

Tania Dominguez



As the attendance coordinator at Tilden Career Community Academy High School, Tania Dominguez handles more than student absences. A former dropout who got her GED at 20, she draws on her own experiences to support her students through tough situations—and she’s determined to help them see the future ahead of them. She sat down with one of her old colleagues to talk about her journey.

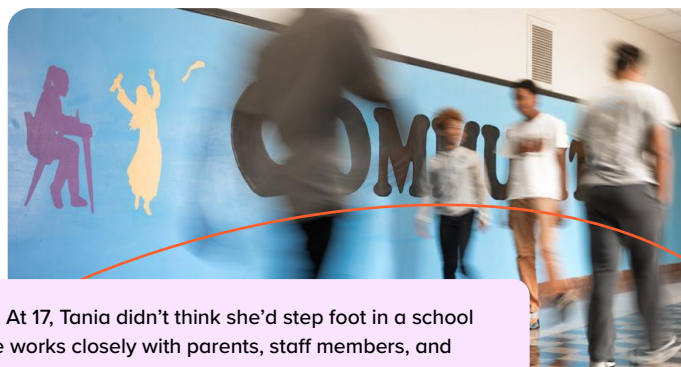


Let’s start from the beginning. You grew up going to Chicago Public Schools, right?

I grew up in Pilsen, here in Chicago. My mom and dad immigrated to California from Mexico when I was about three, and then we moved because we had family here. My dad worked at an auto shop, and my mom was in CPS. She was a clerk at a high school on the South Side.

I went to Jungman from kindergarten to sixth grade, and then I went to LaSalle Language Academy before starting at Lake View High School on the North Side. I was so protected that my parents rode on the bus with me for the first couple of weeks; I didn’t know anything about the world. But once I got to high school, I saw all the freedoms that other kids had, how different their parents and families were.

One day in homeroom, a girl came up to me and said, “Hey, do you want to do a daytime?” My friends convinced me to go—it’s a party during the day at somebody’s house—and that was the end of that. My focus went from being the best at school to being the best at making these parties. Between that and work, I hardly went to school, and of course my grades suffered. When everyone in my class was graduating, I was in the audience because I only had enough credits to be a junior. That made me feel stupid because I knew I could have excelled, and I dropped out.



Back to school: At 17, Tania didn’t think she’d step foot in a school again. Now, she works closely with parents, staff members, and outside agencies to help students make it to school every day.



When did you decide to continue your education?

At 20, I went back and got my GED. I'd probably had a dozen jobs by then, sometimes two at a time, and I was tired of working my butt off for minimum wage. I'd wanted to be a police officer when I was younger, and it dawned on me that I'd fallen off that path because I was too busy doing dumb things. My life wasn't going anywhere, so I wanted to get the education I needed to keep moving forward. After I got my GED, I went to college so I could go into law enforcement. And then I got pregnant.



Is that what spurred your shift from law enforcement to education?

I knew that becoming a police officer meant working nights, at least at first. I wasn't married, so it was just me and my son—I didn't have any backup for taking care of my child. I needed to find a job that allowed me to flourish in my occupation and be the best mother I could be, and my mom was actually the one who suggested applying to CPS. I came to Tilden the year before the turnaround, and I spent some time in the main office before I moved to the attendance office.



And now you've been attendance coordinator for four years. Has your own experience shaped the way you approach your work?

Well, I actually go to school now! But I do remember when living my life was more important than my future. As a child or a teenager, it can be hard to process the fact that you do have a future; that was nowhere near my mind at the time. So when I talk to my students now, that's what I ask them to think about. What are you going to do when you turn 30? Where are you going to live? Are you going to be a parent? How are you going to feed your children? Will you be able to enjoy a nice vacation?

I tell them there's a future beyond what they're living right now. That's something I didn't have—nobody told me that. But I can say, "You're going to be 30 one day. You're going to have a house, bills, kids. You've got to plan for it, and the best way to do that is through your education."



A new start: Tania joined Tilden before its 2012 turnaround, which brought in a new principal and many new staff members. The school graduated its first four-year cohort last year.



That sounds like it goes much deeper than the job description of an attendance coordinator.

