

HORACE

Practice Into Theory: Teachers Coaching Teachers

As students become active partners in their own education, teachers are doing the same. Staff development in Essential schools is increasingly based on the idea that teachers can coach each other to achieve classroom and system change.

ONCE UPON A TIME IT WORKED like this: You were trained as a teacher and assigned to a classroom; you were properly certified and had your own classes to lead. You did your preparations, gave your classes, followed the book and kept the door shut. And once every couple of months, on an early release day for students, the administration got you all together for "in-service training" or "staff development." Maybe an expert came in and gave a presentation; maybe you went to a seminar at a nearby conference center. You spent a few hours, maybe you got a few new ideas. And then you went back into your classroom and shut the door.

Perhaps those new ideas took root, and had a permanent effect on how and what you teach. But an increasing body of research reveals that staff development along these lines is virtually a waste of time—that such sporadic lectures, no matter how inspiring or provocative the subject, are too isolated from actual classroom practice to have much effect on helping teachers grow in their profession. And if the goal is fundamental school change from the bottom up, Essential School people say, it must come about not through occasional advice from experts but in a more fluid, collaborative way, sustained by an active network of teachers sharing their own experiences. The

Coalition's goal becomes not only to rethink classroom practices, then, but to redesign just as radically the entire process of professional development.

The challenge this presents to a quickly growing Coalition is considerable. Most school people get their first exposure to the nine common principles through reading Theodore Sizer's book *Horace's Compromise*, or visiting nearby Essential Schools. Many become interested after trying out "student-as-worker" activities that spark new ideas for additional classroom change. But once a school begins serious planning towards joining the Coalition, how can staff development itself reflect Essential School principles as teachers work toward changing their classrooms and restructuring their schools?

This has become a central question for the Coalition, and over CES's first five years an entirely different approach to staff development has begun to emerge. Instead of listening to periodic presentations about various techniques or content areas, teachers are struggling with essential questions, becoming active learners, collaborating with their peers, applying critical skills to a range of subject areas. Instead of new ideas being poured into their heads as if they were passive receptacles, they generate ideas from their own experience, coached by those who

have been through the same thing before them. They focus more narrowly and go deeper, rather than submitting to a scattershot array of "in-service training" courses.

During the Coalition's start-up years, such training has taken place primarily in three contexts. In introductory workshops at regional symposia, teachers see new techniques modeled by Coalition trainers and try them out for themselves through various exercises. (See Figure 1.) At the Summer Institutes in Providence and St. Louis, they can work with actual high school students over a two-

week period, teaching interdisciplinary courses that incorporate Essential School ideas such as exhibitions, with the help of Coalition facilitators. (See Figure 2.) And when a school is ready to begin serious planning for change, the Coalition offers a year-long training activity known as "the Trek," which guides a core team of teachers and administrators through a process of analysis and reflection aimed at creating and managing a schoolwide vision of change. (See Figure 3.) In addition to this, the Thomson Fellows program, established with funding from the Danforth Foundation, has brought

seasoned Essential School principals into schools to initiate staff conversations about change.

But as it enters its second five years, the Coalition finds itself in a new situation. For the first time, there are enough well-established Essential schools to supply real-world examples of change to other schools, both in the classroom and at the structural level. At the same time—partly because of the burgeoning Re:Learning initiative, a joint effort of the Coalition and the Education Commission of the States—so many schools are asking for Essential School training that the resources of the movement are under considerable strain. Some of the strongest and most well known Essential schools are under similar pressures; New York's Central Park East, for instance, has established the Center for Collaborative Education to accommodate its visitors and at the same time shield its own program from distraction, and Thayer High School in New Hampshire has begun charging outsiders to visit the school or consult with teachers. (See Figure 4.) The Trek program is regionalizing and concentrating its efforts so that costs for participating schools can be kept down. And the Summer Institutes must figure out how to provide adequate guidance for teachers who come looking for models of classroom change.

