

Teacher Education: On Site, On Target

Good ideas for reforming teacher education depart the ivory tower in favor of a trailer parked behind an elementary school in an innovative program launched by Flagstaff School District and Northern Arizona University.

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In January 1985, a 14'-wide trailer, furnished with old tables and chairs from a university warehouse, was backed into place behind Christensen Elementary School in Flagstaff, Arizona. The trailer, leased jointly by the Center for Excellence at Northern Arizona University and Flagstaff School District, became the first home of the Program for Learning Competent Teaching. What began as a one-semester pilot involving 18 volunteer university students, 1 elementary school, 10 classroom teachers, and 250 elementary schoolchildren is today a yearlong program with 4 schools, 120 university students, 60 classroom teachers, and approximately 1,500 elementary schoolchildren.

The Program for Learning Competent Teaching (also known as the "Block" or the "Trailer Program") was created to answer the criticisms of traditional teacher education that surfaced with the 1984 "Nation At Risk" report. Throughout its evolution, the program has focused on four basic tenets: experience, integrated coursework, total immersion, and professionalism.

Experience First

The daily schedule illustrates the program's focus upon experience. Four days a week university students teach at

least two hours in their assigned classrooms. There, volunteer classroom teachers and university instructors, always on-site, guide and coach participants. Students, teachers, and university instructors consider these hands-on experiences the most important facet of the program. After teaching, the students meet with their colleagues for 90-minute seminars and workshops, held in mobile units or "portables" at host schools.

On Fridays, the only day the students do not teach, they meet in the portables to plan lessons for the next week and to view presentations designed to broaden their world knowledge and to make them more engaging teachers (for example, on topics such as The Use of Medicinal Herbs in Traditional Cultures, How to Preserve the Oral Language Tradition Through Music).

The experiences that students and university instructors share in the school—not traditional lectures—drive the content. Yes, the basic framework of content, methods, and theory still exists—but it is learned quickly because the realities of teaching make the apprentices hungry for information that will help them become more effective in their work with children.

A university professor comments:

This kind of work is definitely not

for every professor! You have to want to be where the action is, and be willing to adapt your well-planned lecture to take into consideration that your students have just spent over two hours working with real kids. You also have to make your content relevant; students will evaluate your teaching just as you evaluate theirs. One of the students reminded me that I had forgotten my closure twice this week in lecture!

From a principal:

Our teachers realize their importance as role models. As a result, they conduct themselves professionally—even in the lounge! The college students' youth and enthusiasm is appreciated by faculty and students alike. Fresh ideas are mixed with our faculty's experience; the results are more interesting lessons for the students, as well as extra sets of eyes and ears to check for understanding.

A student teacher reflects:

The whole experience is like an inductive lesson that takes place over a long period of time. You have a chance to try out a lot of different ideas and to take risks. The teachers give you help and support, so you can learn from your mistakes as well as from your successes.

Integrated Coursework

To complement students' intensive classroom experience, the traditional university coursework is supplanted by an integrated course of study, featuring lectures, coursework, and seminars by university faculty, classroom teachers, and resource people from the community. Most of the program of studies is consolidated into two semesters, which frees time for the rewarding guided classroom experience.

The *Communication and Literacy Block* (the first semester in a two-semester sequence) integrates the study of language and language learning with methods of teaching reading, language arts, children's literature, and the visual and performing arts. During the second semester's *Integrated Curriculum Block*, students learn content and methods in mathematics, science, and social studies.

Communication skills, teaching skills, and classroom management techniques are woven through both semesters, along with approaches to multicultural teaching and adapting instruction for second language learners and children with special learning needs.

A principal describes the blending of subject matter:

Ideas are woven together by apprentices and teachers; social studies becomes literature, literature becomes writing, writing becomes drama, drama becomes art.

"Mickey Mouse" assignments have no place in the program, because students are engaged in real-life assignments: planning lessons, preparing materials, and researching information. Professional pride motivates them to do the best job possible.

