

Learning to Teach—and to Respect Teaching

Students at Walton High School, in the Bronx, New York, can enroll in a pre-teaching academy to study and experience the role of the teacher.

At Walton High School—an inner-city school with a 100 percent minority population—we created a pre-teaching academy to encourage students to consider careers in education. The pre-teaching academy gives our juniors and seniors the opportunity to learn the art of teaching from cooperating teachers in the building.

How We Created the Program

In the summer of 1984, Walton began a summer PREP program to prepare incoming freshmen whose skills were inadequate. As part of that program, each of our 22 teachers had a junior or a senior as a student mentor in the classroom. These mentors were used as adjunct teachers; they were considered members of the teaching staff and attended all training and staff development sessions. At this time, Walton was awarded a grant to create the first pre-teaching academy in a New York City school. The mentors from the summer program were recruited to become the first interns of the new academy.

Since that time, 160 student interns have served in 349 classes over 8 semesters. They have served in all departments in the school, including ESL and special education, under 82 teachers. There are presently 58 interns and 36 cooperating teachers in the program.

How the Interns Learn

Students enter the pre-teaching academy in 9th grade. During their freshman and sophomore years they prepare by taking a rigorous academic program. They are also encouraged to participate in some form of school service, such as peer tutoring or assisting in the office. They interact with

the junior and senior interns, both in their classes and at meetings of the academy.

In the fall of their junior year, interns are paired with cooperating teachers on the basis of subject strength, personality, and programming compatibility. Cooperating teachers are recognized master teachers who volunteer to take an intern in one or more of their classes. They act as their interns' mentors and colleagues, training them in lesson planning, questioning techniques, classroom discipline, and interpersonal relations.

Interns are taught to observe the cooperating teacher, not as a student in the class but as a student of the teaching process. As the term progresses, interns take on more and more teaching responsibilities: they introduce or motivate lessons, review homework, work with individual students or cooperative learning groups, or present mini-lessons. All interns keep a process journal and take part in weekly staff development sessions with the cooperating teachers. Their culminating activity is the preparation and presentation of at least three full-period lessons each term.

When preparing for these full-period lessons, interns meet with their cooperating teachers to review and discuss the lesson plans. The cooperating teacher and sometimes the department chairperson, coordinator, or principal are present during the lessons to take notes on content and process. A post-observation conference is held to discuss the lesson, and then the cooperating teacher and/or chairperson writes an observation report.

The College Connection

At the same time that interns are learning from their cooperating teachers at

Walton, they take a three-credit education course at Lehman College, City University of New York. The course is taught by the pre-teaching coordinator and a number of guest lecturers from Lehman College.

The intern receives a grade in the college course (for college credit) based on class participation, field experience, course work, outside readings, and term papers. The cooperating teacher also enters a grade (for high school credit) based on an extensive number of criteria, including resourcefulness, subject area mastery, problem solving, communication skills, and professional development.

Mutual Benefits

One of the most important benefits of the program is the bonding that occurs among teachers, interns, and classes. The teacher-intern team is able to reach more students in the class than either could alone. Students see the intern as a peer to emulate. And bonding between teacher and intern influences interns' goals and aspirations. As a result of their experience, many interns have voiced more positive feelings toward school, their teachers, and the teaching profession.

Not all the interns will become classroom teachers, but they all greatly enhance their skills in communication, critical thinking, questioning, and problem solving. Further, they all develop an appreciation for the difficult tasks of teaching. And those who do choose to become teachers enter the profession better prepared to meet its challenges. □

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