

# Strengthening Teaching

By Rogers M. Smith

*Editor's Note: This piece is a condensed version of Rogers Smith's full report To Strengthen Teaching: An Evaluation of Teachers Institute Experiences, which is being published this spring by the Yale National Initiative.*

For thirty years, the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute has been developing a unique model for improving teacher quality. This approach has now been tested and substantiated by a National Demonstration Project and the establishment of continuing Teachers Institutes in Pittsburgh, Houston, and Philadelphia. The Yale National Initiative, which now offers annual seminars for teachers from eleven participating communities in ten states, is encouraging and facilitating the establishment of yet more Teachers Institutes across the United States. As this summary of recent research will indicate, Teachers Institutes significantly strengthen teachers in all five of the major dimensions of teacher quality. They also include all seven elements now recognized to be crucial in successful professional development programs.

In recent years, educational researchers have converged on the conclusion that the best way to help students learn is to improve *teacher quality*. By common consensus, quality teachers are:

1. Teachers who really *know their subjects*;
2. Teachers with *good basic writing, math, and oral presentation skills*;
3. Teachers with *high expectations of their students*;
4. Teachers who are *enthusiastic about teaching*; and
5. Teachers who *can motivate all students to learn*.

Researchers also agree that most traditional forms of professional development fail to foster teacher quality along these

*Rogers M. Smith is Professor of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania.*



WINSLOW HOMER, *THE COUNTRY SCHOOL*, 1871

five key dimensions. They are limited in duration, content, and active learning, leaving teachers uninformed and uninspired. But high quality programs exist, and researchers are gaining knowledge of their key characteristics. Recent studies stress that these programs feature:

1. A focus on *content* and on *pedagogy linked to content*;
2. *Active teacher learning*;
3. *Teacher leadership*;
4. *Extended duration*;
5. *Collective participation* by teachers from the same school, grade, or subject;
6. *Alignment* with state and local standards;
7. *Ongoing evaluation*.

As researchers also suggest, districts may face a choice "between serving larger numbers of teachers with less focused and sustained professional development or providing higher quality activities for fewer teachers," since "good professional development requires substantial resources" in terms of time, expertise, and dollars. The Gates Foundation recently stated that an "effective professional learning community" requires "teachers who work together to meet shared challenges and improve their skills. They need ongoing, job-embedded professional development." These needs cannot be met through forms of professional development

that feature brief workshops for passive audiences of large numbers of teachers.

How do Teachers Institutes provide these necessary elements of teacher quality and professional development? At the heart of the Teachers Institute approach are partnerships between institutions of higher education and public schools. Teachers Institutes offer five to seven seminars each year meeting weekly over roughly three months, led by university or college faculty members, on topics that teachers have selected to increase their mastery of what they teach. Institute programs focus on *content* and *pedagogy linked to that content*; *active teacher learning*; *extensive teacher leadership*; seminars of *substantial duration*; and the development of curriculum units aligned to *state and local standards*. And, to varying degrees, they also involve *continuing evaluations* and opportunities for *collective participation*. In Institute seminars teachers gain more sophisticated content *knowledge* and also *enhance their skills* as they prepare curriculum units adapting the themes of their seminars for their students. Most teachers are *enthusiastic* about the seminars and the opportunity to teach the units they have written. They *expect more* of the students taking them. And they *succeed in motivating their students* to learn at higher levels.



HONORE D. SHARRER, *TRIBUTE TO THE AMERICAN WORKING PEOPLE*, 1951

The Institutes are especially well-suited to ensure that teachers do not learn advanced content in isolation from attention to how it can be conveyed effectively, and that they do not passively receive content from curriculum prepared by others. Instead, they research and write curriculum themselves, challenged and aided by their peers to ensure that it is exciting for students and teachers alike. The Institute approach does embrace the alternative of "higher quality activities for fewer teachers." Each Institute offers seminars for roughly 50 to 80 teachers per year. But through dissemination of their units, Institutes can have an impact on far more teachers than they enroll; and over time, significant percentages of teachers in particular schools and regions can be direct participants. In New Haven, nearly 600 teachers had been Institute seminar participants by 2005, including 32% of the teachers then at work in New Haven high schools, 25% of the middle-school teachers, and 14% of the elementary-school teachers.

