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## ABSTRACT

This journal examines promising approaches to supporting beginning teachers. It contains the following articles: "Facing the Future" (Suzie Boss), which discusses meeting the need for qualified teachers by using fresh ideas such as better support for novices and more training for mentors; "Building a Teacher's 'Repertoire' Takes Time, Training" (Suzie Boss), which explains how the dean of one college of education is helping pave a more coherent pathway into teaching; "Under the Same Sun" (Denise Jarrett Weeks), which describes how residents of a rural Alaska village are discovering that they can grow into the teaching profession without having to travel far from home; "Mr. Fisher Finds His Calling" (Suzie Boss), which explains how a rookie teacher navigates the rough waters of the first year with one class of fourth graders; "Pipeline To Tomorrow" (Lee Sherman), which presents a model program that recruits, sustains, and inspires teachers of color; and "Surviving the Crossfire" (Joyce Riha Linik), which describes a Washington school district's successful approach to mentoring new teachers. (SM)



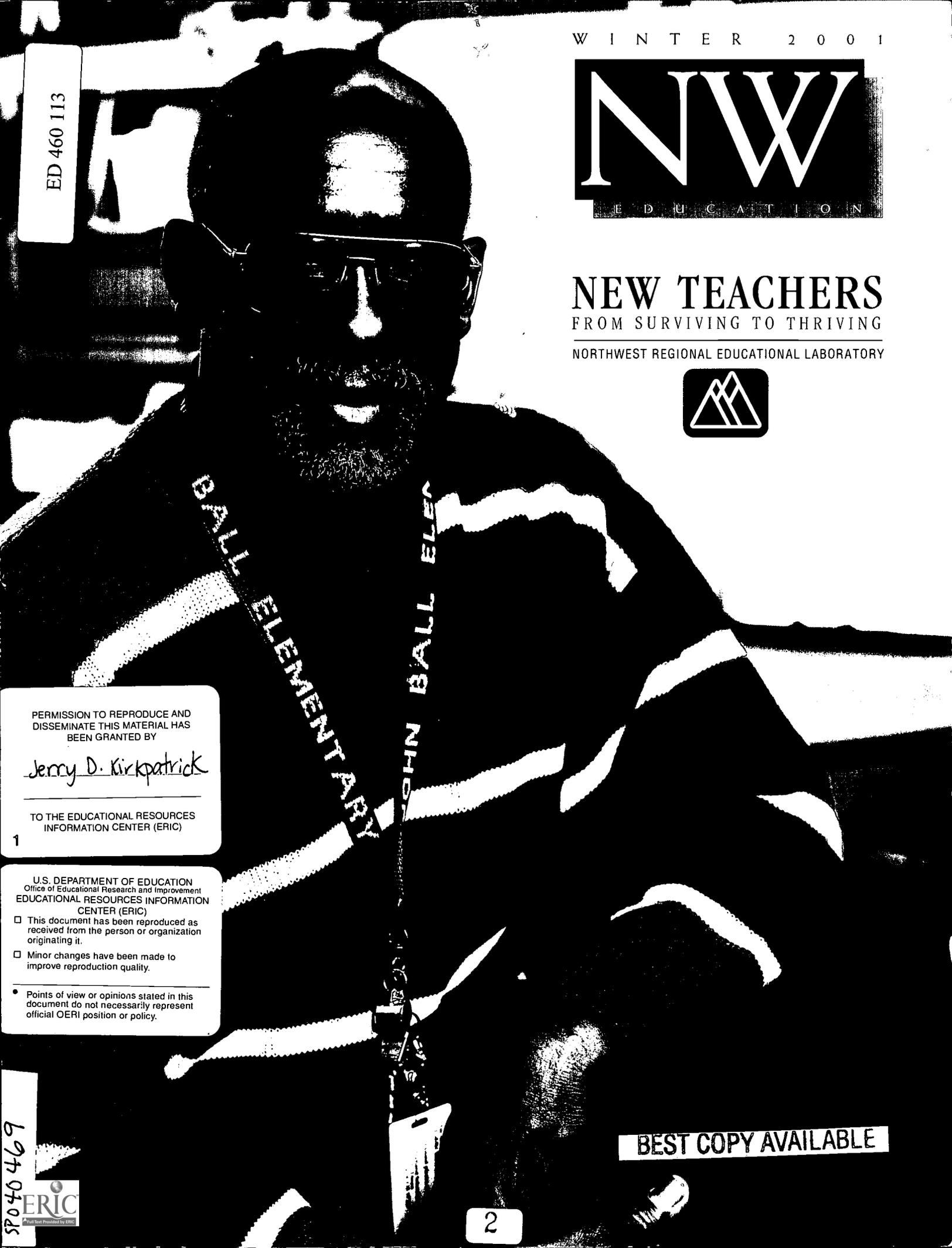
# NEW TEACHERS

FROM SURVIVING TO THRIVING

NORTHWEST REGIONAL EDUCATIONAL LABORATORY



ED 460 113



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**ON THE COVER:**

Lemil Speed was a banker before he switched careers and found his calling. He credits the Portland Teachers Project with providing the comfort and comradeship that made the transition possible. His story, "Pipeline to Tomorrow," begins on Page 24.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MOUNT BURNS.

# New Teachers

## From Surviving to Thriving

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**A**ll across the country, the looming teacher shortage has been earning headlines and raising concerns. This is a demographic trend, affecting schools in big cities, small towns, and rural areas. It's a demographic trend, too, fueled by the anticipated retirement of baby boomers. Social factors also play a role. Before the civil rights movement, schools of education were filled largely with women and minorities. Today, women and minorities enjoy expanded career opportunities in fields offering higher pay than teaching. And it's a political issue, with everyone from the Secretary of Education to the First Lady to members of Congress weighing in with suggestions and sound bites.

By 2010, experts predict that 2.2 million new teachers will be needed for the nation's classrooms. What's more, today's teachers are expected to help students reach high academic standards. Students are increasingly diverse, with many facing challenges related to poverty or language fluency. The national push for accountability can make even the most experienced teachers feel as if they're working in a pressure cooker. Many rookies face the additional challenge of drawing the toughest classroom assignments.

But all is not doom and gloom. When education researcher Ellen Moir, founder of the New Teacher Center, looks at the faces of students enrolled in teacher preparation programs, she sees good reason to hope. "These people," she says, "are dying to teach." The challenge is finding ways to support prospective teachers so that they can overcome the inevitable bumps of the first year or two in the classroom and become the capable educators they dream of becoming.

This issue of *Northwest Education* takes a look at promising approaches to support new teachers. First, we offer a look at what research tells us about why so many novices leave the field and what strategies may help them remain in the profession. We hear from Patricia Wasley, who is retooling teacher induction at the University of Washington so that new teachers gain support over several years. We take a look at mentoring programs, such as the award-winning approach underway in Walla Walla, Washington.

We also zoom in for a close-up look, introducing you to some of the talented individuals who are choosing to make their careers in the classrooms of the Northwest region. Through the eyes of Dorothy Epchook, you'll see why the bond of a shared heritage is vital to the success of rural teachers and their Alaska Native students. In the words of Lemil Speed, you'll hear why seasoned adults are considering new careers in teaching and what kind of support they need to survive the transition. And in the story of Sam Fisher, you'll experience the highs and lows of the first year in the classroom.

These are a just few of the fine people who are dying to teach—the ones who are rising to the challenge with courage, dignity, and humor. We hope you join us in cheering for their continued success.

—Suzie Boss  
[boss@nwrel.org](mailto:boss@nwrel.org)

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# FACING THE FUTURE

WITH A NATIONAL TEACHER SHORTAGE ON THE HORIZON, THERE'S NO TIME LIKE THE PRESENT TO BUILD, SUPPORT, AND SUSTAIN A CAPABLE TEACHING FORCE

Story by SI ZIE BOSS / Photos by DENISE JARRETT WEEKS



Three future teachers—(left to right) Willa Towarak Eckenweiller, Paul Reynolds, and Debbie Toopetlook—are interns in Alaska's Rural Education Preparation Program. (Related story begins on Page 12.)

**S**tanding not quite five feet tall, Beth doesn't tower over anyone in her class of high school freshmen. And that's a shame, because she's the teacher.

If she were a tad more intimidating, suspects the 23-year-old with the sweet face and friendly demeanor, maybe the students wouldn't be so quick to test her. Maybe she wouldn't have had to live through the nightmare of seven large boys "deciding to riot on me" in the middle of a science lab.

That awful spring day marked the low point of her first year of teaching. With papers flying across the classroom and students out of control, she had to "call in reinforcements" from the front office. Nothing in her four years of college, nothing in her training to become a teacher, nothing in her student teaching experience had prepared her to manage that kind of misbehavior. Her small, rural Oregon school district provides no induction or mentoring program for new teachers, so she had no ally to turn to—not even a friendly shoulder to cry on—within the faculty.

Did she think about quitting?

"Oh, yeah."

Did she feel isolated?

"Not physically, but certainly mentally. Sure, the other teachers are nice. But they didn't seem to want to get to know me or make sure everything was going OK."

So why is she back in the same classroom this school year?

"I made a deal with myself that I was going to teach for at least three years. Then I'll decide."

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The first three years mark a critical period in the life of a new teacher. Researchers estimate that as many as 30 percent of novice teachers leave the profession by the third year, and up to half of those teaching in urban schools depart within five years. New teachers recruited under fast-track programs—designed to attract those who have subject-area knowledge but lack a background in education—fare even worse. An estimated 60 percent of those who enter teaching through shortcut programs leave by their third year.

Barnett Berry of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) suggests that employers in the private sector "would not tolerate that kind of turnover. They would be absolutely mortified," he told *Catalyst* magazine, if they were losing even one out of three.

## R & R

To improve these odds, both recruitment and retention are emerging as key strategies.

On a number of fronts, initiatives are underway to bring new faces into teaching—from paraeducators to retired military personnel to mid-career professionals itching for a change. Pipeline programs start as early as seventh grade to encourage more young people to consider teaching careers. In particular, recruiters are eager for faces that better resemble the diverse student body filling the classrooms of America. In 1999, 35 percent of the nation's 52 million school-aged children came from linguistic- or racial-minority families, but only 5 percent of teachers, counselors, and administrators were from racially diverse groups, reported Mary Hartwood Futrell in the May 1999 issue of *Educational Leadership*.

U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige, announcing \$31 million in Transitions to Teaching grants in October, said, "Casting a wider net for experienced professionals . . . will help school districts address teacher shortages, particularly in subjects where there is a great demand for qualified instructors." Both urban and rural districts across the country are reporting shortages in the areas of mathematics, science, foreign language, English as a Second Language, and special education. (See sidebar, Page 5, to learn about new Transitions to Teach-

ing programs in the Northwest region.)

Some communities have already rolled out innovative efforts to lure new teachers. Most dramatic, perhaps, was the offer of \$20,000 in signing bonuses for recent college grads or career changers who agreed to teach in Massachusetts. New York City Schools Chancellor Harold Levy launched his Teaching Fellows program in 2000, targeting young professionals and mid-career changers with the promise of financial help to obtain a master's degree in education in exchange for teaching in underperforming schools in the Bronx and Brooklyn. Clark County, Nevada, has become legendary for its aggressive teacher recruiting, even posting teachers-wanted advertisements in the Las Vegas airport. Chicago has so far lured 125 "global educators" from a host of countries—China, Ghana, India, Mexico, Pakistan—with the promise of work visas and help to earn an Illinois teaching certificate. And a number of school districts offer new teachers assistance with down payments or low rates on home mortgages.

More aggressive recruitment is just half of the equation being devised to solve the looming teacher shortage. Researchers and those on the frontlines of teaching are teaming up to reshape induction programs so that these new recruits will survive—indeed, thrive—once they enter the teaching profession.

As NCTAF's Berry asserts in *Educational Leadership* (May 2001, "No Shortcuts to Preparing Good Teachers"), alternative routes into teaching are necessary, "but they must be good programs. . . . Effective teachers need to know more than subject matter." Without adequate preparation, Berry writes, "many mid-career recruits lack the wide range of knowledge and skills necessary for effective teaching . . . understanding how students think and behave, and how to motivate them." Research shows that "knowledge of both subject matter and of teaching and learning acquired in teacher education is strongly correlated with teacher performance in the classroom."

The public seems to agree. In a recent opinion poll by Louis Harris, 89 percent of those surveyed cited having a well-qualified teacher in every classroom as an important measure for lifting student achievement. Three-quarters of those surveyed oppose allowing those

# TRANSITIONS FOR NORTHWEST TEACHERS

Although a teacher shortage may be looming on the horizon for communities across the country, "it's here now in rural areas," says Joyce Ley, rural education expert at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. To recruit and train new teachers needed in rural classrooms in northeastern Oregon and southeastern Washington, NWREL has joined with partners in the region to conduct a Transitions to Teaching project, funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

In addition to NWREL, partners in the \$750,000 effort include three educational service districts (Umatilla-Morrow and North Central ESDs in Oregon and ESD 123, serving several counties in southeastern Washington); Eastern Oregon University in La Grande, Oregon, and Heritage College in Toppenish, Washington; and 40 local school districts—23 in Washington and 17 in Oregon.

Two additional Transitions to Teaching grants for the Northwest region also were announced by Secretary of Education Rod Paige in October. The Washington Office of State Superintendent will receive \$1.2 million to enhance statewide professional education and certification of new teachers. Salem-Keizer Public School District in Oregon will receive \$550,000 for a local recruiting and training initiative.

In all, the U.S. Department of Education is awarding \$31 million to 42 projects designed to recruit skilled mid-career professionals and recent college graduates into teaching careers. "Casting a wider net for experienced professionals—those with a wealth of experience but who lack a teaching credential—will help school districts address teacher shortages," Paige said, "particularly in subjects where there is great demand for qualified instructors." Areas of high demand include mathematics, science, foreign language, English as a second language, reading, and special education.

## RURAL INITIATIVE

Beginning in January, a cohort of 30 new teachers will embark on the accelerated, intensive training program through the Northwest Transitions to Teaching Partnership being directed by NWREL's Joyce Ley. Training will lead to full state teacher certification at the end of the second year. "It's not an alternative certification program," Ley points out. "What's alternative is the pathway they take" to licensure.

The Transitions to Teaching program will provide these teacher candidates with practical training in pedagogy and instructional practices preparing them to hold down classroom assignments at the same time they participate in the intensive training. Some of the coursework will take place via distance learning and teleconferencing—delivery well suited to the teachers' rural geography. Grant funding will provide stipends for participating teachers and help offset the costs of graduate-level coursework.

In addition to formal training, new teachers will receive additional support from mentors in their local school districts. "The mentor teachers will work closely with them over the two years," Ley explains.

Training coordinators for the project are Dick Pratt of Umatilla-Morrow ESD and Bob Plumb, chairman of the Department of Graduate Education and Counseling at Heritage College. Pratt has developed a professional development toolkit that addresses topics required for teacher certification. Researchers looking for solutions to the teacher shortage have identified access to professional development as a key strategy for solving shortages in rural areas, which often are located great distances from traditional graduate schools.

Ley predicts that the new teacher participants will fit one of two categories. The first category she describes as "placebound. These are adults who are already living in the region where they will be teaching but hold a degree in a field other than education." Because of family commitments or other reasons, Ley explains, "they can't easily pick up and go away to earn certification." The second category includes students who are about to graduate from college and have an interest in teaching, Ley explains, "but aren't on track yet" for a teaching certificate.

6 with college degrees to enter teaching without also requiring preparation in the field of education.

Recruiting and training “new quality teachers,” acknowledges Paige, “will require persistence and imagination.” If he makes the cause sound urgent, it’s no accident. Current forecasts call for 2.2 million new teachers within the coming decade to replace an anticipated wave of baby boomer retirees and keep pace with growing student enrollments. In the Northwest alone, some 35,000 new teachers will be needed by 2005, according to research by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. The spike in demand for teachers is “unprecedented,” reports the University of Washington’s Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy.

And it comes at the same time that states are setting high standards for student achievement. “States are clearly serious about standards for good teaching,” write researchers from the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, “but not when those standards interfere with the ability to ensure an adult, qualified or not, in every classroom.”

