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A Mentoring Success Story: The Resident Teacher Program

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Preparing and retaining highly qualified teachers is a major concern in our education system. The current turnover rate in education (13-16%) far exceeds the 11% rate of other professions (Viadero, 2002; Ingersoll, 2001). Even more alarming is that 30-50% of new teachers leave the profession within the first five years (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Grissmer & Kirby, 1987; Ingersoll, 2004; Viadero, 2002).

This study looks at the use of a mentoring (induction) program that teams with a graduate program of study designed to provide the support and further education that is vital for our new teachers. The success of this program is documented and provides a framework for other induction programs.

Introduction

A shortage of teachers, especially high quality teachers, looms within our current education system. Educators wonder how our teacher education programs, public schools, and most importantly, students will be influenced by these far-reaching shortages. What will need to be done to ensure the success of our schools, enhance the achievement levels of our students, and promote the profession of teaching? How do we attract more qualified people and prepare them to enter into the teaching profession? How do we keep them in our schools? The answers to these questions involve collaborative efforts between teacher education programs, state licensing boards, local communities, and school systems.

This study looks at an induction program designed to further prepare, support, and retain high quality teachers. This program, the Resident Teacher Program, is a collaborative effort between a university

and the local school district with the dual responsibility of mentoring first year teachers as they pursue a master's degree in education.

Significance of the Study

Educators' anxiety escalates as we think about the dilemma of preparing and retaining high quality teachers. New teachers report isolation, lack of support, unclear expectations, low wages, poor preparation, difficulties dealing with student discipline problems, lack of resources, and a sense of being overwhelmed as major reasons for leaving the teaching profession (Brighton, 1999; Buckley, Schneider, & Shang, 2005; Gordon & Maxey, 2000; Heller, 2004; Kronowitz, 1999; Viadero, 2002). This is an overt situation that led to the finding that education has a higher annual turnover rate (13.2%) than other professions (11%) (Viadero, 2002). Ingersoll (2001) reports an even more startling annual turnover rate of 16% for teachers.

Over the years, studies have found that the attrition rate for new teachers (within the first five years) ranges from 30-50% (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Grissmer & Kirby, 1987; Ingersoll, 2004; Viadero, 2002). These attrition figures are further exacerbated by the anticipated rate of practicing teachers who qualify for retirement (or early retirement). Nationally, since 1999, 60% of K-12 teachers have become eligible to retire (Brighton, 1999). In addition, a study by Gordon and Maxey (2000) found that an increase of accountability through the use of high-stakes testing and the "drill and kill" curricula contributes to the loss of quality teachers. This information indicates that our current teaching force may experience a substantial reduction in the next decade, and when teamed with the present exodus rates of new teachers, concerns arise regarding the number of highly qualified teachers available to educate our nation's children.

"The current teacher shortage represents arguably the most imminent threat to the nation's schools. The U.S. Department of Education estimates that approximately 2.2 million teachers will be needed over the next decade^{3/4}an average of more than 200,000 new teachers annually" (Howard, 2003, p. 1). Considering these various elements that lead to teacher attrition, Viadero (2002) suggested enhancing retention by "making improvements in job conditions, such as increasing support for teachers, raising salaries, reducing student

misbehavior, and giving faculty members more say in school decision making” (p. 7).

The Center for Teaching Quality (2006) indicates another critical aspect regarding high turnover rates from both the financial impact and overall effect on student teaching. “Even by conservative estimates, it costs a minimum of \$12,000 to replace a teacher who leaves the classroom” (p. 1). For all of these reasons, concerns over pending shortages have many teacher educators and public school administrators discussing the need for educational reform. What can be done to slow down the “revolving door phenomenon” (Grissmer & Kirby, 1987, p. 9)? How do we counter the alarming statement by Halford (1998) when she called education “the profession that eats its young” (p. 1)?

