

SED LETTER

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At the HEART of the MATTER:

Improving Teaching and Learning
Through Professional Development



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Professional Development


Welcome to the new school year. With this edition of "SEDLetter," we will reach a wider audience than ever before. Because we want to put the results of SEDL's research into the hands of practitioners, we've added lead teachers and department heads to our mailing list of principals and superintendents. We invite you to read "SEDLetter" and share it with your colleagues!

In the past, professional development has often meant a "drive-by" or "hit-and-run" training, a one-shot presentation with no follow-up or coaching. Recently at SEDL and throughout much of the education community, there has been a shift in perspective. We see teacher learning less as an end to itself, more as an integral part of any reform effort. Through this lens, professional development is systematic and well planned. That means teachers, like other professionals, need the time and support to increase their knowledge base, hone their skills, and network with others in their profession.

In this issue of *SEDLetter*, we show how professional development can serve as a tool for school improvement in a variety of ways. We discuss two strategies for improving teaching and learning: One is to improve the core relationship between students and teachers by focusing on how students learn; the other is for teachers to continually improve instruction through a long-term process of reflection and discussion with colleagues.

"Teachers and Students: The Relationship at the Heart of the Matter" discusses the importance of improving the relationship between teachers and their students by concentrating on the learning process, which is the focus of SEDL's work in professional development. "Renewing Teachers, Reforming Schools through Professional Learning Communities" highlights conditions in schools which foster professional learning communities (PLCs) that develop as teachers plan, think, and evaluate their teaching together. PLCs foster teacher professionalization and improve practice.

Two more articles highlight the importance of changing practice to bring about student improvement through a pair of very different SEDL projects. "Learning a Whole New Language in Texas" focuses on SEDL's training for foreign language teachers, while "Student-Centered Activities and Technology Spark Learning" illustrates what happens when a low-performing school implements technology in the classroom along with projects that encourage students to work together and build knowledge.

We hope this issue of *SEDLetter* will encourage readers to reflect on the importance of professional development—to *teachers and students*. 

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Wesley A. Hoover, Ph.D.
Joyce S. Pollard, Ed.D.
Leslie Asher Blair, M.A.

PRESIDENT AND CEO
DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF INSTITUTIONAL COMMUNICATIONS & POLICY SERVICES
EDITOR

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Teachers and Students: The Relationship at the Heart of the Matter

By Kyle Johnson
and Leslie Blair

The question first posed by John Dewey in 1908—“How do we make a quality education available to all people?”—remains as salient as ever.

As the twentieth century draws to a close, educators across the country are reviewing this period of unparalleled innovation and change for America’s schools. From the birth of modern education reform with John Dewey and the so-called Progressive movement of the early 1900s, to the Sputnik-driven radical overhaul of math and science curriculums in the 1960s, to the present era of comprehensive school reform and the push for national standards, virtually no school remains untouched by the whirlwind of reform. However, relatively few have been touched in a *meaningful* way. The question first posed by John Dewey in 1908—“How do we make a quality education available to all people?”—remains as salient as ever.

“It’s all been pretty much like a drop of water rolling off the back of a duck,” says Stephen Marble, manager of the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory’s Program for the Improvement of Teaching and Learning (PITL). “We’ve seen lots of ideas, and a few very, very good ideas that have had isolated success and stimulated a lot of national debate. But they’ve all more or less failed to take hold across the broader system—we haven’t done a very good job at figuring out how to make change sink in.”

Why is that? Richard F. Elmore, a professor at the Harvard University School of Education, has spent most of the last six years attempting



to answer that question. In his 1996 research paper, “Getting to Scale with Good Educational Practice,” he largely faults a pattern of over-emphasis on trying to bring change about at a broad policy level at the expense of teaching teachers the skills needed to implement reforms in the classroom. Citing prior research by University of Chicago professor Larry Cuban, Elmore notes that even the Progressive movement had a “weak, diluted” impact on the education system as a whole, only “slightly” affecting the daily practice of teachers in less than 25 percent of the nation’s classrooms.

“If you’re not changing the way teachers behave in the classroom, what are you doing?” says Elmore. “Whatever it is, it will have at best an indirect relationship to student learning, or more likely no relationship, or a completely random relationship—which explains why virtually all of the major reforms this century have missed their mark. We’ve become very good at changing the overarching structure of the education system without really changing anything.”

This insight led Elmore to formulate his “core relationship” idea of school reform, which

At SEDL, “the heart of the matter” is fostering a core relationship where teachers and students are truly partners in the learning endeavor—a relationship where teachers are constantly looking for ways to build their knowledge of the learning process to enhance that partnership.

holds that for any effort to be meaningful, it must somehow extend to the fundamental manner in which teachers and students conceive of their roles, subject matter, and interaction in the classroom. And, says Marble, that model of teaching and learning has lately helped SEDL address the many challenges it faces in helping to implement school change.

“Thinking about the core relationship represents a significant break from the old way of thinking about school improvement, which centered around changing the mechanics of education,” says Marble. “The main idea of the core relationship, really, is how do you get people to examine the relationship between students and teachers and ask the questions, What is the heart of the matter? What do we want our kids to be doing in the classroom?”

“Those are very difficult questions to answer,” he adds, “because educators in general are not very sophisticated about really talking about the relationship between kids and teachers. But those are the questions we must answer if we want what we’re doing to make a difference.”

At SEDL, the “heart of the matter” is fostering a core relationship where teachers and students are truly partners in the learning endeavor—a relationship where teachers are constantly looking for ways to build their knowledge of the learning process to enhance that partnership.

“We’re really urging people to move away from the core relationship that exists in most classrooms today, where teachers stand up in the front of the classroom and recite their knowledge and the kids write it down. In SEDL’s vision of the core, teachers and kids build knowledge together, because that’s the way a significant body of research shows that most people will learn the most effectively.”

The improvement of teaching and learning, then, requires that teachers shift their focus from what they teach to how students learn. But getting teachers to shift their focus is not easy. Marble tells of the following example of the difficulties of making changes that matter. Elmore also draws on a variation of this example when discussing structural changes schools make that don’t necessarily result in changes in teaching and learning.

