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## Learning by Teaching: The New Teachers Collaborative

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A belief in “learning by doing” lies at the heart of the New Teachers Collaborative (NTC), a small teacher-preparation program at the Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School, and its partner, the Theodore R.Sizer Teachers Center, in Devens, Massachusetts. Now in its sixth year, NTC is designed to bring to adult learners the 10 Common Principles that we, as members of the Coalition of Essential Schools, feel so compelled to offer our younger students. Throughout their one-year apprenticeship, interns (whom we call “Collaborating Teachers”) learn to teach by teaching, with the coaching of exemplary mentor teachers and the support of a year-long seminar. The year culminates in their presentation of a portfolio in which participants reflect on their experience and document their attainment of our professional standards for teachers.

This commitment to teacher training was integral to Parker’s design and charter from the start. Theodore and Nancy Sizer, key founding trustees, saw the new school as an opportunity to create a school-based teacher preparation program. As principal Teri Schrader explains, “Parker’s original charter described (and to an extent, promised!) an environment characterized by professional collaboration with all its positive benefits being brought to best serve students and the professional community.” Initially, this mission was achieved through a partnership with the Harvard Graduate School of Education. By 2002, however, NTC received program approval from the Massachusetts Department of Education to sponsor a completely independent teacher preparation program leading to the awarding of a Massachusetts Initial license.

NTC’s Collaborating Teachers start the program with a two-week seminar in late June, when they begin working collaboratively and developing reflective practices. They also participate in the final panel presentations of the previous NTC cohort. In mid-August, they join the faculty of the school in which they will teach, to participate in the school’s summer planning.

During the academic year, Collaborating Teachers teach at one of four middle and/or secondary school sites: the Parker School; the Linn Murdoch Middle Innovation Academy and the Innovation Academy Charter Schools in Chelmsford, Massachusetts; and Prospect Hill Academy in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In some cases, Collaborating Teachers have teaching partners; in others, they teach alone with the support of a mentor who is in their classroom regularly. NTC director Clare Fox Ringwall travels among the schools, providing additional support and visiting teachers in their classrooms.

Every other week, Collaborating Teachers spend a full day together. Here the focus is on classroom practice, looking at student and teacher work, and reflecting on the dilemmas that teaching provokes. Other seminar time is devoted to the history and philosophy of education, adolescent development, learning styles, and disabilities. In addition to the NTC director, the faculty leading the seminars include Ted and Nancy Sizer and experienced teachers drawn from the participating schools. Collaborating Teachers read and discuss an extensive bibliography of texts in seminar. However, as Teri Schrader notes, “The true ‘textbook’ for first-year teachers in this program is actually the work they are doing as teachers – their curriculum, instruction, assessment, advisories, collegial challenges, dilemmas, joys, and confusions.”

Why do aspiring teachers choose a school-based program like NTC? Amanda Sheffield, now teaching Spanish at Parker, says:

After having moved to Massachusetts to take a reporting job and then finding out the newspaper industry was not something I wanted to take part in, I started thinking about something I’d done periodically over the past few years and really loved – teaching. Though I was interested in teaching, I did not want to have to spend lots of time as a student again, and I didn’t have the funds to do that,

either. NTC was attractive because the learning was based on reflective practice and real experiences with kids. To me, there's no better way to learn than by experience. Having seminar every other week with the cohort to discuss teaching practice and educational philosophy was worlds better to me than sitting in classrooms with different people talking about things we'd only read about.

Other NTC graduates agree that school-based programs offer the experience and learning they seek. William Froberg, currently a seventh-grade science teacher at Blanchard School in Westford, Massachusetts, comments:

I was attracted to the idea of "learning by doing," that is, working day to day with an experienced teacher to learn how to teach. The weekly seminars offered a good measure of education theory that could be put into practice on some level during the teaching days of the week. I felt that my life experience combined with my technical training (albeit years ago) would serve me well in taking a more fast-track approach to a successful teaching career.

Each Collaborating Teacher works closely with at least one mentor teacher. These mentor teachers are key to the success of a school-based teacher preparation program, and the relationship they develop with new teachers over the year is typically far closer than is usual in a traditional "cooperating teacher" relationship. Greg Orpen, who teaches science at Innovation Academy Charter School, describes his take on mentoring:

Watching new teachers grow offers the same rewards as watching my own students grow, except the learning curve is usually faster. Every year I try to figure out what controls that rate of growth. From my experience in this program, it seems to be a mixture of strong administrative support, appropriate teaching loads and resources, consistent communication, and an extra helping of humor.

The leaders of participating schools, too, find that the arrangement works well. Parker's Teri Schrader observes that NTC creates a climate in which learning is personalized not just for students but for teachers.

