

A Successful Program of Teachers Assisting Teachers

For four years, teachers in Marin County,
California, have served as advisors and
facilitators to other teachers.



Photograph by Henry Kent

As the study of new and expanded roles for teachers gains momentum, career ladder and instant master teacher programs are being created. Little has been said, however, about professional development programs to support teachers in new roles—a critical component to ensuring success.

The Teacher Advisor Project of the Marin County Office of Education was implemented five years ago as a staff development program that created two new positions for teachers: teacher advisors and peer facilitators (see Figure 1). We soon learned that professional training for the advisors and facilitators was needed, and subsequently we developed training plans to accompany these types of positions.

Now in its fifth year, The Teacher Advisor Project was developed through the collaboration of administrators of three pilot school districts, the Marin County Office of Education, Teacher Center staff members, and policy board members. It is funded for piloting by the San Francisco Foundation.

The project is based on two major beliefs:

- Teachers can and will define their own professional development needs in relation to school, system, and professional goals to improve schools and learning.

- To affect change in the classroom or school, assistance must be given on-site.

Three areas became guideposts for the success of project staff members in working with teachers: roles assumed by teacher advisors and peer facilitators as documented in contact logs, training and support needed to carry out these roles, and school readiness for change.

Roles of Advisors and Facilitators

Documented activities of advisors and peer facilitators evolved into five roles: resource linker, facilitator, trainer, colleague/coach, and supervisor.

1. *Resource Linker.* The role of resource linker includes finding or developing materials, locating speakers



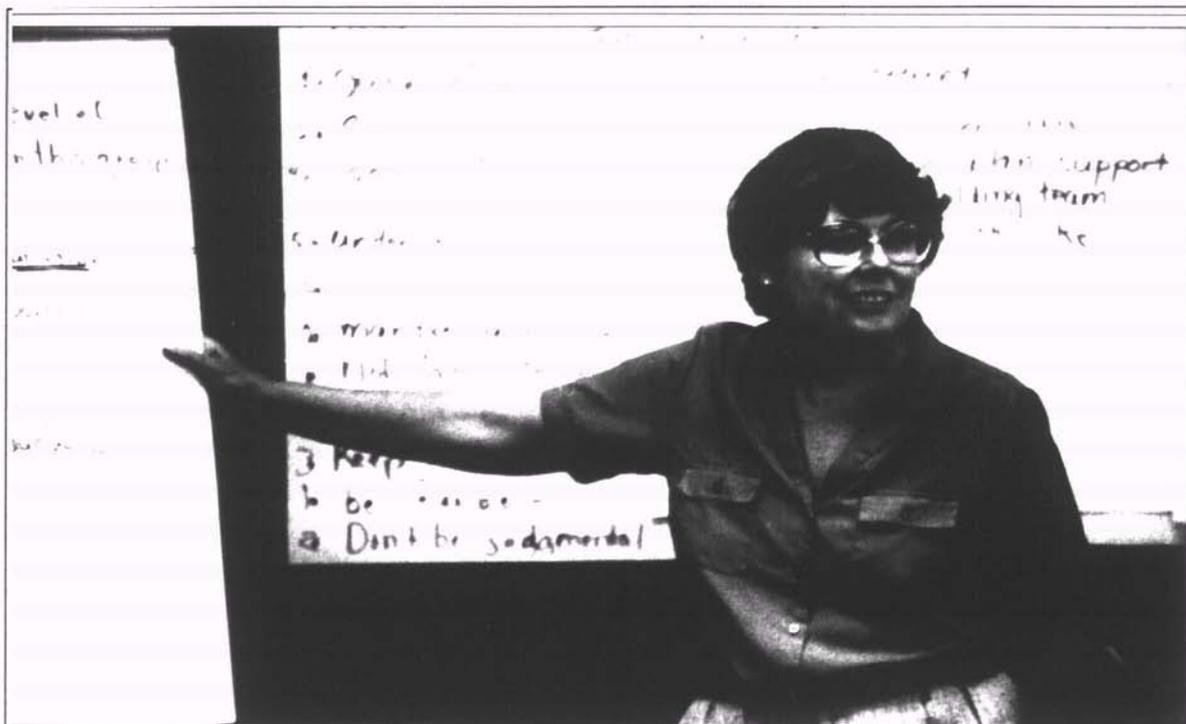
or planning field trips, and linking teachers who share common interests or needs. Because teachers sometimes fill this role for each other, it required few new skills for project staff members, whose needs could be met through regular support meetings. When additional information or materials were needed, staff members could rely on each other for help. Linking resources is a good way to establish contact with teachers and prove one's reliability and ability to "deliver the goods," but it needs monitoring so that the linker's role does not become that of a "go fer."

As a result of this activity, curriculum-centered teacher networks have been created that include teachers from districts all over the county who are interested in science, computers, gifted, early childhood, or special education. A peer facilitator organizes and manages the activities of each network.

2. *Facilitator.* Project staff members learned early how to lead groups using a consensus process for planning curriculum, solving schoolwide problems, selecting materials, and sharing

teaching strategies. We employed training processes developed by a nearby county office (Baker and Scornaienchi, 1980) as well as materials from Interaction Associates (Doyle and Strauss, 1980). These skills were valuable in helping school staff members identify priorities for working together, assisting a group of teachers collaborating on implementing new strategies for teaching math, and resolving conflicts, among others. When two districts voted to consolidate, one advisor became instrumental in facilitating community, staff, and board meetings. Facilitation helped advisors and peer facilitators gain acceptance from teachers and administrators by making efficient agreements when working together.