Block scheduling finally went into effect at the school after a difficult, two-year process during which time the superintendent had to convince the local school board, teachers, parents, and students that the scheduling

change would enable teachers to have the time to get to know students and move toward more in-depth instruction based upon student needs, and that the schedule change would give students the time necessary to learn challenging material. The next year it gained widespread acceptance. Although some teachers at the school used the extended learning periods effectively, others did not. One teacher exclaimed during an evaluation session, “I love it! Now I can show the class the whole movie in one sitting!”

Marble says of this example, “It was just one incident, but I also think it’s not an isolated one in terms of how we generally view school reform. All these years of work, and obviously not much had changed for this one teacher. For me, it really drives home the fact that if we’re going to change the schools, the core relationship is what we must focus on. Changing the bell structure, or laying down a tough new set of standards, or buying a bunch of wonderful technology doesn’t mean a whole lot if we don’t teach teachers to use those tools.”

SEDL’s Emphasis on the Core Relationship

“Professional training, the day-to-day pressures of teaching jobs, and much of the dialogue about educational ills and improvements tend to push teachers’ attention toward what teachers do rather than what students learn. We have come to believe the only way to find meaning in the instructional task is to make student learning the central focus,” reports SEDL program associate Sandy Finley. “This involves viewing teaching and learning from the perspective of what students need to learn and how they can best learn it.”

One way SEDL is helping teachers shift their focus to understanding how students learn is through discussion and study groups. Finley explains that as part of the Promoting Instructional Coherence (PIC) project, SEDL staff met with groups of teachers every two-to-three weeks. Throughout the school year, the teachers spent time discussing the learning process and reflecting on their teaching practices. During the first semester, in the SEDL-facilitated study group sessions, the teachers examined their choices about curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Their conversations revolved around such questions as:

SCIMAST Works to Change the Core Relationship

Changing the core relationship

is the unifying framework for most of the services and support provided by Southwest Consortium for the Improvement of Mathematics and Science Teaching (SCIMAST). Each fall SCIMAST hosts approximately 100 educators at a regional forum that probes important science and mathematics reform topics by engaging them in conversations that cover complex ideas, new sources of knowledge, and participants' ideas and experiences. In 1998, the forum focused specifically on clarifying the core relationship between teachers, students, and knowledge in school settings and then explored how understanding the core can assist educators in making important school reform decisions. Participants first analyzed film clips of teaching, learning, and classrooms as portrayed in the popular media to develop their construct of the core relationship, and then discussed how the core might impact decision making in two reform scenarios. Through reflection and dialogue, participants were asked to further articulate the significance and implications of the core relationship to their own work.

A second example of SCIMAST's emphasis on the core relationship can be found in the project's approach to professional development. Each activity that SCIMAST sponsors engages teachers as learners, assisting them in the construction of new understandings of content, instruction, and assessment through interactions with ideas, materials, and their peers. Teachers at Los Padillas Elementary School in Albuquerque, N.M., for example, have become students of their local environment on the way to designing a curriculum for their own students that incorporated the science and social history of the *acequias*, the canals which make up the complex irrigation system in the Rio Grande Valley where the school is located. In their study of native plants, ethnobotany, and the cultural connections surrounding the irrigation system, the teachers experienced a different relationship with knowledge than they had in their own formal schooling. They then applied what they learned when designing thematic units to take their own students into the field in a nontraditional study of the local environment.

- How do I think students learn?
- What do I want my students to learn?
- Why is it important for my students to learn this?
- How will I teach this concept so that my students can learn it?
- How will I know if they understand the concept?

During the second semester, SEDL staff developed new activities to augment the discussions and provide teachers with new learning experiences. In one group, the teachers were given an engaging science problem to solve. They predicted what would happen and conducted experiments to test their ideas. Afterward, they discussed the process they used to understand the problem, to think about predictions, and to explain what actually happened in their experiments. The teachers also talked about how their learning experiences in the activity related to learning experiences students have in their classes.

Examining students' work was another activity the teachers performed together. Issues such as quality of work, different methods of assessment, and the relationship of assessment to curriculum and instruction were discussed as a result of the activity.

During the discussions throughout the school year, Finley reports the teachers'

understanding of the learning process became much more sophisticated, and the decisions they made regarding curriculum, assessment, and instruction became better decisions for the students. "By having a greater understanding of the learning process, they are empowered to make better choices," she says.

SEDL initiated PIC with the idea that placing learning at the center of practice was the best way to assist teachers in making good decisions about their instruction, thereby improving the core relationship between student and teacher. SEDL staff, however, did not realize the vital role that group settings could play in helping teachers translate ideas into practice.

"To some teachers, getting to discuss their work with their colleagues became a highly valuable part of the year's experience, as important as the changes they were seeing in their classroom," says Finley. "We also found that teachers who engaged in personal and group reflection began to value and also question the expertise that they brought to teaching."

Other SEDL programs that work toward changing the core relationship by helping teachers concentrate on the relationship include the Reading Coherence Initiative (see *SEDLetter*; March 1999), Creating Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement (CCCII, see page 8 of this issue), the Southwest

“Everything goes back to that basic core relationship between the teachers and students, and the fact that if we aren’t really working to significantly impact teacher practice in the classroom, we probably aren’t working very smart.”

Shirley Hord,
SEDL program
manager,
Strategies for
Increasing
School Success.

Kyle Johnson is a freelance writer based in Austin, Texas. He writes frequently for the Christian Science Monitor and is a former reporter for the Austin American-Statesman.

Leslie Blair is a SEDL communications associate and editor of SEDLetter. She may be reached at lblair@sedl.org.

Consortium for the Improvement of Mathematics and Science Teaching (SCIMAST, see page 5 of this issue), and the Technology Assistance Program (TAP, see page 12 of this issue). The Reading Coherence Initiative provides teachers with a framework for the reading process and uses a literary profile to help teachers assess student learning and inform their instruction. CCCII focuses on helping schools to become professional learning communities that function much like the study groups in the PIC project.

Teachers who have been involved in these programs overwhelmingly say they have changed their instruction and their relationships with students.

One SCIMAST participant reports:

The idea of a core relationship has encouraged me to refocus and work harder to align my instructional content more with the needs of the students.

Another writes:

Too often educators get “caught up” in trends and truly forget that the core relationship is what makes learning happen. The idea of the core relationship helped me to realize that sometimes superficial things occur without any real impact on learning. It made me realize teachers need more than just material things to be good teachers.

