

Taking Time to Learn By Hazel K. Palmer

I remember my first days in the classroom after I had graduated from college with a bachelor's degree in education and a teaching certificate. To say I felt a little scared is an understatement. Despite all the courses and the three student teaching experiences I had, I still felt ill prepared. Since my experiences were years ago, I had assumed new teachers entered the classroom today feeling better prepared and supported. I was wrong.

The Education Alliance, West Virginia's statewide education fund, asked 1400 West Virginia secondary teachers to react to the statement, "My teacher education program adequately prepared me for the classroom". A total of 540 teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed with that statement. We asked that question as part of a research and community engagement effort to encourage educators and communities to discuss how quality teaching could be supported, as part of a grant by the Public Education Network with funding provided by the Annenberg Foundation.

If over 38 percent of our teachers don't feel adequately prepared to be in their classrooms, then continuing professional development becomes critically important to give those teachers the tools, guidance and support they need to succeed in meeting the needs of their students. It is, of course, true that any newly minted professional will likely feel some jitters when they first move from the classroom to the real world. But with teaching, confidence is supremely important: errors in classroom management may quickly undermine the classroom culture. Fortunately, there is a solid body of research on effective professional development for teachers.

The literature is clear: students learn more from high-quality teaching and the surest ways to increase the quality of this teaching is to provide professional development programs that are: teacher-driven, ongoing and sustained, school-based and job-embedded, content-focused, supportive of student needs, and adult-learning oriented. The complete research summary and policy recommendations may be found at www.educationalalliance.org.

West Virginia has provided national leadership in professional development through its Teacher Education Partnership Initiative. Thanks to generous support by the Benedum Foundation, Secretary of Education and the Arts, and the West Virginia Legislature, this important initiative supports improved student learning by "1) promoting shared governance between K-12 schools and institutions of higher education; 2) strengthening communications among college of arts and sciences, teacher education programs, and K-12 schools; 3) increasing the

clinical experience and content knowledge of pre-service teachers; and 4) enhancing the professional development of in-service teachers,” to quote the Request for Proposal document. As a member of the Initiative Advisory Board, I have been excited by the open communications and enthusiastic learning by students and teachers. This program actually accomplishes the best practices supported by research.

While most children begin their formal schooling in kindergarten with enthusiasm, many have lost this attitude by the time they reach middle school. Those young folks who become turned off to school have, of course, made an enormously self-damaging decision: if there is one essential ingredient to a happy, productive life in our fast changing culture, it is life-long enthusiasm for formal and informal learning. There was a time when high school dropouts had some hope of living a reasonably comfortable middle-class life. No more. If we do not take every possible step we can to insure that every child has learned and enjoys learning, we have hurt both them and ourselves. Insuring that teachers, both new and old, feel classroom-ready by providing on-going professional development programs, will have a high benefit-cost ratio in terms of helping them support students' learning and love of learning.

Society pays for the failures of dropouts in terms of costs of prisons and welfare and society gains from their successes in terms of better citizenship and increased productivity. We simply *must* do *all* that we can to try to keep West Virginia's kids enthusiastically learning by supporting the best professional development for teachers.

Hazel Palmer is President/CEO of The Education Alliance, a statewide nonprofit committed to higher achievement for every student. She can be reached at hpalmer@educationalliance.org.