ABOUT THE NTC

New Teacher Center Success Stories

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**Jody Bruce, Santa Cruz Public Schools**

Moving toward Excellence: Accelerating the Development of a Master Teacher

Jody Bruce has taught kindergarten at Boulder Creek Elementary in the Santa Cruz Mountains for the past fifteen years. "Kindergarten is never the same from year to year," Jody claims. "But the students are always ready to learn something." A willingness to learn can also be said about Jody. Last year she accepted an opportunity to accelerate her professional practice by participating as a Cotsen Fellow in the Art of Teaching.

The Cotsen Family Foundation chose to partner with the New Teacher Center because of NTC’s reputation for implementing high-quality mentoring programs. The Cotsen Family Foundation seeks to transform experienced, capable educators into gifted teachers. The Foundation offers fellowships to a handful of teachers within a school, providing a full-time mentor and other professional development opportunities over a period of two years. Follow-up grants are available for Fellow alumni.

The Art of Teaching

Jody was introduced to the Art of Teaching when Anne Berg of the New Teacher Center and former Cotsen Fellows came to a staff meeting. They encouraged interested teachers to submit an application.

"I’ve been fortunate to work in a district that has offered meaningful opportunities for professional development," said Jody. "Yet when I heard about the Art of Teaching, I was impressed. The organization clearly values teachers and understands what’s involved in our work. They emphasized honing skills that I already have, playing to my current strengths as a
teacher. I decided to apply.”

In addition to a written application, teachers were observed and videotaped in their classrooms. “It was a little intimidating to present a lesson in front of my peers,” Jody admits. “I spend most of my day with five year olds. I was surprised to find the experience extremely enriching.” Jody and six other teachers at her school were selected as Cotsen Fellows; one was chosen to become a mentor.

**NTC Mentor Training**

Lisa Muirhead was chosen as the Cotsen mentor for the school. Before beginning to work with her colleagues, Lisa and other new mentors in the area received extensive training from NTC on coaching and observation strategies. They continue to attend monthly mentor forums in order to further enhance their skills.

After her orientation, Lisa began meeting weekly with Jody. Years earlier, as a beginning teacher, Jody had been mentored through the New Teacher Center. “The mentees between the two programs differ in experience, but the Art of Teaching shares many similarities with the NTC program,” Jody said. “Both programs are based on inquiry and reflection.”

In addition to one-on-one meetings, Lisa organized an inquiry group that met monthly. She also organized opportunities to observe excellent teachers in other schools and, as a tool for reflection, videotaped the Fellows.

**A focus on writing**

Fellows select a content area of strength to focus on. With the support of her mentor, Jody chose writing. “I knew that if I could provide my students with a positive literacy experience in kindergarten, it would carry them through life,” she said.

Five of the Cotsen Fellows from Boulder Creek decided to use their professional development stipend to attend the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project directed by Lucy Calkins at Columbia University. “I knew this was a once in a lifetime opportunity,” said Jody. “I came home and told my husband that we’d have to put off the vacation we were planning for another year. I was going to New York.”

**Writers, go write**

In September Jody began implementing what she learned at the Writing Project with her kindergarteners. Each of her students has a portfolio of writing, and after a short mini-lesson, when Jody says, “Writers, go write,” they hurry to the writing table and begin. Students create their own work—it isn’t “ghost written” by Jody or an aide—according to their abilities. Like all artists, they are proud of their portfolios.

Jody holds individual writing conferences with her students to discuss their work. “Even in kindergarten, they begin to see the importance of editing and revising,” she said. “I have seen a huge shift in how the students perceive themselves and behave as writers; they comfortably use the language of writers, talking about adding details or using craft-like speech bubbles. Their use of conventions and voice is improving from month to month.”
School-wide impact

“When we came home from New York, we shared the results with our grade level colleagues. Our entire kindergarten team embraced the opportunity to implement this learning,” said Jody. “The same thing happened in other grade levels. The Art of Teaching has made a difference throughout the entire school.”

And it’s not just the teachers. Seeing the difference the program is making in their schools, school administrators have started to meet. Anne Berg and Jerry Harris, Program Officer with the Cotsen Foundation, have organized professional development opportunities for principals including visits to other districts.