A teacher wrote about her experiences through the PIC project and the impact on her professional growth:

I had to question my educational philosophy. I had to hash out a few of my ideas on how to teach. I learned about me as a teacher. My strengths, my weaknesses. [Being in a teacher study group] has helped me grow as a teacher. We became very focused on what we do in the

classroom, why we do it, and what are the effects from doing what we did I will continue to talk to other teachers. To hash things out. To learn. To be inspired.

Program manager Shirley Hord, whose team coordinates the CCCII project, says these SEDL projects are successful professional development vehicles not only because they change practice, but also because they involve teachers in active, engaged learning. “We’re not lecturing to teachers, we are engaging them in processing information in a way that is meaningful to them. Both Stephen Marble’s team and our team does a lot of that—figuring out how we can get people engaged so that they are building meaning of new concepts themselves, and not having somebody just tell them so that they go away with rote knowledge.”

“We’ve tried all manner of things to fix the schools,” says Hord, “and somewhere in the process we’ve forgotten the most important thing we know—that the single biggest factor that determines whether or not a kid will learn is that teacher in the classroom. Everything goes back to that basic core relationship between the teachers and students, and the fact that if we aren’t really working to significantly impact teacher practice in the classroom, we probably aren’t working very smart.”

SEDL



Art Imitates Life in the Classroom

By Kyle Johnson

Great teachers aren't simply viewed as exceptions to the rule in America: They're thought to be so rare that when one does come along, he or she is practically hailed as a superstar. Does that stretch the point a little bit? Take a walk through your neighborhood video store.

There, alongside the war heroes and adventurers, patriots, artists, and athletes, you'll find a surprising number of educators perched atop the pedestal-shelves of popular culture, quietly making a difference in the lives of kids in Anytown, U.S.A.



From left to right: Glenn Ford played a teacher in *Blackboard Jungle*; Sandy Dennis played a teacher in *Up the Down Staircase*; Sidney Poitier played a teacher in *To Sir With Love*; real-life school teacher Jaime Escalante appeared with Lou Diamond Phillips in *Stand and Deliver*, a film based on Escalante's life.

Of course, you already know them by name: There's Mr. Holland, kindling his students' dreams through the marching band, and over there, Mr. Keating—"O Captain! My Captain!"—with his charge to "make your lives extraordinary" through literature. Before their time, there's Mr. Dadier, taming his *Blackboard Jungle*, and with unrelenting idealism and determination, Ms. Barrett, marching *Up the Down Staircase*. And who can forget the real-life heroics of math teacher Jaime Escalante, demonstrating the power of faith and high expectations in the 1987 bio-pic *Stand and Deliver*?

Granted, Hollywood's vision of the story of teaching has remained essentially static for the past sixty years: Naïve young teacher stumbles into the soulless educational machine, struggles for the first couple of reels or so, and then succeeds at transforming the lives of young people by discovering how to teach in a way that makes knowledge directly applicable to students' lives. And yet, the entertainment industry's enduring fascination with the subject also reflects just how deeply the "genetic theory of teaching competence" has pervaded our culture, says Harvard University's Richard Elmore.

"We've arrived at an almost genetic theory of competence, as if good teaching is an inherent trait, almost like a person's hair color or shoe size," the education professor says. "If we didn't

believe that good teaching was some sort of gift like the ability to throw a hundred-mile-an-hour fastball, we probably wouldn't make so many movies about it," he says.

According to Elmore, this belief that the ability to teach is an inherent trait is a real barrier to change. It is a myth that needs debunking.

"The majority of teachers simply don't believe that they have what it takes to do better, so what's the use in trying?" he explains.

Oddly enough, Hollywood's conception of what makes a good teacher dovetails almost exactly with Elmore's definition of a dynamic core relationship in the classroom, says SEDL program manager Stephen Marble.

"Elmore's core relationship is a nice way of putting a name and a definition on what makes good teaching, but it's something we've obviously known about for a long time, as you can see reflected in the popular culture," says Marble. "Good teaching is not just standing in the back of the classroom and talking over students' heads, it's being actively engaged in students' lives, discovering what makes them tick and exploring knowledge together.

"It sounds a little bit corny, but I urge teachers not to look at these movies as movies, but to see them as a kind of instruction manual," Marble says. "These movies are successful because they strike a chord somewhere inside of us. So I ask teachers to look at those characters and ask, What parts can be incorporated into our own lives in the classroom? And then, I ask them not just to think about the stars on the silver screen, but to ask the same questions about the teacher down the hall."

Renewing Teachers, Reforming Schools through Professional Learning Communities

School reform and redesign have led the

American education

agenda for the last two decades. Little, however, has changed in many schools and classrooms.

One reason for this lack of progress is that change

imposed from external sources—often through

legislative mandates

intended to stimulate

school improvement—

tends to have little effect

in transforming what is at

the heart of successful

change: improving the

teaching and learning

process.

By Melanie Morrissey, D’Ette Cowan, Tara Leo, and Leslie Blair

“Schools and teachers often cannot produce the kind of behaviors or skills reform demands because they haven’t learned how,” declares Shirley Hord, program manager for SEDL’s Strategies for Increasing School Success (SISS). “Teacher development is the flip side of the coin of school change. Unless teachers become more effective at what they’re doing, schools will not improve.”

Hord shares this view with researcher Linda Darling-Hammond and the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future (1998). According to Darling-Hammond, educators can expect little change in the teaching/learning process unless they pay more attention to the ways in which teachers learn together and do their work. She advocates investing in strategies that would strengthen teachers’ knowledge base, developing their capacity to make decisions, and giving them autonomy to improve the profession.

Professional Learning Community— The Basic Concept

The teaching and learning process can improve and teachers can become more professional when school staffs transform themselves into professional learning communities (PLCs), sometimes called communities of continuous inquiry and improvement. Staffs who become professional learning communities continuously seek and share learning, and act on their learning. They examine conditions that have an impact on student results, assist one another in evaluating the effectiveness of strategies and techniques, and make informed decisions to increase student learning. Such interactions support improvement

of the teacher-student relationship as well as give teachers the courage to try new tactics and provide a way for them to work through problems associated with changes in practice.

Examining how teachers and administrators learn, work, and make decisions as members of a professional learning community is part of SEDL’s research and development work with co-developers and partners at schools throughout the country.

“One of the things we are doing in the project is trying to better understand what it takes to bring all of the professional staff in a school together, frequently and regularly, in what we call a professional learning community,” says Hord. “The purpose is to learn. And what the learning community does is to focus directly and incessantly on kids and kids’ needs.”

