

MENTOR PROJECT

Support From Peers Helps Prevent Teacher Attrition

By Sandy Dawson

Merida's first year as a mathematics teacher has been a difficult one. At times, the challenges seem almost overwhelming. There is new content to learn, classroom procedures to establish, and never enough time for planning and marking. During her second month as a teacher, she has begun to have problems just managing the class. The students won't listen to her, and they don't seem ready to work. No matter how hard she tries, she can't motivate them. Many afternoons as she closes the door to her classroom and heads for home she is almost in tears.

Will Merida quit? Chances are that she will. Research shows that 30-50% of new teachers in the U.S. will abandon their profession in their first five years. The numbers for mathematics and science teachers who leave during this critical period are even higher. High attrition rates among beginning teachers jeopardize the overall success of school-reform movements, with even more serious implications for mathematics.

To prevent new teachers like Merida from quitting, education systems are increasingly looking to mentorship programs that provide them with support from more experienced teachers. PREL's MENTOR (Mathematics Education for Novice Teachers: Opportunities for Reflection) Project hopes to ease the entry of beginning teachers of mathematics into classrooms in American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia (Chuuk, Kosrae, Pohnpei, and Yap), Guam, Hawai'i, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Republic of Palau.

This means that approximately 500 teachers like Merida will receive support on a regular basis from education professionals with different areas of expertise. College-level mathematics educators will provide support on content and instructional approaches, DOE mathematics specialists will suggest classroom strategies, and site-based senior teachers will consult on day-to-day instructional and classroom management issues. In-school mentors will also sponsor support groups for novice teachers from their own and neighboring schools.

Over the next five years, MENTOR Project staff will work to make this vision a reality. One day Merida – or other teachers like her – will share their stories at the Pacific Educational Conference, describing the challenges they have met and the obstacles they have overcome in the process of becoming capable and experienced teachers. With the other education professionals who have made these success stories possible, these teachers will welcome newcomers into a firmly established and warmly supportive community of mathematics professionals. It is their efforts – and the efforts of other Pacific educators and administrators – that will make school improvement in the Western Pacific not just a vision but a reality.

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