Who will teach tomorrow’s children? How well will they be prepared for the task? At a time when a third of the nation’s teachers are 50 or older—old enough to qualify for membership in AARP, the American Association of Retired Persons—these are urgent questions, indeed.

## DYING TO TEACH

When she looks out on the sea of eager faces of students enrolled in teacher education classes, Ellen Moir is filled with hope about the future of the profession. “We have people who are dying to teach,” says the veteran education professor at the University of California at Santa Cruz and executive director of the New Teacher Center, a nationally recognized resource. The question Moir has been working hard to answer: “How do we keep their spirits alive?” She worries about sustaining rookies’ optimism and energy once they head out to work “in a [school] system that’s complex, and can drain you.”

Patricia Wasley, dean of the University of Washington College of Education, has not lost sight of what drew her to teaching 30 years ago. “I love working with kids,” she says. That aspect of the job remains as appealing as ever, whether teacher candidates are fresh out of college

or—like at least a third of the current crop of UW education students—more seasoned by life and looking for a career change.

Yet, a number of factors make it challenging to maintain interest in the profession. Women and minorities—once the mainstay of the teaching ranks—have a wider range of career choices open to them today than those who went into teaching before the civil rights movement. What’s more, many beginning teachers “have a hard time,” Wasley admits. “We know from research that they typically get assigned to the hardest jobs, the most difficult kids. Salaries are low, and esteem is low. Teachers are often blamed,” she says, if student performance is not up to par. On top of all that, many teachers begin their careers in virtual isolation—having little interaction with anyone except the students they’re assigned to teach. “There’s been very little collegial interaction,” admits Wasley. (See Page 10 for an interview with Wasley about UW’s initiatives to support new teachers.)

Indeed, researchers Dwight Rogers and Leslie Babin-ski of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill have written of the “reality shock that comes with being the teacher in charge. Beginning teachers,” they wrote in an issue of *Educational Leadership* (May 1999) devoted to supporting new teachers, “feel isolated and are afraid to reveal uncertainties about their practice and reluctant to ask for assistance for fear of appearing inadequate.”

The Southern Regional Education Board drew on research from the National Center for Education Statistics to track what happens to those who leave the field. Approximately 25 percent quit within their first five years to pursue other careers. Another 25 percent leave because they’re no longer interested in teaching, or have grown dissatisfied with teaching. And 40 percent of those who quit say they would not teach again. Although money plays a role, low salaries are cited as the primary cause by only 10 percent of those who flee the field.

Recruiting New Teachers, a national nonprofit organization based in Massachusetts, suggests a simple way to think about remedying the complex situation: For new teachers to remain in teaching, “*the good must outweigh the bad.*”

# COMPETING FOR BEST AND BRIGHTEST

Last year, when the principal of a small high school in rural Montana needed to hire a new math teacher, it took him three months of recruiting and the offer of subsidized housing to convince a wet-behind-the-ears rookie to take the job. Although the state's schools of education graduate about 900 new teachers each year, increasing numbers of them head off to greener pastures—states such as Nevada and California, where the starting salaries are higher and benefits for new teachers include mentoring and other structured induction programs. Local school district administrators, often scrambling to make hires at the last minute and on limited budgets, find themselves outmaneuvered by professional recruiters eager to snap up the “best and brightest.”

*Who Will Teach Montana's Children?*, published earlier this year by the Montana Board of Public Education, reports that only 29 percent of those who earn teaching credentials in the state are teaching there within two years of graduation.

It's a trend that has administrators and policymakers concerned, not only in Montana but also in other parts of the Northwest region. Oregon State University reports that half of the state's principals have had difficulty recruiting enough candidates to fill teacher positions within the past two years. The twin factors of increasing student enrollment and an aging teaching force mean that by 2005, Oregon will need to hire more than 10,000 new teachers. The state's higher education institutions are on track to graduate only 65 percent of that number.

Northwest states are facing the future with a variety of strategies—not only for recruiting new teachers, but also for supporting novices so that they will develop the classroom skills to help students reach high academic standards. Idaho, for example, has earned national attention—including a three-year federal grant—for its teaching initiative called Idaho's

MOST (for Maximizing Opportunities for Students and Teachers). The program focuses on new teacher preparation, certification, professional development, and the teaching environment, strategies that align with the “What Matters Most” program of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future.

“The best strategies,” argues Dori Nelson, author of the Montana study on teacher shortages, “will enrich the school experience for students, as well as for teachers.”

In addition, she suggests taking more aggressive action to spread the word about the benefits of living—and teaching—in the Northwest region. Montana schools, she points out, are known for many qualities that research has shown to be critical for student success: small schools and small class sizes; friendly, supportive communities; concerned and involved parents; safe schools; and committed teachers and administrators.

The Oregon School Boards Association suggests using “the Northwest lifestyle” as a recruiting tool to attract qualified teachers to the region. “Once established in the Northwest,” the OSBA points out in a recent newsletter on teacher shortages, “teachers aren't likely to trade their jobs for positions in actively recruiting cities like Los Angeles or Las Vegas.”

## BETTER BEGINNINGS

The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future views high-quality mentoring as one of the most effective ways to address new teacher concerns. NCTAF recommends structuring the first year or two of teaching like a residency in medicine, in which novices continually consult veterans. Instead of coaching rookies through appendectomies, however, veteran teachers can help novices overcome such daily challenges as classroom management, assessing how well students are learning, lesson planning, and understanding the culture of the school.

About half of all new teachers already participate in some type of induction during their first year of teaching. The scope and quality of these programs vary widely, however. As RNT points out in its 2000 publication, *A Guide to Developing Teacher Induction Programs*, “Well-funded, comprehensive, developmental induction programs that serve all teachers who need assistance are far from the norm in U.S. school districts.”

In a recent NWREL publication, *Supporting Beginning Teachers*, authors Cori Brewster and Jennifer Railsback point out, “Although many schools provide orientation programs for new hires, they often focus primarily on school policies and procedures, falling short of the ongoing professional support, training, and encouragement that new teachers need.”

Well-designed induction programs, RNT reports, hold promise to slow teacher attrition; remove incompetent teachers and retain talented ones; help novices continue to develop as proficient, knowledgeable, and successful teachers; improve the climate for teaching and learning; and build community between new and veteran teachers.

The most effective programs, described in *A Guide to Developing Teacher Induction Programs*:

- View induction as a multiyear, developmental process. Two or three years of support may be needed to move new teachers from basic survival skills and orientation to focus on instructional effectiveness and, eventually, address systemwide issues such as student assessment, teacher leadership, curriculum reform, and school improvement.
- Ensure that school administrators understand how to orient new teachers, create supportive working conditions,

8 effectively meet their professional needs, and convey to the entire staff the importance of welcoming, guiding, and assisting them. This means principals may need training to be alert to new teachers' needs and concerns.

- Provide high-quality mentoring, backed by adequate funding.
- Link inductee evaluation to standards.

Researchers at the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, in a 2001 report called *Revisiting What States Are Doing To Improve the Quality of Teaching*, point out that formal induction programs are becoming increasingly common. In the 1980s, only 15 states offered new teachers some form of induction. By 1999, 38 states and the District of Columbia had adopted induction programs. They range from small projects that reach only a fraction of a state's newcomers to California's Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment Program, a \$100 million effort intended to match every beginning teacher with a mentor for the first two years on the job. To the extent that states require new teacher induction, "they send a powerful message to districts, schools, and new teachers themselves," conclude *Revisiting What States Are Doing* authors Eric Hirsch, Julia Koppich, and Michael Knapp.

Out of necessity, California is emerging as a national leader in supporting new teachers. Since the state passed a class-size reduction initiative five years ago, local districts have had to scramble to find teachers to fill new assignments. Between 1999 and 2005, the state projects hiring another 265,000 new teachers—at least 10 percent of whom are expected to arrive at the classroom with emergency credentials, without adequate training or experience.

The New Teacher Center in Santa Cruz grew out of a California study to identify effective approaches to beginning teacher support. It has been designated as an exemplary mentoring program by the U.S. Department of Education and highlighted by Recruiting New Teachers. The center consults with districts across the country, including some in the Northwest region, and attracts educators from more than 20 states to an annual symposium. The staff, headed by Executive Director Ellen Moir, also works in close collaboration with local school districts in the Silicon Valley, Oakland, and elsewhere to

teach classroom veterans how to observe, coach, and support new teachers.

Moir and her hand-picked staff of veteran teachers have developed "a curriculum of mentoring," but they had to learn their lessons the hard way. "It took us a lot of messing around to come to our current understandings" of what new teachers need, she admits, and move beyond providing emotional support. No one will deny that kind of support is important for the survival of rookies. "Being new and facing the complexities of the job causes new teachers to question their sense of efficacy," Moir explains. Her research has shown that new teachers start the school year full of hope and optimism, but then "their confidence typically falls by October."

To keep up their own spirits and bolster their students' learning, novices need access to materials and strategies to support the development of sound instructional practices. "We want to support their learning over time," Moir explains, and to do so in the context of the new teacher's own classroom. A veteran teacher—known at the New Teacher Center as an "adviser"—can help by employing such methods as observation, coaching, role-playing, lesson modeling, and assessment. That way, the program becomes focused on "teacher learning to support student learning." What's more, the strategies that help new teachers learn align with sound classroom practices. Formative assessment, for example, is a powerful tool that advisers use to gauge new teachers' understanding of their own learning. New teachers, in turn, can use the same tool to help their own students become more self-directed learners. "It's all nested," Moir explains.

Harry Wong, author of the best-selling *The First Days of School*, argues that new teachers want instructional support more than hand holding. Although Wong is a believer in "the efficacy of mentoring," he asserts in a recent column in *Education Week* that what a new teacher needs and deserves "is a tutor, a master teacher, or ultimately, a group of teachers, staff developers, and administrators who will teach that new teacher and get him or her up to speed quickly. . . . Novice teachers want teachers—teachers they can watch teach in their rooms, teachers who will give them activities and lesson plans, teachers who will tell them what

# BIG SHORTAGE, BOLD IDEAS

In *Solving the Dilemmas of Teaching Supply, Demand, and Standards*, Linda Darling-Hammond points out that large numbers of under-prepared teachers are hired each year. Raising standards for student performance has highlighted teachers' shortcomings, she argues. Meeting the standards, suggests the Stanford education professor and executive director of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, "requires system change—change in recruiting policies and teaching policies."

What would these changes look like? Darling-Hammond outlines the following measures to solve the ongoing problems of teacher quality, supply, and demand:

- Raise teacher standards while equalizing teacher salaries
- Establish licensing reciprocity across states, enabling new teachers in states with surpluses to move more easily to states that experience shortages
- Create national recruitment initiatives (including a national electronic clearinghouse to advertise vacancies), and streamline hiring procedures
- Create scholarship programs to prepare high-ability candidates in shortage fields
- Expand teacher education programs in high-need fields
- Create high-quality induction programs for beginning teachers
- Just say no to unqualified teachers

For more information on NCTAF and its publications, see the Web site at [www.nctaf.org](http://www.nctaf.org).

to do with those kids who challenge even the best in the field."

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## TRANSFORMING THE PROFESSION

When 18-year teaching veteran Jan Miles was invited to leave her regular duties and become an adviser for a group of new teachers, she felt as if she was letting down the children assigned to her classroom. But then she thought about all those new teachers struggling to get along—many of them without teaching credentials, working under emergency certification because of a dire shortage. "I told my students that if I didn't help, it would be as if I saw a building on fire and walked past it. I hated to leave my own kids, but I knew I had to help," she says.

She's had no time to look back. As senior outreach coordinator and educator-in-residence at the New Teacher Center, Miles has spent the past six years advising novice teachers in a variety of school settings, including the Silicon Valley. There's no doubt the program has made a difference for the rookies—more than 90 percent of whom have remained in teaching after six years.

The surprise, says Miles, is how much she has learned about her own teaching from being an adviser. "I knew before that I was a good teacher," she says, "but I didn't know why." Being an adviser has caused her to examine her own teaching practices, to understand her own wisdom well enough so that she's able to share it with others.

Moir sees that reflective process as one of the most useful aspects of mentoring. "It means the exceptional teacher has to ask, What have I been doing that's so effective? They have to unpack that, deconstruct what they've been doing well in the classroom," she explains, so that they're able to explain their strategies to novice teachers.

The assignment has given Miles the opportunity to visit scores of classrooms—also a revelation. "I seldom left my own classroom in all my years of teaching," she admits. "I'd never gotten a chance to see all the other ways there are of doing things." Perhaps best of all, being an adviser "has taught me to listen, to pause, to reflect," Miles says.

Another educator-in-residence in the program, Tom-asita Villarreal-Carman, sees mentoring as "a real op-

*Continued on Page 41*

# BUILDING A TEACHER'S 'REPERTOIRE' TAKES TIME, TRAINING



**SEATTLE, Washington—** When Patricia Wasley embarked on her career in education 30 years ago, teachers didn't get much in the way of mentoring, on-the-job training, or even hand holding. "On the first day of school," she recalls, "the principal would say, 'See you at lunch.' At lunch he'd say, 'See you in the spring.'"

Today, as dean of the College of Education at the University of Washington, Wasley is working to reinvent induction so that new teachers not only get off to a good start, but can continue expanding their skills and knowledge over the course of their careers.

University of Washington is working with school district partner sites in Seattle, Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Portland, Maine, to develop "a more coherent continuum" of support for new teachers that includes mentoring and professional development through their fifth year in the profession.

The initiative, called Sustaining and Strengthening Teaching, also includes Bank Street College where Wasley was dean of the Graduate School of Education before joining UW a year ago. Other partners are the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, the Teachers' Union Reform Network, and the Center for Educational Renewal, also based at the UW.

Such partnerships can go far toward breaking down the isolation between university-based teacher preparation programs and the classrooms where teachers practice their craft. "Too often new teachers hear that old saw, 'Well, you might have learned that in the university, but you're in the schools now,'" says Wasley. "I'd like to see more of a link so that we have a coherent pathway into teaching."

This means making changes in the schools of education, the dean acknowledges. “We’re redesigning our teacher preparation to focus on getting our candidates ready for the first two years of teaching,” she explains, rather than trying to prepare them for a lifetime in the field.

By their third year, most teachers are comfortable with the routines of their job “and are ready to go deeper into subject areas. They’re ready to master content and learn new ways to present it.” That’s the time to bring them back to the university for summer institutes and other forms of professional development that will help them build their repertoire of classroom skills, Wasley says. By the end of the fifth year, she expects, teachers who have been through the program should be ready to pursue certification by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards “and see coherence in their profession.”

Within the UW College of Education, this new approach to teacher preparation is getting nods of approval from the faculty.

“We’ve known for a long time that induction has been a problem. We know that many new teachers have a hard time,” Wasley says. “For our faculty, it’s a relief to consider a different way to prepare teachers. They no longer have to try to cover it all in one year. We recognize that new teachers need extended preparation and support,” she says.

It doesn’t hurt that Wasley has been down this path before. At Bank Street College, she led the faculty through a comprehensive redesign of the teacher education program and built new school-university partnerships with school districts. Previously, she focused on school change as a senior researcher at the Coalition of Essential Schools and Annenberg Institute of School Reform at Brown University.

As the UW teacher preparation program evolves, Wasley hopes it has lasting value for educators. “We hope our alumni will cycle back to us” for the support they need at different stages of their professional development. “We want the university to be a place that prepares, sustains, and supports teachers through the life of their careers.”

This year, for example, 10 first-year teachers are meeting regularly in a beginning career network, facilitated by Keiko Kawasaki who recently completed her master’s degree at UW. “She gathers them as a group every couple weeks, and she also meets with them individually” to provide additional collegial support, Wasley explains.

The university can also play a key role in training mentors to work with new teachers. “We know from research that mentors need training to be successful,” Wasley says. For starters, mentors need to know “what new teachers learned while they were here at the university, so that they can build on that knowledge,” she says. “A mentor should be able to tell a new teacher: ‘OK, I know you learned these two ways to teach reading while you were at the university. Let’s work with those methods until you’re comfortable using them in the classroom, then I’ll show you something new to add.’” Mentoring that is infused with intellectual content becomes connected to professional development and goes well beyond “showing someone where the erasers are kept,” Wasley says.

