



Mentor Pat McDonald (left) offers advice to Fairbanks music teacher Liesl Wietgreffe.

Beginning teachers everywhere struggle with isolation. But for teachers launching their career in rural Alaska, isolation can take on a whole new meaning. "They may be isolated from grocery stores, from their family, from their social group," says Debbie Hawkins, a longtime Alaska educator who regularly climbs aboard small planes to go into the villages and mentor new teachers. "It's our job to provide them with the support and encouragement they need to be successful teachers."

Launched during the 2004–2005 school year, the Alaska Statewide Mentor Project has enlisted 22 master teachers to serve as mentors for 350 beginning teachers from 37 school districts. The program is a collaborative effort by the state Department of Education & Early Development and the University of Alaska system. Reducing turnover is only one goal. Equally important, explains program director Lorrie Scoles, is developing the "effective practice" that will lead to improved student learning. "The impact we're having on beginning teachers across the state has been phenomenal," she says. "It's a huge contribution to the teaching profession."

Mentors are released from classroom responsibilities so they can focus full time on supporting beginning teachers. To overcome the challenges of geography, they use phone, e-mail, videoconferencing, audio conferences, and online chat rooms to stay in regular contact with their caseload of beginners. But they make time to visit each new teacher in person at least monthly, even if that means flying, boating, or snow machining into a village and sleeping on the school floor at night.

During site visits, mentors might observe the new teacher in action, teach a model lesson, or analyze student work together. "It's based on the beginning teacher's needs," explains mentor Carol VanDerWege. "I'll check in before each visit to find out the issues that the teacher is dealing with. What's going well? What are the challenges or concerns?" she explains. "After an observation, we both take time to reflect on what we've seen."

"A reflective teacher is a huge goal of the project," adds mentor Laurie Leonard. "After each lesson, we want them to automatically think about what worked

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well, what they would do differently next time. By the time they leave our program, we want that reflective quality to be part of who they are as a teacher."

Alaska's beginning teachers have the benefit of mentoring for their first two years in the profession. The long-term support is important, mentors agree, to help newcomers overcome initial

challenges and then begin to build professional practice. "At first, one of my teachers only wanted to talk about how to get his classroom under control," VanDerWege says. "Once we worked through some management issues, then we could focus on other aspects of teaching and learning. He became much more reflective as time went on. He could see, 'Oh, this is what it means to be a good teacher—you continually readjust, and make it better every time.'"

The program is grounded in research about effective mentoring and engages consultants from the New Teacher Center at the University of California at Santa Cruz. Mentors come together for eight academies, scheduled during two years, to learn from consultants and share their own insights.

The program includes a research component to track results and capture key learnings. Already, however, one outcome seems clear. Mentoring not only supports new teachers, but opens learning experiences for veteran teachers. "This is such an opportunity for professional growth," says VanDerWege. In particular, she says, mentors learn more about the state's diverse culture when they visit villages and talk over coffee with community members.

Convincing school districts to release some of their most capable teachers to become mentors was a challenge, Scoles admits. "But I know that the training and experience they have had as mentors will not go to waste. The mentors may go back to their own classrooms, or become new principals or curriculum specialists. Whatever they choose to do, they will bring with them new insights into effective teaching and enhanced educational leadership abilities. I believe that full-release mentoring is the best way to lift up the entire teaching profession."