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# Supporting Student Teachers in an Urban, Multicultural Setting

By Brian White

**There is nothing unusual or startling about Grand Rapids Central High School, an urban school like hundreds of others across the country. But like most preservice teachers, the students in our teacher education program at Grand Valley State University have had very little experience in urban schools, and many find the prospect of student teaching at Central frightening indeed.**

“I just found out I have to student teach at Central High. Isn't there anything I can do to get out of it? Can you do anything about it? I'm scared to death! I thought they'd send me to the suburbs!”

How often have I heard that in the last six years? The frantic voice, the pained expression—it's all become familiar. As the liaison between a state university with a mostly Caucasian student body and a highly multicultural, urban partnership school, I am often the recipient of the urgent phone call, the insistent knock on the door. They don't want to student teach at Central.

“But why?” I ask. “Why do you want to get out of it? Central really takes care of its student teachers. And besides, you know we require that at least one of your field experiences take place in a multicultural setting.”

“But Brian, the School of Ed. has placed me at *Central*. You know what kind of reputation it has. When I told my dad I was placed at Central he got very concerned.”

“Yes, I know Central's reputation, but it's really not...”

“Brian, I've never been in a big, urban school before, and I don't know how I'll do working with so many different kinds of kids.”

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So many different kinds of kids. Now we're getting to the bottom of it. The vast majority of the student teachers at our university are white females, most of them graduates of highly homogeneous rural and suburban high schools. One of the reasons we entered into a partnership with Central High was to place more of our student teachers in a truly urban environment; we wanted them to see what education can be in a school that isn't at all like their home town schools. And Central's administrators were eager to enter into partnership with us, because they confront every day the kinds of problems endemic to urban schools in this country. By involving 10–15 student teachers every semester, they hoped to improve their students' chances for a solid education.

## A Look at Central High

Grand Rapids Central is the oldest high school in the city and one of the oldest in the state of Michigan. Entrance to the 83-year-old building is restricted to those on official business: Central's students and staff wear photo identification badges, and visitors without proper identification are met at the only unlocked door by security guards who provide directions and assistance.

Central's student body is typical of the inner-city school in terms of racial make-up, socioeconomic status, and mobility. Whereas in earlier decades the school served largely Caucasian (and relatively privileged) students, of the 1,065 students presently enrolled, 60 percent are African-Americans, 21 percent are Caucasian, 15 percent are Hispanic, and 4 percent are Asian. The percentage of minority students increases every year. Twenty percent of the students are officially designated "special ed."

The students' families are neither as well-to-do nor as "nuclear" as were previous Central High families: About 60 percent of students receive free lunch and the administrators say that even more are eligible; 70 percent come from single-parent families; and despite the vigorous efforts of Central's faculty and administration, only 25 parents were able to attend this semester's round of parent-teacher conferences.

Central's student body is the most mobile in the Grand Rapids district. In the course of a normal school year, Central's counselors record more than 1,000 "ins and outs"; three of every four freshmen do not graduate from Central High.

## The College Connection

Faced with these demographics, declining test scores, meager and declining resources, and an untenable student/faculty ratio (typically approaching and

often exceeding 40:1), Central's administrators felt that bringing in more student teachers might make a difference. Their goal was not merely to add bodies to the building; They sought to enter into partnership with the university, to increase the university's understanding of and involvement in urban education while providing more individualized attention for Central's students.

They set out from the beginning to integrate student teachers into the faculty, to make them feel at home, to teach them about urban education, to provide opportunities for mutual support among the student teachers, and to learn from the student teachers by soliciting their ideas. The program Central has put in place could serve as a model for any school—urban, suburban, or rural—wanting to enhance the training and increase the effectiveness of student teachers during the field experience.

