

# Maximizing Student Learning by Mentoring Interns

*By Angela Sullivan, First Grade Teacher and Mentor Teacher at Showell Elementary School*

*Note: Angela Sullivan is also credited with developing the Collaborative School Setting model*



The Worcester County Public School System is committed to helping prepare future teachers in order to ensure best practices in the teaching profession and to maximize student learning. To prepare future teachers, local colleges and universities partner with our school system to place teacher candidates – referred to today as interns rather than student teachers – at designated schools, called Professional Development Schools (PDS). Interns are placed with veteran teachers who work collaboratively with the interns, enabling the interns to acquire valuable field experiences. Our school system places about 100 interns in our schools each year.

Teachers who work with interns are known as mentor teachers. Being a mentor teacher is an enriching complement to professional development. This experience offers new challenges and opportunities for one to grow as an educator. Experiencing the motivation and excitement of an intern is infectious to students and parents and is rejuvenating to mentors. In addition, mentors are exposed to the current ideas in the education field by interns, thanks to the knowledge and experience of our esteemed university colleagues.

The development of the PDS program brought several changes to the previous “cooperating teacher” and “student teacher” model. Interns are now expected to complete an internship of a minimum of 100 days, which is approximately 30 days longer than in the past. Previously, the student teacher would observe the cooperating teacher before gradually taking over instructional responsibilities – as the cooperating teacher faded into the background, eventually leaving the classroom completely.

The PDS program brought about a new approach, which some have termed the Collaborative School Setting, in which interns, mentors, supervisors, and PDS liaisons collaborate to make the experience successful for all stakeholders. Increased student achievement is at the heart of the model.

With the Collaborative School Setting, mentors and interns employ a co-teaching model in which the mentor and intern are engaged in the planning, delivery, and assessment of instruction throughout the experience in hopes of maximizing student learning. There are many co-teaching instructional strategies utilized during the experience. Most important, mentors and interns find greater opportunities to differentiate instruction according to the needs of students. For example, the intern can take a small group of students who may need enrichment or remediation, while the mentor continues instruction with the rest of the class or vice versa. In some cases, both mentor and intern may teach the same lesson, but divide the class so each teacher has half. Simply reducing the student-to-teacher ratio has a huge impact on the number of student-to-teacher interactions that positively affect student achievement.

With the addition of an intern in the classroom, many authentic learning experiences are possible, such as a simulation of “Market Day” in which students actually become producers and consumers – selling and buying snow cones, creepy crawlers, and the like. Such elaborate lessons can be daunting for a single teacher to execute; however, these lessons can become manageable in a classroom with two teachers available to organize and orchestrate. This kind of learning is so powerful for students because they actually experience what they have learned, rather than just hearing it from a teacher or reading about the subject in social studies textbooks.

Research indicates that collaborative instruction yields positive results. One study, for example, compared Maryland state competency test scores of 9<sup>th</sup> graders. The passage rates of over 700 students showed 66.9 percent passage for students taught in collaborative classrooms, compared to 52.8 percent passage for those taught in traditional classrooms.

Collaborative teaching better prepares the next generation of teachers by enabling the intern to have continuous interaction with a veteran teacher in planning for instruction. Veteran teachers share their expertise by thinking aloud about the multitude of details that must be considered, such as materials needed for the learning experience, how the students will be grouped, special accommodations needed for individual students, and how the learning will be

assessed. Interns benefit tremendously by directly learning classroom management techniques – often the biggest challenge for any teacher.

When the collaborative internship model was first introduced through Salisbury University, there was concern that if the mentor stayed active throughout the experience, interns would not develop the management skills necessary; however, this is contrary to what participating mentors and interns have discovered. Students in the classroom saw the mentor and intern on an equal playing field. Students no longer looked back at the mentor to check for approval while the intern functioned as lead teacher in charge of the management issue at the moment.

Towson University conducted a study to examine retention rates for teachers prepared in a PDS. Researchers followed 87 beginning teachers for a five year period. The number of teachers who stayed in teaching was 37 percent higher for those trained in a PDS than those trained in a non-PDS setting. At the end of five years, 71 percent of PDS-trained teachers were still teaching, while only 34 percent of non-PDS-trained teachers were still teaching. According to Dr. Keith Conners from Salisbury University, “The collaborative model is a value-added ‘win’ for all stakeholders.”

If you have a question about the benefits of mentoring interns or the Collaborative School Setting model, you may call me at Showell Elementary School at 410-632-5350. If you have questions about our school system’s PDS program or field placements, you may call Barbara Witherow at 410-632-5092.