

From the Mentors: Working with Alaska's Teachers for Alaska's Students

For ECTs in the Alaska Statewide Mentor Project, setting a professional goal for the year is an important milestone—and the process is so interesting! Last week I was in a village that has undergone tremendous change, and continues to have longer “to do” lists on their professional plan of action. We were nearing the end of the self-reflection activity and I knew my teacher’s next standard would be *Developing as a Professional Educator*. Since this standard is usually about the teacher’s growth and not the “practical act” of teaching, not many teachers new to the profession have much to say, except perhaps when it comes to the element, “Balancing professional responsibilities and maintaining motivation.” Many ECTs share the struggle they have to simply “take care of themselves”. The work is so daunting and the demands so strong that many teachers find themselves exhausted to the point of getting sick.

It didn’t take my ECT long to say, “I think ‘Balancing professional responsibilities and maintaining motivation’ would be my strength.” I started to type it in the box headed “Area for Growth” when I realized that this was expressed as a *strength*. I turned and said, “I am interested in hearing more,” and it went something like this:

‘My spouse and I took a lot of time to see where we would like to live in Alaska. [My spouse] is an artist and we wanted to live in a village that would lend itself to artistic expression. When we were offered the job here, we knew it really didn’t have the coast and the hills that we were looking for, but we took it anyway, and have made a conscious effort to make it our home. Maybe sometime in the future we’ll go to a place where we have a different terrain, but for now this is home—and we’re happy.’

I could feel the emotion creep up from my chest, thankful that I had glasses to somewhat blur my eyes. What an ending to this teacher’s reflection. Amidst all the standards, assessments, test scores, deadlines, lesson plans, behavior challenges, this teacher made a choice that would affect all the other important decisions:

Contentment.

—Judy Olsen

An important aspect of mentoring ECTs in rural Alaska is connecting content to students’ interests and their local culture, and during one such conversation, we discovered that trapping was a topic of interest for his students. The mentor knew a local trapper, and had found an old life-skills curriculum that included a component on trapping. Adapting the teaching plan for his specific situation, the ECT’s students are now running a trapline and successfully harvesting a bounty of fox. Elders from the community are coming in to talk about traditional skinning techniques and stretching racks. The furs are being donated to elder skin-sewers to make items such as dolls and boots.

As an extension activity, the teacher is working with his class to articulate a fox skeleton. The mentor was able to connect the teacher with a bone expert from his home town. The bone expert was glad to offer his expertise, and there is great excitement at the school about this hands-on project. Often, a mentor is a catalyst for developing this type of rich learning experience, connecting traditional and western learning.

—Ed Sotelo

ASMP
mentors learn
how to support and
enhance ECTs' classroom
instruction, and connecting
to the community is
vital to the success of
teachers and their
students.

The students in this second-year teacher’s class are indeed lucky. Early in the year, we considered ways to build connections between school and culture. Some of the ideas were inviting elders to come to class, learning traditional crafts and becoming involved in subsistence activities. Committed to integrating culturally relevant activities, my ECT planned a field trip with the help of several community members to take her fifth- and sixth-grade students on a seal hunt. The class prepared by reading and studying about the importance of the seal to their community. Elders visited the classroom, shared stories, and the students made lists of materials necessary for a successful seal hunt, including appropriate clothing. They earned the money with various fundraising activities to cover the cost of the fuel for the boats.

On the planned day, the community showed up to send them off with lunches, best wishes, and lots of advice. Each of the boats had experienced hunters who assigned students specific tasks to make the day successful. The group returned in the early evening with two gutted and skinned seals, which were then divided among community members as was traditionally practiced. The students returned to the classroom the next day both to discuss and write stories about the previous day—a highlight of the year for many of them.

—Katy Odneal



Enter: My mentor. She was not wearing a superhero's cape when I met her, but she may well have been. Adding to the already difficult classroom situation were my own feelings of being ineffective and not cut out for this new job I found myself in. Mixed in with a few other stressful glitches and a family tragedy to top it off—in short, I was a complete and utter mess.

My mentor-in-shining-armor (well, a brown fleece vest, at least) bravely waded into this mess I had become. With patience, wisdom, and pure understanding, she guided me as I limped through the beginnings of my teaching career. She was undaunted by my breakdowns, colorful language, and overwhelming self-doubt that exploded as soon as my classroom door closed behind the last student at the end of the day. Now, I'm not delusional; I know this is part of her job, but when I needed her—even before I knew I did—she was all mine and all ears, always going way beyond the call of duty.

—an early career teacher

ASMP hosts an online networking forum that allows deeper conversations on relevant topics while connecting ECTs to each other across Alaska's remote sites.

What I've taken from this evening's ECT Expansion Forum is the desire to take getting to know families and the community much more seriously; I sense that this can be a make-or-break for building one's success within the classroom. I've noticed that the more I get involved with families through simple things—walking my kids home, or stopping by their homes at random—families are super appreciative. It seems that they feel like they matter to you, and that their homes and school mean more to you than a simple paycheck, and I have come to believe that the idea of "community" is the fabric that we are working to create through effective schooling.

Like I mentioned briefly in our live forum, I baked cookies for the families of my kids, and the gesture seemed to break down some barriers that divide. As teachers, it's important that we care, but this caring isn't too meaningful if we are not actively engaged in making a physical, community connection. I attended my second community feast since I've been in the village. It was immediately obvious that the community valued that I came out to be with them. They were touched that I attended their church, partook in eating the traditional foods, and that I was getting to know them outside of the school.

Other things that I took from this evening's forum:

- The importance of positive communication, and simply being visible in the community.
- The value of drawing on locals for community knowledge. Along with this, I am noticing that they want to be a part of my life.
- The value of smiling and humor.

—Roger Reisman,
a Grades 2–4 teacher

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How do Mentors travel?

by **air**—jet or small plane: 107 sites (85%)

by **water**—ferry, boat, or hovercraft: 4 sites (3%)

by **road**—car or truck: 15 sites (12%)

Many new teachers at rural sites are asked to take on multiple roles: subjects outside their college prep programs, multi-grade classrooms, sporting and other after-school events, as examples. Isolated villages often lack veteran teacher or peer support, and mentors' travel to work with ECTs helps to fill this gap.

In the Next Issue ... from **Ongoing Research** to **Recent Results**

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