In her own career development, Wasley frequently returns to the classroom when she wants to master a new skill or try out a new approach for delivering instruction.

Early in her career, she taught high school in rural Washington. “It’s powerful,” she says, to be back in a classroom. “It keeps me fresh. And it’s good to remember how hard it is to teach—how wily kids are!” What she likes best is finding a public school teacher willing to take her on as a temporary classroom partner. “We can decide together what skills we want to add to our repertoire. Then we can coach each other.” She hopes to be teaching ninth-grade English part time next year.

“Expanding the repertoire” is something all teachers need to do throughout their careers, Wasley believes, whether they work in the elementary grades or teach graduate students. “It’s our professional responsibility.” Without change, teachers fall into predictable patterns that fail to excite students about learning. “Kids figure out routines quickly. They need greater variation, and not just in the curriculum. I’m also talking about pedagogy and assessment. We need to switch it up on them, keep them fresh.” The saddest scene in any classroom, says this veteran educator, “is when we don’t ask enough of kids, when we don’t push them, when we don’t keep them on the edge of their seats.”

—Suzie Boss



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# UNDER THE SAME SUN

RESEARCH SHOWS THAT WHEN TEACHER AND STUDENT SHARE BONDS OF CULTURE, LEARNING SOARS. IN ALASKAN VILLAGES LOCATED FAR FROM TRADITIONAL TEACHER PREP PROGRAMS, NEW RECRUITS WITH DEEP LOCAL ROOTS ARE TAKING AN INNOVATIVE ROUTE TO BECOMING TEACHERS.

Story and photos by  
DENISE JARRETT WEEKS

**KWETHLUK, Alaska**—“We don’t want you there. Get out,” the Saudi man told the *Frontline* TV reporter, referring to the American troops stationed in his homeland since Desert Storm. I’d never heard it stated so baldly before, and it made me feel defensive and a little dense, like an expansive guest who’s just discovered that everyone at the party thinks she’s a lout.

I watched this television interview shortly after visiting a Yup’ik village school in Alaska, near the Bering Sea. The urgency of cross-cultural relations, disastrously apparent to all of us after September 11, had preoccupied my thoughts the day I strode down the rutted road from Kwethluk’s dirt airstrip to its community school. I was there to learn about the interplay of Western and Alaska Native knowledge in the education of village youth. But, that day, I was particularly conscious of being a *kass’aq*, a white person with good but, perhaps, uninvited intentions.

I grew up in Anchorage, but this in no way educated me about the state’s first people. So I felt privileged to walk through Kwethluk, casting my eyes over the mottled tundra with its lacework of Kuskokwim River tributaries and having the chance to talk with students, teachers, and village elders. I particularly wanted to talk with

Dorothy Epchook.

Epchook grew up in Kwethluk and has been an associate teacher at the school for 10 years. She teaches Yup’ik Studies, instructing students in traditional skills and crafts and coaching them in the use of their native language. I wanted to talk to Epchook about the benefit to village students of having teachers who share their heritage. I’d heard that Alaska’s rural schools import up to 85 percent of their teachers—mostly white—from other states, and that many don’t stay beyond their first year. While the Lower Kuskokwim School District, which includes Kwethluk, hires the greatest number of Alaska Native teachers in the state, there are never enough.

I found Epchook in the library. We sat at a table near a row of Macintosh computers and a wall display of handmade fishnets. As she talked, her ready laughter dispelled my worry about being an unwelcome outsider, and, wanting to grasp every nuance of her meaning, I barely took my eyes off her. She sat back a moment and reminded me, kindly, that it was customary to lower one’s gaze when another speaks. I had a hard time remembering this, but, no matter, she cheerfully talked about what I’d come to learn.

“I was raised speaking Yup’ik,

but when I was 10 we moved to Egegik, and we lost it somehow. We were teenagers and wanted to be like everyone else, and the others didn’t speak Yup’ik,” she told me.

About 250 air miles south of Kwethluk, Egegik is on Alaska’s peninsula and has had a history of white influence since 1818, unlike many villages in the Lower Kuskokwim region where whites moved in a century later. English is commonly spoken there. Epchook finished elementary school in Egegik, but, when it came time for high school, her options were distressing.

At that time, Alaska typically funded village schools only through the lower grades. Village students were sent to boarding schools for their high school years. Like others, Epchook faced these prospects: Quit school and stay in her own community, or attend a boarding school on the other side of the state or a Bureau of Indian Affairs high school in the Lower 48. She chose to stay in school and was assigned to the Chilocco Indian School in Oklahoma. It was 1969.

“I learned the word hatred, bigotry,” she said. “In our culture there was no such thing. I was taught never to pass judgment on anybody. Grandfather always said, if you’re under the same sun, we’re the same.”

REPP intern Willa Towarak (top) meets with her university partner, who will work closely with Towarak and her mentor teacher during the coming school year.

Students in rural Alaska win big when their teachers share their roots—or are willing to put down new roots in the community.

## 14 SHAPING DESTINIES

The civil rights movement of the 1960s fueled objections to the Indian boarding school system, but little changed for Alaska Natives until the 1976 “Molly Hootch” Alaska Supreme Court out-of-court settlement, in which the state agreed to provide a tax-supported high school in any village that wanted one—and nearly all did. This settlement, coupled with the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act that established influential Native corporations, empowered Native communities to shape the educational destinies of their own young people. Schools were then expected to help village youth build a firm foundation in their heritage and language as part of preparing them for adulthood.

“I think it helps the students to have a Native teacher because they understand more about their culture,” said Epchook, who relearned the Yup’ik language when she returned to Kwethluk as an adult, “and learning how to make things for survival. If anything should happen, they’ll know how to survive anywhere and by any means. The [attack on the World Trade Center] towers made me think that I need to teach the kids how to survive, maybe without electricity.”

She’d invited a village elder to come to the classroom the next day



to show students how to make a *qalu*, a dip net for catching small white fish from the nearby Kuskokwim River.

“Every one of us is capable of teaching,” she continued. “By sharing [my teaching responsibility] with elders, students can learn from the elders how to stand on their own two feet. They will understand by teamwork, by working as one, they can accomplish anything.”

Epchook herself will be learning to make dip nets along with her students—how to use traditional finger measurements and where among the stands of reeds and grasses on the tundra one can find the special roots needed for the bindings. Teachers should foster an exchange of teaching and learning with their students, she said.

“It’s OK to have a student teach you, and that way you’ll see how much they’ve learned, and you can help them advance. I think being an excellent teacher you have to be, personally, humble. By being humble, by being very meek, students learn more from you, you learn more. If you let them know that you are a student, no matter what age, then you can go from there. And that’s how our elders taught us. That way, you have respect and trust. Even a non-Native teacher can do that—work hard to learn the culture—if you’re willing to.

A non-Native could be a teacher and a Native can help convey meaning to the students—it would be a working team.”

Such teams are common in the Lower Kuskokwim School District, a 44,000-square-mile area encompassing about 23 villages. A quarter of the district’s teaching staff is Alaska Native—about 65 teachers—and half of them are instructional aides who assist elementary teachers (requiring some college coursework) or teach Yup’ik culture and language (requiring village recognition of one’s expertise and nomination by the local school board). While such partnering is valuable in these bilingual schools, the need to increase the number of fully certified Alaska Native teachers persists. Instructional aides can’t teach core academic subjects such as mathematics and science, where the confluence of Western and Native knowledge is especially rich. While their classroom experience and cultural expertise help make them strong candidates for a teacher preparation program, living in rural Alaska presents formidable challenges to pursuing college degrees.

“Life here is very demanding,” Epchook told me. It’s easy to see what she means. A village lifestyle not only includes modern chores—jobs, bills, taxes, elec-

tions, and community meetings—it involves the traditional demands of subsistence fishing and hunting, extended family obligations, close living quarters, and geographic isolation and hardship. Phone and Internet service can be patchy, if available at all. There are no roads to these villages. All transportation is by small airplane or barge, skiff, or snowmobile up the Kuskokwim River from the Bering Sea.

These realities of village life make it difficult to leave to attend college in a city. While some Alaska colleges and universities offer distance-delivery courses leading to undergraduate degrees and teacher certification, an aide who is working full time in the classroom may need up to 10 to 15 years to complete her program.

“For me, I’m 50, I’m looking at maybe I should go back and get that degree,” said Epchook, laughing wryly, “I keep taking [distance-delivery] courses, and I’m always at level 101. It’s almost like a glitch in the computer: one-oh-one, one-oh-one, one-oh-one.”

And so, the conundrum: To staff Alaska’s schools with more Native teachers who are grounded in Western knowledge and Native tradition, prospective Native teachers frequently must leave their villages to get their college degrees. But this separates them from village life

and the sources of tradition that help make them especially valuable as teachers.

## PREPARING RURAL EDUCATORS

Since the “Molly Hootch” settlement, the state of Alaska has tried to provide Alaska Native students with teachers who can teach the curriculum in the context of Alaska’s indigenous heritages. One strategy has been to prepare *all* teachers to teach in village schools. To be certified in the state, all prospective teachers must complete coursework in Alaska studies and multicultural education. As part of its reform measures, the state also introduced voluntary Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools, a document prepared by the Alaska Native Knowledge Network and approved by the Assembly of Alaska Native Educators.

But the ideal, most agree, is to increase the number of Alaska Native teachers, especially in schools serving a majority of Native students. Studies validate this. A recent study by the National Bureau of Economic Research demonstrated that students of color significantly improved in their math and reading achievement after having spent as little as one year with a same-race teacher.

The state has launched several programs over the years to help in-

dividuals from the villages earn teaching certificates. One of the latest is the Rural Educator Preparation Partnership (REPP), launched in 1996 by University of Alaska, Fairbanks, with funding from a half-million dollar federal grant. In the first year of the program, 11 of the 13 REPP interns who enrolled were Alaska Native. Today, very few of the 40 interns enrolled are Native. The reason for the reversal, said REPP Director John Weise, is the small number each year of Native students who complete undergraduate degrees, a requirement to qualify for the REPP program.

“We nearly depleted our qualified pool of Native applicants that first year,” said Weise.

REPP is a “fifth-year,” or post-baccalaureate, teacher preparation program that is aligned with the state’s teaching standards. It enables students with undergraduate degrees in any major to earn their teaching certificates by working full time as interns in village schools, teaching side-by-side with regular classroom teachers who serve as their mentors. Both mentors and interns receive guidance from university faculty members. During the school year, interns teach, complete assigned readings, participate in audio seminars, write papers, and occasionally meet together at the university in

Fairbanks. Their portfolios are expected to reflect their mastery of theory, practice, and academic content, as well as a deep understanding of multicultural contexts and how to involve families and communities in the schools.

### BRIDGING CULTURES

REPP Director John Weise grew up in Bethel, across the river from Kwethluk in the district's largest community with 5,500 residents. He is a tall, soft-spoken man with a ready sense of humor. A professor of education at UAF, Weise also has been a classroom teacher and district superintendent in rural Alaska communities. He remembers being a college freshman at UAF and flipping through the pages of the course catalog. To him, it was "like a supermarket" of tantalizing discoveries, and he wanted to pluck a course from every shelf. One class, Orientation to Education, required

him and his classmates to help out for a couple of weeks in classrooms at Lathrop High School and Joy Elementary. The experience was a decisive one for Weise. "Something clicked, I guess, and I wanted to become a teacher," he said.

At the time, UAF offered a field-based teacher education program, the Alaska Rural Teacher Training Corps (ARTTC), in which students could earn teaching degrees while assisting teachers in rural schools. Weise chose to earn his teaching certificate through this program, and, in his final year, he went to Metlakatla, on the southernmost tip of Alaska's Panhandle. Mornings, he and a few fellow ARTTC students would study and discuss their coursework, and afternoons they would teach in classrooms at the local school.

The program, later called the Cross-Cultural Education Develop-

ment Program (X-CED), graduated more than 200 Alaska Native teachers through the 1970s and 1980s. Students followed the same curriculum as campus-based students—general education, teaching methods, and a teaching practicum—but their instructors were UAF faculty field coordinators who traveled a regional circuit. Videotapes featuring lectures by other UAF faculty arrived weekly.

"I learned to be a teacher by teaching, reading, and looking at these tapes. I could read Piaget and then go the next day into my sixth-grade classroom and ask my students if the clock on the wall was alive or dead—then I'd go back and read that book again!" said Weise, poking fun at his first attempts to blend theory and practice. But he's very serious about the value of learning to teach while teaching, believing it can be better



Kwethluk teacher Beverly Chmielarczyk (at right) has made the village her home for several years, learning by living there to see where Native and Western knowledge intersect and how to infuse this into her instruction. When village students learn from both non-Native and Native teachers, they can look to these adults as role models for cross-cultural relationships and ideas.





about creating special programs for prospective Native teachers. While the intent might be good, they worry about creating a two-tiered system in which Native teachers might receive inferior training.

“It’s more important to have a good teacher than to have a lousy teacher who looks like you,” said Sam.

But what if you have a *good* teacher who looks like you?

Willa Towarak Eckenweiler is a REPP intern in Unalakleet this year. For several weeks now, she’s been working with a small group of first-graders on their reading skills at the same school she attended when she was a child. The youngsters are cute and eager, and they remind her of herself—at the very age when one of her teachers made a lasting impression.

“I had some Native teachers who were from the village, and I think about them, about how we were taught and how we used to enjoy listening to them,” said Eckenweiler. “I have been thinking about my teacher I had in elementary school, who enjoyed telling us stories about hunting and Native games.”

Today, Eckenweiler is married and the mother of two daughters. For the past 14 years, she’s coached Unalakleet’s Native Youth Olympics in which students compete for state

preparation for the profession than traditional campus-based programs. He stresses, however, that any distance-delivery program must factor in human contact.

As a team, mentor teachers and interns work closely every day of a school year. This one-to-one relationship is an essential aspect of the program, said Weise. And if one of them is Alaska Native and the other non-Native, they have an opportunity to model for students how to work together and negotiate the intersection of Native and Western cultures, essential lessons for village youth. Even the most remote Alaska village has been deeply influenced by mainstream America, said Weise, whose own family includes Yup’ik and Norwegian ancestors.

“You tell me where I can live as

only a one-race type person,” Weise stated flatly. “You can’t do it in Alaska.” To help prepare students for productive and fulfilling adult lives—whether they choose to stay in their village communities or move elsewhere—they need role models, others who’ve successfully bridged the cultures, he said.

### MENTORING AND ROLE MODELING

Sam Bailey and his wife Lana grew up in Unalakleet, on the shores of the Bering Sea. With an undergraduate degree in mathematics from University of Alaska, Anchorage, Sam earned his teaching certificate through the REPP program. Today, he teaches math and she is vice principal at Galena High School, on the Yukon River.

In some ways, Sam envies Lana,

who received her teacher training from a traditional program at Pacific University in Oregon (although the REPP program supervised her student teaching practicum in Galena). He suspects he might have learned more about the nitty-gritty of teaching from formal coursework.

“You spend an entire year in the classroom” as a REPP intern, he said, “but I don’t think you really understand all of it. You’re at the mercy of your mentor teacher, and if they can’t help with methods or how to present a lesson, you have to learn on your own. I never knew what to ask my mentor teacher.”

Although the REPP program helped them earn their teaching certificates, Sam and Lana, who are Alaska Native, are ambivalent

championships in such contests as the Alaskan high kick and the seal hop. Now, she is training to be a classroom teacher. It's easy to trace the line of influence back to the teacher who captivated her students with stories of Native life.

"We need to have role models to let the kids see that there are jobs to be had if they go and get their education," she said. "One way to keep our culture, values, and traditions alive is for local people to stay here and work in the village."

In fact, as Sam Bailey pointed out, Unalakleet is a village where "the professionals look like the community," meaning that Native people are among the physician's assistants, dentists, economic developers, airline managers, and other college-educated specialists.

"I have 11 brothers and sisters and . . . six got degrees from the university in Fairbanks. Education was a big deal in our house," said Eckenweiler. "I even have a niece who will be graduating from MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology]."

