

# Riding Texas' digital divide

**W**hen Mary Tsadi arrived at her first job interview, she was dismayed to see chain link and razor wire.



**MARY TSADI**

**It wasn't at all what she expected.**

She sat for five minutes before getting out of her car. As she wondered what a nice Oklahoma girl was doing in San Benito, Texas, in a place like this, she started to realize why the job announcement referred to JCPRC instead of the Joe Callandrett Positive Redirection Center.

Her vision of teaching seventh grade math and science was something very different than a military boot-camp-style school for students with serious disciplinary issues. "I wasn't sure I could teach there," she says.

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Drill sergeants directed daily drills for students in grades 6-12 and taught them military values, such as discipline, loyalty, trust, and teamwork.

Most of her students bounced from family to social to legal issues like racquet balls, so she learned to support and counsel them and develop relationships before she could teach them math and science.

But, "Watching them do experiments, work together, and be kids while they were with me was always worth the effort and – frankly – the fight."

Near the end of her second year, she helped launch a drop-out recovery high school that's working. Her kids don't read chapters, take notes, or tests. They learn by doing. They explore and discover in their science labs, they create with technology, and they demonstrate mastery by explaining principles or processes to friends.

Some days, students work together in groups. Instead of talking about force conceptually, they race model cars to demonstrate force, distance, and acceleration. They engage in lots of hands-on modeling, like building cells and DNA strands.

Her students are physically adults, but they don't have the skills you'd think they should.

**"We are the digital divide.** These kids have a lot of experience navigating a computer or cell phone, but not truly *using* the computer. They can type but can't make changes on a Word document. Doing a PowerPoint project takes at least a week. So, sometimes, they need a computer and sometimes they need PlayDough."

**That's how it works some days.**

Other days look more like group therapy.

**"I don't know if every day is a success, but I do know that over the past six years, I have helped almost 200 kids earn a high school diploma, and I've become a passionate advocate for giving kids a second or third chance."**

Tsadi flipped her classroom because many

### **Tsadi wins Ellenberger Scholarship**

Mary Tsadi was awarded the 2013 Sean Ellenberger Scholarship offered annually by Boise State's Department of Educational Technology to teachers of at-risk students.

The scholarship—this year in the amount of \$3,414—memorializes EdTech graduate Sean Ellenberger who taught at-risk students in Florida. In the summer following his graduation, Ellenberger was helping a friend install a new radio in his car, which was parked on the street at the friend's home. They were robbed at gun-point by a teenager, and Ellenberger was shot and killed when he resisted.

students do not want to raise their hand in class, or they don't understand instructions (some still struggle with English), but at home, they can listen to her instructions over and over. Class time is better used for demonstrating and

helping. **"We hear that flipped classrooms won't work with students like mine, but it works with all kids," she says.**

Tsadi, who plans to apply to the EdTech doctoral program at Boise State, says she is getting more from her Master of Educational Technology courses than her colleagues are getting from other master's programs.

**"I have products and projects to show and use in my classes. I have supportive dialogues and helpful divergent views, but my colleagues are not getting as much value from their programs."**