Supporting Teacher Induction Through University-School Partnerships

Research has shown that mentoring and induction programs work. Numerous researchers (Ingersoll, 2001; Kelly, 2001; Martin & Robbins, 1999; Wong, 2002) indicate that using mentors for first-year teachers has resulted in substantially better retention rates. Johnson, Birkeland, Kardos, Kauffman, and Peske’s (2001) research suggests

The key to addressing shortages lies not in active recruitment policies but in support and training for new teachers at the school site. For it is in schools and classrooms where teachers must find success and satisfaction. It is there they will decide whether or not to continue to teach. (p. 8)

This study looks at an induction program that is devised from the Professional Development School model, which was developed in the 1980s with three major functions in mind: enhancing student achievement, supporting teacher induction, and improving current practice (The Holmes Group, 1986). As a special interest group, The Holmes Group (1986, 1990, 1995, 2000) has led the way in establishing and promoting numerous goals central to improving our education system. Two such goals (The Holmes Group, 1986) are particularly relevant for this study: (a) connecting schools of education to K-12 schools and (b) making K-12 schools better places for practicing teachers to work and learn.

The Professional Development School model envisions that public schools and universities will form a collaborative partnership in the preparation and retention of our teachers as well as enhance the teaching and learning environment for practicing teachers. Gimbert (2001) stated that a relationship between schools and universities will “create learning opportunities that are different from and richer than the opportunities either the school or the university can provide alone” (p. 40).

The Resident Teacher Program

The original discourse that led to a collaboration program between the university and the public schools began in 1990. The actual proposed program was instated in 1992-93 at the elementary level under the name of Resident Teacher Program. In 1999, the program was extended to the middle school level, which is the focal point of this study.

Program Format

Each year, a team of public school personnel and university faculty interviews and selects three to four resident teachers (depending upon available positions) for the program. To apply for a position, the applicant must have completed an undergraduate education degree, be qualified for a teaching license, and cannot have held a contracted teaching position as the program is designed for first-year teachers. Upon hire, the resident teachers (referred to in this article as residents) are assigned to a one-year teaching contract in the middle school and simultaneously pursue a master’s degree program of study that extends over four semesters, starting the summer prior to their teaching contract and concluding the following summer. Residents are paid a stipend that is half of the district’s base salary and receive a tuition waiver for 30 of the 32 credits of their master’s degree.

The goal of the Resident Teacher Program is to provide these first-year teachers with a mentoring system as well as an opportunity to further their education. This collaborative experience provides higher education coursework combined with classroom experiences that facilitate the interaction between theory and practice. The program

offers first-year teachers guidance in pedagogy and content refinement as well as a solid foundation of educational thought and practice.

To assist in the accomplishment of this goal, two mentors oversee the resident teachers. The mentor teacher and the university mentor work closely together to provide the best possible experience for these first-year teachers. In addition, the resident teachers form a cohort and, thus, support and assist each other as they take their graduate courses. Support, rather than supervision, is the key to helping new teachers in this program.

The mentor teacher provides the primary support in the public school. The mentor teacher is released from her public school teaching responsibilities for the year, although in addition to mentoring the first-year teachers, she teaches one course each semester at the university. The mentor teacher's role varies according to the needs of the individual residents, but generally involves (a) assisting the residents by orienting them to the climate of the school; (b) locating supplies and materials; (c) assisting residents with the classroom management and with planning lessons and units; (d) observing and reflecting with the residents regarding their lessons, (e) providing ideas for assessing, evaluating, and grading student work; (f) suggesting instructional strategies; and (g) establishing expectations both for the resident teacher and their students (Johnson & Gates, 1998). At times, the mentor teacher also takes over the resident classroom responsibilities so the resident can observe expert teachers and/or participate in professional development. The mentor teacher is the backbone of the program, for this individual supports the residents on a daily basis as they face the challenges of a first-year teacher.

The university mentor's role also focuses on supporting the resident teachers. The main thrust of this support is in the resident teachers' graduate program of study. The university mentor/program coordinator provides academic assistance as an advisor, teaches six credits of coursework for the residents' middle school cognate (one three-credit course on middle school curriculum and the other based on philosophy), and facilitates the seminar courses, which comprise eight credits of their graduate program of study. These seminar courses (fall and spring semesters) are devised to connect the residents' graduate work with their teaching responsibilities. The university mentor promotes the residents' research agendas and the need for active

reflection and continuous learning. In addition, the university mentor observes the residents' lessons, especially those projects that are devised through a graduate assignment, and discusses the experience with the resident teachers. The university mentor is also a licensed teacher who can substitute in the residents' classroom for the purpose of expanding their learning opportunities.