The credit must go to the parents in the village for having high expectations for their children, she said.

"It was really stressed that you really needed to go to school. Once that standard was set, where students went to college, then they

came back and had kids and they expect a little more from their own children," she said.

Eckenweiler expects her own two daughters to follow suit, but there's another part of their lives that she wants them to embrace, too.

"I would like to see them earn a college degree *and* be able to remember their Native heritage," she said. "I think it's important not to lose our identity. Nowadays, it's so easy to get caught up in mainstream society and be just like everybody else. It's important to keep our own culture alive, our own identity, and be proud of it. So they will not be afraid to accomplish their goals."

## TEACHING TO LEARN

For many, teaching students about their heritage becomes a personal journey in which they, too, discover the richness of their ancestry.

"Teaching in your own language builds your self-esteem," said Nita Rearden, a specialist in Yup'ik Studies for the Lower Kuskokwim School District and an alum of the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, campus-based teacher preparation program. "You discover who you are, your ancestors, your values."

While much about village life has changed from the old ways, young people still need to nurture their roots, she said. "They adapt into another culture, but they still

need their tools, their Yup'ik values. Those were already in existence before we ever had contact with white people."

In fact, ancestral ways of viewing and being in the world still exhibit a strong influence on village youth, and students are more apt to master Western knowledge if they also can apply their Native knowledge and skills and learn in the context of their environment and culture. "If we build where kids are, how much easier that would be," said Rearden.

Ray Barnhardt, education professor at University of Alaska, Fairbanks, and director of the Alaska Native Knowledge Network, agreed. "The extent to which instruction and curriculum are linked to students' language and cultural context, you reap all kinds of benefits," he said. Students' academic achievement rises—even on standardized tests—their motivation improves, and they're less likely to drop out of school, he said.

"If we accept that, then how do we do it? By developing curriculum and instructional strategies to engage students in the study of their place and their culture. But teachers need to know something about that place, its history, how they live their lives. So the next question is: Who's best equipped to do that?" he said.

A new non-Native teacher will

need at least a couple of years to learn something about the village's culture and incorporate it effectively into classroom instruction, Barnhardt said. "And then they leave. But people who are from the villages, those people don't leave." Eighty-five percent of the 300 Alaska Native teachers who began teaching during the past 25 years are still out there teaching, he said.

"Those teachers are now senior staff, and they're beginning to influence their schools . . . leading the way for providing Native students with an education that's second to none. But we need the educational system to be supportive of what they have to offer," not only by developing curriculum and instructional models for integrating Native and Western knowledge, he said, but by recognizing the special attributes Alaska Native teachers bring to the classroom.

"There's often an expectation from principals that a quality teacher is bubbly and high-energy. Native teachers very seldom exhibit all of those qualities, yet their students outperform those who don't have a Native teacher," Barnhardt said.

Expecting those who live in the villages to leave their communities to attend campus-based teacher preparation programs, "like everyone else," is misguided, he said.

Their cultural expertise is often inextricably linked with being a part of the fabric of that community.

“Coming to a university in Fairbanks or Anchorage or wherever, you can become detached from your own community. In the four or five years it takes to complete your degree program, you have other experiences, and it’s sometimes hard to come back to the village,” he said. Programs such as REPP allow village residents to do their studies in the context of their community and language.

However, Rearden said, “I feel that it is important to mention to those who choose to complete their college degree, it is OK to do so on campus, and they do not need to stay in a village. You can always regain any Native knowledge when you return to your village or in other villages, but I really think colleges should include Alaskan Studies to make the learning on campuses interesting, relevant, and to be aware of the importance of learning our own language.”

But distance-delivery programs are neither easier nor a shortcut to a teaching career, said Barnhardt. “I find the students in the distance-education program more motivated, more mature, and less concerned about grades. They’re grappling with real-world issues out there. They’re going to be

going into the classroom the next day and trying to put into use those ideas and strategies they’re learning about.”

## LEARNING THE ROPES

In the Kwethluk school library that day, Dorothy Epchook taught me, just as she teaches her students every year, how to make a fishnet for catching salmon. She brought out a finished net, maybe 12 feet long. It was rolled neatly, and the layers of thin nylon cord gave it a silky sage-colored appearance, like a bound lock of hair from a beautiful giant. She showed me how she grades the students’ handiwork, pointing to the tight knots of nylon cord that should align perfectly when the net is rolled up.

“They must line up, like this,” she said, running her finger across each straight row. “Here, I will show you how to make a net.”

I was nervous, afraid I’d prove to be a slow learner. She said, “Everyone can learn. This is how I teach my students.”

From a large plastic bag she pulled out nylon cord, rope, hand-tooled wood blocks, and net-weaving tools.

“These are made by the students,” she said, showing me a wooden square block measuring *patneq*, or a width of four fingers. We sat on the floor of the library.

She tied one end of the nylon to the leg of a chair, let out a length of cord, and wrapped the other end around the wooden block, crossing over and under, and knotting it in such a way as to create the first square in the mesh.

“Do you see?” she asked me. “Here, I will do it again.”

I watched intently, wanting to be able to replicate her movements exactly. She handed me the spool and said, “Now you do it.” I tossed the cord around the wood block. “No,” she said, “like this. Let me show you again.” On my next try, I worked the nylon cord around the block of wood as she had, knotting it snugly. “Very tight,” she said. “Make sure it is very tight. Good! You did it!” She praised me, and I laughed with her, proud of my little triumph.

“Now do another one,” she said, firm in her desire to see me make perfect knots that would align in an elegant row. Afterward, we cleaned up—she, insisting that I keep my little net and keep practicing—and I noticed that I felt good, valuable, and worthy. And this, of course, must be how she makes her students feel.

That afternoon, Epchook walked with me back down the dirt road to the airstrip. She continued to teach me all along the way—the medicinal uses for the wormwood that grew beside the road, the historical

value of an age-old sweat house. When we came to the end of the road, I asked her how to say goodbye in Yup’ik, and she said there is no such word. Instead, Yup’ik people say, *tua-i-ngunrituq*, it’s not the end. I practiced the word, and she praised me loudly: “You’ve got it! You’ve got it!”

Then my plane taxied up, and we parted. I called back to her, “*Tua-i-ngunrituq!*” and, without thinking added, “Bye!”

“No!” she hollered back, “There’s no goodbye!”

I hoped she was right. □

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# MR. FISHER FINDS HIS CALLING



IN A FOURTH-GRADE CLASSROOM, A NEW TEACHER GRAPPLES WITH HIS STUDENTS' DIVERSE LEARNING NEEDS, INADEQUATE TEXTBOOKS, AND THE ISOLATION THAT COMES WITH BEING A ROOKIE. CAN HE BECOME THE TEACHER HE WANTS TO BE?

Story and photos by SUZIE BOSS

**ESTACADA, Oregon**—At 6:45 a.m. on the day after Labor Day, Sam Fisher enters the doors of River Mill Elementary School and walks to a classroom located at the far end of a long hallway. His fourth-graders won't join him here for another two hours and 20 minutes, but he wants to be ready. The week before, he came in to set up bulletin boards, arrange desks, and meet his fellow teachers. A few of them rolled their eyes and wished him luck with "that bubble" of fourth-graders he's been assigned. He shrugged off the warnings, eager to start the year with hope as his only prejudice. Outside his classroom, he has posted a construction paper sign that reads, "Welcome to Mr. Fisher's School." There are 24 little fishes—one for each student—swimming toward a schoolhouse.

At 9:05 a.m., when the students enter the room, they are quieter than he expected. He settles them onto the carpeted corner of the room for a get-acquainted game. Shyly at first, they size him up.

They notice that he is bearded but has shaved his head so he looks bald as a cue ball. He wears shoes with the heels missing and tie-dyed socks. One student asks why he wears those hoop earrings. Doesn't he know that guys wear studs? When he smiles in response, 24 grins come back at him. He tells them that he and his brother grew up in Estacada, too. They play a name game, filling in the blanks in the sentence: "I'm \_\_\_\_\_ and I like \_\_\_\_\_." At the end, he manages to go back around the circle, showing that he knows all their names and something special about each person.

The next day, the school counselor tells him that a boy who had a rough go of it last year is excited to be assigned to this classroom. "I think Mr. Fisher is interested in me," the boy confided. Hearing this, Sam Fisher grabs for his heart.

His teaching career has begun.

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WHAT EVERY STUDENT CRAVES: UNDIVIDED ATTENTION.

In classrooms all over the country, about 100,000 new teachers are launching their careers this school year. They are among the most closely observed rookies in history, as researchers search for effective ways to support newcomers and stem the looming teacher shortage. Half of those who started teaching in September are expected to leave the field within five years. Why do some stay? What makes others leave? And how do the inevitable bumps of their first year affect the learning of students entrusted to their classrooms? For a new teacher like Sam Fisher, the school year opens with more questions than answers. Has he made the right choice? Is he up to the task? Can he be everything he hopes to be? He and his 24 students will discover the answers together as the school year unfolds.

At 30, Fisher is a little older, and

perhaps a little wiser, than the typical rookie. Although he grew up in a family of educators, he didn't head into the field directly after college. "Money was important to me for a while," he admits. After earning degrees in business and theater from Lewis & Clark College in Portland, he worked in sales in Seattle and then moved to San Francisco, hoping to combine his passion for music with business opportunities in technology. That bubble burst around the time a first marriage failed, and he came home to Oregon to regroup.

Estacada is the kind of place that made the Westward Migration worth the walk. Located on the banks of the Clackamas River and in the shadow of Mt. Hood, it's a classic timber town of about 2,000, 45 miles from Portland. Fisher's great-great grandfather homesteaded here in the 1860s along a

spur of the Oregon Trail, and members of his extended family still own 700 acres of forests and fields. From the living room of the house his parents built when he was 10, Fisher can see a patchwork of green rolling toward the horizon. Every stick and stone within sight belongs to someone in his family.

For all its splendor, Estacada has seen hard times in recent decades, with a rural poverty rate pushed upward by mill closures. When Fisher was in sixth grade and again during his junior year of high school, Estacada made headlines for having to close its schools because tax levies had failed. Today, the state has a safety net to prevent such school closures, but Estacadans are still debating how to build a more stable economic base for their town.

For Fisher, especially, Estacada holds a melancholy beauty. In 1998, he spent what he remembers as "a perfect day" here with his parents, enjoying the sweet, simple pleasure of being in each other's company. A day later, his mother and father were killed in a car accident. Suddenly, everywhere he looked he could see their footprints—at the house they designed to have no right angles, at the historic community church where the family has gathered for generations, in the garden they tended during long sum-

mer vacations. His mother taught high school German in Portland; his father was a school psychologist in Vancouver, Washington.

After some soul-searching, Fisher decided to steer his own career toward the familiar waters of education. "I took some time first," he says, "to make sure I was deciding to go into teaching for the right reasons." He re-enrolled at Lewis & Clark College. But as the old saying goes, you can never step into the same river twice. This time around, he was a graduate student in education, pursuing a master's degree in teaching. During the 15 months of that rigorous program, he somehow found time for love. His new wife and her two young sons joined him at the Fisher family home, which began to feel wonderfully full again. When he heard the boys' voices echoing from the loft, he couldn't help but smile. This was a house made for child's play.

When it came time to look for a teaching job, Fisher set his sights on Estacada. During the summer before the 2000–2001 school year, the principal at River Mill called to invite him for an interview. Fisher recognized the name: Larry Adamson had been his pre-calculus teacher at Estacada High School. Fisher was excited by his summer interview. It involved not only the principal, but also a team of teach-

## A BEGINNER'S BOOKSHELF

Which books offer the advice and inspiration a first-year teacher needs? Here are a handful that Sam Fisher found helpful as he navigated his rookie year of teaching in a fourth-grade classroom.

• **Tribes: A New Way of Learning and Being Together** by Jeanne Gibbs. Fisher relied on this classic guide to building a learning community to get the school year off to a positive start. Gibbs draws on more than 20 years of experience to outline a process for building collaboration, cooperative problem solving, and inclusion in the classroom.

• **Comprehensive Classroom Management: Creating Communities of Support and Solving Problems** by Vernon F. Jones and Louise S. Jones. Fisher credits this book with helping him build a strong foundation for managing his classroom and dealing fairly with behavioral challenges.

• **Mosaic of Thought: Teaching Comprehension in a Reader's Workshop** by Ellin Oliver Keene and Susan Zimmerman. Fisher first encountered this book in graduate school and found it worth another look as he sought to help students of diverse abilities become more proficient and enthusiastic readers.

• **Craft Lessons: Teaching Writing K-8** by Ralph Fletcher and Joann Portalupi. Fisher turned to these authors to help make his writing workshops more successful. He liked the book for its discussion of concepts as well as its practical ideas and mini-lessons.

ers. What's more, the principal had arranged for five students to come in so that Fisher could demonstrate his classroom skills. "It felt friendly," he recalls. When Adamson showed him around the building, Fisher discovered that his classroom would be right next door to the music room—where the same teacher who taught him when he was in elementary school is teaching a new generation of children to love music.

To be honest, Fisher doesn't remember much about his own fourth-grade year. "I remember the relationships, but not what I learned in history or science." He knows that standards have become substantially more important since he was a kid, but he hopes there's room to help kids reach benchmarks and also master social skills. "A lot of school is about how to relate," he says. "If these kids can function as human beings, they can learn to do anything."

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A month into the school year, Fisher stands before his class, textbook open to a unit on earth science. The book describes an experiment in which students are supposed to mimic erosion by dripping water onto sand. It isn't working. Sand doesn't behave the same way that soil does. The teacher detects another problem. During his

year of student teaching, Fisher worked alongside a skillful veteran who used the inquiry method to teach science. He remembers the look in her students' eyes when they were engaged in investigations that answered their own authentic questions about the world. He looks up now and sees vacant stares heading for the windows. He snaps his book shut and asks the class, "Is it just me, or is this boring?"

That gets their attention.

"Tomorrow," he promises, "we'll start a new unit."

Then he asks the class to suggest ways that the Earth changes. That's the larger lesson that fourth-graders are supposed to master in science. What do they wonder about? What intrigues them? In the lively discussion that ensues, several students bring up questions about volcanoes. Fisher feels his own curiosity heating up. "Tomorrow," he promises, "we'll start on volcanoes."

A promise made to 24 students means that a rookie teacher will be

See FISHER, Page 36



STUDENT HIGHLIGHTS: SINGING THE ELECTRICITY SONG, WRITING GHOST STORIES.





# PIPELINE TO TOMORROW

NONTRADITIONAL TEACHER CANDIDATES OFTEN MUST MAKE HERCULEAN EFFORTS AND FINANCIAL SACRIFICES TO PREPARE FOR NEW CAREERS IN THE CLASSROOM. A MODEL PROGRAM HELPS SMOOTH THE WAY.

Story by LEE SHERMAN

Photos by MOUNT BURNS

**PORTLAND, Oregon**—A trio of third-graders files solemnly into the office that Lemil Speed shares with another teacher at Ball Elementary School. Two little girls, neatly coiffed in pigtails and cornrows, and a very small boy, as serious as a diplomat on a dangerous mission, line up before him. It's impossible to miss the respect in their wide eyes as they wait for Mr. Speed to speak.

You'd expect this powerfully built man (who looks more like a former football player than the ex-banker he is) to talk in the booming tones of a coach. But as he leans toward their expectant faces, his voice is softly reassuring, quietly encouraging. With congratulations for their good work and a

gentle admonition to keep it up, Speed awards daily stickers to the threesome before sending them back to class.

As you follow Speed around this struggling inner-city school, as you watch him teach a writing lesson, pinch-hit for the principal, or mentor another teacher on meeting benchmarks, you'd think he'd been an educator forever. But teaching is a second career for this 56-year-old who grew up in an all-black community in the segregated South. After a long stint in the Air Force, a couple of years at McDonald's, and then a solid banking career that included being affirmative action officer for First Interstate, Speed found himself out of work during the recession of the 1980s. It was then that someone told him about the Portland Teachers Program. And it was there that he found his calling. Now in his seventh year of teaching, he says of the profession: "I don't see myself doing anything else."