Sasha Douglas, a mentor teacher of humanities at Innovation Charter School, explains how this personal give-and-take works over the course of a year:

Being a mentor has really given me the opportunity to be reflective in my own practice. If my goal is to encourage new teachers to set high standards for themselves and their students, it pushes me to do the same. And mentoring a new teacher encourages me to be purposeful in my decisions about students, as these decisions often become the focus of debriefs and conversations. Finally, mentoring has been a way to reinforce what I know about good teaching, while opening up an avenue to hear new ideas and work with two teachers who have fresh perspectives.

Even so, new teachers face considerable challenges, especially when they work in programs or settings that are "under construction." William Froberg found his placement in a new charter school particularly challenging:

It was the most stressful year of my life. This is not hyperbole. It changed me in ways I never would have imagined. I wouldn't recommend placing a student in a start-up school, as happened in my case. I think the NTC was effective in better preparing me for my own classroom. That's not to say I didn't have some stressful years, but I don't think that can be avoided completely.

NTC has learned that Collaborating Teachers and schools must be matched with care. The commitment requires flexibility on the school's part. For example, Collaborating Teachers must attend Wednesday seminars twice monthly, as well as complete a minimum of 72 observation hours in other classrooms and schools. Success also depends on daily support from mentors who value their work with new teachers and make that relationship a priority. Schools experiencing significant challenges, such as changes in leadership or program redesign, may not be able to provide the structural flexibility and support required, regardless of how eager they are to participate in the program.

Walter Landberg, executive director of Linn Murdoch Innovation Academy and Innovation Academy Charter School, candidly describes that effect:

NTC contributes to the professional culture of constant improvement. When people know we're using

the “hospital model” of training staff, somehow I think this allows all of us to take more calculated risks in our work, to improve what was done before. NTC keeps us honest, in a sense, and true to our mission of teaching in a way that gets students excited about their work—indirectly, we’re constantly being compared to the other schools in the NTC program. Through this, we’re benefiting immensely from the work of the other schools.

School-based teacher preparation programs face many challenges. NTC’s stipends for Collaborating Teachers are modest (\$15,000 in 2007–08). Receiving compensation rather than paying tuition and program costs does open the door for many prospective teachers, but others cannot forgo a full year’s salary as they prepare for a new career in teaching. The stipends are less than a full teaching salary, but this savings to schools is typically offset by the increase in teacher to student ratio on which the program is based.

Also, even though schools in the program are full partners in all respects, the resources and administration necessary for a sustainable program are hard to squeeze entirely from schools themselves. In NTC’s case, administrative costs and the director’s salary have been generously funded by grants from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

The first year of teaching is notoriously daunting, and this is particularly true for Collaborating Teachers. They are teachers, committing fully to their students and their schools – at the same time that they are full-time students of the craft, reflecting critically on their own learning and growth. They may fall in love with their schools, but they cannot necessarily stay beyond their one-year appointment, since participating schools must reserve spots for future Collaborating Teachers.

As daunting as these challenges are, however, Ted Sizer’s long-time commitment to school-based teacher education and his leadership in establishing an in-house teacher preparation program thirteen years ago now seem prescient. Preparing teachers within our school communities is the best way for schools to find and mentor the teachers they need today, as administrator Walter Landberg concludes:

This is the best way to find and develop new teachers that fit our model and our mission. This is bigger than the schools in NTC as well; this is a model that I feel should be replicated across the country. Education schools should really stand up and take notice of this excellent program and look to mold their programs into something similar – this is what we really need in our schools. In short, I believe that this is the way we’ll be training teachers in the future.

Small, reform-minded schools set themselves a hard task when they make priorities of “teachers knowing their students well” and “students learning by doing.” If they are to succeed in meeting those priorities, they must take on the crucial corollary task: preparing new teachers in programs that are guided by those very same principles.

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The Francis W. Parker Charter Essential School, a CES Small Schools Project Mentor School, is a public charter school open by lottery admissions to all residents of Massachusetts in grades seven through twelve. One of the state’s first charter schools, Parker was started in 1995 by area parents and teachers. The school is named after Francis W. Parker, the 19th-century New England educator who is known as the father of American progressive education. CES founder and Chairman Emeritus Theodore R. Sizer and Nancy Sizer are trustees of the school and participate actively in its ongoing development and work; they served as co-principals in 1998–99.

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### **Related Resource**

For more on Parker Charter Essential School, see “Sustained School Partnerships: Mentoring, Collaboration, and Networks,” which appeared in *Horace* Volume 20, Issue 1, Fall 2003, available online at [www.essentialschools.org/cs/resources/view/ces\\_res/319](http://www.essentialschools.org/cs/resources/view/ces_res/319)

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