Prior to their final semester, the residents take an action research course in which they study their students/classroom through observations, field notes, and reflective journaling. Upon completion of the course, the residents choose one project (e.g., reflective narratives, research articles, independent studies, conference presentations) to complete during the last semester of their graduate program.

The final means of assessment involves the year-long process of studying, implementing, gathering artifacts, and then creating a portfolio based on the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS). This culminating activity allows each resident to recognize their accomplishments, discuss their professional growth, reflect upon their experience, and celebrate their first year of teaching.

Purpose of the Study

For this study, the researcher (program coordinator/university mentor) sought to determine whether the goals of the program were met and how the program influenced teacher retention. The goals of the Resident Teacher Program for the residents are to: (a) improve teaching performance, (b) promote personal and professional attitudes about being a teacher, (c) keep good teachers in the profession by building early career success, and (d) develop a love for and a commitment to continued learning (Johnson & Gates, 1998).

Methodology

In an effort to determine the program's effectiveness in supporting, preparing, and retaining first year teachers, ongoing action research is conducted. For this study, all of the former resident teachers were interviewed regarding various aspects of the resident teacher program. Of the 13 participants in the resident teacher program from 1999 through 2003, 12 of the residents were interviewed in person or by telephone while the remaining individual responded to some of the

questions by e-mail (see Appendix A for interview questions). The questions were devised to discuss the growth of each individual as a professional, to determine program success as well as suggestions for improvement, and to hear about the exciting teaching and learning opportunities each individual has been experiencing since completion of the program.

Interviews were conducted in the fall of 2004 and were typically an hour to an hour and a half in duration. All 13 participants in the study had completed the program at the time of the interviews. Additional data were collected during each resident's final portfolio review/program assessment through a final interview process. These data sources were coded, along with anecdotal records from both the resident and university mentors. The themes that emerged pertained to the program goals (e.g., professional attributes, teaching practices, professional growth) and program assessment (e.g., program successes, areas for improvement, general experiences). The final category dealt with the resident's current profession/practice.

The cycle of research involved observations, reflections, participant evaluations, and interviews by the program coordinator. Through this process, the program coordinator was able to focus on the experience of each participant while they were involved with the program (anecdotal notes and the portfolio review/program assessment) and after completion of the Resident Teacher Program and their master's degree (individual interview). In this way, triangulation of data were used to better assess whether the program goals were met.

At the time of their participation, the residents ranged from 22 to 39 years of age. All of them had completed their undergraduate education degrees within six months of being accepted into the program. Twelve of the participants had completed their undergraduate degree at the same university as the Resident Teacher Program. The remaining participant was a graduate from another institution within the state. Regarding their education background, 10 of the resident teachers had a degree in secondary education while three had completed an elementary education program of study. Of those 13 individuals, six also had a middle school education background (double major, middle school major, or middle school minor). For the purpose of maintaining anonymity, pseudonyms are used to protect the participants.

Findings

In this section, the researcher explores the resident's professional commitment and growth as well as the influence of mentoring and partnerships on the experience of each participant. In addition, the residents discuss the challenges they faced and the knowledge they gained regarding teaching and learning. And finally, the critical element of the participant's overall assessment of the program is addressed.

Professional Commitment and Growth

The initial interview question was to determine why the resident teacher had applied to the program. This question actually addressed several of the goals of the program as the participants' desire to improve their knowledge of teaching and learning as well as their attitude toward the profession were revealed in their answers. Every participant's response regarding their reason for applying indicated the perceived benefit of being mentored and the desire to pursue their career aspirations of a master's degree (professional growth) as well as to become a better teacher. Several added that the program's reputation and persuasive professors also had a bearing. It was interesting that the modified teaching salary (half of the base salary) was not a big concern for any of the residents. Eight of those interviewed indicated that a substantial benefit of the program is that they received a tuition waiver (for 30 of the 32 master's degree credits). Seven of these eight residents indicated that the reduction in salary for one year would be compensated quickly by the salary increase that accompanies an advanced degree.