For 13 years, the Portland Teachers Program has been redirecting the talents and ambitions

of people like Lemil Speed toward the classroom. A public school-university partnership that recruits and supports minority teacher candidates throughout their professional training, the program serves students ranging in age from 18 to 55. The average age is 29. These nontraditional students are, in the words of PTP Director Deborah Cochrane, "entrenched in reality."

"We tend not to take the kinds of people who have stars in their eyes," says Cochrane, who runs the program almost single-handedly out of the northeast Portland campus of one of the program's sponsors, Portland Community College (PCC). Many of the 65 current students are parents themselves; many have steered their own kids through Portland Public Schools, another PTP partner. Virtually all have had some first-hand experience working with kids, lots of them as paraeducators. The program waives full-time tuition at PCC for two years, and then at Portland State University for upper-division and School of Education graduate requirements. But stu-

dents are on their own to pay bills and buy groceries throughout the five-year program. Most must make a Herculean effort to support themselves and their families.

"These are amazing people," says Cochrane, who herself grew up with hardship as a child of rural poverty. "I was talking to one of my graduate students last night, and she waits till her kids are in bed to do *enormous* amounts of homework after student teaching all day and taking courses in the late afternoon and early evening."

Lemil Speed is no exception to this characterization. He and his wife tried to scrape by on her income and keep up with child support payments to his former spouse. But when the budget wouldn't stretch anymore, he took a \$6-an-hour job at the Expo Center as a laborer.

His keystone through the five-year grind was PTP. When the going got rough, he and his fellow students found comfort in the comradeship of others with a similar struggle and shared goals. Equally important was Cochrane herself. By all accounts, she is infi-

nitely more than an administrator. Her role includes mentor, counselor, confidant, and, now and then, mother. For her students, she provides encouragement, problem solving, advocacy, and guidance.

"There were a lot of people who helped me along the way," says Speed, "but Deborah was the one who was always there, always checking in. To me, she is the Portland Teachers Program."

Speed's career has taken off. Last year, he was recruited for a new position at Ball—instructional specialist—created to assist teachers in a districtwide push to raise academic standards at struggling schools. And he has been accepted into a competitive principal preparation program sponsored by the district.

#### NUMEROUS INITIATIVES

PTP is one of the oldest of a number of programs throughout the Northwest designed to pull nontraditional candidates into the teacher-preparation pipeline (see sidebar, Page 28). The need for new teachers over the next decade is critical. The need for minority teachers who reflect the growing diversity of America's student population is perhaps even more acute.

In Oregon, for example, minority students make up almost 20 percent of public school enrollment. Yet, minority teachers, including administrators, account for only 4 percent of faculty employed by school districts and education service districts, according to the *Minority Teacher Report: A Ten-Year Perspective* prepared by the Oregon University System and the Governor's Office of Education and Workforce Policy and presented to the legislature in February 2001. The report describes progress on Oregon's Minority Teacher Act of 1991, which called for equalizing the proportion of nonwhite teachers and the proportion of nonwhite students.

The act mandated that the Board of Higher Education require each public teacher education program to prepare a plan with specific goals, strategies, and deadlines for recruitment, admission, retention, and graduation of minority teachers. The numbers show, however, that 10 years later, the gap remains. Reasons cited in the report include sluggish school employment due to scarce resources and teaching's low salaries and prestige relative to other professions. Also, the legislature's

mandate had no funds attached, and it coincided with the devastating impact of Oregon's property tax-limitation Measure 5.

But the picture is not all bleak. "In spite of resource scarcities," the report notes, "numerous initiatives have been instituted over the past decade to attempt to address the shortage of minority educators, particularly teachers, in Oregon schools." One such initiative was the November 1997 meeting, Diversifying the Teacher Workforce in the Northwest, sponsored by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. According to the report, the Oregon group formed a planning team that developed a "multistep plan" that included: (1) coordinated, statewide commitment and action; (2) multiple, targeted strategies among the key stakeholder groups; (3) statewide policy direction from the top; and (4) specific projects and initiatives with the highest priority on paraprofessional career-ladder programs, professional development of the current workforce, and a statewide Oregon diversity teacher program. That program, the group said, should be modeled on the Portland Teachers Program.

Over its lifetime, PTP has turned

out 70 graduates, most of whom have gone to work in the increasingly diverse Portland School District. But it's not just the numbers that make the program an attractive model for others to follow—it's the quality behind the numbers. Cochrane is careful to point out that the program is selective and committed to turning out *good* teachers, not just minority teachers. "The PTP really pushes excellence—that's Number One," she says. "We expect that all the teachers who come out of the program will be exceptional teachers."

PTP students must keep their grades up and attend seminars, colloquia, and other special activities in addition to their formal coursework. Although students sign a contract promising to apply to teach in Portland, and if hired, to stay for at least three years, a job with the district is not guaranteed. "We want Portland Public Schools to hire them because they're the best person for the job," Cochrane explains, "*not* because they're African American, *not* because they're Native American, *not* because they're Latino or Asian American."

#### FOLLOWING HER HEART

Takiyah Williams grew up on the



West Indies island of Trinidad off the Venezuelan coast. The diverse people who populate this former British colony speak English, though their lineage spans the planet, particularly Africa, India, China, and Syria. When the islanders speak, consonants are soft and languid. Williams' voice as she teaches carries a melodious lilt hinting of rain forests and azure surf lapping at trackless sand. From the birthplace of calypso and steel drum, she also brings a love of music.

If you observe Williams at work with her first-graders at Faubian Elementary School, you're likely to be invited to join a joyous march around the room before recess to "The Marching Song" on a tape called *Run, Jump, Skip, and Sing*. You'll hear 20 tiny voices singing the days of the week in Spanish and see 20 tiny bodies gyrating to silly rhyming songs such as "My Dog Dingo" or "Luckless Lucy," created to teach letter sounds. And you'll see students smoothly transition from one activity to another at the cueing of a soothing Celtic tune.

"Music and the arts are really big for me," says Williams, lamenting that districtwide budget

cuts have whittled most visual and performing arts programs down to bare bones.

Williams perfectly reflects the program's emphasis on excellence. "Principals fight over her," Cochrane reveals. Like so many PTP students, Williams started out in another field. For her it was business administration and computer applications, which she studied at City University of New York while living with relatives and earning money by babysitting, walking dogs, and any other flexible work she could find. The child of an impoverished family who was the first to finish college, Williams was initially motivated by the promise of a fat salary that could help lift her and her loved ones into the middle class. She managed a Wendy's fast-food restaurant in New York for a while, worked for the provost at CUNY, and then moved to Atlanta where she worked in human resources at MCI. The money was good, but she felt no passion for the work. "It just wasn't my thing," she recalls.

Determined to seek a career in teaching, she loaded her kids, then two and six, into the car and headed to Portland, where she has family. To save money on food for the

## RECRUITING TEACHERS OF COLOR

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28 “A student today could go through 12 years of education without ever seeing a teacher of color,” Mildred Hudson of Recruiting New Teachers told the National Education Association in May. In its newsletter, *NEA Today*, the teacher union points out that nationwide, one-third of public school students are minorities, yet only 13 percent of the teaching force are minority educators. Fully 40 percent of schools have no minority teachers at all.

To address this discrepancy, educators in the Northwest are employing a variety of strategies to bring more minorities into the teaching profession and keep them there. Here is a sampling:

**Bilingual Teachers Pathway Program**—This Portland State University program is designed for bilingual and bicultural educational assistants who want to become licensed teachers. In partnership with four area community colleges and 20 local school districts, the program recruits paraprofessionals for a seamless program of coursework and field experience. With the support of Title VII dollars, the program will create a teacher licensure and degree program with an English-as-a-second-language endorsement, as well as providing individualized advising, assessment, student services, financial support, mentors, and community building. For more information, call (503) 725-4704.

**Montana Systemic Teacher Excellence Preparation (STEP) Program**—A National Science Foundation-funded project, the STEP Program was designed to smooth the pathway between the state's seven tribal colleges and campuses with teacher preparation programs, according to Professor Elisabeth Swanson, Director of the Science and Math Resource Center at Montana State University, Bozeman. To attract more Native American students to the teaching profession, particularly in math and science, the program has held a series of summer institutes to bring faculties together to reform math, science, and education curricula. They have also worked on ways to attract and retain minority students. Because “there can be more students in one introductory course at the university than in an entire town on the reservation,” Swanson says, many Native students find four-year colleges “daunting” and “scary.” So the program has organized “bridge” institutes to provide cohorts of tribal students with math and science coursework and experience in campus life within a supportive structure. For more information, call (406) 994-5952.

**Alaska Recruitment and Retention Project**—To keep new teachers in the classroom and address a severe shortage of teachers in Alaska's isolated villages, a \$2.5 million U.S. Department of Education grant is funding a variety of activities delivered through school districts and service providers, says Eric Madsen, project director. One strategy is providing trained mentors and extra inservice days for all new teachers. A rural practicum for preservice teachers gives novices a “realistic picture of teaching in the bush—that it isn't ‘neat and romantic’ as some people imagine,” says Madsen. Other incentives aimed at retaining teachers in the bush include improving teacher housing by providing, for example, new carpeting and insulation, and paying for professional development expenses. The other piece is providing better “connectivity” to ease isolation—that is, reliable phone, Internet, and e-mail services, according to Madsen. For more information, call (907) 465-2970.

seven-day drive, she bought a one-burner hot plate and cooked oatmeal, eggs, and rice in rest stops and supermarket parking lots along the way.

It wasn't long before she heard about PTP, but the application deadline was tight. With no typewriter or computer, she was frantically trying to finish the application on the bus just hours before the deadline. She flew off the bus, ran to the PTP office, squeezed herself into the crowded office, and begged to use the computer.

Cochrane says this kind of intensity is the norm for her students.

"I really feel passionate about the commitment level of my students—they really *want* to be here," she says from her office as she juggles a constantly jangling phone and a steady flow of students dropping in for a minute of her time. "When you ask them, 'Why do you want to be a teacher?' they say things like, 'I want to make a difference for someone like me,' or 'My kids are in public school, and I don't like what I see—I want to change it.' The career-change people say, 'This wasn't satisfying to me,' or 'I realized money's not important,' or 'I

want to do something meaningful.' A lot of it is just wanting to give back to the community—somebody made a difference in *their* life, and they want to pass that on."

#### ROLE MODELS FOR ALL

Bud Mackay's ancestry is a blend of European and American Indian. Although his dad came from the Ute tribe (from which his home state of Utah got its name), he was raised by his mom and stepfather off the reservation. In the small town of Vernal, Mackay stood out.

"Nary did I ever have a teacher of color as a role model," he recalls. "It was not uncommon for me to be called 'nigger' as a child. I was the closest thing to black that they had in our district. It was painful and hurtful."

It was partly to spare other children the experience of being "negated" that he decided to pursue teaching after his used-car dealership failed during an economic downturn. He landed a job at Clark Elementary School, where he teaches ESL behind the scarlet curtains of a stage converted to a classroom. "I think it's very important that we have teachers of color in the classroom," he says. He felt validated the very moment he met

Cochrane. "She gave me this feeling that 'you may have been negated then, but you're not going to be anymore.'"

Cochrane offers several reasons that kids should have teachers who represent all groups in the nation's multiethnic mix. First and most obvious, she says, children of color need role models who "look like they do." They need to see that "they, too, could achieve a position of authority and power—the power to pass on knowledge. They need to know that they can accomplish things, that they can go to college and get a degree and be a professional."

Second, she says, kids need teachers who are connected to their culture, teachers who "understand the cultural implications of learning, understand different learning styles, understand family dynamics and incorporate that into the curriculum."

Third, says Cochrane, these teachers can bring cultural insights into the school as a whole, sharing their perspective with other teachers and with administrators. And, finally, minority teachers are important role models for kids who *don't* look like them, as well.

"On a larger scale, long term, what you really hope is that having more diversity in the teaching workforce will have some impact on racism in this society," she says. "If children—all children—learn from a diversity of cultural and ethnic perspectives, then they grow up with a whole different view of reality." □



## WALLA WALLA'S MENTORING PROGRAM HELPS NEOPHYTES TRIUMPH OVER THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING

STORY & PHOTOS BY JOYCE RIHA LINK

**WALLA WALLA, Washington**— Amidst the arid bunchgrass and sagebrush plateaus of southeastern Washington winds a verdant river valley, steeped in history. The Walla Walla, Nez Perce, Cayuse, and Umatilla tribes once roamed this valley and fished in its rivers and streams. Lewis and Clark passed through during their legendary westward journey in 1805 and traded goods with the Native Americans. Not long after, the settlement of “many waters”—Walla Walla—was established as a fort and trading post, while the neighboring Whitman Mission became home to one of the region’s first schoolhouses.

Evidence documents that this school’s early teachers faced monumental challenges: the harshness of frontier life, for starters, plus the charge of teaching “reading and writing” and “the rudiments of agriculture” to the Cayuse and Walla Walla Indians, alongside the settlers’ children. Unfortunately for one Judge Saunders, these challenges were augmented by a particular incident involving flying tomahawks when a dispute broke out between the mission’s founder and a small band of Cayuse, ending the career of a promising young schoolteacher caught in the crossfire.

Although today’s education challenges are decidedly different, they are no less formidable to new teachers saddled with enormous responsibility and often dodging the latest crossfire in the public education arena. It’s no surprise that, without proper support, nearly a third of new teachers abandon the profession within the first three years and as many of half are gone within five.

But history is not repeating itself in Walla Walla where an award-winning teacher mentoring program has managed to boost the new teacher retention rate to 93 percent in the five years since the program has gone districtwide.

“It started out as a real grassroots effort,” says Tracy Williams, mentoring coordinator for the district. Williams recounts her own experience as a first-year teacher in Walla Walla nearly 20 years ago, when she was one of 15 new teachers on a staff of 26. “We were lost,” she says. “We’d stand around the copy machine and say, ‘What are *you* going to do?’ ‘What are *you* going to do?’ And we just tried to figure out how to teach on our own. So I was really committed to the fact that people who are new to the profession of teaching need some guidance and peer support.”

About 15 years ago, Williams re-

ports, the program started as “a voluntary, after-school kind of thing.” Williams and others in the district took it upon themselves to take new teachers under their wings and tried to find ways to plan helpful workshops. “It was hit and miss,” Williams says, “until, about seven years ago, we applied for a pilot grant from the state of Washington and got the resources to make it more formal.”

Today the program is a finely coordinated effort carried out by the Walla Walla School District and the Walla Walla Valley Education Association. Working as a team, a school principal, the mentor coordinator, the local education association president, and an assistant superintendent pair up veteran educators with teachers who are either new to teaching or new to the district. In addition, the team provides training and ongoing support throughout the year to ensure success.

This collaborative process was recently recognized when the Walla Walla Mentoring Program was one of six programs across the country selected as Distinguished Winners in the 2001 National Education Association/Saturn/United Auto Workers Partnership Award for Teacher Mentoring Programs. Recipients were honored for their use of strong union-management partnerships to

create outstanding mentoring programs for new teachers.

Current funding for the program comes primarily from Washington’s Teacher Assistance Program (TAP), which provides approximately \$1,400 per new teacher as long as the school district meets certain training criteria. This money is split between stipends for mentors and new teachers, and release time for participants to engage in classroom observations. The district provides additional financial support, funding the district coordinator’s salary and footing the bill for training and materials.

### JOINING THE RANKS

This year, Walla Walla has 21 first-year teachers and 19 new-to-district teachers in the program. All 40 have a mentor.

Some even have two.

Each new teacher is assigned a “peer coach” and a “peer mentor.” The peer coach is a veteran teacher who has taught the same or similar curriculum and can help the neophyte “develop a yearlong plan with the curriculum that they’re actually going to teach,” Williams explains. The focus is on the “what” of teaching, addressing specific course content. The peer mentor focuses on pedagogy, the “how” of teaching, with an emphasis on

issues of performance and classroom management. When possible, one person fills both roles. When this isn't possible—for instance, when there is no “job-alike” in the building—two separate veterans are assigned the roles of peer coach and peer mentor. In these cases, the peer mentor will most likely be a veteran within the same building, while the peer coach may be from elsewhere in the district.

