

Brian Freiss

“If you’re having a bad day, Mr. Freiss will cheer you up. He is my best and favorite teacher,” emphatically states fifth grader, Benita McCoy, as she constructs a triangle on her geoboard, a pegboard used to teach geometry concepts.

The only teacher at Highland Elementary School with prestigious National Board Certification status, Mr. Freiss applies his educational expertise to helping students, families, and staff during every moment of his day. Since 2009, Mr. Freiss has taught mathematics to students in four different grade levels in a variety of roles.

Expressing the belief of many in his school community, Principal Scott Steffan says, “Aside from being a skilled teacher, which Mr. Freiss certainly is and has been since he began his first year of teaching at Highland in 2001, I would consider his passion for teaching and learning to be his greatest asset as an educator. He goes the ‘extra mile’ to provide opportunities for our students that they might not have had otherwise.”

So what does going the “extra mile” look like? “As a parent, I’m impressed that Mr. Freiss does not limit his time strictly to the four walls of his classroom,” says Kirstin Goldston, Highland PTA treasurer. “He touches the lives of everyone at Highland Elementary School – from ‘high-fiving’ my two-year-old each morning to coaching soccer and basketball after school.”

In addition to his responsibilities as a mathematics teacher at Highland, Mr. Freiss serves in a number of leadership roles that include elected faculty representative, Montgomery County Education Association representative, Core Leadership Team member, and Student Government Association (SGA) sponsor. In his

SGA role, he helps students give back to the community with efforts such as Pennies for Patients.

Mr. Freiss' positive impact on the school as a whole doesn't end there. Shortly after arriving at Highland, he noticed dismal attendance at Back-to-School Night. He realized that parents weren't involved because they didn't know how to be. He realized what was missing were specific opportunities to engage so he spearheaded a movement that sought to make personal contact with each parent, inviting them to this important school event. He also set up 'Dinner with Dads' where fathers spend time investing in their children's education and by teaching after-school math classes to parents so they can better help their children with homework. Through these efforts, Highland's Back-to-School Night attendance is now about 80 percent.

"I've tried to help create opportunities for parents to feel welcome and comfortable," shares Mr. Freiss. "I feel that is it my job is to reach out to the parents so that there is constant three-way communication among the student, the parents, and myself. I like to share the positives that happen in school (not just the 'you're in trouble phone calls'), and I believe that reaching out to parents leads to so many benefits in the classroom."

Colleagues Shannon Dorsey and Courtney Thompson share, "It is not uncommon for Mr. Freiss to be the last one to leave the building at night. Mr. Freiss has seen Highland through many of its struggles - corrective action, the second highest poverty rate in MCPS, the greatest percentage of English language learners in Maryland - and now is celebrating its success as a National Blue Ribbon School. He has been a true leader in cultivating positive changes in our school structure and climate."

In what ways did Mr. Freiss specifically impact progress at Highland? In 2003, Highland's math proficiency on the Maryland School

Assessments (MSAs) was 42.7 percent and in 2010 was 89.7 percent – an impressive gain of 47 percent. According to Principal Steffan, “As a Grade 5 classroom teacher from 2003–2009, Mr. Freiss played an integral role in implementing and championing the school reform efforts that led the school out of corrective action and into national prominence.”

Young and dynamic, Mr. Freiss exhibits the expertise of a master teacher and sums up his beliefs about education, “I try to make learning extremely fun – I can definitely be a bit outlandish with it. I feel that instilling a love of learning is key. I try to model a love of learning and inspire my students to be risk takers – it is ok to make mistakes if you learn from them.”