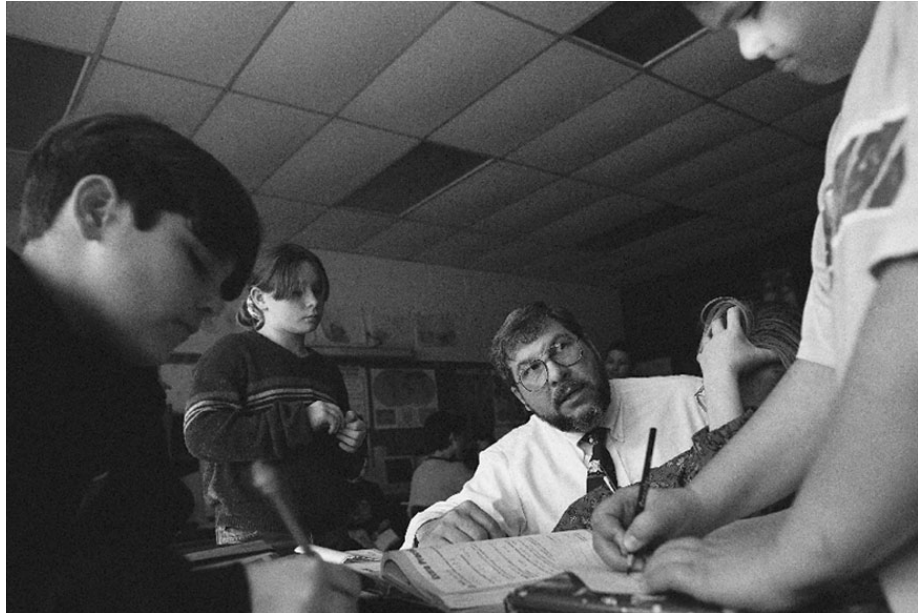


Teaching Teachers

A Rowan program helps rookie teachers

By Mary Galloway Dovey, '75, '96

Mary Galloway Dovey '75, '96, is a writer, public relations professional and former high school English teacher who wishes the BTIC had existed years ago. She lives in Egg Harbor City with her husband and three children.



Thomas West spent 21 years on the police force, but says his new role as teacher is tougher duty. He admits, "I come home more exhausted from this job than I ever did on the force—even as a rookie. But I don't regret entering teaching for a moment. I love the kids."

Editor's Note: Rowan's education program is renowned for preparing students to meet the challenges of the teaching profession. But many new teachers face challenges in real life that even the most comprehensive formal education doesn't address. The Beginning Teacher Induction Center meets those needs.

The bell rings. The door shuts. And twenty-some pairs of eyes focus up front on the teacher. Gulp.

For a newcomer, teaching can be intimidating, scary and a lot of responsibility. Unfortunately, it's also a career where there's no break-in or grace period. "The day before I started school, I felt so prepared. I thought I could do anything. The next morning, I was terrified. I was crying before the kids even got there," said first-year teacher Elise Plotkin '98, recalling her first day as a kindergarten

teacher at the Indian Avenue Elementary School in Bridgeton.

Washington Township High School's Alice Ruppel, now in her first year of teaching, compares it to being dropped in a lake—after reading a book about swimming.

No one, regardless of education or experience, is prepared for how hard being in charge of a classroom can be, explains Rowan Elementary Education Professor Carl Calliari. Calliari experienced the challenges firsthand during the 1960s as one of seven new teachers hired in a southern New Jersey school. Within a few years, he was one of only three rookie teachers who remained.

Seeing a need to ease the stress of first-time teachers and to reduce the number of men and women leaving the profession in the early years of their careers, Calliari helped found Rowan's Thomas E.

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Robinson Beginning Teacher Induction Center (BTIC) in 1988. The Center, named in honor of the University's third president who was a teacher at heart, links new teachers with veteran educators through a year-long seminar series featuring topics of interest to beginners. The presenters, either university professionals, teacher consultants or veteran educators, share one important criterion: they are still excited about their choice of profession, Calliari said. "These are the types of teacher who haven't just survived, but really like kids," he explained, "the type who can't wait for the next day in the classroom."

