

# Making The

*Four alumni help*



*Amanda Warco ('07)  
interacts with sixth-graders  
at the MATCH middle school.*

Story by Jane Bianchi ('05)

Photos by Justin Ide

# Grade

*the farthest behind get ahead.*



**A**T MATCH MIDDLE SCHOOL, A TUITION-FREE CHARTER PUBLIC SCHOOL IN JAMAICA PLAIN, Massachusetts, Amanda Warco ('07) has discovered the secret to making perfect bathroom passes. "Use a paper cutter, not scissors, for the straightest lines," she advises.

But properly slicing laminated construction paper is only a small part of Warco's job. After leaving her four-bedroom apartment—which she shares with seven other female colleagues—at 6 a.m. every weekday morning, she spends most of her days tutoring disadvantaged inner-city kids.

That's because she and more than seventy recent graduates of top colleges across the country make up the MATCH Corps. These full-time employees work at one of the two MATCH schools: either the new middle school, which ushered in its first group of sixth-graders this past fall, or the high school, which was created in 2000 and is located in nearby Boston. Similar to the well-known Teach for America program, the Corps is a fellowship that lures high-achievers into helping children who need the most academic assistance.

Beyond tutoring various subjects for up to six periods a day, most Corps members also act as teaching assistants. TA duties include planning out-of-school activities, coaching sports teams, and running clubs. In return for their commitment, Corps members get free housing, a \$600 monthly stipend, and, as of this year, the option of taking a free teacher certification course on weekends. Administrators at MATCH (the acronym originally stood for "Media and Technology Charter High") developed the Corps in 2004 to support their mission of preparing all of their students for success in college and beyond.

It's an ambitious goal, considering that most kids enter MATCH at achievement levels far below average. Students are chosen by lottery: ninety to 95 percent of them are African American or Hispanic, and 70 to 75

percent live at or below the poverty line. Warco, who spent a year at the high school and returned to MATCH this year to help launch the middle school, remembers working with a teen who couldn't tell time. Cultural obstacles, she says, are also common. "When I was going over a reading comprehension essay about camping, the student understood the questions, but didn't know what camping was. So I had to explain the context before we could analyze the passage," says Warco.

Despite these setbacks, MATCH has an impressive record of accomplishment. The percentage of students who graduate from MATCH increased from 35 to 50 percent between 2007 and 2008, and of those who earn diplomas, 99 percent are accepted to four-year universities. In 2006, MATCH was one of eight American charter high schools cited for "outstanding results" out of over 400 reviewed by the U.S. Department of Education. In 2007 *U.S. News and World Report* magazine ranked MATCH 99th out of 18,000 public schools in the nation.

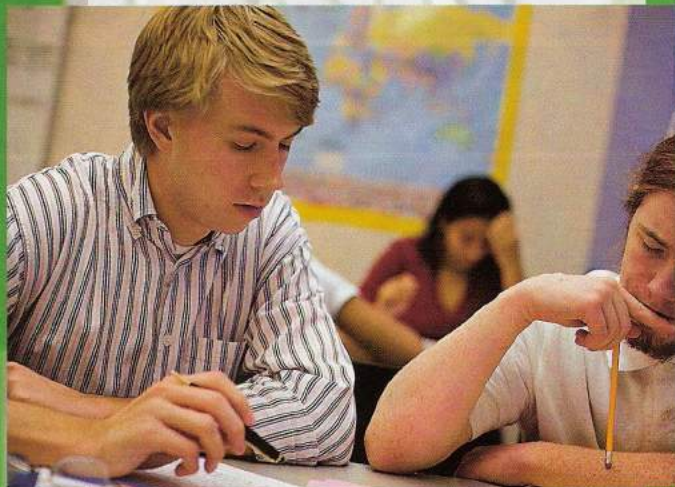
One major part of the school's recipe for success is a "no excuses" philosophy that's firm enough to make a Marine's knees shake. To graduate, upperclassmen must take at least two advanced placement classes and two courses at neighboring Boston University. Plus, any student who receives two Ds or more on a final report card has to repeat not just those particular subjects, but the entire grade. Kids are encouraged to stay enrolled as long as necessary. "We hold the standard and vary the time it takes to get there," explains Alan Safran, the executive director of MATCH. The school's dress code and reward/punishment system ("points" for good behavior and "demerits" for breaking the rules) are also strict.