Now, Coaches for Teachers

To address these challenges of growth, the Coalition has launched a new and ambitious program, which has been funded by Citibank over a three-year initial period. Designed to provide teacher-centered staff development in an expanding network of schools, the Citibank Coalition Faculty Project puts experienced Essential school teachers into other schools to help as they work towards change. The Citibank faculty member is a classroom coach experienced in the ways school structures change as

FIGURE 1

Introductory Workshops: The Teacher As Active Learner

"People often come to the Coalition's introductory workshops wanting to learn 'how to do it,'" says CES's Beverly Simpson, who with Director for Schools Bob McCarthy runs a good many of those workshops at regional symposia. "What they learn first, though, is that there is no 'it' to swallow and take home. Just as a good coach can help the athlete play the best game depending on his own personal strengths and style, the teacher has to create 'it' in her own right."

In traditional teacher education, Simpson points out, teachers learn they must cover a certain amount of material, and textbooks suggest every move they make. What her workshops emphasize instead is teachers' own knowledge of what works best for them and for their students. To get to this point, Coalition workshops put participants in the student's role as often as not, asking them to experience directly what works for them.

"In one exercise, we ask small groups to come up with the most powerful learning experiences they have ever had, in or out of school," Simpson says. "From those stories, we extract what the conditions are under which real learning takes place." The answers are revealing; one group reported, for example, that almost all its stories revolved around near-disasters. "They concluded that we learn a lot from our mistakes," Simpson says. "But in many of our classrooms, we tend to mark down for mistakes—we dismiss them as learning tools."

Another story described a merely average student who unexpectedly scored extremely well on standardized tests one year. "Her teachers began to pay extra attention to her, urging her to live up to her full potential," Simpson says. "By the time it was discovered that the scorers had made an error, her grades had already gone substantially up."

One of the things introductory workshops try to model, Simpson notes, is that teachers don't necessarily have all the answers. "Anything we learn well we learn by doing ourselves; so we encourage teachers to believe that they can do it," she says. "I've seen incredibly creative people leave believing for the first time that they can do things their way. When you go through this, you start to appreciate the anxieties students go through when there's no right answer—when they have to look actively at the alternatives, and evaluate them for themselves."

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FIGURE 2

The Summer Teachers Institute

What is an Essential School classroom really like, on a day-to-day basis? What do teachers do? How do students respond? What are the problems? The rewards? At Coalition Summer Teachers Institutes, several dozen teachers come together to address these questions in a week or two of workshops and practice teaching. Past Summer Institutes have been held at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island and in St. Louis (where it is sponsored by two Essential schools, Whitfield School and Parkway South); students from the surrounding area attend classes, and participating teachers are coached in Essential School pedagogy and curriculum.

In Providence, Institute participants work in groups of three or four with Coalition staff and Citibank Faculty members. These teams plan and teach a five-day integrated curriculum unit to a heterogeneous group of high school students. Participants spend their mornings planning, teaching, and "debriefing" their two-hour classes. Afternoons are spent in an intensive seminar, exploring curricular and pedagogical issues that emerge from Essential School practice. Both institutes emphasize the relationship between good theory and good practice; its aim is that participants leave with an array of practical teaching resources and strategies grounded in the nine common principles.

The 1991 Summer Institute at Brown will address a range of questions, including:

- Recent school reforms: What are they? Where are they going? Where does the Coalition of Essential Schools fit in?
- What do the nine common principles mean in practice?
- How does change happen, for people and for institutions?
- How can a teacher create a student-centered classroom and promote active student engagement?
- What is non-traditional assessment? How do portfolios, authentic performances, and exhibitions work?
- How do teachers plan an integrated curriculum?

The program is open to secondary teachers and administrators. Three graduate credits are available in some instances. The cost is around \$600 per participant plus travel and living expenses.

might be struggling with the tone of the school, or with exhibitions, or with tracking, for example," says Faith Dunne. "The Citibank person is there to help a school mobilize its own resources, to identify useful outside resources, to help schools over barriers when they encounter them, and to make sure that Coalition principles remain at the heart of the effort." In practice, this may mean helping a teacher figure out how to pose a central question on which to focus a math class, or working with two teachers on arranging a cross-disciplinary team, or visiting a classroom and suggesting other ways than worksheets to keep track of student mastery.

