

building education professionals

By using the academy model, schools can provide new teachers and administrators with a built-in support system and the training to become true winners at their schools.

If we are serious about improving the educational system in the United States, we must be strategic in how we accomplish our goals. Only the best-suited and best-trained professionals should ever have the responsibility of teaching our children.

Existing teacher preparation and professional development efforts and policies fall short of addressing these needs. New teachers are introduced into the educational system after five years of college and less than 500 hours of actual classroom experience. Within this limited experience they are expected to accept full responsibilities of an experienced professional educator.

In contrast, doctors complete their course work and enter into an internship/residency where they work side by side with experienced doctors. This time

in which doctors hone their skills is essential to producing capable doctors who remain in the profession.

This support is the missing piece for teachers. Teachers do not have a residency in which to hone their skills. This leaves them feeling frustrated, inadequate and unsupported. As such, the existing framework has resulted in 50 percent of new teachers leaving the profession within the first three to five years. This loss is particularly alarming knowing that in the next 10 years, California will need an additional 300,000 new teachers.

Experience has shown that paying the course fees and completing all required classes to graduate in no way guarantees readiness to perform in one

By Judy Cunningham

of the most important of all professions — teaching. Research and experience point out that collaborative reflective practice and an allocation of significant time, along with action research, are all essential components of effective professional development for teachers and administrators.

The academy model embodies key strategies that have been identified in the 1996 report, "What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future," pub-

lished by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future. Key recommendations of the commission's report are to reinvent teacher preparation and professional development, and to overhaul teacher recruitment and put qualified teachers in every classroom.

The Academy at South Lake Middle School seeks to provide an environment where student teachers and first-year resident teachers have the opportunity to hone their craft and work with expe-

rienced academy specialists/master teachers while building a network of professional peers. The goal of the academy is to first showcase an exciting model of professional educator training, and to then expand the model county-wide and beyond.

Addressing the problem

The academy is a specialized teacher-learning and training model responding
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CASE STUDY: ACCELERATED LEARNING

Daily mentoring: The fast track to strong teaching skills

By Judy Cunningham

School has opened and we are desperate for a new math teacher. Interviews and search of resumes has not proven successful. The year begins with a substitute teacher in the classroom. The principal learns that Arvin, a substitute teacher and retired engineer, is enrolled in a teacher-credentialing program at Concordia University. He has had no formal teaching strategy course work. Arvin is strong in content and has a strong desire to teach. After his wife (a teacher) told the young retiree to "get a job," Arvin did some substitute work at both the middle and high school levels.

Arvin reluctantly agrees to fill in while we look for a math teacher. The principal has a gut feeling that Arvin is more ready than he thinks, and if he had true mentoring support daily, could probably gain strategies faster than from any college course work. He agrees to try. The university agrees, the district office agrees and we promise Arvin that we will not let him fail.

Maureen, an experienced math teacher who is also an experienced master teacher/coach for student teachers, offers to be Arvin's Academy Specialist/master teacher. Arvin's and Maureen's assignments are designed so that they each teach four classes per day, have one conference hour and one hour of collaboration daily. They are both teaching seventh grade pre-algebra and the collaboration time is the last hour of the school day.

Arvin begins each day (his conference period) watching another very skilled math teacher (Valerie) teach pre-algebra first period and stays a day behind in his lessons. During sixth period, Maureen and Arvin collaborate, coach, observe, study student work, plan lessons and reflect on student progress and teaching strategies. They discuss Arvin's observation in Valerie's class and Maureen's observation of Arvin's third period.

Before he leaves each day, Arvin is clear about next steps for the following day. Phone and personal parent conferences, materials and cur-

riculum are shared. Strategies for managing classroom time, materials and student activities are studied and changes are made to enhance the effectiveness of student learning.

Arvin's network of support is growing. A special education teacher (Elaine) provides support during one period and often models questioning strategies and other ways to approach math problems. The principal and assistant principal (both former math teachers) visit Arvin's room frequently, leaving simple notes of specific observations.

Since informal conversation is a regular routine with Arvin, whether at the copy machine or in a brief chat at lunch, he is comfortable and knows that administration is there to support, coach and reinforce his improved skills. He

knows they are there to help with the problems, the difficult parent, the test that was too hard and more. Daily he is able to discuss, in detail, each class with his coach.

Once he becomes more familiar with the day-to-day routines of school he begins to focus on the individual student learning styles and how his teaching supports them. Analyzing student work, holding special "help" sessions with students and watching Maureen and other teachers work with students all becomes a rich and essential laboratory of learning for a new teacher. (At the end of the year Arvin said, "I never would have stayed unless I had had the support provided to me.")

At the end of second trimester, Arvin is concerned that students' grades are below his expectations. Despite progress reports and parent communication, student grades are low and Arvin is concerned that a high percentage of students are not taking the work seriously. Maureen looks at his practices and grading procedures and coaches Arvin on how to communicate his concerns to administration.

Arvin's confidence grows and during the last 12 weeks of the year, he and Maureen design a special math support class for students who are capable, but for one reason or another are missing different build-
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to the new teacher's need to support, nurture and develop excellence and expertise as we build educational professionals. The academy does this by providing support and training for new teachers and principals while helping experienced instructional leaders build professional capacity and capability through redesigning responsibilities and structures within our system.

A seed project of this teacher-training model, funded by Rockwell International through Project Tomorrow — a collaborative of businesses and educators in Orange County — began in September 2000 at South Lake Middle School. The project has expanded for the 2001-2002 academic year (see case study, page 35).

Funding the academy

The cost of release time for each teacher appears to be expensive at first glance. However, if one considers the return on investment, and the expense of having untrained, unsupported emergency credentialed people with limited content mastery in our children's classrooms, the cost is infinitesimal.

How can we continue to fund and grow this program? We must look at how we allocate the money currently available, how we allocate Fulltime Teacher Equivalency, the creative use of para-professionals, and explore combining BTSA (Beginning Teacher Support and Assistance Program) and PAR (Peer Assistance Review) resources to support training new teachers. Implementation of the academy model requires financial support, professional expertise, political resources and freedom from factory model constraints.

Administrator component

This initiative is designed to build leadership capacity in teachers and para-professionals as well as principals. On site, there are three administrators in training from three universities — Chapman, California State University, Fullerton and University of California, Irvine.

It is essential that we "grow" administrators who are true educational leaders and recognize the importance of investing resources in attracting, supporting and retaining the best and brightest

classroom teachers. We must provide time for aspiring administrators to work side by side with creative, energetic, bright principals during the school day.

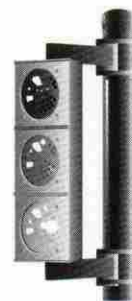
The modeling of skilled professional behaviors in instructional leadership, assessment, support of teachers, evaluation, budgets, legal issues, building culture and working with community can not be duplicated. ■

Judy Cunningham is program director and principal of South Lake Middle School in the Irvine Unified School District. If you would like to learn more about this teacher training initiative, please contact Judy Cunningham at (949) 936-6705 or e-mail her at jcunning@iusd.k12.ca.us.

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