These pairings are monitored and adjusted when necessary. Today, for example, Williams and Margaret Yount, president of the teachers' union, are discussing changes. In one instance, they've decided to assign a new peer mentor to one of their new-to-district teachers, a 40-year-old veteran who may relate better to a contemporary than to the 22-year-old teacher originally recommended by the principal because of a similar job assignment. In another case, Williams and Yount discuss alternatives for a mentor who both think may be “overbearing.”

“We want new teachers to succeed,” says Yount, “because when teachers don't succeed, then you have plans for improvement and probation, and then a teacher is ushered out of teaching. Nobody wins. It's much better to train them, get them the right mentor in the beginning so that they're suc-

cessful teachers.”

But even with this thoughtful attention to matchmaking, mentoring goes far beyond the simple pairing of veterans and neophytes. According to research, programs that do little else than assign mentors inevitably fail. Training and ongoing support are essential elements of a successful induction program.

### **TRAINING THE JEDI KNIGHTS**

Like the valley's early inhabitants, Williams—the key figure in the development of Walla Walla's mentoring program—has demonstrated great resourcefulness. Elements of the program are based on a California teacher-training model developed by education researchers Ann Morey and Diane Murphy. Williams also utilizes references on instructional strategies and classroom management, notably work by Harry Wong. Additionally, Williams pulls useful information from any promising piece of research or tool she can get her hands on. This includes books, journal articles, Web sites, and even the odd movie classic when the situation calls for it.

“In training, I talk a lot about the qualities of a peer coach, the qualities of being a good mentor,” Williams says. In short, she tells mentors to follow in the path of

one wrinkly space gnome named Yoda. “Yoda doesn't tell,” she counsels veteran teachers, reminding them of the wisdom exhibited by the *Star Wars* character. “He just asks questions and guides. Yoda doesn't see himself as superior. He doesn't come with all the march music and the regalia and the fanfare. He comes in the mud, with questions. He pulls it out of Luke Skywalker. He says, ‘It's in you. You have the ability to do this,’ and he helps Luke pull it out. And he's always there in Luke's head—his words echo. That concept works for me. The people who were my mentors—their words echo in my head. And you can't get rid of those, the little gems of advice.”

Training also addresses how mentors can avoid common communication barriers with those under their tutelage. Most find it obvious that they should avoid criticizing, preaching at, or threatening their wards. But some are surprised to learn that general praise, reassurance, or diversion can shut down communication. “Too much praise can shut down a teacher from asking questions,” Williams observes. “They'll say, ‘Well, I'm supposed to be really good at this,’ and so they don't ask questions.”

District Elementary Science Coordinator Peggy Willcuts reflects on her first-year assignment, many

years ago, as a fifth-grade teacher teamed with two very experienced male instructors. “I didn't want them to think I was this stupid, young, inexperienced little thing. So I kept to myself.” Willcuts had questions about basic procedures for lunch and recess and how to deal with behavioral issues, but she kept quiet. “You know, sometimes, it's the really dumb questions that you need to ask. But you don't have anybody who's supposed to answer those, so you decide you're not going to ask and you hope, somehow, you're going to assimilate the information just by observing.”

Many veteran teachers remember contracting strains of Emperor's New Clothes Syndrome, where they felt they couldn't let others see what they didn't know. That's why Williams provides tutorials for new teachers, including curriculum scavenger hunts and how-to lists for basic procedures. It's also why, at a training session with administrators and mentors, she promotes discussion of the “unwritten rules” of each school's environment and encourages mentors to share these insider tips with new arrivals.

### **LEARNING TO JOUST**

Cindy Nass, a veteran at Prospect Point Elementary, says Williams “put us empathetically back in the shoes of being a first-year teacher again.”

## BUILDING A BETTER SUPPORT SYSTEM

**B**efore a new doctor ever touches a scalpel, she watches at the elbow of an experienced surgeon. Before a rookie lawyer argues his first case, he typically sits "second chair," assisting a more seasoned colleague. Even a rookie baseball player usually has to work his way up through the minors to debut in *The Show*.

ut new teachers? They're expected to shoulder all the responsibilities of classroom veterans, starting on day one. Worse, rookies often inherit the most challenging assignments in schools where teachers come and go as if by revolving door. Words of encouragement or advice from a veteran colleague can make a huge difference as rookies grapple with classroom management, lesson plans, and school procedures.

ut in the hectic first weeks of school, "it can be easy to overlook new teachers or assume that somebody else is keeping an eye out for them," acknowledge Cori Brewster and Jennifer Railsback, authors of *Supporting Beginning Teachers: How Administrators, Teachers, and Policymakers Can Help New Teachers Succeed*, a new publication in NWREL's By Request series. *Supporting Beginning Teachers* outlines strategies that promise to improve the induction of new teachers so that they—and their students—get off to a better start. The authors outline three models that are finding more widespread use: formal induction programs, teacher mentoring programs, and school-university collaborations. Any of the models can be developed within a single school, across a district, or at the state level. But all of them require planning and the commitment of resources and time.

ormal teacher induction programs seek to introduce beginners to teaching methods and school policies, as well as to the "culture of teaching," the authors explain. Elements may include orientation; individual plans for growth and development; ongoing seminars; regular opportunities to observe and be observed by other teachers; opportunities to team teach with a more experienced colleague; action research; modified teaching schedules in which newcomers receive smaller loads, fewer preps, less difficult classes than teachers with more experience, or release time for professional development.

eacher mentoring programs pair a novice teacher with a veteran or a team of veterans. Well-designed mentoring goes far beyond pep talks, and aims at maximizing the new teacher's effectiveness in the classroom. *Supporting New Teachers* underscores the importance of training mentors in order for such programs to be effective. Good programs take care to match new teachers with mentors who share such bonds as similar subject areas, grade levels, or teaching philosophies. In addition, the booklet points out, mentoring should not be tied to evaluation, and mentors should not be seen as "stand-ins" for principals. Regular times for mentors and mentorees to meet should be built into the school schedule.

chool-university collaborations bring together the worlds of classroom practice and educational theory. Although models vary widely, such programs may involve university staff in leading seminars, training mentors, or facilitating discussion groups for new teachers. Although such partnerships are most likely to occur near college campuses, proximity is not essential. Technologies such as videoconferencing, e-mail, and electronic bulletin boards are making it easier for programs to be effective across long distances.

he booklet describes several programs in the Northwest region that provide hopeful examples of support for beginning teachers. As the authors conclude, "Schools that provide high levels of support for beginners will not only retain more teachers, but better teachers—and students will reap the rewards of a more positive and effective learning environment overall."

opies of *Supporting Beginning Teachers* can be ordered at no charge by calling (503) 275-0666.

Those shoes cover some rough terrain. According to the research of Ellen Moir, first-year teachers move through a predictable cycle. They slide from anticipation to survival and then disillusionment in the first half of the year. They go on to experience rejuvenation, reflection, and renewed anticipation by year's end. By understanding this cycle, mentors can gauge how best to support new teachers through the inevitable peaks and valleys.

When Lance Longmire came to the district two years ago, he was fresh out of grad school and starry eyed. "I was very idealistic," he says. "I thought I was going to hop in school, change the world. Everything was just going to go my way. Things didn't go as smoothly as I expected."

Like many new teachers, Longmire was given an especially tough first assignment. The latest in a string of bodies meant to fill a revolving-door position, Longmire became the Lead Special Education Teacher at Green Park Elementary. Charged with developing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) for 30 kids, he had his hands full.

Longmire says Williams and Nass, his mentor, "saved my life." Nass walked him through initial IEPs and parent conferences, and shared invaluable techniques for classroom management and basic

survival.

And, Longmire says, Williams shared one gem of advice that got him through the rough spots: Expect train wrecks.

"She told me that sometimes, when you're a first-year teacher, it's like a train wreck coming through. Sometimes things just get messed up and, the next day, you have to pick it up, put it back on the tracks and just keep on going. And I'd say that I derailed a few times. It was humbling. But it was good to know that was normal and that it's OK to make a mistake, and then pick things up and move on."

This concept of "failing forward" is an important lesson Williams attempts to impart. She says it is imperative that teachers are given license to try things that might not work as they attempt to improve learning in the classroom, and it is essential that the education environment allow failure not to be fatal. "Trying new things is essential to growth and achieving," she says. "Bret Boone of the Mariners wouldn't hit home runs if he wasn't making good attempts and striking out sometimes. You have to take the chance that you're going to make mistakes, and then learn from those mistakes. And know that, even in failure, we find things that improve performance." Williams says this is especially important in the culture



MARK PAUL, A FIRST-YEAR TEACHER AT PROSPECT POINT ELEMENTARY, TEACHES HIS KINDERGARTNERS TO WALK IN A LINE AND FOLLOW DIRECTIONS.

LANCE LONGMIRE WORKS ONE-TO-ONE WITH A STUDENT AT PROSPECT POINT ELEMENTARY.

of first-year teachers where mistakes will be made. “If veteran staff don’t criticize them as much, things will get better for those new teachers faster.”

Throughout the year, new teachers meet with their mentors, usually on a daily basis, for troubleshooting and guidance. “The first few months, it’s like being on call,” says Nass. “Then as the year rolls on, there are fewer and fewer questions and more conversations about how things are going instead of what fire is burning at the moment and needs to be put out.”

Additionally, mentors and new teachers engage in assigned observation-feedback cycles, tied to their stipends. To further support teachers through that crucial first year, neophytes attend monthly workshops covering a range of topics, including such things as how to conduct parent conferences and prepare substitute plans.

### **GAINING GROUND**

Teachers who have been through Walla Walla’s mentoring program have nothing but praise for it. Kenny Singer, who joined the eighth-grade staff at Pioneer Middle School last year, says, “I don’t think anything prepared me better for teaching than working in this mentor program. I mean, being able to collaborate on curriculum, being able to talk about classroom man-

agement, being able to talk about how the day went or how this kid was so hard or, you know, wow, that class was really intense. Or a parent called me and was not happy, or even—woohoo!—a parent was so happy . . . Just being able to talk about the emotional roller coaster that is teaching was great.”

Lisa Firehammer, Singer’s mentor, says she also benefited from the experience. “The nice thing about the program,” she says, “is that it’s not all Ken asking me things. It becomes more of a collaborative relationship. It’s not one teacher always getting help from another teacher. It’s just teachers working together. It fosters that—the give-and-take that you really would like to have happen. Everybody’s used to working together and talking things over, and we’re just all really comfortable with collaborating. I think the fact that it’s established around our district makes everyone more open.”

Williams gives a Yoda-like nod. “We’re trying to build a culture of collegiality,” she says. “We don’t expect teachers to teach in isolation. We want them to be models for students. We want them to be continual learners.”

For the district, the mentoring program has become a good recruitment tool. Judy Reault, assistant superintendent, says that with the current teacher shortage, “we’re

in a sellers’ market. For teachers deciding between Walla Walla and another district, this may give us the edge.” Certainly, Reault notes, “it has given our district the ability to maintain quality teachers.”

Evidently so. While new teachers fall in droves around the country, those in Walla Walla stand steadfast and tall.

Now in his second year of teaching at Walla Walla, Singer shares a story about a fallen comrade: “I was at a wedding this weekend and met a woman who graduated with honors from Stanford, then got her master’s in teaching. She taught for one year in California schools and she’ll never teach again. I asked her, what was her year like? She didn’t have a staff that she could talk to; she didn’t work with anyone all year on anything; she had contact with her principal or vice principal only once or twice; neighboring teachers didn’t talk to each other. It was completely isolating. And she was miserable because she had to do everything and she had no one to talk to about, you know, the problems or the good things. She had no support.

“And I told her if she had taught her first year in Walla Walla, she would still be teaching.” □

# FISHER

*Continued from Page 23*

up all night, surfing the Internet for materials he can use to teach about volcanoes. But over the following weeks, as he invents a hands-on earth science curriculum one day at a time (and with the help of a Web site called Core Knowledge, at [www.coreknowledge.org](http://www.coreknowledge.org)), he has no regrets. He watches students build their understanding by making clay models of Earth. They start with the core then build out, using a different color for each layer. When the tennis-ball sized planets are complete, he slices into them with a guitar string, revealing the geologic layers within.

Next he assigns a team project. Table groups build models of volcanoes using papier-mâché and cardboard tubes. He enlists his students as fellow researchers. With resources they find at home and online, they assemble a class library on volcanoes. Meanwhile, Fisher gets the idea of weaving together science, social studies, and writing. While the completed volcano models sit “dormant” on a window ledge, he assigns students to write their own myths, in the style of the Native American story that describes the long-ago eruption of Mount Mazama and creation of Crater

Lake. After the students read their myths aloud, they will imagine their own volcanoes erupting. To connect the volcano projects to the real world, they begin planning their first field trip: a full-day outing to the observatory at Mount St. Helens. Six parents have volunteered to drive, keeping costs to a minimum.

It’s an ambitious plan, to be sure. But so far, Fisher’s energy shows no signs of flagging. Shucking that dull science text was one of his smartest moves, even though it’s meant more work for him. “I felt high for a week,” he reflects later, “like a weight had lifted.” The experience reminds him of something he learned from Nancy Nagel, a professor of education at Lewis & Clark. “She taught us that to tackle the hard work of problem solving, we need to be interested and involved. That’s true for both teacher and student—we all find it hard to try new things. We have to struggle to break out of what’s comfortable.”

Even as he gains confidence to try new approaches in the classroom, Fisher worries about the pace of teaching. “How much should I try to do? And what’s fair to expect of my kids?”

Those would be good questions to discuss with the two other fourth-grade teachers in the building, but he seldom bumps into them. Fisher’s room sits between

the music room and an exit to the blacktop, across the building from his grade-level colleagues. He makes a note to check in with a fifth-grade teacher who looped with her fourth-graders from last year. He recalls hearing about a program in California, where new teachers are matched with mentors for two years. There’s no time for feeling envious; he has a million details to take care of before that field trip.

\* \* \*

Twenty minutes before school begins, half a dozen kids have put away their backpacks and are dancing to the music that spills out of Mr. Fisher’s boom box. A couple others play computer games. One girl relaxes with a book on the sofa that Fisher picked up at a garage sale. These are the precious moments that make the classroom feel like a community.

With a ring of a handbell (the same one his grandmother used in a one-room schoolhouse and his mother used in her high school classes), Fisher signals that it’s time for students to take their desks. But not everyone’s quite ready to settle in for the day. One boy realizes he left his backpack on the bus. Another has forgotten his glasses. Fisher sends them off to take care of business while he steers the rest of the class toward a math assignment. About every six seconds,

someone else begins a question with, “Mr. Fisher. . .?” He makes the rounds as fast as he can. He’s in such constant motion, he might as well be on roller skates.

Peter\*, a quiet boy with dark hair and big brown eyes, tries to focus on the assignment on his desk. But he’s easily distracted. He chews his fingers, writes on his hand, builds little sculptures out of masking tape. He’s one of nine students in the class identified as having special learning needs, which range from attention deficit disorder to giftedness. His needs are the result of fetal alcohol syndrome. Fisher has been meeting with Peter’s foster parents to learn more about the syndrome and how it affects learning. Usually, the boy is pulled out to work with an aide during math. It’s a subject he understands well, despite his struggle to concentrate. Today is an experiment, to see if Peter can stay on track within the larger class setting. Fisher keeps circling past his desk, calling the boy’s attention back to the task at hand with a soft word or deliberate arch of his eyebrows.

Without warning, Fisher stops in his tracks and claps his hands together. Conversation halts. “I just heard a scream,” he says. “There’s no reason ever to scream during math. Math isn’t scary.” The noise level plummets and he’s off again,

\* Names of students have been changed.

answering the next ‘Mr. Fisher . . . ?’ question. With five minutes left in math period, Peter picks up his pencil and tackles the math problem.

So far, class management hasn’t taken up too much time. “These are great kids, and most days the class takes care of itself,” Fisher says. “But,” he adds, “so much more is going on here besides academics.” Three times a day, for instance, a timer on his belt goes off and he gives a hand signal for a certain boy to head to the office for his medication. He uses motivators with a couple kids who struggle to keep their behavior under control. He’s grateful that fourth-graders will extend themselves for a reward as humble as a Pokemon pencil.

