Mini-Sabbaticals
Widen a Teacher's World

Administrators of the Wilton, Connecticut, School District found a fresh, vital approach to staff development: give teachers a few weeks off during the school year to pursue professional research projects.

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Recently my district, Wilton, Connecticut, Public Schools, granted me a mini-sabbatical. Unlike year-long sabbaticals, this arrangement allows the classroom teacher to continue the school year with only a 6-8 week hiatus from teaching duties. A long-term substitute covers the classwork during that time, leaving the teacher free to work on a project that could not otherwise be completed outside the school year. My project was to refine my expertise as a cooperative learning trainer and practitioner. With the knowledge that my students were in the hands of a very capable substitute (who prepared with me previous to my departure) and with the blessings of a very supportive administration, I set off in pursuit of new knowledge. Thus, the "traveling school marm," as someone called me during my adventures, was born!

On the Road

And travel I did during the nearly seven weeks of released time. Free from the summons of the classroom bell or the requests of students for help after class, I devoted myself to a study of cooperative learning. I visited teachers and classrooms from Connecticut to North Carolina to Ontario, Canada, and learned how cooperative learning was being incorporated into programs as diverse as the "Success Express" for at-risk students in Phillips Junior High School in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and at the noncompetitive "Cooperative Behaviors" program for the gifted at the North Carolina School for Math and Science in Durham. I saw cooperative learning in fine, small private colleges like St. Bonaventure University and Niagara University and in large prestigious institutions like Johns Hopkins University.

I was able to meet with professors like James Gallagher of the University of North Carolina, Robert Slavin of Johns Hopkins, and Dr. Paul Vermette of Niagara, whose research I was reading voraciously. I learned much from Susan Ellis and her teachers in Greenwich, Connecticut, whose work in cooperative classrooms is exemplary, and from Harry Foy and Dave Thalen, whose district leadership reflected the

The author, left, dubbed the "traveling school marm," confers with Marie Bristol of the University of North Carolina during her mini-sabbatical quest to improve her cooperative learning skills.
The mini-sabbatical is perhaps the most creative of inservice programs. It is designed to bring long-term benefits not only to the individual participant, but to the district as well.

Teachers in this country are a veteran, aging group. In 1989, the average teacher was nearly 50 years old with 20 years of service. Whatever the benefits of age and experience, they do not necessarily include flexibility, or openness to change (Evans 1989). Having reached the half-century mark myself, I realized that although many of us were working diligently, too often we were not obtaining the results we should for the effort expended.

America is different from the America of our youth; the kids are different. Yet most of us teach the way we were taught. A wise teacher/trainer I met in my travels, Dottie Sauer of the Center for the Reorganization of the Wilton, Connecticut, School System. She can be reached at 77 Scarlet Oak Dr., Wilton, CT 06897.


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