Many Citibank faculty mem-

bers have already experienced first hand, in their own schools, the difficulty of that task. "If you're wise you don't 'bother' people," says Wilbur Johnson, a social studies teacher at Bronxville High School in suburban New York and one of the first group of Citibank faculty. "You have lunch, you ask about their curriculum. You say, 'I'm doing Copernicus at the same time you're doing astronomy; maybe we can do a unit together.' Once teachers start to work together they really enjoy it."

When the Citibank faculty member comes in to work with a client school on a regular basis, Johnson says, sensitive listening to the teachers there is crucial. "We

are definitely not there to say what needs to be changed," he asserts. "At most schools anywhere in the country, the people who are considered good teachers are already doing things that by some other name are very much like Essential school principles. The conversation has to start with how what they are doing fits in to the picture." Other teachers become entrenched in old habits or burned out, Johnson notes, because nobody treats them as "genuinely curious people who see a chance to learn in anything. They are entrenched because they were neglected," he argues. "But what even a burned-out teacher once liked about the job is really the same things I like. The key is to facilitate those things, to get the teacher engaged again, the same way we all want our students to be engaged."

"You want to approach those teachers who are willing to do even one thing," agrees Steve Poynter, another Citibank faculty member who moved from Arkansas's Springdale High School Essential School program to teach at Pasadena High School in California this year. "It won't work to get the whole faculty together and say 'We're going to work on making you guys into an Essential school.' It works one little bit at a time, one person to another person standing in the hall relaxing after work with a leg against the wall."

Teachers Coaching Each Other

Poynter has been working with Dave Marsh, a CES regional coordinator for Southern California and a University of Southern California professor there, on nonthreatening techniques for coaching colleagues in the classroom. "We'd like teachers to learn to do these same things with each other," he says. "Teachers can go into each other's classrooms and give simple feedback, collaborate with each other and help each other out. You can pick some one thing you'd like to

work on—like your questioning technique, for example: maybe you'd like to be asking questions in class that stimulate higher-order thinking. Then you get another teacher to come in and watch for just that one thing. Afterwards, you get together and talk. You say what you were trying to do; the other guy says what he saw. It's not evaluation, it's not criticism, it's not done by a supervisor. It's observing and reflecting, done as equals who can help each other."

Another way to enlist teachers in their own professional development is to directly involve them in presenting workshops to other staff. Instead of doing a workshop for a partner school (or their own), many Citibank faculty members say, they invite another teacher to do it with them. At her small Massachusetts private school, Brimmer and May science teacher Jen Prileson helped arrange workshops that explored questions of cooperative learning, problem solving, and the use of seminars. "A math teacher and an art teacher did something on problem solving in math and art," she says. "I did one on cooperative learning with a first grade teacher. We need to value teachers who aren't what we call 'experts.' Once the Citibank faculty member goes back home, teachers can mushroom out from things like this and do workshops on their own."

"Staff development isn't something that should be done to a staff," agrees Michael Patron, a humanities teacher and administrator at the Crefeld School in Philadelphia, and a Citibank faculty member. "If teachers have a way of talking to each other as a group and determining their own needs, they can decide what they can provide for each other and when they need experts."

Who Is the Expert?

So is the Citibank person an "expert"? The answer seems to depend on whether the word carries

negative connotations for the speaker. "Facilitation is a large part of my job, but I'm not a blind facilitator—in a way I am an expert," says Patron. "I have access to articles, examples from other places, and of course my own experience at an Essential School." Other Citibank faculty prefer to emphasize their collegial role

instead. "I make no bones about not being an expert but a colleague," says Bronxville's Wilbur Johnson. "I've had a chance to focus on these issues because of the Citibank training, but I come from my own experience. If you're interested, you can join my experience; but I expect to learn as much from any one of these people as they are going to

FIGURE 3

How Does the Trek Work?

