

## Innovator of the Year: Clayton takes science to fun rather than formula level

Written by Brenda Johnson Brandt

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Ninth-grade physical science students at HHS construct impressive roller coasters built for marbles to learn about laws of motion.

Chemistry students play Battleship Periodic Table to navigate the periodic table.

Students make homemade ice cream and slime, and they tie-dye clothing to test how chemical reactions take place.

Science teacher Ashley Clayton is the instigator of the innovative learning taking place at Holyoke JR/SR High and is this year's Emerald Award winner for Innovator of the Year.

"Mrs. Clayton uses best practices to encourage students to become active learners and not just passive recipients of knowledge," said teacher Heather Bieber in nominating Clayton for the Innovator Award.



**Ashley Clayton works on a group lesson with her ICAP students. The periodic table in the background is a dominant element of her science classroom and is one base for**

which Clayton develops innovative learning techniques for students.□□

### —Enterprise photo

She continually goes above and beyond the requirements of a classroom teacher to develop interactive hands-on science projects for her students.

Bieber acknowledges these experiments require risk-taking. After gathering materials and coming up with creative ideas, will students be invested? Will the experiment be successful?

“Ashley knows the benefits that students gain from conducting such experiments greatly outweigh the risks, and she frequently incorporates them into her classes,” wrote Bieber.

Angela Powell hails Clayton for revitalizing and revolutionizing the science department. “She has reignited students’ passion for science,” said Powell.

In another nomination letter, counselor Summer Maloney cited the love of learning and love of science that Clayton strives to instill in her students. “She wants learning to be fun, and this is evident in the types of things she does in class,” wrote Maloney.

“She takes so much time to plan for every class and come up with new and exciting activities so that they can enjoy learning just as she does,” said Maloney. “Her students appreciate what she does in the classroom.”

“Her belief that hands-on learning makes complex topics less daunting has helped numerous students enjoy and develop a passion for science,” said Powell. “She’s also teaching them 21st century skills by allowing them to be in charge of their own learning.”

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Clayton said the way she chooses to teach was impacted by her experience as a child. Taking the boredom out of going to school every day is her purpose.

She likes her lessons to answer the “so-what?” and she makes a conscientious attempt to make her science classes full of fun, not just formulas.

Whether it be her physical science, chemistry, physics or eighth-grade science classes, she looks for ways to give relevance to the lessons.

“I want kids to know that they can do science, even though they come from a small town,” said Clayton.

If they want to be an engineer or start a tie-dye business, Clayton wants her students to have confidence in themselves to believe they can do whatever they desire.

“Science can be difficult,” said Clayton. Seeing kids be able to work through the hard stuff and have confidence means a great deal to this innovative teacher.

Random science lessons include such concepts as the reason one puts oil in their car every 3,000 miles. “I try to keep lessons life-related,” explained Clayton.

For example, she helps students relate to the use of a formula for seeing how hard they throw a ball. She admits they may never use that again, but it gives relevance to theories.

Clayton is in tune to each individual student’s needs and works hard to make sure she demonstrates this in class to every student.

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“She may put together three different ways to learn one lesson so that her kids who need to hear it, see it or feel it can do so for every task they are given,” said Maloney.



**Ashley Clayton looks over the shoulders of 10th-grade ICAP students Anastasia Conklin, pictured at left, and Stefani Razo. □ □**

**—Enterprise photo**

“She is kind, compassionate and fun, yet sets high expectations for all of her students,” added Maloney.

Bieber referenced another dimension of Clayton’s teaching in involving life beyond the science

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room walls.

“On multiple occasions, she has created science scavenger hunts around the school. In these hunts, students travel throughout the building solving science problems and taking ownership for their learning,” said Bieber.

She is extremely dedicated to not only teaching students about science but also teaching them critical thinking skills.

Somewhere in her busy schedule, Clayton finds time to incorporate other disciplines into her lessons.

Recently, freshmen who were learning about nuclear power were asked to write an argumentation essay where they took a position on whether or not they would appreciate or allow the building of a nuclear power plant by their home.

“Ashley took a risk by holding her students to high expectations,” said Bieber. “They were not only graded on their science knowledge but also on their ability to defend an argument.”

Clayton works with other academic areas well. She cited a recent history/English integrated project focused on the World War I era. She was quite impressed when students asked science questions about gas attacks to add perspective and depth to their English/history project.

“I am so impressed with the people I work with,” said Clayton. She noted her fellow teachers truly value giving Holyoke students a good education.

Teaching life skills beyond the walls of the school is important to Clayton, and she enjoys incorporating those lessons in her 10th-grade ICAP class.

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The Individual Career and Academic Plans further enhance the push to help kids to be successful. Clayton likes the ICAP approach that lets students build all the tiny, little steps to success.

### **Tutoring experience sparks Clayton's passion for teaching**

Pharmacy school was Clayton's focus as she started her college education at the University of Northern Colorado in Greeley on a softball scholarship.

As part of the softball team at UNC, players had to choose different community service activities to participate in. Clayton chose to tutor at-risk students. "That sparked my passion for education," she admits.

Unable to switch majors without jeopardizing her softball scholarship, Clayton continued in the science field, earning a Bachelor of Science degree in chemistry in 2008.

She took a nontraditional route to obtain her education hours and to earn her teacher licensure. She completed the alternative program through BOCES, taking classes during her first year as an employed teacher at HHS.

At the end of that year, she was a fully-licensed teacher, and her innovative ideas continue to grow as she now nears the end of her fifth school year in Holyoke.

Softball coaching is another area in which Clayton influences kids.

She thrives on teaching the students how to be team players, with emphasis on expecting the

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best from themselves every day.

“Sports taught me a lot of life lessons and made me the person I am,” said Clayton. Learning to deal with failure and disappointment and how to move on after a disappointment are important.

“I didn’t become a teacher to coach sports, but I’m lucky to be able to do that too,” said Clayton.

Crediting her parents for pushing her to do her very best, Clayton acknowledges they have taught her how to handle adversity and to not be afraid to work hard for the things she desires in life.

While Clayton is clearly an innovator in the classroom, Bieber points out that her initiatives don’t end there.

She serves on many committees focused on improving practices. These include logistics of the Academic Opportunity Center, student success and teacher effectiveness.

Her innovative approach is an advantage on the leadership team and Positive Behavior Support committee on which she has served.

Quick to push the limelight elsewhere, Clayton emphasizes the value of support.

She said she’s thankful to be in a school district where the board, superintendent, administrators and teachers work so hard to give students the very best, even in hard financial times.

The Re-1J Education Foundation’s support of science is also appreciated by Clayton.

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In general, she touts the full community. “It is an amazing thing to see the kids so well-supported,” said Clayton. “The community is really invested in our kids.”

Clayton’s support system also includes her husband, Justin, who she said is very encouraging. Justin graduated from HHS in 2004 and NJC in 2006 and is involved in his family’s farming operation.

The Claytons have an 18-month-old son, Levi, who’s already well-known in the school.

Born just before his mom’s post-season softball play in 2011, he was a part of the team from the very beginning.

Clayton is a dedicated mom to Levi while transitioning to balance school work with home life, according to Maloney.

Her creative approach to science continues to escalate, and colleagues and students all look forward to the new ideas she has in store for them.

Innovation at its best—that’s Ashley Clayton.



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