Oh, I do everything. Whatever's necessary. When a kid is absent, there's a reason for their absence. Sometimes it's just a cold, but where we work, it usually has to do with social and emotional issues. Some of our kids are homeless. Some of our kids don't have parents. They don't have a person in their life to say, "Hey, this is how you do things."

I'm not a teacher, so I don't have these children for long periods of time. But whatever little time I do have with them, I hope I reach them. The kids come in here all the time, and it's "Ms. Dominguez, I need a pregnancy test. Ms. Dominguez, I'm hungry. Ms. Dominguez, can you talk to my mom or my dad? They don't listen to me."

When it's something beyond what I can do, I call in reinforcements—our social worker, our psychologist, or my assistant principal. But the majority of the time, I do my best to counsel the students and point them in the right direction. When you're a kid, sometimes everything feels like it's the end: This is it, there's no more. I try to calm them down and open their minds to another outlook.



Not every adult has this kind of connection with their students. What do you think makes so many kids comfortable enough to open up to you?

I welcome them. I don't push them away. I say good morning to every single child who walks through that door, so if they need anything, they know where I am. They can be who they are and express themselves in a safe way. If they need a moment, they can sit here and have a moment. If they're ready to talk, we can talk. I allow myself to be open to them.

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I know there's no such thing as a typical day, but describe what a day might look like for you.

When I come in, I'll run attendance reports for the previous day and reach out to the teachers and deans. Then, I'll go downstairs at about 7:15 to greet the students as they swipe in and get any pertinent notes. It'll be 8:00 when I come back up, and I'll start sending out phone blasts or calling the families whose students aren't in yet. I do a lot of paperwork—emails, reports, preparing. It's part of how we execute and improve on our plan for attendance.

The kids know I'm in my office by then, and they'll start coming in for various things. It might be as simple as needing a Band-Aid, but most of the time they're coming in to call Mom or Dad or whomever because they can't use their cell phones during the day. We'll have other people come in as well—parents, probation officers, people from outside agencies who want to see the children, since we have a few students who are wards of the state. No two days are the same, but there's a lot of traffic and a lot of customer service. A lot of listening, a lot of taking care of things. Then comes the paperwork.



What technology tools do you usually use throughout the day?

Lately, I've been using Remind quite a bit to communicate. People know they can get ahold of me that way, so they don't need to seek out my phone number or anything. CPS also has Blackboard, which lets us send phone blasts to families—I use my voice instead of computerizing the calls. That's pretty much it: Remind and phone blasts.

Planning ahead: "I want my students to know that they have a future, and that they have control of that future," Tania says, here with student Theron Averett. She keeps photocopies of their diplomas on a wall in her office, along with a photo of Kevin Baker, a former student who was killed in 2014.



How did you start using Remind in the first place?

One of my son's teachers was using Remind, and it looked interesting. I printed out the instructions, put them up in the main office, and added them to our pamphlets to get the word out. I didn't have much luck the first year, but then it took off, thanks to the presentation you gave. After that, I just needed a way to get the kids to buy into it.

What the kids love most is taking selfies, so I decided to dress up these hallways with the faces of our beautiful children. They all take lovely pictures, by the way—they're born photographers. I said, "Okay, send me these pictures via Remind. Here are the steps. This is how you follow them." Next thing I knew, I had almost the whole school on Remind. They loved it. They sent me a million pictures, and I ran out of ink twice printing them out.

After that, they were like, "Well, since I have Ms. Dominguez on the Remind app, let me tell her I'm going to be late. Or let me tell her my mom wants to talk to her. Or let me tell her I need to use the restroom. Or let me tell her anything." They have that open line of communication with me now, just because I asked them for some pictures. Selfies!



What an awesome way to get the kids on board. Now that they're on Remind, what do you usually use it for?

I use it to communicate with students, parents, and staff, and I send out blasts about everything: events, dress-down days, medical records. If we're coming back from vacation, I'll send something like, "Hey, missed you guys. I'll see you soon!" Mr. Swinney, our principal, likes to send out encouraging words in the morning to get the spirit going.