The Trek is a year-long staff development activity involving a core team of teachers and administrators who are trained to envision, plan for, and manage change within their own system. It starts with a five-day summer training session; later activities include site visits to partner Trek schools that serve as "critical friends." Schools generally send a team of three to six teachers and administrators to the Trek, possibly including school board members or central office administrators. About 50 schools have been through the process thus far. The cost in 1990-91 is \$800 per participant, plus travel expenses and substitute fees during site visits.

The Trek is aimed primarily at how to manage change at the school and system level. "Trek may be the first step that a faculty takes collectively," says the Coalition's Pat Wasley, a senior researcher who leads Trek workshops. "It's a beginning journey; typically it takes place during the first real year of planning."

The Trek starts with each team making a thorough investigation and analysis of its school. Using different analytical "lenses," the team examines the priorities, assumptions, and compromises implicit in each facet of its school, and comes up with key conditions that are necessary for it to change. A crucial part of the process is to articulate a shared vision of the school as it is and as it could ideally be, and to consider ways of getting from one place to the other.

After the five-day summer session together, the Trek team returns to its school with a framework for change, some tools to carry it out, and a plan for engaging the rest of a school's faculty. Working collaboratively and serving as a model for group decision-making, the team enlists support and leadership from others in the community. Team members lead discussion groups, model what they have learned about Coalition principles, and encourage others to visit Essential Schools and reflect together on how they work.

To check their own progress and to keep up the ties they have built with other Trek members, each school hosts a visit from two other schools' Trek teams. The visitors serve as "critical friends," trained to observe and help solve problems; they may visit classes or talk to the larger faculty; and they also present their own ongoing problems for the host team to help with.

As the Trek program builds, the Coalition hopes to create clusters of Trek schools within geographic regions, so critical friend relationships will be easier and less expensive. Towards that end, Delaware ran a regional Trek just before the 1990 Coalition Fall Forum. "It would be wonderful to have the connections be closer to home," says principal Valerie Woodruff of Delaware's Middletown High School, which sent a team to the 1989 Trek. "Our site visits with partner schools were a wonderful experience, an authentic check on how we were living up to our vision."

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Part of the problem, Johnson agrees with Patron, is that "experts" have traditionally been inflicted on staff by management decision, not requested by teachers. "Attitude is a large part of how well it works," he says. "We are real teachers who want you to come visit our classrooms too."

"We would lose interest if we thought of ourselves as experts here," says Jude Pelchat, a Citibank Faculty member and a math and science teacher at School One in Providence, Rhode Island. "This project reflects the kind of ongoing, personal, reflective learning that

good teachers do all the time. Good teachers are compulsive learners, not experts."

A 25-year teaching veteran, Pelchat has a long history of working with teachers; for some years she has helped give workshops at Coalition symposia. The Citibank project, she says, gives teachers a degree of support they haven't felt until now. "I think that left to themselves teachers would have come up with something like this," Pelchat says. "They need a form of communication that is familiar to them. What's important is that the consultant comes from the classroom." Working on an

ongoing basis with other teachers, she argues, gives even very experienced teachers the courage they need to try out new things. "It can be just as hard for a seasoned teacher to step away from something she feels is a sure system," Pelchat says.

Crossing Disciplines, Grades

As teachers start coaching each other, the notion of "expert" frays in another way, because they realize how much they have to offer even to teachers in other disciplines. Many Citibank faculty members say their eyes were

FIGURE 4

Thayer's Traveling Teachers

How can teachers from a financially strapped district share their successful teaching strategies and earn good money along the way? Dennis Littky, the New Hampshire principal of Thayer High School who has won fame as "Doc" in the book of the same title, has come up with one answer. As Thayer's Essential School has attracted widespread interest for turning around a floundering student body through team teaching and active learning, Doc Littky has sent his teachers on the road in teams to consult with school systems all around the country.

Thayer teachers get \$350 a day plus expenses for their labors, and have traveled from tiny Winchester, New Hampshire to Minneapolis, San Diego, Santa Fe, and Pennsylvania to coach other teachers on how to achieve change. But though they welcome the travel and extra pay, teachers say they are most enthusiastic about their task because it strengthens their own teaching and leadership skills. "I've watched colleague after colleague get very strong," says Edorah Frazer, who teaches science, math, and typing to Thayer seventh-graders. "Dennis is very charismatic, and when he goes with a team it's a sure bet that people will sit up and listen. But when we go out without him, we really come into our own."