## **Integrating Student Teachers Into the Faculty**

Student teachers across the country report they often feel isolated from the regular faculty in their buildings, that they don't quite know where they belong: "Am I still a student, or am I supposed to act like a teacher?" Central settles that question for its student teachers early on when principal Joe Grandy tells them at their first meeting, "When you come to student teach at Central, we consider you to be part of our faculty"—and that means having many of the same rights and responsibilities that regular faculty members have. Student teachers at Central wear the same faculty identification badges that regular faculty wear, help to direct orientation activities for incoming freshmen, and attend faculty meetings. Student teachers are informed of discipline and security procedures and are expected to help enforce school policies.

Student teachers become aware of school policies and procedures (for everything from detentions to breaking up fights to photocopying) at semi-weekly group meetings that all student teachers are expected to attend. These meetings, held for one hour every other Thursday morning, are the most important aspect of Central's efforts to integrate and train their student teachers. At the first meeting, prior to the start of the semester, the student teachers meet one another and are introduced to all the principals and their respective areas of responsibility. They are given student and fac-

**Central's administrators ...sought to enter into partnership with the university, to increase the university's understanding of and involvement in urban education while providing more individualized attention for Central's students.**

ulty handbooks, learn something of Central's history and its present mission, and become familiar with much of the paperwork (grade reports, discipline referrals, etc.).

Subsequent group meetings throughout the semester focus on various aspects of urban education. Guest speakers come to share their experiences and expertise with the student teachers:

**1** Central's counseling staff members explain what urban school counselors do; how teachers and counselors can work together on specific problems; and the kinds of social, economic, and academic challenges faced by both teachers and students in the urban setting.

**2** Central's social worker concentrates on the direct and by-referral services available to students, as well as helpful hints on working with troubled students, things to watch for, things to avoid.

**3** Central's special education staff members discuss the workings of special ed in the building and focus on the problems and possibilities of increased inclusion.

**4** Central's library/media staff members discuss the materials and technology available to students and teachers, as well as media center policies.

**5** Central's administrative support staff members discuss procedures for taking attendance, marking grades, and communicating with parents.

**6** Grand Rapids Public Schools' assistant director of personnel focuses on the staffing patterns of the urban district and shares information about hiring and retention.

Occasionally, other school district personnel join the group to discuss drug and alcohol abuse, gang activity, and other subjects of interest and concern. When there is no guest speaker, the students sometimes view and discuss documentaries focusing on urban education.

The vice principal in charge of student teachers presides at every meeting, along with the liaison from the university. Each meeting concludes with a time for the student teachers to ask questions, to share concerns, to get advice from one another and from the administration. There is also ample opportunity for student teachers to advise the administrators and to share their ideas for curricular or procedural improvement.

## How the Connection Has Helped Student Teachers

At the end of the semester, student teachers complete a written evaluation of Central High, its administration, its faculty, its staff, and its overall program for student teachers. Following are some representative quotes from

anonymous student evaluations of the group meetings and of the overall program:

- These meetings really needed to be longer! They clued me into other aspects of teaching that didn't pertain to what we learn at the university. Thank you for all this knowledge; it will pay off in the future.
- The best part about these meetings was the moral support! It was really a help to be able to talk about our experiences.
- I found that Central is a very warm place, offering all kinds of help, asking me how I was doing, making me feel included. They always made sure that we felt like staff members, not students—this is important.
- The meetings made me feel I was involved with the school.
- They let me know the building, how it works and runs, how the other [student teachers] were doing with some of the same students.
- The best part of my field experience at Central has been being treated as part of the “family” rather than “just a student aide” as I have been called in other buildings. Continue the group meetings. The welcome I felt here and the feeling that my help was appreciated made my experience enjoyable.
- The meetings provided an outlet for some of the concerns and problems, as well as addressing topics critical to our success.

The importance of the regular meetings for socializing student teachers into the urban environment cannot be overemphasized. Instead of feeling isolated, the student teachers feel a part of the team; instead of feeling powerless, they feel they have a forum in which they can air their views and concerns, be heard, and receive support and (when necessary) correction and direction; instead of feeling confused about their role, they are confident of their mission.