3. *Trainer.* One of our hopes when we began this project was to involve teachers in the study of teaching. During the first year, we implemented a formal teacher training program to establish a common technical language and the project staff members' expertise. Advisors were also trained to use Madeline Hunter's theories (Wolfe, 1984) and classroom manage-



ment procedures presented in other workshops. Advisors subsequently organized material into a four-day training workshop, *Instructional Skills*, into which some of Bloom's work on mastery learning, Bloom's Taxonomy, and other teacher-effectiveness material has been incorporated during the past four years. Advisors worked together to organize the training and systematically coached each other as they began leading workshops the first summer.

Other training methods have since been developed to build on what we perceive to be the limited but basic

material that makes up *Instructional Skills*. *Cooperative Learning* (three days), *Peer Observation* (one day), *Behavior Management* (one day), and *Models of Teaching* (one to six days) are now part of the training program. Some peer facilitators have taken on the trainer role for portions of *Instructional Skills*, but their other responsibilities to students preclude them from having the time to do much training.

All project staff members report that it is helpful for them to conduct training sessions, because other teachers then view them as persons to learn

from. Their expertise is recognized by teachers throughout Marin County and by educators in other California districts who contract with advisors to conduct training sessions.

4. *Colleague/Coach*. Originally, we intended to make coaching the primary role for teacher advisors and peer facilitators. We learned that there were precedents in this role to gaining teachers' acceptance. Little (1985) clarified some factors when she studied conferences of teacher advisors with teachers. Her work resulted in the articulation of six principles of advising. The first three—common language, focus, and hard evidence—emphasize a shared technical language. The second three—interaction, predictability, and reciprocity—are termed the "social" principles of trust needed if work between advisors and teachers is to be effective.

It takes time to be accepted in this role and to develop the shared technical language and trust needed for productive observations and conferences. Advisors and peer facilitators must be able to use the technical language, model the practice, and teach the language to teachers. Training, communication, observation, and conferencing skills precede substantive in-class work with teachers. Monthly training

Figure 1. Teacher Advisor and Peer Facilitator Positions

	POSITION	SALARY REMUNERATION	RESPONSIBILITIES	REQUIRED EXPERIENCE
TEACHER ADVISOR	Full- or half-time advisor	Regular teacher's salary	1. Working with staff members at two or three target schools 2. Training and facilitation	At least 5 years' teaching experience in Marin County schools
PEER FACILITATOR	Regular classroom teacher released three days each month to work with the Teacher Advisor Project	\$1,200/year stipend and released time	1. Coordinating a network or working with one school staff member 2. Some training or facilitation	Same as above

"District policy states that advisors and facilitators do not participate in teacher evaluation—a sensitive issue."

sessions for project staff members emphasize reinforcement and refining of the training described above as well as team building and communication skills. As trust develops among team members, they are able to serve as colleagues and coaches for one another in problem solving and in learning the skills needed to work with teachers.

5. *Supervisor.* Project staff members seldom venture into supervision until near the end of their second or the beginning of their third year at a school, working with the same administrator. Performing in this role requires a high degree of trust between the site administrator and advisor and between the teachers and advisor.

Teacher advisors and peer facilitators work with teachers upon their request but do not inform others of the substance of their work with a teacher in his or her classroom. District policy states that advisors and facilitators do not participate in teacher evaluation—a sensitive issue.

Issues Raised by this Program

In developing the Teacher Advisor Project, we have encountered three issues that are likely to affect the success of similar programs elsewhere.

1. *The need for additional training.* When teachers take on roles other than traditional classroom teaching, they need additional sets of skills and knowledge to work effectively with adults, implement change, and serve as curriculum or staff development consultants or researchers. Master or mentor teacher programs are sometimes based on the assumption that high quality classroom performance with students is sufficient qualification and preparation for working with other teachers. But our teacher advisors and peer facilitators say they wouldn't have lasted one year without opportunities to learn about adult learning, facilitation skills, change theory, and research on teaching. They need to have a context against which they can judge their degree of success and that shows them how to set up or change strategies when working with colleagues.

In their study of assistance personnel in three school improvement programs, Goodwin and Lieberman (1985) and Saxl and Miles (1985) confirmed this need and extended it further. Even though the assisters in their study entered these positions with impressive skills and abilities, it became clear that much new learning took place when they assumed new roles.

2. *Jealousies.* Teacher advisors and peer facilitators sometimes encounter jealousies of teachers who are not moving into new roles because of the additional training and teamwork to which they have access. In many districts, continuous learning for all teachers is not an accepted norm, as if a teacher upon graduation from college has all the professional training he or she will ever need. Further training is necessary for employees to keep up in almost every career occupation, and successful organizations allocate work time and resources for employee training. Teamwork skills in setting goals, solving problems, and keeping high morale are also valued. Traditionally, few schools have recognized that many teachers are voracious learners and capitalized on that fact as an incentive to keep classrooms and schools vital and exciting. No wonder some of our most vital, growing people leave the profession after five years!

3. *Fear of empowerment.* School districts and teachers need to re-examine their willingness for teachers to become active problem solvers participating in organizational decisions. With so many legal and public demands on schools, districts sometimes fear losing more control; teachers often are not sensitive to this.

Conversely, as teachers move into advanced career positions, they must be willing to accept some of the burden of responsibility for addressing these demands by becoming knowledgeable, committed, and active members of the organization and of the professional occupation. Teachers who choose to advance in their teaching careers must carefully consider the responsibilities that accompany empowerment.

More to Be Learned

From the beginning of the Teacher Advisor Project, we believed in the importance of collecting data and reflecting on what we were doing. The study of our work and the assistance we have received from research professionals has been critically valuable. No doubt there is much more to be learned about emerging new roles for teachers, school improvement, and an improved status of teaching. If we had not allocated time for reflection and analysis, we would not have learned what we now know. □

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