

2012
People
TEACHER
of the **YEAR**



ROBERT VEGA
Music



ELIZABETH CURRAN
Special Education

If the deluge of applications to PEOPLE's first Teacher of the Year contest is any indication, America is full of great educators. By the end of our search, five stood out with winning combinations of proven success and moving stories of how they connect with their students. On these pages you'll meet innovators who challenge kids to dream bigger, work harder, think more creatively and accomplish more than they ever imagined. Congrats to the class of 2012!



JENNIFER BOHN
Leadership



BRIAN COPES
Pre-Engineering



**ARWEN IMAI
 MATTHEWS** *Science*



Photographs by **Michael Lavine**



"I always insist that everyone in class participate," she says.



THE 'SCIENCE MAGICIAN'

ARWEN IMAI MATTHEWS, 31
KIPP 3D Academy, Houston

You can look at statistics to see that Matthews' work is having an effect: Her eighth graders at this public charter school scored higher in science than all their KIPP peers nationwide. Or you can listen. For Matthews, success sounds like this: "Ohhhhh! I get it!" She hears that frequently, as a student latches onto a new idea—what makes a rocket soar, how a turbine turns wind to energy—and then explains it back to the teacher. "She's determined to help us succeed," says Emily Quach, age 12. To that end, Matthews is on-call after hours—or even after graduation day. "She's often on the phone giving advice," says principal Alison Cumbley. "Arwen takes her bond with students very seriously. Those bonds aren't cut when the school year is over." Getting female students to stick with science is a goal, though Matthews says, "I work with girls in the same manner I work with anyone. But

Why I Became a Teacher

"I want to leave the world a better place than I found it. When I'm gone, I hope there's some part of me still existing that reflects what I've done."

I also try to role-model that it is okay to find all the gross, slimy, more stereotypically 'boy' things cool." She runs the robotics club, founded the science fair and heads a department that she has improved not just through teaching innovations but by being a tireless grant writer. "If something is needed," says Cumbley, "Arwen will find a way." That ability to juggle may help when, later this year, Matthews and husband Ken, a chemical engineer, welcome their first child. What might give way in her packed schedule? Possibly the regular Dungeons & Dragons game she plays with other science teachers and engineers. "Really nerdy," she allows. "But really fun."



Among Matthews' rules for her kids: Make sure "everyone is learning, not just me or the person next to me, but everyone."