In the interviews, the respondents addressed fears/concerns regarding the initial stages of the program. The interviewees remarked that their worries/concerns were about "teaching, not being knowledgeable enough, my ability to succeed in graduate school, letting my students down, being overwhelmed (due to the rigorous demands of the program)." Jon summarized his fears by stating it was "baptism by fire." When asked to expand his thoughts, he added, "I was fairly well prepared through my undergrad degree, but it was still a reality shock when I got into the classroom." Each of them affirmed that their fears were dispelled as they progressed through the first two semesters of the program, although six of them (50%) stated that the program

was very demanding and/or overwhelming. When asked to elaborate further, the categorized responses pertained to the rigor of being involved with both a full-time teaching responsibility and their graduate program of study.

Mentoring: The Key Component

Halford (1998) states, “Mentors can be a professional lifeline for their new colleagues” (p. 3). An absolutely critical element of the Resident Teacher Program is the mentoring aspect. An experienced mentor teacher from the public school system is readily available to provide support, coaching, classroom aid, and myriad other assistance to the resident teacher. The program is designed to have the resident mentors reside in the middle school where the residents teach, and the fact that her main responsibility is for the well being of these individuals has had a very positive influence on the success of the program.

Nearly every resident teacher (12) mentioned that the mentor(s) was the most important benefit to the program. Kathy remarked, “She’s [the mentor] the glue that held the year together.” Other residents (Alex and Sarah) responded with comments such as, “She’s our go-to person, a sounding board, a person to bounce ideas off of, and she alleviates our fears and helps us solve our problems.” Lynn said, “She’s so approachable and insightful, she helps me reflect and learn better ways to teach.” Interestingly, Ron and Kathy alluded that she was like “a mother figure.”

In addition to the mentor teacher, the program has a university mentor. This individual advises the residents and provides a link between the university and the public schools. As the coordinator of the middle school program, this person is responsible for facilitating or teaching 14 credits in the resident teacher’s program of study. Kathy labeled the university mentor as “the Lego-master as she provides the building blocks, the construction layout, the tools, and the instructions to pull it all together.” Kayla referred to this mentor as the “ ‘middle school guru’ who helped prepare us for the adventure of teaching early adolescent students.” Hanna indicated that, “My learning curve was definitely enhanced by the instruction and encouragement that I received from (the university mentor). I learned so many strategies and approaches that still help me today.” Additional comments referred to

how this mentor was responsible for supporting and assisting on academic/research issues, organizing the program of study, and helping to “steer through the bureaucracy” (Ron). Several (five) of the residents indicated that the passion of the university mentor was a major reason they applied for the program. Cody remarked, “When I think back at the RT program, I aspired to be the best teacher possible because that is what (the mentor teacher and university mentor) expected, and I think I still do that today.”

An additional level of mentoring (support) is found in the cohort experience. The opportunity to share ideas, frustrations, similar experiences, and the “chance to play off of each other’s strengths” (Alex) cannot be underestimated. Lynn felt that without the other residents, “I wouldn’t have made it.” Hanna said, “I still keep in contact with (Jon) and (Ron).” Two resident teachers expressed their gratitude toward the others by saying that they had “developed into lifelong friends” (Bobbie) and we were like “kindred souls” (Sarah).

Partnerships: An Invaluable Aspect

The partnership between the university and the public schools is paramount for this program to succeed. The university and the school need a shared vision, and all stakeholders need to feel they have a voice. Metcalf-Turner and Fischetti (1996) concluded that these two entities need to develop a mutual agenda, share decision-making and power, and balance the work loads for all before collaboration can be successful. Rice (2002) added that the collaboration process “utilizes resources, power, authority, interests, and people from each organization to create a new organizational entity for the purpose of achieving common goals” (p. 56). The need for the two mentors to emulate this collaboration is crucial. Lynn describes the relationship between the mentor teacher and the university mentor as “like salt and pepper, each adds their own spice to the program to provide us with the best possible experience.” Jon put the importance of the partnership in educational terms when he remarked, “I’d compare this program to an ideal Venn diagram—two separate entities (the university and the public schools) that are woven together. It bridges the gap.”