A teacher whose school has formed a professional learning community explains, “This is a very ‘together’ school. The other teachers and I pay more attention to what we identify as students’ needs [based on the school’s data] than on directives sent by the state department or district office. After all, we’re more knowledgeable about our students, aren’t we? We recognize where we need to change to help our kids succeed.”

Hord says that as a PLC, the faculty members ask themselves if what they are doing in the classroom is effective. If it is not, they must ask themselves, What do we need to do differently? The group then must decide how they should change its practice so that the students benefit.

“And that is not an easy thing to do,” she declares. “Because one problem schools face is that they have no time to do this kind of work. We expect that they’ll be flying the plane, and designing and changing it at the same time. So

finding the time for planning and implementing change is a real barrier, a real problem.”

Reviewing research literature about schools as organizations, Hord discovered that schools operating as PLCs share five characteristics: supportive and shared leadership, collective learning, shared values and vision, supportive conditions in human and physical resources, and shared personal practice. However, the literature did not reveal how the school’s administrators and teachers created or invented this way of working with each other. To identify ways a PLC is created, SEDL undertook a research project through the SISS program at four schools in Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, and Texas. At each of these schools, a culture of continuous learning was established over time.

A research instrument was designed to assess the presence or absence at each school of seventeen dimensions associated with the five characteristics of PLCs. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with faculty and staff members to gather information related to the history and development of the professional learning community that existed within each school.

Faculty and staff at these schools overwhelmingly agreed that their school was a “good” school, and mentioned that their focus on students and their relationships with each other made their school a good one. Each of the schools had a diverse student population and showed improvement in test score data over time as well.

Principals’ Role in Nurturing Teacher Development

Principals play a critical role in nurturing teacher development by sharing decision making with teachers and developing the leadership capacity of teachers. In each school studied, the principal created a structure or process for obtaining input from professional staff on a regular basis. Such processes helped to organize and support regular meetings of a school’s entire staff as well as team and committee meetings for deliberation on school concerns.

At schools that operated as PLCs, the principals promoted teacher participation in decision making on school priorities and staffing, and encouraged professional staff to assume leadership roles in the development of new programs and activities. These principals were also a visible and knowledgeable presence in their schools, continually visiting with teachers to gain firsthand information on how issues were being addressed. They recognized and reinforced staff efforts by facilitating and supporting teachers’ decisions and actions that were in the best interest of students.

At one school, the principal established design teams to deal with major issues confronting the school. During the year of the study, the teams focused on professional development, safety, curriculum and instruction, community relations, facilities, and faculty well-being. Any issue that needed to be addressed was sent to the appropriate design team.



Creating a professional learning community requires staff time for planning, communication, and collaboration. At left, Steve Brown, from New Orleans’ MetroVision and Orleans Parish teacher Tara Lampton and assistant principal Randolph Spencer collaborate on the development of a professional learning community as part of project under SEDL’s Strategies for Increasing School Success Program.

Recognizing the connection between their own learning and that of their students reinforced the belief that they could overcome conditions usually identified as barriers to student learning.

“People who aren’t used to a site-based school and come to this school feel a little overwhelmed at first,” comments a teacher at the school. “And even those of us who have been here a while feel a little overwhelmed sometimes. But I think the input that we have and the decisions that we make have made our school much more productive, not only for staff, but also for our students.”

The study found that principals at the four schools also encouraged purposeful learning and practice on the part of the professional staff. The principals modeled their own personal continuous learning and growth by maintaining current knowledge of the professional literature. They nurtured the faculty’s continuous learning by providing learning opportunities on campus, by encouraging teachers to attend professional development activities, and by arranging opportunities for teachers to share with others what they had learned. The study also fostered partnerships with external entities so that their staffs had professional contacts outside of the school and district.

The principals always kept the vision of what the school was striving to become at the forefront of attention. At one of the schools studied, the school’s mission statement was much more than a written statement—the teachers often referred to the statement when asked about the school’s vision. They also all knew what priorities had been agreed upon for the year. The vision and the priorities were directly related to teacher actions. Explained one teacher, “We are meeting our priorities not just for the principal, we are doing it for the kids.”

Finally, principals promoted and encouraged communication among the staff. This communication between and among administration and teachers helped bind the staff to their common cause. Staff at all study sites reported that they were well informed about school issues and believed that their communication fostered coordination of effort and unity of purpose.

Virtually every teacher from one successful school mentioned that e-mail facilitated communication between the administration and faculty and among faculty members. Within the school there were several places where teachers could easily check for messages. Another school used a variety of communication methods: frequent staff meetings, a bulletin board, and a printed document that was distributed twice a week that included information from the principals and faculty and staff members.

A Culture of Collaboration

A culture of collaboration pervaded the campuses at each of the four study sites—teachers were committed to using the time they had together in productive ways. In some cases, they used the time to focus on improvement initiatives involving curriculum, staff development, or student achievement scores; in others, they focused on faculty study or behavioral expectations for students. Teachers at the study sites not only worked together as a whole staff, but they often met in grade-level and cross-grade teams to collaborate within discipline areas on curriculum concerns or instructional strategies. Time allotted for these activities gave teachers regular and ongoing opportunities to problem solve around critical issues, to learn together, and to reflect on their work.

At each study site, a spirit of professional respect and trust promoted teachers’ collective work on school improvement initiatives. Teachers viewed parents and community representatives positively and solicited their input into the decision-making process. Together, they developed ways to improve educational experiences for students.

One of the schools created a parent task force to reach out to parents; another had good luck getting parents into the school by offering “Dine-a-versity” once or twice a year, where families were invited to attend a dinner and educational program. All of the schools reported having active PTAs that played a role in school decision making.

The staffs at the four study sites also supported one another’s improved professional practice. Teachers shared instructional materials and sought advice and opinions from colleagues about effective approaches to working with students, although this sometimes happened in informal ways, such as in the manner described by a teacher at a suburban school: “I spend a lot of time each week talking with other teachers about how well things worked or didn’t work in my classroom. I have a lot of friends who work at this school so we will contribute among ourselves Everyone is willing to share.”

At another school, the Critical Friends program allowed teachers to observe and coach each other.