After each seminar, participants break up into small groups, often facilitated by one of BTIC's 43 veteran teachers known as pros or clinicians, or one of its



The first day of kindergarten was "terrifying" for rookie teacher Elise Plotkin '98. But she survived and now says she's "the luckiest person in the world." Her confidence and pleasure in the classroom has come through experience and help from veteran teachers.

advisory board members. This question and answer session was a life-saver for Connie DiNardo '96. "Finding out I wasn't the only one with difficulties was a relief," explained the first grade teacher at the Whitman School in Turnersville. "It was such a positive experience, we all exchanged phone numbers and e-mail addresses to continue helping each other outside the BTIC."

Other new teachers say they find the networking sessions valuable for learning how to teach children affected by drugs or alcohol, kids who bite, those who can't sit still, or others with rare disabilities, such as one student with "selective mutism"—a little known disorder in which a child chooses not to talk.

Thomas West, a former Philadelphia police lieutenant who retired after 21

years on the force, is now in his third year as a sixth grade teacher at the Frederick A. Priff School in Waretown, Ocean County. West, the father of two grown children and an experienced scoutmaster, believed teaching was the right choice as a second career. "Police work was very interesting and there's certainly a danger that you can't equate, but I'd have to say teaching is harder. I come home more exhausted from this job than I ever did on the force—even as a rookie," said West. "But I don't regret entering teaching for a moment. I love the kids. I just don't think I ever realized how much work there would be."

West found BTIC's seminar on classroom management particularly valuable. "Learning how to get the cooperation of students, developing an effective reward

system, figuring out how to do something, when to do something—you just can't get enough of this," he said.

"You have so many things going on, that something basic like posting classroom rules, you forget," explained Jim Lavendar '95, a seventh grade social studies teacher in his first year at Delsea Middle School in Franklinville.

Lavendar has attended several BTIC seminars. "They've really helped me transition from college to my first job. There is a real difference between learning theory in the classroom and getting out into the real world to begin teaching."

DiNardo agrees. "Your school gives you the core curriculum, but when and what you teach is up to you." She also stays late at school, working until 7

o'clock many evenings. "I know that if I don't put time into my lessons, I'm cheating the students," she said.

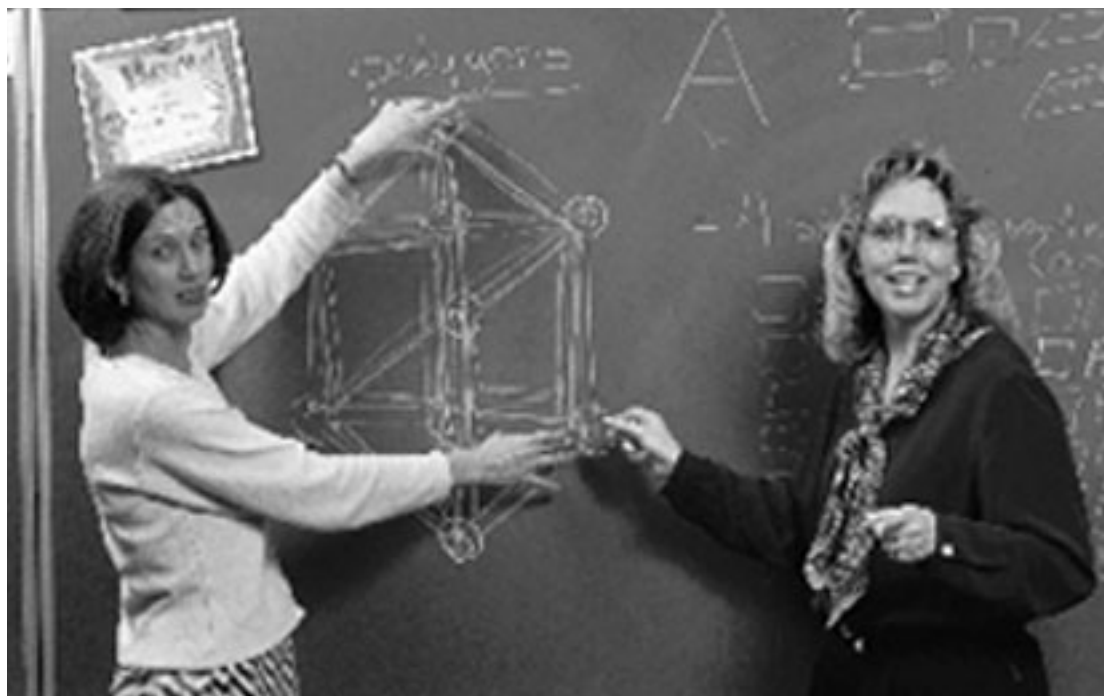
BTIC advisory board member Judy Frett '89 attended seminars faithfully during her first two years in teaching and now serves as a clinician. A fourth grade teacher at the Samuel Mickle School in East Greenwich Township, Frett has become as committed to helping new teachers as she is to her students.

