



Commissioner Roger Sampson
Department of Education
& Early Development
801 W. Tenth Street, Suite 200
Juneau, Alaska 99801-1894
www.eed.state.ak.us

Date: May 20, 2005

N • E • W • S R • E • L • E • A • S • E

More information Harry Gamble, Information Officer, 465-2851; Lorrie Scoles, Alaska Statewide Teacher Mentor Project, Program Director, 450-8406.

Alaska Initiates Statewide Teacher Mentoring Program

350 Teachers In First Statewide Mentoring Program In Nation

Great teachers—those outstanding individuals who inspire and help students learn—are every parent’s dream and the long-remembered heroes of every child’s school experience. To help increase the number of such teachers in Alaska, the Department of Education and Early Development and the University of Alaska have initiated the Alaska Statewide Teacher Mentor Project.

“We expect teachers who receive mentoring to gain teaching skills in two years that they otherwise would develop in five years without a mentor,” Sampson said. “This project is one of the most important educational endeavors underway today. We expect to have a great impact on improving the quality of schools and improving student achievement throughout the state.”

This school year 22 highly competent and experienced teachers are working with about 350 first- and second-year teachers in 37 school districts across Alaska to develop skills in planning and presenting lessons, creating effective classrooms, and setting the stage for improved student learning and achievement.

The Alaska Statewide Teacher Mentor Project is based on the nationally acclaimed teacher mentoring program at The New Teacher Center of the University of California Santa Cruz. The Alaska project adapts the Santa Cruz model to conditions characteristic of Alaska, such as the prevalence of multi-age classes in rural schools, the geographic area of our huge state, and efforts to support local culture and initiatives in the classroom.

The Alaska project also responds to a problem that has dogged education in Alaska and across the nation: the loss of up many promising new teachers during their first few years of teaching. Up to half of all new teachers leave the profession within five years. The high teacher turnover is particularly acute in rural areas, including Alaska.

But mentoring could change that. Among beginning teachers who participated in the New Teacher Center model, 94 percent were still teaching after five years, and they achieved higher instructional standards as well. Quality mentoring programs are often associated with improved student success.

All Alaska’s mentor teachers have extensive classroom experience, often in a variety of grade levels and settings. Each is paired with 12 to 19 beginning teachers, with whom they meet every week by phone, once a month in person and regularly by email.

The collaboration between new teachers and mentors is carefully structured by a series of planning and assessment tools that focus attention on specific skills that research proves are effective in the classroom. New teachers and mentors decide within these frameworks what is

working well, where the teacher needs to improve, and how to move continuously toward improved instruction for students.

What distinguishes this collaboration from traditional “buddy system” mentoring, in which new teachers may be linked with more experienced teachers in nearby classrooms, is that mentors are released from their own classroom duties, allowing them to focus full-time on mentoring the beginning teachers. Each “full release” mentor also receives formal training in a series of eight workshops held over a two-year period.

“Mentoring isn’t about telling teachers what to do, it is about asking the right questions,” said Lorrie Scoles, program director for the Alaska Teacher Mentoring Project. “Mentors help the beginning teachers analyze why they do what they do so that they develop habits of inquiry and problem-solving. Through ongoing examination of classroom practice, teachers learn how to get the results they are after—student engagement and learning.”

Jan Littlebear, a veteran teacher from Anchorage, is mentoring 17 new teachers in the statewide program this year. “Collaboration is the key,” she said. “This project involves K-12 teachers, their principals, each school district, my superintendent, the university, and the Department of Education. Never in all my years of experience has everyone been working together like this to improve student achievement.”

Littlebear is mentoring Troy Larson, who teaches a combined fourth and fifth grade class in Kotlik. Recently she arranged for him to spend two days with her observing teachers in eight different classrooms in four schools. After each visit, the two discussed what they’d seen. “This was an incredible chance to see things done in different ways. It re-energized me. Now I can’t wait to go back to my classroom and try some new ideas,” Larson said.

Larson said earlier this year he wanted to do some outdoor science projects with his students, but he wasn’t quite sure how to go about it. When he mentioned that to Littlebear, she posted his question on the Mentor Project’s interactive web site and within a few hours got a slate of ideas from other experienced teachers. Larson conducted an outdoor science experiment with his students the next week.

To contact teachers involved in the mentoring project, see attached page or contact Lorrie Scoles, Teacher Mentoring Program Director: 322-2765; or Mary Johnsen, Information Specialist: 450-8413.

###