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Achieving Educational Reform: A New Coalition



Carl L. Calliari and Charles M. Ivory

Our nation's dissatisfaction with education is evident. Little that is wrong in our society is not at some point perceived to be related to the quality of education. National Assessment of Educational Progress reports show America's youth deficient in mathematics and science. The ability of our youth to think and solve problems within the context of a global economy is questioned.

Education, like politics and industry, is facing new problems in the 1990s, and strategies effective in the 1960s, 1970s, and the 1980s are no longer effective. Old solutions to new problems just aren't working anymore. The finger-in-the-dike approach is no longer sufficient to hold back the waters of the 21st century. The new century requires new solutions to the problems of a new generation.

The 1986 Holmes Group report refers to the paradox of the educational reform movement: teachers are seen as a root cause of our educational problems, yet at the same time are seen as our hope for reform. Few would argue against the idea that teaching needs to be improved, but we must also focus on strategies for improving teaching. There must be a new coalition of pre-service, inservice, and post-service agencies and

institutions to effectively and efficiently address the reform issues before us. The issues are far too wide-ranging for any one part of the educational community to attempt to resolve our dilemma. We must simultaneously address academics, planning, and governance issues. The scope of such reform necessitates a comprehensive and carefully orchestrated strategy. Leadership at the state, college, and local school district levels must be willing to rise above turf issues if we expect to make a significant difference.

There is not enough time during a four-year undergraduate program to ingest the volumes of academia as well as to develop a repertoire of teaching skills necessary to succeed in any classroom, pre-school through twelfth grade. Education is a lifelong process. The need to learn continues beyond graduation from an undergraduate teacher education program. The Holmes report recommends that "university officials and professors must join with schools and with the teacher organizations and state and local school governments that shape the schools, to change the teaching profession" (1986, p. 322). Only then will we create an environment in which we can integrate research and practice.

To address this problem, the Thomas E. Robinson Beginning Teacher Induction Center (BTIC) in the School of Education and Related Professional Studies at Rowan College, and the Regional Curriculum Services Unit-South (RCSU-South), a field office of the New Jersey State Department of Education, joined in a unique collaborative venture to provide support services to address the needs of beginning teachers.

Developing simultaneously was a New Jersey State Department of Education proposal to mandate induction support teams at the local school level for all beginning teachers hired after August 31, 1991.

The BTIC/RCSU-South seminar series began in August 1989 and focused on Classroom Management/Discipline, one of the most difficult problems identified by beginning teachers during the first year of teaching (Veenman, 1984).

The seminars were offered as two full days of training. The first day was held in August or September with a follow-up day in October or November.

Separate seminars were conducted for elementary (K-6) and secondary (6-12) teachers. The sixth-grade overlap accommodated self-contained or departmentalized arrangements in the middle grades. The first day of the seminar, new teachers received training on the importance of pre-planned and organized routines implemented from the outset of the school year. Many examples of effective classroom management strategies were discussed with the novices. In addition, experienced teachers were on hand to share their knowledge and expertise with new teachers. The second day of the seminar focused on feedback from new teachers related to their classroom management and organization experiences. The extended period between the first and second day allowed for the novice teacher to institute, experiment with, modify, and re-apply strategies presented during the training. New teachers were then able to share what was effective, what was not, and generally, to discuss how their year had begun.

In this non-threatening environment, experienced professionals were able to support beginning teacher efforts, present new ideas and materials, and send the novices back to schools more competent and more confident of success. In all, 10 classroom management seminars were conducted between August and November 1989, serving 421 beginning teachers from pre-school through grade 12 in all subject or specialization areas.

At the time of this joint venture, the Thomas E. Robinson Beginning Teacher Induction Center had been offering services since 1988. The Regional Curriculum Services Unit-South was opened in 1983. Both agencies have successful histories of offering extensive training opportunities in the South Jersey area. The new effort combined the resources and expertise of two educational agencies, each providing support for new teachers entering the profession, thus reducing the

attrition rate of new teachers while improving their effectiveness.

Representatives of both agencies spent the early part of summer 1989 designing a program to integrate the recently developed "Knowledge Base of Beginning Teachers" (Reynolds, 1989), as well as objectives of the New Jersey Department of Education in teacher induction. Free seminars were offered to teachers throughout the seven-county South Jersey area served by RCSU-South. These teachers, along with non-participating new teachers employed in either a public or private school in the southern part of the state, were eligible to enroll in the six additional seminars offered through the Thomas E. Robinson Beginning Teacher Induction Center during the rest of their first year of teaching. The remaining seminars were held after school hours so as not to interfere with teacher/student contact time. New teachers were also encouraged to participate in training opportunities at RCSU-South, especially during summer months.

Data collected during the ensuing school year indicate that the attrition rate of teachers involved in the seminar series was 3.48%, even less than the low 4% attrition rate reported by the New Jersey Alternate Route Certification Program (Kearns, 1990). Additional data collected during the past two years reflect a high degree of satisfaction of participant novice teachers with the support induction program (Calliari, 1990). Additionally, this interagency initiative was developed using existing staff, materials, and financial resources.

It is clear that graduation from college or an approved pre-service teacher preparation program in the 1990s is only the first step in a long career voyage involving continued professional growth and development. Teaching has become more complex than it was even a single generation ago. Teachers must continually update their content knowledge and repertoire of teaching skills to address the needs of current and future generations of children. Continued joint ventures such as the one described here are essential in the '90s if we expect to meet teachers' pre-service and post-service needs. As for the

BTIC and RCSU-South, the 1993-94 schedule to continue their collaborative support for new teachers is already set.

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