I'll also use Remind for one-on-one conversations with the students. I'll ask, "Where are you? Where have you been? Are you coming to school? What's going on?" Or it can just be having that line of communication. I had one student who had been through a lot and was having a hard time dealing, but on Remind, she would say anything. Things like "Hey, Ms. Dominguez, how are you? Have a great day!" It wasn't a deep conversation—she was getting help, too—but she had someone to talk to. In that sense, it was instrumental.



A warm welcome: Every morning, Tania heads downstairs to greet students as they come into the building. "A 'good morning' goes a long way," she says.



When it comes to communication, you've tried everything. What makes this work?

For this generation, having a phone is everything. To them, texting is like being there in person. It's real life. Like I said, I'm not in the classroom with these students all day—I have two minutes downstairs, during lunchtime, or between classes. I don't have time with them; I have moments. This app allows me to have a few more of them, and I really appreciate that.

And now, our staff knows I can facilitate this communication. Last week, Mr. Chung, our counselor, reached out to me about something we had to do for Mr. Swinney. He asked me to tell a few different people to turn in some forms for their classes, and I just messaged them on Remind. It got taken care of right away.

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From your perspective, how important are the relationships you form with students and parents?

Students need someone to back them up, whether that's a parent, a teacher, me, or another administrator. When they feel like they have somebody behind them, they have the confidence they need to go out and reach their goals. If they don't have that support, they fall through the cracks. They get lost. We lose them.

I do my best not to let a child go unseen or unheard. I do notice my quiet students. I do notice the parents who are incredibly shy. That's when I usually pull in the social worker, because I need her expertise for getting a parent or student to talk. They'll go with her and figure it out, and when they come back, they'll open up a little more because she's worked her magic.



So it's like you have a unique communication plan for every kid you see.

Every child is different, so I have to get on their level. If they know they can trust me and come to me, that's when they let everything out. I'm not going to exaggerate what they say, and I'm not going to gossip. I'll assist them in the best way I can if I have the resources, and if I don't have the resources—well, damn it, I'm going to find the resources. And I'll fight like hell to get it to them.

And every child is a lesson. I've had children who have disappointed me, but I'm not going to take it out on the others. I had a child who took from me, but she apologized and said she wasn't in the right frame of mind; could there be communication again? I gave her a shot, but I told her there were going to be guidelines if we were going to have a relationship. No more stealing, no more smoking. If you're high, please do not come to my office. She wasn't willing to change, so she moved on. It happens, and we keep moving.



A warm welcome: Tania in her office with students Shareef Peoples, Dae'mia Franklin, Corbin Poindexter, and Jania Irby. Students stop by all day, whether they're getting a Band-Aid or just looking for a little space. "Last year, I had a group of kids who came here for lunch—I called them my quiet children, because they don't speak very much," she says. "They started to get to know each other and converse with each other, and now they're not on their own."



But then you have relationships that are especially meaningful to you.

They're all meaningful, but there are some students who will always stay in my heart. There's one in that photo back there—that's Kevin "Fly" Baker. He was a great kid, a positive kid. He always looked good; that's why they called him Fly. He was a shining light to his peers, and he brought up everybody around him. He was walking to college one day when somebody asked him for his phone. He gave them the phone, no fight, no nothing, but he still got shot in the face. And he died.

That hurt me so badly. He was such a great individual, and I think about him every day. I talk to him every time I walk into the office.

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Kids here are going through so much, and they often share their challenges with you. On a personal level, how do you find the energy for your job?

At the end of last year, one of my students told me that her mom overdosed. It's hard to see a child crying and saying, "She cares more about the drug than me. I don't know what to do." It's hard to swallow everything and witness everything these kids go through, but I have to. And I'm just now learning to take care of me—I have a tendency to hold everything in, but I'm not tough, and I don't have to be tough. If I can learn that, it's something I can teach my kids.

They're the best part about my job. They keep me laughing; they keep me on my feet; they keep me young. I'm 40 years old, but in my heart, I'm right there with them. I've been where they've been and I feel what they feel. If something hurts them, it hurts me. I just love my kids. I could never leave them, even though they leave me. And I consider them my kids because I'm part of the community that helps raise these children, and I take pride in that.



Interview by Jackson Klein, who spent three years on the admin team at Tilden.
Photography by Patrick Michael Chin.