Total Immersion

University students and their instructors "live" in their host school every day, becoming an integral part of the life and work of the building. Two students are assigned to each participating classroom teacher. They spend half the semester in a primary classroom and half in an intermediate one.

A university student's remarks illustrate her involvement in the daily life of the school:

Our room is ready for Open House tonight. The kids' work is displayed everywhere. I'm looking forward to coming because I think most of our kids are bringing their parents, and I want to meet them.



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A teacher notes:

I always save my science and social studies units for the Block students to do. They turn themselves inside out to bring in all kinds of books, displays, and media. It's great for me—I just hope the program doesn't move to another school!

A principal comments:

This program works so well because the university professors constantly monitor each apprentice's progress. University professors hold meetings where participating teachers can air concerns and plan for successes.

A university instructor describes his efforts:

We push, pull, encourage, and expect the students to meet high

standards in their teaching and professional responsibilities; however, they know they are never alone. Empathetic nurturing by university instructors is vital. We mentor students because we believe, without question, that they are capable of becoming superior teachers.

Professionalism Is Essential

Evaluation of the students takes many forms (videotaping, classroom observation, appraisals by the teachers, assessment of daily lesson plans, case studies, and performance indicator checklists), but at least *half* of a student's grade is based upon professional behaviors. Teamwork, acceptance of responsibility, preparedness for daily teaching, promptness, appropriate dress—all these factors are crucial to a student's success in the program.

Although the university team constantly scrutinizes and updates grading procedures and standards, one factor has remained constant during the last six years: any repeated infraction of the professional code drastically affects a student's grade.

A student explains:

You're late once—they talk with you about it. You're late twice—they take you to the woodshed!

How the Partnership Works

The partnership between the Center for Excellence in Education at Northern Arizona University and the Flagstaff Public Schools is based upon a shared responsibility for preparing the best teachers possible. From the schools' viewpoint, the program must be an asset, or it would quickly wear out its welcome. The four host schools presently participating in the program do so voluntarily.¹ Teachers, too, volunteer to welcome the university students into their classrooms and to serve as mentors and coaches for their apprentices.

Staff development for teachers, as well as for university instructors, comes naturally through informal daily sharing of ideas and materials. The students infuse enthusiasm and idealism into the walls of the schools. This mutual "inservice" is complemented by brief after-school meetings twice each month, when university instructors and teachers discuss issues, ideas, and problems related to the program and to the larger challenges of teaching and learning in today's schools. Session topics range from Screening Prospective Teacher Candidates to The Latest Selections of Multicultural Literature for Children.

Obviously, such an endeavor is not without difficulties. Staffing, resources, logistics, and controversy must be

addressed almost daily. The program is definitely not for every student who aspires to teach, nor is it appropriate for every school, classroom, or teacher. But, from the perspectives of both the school and the university, the partnership is well worth the resources and effort it takes to preserve it.

A principal explains the benefits to all:

The interaction between aspiring teachers and their mentors develops confidence in the college students. They leave the Block Program truly ready for their student teaching experience; as a matter of fact, our teachers will accept only student teachers who have been through the Block Program because they are so professionally prepared.

Student teachers who have come from this program are the ones that I keep my eye on for future hiring. These former Block students shine in the classroom; they are requested by parents and have been recognized nationally for their "excellence in teaching."²

Another principal comments:

The advantages of having the Block Program at our school far outweigh any inconvenience. I was once asked about the disadvantages of housing the Block Program on our campus, and the only thing I could come up with was "parking spaces."

A Bridge Between Practice and Theory

The Program for Learning Competent Teaching thrives because it provides a bridge between experience and ideas. In response to the demands for reform of teacher education, Northern Arizona University and Flagstaff School District got started six years ago. Eventually, the 14'-wide trailer became too rickety and was replaced with a nice portable classroom building, but it's still there in spirit. Thanks to the good will, patience, and hard work of all concerned, our program is still working! □

¹The four host schools are Christensen, Kinsey, Cromer, and Killip Elementary Schools.

²In 1987, the National Council of Teachers of English named the program a "Center of Excellence in Teaching Language Arts."



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