



TEA Time: A Conversation with the 2018-2019 Texas Elementary Teacher of the Year, Rhonda Peña – October 2018

Narrator: Welcome to TEA Time, a podcast about all things public education from the Texas Education Agency.

Host: Welcome back to another episode of TEA Time. We're joined today by Rhonda Peña, an elementary school teacher at Bryan Elementary School in the Mission Consolidated Independent School District and the 2018-2019 Texas Elementary Teacher of the Year. Mrs. Peña, welcome to TEA Time.

Texas Elementary Teacher of the Year Rhonda Peña: Thank you. It's nice to be here, and an honor.

Host: Talk to me about Bryan Elementary School and why you became a teacher.

Peña: Well I started off in 1990 actually at a different school. I was there for three years but then I moved to Bryan and that's been my home for the last 25, going on 26 years. We're a family. The minute you walk into the door you can feel it. You can feel the cohesiveness. The students just love coming to school. We are there for our students each and every day. You can just see the happiness on the kids' faces as they come in and as they're leaving. Some kids don't even want to leave school, they want to stay a little longer in the day. We are just excited each and every school year to welcome new kids into our classrooms.

Host: What inspired you to become a teacher?

Peña: I grew up in a family, a big family, I'm the youngest of ten kids, so I had a lot of teachers before I ever stepped foot into elementary school. And they brought the learning to me at a young age and they made it fun for me. My brothers gave me coins, different types, and said, 'Make 50 cents,' and that's where my love of math came from. At an early age I was already being intrigued by math and numbers. My family up north in Minnesota, that's where I'm from originally, they made me love teaching and made me want to be a teacher, because I have a lot of nieces and nephews as well, so being a teacher is just kind of in me. It's a calling.

Host: You're a math and science teacher at your elementary school. You're teaching fifth grade students. What does a typical day in your classroom look like? Is there any typical day in your classroom?

Peña: Well each day is different, but we try to be excited about everything that we're doing. The kids, they come in and they're ready to go. They have Chromebooks that they work on each day and so they're excited with that. With the coding initiative that we have in our district now, they're doing coding –just scratch coding – and they just love it. They just beg for it. So the kids are engaged the minute they walk in until the minute they leave, so – Like I said, they don't want to leave sometimes. They want to stay and continue on.

Host: With your fifth graders, you teach them math and science. There's a lot there that you get to explore. What's your favorite area to dive into and teach them?

Peña: My favorite area is algebra. I know that when I was in school, I was not introduced to algebra until junior high, and it was a scary thing. And so I don't want that for my students. When I was teaching third grade,

that's when I started to look into a program that would help them to understand algebra at the foundational level, concretely. It's all concrete. They use manipulatives to balance the equations, and so it's visual for them. They're understanding the reason why you do your steps in algebra. It's not just abstract.

And when I told the kids they were going to learn algebra, of course I saw the same fear in them that I had. And I told them, 'You guys have been doing algebra since kindergarten, you just didn't know that it was called that. Algebra's just a word. Don't be afraid of it.' And so when we dive into the program, the kids see it and they're just so excited. They go home and they say, 'Mom, I'm doing algebra just like my older brother or sister.' You know, so they have that excitement in them and I think that if they keep that excitement through third on up, and by the time they get to junior high, that word is not going to scare them like it did to me. That's my passion. That's my love.

Host: In your 29 years of teaching, what's changed the most?

Peña: Changed the most is I guess the amount of paperwork that a teacher has to do, but as far as the kids go, it's the same. The kids are always wanting to come in and learn. They bring out the best in you each day by challenging you to learn new things as a teacher. Technology has changed a lot, that's one big thing. Knowing that the kids are on devices and the capabilities of incorporating that into your classroom is just, they're endless. And so, trying to find those ways that you can do that to keep the kids engaged is always a challenge, and it's a fun challenge for me. That's what I like to do.

Host: What does it mean to you to know that you are in the top echelon of teachers in the state of Texas and that you're influencing lives in a major way?

Peña: It's overwhelming, to say the least, but it's quite an honor. I know that I'm a voice now for my school district, for my students, for my school, and I can't be more pleased to be in that position. Teachers become teachers because of our passion, and our passion is kids. And there's no other job or profession that I would want to be in. It's my calling. Sometimes people ask me why didn't I go into administration or other fields of education and I just say, because God wanted me to be in the classroom. My kids need me. And that's how every teacher needs to feel, that your children need you, and they need you to become a part of them as far as their life. Know them. Build that relationship with them. And when you do that you're going to see success for your kids and they'll know you're there for them.

Host: Mrs. Peña, we can't thank you enough for joining us here on TEA Time. We congratulate you on this immense honor and we also thank you for um being such a positive role model and an excellent teacher for our students in the state of Texas.

Peña: Thank you for having me, it's been quite an honor and a blessing to be here.

Host: We'd also like to thank the Texas Association of School Administrators, which facilitates the Texas Teacher of the Year program, for providing us the opportunity to speak to Mrs. Peña and the other 2018-2019 Texas Elementary and Secondary Teacher of the Year finalists. If you missed our conversation with the 2018-2019 Teacher of the Year, Jeff Wheatcraft, you'll find it on our website, www.tea.texas.gov/podcast. We'll bring you some of our conversations with the other Elementary and Secondary Teacher of the Year finalists in upcoming TEA Time episodes.

Narrator: For more on this and other education issues, visit our website at tea.texas.gov. For more TEA Time episodes, visit tea.texas.gov/podcast or look for us where you download your other podcasts. Join us again soon for another episode of TEA Time, a podcast from the Texas Education Agency.