

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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“The academy model is an imaginative solution to a pressing problem for public schools. It provides the psychological support and the access to professional expertise for those who are just starting out. The key is regular, person-to-person contact with a real pro!” — Patricia Clark White, superintendent, Irvine Unified School District

CASE STUDY: ACCELERATED LEARNING

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ing blocks in their math understanding. They set the parameters, send letters to parents and students and give their commitment to the class — “first come, first served.”

The principal is concerned that they are using some of their precious collaborative time to teach this class. Arvin is given full autonomy to cancel at any time. This math support class provides Maureen and Arvin with an intense, focused teaching lab of 20 students. They watch each other teach and then debrief the day’s lesson. This turns out not to take away from their collaboration, but instead provides a rich learning environment for students and, most importantly, for Arvin.

Arvin learns assessment strategies, ways to individualize assignments, and new classroom management skills. This lab class works because it emerges from teacher-identified needs, and the same teachers design the response to the need.

Arvin returned in the fall of 2001, assigned to most of the same students for five periods per day, teaching eighth-grade introduction to algebra and algebra. His mentor, Maureen, has the same assignment but is now working with another new teacher (Hyun Sook — a former instructional assistant who holds a doctorate degree in chemistry), in the UCI intern program, teaching eighth-grade introduction to algebra. Hyun Sook and Maureen have release time daily for collaboration.

Arvin’s network has expanded and so has the network of support for another first-year math teacher.

This seed project has grown to include a science component. Nancy, an Academy Specialist/master teacher who is an experienced coach of student teachers, provides support to Dorit, a former attorney who wants to teach. Dorit has a strong science content background in biological sciences and has some experience working with small groups of students in a private setting. She is concurrently completing her student teaching at Concordia. Dorit and Nancy also have a common assignment and a collaborative hour each day.

During the summer, Dorit was paid as a regular science team member as they developed curriculum aligned to the state standards, and developed seventh- and eighth-grade curriculum. Arvin and Hyun Sook were a part of the math department team for summer work, with the same focus around math standards. This departmental professional development team time was made possible through API funds approved by the school site council.

This important time together prior to the beginning of the school year provided time for professionals to have deep conversation about the work, design materials together, plan implementation, ask questions in a safe setting, and be a part of the work as it emerges. These relationships add to the comfort level that builds a true professional learning community.

Even though Dorit and Hyun Sook have only had their own classrooms for a few weeks, it is obvious that with the built-in support, they will grow to become excellent teachers and, one day, mentors.

“This exemplary program helps identify key people in our communities who want to teach and who will make great teachers. The program demonstrates how we can locate and keep these people and provide them with the training that will make them winners in every classroom!” — Bill Habermehl, superintendent, Orange County Department of Education

