

MENTOR

Mathematics Leaders Support Novice Teachers

By Sandy Dawson

More than four years ago, approximately 50 educators from Pacific island communities began a journey to increase their effectiveness as professional development leaders. They include teachers from departments and ministries of education and from local colleges in the U.S.-affiliated Pacific. These educational leaders are the mentors for PREL's Mathematics Education for Novice Teachers: Opportunities for Reflection (MENTOR) Project.

The goal of the MENTOR Project is to decrease the attrition rate of novice mathematics teachers by providing them with the professional development and collegial support they need during their first five years as classroom teachers. The participating states and territories are 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. The impact of the work the teams have done can be seen in the steadily improving mathematics test scores in a number of the island communities served by MENTOR.

One key reason for the success of these efforts may be that the majority of the mentors are members of the communities they serve. Approximately 85% are indigenous to the islands, and those who are not native-born have lived there for five or more years. When the mentors travel around the islands to visit teachers at the schools or to conduct seminars and workshops at the local college, they are recognized as homegrown educational leaders. Their effectiveness is greater because they have firsthand knowledge of the people with whom they are working and can offer assistance that is not only educationally and pedagogically appropriate, but also sensitive to local customs and practices.

These educational leaders hold positions of responsibility in their communities. They are confident in the work they do, and they are respected for the manner in which they carry out their professional duties. Their confidence has grown in part because of the support and encouragement they have received from department and ministry of education administrators.

As a group, the mentors have participated in twice-yearly institutes at various sites across the region. The institutes focus on both mathematical content and pedagogical knowledge, and they challenge MENTOR Project leaders to extend their understanding of new visions for both mathematics content and classroom instruction. Financial support for these institutes is provided through PREL and through grants from the National Science Foundation.

New knowledge and insights also come from within the group. Institutes have been held on all but a few of the island

states and territories represented in the group, and this has fostered greater understanding across island cultures. In many instances, these educators had never met their counterparts from other participating Pacific communities. Some had not even connected previously with other mathematics educators on their home islands. The experience of working and living



Photo: Joseph Zilliox

▷ The MENTOR Project has helped develop a homegrown team providing mathematics leadership and professional development in Pacific schools.

together for extended periods has helped develop a strong sense of community. Mentors provide support and encouragement for each other, sharing their successes and challenges.

These mathematics leaders are having a strong impact on education for a variety of reasons: because they are local educators, because they have the support of their organizational leaders and financial assistance from a funding agency, and because they have gained the respect of prospective, novice, and in-service teachers. The MENTOR Project acknowledges that teachers work in a context of different social and cultural constraints. The mentoring program is successful because experiences it provides are relevant and meaningful for the teachers within these contexts. There is respect for local culture as well as unique needs and priorities, and the project accommodates the sociocultural and political contexts in which the novice teachers and their mentors work. The MENTOR Project supports mathematics teaching and learning for, with, by, and through Pacific educators. Improving student test scores attest to the success of the process.

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