Annual surveys in the last six years of over 1200 teacher participants at all four existing Institutes in New Haven, Pittsburgh, Houston, and Philadelphia

show that teachers *chose to participate* in Institute seminars out of desires to improve themselves in precisely the areas that are vital to teacher quality. When asked to choose among twelve reasons for participation in the seminars, the teachers at every site listed the "opportunity to develop materials to motivate my students" as the leading reason. Teachers drawn from all grade levels and all subject areas participated out of desires to obtain materials *to motivate their students* (93.2% to 94.7%), to obtain curriculum suited to their needs (84.6% to 89.3% at the four sites), to increase their mastery of their subjects (85.5% to 90.5%), and to exercise intellectual independence (85% to 91.6%). The data on unit use also show that after teaching their Institute units two-thirds of all participants rated them superior to all other curriculum they had used. *Roughly 60% of all participants rated student motivation and attention as higher during these units, producing substantially greater content mastery.*

The surveys also revealed that, in contrast to most professional development programs, there are no widely shared criti-

cisms of Institute seminars. Instead, *over 96% of participating teachers praised the overall program, rating it "moderately" or "greatly" useful*, in a remarkably consistent range running from 96.5% in Houston to 100% in Philadelphia. Only 3% of the respondents said the program was useful only to a small extent. Fellows also overwhelmingly "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that the seminars provided them with professionally useful new *knowledge* and that the seminars raised their *expectations of their students*. These data strongly support the conclusion that virtually all teachers who complete Institute seminars feel substantially strengthened in their mastery of content knowledge and their professional skills more generally, while they also develop higher standards for what their students can achieve.

Strong testimonials over the years by teachers, university faculty members, and university and public school administrators also indicate that the Institute approach generates significant corollary benefits that are not easily grasped through survey responses and not always visible in a relatively short time period. Perhaps the most important of these include:

- The development of *teacher leadership* capabilities, as many teachers serve as Teacher Representatives or Seminar Coordinators;
- The development of *teacher collaborations and teacher networks*, as teachers gain knowledge of who their fellow teachers in other subjects, at other grade levels, and in other schools are, and what they are doing in their classrooms;
- The development of *university faculty who see themselves as partners in improving public education*, rather than passive, often critical recipients of its graduates;
- The development of *university-public school institutional partnerships* in ways that promote respect and strengthen education in both settings.

*(continued on back cover)*

# On Common Ground®

## Strengthening Teaching through School-University Partnership

Number 13, Spring 2009  
Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute®  
Phone: (203) 432-1080  
Fax: (203) 432-1084  
E-mail: Common.Ground@yale.edu  
World Wide Web: teachers.yale.edu

Executive Editor, James R. Vivian  
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The Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute is an educational partnership between Yale University and the New Haven Public Schools designed to strengthen teaching and learning in local schools and, by example and direct assistance, in schools across the country. In 2004, the Institute announced the Yale National Initiative to strengthen teaching in public schools, a long-term endeavor to establish Teachers Institutes in states throughout the nation.

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Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
P.O. Box 203563  
New Haven, Connecticut 06520-3563

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## Smith: Strengthening Teaching

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A five-year quantitative study of the impact of Institute experiences on teachers and students in New Haven further shows that the Institute attracts participants roughly equally from each identifiable demographic group: women and men, younger and older teachers, new and experienced teachers, white and African American teachers — with the latter in fact over-represented. The study also shows that *Institute participants also had nearly twice the retention rate of non-participants* in local teaching. Overall, over 50% of those who were teaching in New Haven in 2000-2001 had stopped being New Haven teachers by 2004-2005, a turnover rate consistent with national averages, especially in urban districts. That turnover percentage was substantially less for those who had been Fellows. The study design does not permit a claim of causality, but in light of the high percentages of New Haven teachers who become Fellows, it is reasonable to view this correlation as substantively significant. Because research suggests that experience within a district is more strongly associated with teaching effectiveness than earlier experiences elsewhere, this finding is especially notable.

The continuing positive results of annual surveys of teachers at each Institute site and of national seminar participants leave little doubt that teachers consistently rate their Institute experiences and the curricu-

lum units that result favorably along the five dimensions agreed to be key ingredients of teacher quality. Though we have less data on teachers' experiences in using Institute curriculum units, those data are also positive. The New Haven quantitative study indicates that Institute seminars attract a broad range of teachers from every observable demographic category and that those who choose to be Fellows are much more likely to continue teaching in the district than those who do not. These results are all the more credible in light of the ways the Institute approach embodies the different elements that researchers have found to contribute to successful professional programs: a focus on content and

pedagogy linked to content; active teacher learning; teacher leadership; duration; alignment with state and local standards; and, somewhat less extensively, collective participation and continuing evaluation.

It is advisable for Institutes to continue such surveys and to undertake additional quantitative and evaluative studies of student and teacher outcomes. Such evaluation can confirm, maintain, and improve the impacts of Teachers Institutes as they continue to foster teacher leadership, develop supportive teacher networks, heighten university faculty commitments to improve public education, and create positive partnerships between school districts and institutions of higher education.



JACOB LAWRENCE, *THE MIGRATION OF THE NEGRO*, PANEL NO. 58, 1940-41