

Transitioning into TEACHING



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BY SUSAN REESE

More than 100 different alternative pathways to teacher certification were identified in a study by the National Research Center for Career and Technical Education (NRCCTE), a number that surprised even the researchers. Chris Zirkle of The Ohio State University led the study, and he noted in a podcast on the NRCCTE Web site, that one compelling finding of the study is that no two states have the exact same requirements for alternative certification, a common pathway into teaching for career and technical education (CTE) teachers. Zirkle notes that the researchers found that not only are we testing students more often, but we are also testing our teachers more often.

“States are using tests to assess a person’s ability to teach, and these can be tests of basic academic skills, they are sometimes

subject area and content area tests, and they can also be tests over the principles of teaching and learning,” Zirkle says. “We also saw the requirements for these teachers to participate in some type of mentoring programs to be more common than perhaps in the past. And this fits also with the research that we’re seeing now that finds that these are a key piece for getting new teachers off to a good start, and that also helps with teacher retention.”

Retention of new teachers has long been an issue, and that includes teachers who are taking an alternative pathway to CTE from other professions; however, a number of them are staying and succeeding in the classroom. Their stories, and the advice these teachers have to offer, may help others taking an alternative pathway to the classroom to succeed as well.

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Laying Out a New Career

Jay Davis had more than 13 years of business experience in the graphic design and printing profession when he began teaching at the Kokomo Area Career Center in Kokomo, Indiana, and that wealth of experience has greatly benefited his students. Within four years of his arrival at the career center, Davis had grown the program from a half-day program with 12 students to a three-block-per-day program with more than 70 students. The first eight years at Kokomo, he taught graphic design and has taught digital photography for two years.

He was the first instructor to teach Web page design, and he introduced the Virtual Intern Profiles program, which helped place students in internships with local businesses. Davis is also credited with writing an articulation agreement for the career center with Ivy Tech State College, which enabled qualifying graphic design students to earn three hours of college credit. The contacts he had made in his previous career provided his students with the opportunity to design projects for local businesses and nonprofit organizations. In recognition of all of his accomplishments, he was named the ACTE Region III Outstanding New Career and Technical Educator for 2005.

When Davis first went into teaching, he says, “The number one challenge was that I had to learn how to deal with high school students instead of adults. The way you speak to them, their responses and the results you get are different from when

Jay Davis (in striped shirt) shown here with his second-year photo class, had more than 13 years of business experience before coming to teach at the Kokomo Area Career Center in Kokomo, Indiana.



PHOTO BY KATIE BERRY

dealing with adults. There are differences in their perspectives and how students treat their goals and responsibilities.” Davis also found that the students needed to be better at applying what they learned in the classroom to real-world situations. Moreover, because he knew from his business experience that employers greatly value good communication skills, helping his students improve in that area became one of his priorities. To achieve that goal, his students not only complete hands-on projects, but they have to either make a presentation in front of the class or produce a written commentary about the project.

Davis says of his students, “They really keep me going. They give me a reason to get up every day and go to school. The respect they give me is the best reward. They listen, they understand, and they

know that what I am teaching them on a daily basis will be valuable to them in the professional field and in life.” At first he was a bit overwhelmed by some of the things he had to deal with, such as Individualized Education Plans, but Davis says that he soon found working with special needs students to be very rewarding. “I really enjoy helping special needs students realize success in classroom situations,” he notes. “I found that special needs students in certain situations, such as tactile learning situations, can do as well or sometimes even better than other students.”

That view influences his lesson planning. “I try not to give overall generic lessons,” Davis explains. “I try to address the individual skills of my students. I want to teach them so that they can be successful.” Another technique Davis uses

is a daily warm-up lesson. He has found that the 10- to 15-minute activity puts the students in the mood for learning. The success Davis has achieved is due in part to his own transition into the classroom environment, but he also credits two mentors who helped him along the way. The first was a high school classmate of his who was also a television production teacher, and the second was the person who taught the program before him. "I adapted pretty well to lesson planning and creating projects," Davis says, "but they helped me with building rules and regulations and with student discipline."

He has high praise for Kokomo Area Career Center Director James Little. "He helped me expand my program and bring in the equipment and software to ensure the viability of the program and to make sure we are teaching to industry standards," notes Davis. Little also encouraged Davis to become involved in his professional organizations, and Davis says, "Becoming involved in ACTE and Indiana ACTE has been so beneficial to me."

In fact, that is one of the things he would encourage others entering the classroom from the business world to do. The other thing he would advise is continuing the educational process. He has earned his master's in curriculum and instruction, and he has completed the coursework to obtain his director's license. "It increased my expertise in the classroom and my awareness of what we need to be doing to reach our goals," says Davis. He took a big step when he left the business world for the classroom, but Davis would urge other teachers in his situation to take those extra steps into professional development, which he says can help them become what he calls the "heroes" of education and "champions for CTE."

A Healthy Dose of Success

Although she had been a nurse for 20 years, teaching came naturally for Sharon

Cato. Cato was presented with the challenge of creating the first health science technology program at Gilbert High School in Gilbert, South Carolina. It's a challenge she met with great success. In the fall of 1999, the program began with 33 students and one instructor but became so popular that another instructor had to be added. The program has since achieved state certification as a nurse aide program. Cato still teaches and serves as her school's Health Occupations Students of America (HOSA) adviser as well as a state officers HOSA adviser. In 2006, she was honored for her dedication as the ACTE Region II Outstanding New Career and Technical Educator.

