

The Emergency Teacher

Christina Asquith taught for a year in an urban school with no curriculum and no books. Read her story in the **Going Beyond** folder for Chapter 21 at EffectiveTeaching.com.

At age 25 and passionately interested in education, Christina Asquith left her job as a journalist for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, to teach. It was easy to get a job because Philadelphia was willing to hire people without experience or credentials to fill the voids in their classrooms.

She found a city school system so desperate for teachers that it had an “emergency” certification program for any person who applied.

“Can I really teach without any experience?” Christina asked. The school district recruiter was unfazed. “Believe me, we need you more than you need us,” he said.

When Christina joined the Philadelphia school district as a teacher, she was enthusiastic and a little idealistic. She had been swept up by the promise of a recruitment brochure to “make a difference in the life of a child.” She also wanted to discover for herself the answers to two classic questions. Why are American inner-city schools failing and can one young motivated person make a difference?

Without certification or training, she was hired in September 1999 as an emergency teacher. She was assigned to a classroom that, unbeknownst to her, few veteran teachers would take—teaching sixth grade in the city’s oldest school building, in a crime-infested neighborhood. Though she had been charmingly recruited, on her first day of school she was left to “sink or swim.”

According to Christina, she received one day of orientation, and she spent most of her time filling out forms. No one officially welcomed her or the three other new teachers to the school. A veteran teacher had been assigned as her mentor, but she was busy with her own classroom and had no extra time. The mentor had no goals and no plans. She was just there if Christina needed her help. The principal never monitored the relationship; in fact, there really was no relationship.

In Christina’s book, *The Emergency Teacher*, which she wrote to document her dismal experience, she notes that “by the time school started, one in ten teachers had wandered off the street and been handed classroom keys.”

“They were directed to the most troubled schools, and when September started they stood in front of their classrooms. They had no educational experience, no guidance, no instruction and scant support. Like me, many had no clue how to teach.”

She was placed before a class of 33 sixth graders at Julia de Burgos Middle School, located in one of the most troubled neighborhoods in Philadelphia.

Christina could have succeeded. After all, thousands enter teaching each year from alternative certification routes or other credentialing programs. However, these programs provide weeks, even months, of intense training before teachers are placed in the classroom, and ongoing support typically continues for a year or more.

The Emergency Teacher (continued)

At de Burgos, Christina received no training, support, or help. What Christina discovered was a disgrace, not only for her but for the kids. She had no lesson plan, no coaching, no supplies, and no textbooks. She eventually discovered boxes of old, outdated, undistributed books.

When a student asked for a pass to the bathroom on the first day, she was floored. Christina had no idea where it was. At the end of September of that year, 100 new teachers had already quit the district. Christina struggled to control her classroom. At the end of the year almost all of her students failed the state writing tests.

Julia de Burgos Middle School had more than 10 “emergency” teachers that year. One of the emergency teachers left after one week, another after a month, and others throughout the year. Only four survived the year. Worse, there were teachers in the school who had given up on teaching kids long ago but who stayed in place biding time to qualify for a pension. One has to wonder about the wisdom of placing untrained novices in classrooms with the most challenging students.

Christina toughed it out through the full year, buying books and supplies for the children, and finding a small network of skilled teachers inside the school who inspired and counseled her. But she chose not to attempt a second year.

In spite of not returning after her first year, Christina's passion for education still shines brightly. Her struggles as a teacher and with the system are detailed in *The Emergency Teacher*. [Click here](#) for ordering information.