At a time of budget cuts in education, the Art of Teaching has helped raise the level of teaching and learning throughout the district. And Jody’s kindergarten students have begun to own a vision of themselves as writers, capable of expressing their thoughts and experiences through the written word.

Taiesha Woodson-Durham, Chicago Public Schools

Targeted Instruction Leads To Success With Middle School Readers

First-year Chicago Public Schools teacher Taiesha Woodson-Durham studied the test scores of the 150 fifth and sixth graders who would be her reading students. Just 27 percent met the state standard in reading. And on extended written response to reading, virtually all posted 1s and 2s out of a possible 4. Taiesha’s goal was to improve their ability not only to connect with what they read, but also to write about it. She turned from the data spread before her and studied a calendar. She wondered how far she would be able to bring her students by the March test date, and whether her first baby would wait until after ISATs to be born.

Taiesha’s school, John P. Altgeld Elementary, is located in the Englewood neighborhood on Chicago’s South Side. Schools in the high-poverty neighborhood, where nearly all students qualify for free lunch, had long struggled with low student achievement and teacher retention. The pressure was greater than ever to demonstrate yearly progress. Taiesha would be the first reading teacher responsible for all the fifth and sixth graders. The New Teacher Center—Chicago began offering its comprehensive teacher induction program in the area in 2006. The group has since expanded to provide coaching for new teachers throughout the district.

Data-driven analysis of student work

As a new CPS teacher in 2007-08, Taiesha was assigned CNTC coach Clare Donovan-Scane. She describes their association as a meeting of the minds of two data-driven problem solvers. The two analyzed writing samples from all 150 students to determine trends: What were students able to do? What did they need to learn? The data helped them group students according to key needs identified: making connections, providing supporting details and interpreting the text. During her first year, Taiesha administered Fountas and Pinnell’s Benchmark Assessment System to all her students and became the school’s go-to person for the electronic Gradebook system.

During one-on-one weekly meetings Clare and Taiesha used the NTC Analysis of Student Work
tool to help clarify lesson plan objectives and ensure that they were matching the identified student needs. Taiesha credits the Selective Scripting observation tool with helping her further fine-tune her instruction. Clare’s timed notes of teacher and student interactions provided a mirror of what was happening in the classroom.

“Analyzing student data with Clare helped me know when I had to revisit something I’d already gone over in class,” Taiesha said. “I would do a mini-lesson with the whole group and give small group instruction to help students master specific skills.”

The results: Fifth-grade reading scores jumped from 27.8 percent of students meeting state standards to 66.7 percent. Sixth-grade scores improved from 27.3 percent to 69.9 percent. And Taniya Durham was born April 16, 2008.

Heightened Student Engagement

During her second year, Taiesha began working with another CNTC coach, Kyle Miller. While her work with Clare had focused outward on student skills, her work with Kyle was more introspective. “I wanted Kyle to tell me what was working and to recommend techniques to try. Instead, he turned the questions around asked me what I thought was working, what strategies I thought might work.”

Through this process of reflection, and with the guidance of her coach, Taiesha challenged herself to differentiate her instruction and introduce more group work. As the year unfolded, Kyle saw Taiesha move from a traditional instructive presence to a teacher whose students worked in groups at a heightened level of engagement.

Taiesha recalls that when they started working together, “Kyle told me I was too serious—that it’s OK to laugh and let the students talk.” She recalls a casual conversation with students during which “a light bulb went off. I realized, ‘You’re having fun. You’re smiling. You don’t have to be a stern face.’ Now the bulk of my lesson and the students’ day is centered around them working together, talking together and learning from each other.”

This year, 81.7 percent of Taiesha’s sixth-graders soared to meet state reading goals. Her fifth-graders hit 78.1 percent. But the results that Taiesha is most proud of are in extended response. Among 69 sixth-graders, who had been with her for two years, the number who achieved 3s on extended response rose to 27, up from seven for the same students the year before. Seven students earned highest scores of 4, which none had achieved as fifth graders. Thirty-one scored 2s and only four students posted 1s, down from 30 of the same students the year before.

“Extended response is so important to me,” Taiesha said. “When it comes to multiple choice, the answer is right there, and students can guess. In extended response they actually have to think and express their thoughts in an essay format to prove they understood what they were reading.