The residents were asked how the university and the middle school worked together. Alex summarized this relationship as she

responded, “The programs can’t be separated. The connection between [the university] and [the school] has created a community for learning.” More than half of the residents spoke of how the university coursework provided them with the theory that guided their practice. Jon elaborated by saying, “The theory that we learn informs our practice. Then we were encouraged to reflect and reexamine the theoretical meaning.” Diane, Kathy, and Kayla all alluded to the specific projects (units) that were developed in their courses that were then taught in their classrooms. For many of the residents, the middle school coursework provided a mix of philosophical concepts and a practical knowledge base that included many related and applicable ideas the resident teachers could incorporate into their classrooms. “Our middle school courses helped us to root our practice in what’s best for our kids” (Cody).

Connecting School and University Experiences

Dewey (1964) stated, “The importance of a strong foundation in educational theory is the cornerstone of good practice” (p. 314). The partnership between the residents’ graduate coursework and their evolving practice as teachers was a key factor of this resident teacher program. According to Arends and Winitzky (1996), the function of a Professional Development School is to “serve as a field placement site for teacher candidates, to promote the professional development of experienced teachers, and to advance the knowledge base on teaching and learning by supporting reflection, inquiry, and research” (p. 543). As the university mentor, I have had numerous conversations with practicing (experienced) teachers who had resident teachers on their teams. Many of them remarked about the positive influence the program has on the curriculum in the middle school. The experienced teachers, who had individually developed their curricula prior to involvement with the Resident Teacher Program, have been motivated to develop new and innovative curriculum with the resident teachers. These new curricular ideas often stem from assignments in the resident’s graduate program of study as well as individual initiatives taken by these first-year teachers.

The resident teachers are consistently engaged in curricular development through action research. The following examples depict some curricular and instructional methods the resident teachers

incorporated in their classroom or with their teams: interdisciplinary units, curriculum mapping, reader/writer workshops, brain-based projects, differentiated instruction, parental involvement activities, and service learning projects. Interestingly, numerous curricular projects/strategies devised by resident teachers are still being implemented after the departure of the particular individual (e.g., interdisciplinary units, curriculum mapping).

The curricular challenges for a first-year teacher are immense and even overwhelming (Halford, 1998; Johnson & Gates, 1998). Knowing this, it was imperative that participants were asked about the overall challenges of the Resident Teacher Program. Their responses were varied and have been grouped by generalizations (i.e., curricular and instructional concerns, overall preparedness, classroom environment) with identified patterns.

First-Year Teacher Challenges

During both the exit interviews (portfolio reviews) and post-program interviews, the participants addressed challenges that they incurred as a first-year teacher and/or within their graduate program of study. Curricular concerns were an element of confusion. Missy stated, "Initially, I wasn't sure how to meet the standards and benchmarks aligned to my curriculum, but I became more aware of what they were and what they meant and at that point I began to address them within my teaching." And Kathy added, "Incorporating new curriculum components due to the grad classes was very overwhelming." When asked if it was too much, she replied, "At times, but I wouldn't have traded it for the world—at least not now." Another challenge for the residents was assessment. Sarah, Alex, and Bobbie indicated that assessing student learning was a challenge or "work in progress" (Bobbie). Sarah felt that she "struggled with knowing if my students were really learning what I was teaching." She later remarked with confidence, "I'm now able to take a holistic approach to assessment ... I now see and understand the entire process and also how to assess my students and myself." Alex wanted to find a way to reach more of her math students because, "I swear, half of them got it and the other half didn't." So she challenged herself to learn about differentiated instruction and found success, stating, "I continue to use aspects of

differentiated instruction. I've even been designated as the head of our math department regarding instructional variations."

The middle school philosophy states that a curriculum must be "challenging, integrative, relevant, and exploratory" (National Middle School Association, 2001, p. 63). In the graduate program of study, the students (residents) are required to devise curricular projects to be implemented in their classrooms. Cody talked about the pressures of graduate coursework, "I often felt overwhelmed as I was preparing a project for your class, but when it came to implement it in my classroom it really gave me a break (as it was already planned) which I really appreciated." He also commented about his preparation by stating, "I now realize how fortunate I've been, my understanding of middle school philosophy has been both a blessing and a curse ... I'm able to help move us (referring to his current team) forward because we are only a middle school by name ... I can't tell you how lucky we were at [middle school], the philosophy is woven into the curriculum" (Cody). Jon addressed his experience regarding a schoolwide interdisciplinary unit that he was instrumental in developing as he remarked, "My experience with developing the mock election unit was a powerful learning experience even though it was a lot of work." In addition, Kayla expressed, "You know me, I always went overboard and would bite off more than I could chew but I always made it work." She also talked about the opportunities that occurred in her new position as a second year teacher, "Due to my persistence, my team devised their first interdisciplinary unit." Kathy remarked about how implementing a new strategy, working with her mentor on management skills, and a personal realization made a huge difference in her current classroom practices:

