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FRESHMAN MATH TUTORS + LOCAL SCHOOLKIDS = THE RIGHT ANSWER

"THERE IS NO GREATER FEELING THAN KNOWING YOU ARE IMPACTING CHILDREN'S LIVES"

by [Kelley McGee](#) | March 4, 2024

Above: Laney Carnahan '26 works with students from Yorktown Elementary School. Photo credit: Teresa Morris, Yorktown Elementary School

Read time: about 3 min

Laney Carnahan '26 felt a rush of both nerves and nostalgia when she entered Yorktown Elementary to serve as a volunteer math tutor. Returning to the district where she had once been a student was a full-circle moment for the future teacher. Despite some initial jitters, Laney was confident Dr. George Kuster's Freshman Honors class, [Early Field Experience in Education](#), had prepared her well for the opportunity and she was excited for the chance to both expand her skills and connect with her hometown.

"As soon as I entered the classroom I was greeted by the friendliest staff and first-graders, I knew this was going to be how I'd want to spend my afternoons. After tutoring every week in the classroom, it quickly became clear to me that we are making a difference. There is no greater feeling than knowing you are impacting children's lives," said Carnahan, a [Leadership](#) and [Psychology](#) major. "This experience has also impacted my own life as well, since I'm learning



classroom management skills and how to effectively assist young learners– all skills that will prove beneficial when I have a classroom of my own.”

Laney's experience perfectly exemplifies Dr. Kuster's vision for his class, which he designed to align with a National Science Foundation grant he was awarded. The grant was aimed at recruiting, training, and retaining highly qualified teachers for high-need schools, and his tutoring course supports that goal.

“Research shows that the best way to recruit students into the teaching profession is to provide meaningful field experiences to them as early in their academic careers as possible,” said Kuster, Associate Professor of [Mathematics](#). “This course focuses on student thinking and learning and introduces students to all the challenges that education faces. My students quickly learn that teaching is hard. Just being able to say, ‘I taught topic x,’ doesn't mean the students they were tutoring actually learned it.”

Dr. Kuster's students tutor at the nearby Yorktown Elementary School. Although the partnership with the school began as largely a field experience course for his students, it quickly grew into a community engagement and innovative learning opportunity. Under the guidance of Kuster, Yorktown Principal Dr. Kristin Bolam and Elementary Math Coach Kirsten McLoad, Christopher Newport students are taught how to interact with students and design instructional activities. The program ensures CNU students are not just teaching, but also focused on understanding student thinking and learning processes.

“On Mondays, the math coach provides instructional activities to me, and I discuss the thinking and learning that the activities support with my students. Then, on Wednesdays, a large group of my students visit the elementary school with me and we work with the students. On Fridays, we debrief and reflect on the experience,” said Dr. Kuster.

"When we initially conceived this partnership, we envisioned just a handful of Christopher Newport University students working with our elementary students to develop mathematics knowledge and skills, while also learning about the intricate relationship between teaching and learning," said Principal Bolam. "However, Dr. Kuster and I have grown this program, and it has evolved to become about so much more than just academics."

As a mathematician, Dr. Kuster understands the power of compounding. Over the past year, he has been able to build upon the program's initial investment of a few students in local classrooms, and grow it into a larger program that impacts almost 100 students in the York County School Division and involves more than 50 Christopher Newport University students, some but not all on a career path to one day become teachers themselves. This partnership also recently expanded to include supporting students at Yorktown Middle School.

“I want our Christopher Newport students to gain meaningful experience and support directly from math and literacy coaches who are actually working in the field training and supporting teachers, and use it as a mechanism to recruit more students into teaching,” Kuster said.

Kuster credits his participation in the Tidewater Faculty Fellows Program through the Center for Community Engagement for helping to elevate and broaden his initial idea.

“We used student feedback from last year to refine the experience. Of the volunteers, 30% have returned from last year, and many of them have recruited roommates and friends,” he said. “The fact that this many students are seeking to continue this experience is truly phenomenal and showcases just how impactful and special the experience is.”

As for Laney, she views the tutoring work as much more than just a professional development opportunity. The experience has become one of the highlights of her week.

“I can't wait to tutor these students each week,” she said. “Seeing the smiles on the faces of all these elementary school kids when we walk through the door is one of the best feelings in the world!”