

---

---

# 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.*

PATRICIA MAHONEY DUMSER

---

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.*

kind of search for instructional excellence I had come to expect. Everywhere I went, from college think tanks to classrooms, I found a real sense of collegiality in my fellow educators and a willingness to support my mission: to find the best possible way that we as a district could continue to use cooperative learning and ensure the optimum educational experience for all students, especially those at both ends of the spectrum.

I also found in my travels an almost complete disbelief that I was "just" a classroom teacher—not an administrator or research fellow—and that I was so totally supported by my district. I suppose I should not have been too surprised—how often in my own experience had I known secondary teachers who had spent more than a day or two away from the classroom for training? Any kind of more intensive training is rare. A mini-sabbatical was certainly a new idea, but the educators I spoke with on my journey all seemed to agree that it was an idea whose time had come.

### Encouraging Teachers to Learn

In some ways it is amazing that our district is willing to back such innovations as mini-sabbaticals. We are, after all, in conservative New England, where Yankee thrift and tight budget considerations have touched each of us, right down to the classroom level. We are a conservatively innovative school—we do not jump on educational bandwagons—but we are directed by a sincere need to provide a strong educational system to a town that will settle for nothing less. Staff development is, by necessity, a strong component of that. Recent state mandates now require staff development for teachers, no matter how long tenured, to retain their teaching certificates. These mandates are appearing in many states across the country, and they will prove beneficial. They not only convince taxpayers that staff development is a necessary expense, but they prevail upon teachers to seek professional growth opportunities.

## 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 Elementary and Middle Schools at Johns Hopkins, made an interesting comparison. Suppose, she said, that your doctor used the same methods and medications that he used in the 1950s. Wouldn't you be concerned? Yet how many teachers teach exactly as they did in the 1950s despite new research findings? Good inservice programs can help us remedy that, initiating us into new approaches, inspiring us to pursue new levels of excellence.

### Benefits for All

The mini-sabbatical is perhaps the most creative of these inservice programs. It is designed to bring long-term benefits

not only to the individual participant, but to the district as well. A panel of teachers, administrators, staff development members, and educational association representatives chooses candidates in our district. Each candidate must submit a proposal for a project that ties into a district priority and is directly beneficial to the students. Materials generated by the sabbatical effort become the property of the district, and each candidate must give a full report of findings to the Staff Development/Curriculum Coordinator as well as to the Superintendent and the Board of Education. Additionally, the recipient is expected to share findings with any and all staff members who might benefit. In my case, I will be giving both written and oral reports to many individuals and groups in our district. This debriefing work will keep me busy, but it will be such a pleasure to share the valuable insights I've gained—and a small price to pay for the wonderful experience that has been mine.

This has been a time of great professional growth and personal rejuvenation for me. I hope what I have learned will reach great numbers of the children entrusted to us. I know I'll return to the classroom a better person and a better teacher, armed with new knowledge and energized by a new pride in my profession. My experience "out there" with the bright, caring individuals who have done so much to make cooperative learning work has convinced me that there is a great deal that is right in the much-maligned world of education. □

<sup>1</sup>R. Evans, (1989), "The Faculty in Midcareer: Implications for School Improvement," *Educational Leadership* 46: 10-15.

**Patricia Mahoney Dumser** is a high school English and social studies teacher in the Wilton, Connecticut, School System. She can be reached at 77 Scarlet Oak Dr., Wilton, CT 06897.

Copyright © 1991 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.