I knew I needed to do something different with my students, as we just weren't getting anywhere. The harder I pushed, the more they resisted and then more and more discipline problems happened. I didn't even really like them (her students) at that time so I was really at my wits end. But (the mentor teacher) worked diligently with me to find strategies that worked for me. She also helped me to see that I needed to let the students know that I cared about them. At the same time, we submitted a (curricular proposal) project for (the university mentor's)

class. So I decided that I needed to find something different, something that would motivate or engage my students. That's when I bought into Reader's Workshop. Thank goodness. I'm still using it today."

Kathy also added, "I am so thankful for the RT program as I gained five years of information, experience, and confidence in just one year."

Kathy wasn't the only person to address discipline problems as a major challenge in their first year. Actually, seven of the 13 addressed varied levels of frustration with students' behavior. Bobbie said, "It seemed like I worked daily for the first half of the year with (mentor) as I struggled with discipline. I don't think the kids thought I liked them and, boy, did that cause problems. And then about November it all clicked and I got it." The other six respondents talked about common discipline issues (attention getting, overt socialization, refusal to do work, and breaking rules/procedures). Each of them expressed that they learned great strategies and how to establish routines that better enabled them to create a positive classroom environment.

Three residents responded to their level of preparedness. "I thought I was well prepared until I stepped foot into my very own classroom and, wow, was it a rude awakening. Now, I am wise beyond my years thanks to the program" (Bobbie). An additional testimony came from Lynn, as she claimed, "At times, I didn't know if I'd make it through the program, but now I realize that without the program, I wouldn't be where I'm at today" (currently teaching in a middle school). "I never thought that I would be comfortable taking on a leadership role as that has not been my style (as an undergraduate), but now I feel confident about my abilities and knowledge" (Missy). Missy assumed the role of team leader in just her second year as a teacher. Missy was a first-year participant in the resident program and was hired upon completion for a science vacancy in the middle school where the program is housed. This has allowed her to continually use her leadership role to encourage and support the new residents each year. She responded by saying, "I've seen so much change and progress since the first year of the program. It's exciting to be a part of it."

Program Advantages

Responses to the question, "What were the biggest advantages of the Resident Teacher Program" invoked various comments. The one

reply that was echoed by all was the benefit of having a mentor. Cody referred to this as “a network of support that developed community.” Jon added that the mentor provided a “safety net that was there to ensure that we didn’t fall or fail.” For many of the residents, the cohort experience was invaluable. “It added another layer of support” (Diane).

Obtaining a master’s degree was voiced as an advantage for all the resident teachers. Their responses recognized the importance of lifelong learning (Kathy, Kayla, Bobbie, and Jon), knowledge gained/improved teaching (Kathy, Lynn, Jon, Alex, Missy, Diane, Cody, and Hanna), and also earning power and prestige (Sarah, Cody, and Ron). In addition, the residents recognized their greater understanding and appreciation of the education system and the opportunity they received to experience “guided learning” (Sarah). Another benefit noted was that this experience made them more marketable. Kathy commented, “I feel strongly that the Resident Teacher Program made me more attractive to potential employers. My current principal commented on how well prepared I was for being just a second-year teacher.” While visiting with recruiters at a teacher education fair, two different recruiters made comments to me regarding how impressed they were after interviewing Alex and Hanna for positions in their school districts. These initial interviews led to additional interviews and eventual hires for both individuals.

