

Teacher academy

Written by Elizabeth Barrett

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Exchanging ideas to become better educators.

What does a new teacher development program have in common with a saw?

Just ask Gothenburg Public School band teacher Tom Belanger who completed the district's first eight-month long Teacher Academy last week.

Belanger likened the academy to what Steven Covey explains in "Sharpening the Saw" —a habit from the book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.

Trying to saw wood without stopping to sharpen the blade results in dullness and ineffectiveness.

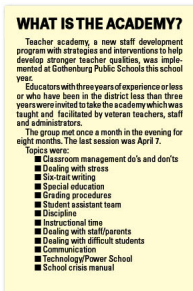
"It's a good analogy for any teacher," he said. "Sometimes we need to relook at our practices in education."

The academy is a new staff development program at District 20 where new teachers, and teachers new to the system, learn strategies and interventions to help them become stronger educators.

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During the academy, 19 teachers met in eight different evening sessions that were taught and facilitated by veteran teachers, staff and administrators within the district.

For Belanger, a veteran band teacher from Minnesota who is completing his first year at Gothenburg, the academy has also been way for him to become acquainted with staff.

“It’s also been an opportunity to be able to discuss various topics with colleagues in small group settings,” he said.

The academy is offered to non-tenured teachers and/or those who have taught less than three years in the Gothenburg school system.

Fifth-grade teacher Barb Hicken said it’s been good to learn from other teachers who have the same kinds of problems and stressors in the classroom.

When Hicken was first invited to Teacher Academy, she said she thought, “Wait a minute, I’ve been teaching for many years.”

“But who’s to say we can’t learn from the newbies or young kids?” she asked.

Hicken has taught 12 years in Lexington, three years in country schools and is finishing her third year in Gothenburg.

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She said she found all of the sessions interesting and appreciated when administrators listened and gave participants more time to finish a technology project.

Fourth-grade teacher Gretchen David said she liked the program because “you learn a lot from everybody.”

“There’s more conversation with colleagues that I didn’t see before,” David said.

Of all the sessions offered, the 15-year teaching veteran said she probably got the most from one where they learned about setting a positive tone for students at the beginning of the day.

“We all get caught up in personal stuff before school,” David explained. “It’s a nice reminder you can set a positive tone for all day.”



David also acknowledged that long-time teachers sometimes get into a rut.

However the academy, she said, has made her more aware of her flaws and what she can do differently to make learning more fun.

“It’s helped me realize how to be more effective,” David said.

She said she also enjoyed learning about different teaching strategies—a topic explored during one of the sessions.

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For example, one strategy sends students to different tables to write an idea about a story the teacher reads to keep learning fresh and fun.

For Hicken, the strategies reinforced what she is doing right.

A game she plays with students, for instance, has half writing vocabulary words while the others write a definition.

They then match the word with the definition, wad up the paper and have a paper snowball fight.

Finally they move around and find a match for the word with the definition,

Second-grade teacher Tara Weaver, who is in her first year of teaching, said she's enjoyed building rapport with other staff members.

"I'm also picking up new techniques and strategies to use in the classroom," Weaver said.

Special education teacher Maria Andersen, who has taught 11 years in Lexington and Hastings, said the academy has given her an opportunity to be a better teacher.

Both Weaver and Andersen said they'll use information they gained from every session.

Andersen added that she learned how to be more proactive when dealing with student behavioral concerns.

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“Like being consistent with your expectations,” Weaver offered.

Weaver also picked up valuable information from the classroom management and strategy session where she learned how to reach the needs of different learners through such techniques as auditory, visual and manipulation.

“For different learners, you need different instruction,” Weaver explained. “That was a profound session.”

High school English teacher Pat Zwink, who taught the session along with fourth-grade teacher Claudine Kennicutt, said she learned valuable things as well.

“I really think it’s important for teachers at all levels of experience to collaborate in order to continue to improve,” Zwink said.

She added that the academy was a great way to build positive relationships and connect with staff members that she may not have had a chance to know otherwise.

Perhaps the most unusual session, Weaver and Andersen agreed, was when participants did aerobics with an instructor who showed them how to deal with stress.

Belanger said the academy has reinforced why he’s in the teaching profession.

“We are impacting the lives of children in a positive way at this school,” Belanger explained, noting that the school is always working to improve itself.

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He added that administrators don't have to offer an academy but they do because of their willingness to take time to improve education for children in the community.

Zwink noted that a positive support system is important for teachers new to a system.

"I appreciate the fact that the administration is proactive," she said.

Gothenburg High School principal Randy Evans, who spearheaded the development of the academy, said it brings the freshest teachers to a level of success and brings in expert teachers to share their ideas.

"They're collaborating by sharing ideas," Evans said.

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