

Improving Teacher Quality, One Step at a Time

Cindy Johnson-Taylor, Published in the Newberry Observer, August 2010

Many years ago (26 to be exact) I was considering a college major and leaning toward journalism. I thought I would become a broadcast journalist, travel the world speaking several languages and reporting on world events. At age 18, the last thought in my mind was staying in my home state of South Carolina for my career. In discussing my future dreams with my father, he replied, "You can go anywhere you want to go and do anything you want to do, but you need to remember that South Carolina needs you more than any place on Earth." I took that quote with me to college and majored in English instead of journalism and decided to become a high school teacher. I have dedicated my career to improving education in South Carolina schools. Over the years, I have watched and been part of many changes in education. Gone are the days of the purple mimeograph machine and the overhead projector. Today we are holding conferences via Twitter and using Smart Boards to guide our teaching. We know now that students have to be engaged in class for true learning to take place.

One of the few areas of real consensus among education policy makers, practitioners and the general public today is that improving teacher quality is the most direct and promising strategy for improving public education. In a recent report published by Education Week called Quality Counts 2010, South Carolina ranks #1 in the nation in improving teacher quality. The teacher education program at Newberry College is contributing to this statewide trend toward better teaching. In order to remain a premier institution of higher education for educators, Newberry is constantly changing the way it prepares teachers to teach.

Student teaching is but one example of changes in how teachers learn their craft. Instead of an undergraduate student observing a teacher for a number of weeks and teaching a few lessons (like I did,) the old model is retired. The new model consists of field experiences that are more innovative and involve a far more hands-on approach. Teacher candidates no longer learn by watching; they learn by doing, over several semesters in which their degree of teaching experience becomes more intense as the candidate progresses from small experiences to full-time student teaching.

A prime example is the Social Studies Fair scheduled later this year. In cooperation with the Newberry County School District, Newberry College teacher candidates have developed a social studies event called Passport Day to be held on the campus on November 12, 2010. They are going beyond merely developing lesson plans. They are taking those plans to another level and creating real learning experiences for the elementary students based on the 4th grade social studies standards and the theme of People from America's past.

Economic cuts may prevent a class trip to Charleston, but Newberry teacher candidates are unfazed. They'll bring colonial America to the fourth graders by focusing on the people who made history for us. The day will be filled with varied activities and experiences from eight different groups of people who wrote the history of America from Vikings to Native Americans to Women to African Americans. Local 4th graders will step into an earlier time of progress, hope,

and renewal and learn about history in an exciting, interactive way. Lessons will be taught using what we know to be best practice in how students learn.

Passport Day is being planned by Dr. Lisa Waller, Assistant Professor of Education and Ms. Paige Graham, Curriculum Coordinator, at Pomaria Garmany Elementary School. It is intended to help early childhood and elementary majors learn how to teach the South Carolina elementary social studies standards and to assist local 4th grade teachers in teaching content that they may otherwise have to skim over during the school year.

Henry Adams quotes "History is only a catalogue of the forgotten." Newberry college students are resurrecting the memories and accomplishments of important individuals from our nation's history by bringing the subject matter alive for these students.

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