"Working in a hospital and teaching in the classroom can both be stressful, but when you leave the hospital, you leave that stress behind," Cato notes. "For me the challenge for the first couple of years was all the homework we have to do as teachers—all the preparation, lesson planning, and creating tests and assessments."

She was fortunate to have several seasoned health science teachers at nearby schools who served as her mentors. "They were so generous and so giving," Cato adds, "but I think that is characteristic of nurses."

Cato has been teaching for 10 years and now mentors others through the Developing Instructional Readiness for Educators of Career and Technology program. The program is directed by the South Carolina Department of Education and is required for all new CTE teachers. Its goal is to help all professionals in the workplace transfer successfully into education. According to Cato, each new teacher is assigned a master teacher who serves as a virtual mentor, visiting once a year and staying in contact via e-mail the rest of the time. In addition to serving as a virtual mentor, during the summer, she and another South Carolina teacher, Grace Decken, teach a two-day program that includes strategies new teachers can

Sharon Cato was a nurse for 20 years before she came to Gilbert High School in Gilbert, South Carolina, where she created the school's first health science technology program.



Mark Raines was a television reporter and anchor before he began teaching at Central High School in Alabama. He now teaches at San Diego's Canyon Crest Academy.



PHOTO BY MICHELLE WILLIAMSON

use in their first year in the classroom.

"I tell new teachers to use the CASE Method—copy and share everything," Cato explains. "They should also realize that the first couple of years will be challenging, but they should hang in there."

If they do, they will find it very worthwhile, as Cato now does. "I am starting to see my students in the workplace and in careers they set as their goals," she says. "I see that I have made at least a small difference in getting them started. It is very rewarding to see them successful as adults."

Broadcasting a Success Story

In 2000, the Tuscaloosa City Board of Education hired a local television reporter and anchor to begin a new video production program at Central High School in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. That reporter, Mark Raines, began the program with

a small group of students and one video camera; but two years later, he and his students were producing a daily live newscast for their school that became so popular that it increased attendance at all school events. Since that time, the program has racked up a number of awards, from the first-place newscast award by the Alabama Scholastic Press Association to the Alabama State Department of Education "Technical Education Program of the Year."

Raines' students won medals in state and national SkillsUSA competitions, and Raines himself was honored as the Alabama ACTE New Teacher of the Year, going on to win the Region II award, and then the 2008 ACTE Outstanding New Career and Technical Teacher Award. In the fall of 2008, Raines left Alabama for a teaching position in San Diego, California, but he left the program he

began in the hands of one of his former students, Chris King. At the Canyon Crest Academy, Raines now serves as Envision Cinema Coordinator. The school is part of the San Dieguito Union High School District, which serves the cities of Encinitas, Solana Beach and Del Mar, as well as the unincorporated neighboring areas commonly known as San Diego's North County. Envision Cinema offers day courses in video/film and advanced video/film, as well as an after-school arts program, the Cinema Conservatory.

Unlike Davis, Raines found relating to his students the easier part. "I started teaching in 2000, but I had been volunteering in a youth ministry teaching Sunday school and Bible studies to teenagers, so that helped," he says. "But I had never done a lesson plan before, so the planning, grading and classroom management were challenges for me." The first thing Raines realized was that he was going to need a lot of help if he was going to succeed. His first mentor was the school's drama teacher. He saw amazing things going on in her class and in the plays that came out of it, and he wanted to get top students into his program and get them as excited about it as the drama students were about theirs. After the first semester, however, he realized that he needed help from a CTE teacher, so his second mentor was the health sciences teacher across the hall, Sally Latham—another teacher who was attracting top students to her program. She was a big help because, as Raines says, "CTE is different because we're teaching employability skills, and there is more paperwork and documentation than in other programs."

Raines took what he had learned from his mentors and shared it at the New Teacher Institute when he was still teaching in Alabama. For new teachers, he says, "The most important thing is building a team to support you." His team was a community of teachers, administrators, parents and industry contacts. He also includes the students in that community,

because he says they taught him a lot, especially about technology. He also finds that his students learn from one another.

"It's really rewarding to see students find a passion in my classroom and to take that passion and use it to determine a career," Raines notes. But he has found that his students are taking away more than just job skills from his class. He shares a story about a guest artist in his classroom one day who commented on how three students who initially didn't want to work with one another on a project Raines had assigned them came together, did the project, and did it well. "It's about learning how to be a good person and a good employee," Raines says. He then adds with a touch of amazement. "I had no idea that I would have that kind of impact on my students on a daily basis."

Davis, Cato and Raines each took on the challenge of a new career, and while it wasn't always an easy path they traveled, the rewards they found along the way made it all worthwhile. They all express an appreciation for those who helped them on their journeys, and are now able to pay it forward as they help others new to teaching find success in the classroom. ■

Explore More

To read the report and hear the podcast on the "Study of State Certification/Licensure Requirements for Secondary Career and Technical Education Teachers," visit the National Research Center for Career and Technical Education Web site at www.nrccte.org.

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