When my principal asked in spring 2001 if I would work as a facilitator one period every other day during our high school’s block cycle, I didn’t know anything about the word — or the job. He had only a sketchy understanding of the concept, proposed by the district’s director of staff development. According to him, I would support new teachers, offering orientation, inspiration, consolation, and intervention when needed.

And so I began a wonderfully challenging and fulfilling journey as an on-site high school facilitator at Parkway Central Senior High School (Chesterfield, Mo.). The results have been exhilarating. New teacher five-day evaluations are up. High school attendance is up. Soon we hope to show that the achievement of students of first-year teachers is higher.

**HOW WE LEARNED**

We began the change when the four on-site facilitators met with district administrators to discuss the job’s parameters, challenges, and potential satisfaction. Then, in June, the district’s professional development director led a three-day session to orient us to state teacher certification requirements, state and district frameworks and goals, the nuts and bolts of the district’s new teacher orientation, and techniques for supporting new teachers on a daily basis.
This crash course, along with a thorough handbook of resources from state forms to articles describing techniques to help new teachers to articles on professional development, introduced us to the task at hand and helped prepare us for the work.

Because our high schools are large, we realized the best support would come from someone on-site. Outside facilitators would not know the culture of each department or school. So rather than create a central office position of staff development facilitator, we decided to schedule a quarter-time individual in each school.

WHAT WE DO

We began our work by calling the new teachers and welcoming them to our school. Our high school has a mentor who assists each new teacher in our building, but facilitators serve in addition to the mentor.

We told the new teachers what to expect at their five-day new teacher orientation, for which we have taken greater responsibility over time. During the orientation, we introduced our new colleagues to their mentors and to school administrators, secretaries, and support staff. We discussed district policies, everything from sick-leave policy to parents’ expectations. We also worked in small cohort groups to help the new teachers write lesson and unit plans.

“The cohort groups have helped make a big school seem smaller,” said Cindy Harrison, a facilitator at South High. “Even though each teacher has a mentor, I think each feels as if the cohort facilitator is someone he or she can go to when it isn’t clear who has the answer needed.”

A new speech teacher said she valued that contact: “When new teachers come to a building, there are dozens of little things that the veterans do as second nature which they often forget to tell new staff about. Things like how detentions are handled, how I request a personal day, what happens to the rotating day schedule if we have a snow day...”

We tried to pattern our work on the research of Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers (1996), who said that “modeling practice under simulated conditions and practice in the classroom, combined with feedback” produce the best results for improving teaching.

Based on this research, my fellow facilitators and I observed classes as the year progressed and gave teachers feedback about content, classroom management, and tone. In one teacher’s class, for example, the configuration of the room did not allow her to walk back to some students’ desks. As a result, some students did other homework or talked. The teacher and I discussed simply rearranging the desks in a U shape so she was never more than three desks away from students. It made all the difference.

Christian, another new teacher, was struggling with a challenging class. “The beginning of this year had a particularly rocky start with one of my classes,” he said. “(My facilitator) kept the lines of communication open between me and the other staff that I may not have felt comfortable approaching. The situation met a quick resolve and has since helped with new, professional relationships and support.” Christian was introduced to other math teachers who had taught the class and was able to connect with them for advice and assistance.

We also modeled lessons and videotaped our new colleagues.

Afterward, we watched the tapes with the teachers and discussed class behavior, the teacher’s use of time, student reactions, content, and use of classroom space. One lesson we learned is that having facilitators working from within the school means the facilitator can more quickly ascertain which new teachers need the most support. We have more credibility since the new teachers see us as one of them.

We tried to contact our new colleagues often because, especially early on, they had many questions about matters more experienced teachers take for granted. The open house at the beginning of the year and parent-teacher conferences were formidable challenges to many new teachers. We discussed how to use time, parent concerns to anticipate, and sample responses to situations that might arise.

During the year, we presented three mini-conferences on subjects including using technology in the classroom, closing the minority achievement gap, and teaching strategies. The new teachers chose sessions to attend from presentations throughout the district.

In addition, each of us met formally four times with all the new teachers in our schools in after-school sessions. We included reminders about certification and district requirements and about upcoming programs. We talked about concerns in our buildings and district. The sessions gave the teachers a chance to share successes, problems, questions, answers, and information. Teachers said the meetings helped build their sense of community.

ONGOING DEVELOPMENT

In addition, facilitators met six
times a year to discuss our cohort’s progress, review professional development literature, talk about the content of cohort meetings, share ideas about videotaping and our work with the new teachers, and generally focus on how best to do our job as facilitators. We took turns sharing our successes and concerns, stories from classroom observations, and suggestions for future meetings. I appreciate the camaraderie and practical aspect of these gatherings, which have been a crucial part of the experience.

One of the great gifts of our program is continuous support from district-level staff. The district offers us one 90-minute block every two days for our work. We also are able to attend the state professional development convention. The district hires substitutes for us and pays for the conference.

**CONCLUSION**

The best part of our job is that we have positively and significantly affected new teacher spirit, classroom strategies, and overall satisfaction.

This year, one of our teachers, Erin, who team teaches an English as a Second Language history class, asked for advice in dealing with a challenging young man who clearly dominated the class. After reviewing a videotape of this class in action, Erin and I could see that the young man needed one-on-one attention outside the full class. She began working with him individually in the library while her team teacher worked with the rest of the class. The change made a tremendous difference. The young man has responded well, and the rest of the class has been more focused.

I worked with another new English teacher to use the idea of the literature workshop as a method for cooperative learning. In this technique, students “workshop” literary works and discover that they can unlock the meaning of the literature on their own rather than copying into their notes the teacher’s interpretation of a story. It delights me to think that April may successfully employ a new technique for the remainder of her career ... and I had a small part in that.

Through changes such as this, I see what the facilitation concept is all about — people who care helping colleagues to survive, succeed, and grow as educators.

**REFERENCES**