Many of the student teachers report that knowing they are not alone, that others are also wrestling with being in an urban school with “lots of different kinds of kids,” has made all the difference, has given them confidence, has helped them to honor rather than fear the many differences they encounter at Central. More than anything else, the student teachers report they have learned about teaching, about urban education, about working with and learning from people who are different.

Of course, all the student teachers have one or more cooperating teachers who oversee and direct their progress in the classroom, but the administrators have taken it upon themselves to instruct the student teachers in the ways of urban education. In their evaluations of the program, the student teachers consistently cite “increased contact with administrators” as a strength.

## How the Connection Has Helped Central High

Central's administrators report that taking the time to meet with student teachers on a regular basis has paid off for Central as well: Students are receiving more individual attention and more diversified instruction; classes and hallways are more consistently monitored; and Central's teachers get new teaching ideas from their student teachers. They tell us that increased contact with student teachers has benefited both Central and the entire urban district. Alumni of the College Connection at Central have been hired as regular faculty members both at Central and throughout the district; people who student teach successfully at Central have become something of a hot commodity when there are job openings in area urban high schools.

## How the Connection Has Helped the University

Naturally, the university has been very pleased with the quality of the student teachers' experiences at Central High. The program provides an authentic and professional field experience in an urban, multicultural setting. But Central has welcomed university faculty members as well as student teachers. A professor of English education spent the better part of a semester team-teaching with one of Central's English teachers. The professor's previous teaching experience at the secondary level had been in largely homogeneous, suburban schools; as a teacher educator, she wanted to gain experience in a contemporary, urban setting so her methods courses in the teaching of English could be more practical and realistic. She was able to bring to Central many innovative strategies that proved to be beneficial to the classroom teacher and her students; and she brought back to the university a new perspective, a new understanding of the realities of urban education.

Other university faculty have taken advantage of Central's invitation. A professor in math education has been working with Central High students every Wednesday morning, teaching them to get the most out of the school's graphing calculators; this semester, he will spend a good portion of his sabbatical team-teaching with one of Central's math teachers. Professors of chemistry and physics have traveled to Central each semester to do demonstrations for the students and to talk with them about the importance of studying science at the postsecondary level.

While university faculty members have been traveling to Central, Central's faculty and administrators have been traveling to the university. Mr. Slade, the vice principal in charge of the program, sits on the university's Teacher Education Advisory Council; teachers from the high school have worked with students in various methods courses, sitting on question-

and-answer panels, making presentations, sharing teaching ideas and philosophies, and providing opportunities for students in methods courses to respond to high school students' writing.

## **"Thanks For Placing Me at Central"**

After three years, the word is starting to get around. Far fewer students now ask me to help them avoid being placed at Central. Many alumni call me during their first year of teaching to say, "I sure miss Central. I was scared at first, but now I'm grateful that the School of Ed. placed me there. I feel like I can teach successfully anywhere because of what I learned in the program."

Central's administrators have made a serious commitment to improving their students' educational experiences by welcoming, training, and supporting a sizable number of student teachers every semester. Their commitment is paying off for Central and for other schools, urban, suburban, and rural as graduates of the program move into full-time teaching positions.

It's made my job a little easier, too! Before the program existed, I never heard a student teacher say, "I'm so glad I got placed at Central." Now I hear it all the time. ~**B**

### **Grant Opportunity for Math and Science Teachers**

Growth Initiatives for Teachers (GIFT) is a grant program funded by GTE Corporation for public and private school math and science teachers, grades 7-12 (grade 6 only if in a middle or junior high school) in eligible states. Each winning team shares a \$12,000 grant: \$7,000 for a school enrichment project and \$5,000 (\$2,500 for each) for professional development activities.

Applicants must teach in Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, D.C., Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, and Wisconsin.

Since 1983, approximately 1,400 outstanding teachers have received GIFT grants. For more information or to request an application, send e-mail to [gift@gte.com](mailto:gift@gte.com), or call 800-315-5010. Applications must be post-marked by January 17, 1997.