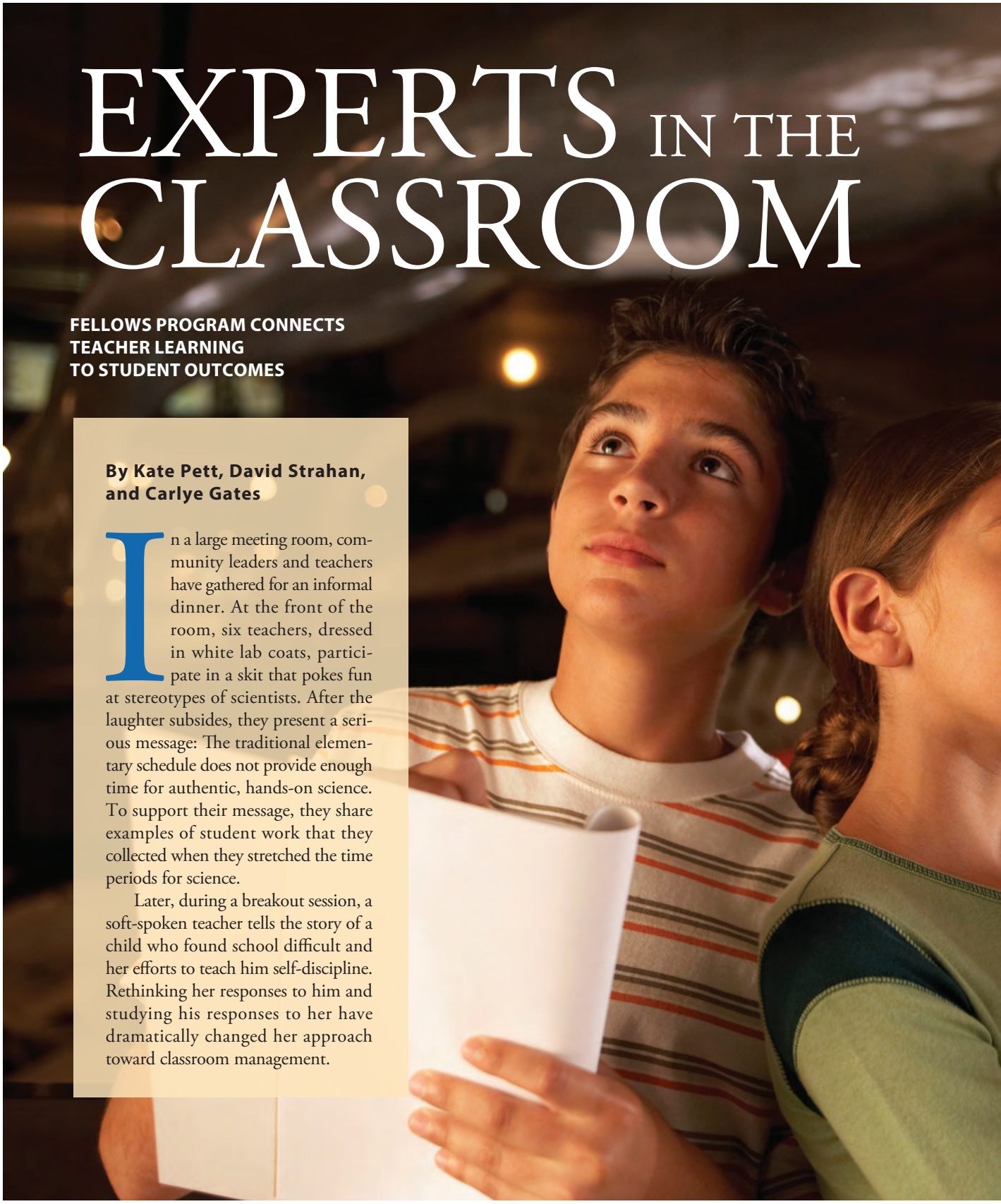
EXPERTS IN THE CLASSROOM

FELLOWS PROGRAM CONNECTS TEACHER LEARNING TO STUDENT OUTCOMES



By Kate Pett, David Strahan, and Carlye Gates

In a large meeting room, community leaders and teachers have gathered for an informal dinner. At the front of the room, six teachers, dressed in white lab coats, participate in a skit that pokes fun at stereotypes of scientists. After the laughter subsides, they present a serious message: The traditional elementary schedule does not provide enough time for authentic, hands-on science. To support their message, they share examples of student work that they collected when they stretched the time periods for science.