The teachers at the four schools were committed to school improvement initiatives and were willing to come together to develop innovations and monitor their results. The professional staffs were comfortable taking risks, attempting new strategies, representing their peers in decision making, and expressing their personal views and concerns to the whole faculty.

Teacher Accountability

Teachers at the schools that developed PLCs held themselves accountable not only to the students, parents, and community they served, but also to one another. An expectation existed that all teachers were responsible for engaging students in high intellectual quality work. Teachers believed that reviewing their work with peers was effective and productive, and they linked this collaboration and inquiry to improved teaching practices.

These teachers also believed they had responsibility for learning new skills to improve their students' learning. They attended and participated actively in schoolwide meetings that focused on improved instruction and curriculum strategies. They sought staff development related to their goals and brought information back to the school from these learning opportunities to apply to their instruction. The support from peers encouraged teachers to try new practices and take risks.

One teacher summarized the faculty's attitudes at her school: "You could say we were change seekers. For sure, we valued finding new ways to teach, and learning how to do things, although it was sometimes scary."


As teachers implemented new strategies, they continually evaluated the impact the new practice or program had on student learning. Teachers in two schools kept professional portfolios that reflected how they addressed school goals in their classroom. The principal at one of these schools regularly reviewed the professional portfolios, adding comments, praise, and suggestions that might be helpful to the teachers.

Teacher's Commitment to All Students' Success

Teachers at each study site were committed to all students' successful learning, regardless of students' backgrounds or circumstances. Social or economic factors were not viewed as insurmountable hurdles, and teachers truly believed that their collective effort could overcome conditions otherwise considered barriers to learning. They believed that schools should adapt to fit students, rather than the students adapting to fit the school. They were continually questioning themselves as to how they could improve student learning.

All professional staff believed that good teaching would positively impact student learning. As they learned new practices and received

ongoing coaching and feedback from their peers, their teaching improved. Consequently, student learning improved. Recognizing the connection between their own learning and that of their students reinforced the belief that they could overcome conditions usually identified as barriers to student learning.

A spirit of determination and collective effort supported teachers in their work. As they worked together, an atmosphere of collegiality and support developed in the schools. They viewed themselves as allies in reaching their common goals. As one teacher reported, "Our principal is passionate about enabling kids to learn well and instilled this belief in the staff. . . . We have seen what we can do when we help each other." 

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*Program specialists
Melanie Morrissey
and Tara Leo and
program associate
D'Ette Cowan are
SEDL staff members
who work in the
Strategies for
Increasing School
Success Program.*

Student-Centered Activities and Technology Spark Learning

by Leslie Blair



Language arts classes at Carencro Middle School are two hours long to allow time for in-depth projects which often include Internet research and using the computer to write multiple drafts of papers.

Math teacher Torrie Guzzetta (below) says that her students are more willing to work on difficult math problems when they are allowed to work in small groups.



“I can’t imagine going back to teaching the way I used to,” commented a teacher at Carencro Middle School in the heart of Acadiana, six miles northwest of Lafayette, Louisiana. Professional development sessions with staff members from SEDL’s Technology Assistance Program (TAP) encouraged the

teachers at Carencro to combine technology with project-based activities that foster the students’ ability to think critically and solve problems.

Most of the Carencro Middle School teachers grew up in Acadiana and learned to teach in very traditional ways. Carencro is a semirural, working-class area steeped in the Cajun culture,

where bilingual means speaking French and English.

Principal William Butcher realized that changes in instruction were necessary to improve the performance of students at the school, which falls into the lower 20 percent of test scores for Lafayette Parish. Money for technology was available, so the timing was right to incorporate technology into the classroom. Butcher reports, “Technology is useless without training, and that is what SEDL has helped us with.”

SEDL’s Technology Assistance Program goes beyond simply instructing teachers to use software, which is often the focus of technology training. SEDL staff members model how teachers can embed technologies in their lessons to create a more active, engaging classroom and provide opportunities for teachers to reflect on and evaluate the classroom activities to make certain that student and curriculum needs are met.

Although performance data is not yet available for the 1998–99 school year,

Carencro staff report the shift from traditional teacher-centered activities to a variety of activities that encourage cooperative learning while incorporating technology has energized teaching and learning. Not only are the students more enthusiastic about their classes and their work, but teachers are collaborating more. Their professional learning community has expanded via technology—they are sharing thoughts about teaching and classroom activities via e-mail and an electronic bulletin board. They are eager to learn how activities have worked in classrooms at other TAP schools; some are asking for even more intensive training. Many are looking forward to year two of the training, which will focus on assessing student-centered learning and evaluating classroom activities more critically.

Butcher finds that the teachers who declined to participate initially are eager now for the in-service training after experiencing the enthusiasm of the teachers and students who have been affected by the training.

There is no doubt the children are enthusiastic about using the computer—all of the Carencro teachers agree that students are more eager to work on projects when the computer is involved. Many teachers mentioned that technology is the hook to draw students into the subject matter, that students are more receptive to information that is presented using technology. But for social studies teacher Chris Cormier, the real payoff is that the students retain more knowledge by working in groups to create technology-based presentations. Her students work on group PowerPoint presentations at the end of each unit, something she terms a “culminating enrichment activity.”

