



## Mentors provide the support educators need to survive

Last year, as a brand-new teacher, Jaime Avila was assigned the most challenging students at Silver Creek High School in San Jose — those who had behavior problems and a cumulative grade point average of 1.3. At times, Avila didn't think he'd survive the year.

Other new teachers in similar situations might have quit, but Avila survived, refined his craft and came back for more last fall. He gives much of the credit to his mentor, Paul Kilkenny, who continues to work with him in a teacher induction program sponsored by the Silicon Valley New Teacher Project, which operates out of the New Teacher Center at the University of California at Santa Cruz.

"I don't think I would have made it if Paul had not been there," says a grateful Avila, who teaches oceanology and the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) college preparation program.

In an era where it is not unusual for new teachers to leave in droves, Silver Creek High School and other sites in the East Side Union High School District routinely boast an 85 percent retention rate among new teachers af-

ter three years. The reason, say staff, is the strong support that district mentors offer new teachers. Both mentors and trainees are members of the East Side Teachers Association.

Things weren't always so rosy, says Kilkenny,

one of five full-time mentors in the Program Improvement district. Three years ago, before signing on with the New Teacher Project, district schools were losing nearly half of their new teachers by the end of the third year.

"The cost to the district was exorbitant," says Kilkenny, who mentors new science teachers. "It was a crippling amount of money to be losing. We decided we were losing people because we were not supporting them. So we started asking the question, 'How can we support these teachers and retain them?'"

Eastside Union High School District, which has 11 comprehensive school sites and four alternative campuses, began surveying its first-year teachers, many of whom were exiting the system.

"We found that the number one reason teachers were leaving was frustration with the inability to get the resources and the support they needed," says Kilkenny. "The second reason was shock and awe that students in high school were more of a disciplinary problem than new teachers anticipated. They just weren't prepared."

After the interviews, the district hooked up with the New Teacher Project, one of the state's approved two-year Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment (BTSA) programs that new teachers need to undergo to clear their credential.

The center is currently working with 31 California school districts as part of a BTSA consortium. The program isn't cheap — costing about \$6,000 to \$10,000 per new teacher





each year — but it more than pays for itself in terms of teacher retention and improved student achievement. According to a cost-benefit analysis released in October, every dollar invested in the program produced a return on investment of about \$1.66 after a five-year period. Kilkenny and others fear that the state budget crisis will have an impact on the program and could threaten the district's gains in retaining new teachers.

Even though the school had a BTSA program before joining the New Teacher Project, things changed dramatically after that. Mentors were given full-time release from other duties so they could support teachers as needed, instead of just “squeezing it in” around their own full-time teaching load.

“When I was a new teacher in 1998, my BTSA provider would drop in when she could after school and ask if I was okay,” recalls Abigail Soriano. “I would nod my head yes and she would say goodbye. She would observe me once or twice during a semester.”

Today, as a full-time district mentor of new English and social studies teachers, So-

[Huong Tran and students Mercedes Arevalo, Kim Truong, Thomas Wynn and Kethan Mistry at Silver Creek High in San Jose](#) applaud a correct answer. Facing page: [New teacher Jamie Avila](#) says he greatly benefited from the support he received from mentors like [Paul Kilkenny and Abigail Soriano \(below\)](#).

riano is able to offer novices the kind of support she wishes she had had. Much of it is moral support, but mentors insist the program is much more than a “buddy” system.

“We are trained to collect objective data through observations in their classrooms,” says Kilkenny. “We are giving them immediate feedback, so they can reflect on their teaching. We have begun individual learning plans for new teachers based on the standards of the teaching profession. We are teaching them how to manage a classroom and deal with discipline problems.”

But for Avila, the emotional support was

especially valuable.

“Sometimes I just needed someone to talk to,” he says of that difficult first year.

Kilkenny says that what happened to Avila — giving the least experienced teachers the most challenging students — is a type of “hazing” that those involved in the program are working with administrators to end, as mentors take on an advocacy role for those they help.

**One of Kilkenny's protégés** is a former high school student of his, Huong Tran, who now teaches forensics and biotechnology at Silver Creek.

“I'm so happy he's here,” says Tran, a second-year teacher. “He's always available and, when I have a bad day, he listens. He tells me to look at the bright side and not be too hard on myself. I can call him with questions about lesson planning and classroom management. It's nice to have a mentor come to my class instead of me having to go to him.”

Tran's students are doing DNA extractions and holding mock trials with forensic evi-



dence based on curriculum that Tran came up with herself. She has obtained state-of-the-art technology for her classroom by linking up with biotech companies in Silicon Valley.

In Jennifer Fernandes' classroom, English language learners are studying chemistry by making candy inside the lab. As she supervises the cleanup, she confides that she constantly tells Kilkenny that she returned as a second-year teacher this fall because of his caring and willingness to help.

"I keep telling him, 'Because of you, a lot of us are still around,'" says Fernandes. "He especially helped me with discipline, and finding that happy medium between not being too strict and not being too nice."

Knowing he's helping to keep creative, talented teachers from leaving the district is reward in its own right, says Kilkenny.

"I love working with these idealistic, fired up people," he says. "I love seeing their confidence go up and watching them succeed."

"These are smart, talented and creative people who could do *anything* they want, and fortunately they want to be teachers. Nothing is better than knowing you are helping to keep people like that in the profession." ❖