Later, during a breakout session, a soft-spoken teacher tells the story of a child who found school difficult and her efforts to teach him self-discipline. Rethinking her responses to him and studying his responses to her have dramatically changed her approach toward classroom management.

Central to the success of the fellows' projects was their commitment to student learning. In 2010, for example, eight fellows formed a professional learning community to improve instruction in 5th-grade science. In their action research plan, the fellows focused on enhancing students' understanding of science and critical thinking skills.

The next day, in a middle school across town, students giggle and smile as they look at a journal article hot off the press. A few months before, guests with cameras had captured pictures of them engaged in a lesson their teacher had offered as part of a pilot study on conversation and literacy. The pictures were featured in an article about teachers and innovation.

INNOVATION FELLOWS PROGRAM

These snapshots of teacher leadership in action are one result of the Asheville (N.C.) City Schools Foundation Innovation Fellows program, an approach to providing high-quality professional learning for the district's best teachers. With start-up funding from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation, this program was created to retain great teachers and lessen achievement gaps by directly connecting teacher learning and student outcomes. Fellowships are awarded on a competitive basis for teacher-directed action research.

Over the last four years, the Asheville City Schools Foundation awarded more than $101,648 in fellowships to 70 teachers and three administrators. Projects spanned various disciplines, directly impacted students from kindergarten to 12th grade, and produced impressive student and teacher learning outcomes.

Teams studied and implemented strategies including Paideia, the Baldrige Model, Conscious Discipline, Leveled Literacy Intervention, project-based learning, and the Schoolwide Enrichment Model. Through their projects, fellows enhanced grade-level proficiency in reading, improved college test scores among first-generation college-bound students, increased student engagement using brain-based strategies, discovered how to best integrate the use of technology into the classroom, incorporated global education into the elementary-level curriculum, and much more. The culminating experience for participants has been presentations of results that elevate the work of individual teachers and teams to influence policy, program, and resource decisions to the district level.

Results from a comprehensive evaluation of the fel-

lows program have documented a number of ways that the fellows program has been an effective tool for improving student learning and increasing teacher effectiveness. Survey data shows that all of the fellows perceived their experiences as very worthwhile. In their project reports and focus group interviews, fellows reported that they felt more empowered to experience greater success in low-wealth schools. Further, they described specific ways that they had grown professionally and that students benefitted from their innovations. Most of the fellows assumed stronger roles as teacher leaders in their schools.

Overwhelmingly, teachers indicated that the fellows experience transformed them into experts in their own classrooms.

Many factors have contributed to the successful outcomes of these teacher-directed professional learning experiences. The original project design established a comprehensive approach to teacher learning reflected in Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning. From the beginning, participants exhibited the necessary prerequisites for success: commitment to all students, readiness to learn, and disposition for collaborative inquiry and differentiation (Learning Forward, n.d., p. 3). Analysis of data from the first four years suggests that three core components of the program were especially important:

- A teacher-designed action research project that addresses a pressing problem in the classroom;
- Funding for professional learning, released time from the classroom, stipends for summers, and necessary materials; and,
- Support to design and collect meaningful data about the impact of new strategies on student learning.

EXPERTS IN THEIR CLASSROOMS

The most important lesson the district has learned is that investing in teacher-directed professional learning produces powerful results for both teachers and students. Teachers are granted fellowships based on a competitive application process that aligns a classroom need with appropriate professional learning.

Unlike other professional learning, self-directed and self-designed projects have heightened relevance and meaning for each teacher-participant. Overwhelmingly, teachers indicated that the fellows experience transformed them into experts in their own classrooms. Additionally, they described their experiences as both inspiring and empowering.

One fellow reported, "We have a renewed hope for our ability to positively impact our disengaged students. We feel our daily work has taken on new meaning."

This lesson echoes the findings of several recent reports. Flint, Zisook, and Fisher (2011) reviewed studies of professional development and noted that "authentic professional development is voluntary, inquiry-oriented, pervasive across time and space, and open to the complexity, range, and variation of professional development based on teachers' self-identified needs and interests" (p. 1164).

Vaughn and McLaughlin (2011) examined the professional learning experiences of six teachers from four elementary schools in which students made consistent gains in reading achievement. They concluded, "The 'one-size-fits-all' method of professional development and implementation is not working for these teachers. Teachers are expected to differentiate to meet students' individual needs, yet their professional development is not differentiated to their needs. Teachers within this study reported a higher level of change when they had ownership over their learning and a role in the decision making" (pp. 53-54).

CONNECT WITH OTHER TEACHERS

The fellows experience embodies other key components of high-impact professional learning. Compton (2010) surveyed teachers at four different stages of their careers, asking them to rate 16 different types of professional learning.