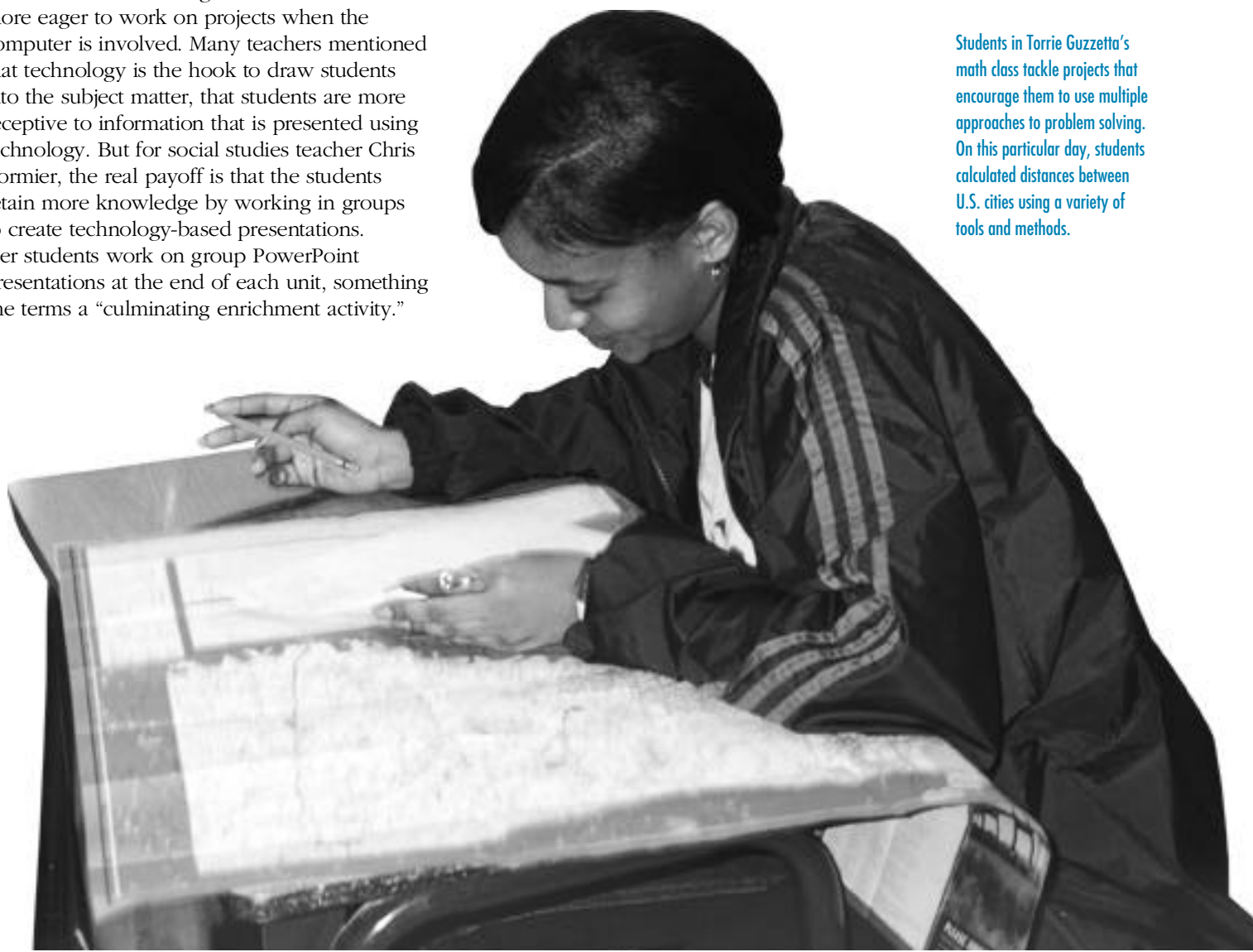
Science teacher Janet Castille agrees that student-centered projects help students internalize new concepts much more quickly. “The activities help them understand the background material—they aren’t just reading something, they have to work their way around to the concept.” Castille stresses that using student-centered activities does not mean there isn’t structure in the classroom. She says that such activities require ground rules and presenting adequate background material before the students can begin the projects.

Language arts teacher Kay Chadwick, who has taught for more than 20 years, reports that because of the training in student-centered teaching, she now gives her students some control over their projects. “The more they have a part in learning, the more they learn things they can use—they are not just regurgitating facts,” Chadwick says. She notes, too, that “technology makes the world smaller for students. It gives the lessons we teach depth.”

“The more they have a part in learning, the more they learn things they can use—they are not just regurgitating facts.”

Kay Chadwick,
language arts teacher

Students in Torrie Guzzetta’s math class tackle projects that encourage them to use multiple approaches to problem solving. On this particular day, students calculated distances between U.S. cities using a variety of tools and methods.



Leslie Blair is a SEDL communications associate and editor of SEDLetter.


Social studies teacher Lisa Sudduth reports that by integrating technology and student-centered projects, she is not “tied to the overhead projector” any longer. Now her classroom is more eclectic and open, and she can more easily encourage students to go beyond the book. Sudduth points out that she plans lessons within the curriculum framework established by the state, but she does not rely as heavily on the textbook for guidance as she did previously.

Sudduth also says that working in a more flexible environment has taken some getting used to on the part of the students as well as the teachers. “Students come to school with certain expectations, that a classroom should be set up a certain way,” she notes. Initially, it was difficult for her students to become accustomed to working in groups and taking the initiative to make the decisions necessary to complete their work.

The group projects that Carencro teachers have been integrating into their curriculum often mean that students learn about subject matter and using the computer from other students.

Interaction among students helps them clarify their own understanding, which is one of the reasons Chadwick uses small discussion groups called “literature circles” in her classes. Math teacher Tori Guzzetta believes that the children actually work much harder to learn material when they must explain it to someone else.

Guzzetta observes that the group work helps establish a positive environment in her classes and provides for many more teaching opportunities than in a traditional math classroom where the teacher models the work and students replicate what she has done. She says that while many students have had prior negative experiences in math classrooms, they are encouraged to attempt difficult material if they are able to work on problems in groups.

Guzzetta says, “SEDL has emphasized how important it is that we all learn together—learning is a team sport. It gives more kids an opportunity to shine—some kids are good with paper and pencil tests, but this way of teaching gives everyone a chance to do a variety of things to show what they have learned.” 

A seventh grader in Andrea Credeur's science class is helping conduct an experiment on maintaining constant temperature. Science teachers at Carencro Middle School say students not only enjoy investigating on their own, but they grasp the concepts more quickly than when just reading the science textbook. They often use spreadsheets and computer-generated graphs to display their results.



Learning a New Language in Texas: TEKS for LOTE and Professional Development in Foreign Languages

by Jay LaPlante

In schools around Texas, foreign language teachers are learning a new language that is helping them to communicate with students. But surprisingly, it's not the language of an ethnic group or nationality. It's a language of standards—what students should

know and be able to do as they learn foreign languages like Spanish, French, or Japanese. The new standards, called TEKS for LOTE—Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Languages Other Than English—are improving foreign language instruction in Texas schools. Teachers who understand TEKS are helping shape foreign language instruction in ways that are meaningful to students and are passing that knowledge on to other teachers by participating in professional development programs through the LOTE Center for Educator Development (LOTE CED).