Suggestions for Change

A critically important aspect of the study was to obtain information from the previous residents in regard to suggestions for enhancement or improvement of the program. Many of those interviewed talked about the demands of a program that involves both full-time teaching and a full-time graduate studies load (some of the comments noted earlier). Cody remarked, “At times I didn’t show up with my ‘A’ game in my coursework.” Even though many of the residents alluded to being overwhelmed and stressed, they indicated that it was manageable and that they wouldn’t change the condensed format of the program. A majority (10 of 13) of the residents indicated that they were more likely to shortchange their graduate studies rather than their teaching responsibilities. Yet, several felt that they were letting their students down because they were so busy that they didn’t have

the time to “create innovative strategies” (Kayla) or “write thought-provoking comments on the students’ papers” (Hanna). Two residents also talked about a lack of support by school personnel. Both respondents indicated that a teacher had inferred that having a new resident teacher on a team caused a lack of team continuity. Prior to the establishment of this program, the Middle School Resident Teacher Program Task Force (consisting of both public school and university representation) addressed this issue and decided that the benefits outweighed this concern. The mentors have continued to address this situation, but believe that the overall perception of the program is very positive.

Two individuals stated that they were frustrated with a course in their program of study, indicating that the course was “disorganized” and “not a particularly good use of my time.” This has led to a change in the program of study to incorporate a curriculum course that better meets the residents’ needs. A couple of respondents indicated that their financial deficits were a disadvantage. When asked to expound on this, both individuals talked about how their salary didn’t cover their expenses (cost of living).

Current Status of the Resident Teachers

All 13 of the former resident teachers have completed their master’s degrees. In addition, all of them have stayed in the field of education. There are several possible reasons for this occurrence, considering the statistical finding that 30-50% of teachers leave the profession within their first five years (Darling-Hammond, 1994; Grissmer & Kirby, 1987; Ingersoll, 2004; Viadero, 2002). One reason pertains to the mentoring aspect of the program. All of the program participants alluded to the benefits of being supported by the mentors. They reported never feeling isolated or unsupported, like they lacked clear expectations or resources, or a sense of being inadequately prepared. Even without the mentoring program, it’s likely that these particular teachers, who went through a selection process, might have continued in the profession. On the other hand, Gordon and Maxey (2000, p. 8) state that “the teachers who leave (after their first year) tend to be the best new recruits.” Further evidence that affirms how the residents benefitted from the mentoring program is that all prior residents maintain some level of contact with both mentors for various

reasons. Support, advice, and collegial contact and personal sharing continue to illustrate the importance of the mentoring program.

Of the 13 former residents, 10 are currently teaching in middle schools, two teach at the high school level, and one teaches in a Department of Defense school. With 100% retention of these teachers, we feel that the program has supported and, thus, enhanced the success of first year teachers.

Concluding Thoughts

The purpose of this study was to determine whether the program goals have been met. In revisiting the goals of the program, I offer the following conclusions:

Program Goal 1: Improve Teaching Performance

So many factors influence one's teaching performance, from pedagogy to content knowledge. From the viewpoint of these resident teachers, the interwoven nature of their graduate studies with the support and guidance provided by their mentor teachers made a difference in their teaching. Due to the interdependent nature of the program, they were able to integrate their knowledge. This fusion is heard in Jon's response, "The theory that we learn informs our practice. Then we were encouraged to reflect and reexamine the theoretical meaning."

Program Goal 2: Promote Personal and Professional Attitudes About Being a Teacher

Every year during their final portfolio review, the mentor teacher and university mentor listen to each of the residents as they reflect upon their first-year experiences. They speak with such passion and confidence about the things that they have done and the successes their students have experienced. The residents reflect about their evolution as teachers and how they have become reflective practitioners. As they relate their philosophy to their standards-based artifacts, they often comment on how "it ties everything together" (Ron) or "it brought my philosophy to life" (Sarah). Bobbie sheds light on how the program benefited her as a teacher, "This year (2nd year as a teacher), I felt comfortable asking the questions that I needed to know to get the year going. The [Resident Teacher] program gave me an air of confidence."