A New Teacher Leader

During these two years, Taiesha had also been pursuing her master’s degree at Concordia
University Chicago. She received her degree from Concordia in May, and this fall, in addition teaching at Altgeld Elementary, she joined the Concordia faculty, teaching Content Area Reading in the Middle School. As she takes on her newest teaching role at the college level, Taiesha credits her CNTC coaches with helping her model techniques that her students of education can use in their classrooms.

As a high school student, Taiesha’s peers voted her “most likely to become a teacher.” As a new teacher, her determination to improve her students’ reading and writing skills, coupled with the coaching support she received from CNCTC, made her “most likely to succeed” and provided her with a multi-faceted perspective on her teaching practice. A new teacher leader was forged in the process.

Viviana Espinosa, Ravenswood City School District

Accelerating Teacher Effectiveness: Bringing a First Grade Class of English Language Learners to Grade Level Reading

Viviana Espinosa, a beginning first grade teacher in Ravenswood City School District (RCSD) in East Palo Alto, California, started the 2008-09 school year with an aggressive goal: she wanted all her students at reading level by the end of the year. Viviana knew this would be a challenge, especially when her class of twenty students included seventeen English Language Learners, two students with special needs, and nineteen who qualified for free or reduced lunch. None of the students began the year at grade level in reading.

New Teacher Center (NTC) is involved in a multi-year, systemic effort to reverse years of low student performance combined with high rates of teacher and administrator turnover at RCSD. The project was initiated in 2003 with a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. During the 2008-09 school year, nine full-time and seven part-time mentors supported 130 first- and second-year teachers. Professional development, offered to both new and veteran teachers, focused on literacy. Learning Teams were organized at each site to examine the relationship between professional practice and student achievement.

Using data to make strategic instructional decisions

Viviana and NTC mentor Bee Medders began working together in September 2008. As part of their weekly meetings, they used a number of key tools and processes to gather data, including Selective Scripting, Analyzing Student Work and the Inquiry Action Plan from the NTC Formative Assessment System. They collaboratively analyzed multiple summative and formative assessment data points, benchmark data, as well as their own observation notes in order to identify specific student learning needs and teaching points.

Moving from incidental to intentional instruction

Viviana attended 5 full-day sessions of Foundations in Literacy and Language presented by Bee and her mentor colleagues. She also attended a year-long professional development series called Classroom Intervention, co-taught by the district’s Reading Recovery coordinator and an NTC coordinator, both of whom are Reading Recovery Teacher Leaders. Both courses focused on the Gradual Release of Responsibility theory and application to practice, as well as best
practices in a comprehensive literacy program. The professional development provided Viviana with research-based theory and content which she was able to transfer into practice with the help of her mentor. The combination of Bee’s mentoring and literacy expertise, Viviana’s developing expertise through the professional development, and their ongoing conversations that connected students’ learning needs with specific teaching points helped transform Viviana’s instruction from incidental to intentional, from trial-and-error to strategic.

**Using best practices and gradually releasing responsibility**

After looking at student assessment data, Viviana concluded that the majority of her students struggled with summarizing, both orally and in writing, and she developed well thought out activities designed to improve students’ summary skills. What helped make the activities strategic and ultimately accelerate student learning, was Bee prompting Viviana to consider various points, including:

- How will you use Read Aloud (in this case) to strategically address summary?
- What is your key teaching point?
- How will you incorporate your teaching point into the lesson?
- After you’ve given input, how will you provide guided opportunities for practice and feedback before expecting mastery and independence?
- What will you look and listen for in the moment?

Just as Viviana’s goal was to move her students to independence, Bee’s goal was for Viviana to internalize the mentoring prompts so that she moved towards independence as a knowledgeable, reflective practitioner.

**Measuring program effectiveness by student growth**

One-on-one mentoring, coupled with professional development focused on literacy, formed a powerful induction program that accelerated Viviana’s growth as a teacher. Analysis of multiple assessments, including teacher and student observation data, became a habit of mind, with Viviana constantly seeking opportunities to improve her teaching and her students’ learning. With her mentors’ assistance, she employed sophisticated literacy strategies usually thought to be beyond the capability of a beginning teacher. At the end of the year, fifteen of Viviana’s students were reading at grade level. Of the remaining five, one made a year’s growth, two made progress in alignment with their special education goals, and two were referred to student study teams for more intensive interventions. In her first year of teaching, Viviana Espinosa provided her students with the skills and confidence for a lifetime of learning.