The LOTE Center for Educator Development

The development of the TEKS for LOTE in 1997 by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) was in response to a mandate from the Texas legislature to clarify what all students should know and be



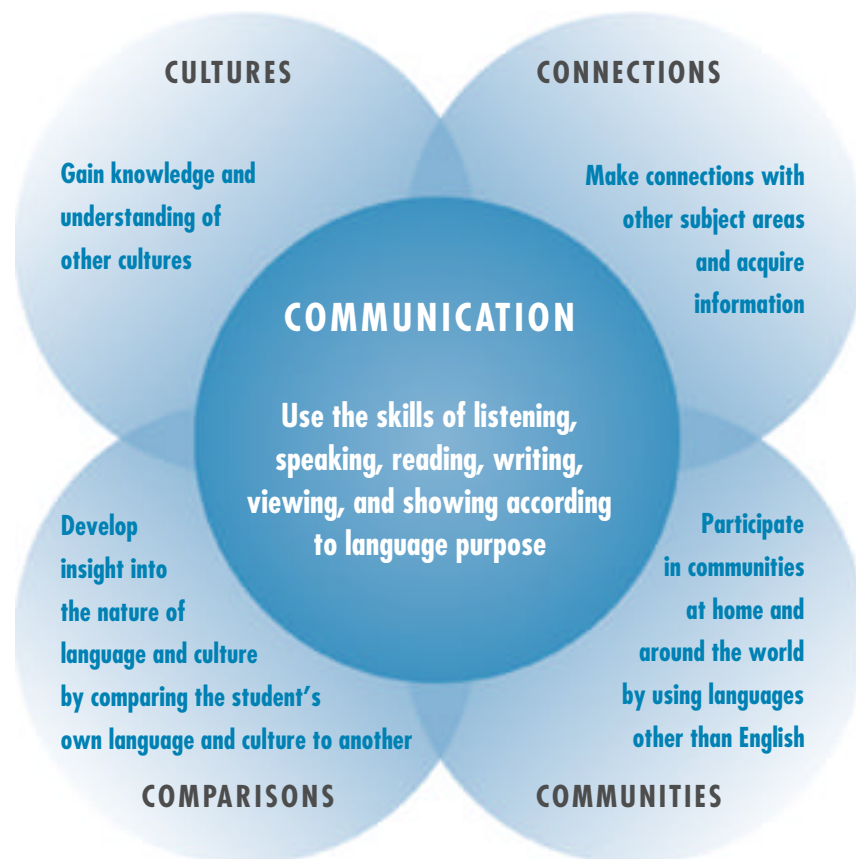
able to do in K–12 public schools for all subject areas, including foreign language instruction. SEDL was instrumental in their formation by bringing together foreign language educators and members of the public to help TEA create the new standards.

Once the TEKS for LOTE were adopted by the State Board of Education, TEA formed the LOTE Center for Educator Development (LOTE CED) in partnership with SEDL to provide professional development training and other opportunities to teachers of foreign languages with the goal that all Texas LOTE teachers will understand and use TEKS proficiently. In-services, on-site learning experiences, teacher exchanges, and peer coaching and mentoring training are just some of the ways the LOTE CED carries out its work.

Lillian King, SEDL program associate and coordinator for the LOTE CED, says the training and other Center activities help teachers

Spanish-language teacher Mary Diehl engages her high school students in activities that allow them to understand Spanish-speaking cultures and develop insight into those cultures

Interrelationship of the Five Program Goals



SEDL staff members Sylvia Juarez-Harms, Lillian King, and Elaine Phillips coordinate LOTE CED training to help teachers implement the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills standards in the classroom.

implement the TEKS by improving instructional strategies and techniques. Inés García, TEA's director for Languages Other Than English agrees. "We wanted to provide opportunities for foreign language teachers to become acquainted with the TEKS for languages and to learn how to better implement those standards in the classroom," says García. "Therefore teachers must have proper training."

The Five C's

Five Program Goals form the foundation of current, TEKS-based LOTE (foreign language) programs: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. Communication, meaning the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, is the primary focus of language acquisition. Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities contribute to and enhance the communicative language experience by supplying context, that is, what students communicate about (e.g., topics, themes, literature, etc.) and in what contexts their communication takes place (e.g., face-to-face, in writing, via the Internet, etc.).

The five Cs are becoming a common framework used by LOTE teachers to shape student learning. Teachers can bring language learning to life by having students use the language to learn about different cultures and to communicate in culturally appropriate ways; to expand knowledge of other subject areas, such as geography; to compare the influences that their first language and target language have on each other; and to involve themselves in language use beyond the walls of the classroom, for personal enrichment and career development. In classrooms like Mary Diehl's, the five C's are part of the everyday experience.

'The Dating Game'

Students in Level IV Spanish classes at Westwood High School in Round Rock, Texas, are gearing up for fun and romance—with full support and encouragement from their teacher, Mary Diehl. "It's fun and they love to do it!" she says. Wait a minute! What are they teaching at Westwood High?

Not to worry. Diehl is referring to "The Dating Game," her students' version of the



popular 1970s television show where a player interviews contestants as potential dates and chooses a winner at the end. The show is staged in Diehl's classroom each year to provide a fun way for her students to learn Spanish.

"The Dating Game" is just one way Diehl incorporates the Five C's to get students engaged in learning. The game is conducted entirely in Spanish by her students—from conceptualization to production. "I'm seeing them communicating in the language and writing in the language. They have to use certain vocabulary and advanced structures." In addition, the students have fun while they work cooperatively. After Level III Spanish students sit in as the "Dating Game" audience, they too are enthusiastic and look forward to moving to Level IV and beyond. Of course, "Dating Game" players don't go out on dates. "There's a line they can't cross," Diehl says, laughing.

Because Diehl has been a Spanish language teacher for 23 years and was recognized for her creativity in the classroom, she was selected by SEDL, along with 17 other Texas educators to help foreign language educators learn about the TEKS for LOTE and develop ways to incorporate them into their classroom activities. TEKS for LOTE training currently consists of three modules that cover a range of professional development topics, including an overview, classroom implementation of the TEKS, and developing curriculum as well as addressing assessment. The TEKS modules are presented by pairs of co-trainers, often a LOTE teacher and a district foreign language coordinator.

The Texas-Spain Connection

A memorandum of understanding between Spain's Ministry of Education and Culture and TEA created the LOTE CED's Texas-Spain



Initiative, which currently offers three professional development programs. Summer institutes place Texas teachers in various university settings throughout Spain where they improve their own language proficiency while being immersed in the Spanish culture. Texas school districts participating in the Visiting Teachers Program invite teachers from Spain to work in their classrooms and live in their community for up to two years.

