
Bring Down the Wall

Elementary and secondary teachers trade classes for a day in an exchange program that explores whether teaching in a lower grade is greatly different from, or very similar to, teaching in high school.

GRETCHEN THOMAS

It is time to bring down the wall—not the classroom wall (open concept did that once), but the one that exists between elementary and secondary teachers, particularly in large school systems. We made a chip in the Hurst-Euleless-Bedford School District, Hurst, Texas, wall this spring. The effort began when Hurst Hills Elementary Assistant Principal, Paul McCollum, and Bell High School Assistant Principal, Bill Shatford, realized that as administrators in the same system, they had little knowledge of each other's jobs and responsibilities. Recognizing the barriers that exist between elementary and secondary personnel, they proposed and implemented a teacher exchange program.

They challenged three teachers from each of their schools to voluntarily take the risk of teaching in each other's classes. I was one of those teachers. As a 5th grade teacher, I was aware of "lounge talk" about the secondary teachers. "They have it made—only two or three preparations a day, no bus duty, no PE duty, no lunch duty, and scantron graded papers as well." I was equally aware that some secondary teachers felt their elementary counterparts were, "not doing the job of preparing those kids for secondary work." These misconceptions and half truths are the concrete blocks that build walls between us.

Exchanging Schools

We met our exchange partners at a breakfast meeting. I was assigned to observe and exchange with an 11th grade English teacher. When we first saw each other, we couldn't help but laugh at the irony of our heights in relation to the grade levels we taught: Jeanice Kerr is 4' 11" and I am 5' 11." We observed each other teach for a half day while our assistant principals took over our own classes. Even that proved rewarding—my students loved having Mr. McCollum as their teacher. They even suggested if I should need a substitute, I should just get Mr. McCollum. And he enjoyed the math class so much he asked to come back another day.

After Jeanice and I observed each other's classes, we arranged convenient times and dates to switch roles for half a day. Although we did not make exact lesson plans for the day of the exchange, we did share previous lessons and make assignment suggestions. Jeanice would take over my language arts block and math classes. She felt comfortable with the language arts but was a bit more concerned about teaching math. And when I learned I would review her three junior English classes on the major differences between romantic and realistic fiction, I figured it was time to do some review and study of my own.

The evening before the exchange we spoke on the phone, reassuring each other and giving last-minute instructions. Jeanice had made me a study guide sheet and arranged a back-up video clip of *Gone With the Wind* in case I should begin to sink. I had provided some additional challenge activities (a student-designed crossword puzzle and an extra game that could be played during math) for her to use in my math class. We both felt like first-year teachers that morning.

As I started my day in Jeanice's class, I soon realized that 5' 11" was short compared to some junior boys! Amazingly though, within a few

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minutes I felt as comfortable in her room as I did in my own. She had warned me that new yearbooks, distributed the previous day, would probably be very much in evidence on

students' desks. In my most confident teacher voice I said, "You may put your yearbooks under your desks," and they did!

Later, Jeanice told me of a positive experience she had had in my classroom. One of my more challenging reading students would often "turn off" and then become quite belligerent when encouraged to participate. He particularly liked to use this ploy on a substitute. Jeanice recognized his game plan and was able to diffuse his power play with her own expertise. (It may have helped that we each had threatened and bribed our classes to be on their best behavior during the exchange). There is

something universal about teaching—the experience was worth the effort.

Making Connections

Following the exchange, all the exchange teachers and our administrators met for an informal dinner and debriefing. We outlined the following benefits of the program:

1. Teachers involved had a greater awareness, understanding, and appreciation of what their colleagues were doing.
2. We made a connection between secondary and elementary schools. Secondary teachers now knew someone

in elementary education who could talk to high school students interested in becoming elementary teachers. We made plans to exchange student writing, giving purpose to writing activities.

3. Teachers gleaned new teaching ideas, strategies, and methods. The secondary teachers saw good examples of student-centered activities; the elementary teachers witnessed good classroom management techniques.

4. Teachers gained new confidence in themselves and in their teaching

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ability. Although we all expressed anxiety before the day of the exchange, once we began teaching it became clear to us just how alike our instructional practices were.

The teacher exchange program is worthwhile. It cost virtually nothing, and the benefits far outweigh any inconveniences. In this era of integrated learning programs it's time to put the names with the faces of those in secondary and elementary schools. We have the same frustrations and desires for our students. We are, after all, in the same business. We have much to offer each other in the way of professional growth, support, and camaraderie. Let's bring down the wall!

Gretchen Thomas is a 5th grade teacher, Hurst Hills Elementary School, 525 Billie Ruth, Hurst, TX 76053.

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