Program Goal 3: Keep Good Teachers in the Profession by Building Early Career Success

Darling-Hammond (1996) called teaching a “sink or swim” (p. 6) profession. She named the Professional Development School program as a means for removing the isolationism that faces many of our novice teachers. She indicated that the opportunity for forming relationships with the mentor teacher, other experienced teachers, and the university faculty greatly enhanced the novice teachers’ experience. Jorissen (2002) reinforced this by stating, “The better prepared a teacher is, the more satisfied he or she will be, thus, more likely to remain in education” (p. 2). Former resident teachers echo these beliefs. “In my second year of teaching, I realized the incredible foundation I had received” (Kayla). Fuller (1969) reinforced Kayla’s comment when he stated that as teachers gained experience they were more able to make connections between the classroom and their foundations in educative principles and then apply these understandings to their teaching choices. A couple of residents directly addressed the area of retention. Missy stated, “At one time during my undergraduate work I switched out of the teaching program; I didn’t think it was something I could do. Now, as I enter my fifth year of teaching, I realize this is what I was meant to do.” When I asked her what influenced her change of thought, she stated, “The Resident Teacher Program gave me the confidence and knowledge to see that the teaching profession allows me to really make a difference.” Kathy discussed another aspect regarding retention. “I can’t tell you how valuable it was to have a mentor teacher. She saw me through some tough moments and offered me the support I so needed. She had the unique ability to help me realize what I needed to do without telling me. That helped me gain the confidence I needed to become a better teacher.”

Program Goal 4: Develop a Love for and a Commitment to Continued Learning

“I realize now that, no matter how much I’ve learned, it’s still only the tip of the iceberg” (Sarah). Due to the rigorous nature of the program, the resident teachers often spoke about their commitment to the program and to teaching. Even though there were times during the program that they doubted their abilities, every one of the 13 residents

completed the program. Even more significant is the fact that all of them are still in the field of education. Two of the residents have talked with me about continuing their education. One previous resident (Alex) is pursuing an additional master's degree, while another individual (Jon) is pursuing his doctorate (part-time) while still teaching in a middle school. In recent conversations, two others voiced an interest in obtaining leadership positions in their schools (as a specialist and a mentor). In addition, one of the former residents (Kathy) is in the final stages of completing the requirements to become a National Board Certified Teacher.

With 100% retention and the many affirming comments from the previous resident teachers, I feel this confirms the effectiveness of this Resident Teacher Program. I believe that this program has met the challenges of teacher retention, the goals of the Holmes Group for Professional Development Schools, and also the initial goals established by the university and the school district for a collaborative experience for first-year teachers.

Although not included in this study, additional statistics are available from me regarding the middle school resident teacher program. As we enter our 8th year, all of the first 13 participants are still teaching. We now have an additional 15 students who are currently participating or have participated in the induction program since the study was conducted. One of the statistics that can be reported is that 10 of the 28 participants in the program are currently employed in a middle school within the local district. The administration readily recognizes the expertise these individuals have as practicing teachers. In addition, 27 of 28 resident teachers that were hired for the resident teacher position are still involved with the teaching profession.

Action Plan

Based on the findings that emerged from this study, I plan to explore the following as possible changes to the Resident Teacher Program:

1. Increase the teaching stipend to provide more financial support to the resident teachers.

2. Consider extending the program over a two-year period of time. This would reduce the heavy course load (10 credits/semester for three terms) by requiring six credits per semester for the first five semesters. During the final (sixth) semester, the resident would complete the two-credit final project/independent study. This would allow the residents to make a deeper commitment to both their teaching and their graduate studies. In addition, the overwhelming nature of the program would be reduced as well.

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Appendix A

Middle School Resident Teacher Program

Questions devised for the Resident Teacher Interviews:

- Why did you choose to apply for the RTP?
- Did you have initial fears about the program and, if so, what were they?
- Were those fears resolved? How?
- What was the role of the mentor teacher?
- What was the role of the university mentor?
- How would you describe the cohort experience?
- Please describe any unique projects that you developed and then implemented with your team or in your individual classroom.
- During the RT program, how were you involved with your team's curriculum development?
- What were some new strategies that you tried? What led you to do so?
- What was the value of your university connection?
- What was your view of the portfolio assessment?
- What was the biggest challenge you encountered through the Resident Teacher Program?
- What were the biggest advantages of the Resident Teacher Program?
- What do you see as the disadvantages of the Resident Teacher Program?
- What suggestions do you have that would help to enhance or improve the current program?
- How do you view your understanding of the following educational aspects: knowledge of current practice (innovative teaching strategies), interdisciplinary curriculum, affective curriculum, community/parental partnerships, assessment techniques?
- What are you doing at the present time?