The third program is the Post-to-Post Teacher Exchange. It gives Texas foreign language teachers an opportunity to change places with teachers from Spain for a year. Moisés Navarro Sabater is a high school English teacher in his native country of Spain. As a participant in the Texas-Spain Post-to-Post program, Navarro Sabater exchanged teaching positions with Francine Sires, a Hays High School Spanish language teacher in Buda, Texas, for the 1998–99 school year. In turn, Sires took Navarro Sabater's English language classes in Villena, Spain.

It's not unusual to walk into Navarro Sabater's classroom to see groups of students researching the history, geography, politics, and culture of a province of Spain. The teacher realizes that it is a stretch for students to truly understand a country they have never visited, but he knows they can learn the language by comparing what they know about their own community and customs with those in his native country. Teaching in Texas has been a learning experience for Navarro Sabater, who was amazed that in many parts of Texas, including Buda, Spanish is spoken in the street, at the grocery store, and even in the school. He reports that his students in Spain hear English on television and radio but don't often have the opportunity to converse in English. He adds, "One of the difficult things is to make your students see that whatever they are learning is going to have real applications in life." He is impressed that his students at Hays have that opportunity and are excited to speak his native language.

An Extra Set of Eyes and Ears

For some teachers who desire to improve instruction, one-on-one assistance and feedback is especially effective. Through the LOTE CED Peer Coaching and Mentoring Program, teachers develop collegial relationships with one another and help each other identify areas for improvement. Greg Foulds, a teacher of Spanish at Winston Churchill High School in San Antonio, is a trainer for the Peer Coaching and Mentoring

Moisés Navarro Sabater, a teacher from Villena, Spain, participated in the Post-to-Post Teacher Exchange program. He switched positions for one year with Francine Sires, a Spanish language teacher at Hays High School in Buda, Texas.

Continued on back cover

Information You Can Use Makes <http://www.sedl.org/> A Better Site for Everyone

In May 1999, SEDL unveiled its new Web site design at <http://www.sedl.org>. You can still find SEDL resources about teaching math or science, literacy, school leadership, language and diversity, and policy. But you will see the look of SEDL on-line has changed in several important ways. The new SEDL site is easier to navigate. It includes more information describing SEDL's mission and projects and puts SEDL's resources about teaching and learning at your fingertips. You can search for information by topic or by SEDL program name.

Please visit SEDL on-line and take a moment to tell us what you think of the new site. Send your comments using the "Contact Us" page so we can continue to improve the site to serve you better!

The site uses graphics and color to help organize information, yet remains accessible to people who use low bandwidth, various connecting technologies, or character readers, all which make some Web sites more difficult to access or navigate. Pages on the SEDL site have been tested and approved by *Bobby*, a Web accessibility testing tool available from the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) at <http://www.cast.org>.



Brian Litke is the SEDL web administrator. He can be reached via email at webmaster@sedl.org.

About SEDL includes the Press Room, links to a field site map, and SEDL calendar.

New navigation bar allows easier access to SEDL's programs and projects.

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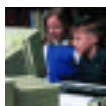
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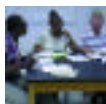
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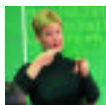
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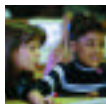
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spotlight

● [Unlocking the Future: Early Literacy](#), the March 1999 issue of *SEDLetter*, SEDL's institutional magazine, is available on-line.

● **LANGUAGE & CULTURAL DIVERSITY:** The [Educator Exchange Resource Guide](#) helps educators participate in or begin their own teacher exchange program with another country. Available in [English](#) and [Spanish](#).

[Native Education Resources for the Southwestern Region](#) focuses on organizations and contact persons available to teachers of American Indian students.

● **TECHNOLOGY:** [Putting Technology into the Classroom: A Guide for Rural Decisionmakers](#) is available in [English](#) and [Spanish](#).

SEDL also recently produced a video called [Engaged Discoverers: Kids Constructing Knowledge with Technology](#).

● **SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT:** The [Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration \(CSR\) program](#) provides information on implementation and evaluation of comprehensive school reform efforts.

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Program. Peer coaching is designed to help experienced or master teachers who want to improve their practice and learn new teaching techniques. The peer coaching process involves a pre conference to determine observation topics and a classroom observation in which data is collected. Finally, in a post conference, through questioning strategies and probing techniques, Foulds coaches his partner through a self-assessment of classroom management style, instructional techniques, and curriculum design, based on data he has collected during the observation.


The goal of peer coaching is “self-discovery,” asking the right questions so the observed teacher uncovers ways to improve instruction and help students learn more effectively. “A peer coach is an extra set of eyes and ears,” explains Foulds.

For less experienced teachers, Foulds says mentoring offers guidance for those who are new to the classroom. The primary goal of both peer coaching and mentoring is to help teachers integrate the TEKS for LOTE and the Five C’s into classroom activities. But the program goes beyond that. “It’s a way of building collegiality in the schools where people get to know one another very well,” Foulds says. “It’s a process based on trust and confidentiality.” Most important, students benefit when these teachers heighten their awareness of what is going on in their classrooms and continually strive to improve instruction.

Evaluating LOTE CED Professional Development

During summer 1999, the LOTE CED will gear up for its third year, bringing approximately 110 new language teachers from Spain to Texas school districts. In addition, almost 60 Texas teachers will participate in summer institutes throughout universities in Spain. The TEKS for LOTE training and Peer Coaching and Mentoring Program will continue throughout the 1999–2000 school year, providing professional development opportunities on TEKS for LOTE implementation to hundreds of teachers through Texas school districts and Education Service Centers. What effect will all of this have on children in Texas schools?

“The ultimate indicator of whether professional development works is what teachers do with the information and what impact that information has on student achievement,” says García.

King agrees. “It’s about teachers acquiring the skills to help students reach their goals.” And she sees this happening already as a result of the training. “Language teachers don’t leave the LOTE CED training behind. They take what they are learning back into their classrooms and use it.” 

Jay LaPlante is a communications specialist at SEDL. He may be reached at jlaplant@sedl.org.

SOUTHWEST EDUCATIONAL DEVELOPMENT LABORATORY

211 E. Seventh St., Austin, TX 78701-3281

512/ 476-6861

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