Working with other teachers in fields often different from their own makes these teachers realize the skills they have developed while teaming across the disciplines at Thayer. "You find that you can sit down with any team and after a lot of effort you can belong," says seventh-grade English and math teacher Marlene Morse. And Peter Eisenstadter, an English teacher in a 9-10 team, says that leading groups on how to turn students into active workers has galvanized his own classroom teaching. "I used to be an actor, and for me teaching was like putting on five shows a day," he says. "When you have to come down off the stage and mix it up, it's very

different. I don't think I even knew quite what I was supposed to be doing until I had to teach someone else how to do it."

Aside from planning their workshops together and calling on their own Essential School experiences, Thayer teachers bring little formal training to their consulting jobs, and many of them say it's better that way. "We set up workshops in a fishbowl setting," says Edorah Frazer. "They might give us a subject for a hypothetical team-taught unit, and then they watch as we sit down and plan how to teach it together. That's the key: They see us do it, see that we talk and think the same way they do. We're not experts; we're teachers like them." The end effect, they say, is a feeling of collegiality that defuses initial resistance to new methods. "When our team went to Minneapolis the teachers there were pretty hostile at first, because they had been told they had to do this," says special ed teacher Trudy Wright. "By the end of the week they were giving us standing ovations, flowers, presents—and we're going back next week to work with them some more."

Two-thirds of Thayer's teachers went on the road last year, says Littky, and he fields dozens of requests for help each week. Characteristically, he has turned the overload from an annoyance to an asset; Thayer now charges visitors \$100 per day, and pays a retired teacher to coordinate and arrange all visits. (In a similar move, New York's Central Park East has established the Center for Collaborative Education to handle its ferocious load of outside visitors.) In a school district where salaries are among the lowest in the nation, Littky says, sending teachers out to share their expertise is "the healthiest thing I've ever done. It increases salaries and self-esteem at the same time. One teacher told me she had been teaching for 23 years and this was the first time that she had ever been treated and paid like a professional."

opened to new collaborative possibilities at the Summer Institute, where part of their training is to lead classes with a diverse group of participating teachers and students. "I taught a course in chemistry and math," says Jude Pelchat. "But I was assigned to work with an elementary teacher from New Mexico, a sixth grade teacher from California, and a high school drafting teacher from Washington, D.C. At the first meeting we didn't have much to say to each other; but before long we had tons to say, and soon we clearly had a common purpose. The elementary teacher, for example, came away with a different way of teaching math: starting where kids are, and not being afraid to enjoy things. As a result she started to tackle more difficult things. Our class had been based on detecting patterns for categorizing ideas in science and math, and she taught a session based on identifying different kinds of rocks."

Several other Citibank teachers, also, are paired with client schools quite different from their own in size and student demographics. But working with a wide range of teachers and students during the Summer Institute, they say, helps; and frequently, differences end up being smaller than they first appear. "My partner school has a large vocational program and they're trying to figure out how to make it work with Essential School principles," says Mary Vasey, an English teacher at Iowa's Metro High School and a Citibank faculty member paired with a Cincinnati high school. "We're much smaller, but we're also working on ways to get our vocational program to focus not just on jobs but on using minds well."

What About Resistance?

But Citibank faculty do worry about how to deal with resistance and even hostility to the Essential School ideas they bring. The ideal

Designing good exhibitions can take five days of steady work, a luxury not available in most staff development structures—and the whole thing could be worthless without feedback and followup.

situation, of course, is when they are invited to a school by the teachers themselves, and welcomed as colleagues. But sometimes they find themselves working with people who feel pressured to change the way they teach all at once, on orders from above.

"I once helped lead a five-day workshop on exhibitions for three schools in Los Angeles," says Pasadena's Steve Poynter. "School was coming up, and the teachers there needed to plan their whole year's curriculum in a week. Instead, here they were mucking around with another measly little assignment to design an exhibition. They just said, 'We're not going to do it. We've got too much else to do to worry about this.'"

