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Living in Dialogue

By Anthony Cody

After 18 years as a science teacher in inner-city Oakland, Calif., Anthony Cody now works with a team of experienced science teacher-coaches who support the many novice teachers in his school district. He is a National Board-certified teacher and an active member of the Teacher Leaders Network. With education at a crossroads, he invites you to join him in a dialogue on education reform and teaching for change and deep learning.



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It Takes a Team to Retain our Teachers

Every once in a while we get a chance to see the greatness in our fellow teachers. Last week I was with 18 of my fellow science teachers from Oakland, who took the last week of their precious summer to take on a huge task. They have agreed to build a team of mentors for the many new science teachers in our district, a project we are calling **TeamScience**. We will be working together to support new teachers through one-on-one support, team meetings, and in online forums. We spent the past week in Santa Cruz working with our partners from the **New Teacher Center**, Kevin Drinkard and Sarah Young, learning some excellent techniques for mentoring, and this week we will hold our first workshop where we will begin to share what we have learned. Our team comes from middle and high schools across the District. Some are relatively new themselves, with only a few years of experience. We also have some real vets, including one who has taught at her school for the past 35 years. One of them is even a former middle school student of mine! Together, we hope to show our new colleagues that teaching is a rewarding, sustainable profession, especially when we work together with our colleagues.

Oakland schools, like those in many cities, suffer from a high turnover rate among teachers. This problem is especially acute for secondary science teachers. Last year, about 40% of our middle and high school science teachers were in their first or second year. This has bad consequences for our students. When I started teaching, I relied heavily on the experienced science teachers down the hall for ideas and support. They shared curriculum resources, management ideas, and listened when I had a rough day. In many of our schools now, there are few experienced teachers left, and new teachers lack this vital support. Furthermore, almost all of our first-year teachers are interns who have had, at most, a short summer training course and a few weeks of practice teaching summer school. They will be handed the keys to their classrooms in a few days, and few will be prepared for what awaits them.

Some rare individuals take to teaching like ducks to water. Most of us, however, struggle to find our sea legs in the classroom. There are so many things to learn! When we were students we did not absorb the many skills an accomplished teacher was bringing to bear. A good teacher figures out where her students are before teaching a subject, and builds on their interests and prior knowledge. She knows how to set clear rules and consequences, when it is ok to let something slide – and when she must be



Anthony Cody.

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firm and rigorous. Science teachers, in addition to knowing their content, must also know how to organize cooperative groups for hands-on activities. That means a whole level of classroom management that takes practice to master.

TeamScience mentors will do their best to close this gap. We have several goals. The first and foremost is to make these new teachers as effective as possible, as quickly as possible. That means we will be providing them with a packet of resources geared to getting their classrooms launched well from day one. These will include organizational tools and model letters home, ideas for class rules, and a sequence of engaging first-week activities. We have smaller teams working on resources for each grade level of middle school science, and for several high school science courses. We will be holding monthly workshops open to all science teachers in the district, but especially geared towards the novices. We will continue to share curricular resources aligned with the standards and our District timeline as the year unfolds. We will also be using online tools to communicate and share resources.

Our second goal is to increase retention for all science teachers in Oakland. Research shows that one of the leading causes of staff turnover is a lack of collegiality. We hope to build a strong community feeling – starting with our team of mentors and extending to all science teachers in the district. We intend to do this by working together to meet the needs of our fellow teachers, and by sharing a sense of purpose and accomplishment as we do so. Lastly, we intend to strengthen our team of mentors, and give them opportunities to develop as leaders. They are the most precious resource, for their own students and for their fellow teachers as well, and we want to not only retain them, but give them the recognition and opportunities for leadership they deserve.

The great thing about being part of a team like this is the way everyone pitches in and gets the work done. We are fortunate to have in Caleb Cheung an extraordinary program manager who is completely engaged and hands-on. Caleb and I have worked together on projects of this sort for the past decade, and so this project is an extension of our efforts. We have also received support from a parcel tax fund within the school district, and from our head of Instructional Services, Mary Buttler. Another key element of our team are the dedicated leaders in Oakland's **New Teacher Support and Development program**, who have been helping us build our web of support.

By the end of the school year, we hope we will have made a real difference in the lives of Oakland's science teachers and their students. We will feel most successful when our novices gradually become our experienced team members, and can offer their support to the next generation of science teachers. Meanwhile, I will post on this project periodically to let you know how things are going.

What do you think of TeamScience? Do you have any advice or experience with mentoring to share?

Posted by Anthony Cody on August 18, 2008 8:17 PM | [Permalink](#)

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I wish there had been teacher support and team science when I taught. I dove right into an inner-city high school with no experience and received no support. I loved my job and loved my students, but the stress of the situation drove me out of teaching. I'm a certified chemistry and general science teacher. I dealt with gangs, drugs, abusive principals, shootings, murdered students, 74 students dumped into one of my classes, etc., etc. I think if I had had a team of mentors assisting me, I would probably still be teaching today. I wrote a book about my experiences: NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND? THE TRUE STORY OF A TEACHER'S QUEST by Elizabeth Blake, on Amazon.com. When I was transferred overnight, to a reservation an hour away to teach 7th grade science, and forced to leave my high school chemistry students, I was told: "That's none of your concern." Then I was dropped into a reservation without even knowing what they wanted me to

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teach, until I walked onto into the trailer. Teachers need support, and Team Science with mentors can provide that.

Posted by: **Elizabeth Blake** | **September 7, 2008 9:12 PM**

Elizabeth,
Thank you for sharing your story. Many people have no idea of the realities teachers face in our schools. With our team approach, at least the new teachers will have some support.

Posted by: **Anthony Cody** | **September 7, 2008 10:49 PM**

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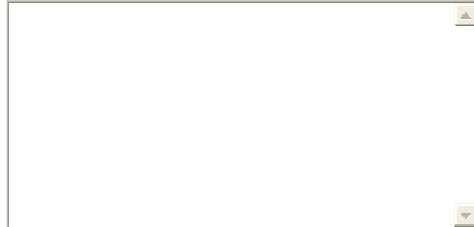
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