But most student improvement can be chalked up to one key factor: lots of individual attention. All kids receive at least two hours of one-on-one tutoring



Zachary Taylor ('08), above, and Samantha Spaeth ('08) tutor students.

from a Corps member daily. If they need extra, Corps members often provide additional personal instruction after school and on weekends. "It's like tutoring on steroids," says Safran. Plus, Corps members go out of their way to make students feel comfortable. Those who work at the middle school spent last summer studying every student's name and photo, so they could greet the kids appropriately on the first day of school.



Being a Corps member, a job that entails at least sixty hours of work a week, can be exhausting (Warco and her roomies can barely keep their eyes open past 10 p.m.). "And living on the stipend was tough, but I found lots of free things to do in Boston," says Huey-Tyng Sun ('04), a member of the first-ever Corps group and currently a coordinator at a company that provides educational programs for students in Washington, D.C. Not taking things too personally is also difficult, as many Corps members measure their success by how their students do.

Sun can attest to that. Jamal, a high school student of hers who had to count on his fingers to add and subtract, was struggling to pass his math class. "Sometimes, I felt hopeless," says Sun. But then she noticed that he made small improvements when she did speed drills with him called Mad Minutes—worksheets that encouraged him to solve as many problems as possible within sixty seconds. "I'll never forget the day he finally got a 'C' on a math exam" says Sun. "I burst into tears because I was so proud of how far he'd come." Jamal went on to win a school award for "most improved student" in math.

Windows

Making a large impact on a young person's life in a short amount of time is perhaps the most enticing part of the job. Unlike classroom teachers who have to divide their attention among twenty to thirty students for roughly forty minutes at a time, MATCH tutors can provide more in-depth, customized instruction for longer intervals. "I feel like I'm doing something more rewarding than most of my friends who have salaries," says Samantha Spaeth ('08), a Corps member who works at the high school with Zachary Trout ('08). A short commute is another draw for the high-school Corps members who live on the third floor of the school in a dorm-style setting, complete with a shared kitchen, TV and pool table.

So what inspired these alums to apply to the service program? Most cite Wake Forest's "Pro Humanitate" focus as a huge influence. "The sorority I was in, Kappa Delta, was constantly involved in philanthropy," says Spaeth. "And through my Women's and Gender Studies minor, I participated in an eye-opening internship at The Children's Home, an organization that takes care of needy kids in Winston-Salem. It showed me what social injustice looked like first hand, and made me want to give back."

Warco had a similar epiphany while job-hunting during her senior year of college. "I kept thinking about all the doors my Wake Forest education had opened up for me," she says. "I wanted to help children whose circumstances denied them the same opportunities I was given."

Corps members who are passionate about the program often find ways to extend their stays at MATCH, but the fellowship only requires a one-year commitment, so the position appeals to college students with a variety of future plans. For example, Warco hopes to get her Ph.D. in English and teach at a university someday, while Trout might go to law school. "This job may not be exactly in line with what I want to do professionally, but it's definitely in line with the kind of person I'd like to become," he says.

Past Corps members have gone on to work in medicine, journalism, business, politics, and many other fields. In fact, a service stint at MATCH often provides college grads with an edge when applying for jobs in the future. "When tutors leave our program, their experience here often becomes the strongest part of their resumes," says Lisa Hwang, the middle school principal.

Though a college student with any major is welcome to apply on a rolling basis at [matchschool.org](http://matchschool.org), landing a spot is difficult. Last year 650 applicants battled for fifty-six openings. Still, all four alums agree: The unique fellowship is certainly worth considering.

After all, it's not just the kids who benefit. While teaching, Corps members have to learn how to relate to younger people who have backgrounds that are usually dramatically different from their own and figure out how to motivate them. "It's an enlightening experience on both ends," says Hwang, who was a member of the inaugural Corps group before joining the MATCH administration. "If a tutor asks a student to do something and the kid just says 'no,' then the tutor has no choice but to get creative."

However resistant students might be, most appreciate the extra guidance—even the sixth-graders. When asked how Ms. Warco helped him learn fractions, 12-year-old Brandon Gaynor responded simply and earnestly: "She just makes me get it." That sounds like an A+ for Warco.

Swamp

Ch...

Penelope



Jane Bianchi ('05) is the associate health editor at Family Circle magazine in New York City.

The MATCH school has a 'no excuses' policy.