Fisher has been reading aloud *Tales of a Fourth-Grade Nothing*. He draws on his drama background, throwing in funny voices that the kids seem to like to underscore the wise humor of author Judy Blume. His acting skills come in handy for crowd control, as well. “You don’t want to see Mean Mr. Fisher make an appearance,” he warns when the noise level starts to escalate. Even at his silliest—when he’s using Monty Python accents during a math lesson—Fisher is careful not to seem too loose. “I dance on that fine line all the

time,” he admits, “between having fun and keeping things under control. I figure if the kids are happy to be here every day, that’s not a bad place to start. And I make an effort to stay consistent so they know what to expect from me.”

When it’s time for morning recess, 24 pairs of shoes hit the floor, ready to dash for the outdoors. Fisher motions for a boy named Jeremy to stay behind. He balks, but Fisher reminds him, “It’s the consequence of not doing your homework last night. Have to do it now.” He doesn’t back down when Jeremy tries whining. He tries not to let Jeremy see him smile when the boy makes a crack that, truth be told, is pretty funny. But when Jeremy turns in his homework, Fisher is quick to offer praise. And he stretches out recess for an extra five minutes so the boy can enjoy some time outside.

\* \* \*

Grace perches on the sofa, signaling that she has a story ready for conference during writers’ workshop. Mr. Fisher leans in to hear her read a tale about two girls on a quest to find a golden diamond. When she finishes, he compliments her effort. But he has questions. So many questions: Why did the girls sneak out of the house? Why do they need the golden diamond? Why is it important? How did it feel when they

walked through the spider web?

Grace’s eyes seem to get bigger with each question. She nods when he reminds of her an earlier class discussion, when they talked about how reading is like mountain climbing. “Every detail the author gives is something the reader has to put into his backpack,” Fisher tells her. “The reader has to carry that backpack to the top of the mountain. If a detail is not important, then why ask the reader to carry it?”

She takes back her paper and makes a beeline for her desk.

Karen plunks onto the sofa next with a story about a horse race and three girlfriends. “This is so much better than the first draft!” her teacher says. She beams. He goes on, “Now it’s time to edit. You don’t need to add anything more to the story. Check the spelling of these words,” he suggests, circling several spots on the page. “And use quotation marks to let the reader know when someone is talking. Remember how?” She does.

Karen is barely off the sofa when Grace returns. She has added more details. But Mr. Fisher has even more questions for her. She rolls her eyes on her way back to her desk. The girl who’s next in line for a conference reminds her, “Don’t make that backpack too heavy!”

Writers’ workshop has moved into first place as Fisher’s favorite

part of the week. His students seem to concur. Last week, because of an assembly, the class had only half the usual time for writing. Students groaned their disappointment. “I was thrilled,” Fisher says. He also has begun to appreciate the benefits of having a smaller class for the part of the day when eight students are pulled out for tutoring or other help. “That leaves me with only 16 kids for writers’ workshop,” he says, “and I can give them so much more attention.”

To his surprise, students were slow to warm up to writing fiction. “They all wanted to write about their dogs, or what they did last summer.” Then, inspired perhaps by the approach of Halloween, one boy tried his hand at a ghost story. Fisher invited him to read it aloud. Suddenly, everyone was writing ghost stories. As part of the school’s Halloween festivities, the fourth-graders will share their scary tales with the first-graders. Knowing that they will soon have an audience is adding energy to the writing process.

When he sees his students so excited about learning, Fisher feels exhilarated. “I can’t wait to come to work in the morning,” he says.

At other moments, however, he looks around the room at the miscellaneous activity and asks himself, “We’re busy, but have I really taught them anything yet?”

Reading, for example, has been a frustration. Although his students are all nine or 10 years old, they read at levels ranging from second to seventh grade, perhaps even higher. Fisher has tried splitting the class into literacy groups but struggles to find the right reading materials. His training gave him a solid understanding of literacy theory, but what he needs now are practical tips to help him teach struggling readers. “We talked in grad school about how to form meaning, but not how to form *words*. That’s where I feel weakest right now,” he admits. It doesn’t help that he has no class sets of books for students who read below the fourth-grade level. He’s tried having one group read *How to Eat Fried Worms*, a personal favorite, but the girls don’t seem to appreciate the book’s humor. Meanwhile, his most proficient readers want to tackle *The Sword and the Stone*. Fisher worries that it will prove too challenging, but he doesn’t want to get in the way of their ambition.

In a few weeks he’ll have to issue his first report cards, assessing not only reading and math, but also skills such as spelling, public speaking, and handwriting that they haven’t given much attention yet. Assessments will have to show students’ progress toward meeting the state requirements for the cer-

tificate of initial mastery. He makes a mental note to design a template so he can write report cards on his laptop. But where’s he supposed to find the time to work with these kids on their handwriting?

\* \* \*

Winter has spilled indoors, dusting the halls of River Mill Elementary with cut-outs of penguins and paper snowflakes. Fisher has decked his room with an evergreen he harvested from his own property. The kids made paper chains to decorate it. He has rearranged the classroom furniture, too. “I like change,” he says with a shrug. His once-shaved pate is sprouting a fresh growth of brown hair. But he’s still wearing those tie-dyed socks.

Fisher introduces a guest who’s guaranteed to hold the students’ interest, even with the start of the winter holidays just two days away. Elwin Shibley, Fisher’s uncle and a retired principal, arrives wearing a plaid shirt and jeans with a big buckle. With his white beard and that twinkle in his eyes, he’d make a great Santa. “Did you know,” he asks the class, “that you’re sitting right on the Oregon Trail?” Before they can answer, he’s tossing handfuls of pennies onto each table. “Whose picture is on those pennies?” “Lincoln!” the kids answer. “Right, and that’s who was president when Mr. Fisher’s family came

across the Oregon Trail.” History has come to life in Room 16, and Shibley draws everyone into it. “You’re all part of this story,” he says. “Wherever you’ve come from, you’re Oregonians now.”

Although Fisher grew up amid the landmarks of the Oregon Trail and has a family tree loaded with ancestors who made the trek West, he dragged his feet when it came time to teach the subject to his fourth-graders. The social studies textbook devoted only three pages to the Oregon Trail. Fisher knew the rich subject matter deserved better treatment, but he wasn’t sure how to tackle it.

When he decided to stop relying on the canned material in the textbook, he began to envision new possibilities. “I had to psych myself up,” he admits, “but when I got excited, the lesson plans started coming together, just as they did with the volcano project.” Using resources he found at a Portland bookstore, he has turned his classroom into a caravan, with each table group playing the role of a family aboard a covered wagon. In this simulation, they are now 500 miles into the 2,000-mile trek. Today’s task: Write a letter home, telling the highlights of your journey so far.

As he explains the assignment to his students, Fisher reminds them

to make use of the writing devices they’ve been studying. They began to get acquainted with similes and metaphors on a recent day when the principal stopped in for a formal observation. Adamson was pleased to see the students excited and actively participating in the lesson, and equally impressed by Fisher’s animated use of body language, voice inflection, and facial expressions to keep the pace upbeat. “Students were required to think a great deal in this lesson,” Adamson noted in his written observation, “but I doubt they realized it.”

At times, Fisher can make learning seem as easy as breathing for his students. Behind the scenes, though, he drives himself like a taskmaster. He arrives at school by 7:30 a.m., and seldom goes home empty-handed. Lunch is an orange, which he eats on the run. He constantly pushes himself to stay organized, to plan ahead, to get papers graded and returned quickly. “Where’s my clipboard?” he mutters now, looking for the checklist he uses to keep track of where students are with their various writing projects. He starts each day with a clean desk, but by noon it’s buried in papers.

What the students want most from him, of course, is his undivided attention. He does his best to spread it evenly among the 24 ex-

pectant faces. When he listens to a boy read his journal entry for today's Oregon Trail assignment, Fisher catches certain words as if they were treasures. "I like a word you used there—you said *tumbled*." Or, "I loved how you said 'something tragic' was about to happen. That got my interest." When he hears an ending he likes in another story, he tells the girl who wrote it, "That's beautiful," and mimes wiping away a tear.

When a quiet, bespectacled student named Lydia volunteers to read her passage to the whole class, he tells her, "Pretend your great grandmother is sitting in the back of the class, and she really wants to hear you." Lydia amazes him by booming out her story. "Awesome!" he says at the end, clapping and grinning. "We could hear you and understand you! Fantastic!" Another girl, for whom speaking up is no challenge, is next to share. She cranks up the volume in imitation of Lydia, making herself giggle. Soon the whole class—including Mr. Fisher—is giggling, too. But she manages to work in two similes, which her teacher catches with delight.

\* \* \*

By the time parent conferences roll around in March, the year feels as if it's shifted into hyperspeed. The calendar has taken on added im-

portance since Fisher learned that in May, he'll become a father. He's planning to take a week off when the baby arrives, which means he'll be mapping out his lesson plans even further in advance.

The class has recently wrapped up a four-week unit on electricity. Fisher introduced the subject with a hands-on project. Giving students batteries, light bulbs, and wires, he asked them to see what they could figure out. Principal Adamson happened to stop by just as several kids were discovering how to wire up the components to shock themselves. "I'd never try that again," Fisher admits, "at least not when I'm being observed."

Although they're now focusing their science studies on the human body, Fisher's students have no trouble recalling key concepts about electricity when he calls out random questions. If they get stumped, they can refresh their memory with the words to the song they wrote as a class. "We brainstormed the lyrics, which include all the major concepts I wanted them to remember—atoms, conductors, closed circuits, insulators," he says. Coming up with a tune meant acceding to his students' musical tastes. But he seems to have struck gold with the catchy number "Whoops! I Got Shocked Again," set to the tune of the Britney Spears single "Whoops!

I Did It Again." (Fisher rolls his eyes, admitting he had to listen to the pop star's music for a week to get inspired. "The sacrifices you make as a teacher!")

Out on the playground, when Fisher overhears his kids belting out the song or teaching it to others, he knows it was worth the effort. And he's amazed, looking back, that he was terrified to try songwriting with his kids, even though he's been performing music for most of his life. "Writing songs together was a goal I had, but I kept putting it off. Then one day the school counselor visited our class, and she brought her guitar. She made it look so easy! So I brought in my electric bass when we were studying the Oregon Trail. We wrote a song called 'The Oregon Trail Blues' (set to the tune of 'Heartbreak Hotel'). One of my best experiences as a teacher was having my kids ask me if we could write a song about electricity, too. Wow!"

During parent conferences, the mother of a boy who has been mouthing off and missing assignments lately mentions that she and her husband are splitting up. That helps explain the boy's change in attitude. The toughest session, though, is with parents whose daughter is one of four in the class identified as gifted. They want to know if Fisher is doing enough to keep her challenged. Is he pushing

her hard enough?

The silver lining of the week: a rare Friday holiday—no lessons to plan, no homework to grade, nobody calling out a question that begins, "Mr. Fisher . . .?"

\* \* \*

When the calendar reaches May, Fisher has mapped out his lesson plans two weeks in advance. The baby is not due until mid-month, but he wants to be ready to hand off his responsibilities at the first labor pain. Plus, he's promised the class a beach trip to end the year, and that will take some organizing.

He's not the only one looking ahead. The principal will have to make some hard decisions next year because of a district budget squeeze, exacerbated by declining enrollment. Would Fisher be willing to loop up to fifth grade with his current students, plus a few more?

Meanwhile, Fisher has been struggling with Jeremy over missing assignments, bad attitude. He begins wondering whether he wasn't firm enough earlier in the year. "Did I let him get away with too much? Laugh too easily at his jokes?" Such are the questions that keep the new teacher awake at night. "At times I've questioned my ability to teach him," he admits, "but not to be a teacher."

There have been more high points than lows, however. A girl

who never seemed to catch on to multiplication has had a breakthrough in understanding. When Fisher showed her how to group numbers, she could see that four *groups* of five means the same as four *times* five. “The lights went on! And she just took off.” A favorite moment: calling her mother to share that the girl had won a math award.

Another high point: Watching a reading group decide to tackle *Call of the Wild*. One boy in the group had seemed unmotivated all year during literature circles. “But he liked that book, and he kept up.” The group had to work hard to understand the book’s symbolism, and Fisher warned them that it would be difficult. “I told them, if it’s too hard, they can stop and move on to a new book. They saw me do that earlier in the year when I closed the science book and tried something else. We’ve all found out it’s OK to struggle.” They did struggle at times with Jack London, but they plowed ahead. “When they were done, they felt fantastic.” And so did he.

And another: A boy’s story about brain-sucking aliens. “He’s a really quiet, shy boy, and this was just hilarious. And he went on for five pages, longer than anything he’s ever written before. Amazing! That’s what it’s all about—moments like that.”

In late May, two weeks behind schedule, Kenneth Steele Fisher is born. The substitute for Room 16 arrives to find a week’s worth of lesson plans ready and waiting.

\* \* \*

Between the new baby’s arrival and the end-of-the-year assemblies and the day trip to the beach, the last days of school fly by in a blur. A week after the final bell, Fisher is taking a well-earned moment to catch his breath on the deck overlooking his garden of roses and raspberries. He and his wife Robin have just finished a leisurely, late breakfast. Baby Kenneth is napping in his cradle. The horses are munching new grass. The sun is shining over Estacada. An entire summer stretches before him—a gift to be opened one day at a time.

Time for quiet reflection is rare in the life of a teacher, especially a new one. “If I have any advice to offer other new teachers,” he says, “it’s this: Make time and effort to go talk to your peers, because they probably won’t have time to come find you. Make an effort to hang out in the staff room. I didn’t do that early enough or often enough.” Not once did he have an opportunity to watch another teacher at work in the classroom, or to be observed by a peer. Late in the year, he was worrying aloud in the faculty lounge that he might not get all the way

through the math textbook because some students needed more time to cement their understanding of division. Some veterans exploded in laughter. “I was beating myself up, but they reassured me that nobody finishes the textbook!”

He suspects he also spent too much time inventing materials that other teachers would have been willing to share. “Good teachers collect ideas. They have files full of stuff. The major weakness of being a new teacher is that you don’t have five years of stuff to pull from.”

Every day, for instance, he invented math challenges for the kids who breezed through their homework. “Then I had a great substitute who gave me a book of ready-made math challenges. Sometimes,” he admits, “I work too hard.”

As for next year, he’s agreed to loop up to fifth grade, a benchmark year. Because of budget cuts, class sizes will be larger. He expects to have 31 or 32 students, 22 of them returnees. Jeremy, the boy with whom he found himself butting heads by spring semester, will be assigned to another room. So will the TAG girl whose parents worried about keeping her challenged. But Fisher and the other fifth-grade teacher have agreed to work as a team. For the first time in his school career, he’ll have a colleague with whom he can brain-

storm and share resources.

Already, he has a zillion ideas percolating. He’s making a mental list of things he’ll do differently next year. But on this perfect summer morning, Fisher can imagine no better job than the one that takes place in the classroom. “I love how fast the day goes. I’m never bored. It’s so different from the world of cubicles and clock watching. I can see myself doing this,” he says, “for another 20 years—at least.” ■

# FACING THE FUTURE

*Continued from Page 9*

portunity for veterans.” Some of her fellow veterans, she admits, “were on the verge of leaving the profession. This allows them to continue to build their careers.” One came out of retirement to work as an adviser, “and she said she’s never felt more fulfilled as a teacher,” says Villarreal-Carman. The collegial relationship between new teacher and veteran “opens the doors to reflective practice,” she explains. “This is purely positive for our profession.”

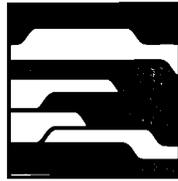
Once veteran teachers have mentored novices, their own classroom skills tend to expand in unexpected ways. “When they return to classroom teaching, it’s almost like they’ve had a sabbatical in terms of their professional growth,” Moir observes. Some advisers have gone into school administration, using their newly honed skills as instructional leaders. “This builds capacity within the profession,” says Moir. “It’s a critical role—being a teacher of other teachers.”