That first day "almost defeated me," Poynter says. "I couldn't work from my notes, so I just shut my mouth and listened. Eventually they worked it out for themselves. They were most concerned about how they were going to do exhibitions that took a lot of time, and still have time to cover all the material they needed to cover in the year's curriculum. Finally one gentleman from the math department stood up and said, 'I've been taking calculus apart. I spent about 80 hours doing it, and I've thrown out a lot of stuff that does not need to be taught. Now if there were things that you could throw out of an algebra class,

what would they be?'"

It wasn't long, Poynter says, before the group rose to the challenge, and eventually they came up with some very good exhibitions. "When you're focused on covering a certain amount of content," he points out, "you can't relax your mind enough to design exhibitions that might take extra time. You have to cover less material if you're going to come up with authentic performances." But the process took five days of steady work, a luxury not available in most staff development structures. "And the whole thing could have been worthless without feedback and followup," he adds. "We are continuing to get together and talk about how the plan is working out in the classroom."

Having More Time Helps

Sustaining the staff development program over an extended period, both Citibank and Trek people agree, contributes tremendously to its effectiveness. "We've all seen good ideas come and go," says Mary Vasey. "Often they get discarded purely because not enough time has been spent talking about them, making an effort. The beauty of this approach is not that it's brand new, but that it puts things together in a sustained way. It may not answer all your questions then and there; it may not tell you 'the answer' from 'the expert,' but in the long run it works better."

A sustained approach to coaching teachers also reflects the Coalition's pedagogical principles, points out Jude Pelchat, who has long experience in giving more sporadically timed workshops for staff. "In a way, I had been treating teachers worse than my own students," she says. "In the context of a one-time workshop it's difficult to know the context of what they're thinking and learning, and to give them the chance to try something for long enough to have it last."

With 20 release days from their

teaching schedules to work with other schools, Citibank faculty do worry about meeting the needs of their own students as they work with other schools. The more integrated their school's curriculum is, it seems, the fewer problems this poses. At Baltimore's Walbrook High School, says English teacher and Citibank faculty member Dorothy Turner, longer time blocks and team teaching make it possible for her to take a day away from school without creating problems.

Teachers as Learners

What links all the Coalition's staff development projects—the introductory workshops, the Summer Institute, the Trek, and the Citibank project—is the fact that teachers are active learners in their own professional education. Becoming students themselves makes classroom change more real, and in many cases more difficult, because as often as not change generates chaos and anger. But rather than sidestepping those problems, these models put them to use. "The Summer Institute participants, for instance, are involved directly in the class's

work, alongside the high school students—doing labs with them, participating in discussion groups, creating lesson plans inspired by their own questions and those of other students," says Citibank's science teacher Jen Prileson. "That participation has a large part in addressing resistance to these new ideas. They can voice exactly where they have problems with the ideas, and work out possible answers."

Interestingly, the intensive weeks of training for Citibank faculty show much the same picture of the dynamic of change going on even among Essential School veterans. Day-to-day notes from their sessions reveal passionate disagreements and discussions about the meaning of the nine common principles and the practical problems they present. The questions these teacher-coaches wrestle with may be the best window of all into the process of change:

"Does everyone have to master the Pythagorean theory? What happens if you can't or don't or don't want to?"

"What is the necessary relationship between mastery and

meritocracy? Does one necessarily assume the other?"

"What if education is not a priority of the community? Should we eliminate academics in favor of football?"

"Isn't it vital that teachers be experts in their own field of knowledge, and have the appropriate wisdom to assist students in this field first?"

"Does perceiving of oneself as an expert in one field get in the way of helping students make connections?"

"How do we reeducate ourselves and live together democratically, when so much of our experience is of dominating and being dominated?"

Active, searching, specific, such questions show a growing belief that, in this movement toward Essential schooling, what teachers think and how they act is the most important thing of all. And as teachers ask these questions, the classroom door that once was shut is opening. Teachers are talking to each other about how their students learn, and in the process they seem to be discovering a new way of learning themselves. □



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