Consistently, across all four career stages, the most highly rated activities were "having opportunities to connect with other teachers," followed by "crafting new methods of instruction," and then by "receiving support for reflection about the result of the work I do in my classroom."

The Innovation Fellows built teams across grades, content areas, and schools depending on their perception of the best combination of participants to tackle the challenge they sought to address. The few fellowships granted to individual teachers were less productive than those fellowships granted to groups of teachers.

Collaborative groups made the extra work of action research possible, allowing teachers to divide the work, keep each other on track, and serve as a source of encouragement when the task was daunting. Additionally, the teams connected highly motivated professionals who shared commitment to their learning and student success.

Central to the success of the fellows' projects was their commitment to student learning. In their review of teacher development, Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, and Bransford (2005) concluded that this commitment is essential to teaching successfully: "Descriptions of classroom practice suggest that some teachers eventually develop a strong focus on student welfare and learning that drives their teaching decisions and self-improvement efforts, whereas others stop short of this state, developing techniques that 'work,' in that they get teachers through the day, but that do not result in high levels of learning for students or high levels of teacher concern when learning does not occur" (p. 379).

In their project reports, fellows demonstrated growth in their abilities to measure student learning. Part of the fellowship experience includes developing student learning goals and crafting a data collection plan that measures the impact of new

approaches on student learning.

Fellows have been challenged to find valid tools for understanding project impact beyond gross measures of student learning, frequently forced to think deeply about how teachers can tease out the value of an approach from the wide net of strategies and interventions at work.

Fellows were supported in this effort through a partnership with Western Carolina University and the administrative staff of the Asheville City Schools Foundation. Teachers reflected on their projects and the results and made recommendations to decision-makers in the district. The adoption, replication, and expansion of fellow-led projects affirmed the value of teacher-directed action research.

In 2010, for example, eight fellows formed a professional learning community to improve instruction in 5th-grade science. In their action research plan, the fellows focused on enhancing students' understanding of science and critical thinking skills. As a group, they decided to spend their fellowship funds to support field trips with students to a local nature center. They reviewed new curriculum guides, gathered research, and consulted with local leaders in science education.

Based on these conversations, they drafted more sophisticated units with enhanced inquiry activities and better assessments. In the spring, they analyzed the results of both formative and summative assessments. In their project report, they noted, "Using purely empirical data, our schools are headed in the right direction with 5th-grade science instruction. Citing the state science exam, 65% of our 5th-graders showed proficiency in science in 2009. This number increased to 78% in 2010. 82% of 5th-grade students in our schools demonstrated proficiency in spring 2011."

As the year ended, the fellows asked if they could continue the project for a second year. One fellow said, "I knew the collaborative piece outside the school level was valuable but didn't know how much it would invigorate me — and I see it in the other teachers, too."

COST-EFFECTIVE MODEL

In addition to serving as a successful approach to improving student achievement and engagement, the Innovation Fellows Program has proven to be a far-reaching, cost-effective model of teacher professional learning. Each of the fellows' projects has been held to a cost of $5,000 per team per year, and every project has directly impacted multiple classrooms. Many projects have impacted hundreds of students.

One team of six fellows presented a day-long professional learning to 80 teachers on curriculum developed based on brain research, and the total project cost over two years was less than $9,000. Another fellow became a certified trainer and provided professional learning for eight teachers in her school, and the total cost of her project was $6,300. The cost per student impacted is not only relatively small within the year of the fellows' engagement, but the investment in teacher learning yields student results for years.

One fellow said, "As teachers, we have all changed for the better. Not only have we established an authentic learning community where we learn, implement new strategies, and reflect upon successes and weaknesses, but we have acquired a belief that our work needs to continue and be shared."

Information gathered from online surveys, case study interviews, and focus groups confirms the experience has not only been meaningful, but invigorating. According to one fellow, "The fellows program has re-energized me. It has given me time to reflect, resources to transform a desire into reality, and opportunities to interact with other visionaries. I believe that my students have been the greatest beneficiaries of the fellows program, and I am a close second."

Another said, "The change in me as a teacher is great. On a daily basis, I am calmer and feel more able to handle the challenges of being a classroom teacher."

The Innovation Fellows program is a noteworthy model of professional learning for other school districts. According to one fellow, "All teachers should be so fortunate to have this kind of professional support for growth. If we value good teaching practice and we value retaining high-quality teachers, the Innovation Fellows program is a best practice for professional development that truly honors the art and science of teaching."

When teachers are given time to design their own projects, funding to support their development, and encouragement to study their impact, students benefit from their efforts.

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