Although programs such as the New Teacher Center can provide curriculum materials, research, and technical assistance to make induction more effective, Moir considers it essential for local dis-

tricts to “own this work” of developing the skills of their new teachers.

By “growing their own” induction programs, districts can make adjustments to fit their specific population needs or unique geography. Montana, for example, uses e-mail to connect new science and math teachers with mentors and overcome the isolation of working far from subject-area colleagues. In urban Seattle, a teachers’ association is playing an increasing role in professional development for new teachers. Anchorage taps the wisdom of retired teachers, recruiting them to mentor novices. In communities located near universities, new partnerships between researchers and classroom teachers are paving smoother pathways into teaching.

No matter what the setting, providing for the growth of new teachers “should be organic—right at the heart of the district,” Moir argues. “It’s really about building the profession. This is such hopeful work. And it’s the cheapest money districts can spend to improve education. Ambitious teacher development goes right to supporting student learning.” ■



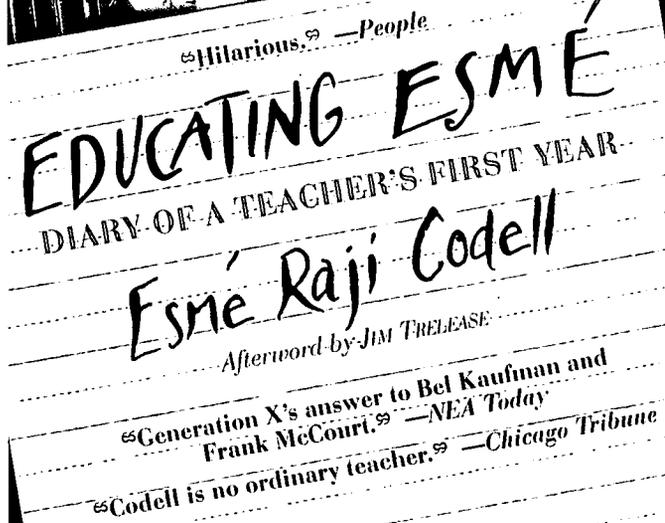
**EDUCATING ESMÉ: DIARY OF A TEACHER'S FIRST YEAR**

by Esmé Raji Codell (Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2001)

Madame Esmé, as she asks to be called, greets her fifth-graders at the start of each school day holding a big green "trouble basket." She invites her 31 children to unburden themselves of their home worries so they can concentrate on learning. But as this first-year teacher quickly learns, real-life woes aren't so easily dismissed. Some children have parents who beat them on a predictable schedule. Others ache to have someone even notice them. One girl starts each day curled in a fetal position under her desk. A boy who has recently been homeless and hungry eats himself sick on cafeteria leftovers.

Into this harsh world comes Madame Esmé, the product of inner-city schools not unlike the one her students attend. She brings a 24-year-old's hope and a fierce determination that can be mistaken for pig-headedness. The diary of her rookie year reads like a daring adventure story. She must steer clear of the mean-spirited principal and sidestep bureaucratic red tape; maintain classroom decorum while nurturing joy and laughter; bring literature to life for children who struggle to read; teach kindness to those who seldom witness it. Throughout the chronicle, one question looms large: Will our heroine abandon her gifted, joyful, creative approach to teaching before the journey's end?

Codell pulls no punches in this fast-paced book that has proved popular with both novices and more experienced educators. Her frustrations and fears help explain why new teachers flee the field in such startling numbers. She notices bullet holes in her classroom window and begins to worry that



her tough-love discipline style might get her shot. She pours her soul into creative lesson plans only to have a curriculum specialist tell her, "You can't possibly teach all you say you can teach." She butts heads with the administration over an issue she considers important only to have her fellow teachers accuse her of being confrontational. In a mid-year entry she confesses: "I've been up in the middle of the night, wondering, *Why do I care? Am I crazy?* A little, maybe."

But her classroom victories keep her passion burning bright. Readers will feel like celebrating with Esmé when her students get excited about the cardboard "time machine," in which history comes alive. Or when she teaches the

cha-cha to make sense of multiplication. Or on the January day when she watches her students concentrate on their reading "so intently, I could hear my own breathing." She writes: "I've worked so hard to get them to this place, harder than I've ever worked in my life, and now it seems they have arrived. . . . It's that I try and they're trying, that's the bottom line."

**SURVIVAL GUIDE FOR NEW TEACHERS** and **WHAT TO EXPECT YOUR FIRST YEAR OF TEACHING**, both by Amy DePaul for the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement

These two popular books bring

new teachers advice from those who have walked in their shoes—and recently, too. Both books feature comments from award-winning rookie teachers, winners of the Sallie Mae First Class Teacher Award recognizing the nation's outstanding new educators. As author Amy DePaul explains, she lets "teachers speak for themselves" because "no one can match the clarity and veracity of their voices."

*Survival Guide for New Teachers*, published in 2000, acknowledges that many first-year teachers continue to draw the most challenging assignments. Many new teachers launch into their careers with little more than a quick orientation on school policies and procedures, which DePaul calls a "sink-or-swim approach to induction."

*Survival Guide* highlights promising initiatives, such as on-line discussion groups for new teachers facilitated by education professors from the University of North Carolina; school district programs that include mentoring, peer assistance, and other forms of support; and regular staff meetings—for newcomers as well as veterans—with discussions focused on best teaching practices. DePaul organizes new teachers' observations to help other novices gain ideas for working with veterans, parents, principals, and college and university professors.

*What to Expect Your First Year of Teaching* (1998) is loaded with more tips and strategies for novices. Among the suggestions DePaul has gathered:

- Be consistent—do what you say you are going to do
- Model a love for learning
- Maintain a sense of humor
- Keep an open door to parents
- Maintain respect
- Plan relentlessly
- Set high expectations
- Be flexible and ready for

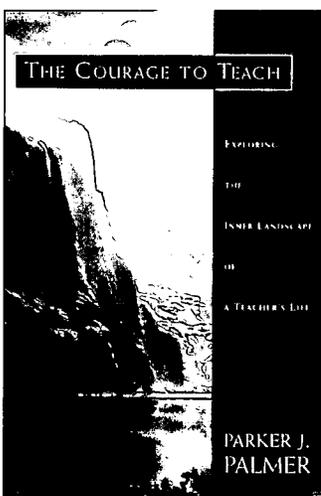
surprises

- Take care of yourself physically and spiritually
- Use innovations in teaching, technology, and rewards

Principals and other administrators can help new teachers overcome the isolation that can break even an enthusiastic rookie's spirit. Among the strategies for administrators: assigning new teachers mentors; making sure they have regular opportunities to talk with other first-year teachers; encouraging first-year teachers to team teach with veterans, or at least work together on planning teams; fostering a collaborative atmosphere within the building.

Both books are available online and can be downloaded at no cost. For a copy of *What to Expect Your First Year of Teaching*, go to [www.ed.gov/pubs/FirstYear](http://www.ed.gov/pubs/FirstYear).

For *Survival Guide for New Teachers*, go to [www.ed.gov/pubs/survivalguide](http://www.ed.gov/pubs/survivalguide).



**THE COURAGE TO TEACH: EXPLORING THE INNER LANDSCAPE OF A TEACHER'S LIFE** by Parker J. Palmer (Jossey-Bass, 1998)

When Parker Palmer conducts workshops on teaching and learning, he often invites participants to

examine their classroom practice through what he calls "the lens of paradox." As he explains in *The Courage to Teach*: "I ask each teacher to write brief descriptions of two recent moments in teaching: a moment when things were going so well that you knew you were born to teach, and a moment when things were going so poorly that you wished you had never been born."

Novice teachers as well as classroom veterans can gain insights from the exercise. As Palmer points out, "Remembering such moments is the first step in exploring one of the true paradoxes of teaching: The same person who teaches brilliantly one day can be an utter flop the next!"

*The Courage to Teach* encourages an ongoing examination of the inner life of the teacher. It's a valuable activity, Palmer argues, because "knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject."

Teaching, he asserts, is about making connections. Good teachers "are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves."

Parker offers no quick answers for improving teaching—only deep thinking. The author doesn't hesitate to put himself through the self-examination he asks of his readers. For example, he explores why he gets uneasy if a classroom discussion happens to stall:

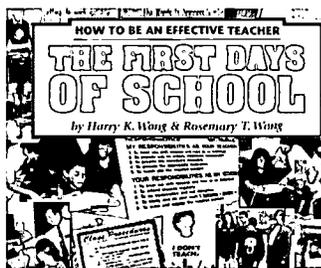
"As the seconds tick by and the silence deepens, my belief in the value of silence goes on trial. . . . Like most people I am conditioned to interpret silence as a symptom of something gone wrong. . . . I am duty-bound to supply conversational CPR." But then Parker examines other possibilities. He writes: "Suppose my students are neither dumbfounded nor dismissive, but digging deep; suppose

that they are not ignorant or cynical but wise enough to know that this moment calls for thought; suppose that they are not wasting time but doing a more reflective form of learning."

Teachers will improve their craft, Parker suggests, when they have opportunities to engage in honest dialogue about the moments that puzzle or challenge them—what he calls "good talk about good teaching."

For teachers prepared to enter into such dialogues, Parker suggests three elements essential to informed, productive conversations:

- Topics that take us beyond technique and into the fundamental issues of teaching
- Ground rules that keep us from defeating ourselves before the talk can go very deep
- Leaders who expect and invite us to join the conversation



**THE FIRST DAYS OF SCHOOL: HOW TO BE AN EFFECTIVE TEACHER** by Harry K. Wong and Rosemary T. Wong (Harry K. Wong Publishers, 1998)

This practical guide to classroom management weaves research with practical wisdom to guide new teachers through the first days of school. It's a critical period that "can make or break you" for the rest of the year, the authors assert. Yet most teachers enter the profession with "no training and no experience in what to do on the first day of school."

Written in the style of an owner's manual, this popular pa-

perback aims to troubleshoot the problems that plague rookies and help struggling teachers regain their footing. *The First Days of School* offers the kind of common-sense help teachers need to enhance their performance and devote more of their school day to enhancing student learning. The authors cover everything from arranging the desks to introducing a discipline plan to structuring assignments in order to "teach for accomplishment."

Wong and Wong, both experienced teachers, are strong advocates of formal training programs for new teachers—so much so that they discourage teachers from joining districts that do not offer induction programs. They also encourage the more informal learning that happens when teachers work in a collegial manner; learn from positive mentors; join professional organizations; and continue to learn through workshops, classes, inservice training sessions, reading, and other forms of research.

If there's an agenda that goes deeper than these important basics, it's to develop a new generation of effective teachers who have positive expectations for student success, are good classroom managers, and know how to design lessons for student mastery. Anticipated turnover in the ranks of today's teachers offers an opportunity, the authors suggest, "to change the culture of a new generation of teachers."

—**Suzie Boss**



**FREEDOM, FRIENDSHIPS  
TOP TEACHER'S WISH LIST**

*By Kendall Beaudry*

The first day of school is just as nerve wracking for the teacher as for the students. I was reminded of that fact last summer when I, a white young doe from the woodsy Northwest, prepared to enter an inner-city classroom of gifted seventh-graders in Louisville, Kentucky.

As soon as I received the job offer from Summerbridge, a national nonprofit service learning organization, I hung up the phone and rushed to my atlas to locate the lost state of Kentucky. My assignment was to instruct writing to middle schoolers—students at the most awkward stage of puberty.

Three days before departure, my fellow Oregonians and I entertained all the tactless stereotypes of my new destination. Humidity and whiskey came to mind. However, my friends couldn't muster up any actual ideas of Derbyland because they were preoccupied with the thought of me *teaching*. I ignored their taunts to calm my nerves. But seventh grade kept flashing across my reverie—haunting me with memories of training bras, scoliosis testing, slow dances, and sex ed.

Then the first day arrived, and there was no more time for reverie.

"Is it true that in Orygun, they can't even pump their own gas?" That was the first question fired at my perspiring back. So much for classroom introductions. I was different, and it stood out.

"Didn't it hurt, getting yo' nose pierced?"

Day one: Prepare for humiliation.

"How many of you enjoy writing?" I asked, trying to sound hopeful.

"I hate writing," said Telicia, one who later grew fond of the pen-on-paper ritual. The rest

groaned in chorus.

Despite my fresh degrees in journalism and political science, despite the nerve-wracking rituals of the first day of school, I find myself drawn to education. If I were to blindly pick a country on a spinning globe, I could envision teaching there. It is an intrinsic pull because teaching is an exchange of knowledge. Within this altruistic exchange, learning is reciprocated between two genres, crossing classes and ethnicities and cultures as different as those found in Oregon and Kentucky.

I have had the pleasure of teaching and learning from 70 inspiring children from the Louisville area. These students were chosen out of a teacher-recommended pool of 400. They are academically motivated but economically set back.

Since 1978, Summerbridge has coordinated summer workshops at sites all over the country. It is intended to enhance learning creatively with the guidance of young mentors. At the same time, it gives college students a taste of the teaching profession. Summerbridge selects young college students for these challenging classroom assignments because of a belief in their vitality and freshness for the job. No fancy technology is used, and the agenda is impromptu.

My training was not confined to concerns over tests, techniques, and courses, because this thinking is considered too linear. Instead, we fellow teachers shared ideas on how to captivate the imagination.

In the English department, my advisor helped us prepare by making up outlines and formatting them into weekly and monthly planners. I would have an objective to follow each week, such as fiction writing with lessons on indirect and direct objects. The approach to delivering the objective then was in each teacher's hands.

Although the middle of the week could pose challenges to keep integrating all learning abilities, the freedom given me was central to my growth in the classroom. Even during my failing moments, my self-esteem rarely waned because I felt comfortable asking for tips from my fellow staff members. Equally as important, I listened to the suggestions of my respectfully honest students who had the wherewithal to fold their arms tightly across their chest and blurt out, "I still don't get it!"

When I talk with my peers about what they will look for in a permanent teaching job, the biggest appeal is freedom. Summerbridge allowed me to use my own themes and approaches to teaching rather than insisting on harboring anyone else's methodology. My English teachers and advisor would meet frequently during the school week to bounce off ideas and problem solve repeated frustrations. The support I received from staff and students served as the motivation central to maintaining health and charisma. And charisma may be the most important attribute to exude because it will ensure a supply of teachers for subsequent generations.

Statistics tell us that many of today's children do not aspire to teach because of the obvious setbacks of salary, abating budgets, and burnout. These visible burdens are often voiced or whispered among staff members. Admonition can scarcely get by any perceptive student. But a teacher's pessimism resonates doubt within all students' purpose to attend class.

I can still name almost every teacher I learned from. Although I cannot even hope to remember a lesson, I can distinctly recall who these mentors, pedagogues, parents, and role models were and what made their blood pulse. They



remain my sources of inspiration.

We are all aware of teacher shortages across the country. As a young adult preparing for my next career move, I know how to play the poker game of counter-offers. I can feel the desperation in a handshake from an administration that is just looking for warm bodies. The typical indices to measure a school's performance based on class size, salary, and test results contribute only a paucity to my final decision.

More important to me is the staff's familiarity with each other. Friendships, humility, and perseverance to stretch the elasticity of perfunctory standards cannot be packaged for a P.R. visit. I know I will need a mentor beyond the initial two months of laying out a secure foundation. I want to work in a setting where teachers can interact and share differences on a philosophical and practical standpoint in order to grow. This collaboration is what empowers teachers, by pushing the intellect above standards and setbacks.

*After graduating from the University of Montana in May, Kendall Beaudry spent the summer teaching emotionally disturbed children and developmentally disabled adults in Homer, Alaska. Next: an editorial internship at Mother Jones magazine in San Francisco. But she adds, "I don't doubt that I will soon be teaching and learning again."*

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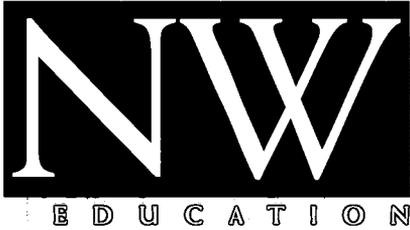
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