New teachers, Frett says, are often so focused on content, they aren't even aware that they need to know the school's procedures for tasks such as the way grade books should be kept or when books should be inventoried. The BTIC's seminars address those topics and more. "As workshop facilitators, we help these teachers handle their problems throughout the year and it's wonderful for us to see the progression. By May, they have all grown so much," said Frett, recalling one young teacher who sat and cried through a good portion of her first workshop.

Terry Ciotto '98, a first-year basic skills aide at the John Glen School in Pine Hill, is glad she went to the seminars. "It's just so nice to hear veteran teachers talk about how they handled things. They encourage newcomers not to be afraid to seek out the veterans in their own schools," she said.

Pairing new teachers with veterans in their buildings became a requirement in New Jersey in 1994 to provide newcomers with mentors. Those mentors have helped tremendously, say the new teachers, but they don't take the place of the seminars. "I had a wonderful mentor teacher, but I still struggled with what I needed to do to help each of my students," said Samuel Mickle School fourth grade teacher Linda Cram '91, a BTIC "graduate" now in her eighth year in education.

Cram began teaching after her children were in school. She felt that motherhood helped her bring additional flexibility to the classroom—but didn't necessarily make teaching easier. "By meet-



Teaching with a team approach works for Linda Cram '91 and Judy Frett '89. They are both BTIC "graduates" and now help encourage and equip new teachers with BTIC techniques.

ing with other new teachers, I learned that they were as physically exhausted as I was, and were struggling with ways to teach kids with so many different needs essentially the same things," said Cram.

And if new teachers have a question about discipline, parents or another subject they just can't bring themselves to ask anyone else, they can use the BTIC's free, confidential "teacher talk" telephone hotline. The phone line is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week during the school year. Teachers give a description of the problem and leave a number where they can be reached. Usually within 24 hours, BTIC Manager Esther DeEugenio has put the teacher in touch with a veteran in the field or grade level for the two to discuss a solution.

Besides the stress that comes from being the new kid on the block, new teachers face challenges in working with parents. "In the beginning, I was afraid that some of the parents who see me as looking very young would doubt my credibility," said Plotkin. "I was nervous about the idea of meeting with them in conferences."

BTIC's seminar on effective parent conferences provided valuable preparation. "The seminar leader assumed that none of us would know anything, and

talked about making sure that we had chairs available and a student's portfolio to review with parents," Plotkin said. Following the seminar, her confidence soared. "I think I was really able to communicate that I want to see every child in my room succeed," she said.

Learning to work with and involve parents are two of a teacher's most important skills, says Martha Gibbons, principal of Pennsauken's Benjamin Franklin Elementary School and an adjunct professor in Rowan's College of Education who has worked with the BTIC. "Research has shown that the single most important variable in a child's success in school is for the parent to participate in a positive way," Gibbons explained.

From its inception, the BTIC has been supported by school districts in the eight counties of southern New Jersey, the market for which it was developed. Many districts have hired teachers on the condition that they attend the seminars, while others have worked with BTIC educators to train their own veteran teachers, forming local induction teams to mentor beginning teachers.

Gibbons has encouraged many new teachers to take part in BTIC programs either on a voluntary basis or as part of their professional improvement plans.

"There is absolutely a need for the type of support the BTIC provides. New teachers need direction, and their principals just don't have the time to cover the procedures in detail the way the seminars can," said Gibbons.

Lewis Katzmar, director of special education in Upper Deerfield Township, is a frequent BTIC seminar presenter. Involved in special education

programs throughout southern New Jersey, Katzmar believes that it is doubly important for teachers in his field to receive the support BTIC offers. "Special education teachers don't have mentors within their own schools as other new teachers do. During our seminars, new teachers can get some real answers to their questions," he said.

The seminars also help special education teachers become familiar with state guidelines which are revised frequently. Often, seminar attendees are the first in their schools to become knowledgeable regarding changes to the laws, Katzmar said.

Teachers who've taken part in BTIC programs agree that their first year may have been hard, but none has plans to leave. "I love seeing the progress of my students," said Plotkin. "And on my birthday, they all just ran up and hugged me. All I could think about was, in what other job would this happen? I feel I'm the luckiest person in the world." ■