

Bio & Testimony

My name is José Eduardo Valenzuela. I was born in the Dominican Republic, but moved with my mother and father to the United States at a young age, and have been living in Boston ever since. I am a product of the Boston Public Schools, having graduated from Boston Latin School in 2003. Following high school, I attended Williams College and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts of in History and Latina/o Studies in 2007. Prior to applying to the Boston Teacher Residency, I had no formal education training, but I had spent three summers as teacher's assistant in the Talented and Gifted, an enrichment program for Latino, Cape Verdean, and Brazilian students. I taught summer school math to English Language Learners, many of whom had just arrived from the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Guatemala, among other places. These students faced significant challenges in learning a new culture, language, and spending time in a formal education system. I learned a lot about myself in those summers, and not just about how I would teach math in Spanish, a discipline I had learned in English. I also learned to see a group of kids that were eager to spend their summer learning Algebra in a setting that valued their culture, background, and language, something many of them had confided to me had been lacking in their Boston Public high schools. This made me sad, but I knew all too well the lack of respect my Latinidad received in my own experience at Boston Latin School, outside of my group of friends and several dedicated and conscientious teachers. I know several of those students that have gone on to graduate from college after spending time in the summer school program offered at TAG (through UMass Boston).

I decided to teach partly because my mother likes to say that I enjoy explaining things to other people. The other part comes from a (growing) conviction to work in my community and make it better than when I attended school. I chose to work in the Boston Public Schools because I felt that I had been disconnected from the community that I had called home for over 20 years. When I returned to Boston in 2007, it did not feel like home, with a growing murder rate, and with many of my friends working in consulting and finance, it was like there were two separate cities, and I wanted to get back to the one I remembered from my elementary school days, when being Dominican in my classroom wasn't peculiar or odd, it was an asset. I thought that working in public schools would give me my humanity back.

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I am here to speak about my experiences in the Boston Teacher Residency, both in my training year, last year, and my first year out of the program as a full time teacher in the Boston Public Schools. I chose BTR over other programs, including an acceptance to the New York City Teaching Fellows, for one simple reason: I would have the opportunity to work closely with an experienced veteran teacher. After completing my residency year and nearly completing my first year teaching on my own, I am still convinced that I made the correct decision. I am really fortunate to have had a terrific match with my mentor, who guided me through a ten-month school year experience that allowed me to grow, mature, and become comfortable with the idea of being “Mr. V.” Although not all matches with mentors were perfect, all residents would agree that the mentor-resident relationship was the single most critical factor to the experience of BTR. Some of those experiences were negative, but most were positive. In my case, I had a mentor who was young, energetic, but had spent 9 years teaching in urban settings, including Malden, Cambridge, and Boston. She had also extensive knowledge of her content, from all of the years teaching multiple subjects, ranging from ELA to history to electives like Global Issues. It was not all luck though. I had sought this out when I chose BTR. I wanted the mentor experience. I had the chance of working alongside a mentor professor at Williams College, when back then my dream had been to be a college professor. I enjoyed the experience of working closely with knowledgeable individuals. I knew that it would be important to learn more from just my assigned mentor, and BTR gave me opportunities to learn from others as well. One of the strongest mentoring relationships I had was with my History Methods instructor. I really gravitated to her style of teaching, her social activism bend, and above all, her commitment to the students of Boston. She truly loves her children, and works tirelessly to making them better students, better citizens, and better people. Now that she and I teach the same subject, Civics, we have continued to work even more closely, as I work through the challenges of prepping for two different subjects (9th grade US History and 8th grade Civics). BTR has made these relationships the cornerstone of their program, and my experience this year has shown that effectiveness increases with the successes that are built upon these mentor-resident connections.

My experience in my residency year allowed me to experiment as well. When I came upon the concept of differentiating instruction in one of my courses in BTR, I had a breakthrough. I became inspired by this concept, and I approached my mentor to discuss my

hopes of implementing some of these strategies right away. By the beginning of June, my mentor and I had reorganized the classroom into something of a laboratory of differentiated experimentation, and I was given the keys to try whatever I wanted. I do not believe that this would have happened in a traditional teaching program setting.

Above all, the most important quality of BTR, the one that I preach to the current cohort of residents (especially when they ask me the question, “Do you feel prepared in your first year?”) is that spending an *entire year* with actual Boston Public School students is an unmatched experience offered by any traditional route to teaching. This alone would make BTR stand out above the rest. And it truly does prepare you. When I taught ninth grade history last year, I watched as my students began to unwind in January, their behavior becoming increasingly more disruptive than it had been in September. I teach ninth grade this year, and I was prepared for what I expected would happen in January. I knew that my routines and structures needed to be tight in order to meet the particular challenges that ninth grade poses. I knew this, though, because I had spent an entire year with a group of students very similar to the ones I currently have this year. You learn a lot from spending so much time with kids, how they think, what they might react to. It’s a tremendous confidence boost in a year with very few of them.

My experience at TechBoston Academy has continued to give me hope for my ongoing development in the years ahead, as well as reinforced my argument that BTR has successfully prepared me for my first year. Of course, no program can prepare you for every challenge that one might face in that year. No two experiences are alike, and no two students are exactly alike either. I do feel confident that BTR has helped me in two ways in my first year. First, it has given me the confidence, the bravado even, to take on leadership opportunities in the building. The program taught us to create “pockets of change” within our community, wherever we might end up, and I took that to heart. That is why I said yes when asked if I would take on the role of 8th grade team leader. Even despite all of the extra responsibilities and challenges of the job, I am happy with the work that our team has been able to do, and the chances to learn and grow from doing some administrative work. I also started the first wrestling program at the school, one of only three middle school wrestling programs in the entire district. This had been a goal of mine since graduating from college. Wrestling for 12 years had a positive influence on my life, and I knew that creating more wrestling opportunities in the city was a common sense decision.

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Although I had a limited operating budget and no equipment, I was able to take wrestlers to several competitions and tournaments, including the Massachusetts State Youth Championships, where one of my wrestlers placed 4th overall (the only Boston resident to do so, I might add). This accomplishment would not have happened without significant contributions from other area coaches, all of who assisted me in my first year as head coach. These are just a couple of examples, but BTR residents in my school have all taken on leadership roles, whether it was organizing Black History Month, the school Spring Dance, or acting as 6th grade team leader (yes, of the six team leaders, two are BTR/first year teachers).

BTR has also been helpful in another aspect at TBA. The program has always dreamed of placing graduating residents in cohorts at schools. My school decided to take on 8 total BTR graduates this school year (7 from my cohort). This critical mass of like-minded teachers has had a tremendous impact for me. Not only do I work with individuals who share the same values that I do, but also remember what it was like to experience the program. I am grateful that just across the whole, I can share my thoughts and feelings about my day, a lesson, or even a particular student with a colleague who also graduated from BTR. I know that in time, BTR will be able to work with more schools to create these cohorts. I do not believe this shuts out teachers that have taken a traditional route because all residents must go through the same hiring process. Even outside of my school, the BTR connection is strong, whether it is speaking to current residents, gathering with my cohort for graduate courses in Special Education, working with graduates from all years on the concept of turnaround schools, or just hanging out, I know that I am part of a strong and active network, one that works tirelessly for the students and families of Boston.