

Small-town teacher touching lives through a progressive approach to traditional academics

By: Allie Stevens

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Taylor High School teacher Bryan Kestner is pushing the boundaries of traditional schooling and approaching students in the classroom.

Through constant compassion towards students themselves and endless support of trade electives, Kestner creates a classroom that fosters productivity and understanding and opens students' minds to possibilities for careers they may never have found elsewhere.

Growing up, Kestner loved the social aspect of school. He loved bantering with teachers—relationships he made with them and an extreme love for sports.

He recalls having teachers and coaches make a heavy impact on his own life. "I had one teacher, in particular my freshman year math class... We got along really well, and she was incredibly supportive— coming to student games, events and even hosting cookouts. She was just a genuine, friendly person," Kestner said.

Because of interactions with faculty, he decided to study education at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio.

Before the last semester of his senior year of college, Kestner applied as a business major.

Thinking back to his time in middle and high school, Kestner recalls not being "good" at the traditional approach of the American education system and offers his opinions,

"I'm not a fan of traditional school. Personally, if I had enough money, I would create my own school. We get kids that normally suck at traditional academics; you get a lot of kids like me with a little bit of attention deficit who can't do the typical 8 am to 3 pm in a chair and just needs some attention and hands-on work to get them to succeed."

Initially, Kestner taught 7-12th grade Social Studies for eleven years, and his class sizes continued to increase, and he was teaching the same bell for seven



belts straight. Kestner needed a change and, as previously mentioned, found himself criticizing the approaches of the education system.

"I see such a value in trade skill sets, both financially and intrinsically," Kestner said. "The fact that people in the trades make good money and have good jobs that can provide for their family made me ask, 'Why are we not helping kids and showing them that this is a great pathway but even more so a *needed* pathway?'"

"Finally, the district came to me with an idea and said, 'Hey, you yell at us enough for not doing anything for kids who aren't going to college, so for this, we thought of you,'" Kestner recalls.

That idea was to create a Career Academies Program at Taylor to focus on the trades for students to explore post-secondary options that might not need a college degree. He explains what a blessing it was to have the opportunity to fall into his arms,

Since the program's creation in 2019, class numbers have only continued to grow, with word getting out not only about Kestner's infectious attitude during class but also because of the actual value of the material within them that the students can now recognize due to his marketing.



"My favorite part about my job has and always will be the kids," Kestner says. He explains that relationships and friendships are what he values most in this world and tries to nourish them at every chance.

"It's always just trying to be a positive interaction or support for a kid who might not get *any* others that day. That's always my focus: How can I make this kid's day just a *little* better?" Kestner said.

He brings up how teachers can often get tunnel vision, thinking that their class should matter most to every student because it's theirs and ignoring that these children have *lives* they know nothing about outside of school.

This behavior can easily lead to negative dynamics between students and teachers, further preventing students with extenuating circumstances from flourishing.

"I have an old buddy, and one day we were hanging out, and he said to me, 'You know sometimes when you're sitting in shit, you just need someone to sit in the shit with you,' ... I talk a lot, and as I've gotten older, I've realized to just listen and say, 'Hey, that sucks,'" Kestner stated.

He explained that as he's gotten older, it's become more apparent that you never know what's happening with someone. "It has progressively gotten harder to *be* a kid. I tell my own kids when they pick on each other, and it's the same for students, that there's going to be a lot of other people that rag on your sister/classmate, you don't need to be one of them."

When asked if there was ever a student that solidified his decision to become a teacher, he responded, "I could write a book."

Kestner said that watching his students produce amazing things in his class that they might not have had the chance to create before

the class existed provides him with what he calls "proud dad moments."

"When students learn more about themselves through their actions than they could from me just facilitating information for them to learn, it makes what I do worth it every time," says Kestner.

He explains that seeing students take valuable skills they weren't interested in before picking his class, even if they only decided it as an easy elective they needed for graduation, into their adult lives to make it into a career is one of the most rewarding things for him.

"If my class is the only reason a kid comes to school, just so they can go outside and be good at something they like to do, then I've done my job. It's why I do what I do," Kestner said.

He is incredibly transparent that he hasn't always been as in control of his perspective as he is now. When asked what he was most proud of, he knew instantly: the family he'd created with his wife. Four kids *and* an entire academy program? *Sheesh*, how does he do it?

"I don't tell a lot of people this because I don't try to preach anything... It's always in the back of my mind to be Christ-like to everyone I come into contact with," says Kestner. "I'm far from perfect, but I try to love people well and give grace. Life is hard enough, I screw up enough and need grace myself, so I try to give it abundantly to others because there's enough people in the world that don't give any at all."

Students have picked Kestner as the honorary faculty member to speak at the high school's senior Baccalaureate program for the last two years, proving his substantial effect on the students he crosses paths with.

Whether they plan to or not, students who take his classes get substantial life and career field experience along with a mentor and confidant because of Kestner's actions to ensure Taylor High School builds a bright future for its students.

Finally, upon pondering how he wanted people to remember him, Kestner stated, "As somebody who always showed up. Someone you could rely on and was always the hardest worker in the room. Someone who gave their best effort and loved people really well."