were able to self-regulate, come in quietly and focus on our

warm-up with a minimum of redirection. My high school Art classes really were some of my favorites (if you tell my younger students, however, I will deny it), and I really enjoyed the culture we created. I was often greeted with hugs (happy to see they weren't too 'grown' for hugs) and students were eager to share the latest gossip with my student teacher and I, most of which was welcome and some of which I wish I could unhear to this day.

I believed I needed to follow the written curriculum in the event that we needed to provide artifacts, which was the most difficult for students to become accustomed to. They were used to having a lot more choice and flexibility, being able to solve problems in whatever medium spoke to them. This was something to get used to - and something I was quick to change this current school year.

After the close of the semester, I ran Three-Dimensional Design, figuring students would want a break from all of the drawing. Our last project was soapstone carving. In 8 years, I had avoided giving my students anything 'stabby.' It definitely took me out of my comfort zone, which was terrifying and very good for me. I just had to trust that students would do the right thing because I trusted them to do the right thing. After much modeling and practice, I had to just let them do it. Yes, there were reminders, specifically mine of "don't ruin my streak." To which my students would respond, "What streak?" I would answer, "Of no bloodshed in the Art room."

I am so glad that my school has taken this step to provide our learners access to a high school program that is familiar and suits their needs. It has truly been a gift to watch my students grow from kindergarteners to eighth graders and now, to be a stakeholder and agent in their journey through young adulthood. Reflecting upon this journey has been key to honing our high school Arts program and maintaining these gratifying relationships of mutual respect.



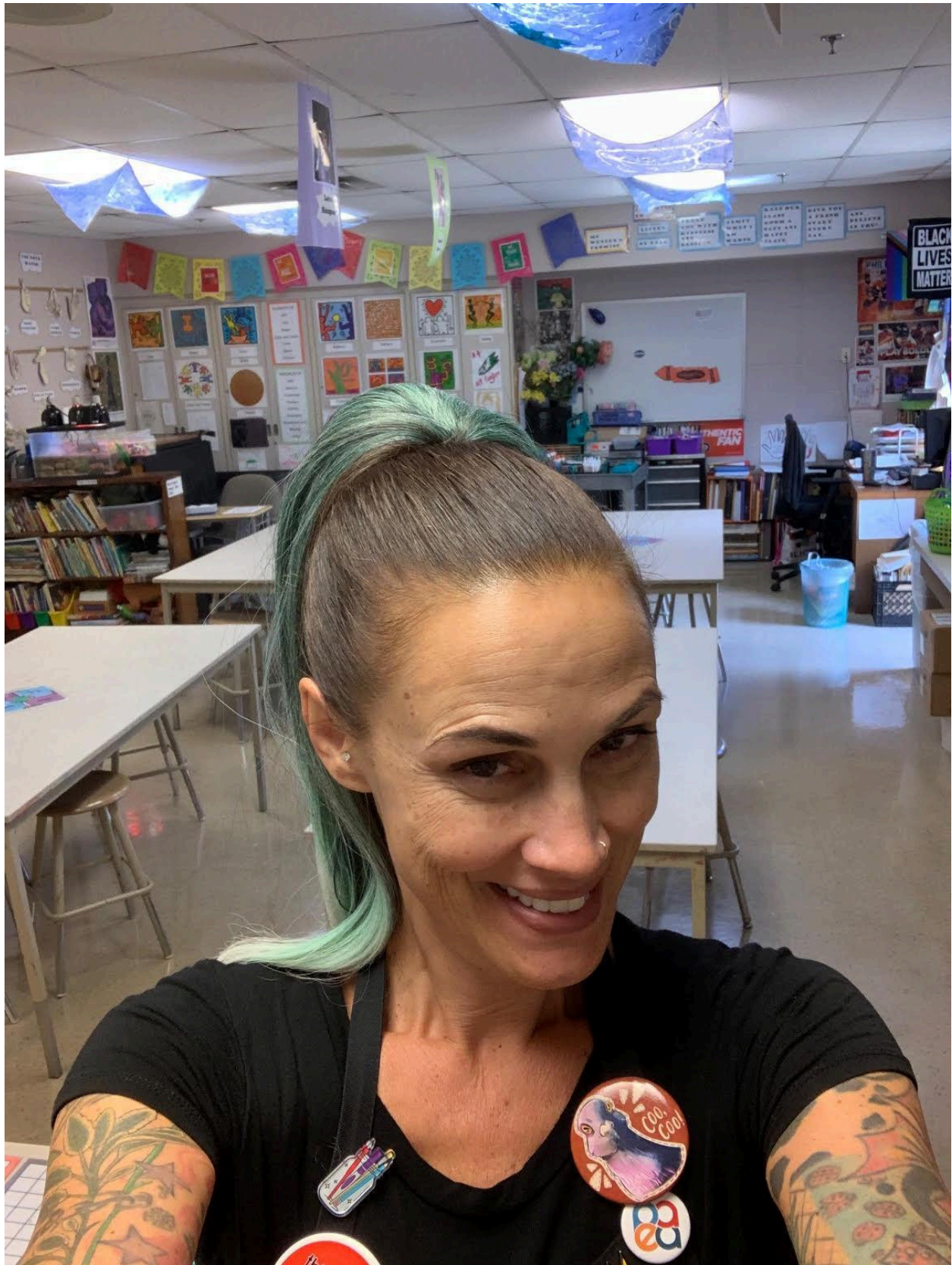
*Photograph of a student's hand gripping a carving tool against a sculpture of a dollar sign.*





*Photograph of 4 sparkling “VIP All Access Pass High School Artist” badges on lanyards*





*Photograph of the author, a woman with a long ponytail smiling in an Art classroom*