

# Teacher, teacher!

By Leslie Mertz

While the media was busy bemoaning the state of education in major American cities, Wayne State's College of Education and the Detroit Public Schools (DPS) were working together to do something about it.

Through a series of innovative programs, the College of Education and DPS have helped more than 180 DPS employees, many of who are from minority groups, to either earn or begin taking steps toward earning their teaching certificates. Now, the strategies behind those programs are beginning to help other school districts around the country to make similar progress.

The WSU-DPS programs had one primary goal: to provide new teachers to match the needs of urban schools, particularly those in Detroit. "We are on our way to a severe shortage very soon. There is one now in the urban districts, and it's starting to spread to other districts," said Sharon Elliott, assistant dean of the WSU College of Education. She noted that urban districts have been the hardest hit as teachers either retire or choose to teach in suburban districts that typically have smaller classes, greater resources and higher salaries.

"We are also finding that there are not enough people of color in teaching, so our programs in Detroit particularly had an emphasis on increasing the numbers of teachers from minority and other under-represented groups to reflect the diversity of the student population in Detroit," she explained. Besides the high percentage of African-Americans, she pointed out that Detroit's student body includes at least 10,000 children whose primary language is not English, so the schools also have a critical need to hire bilingual teachers.

## Opening new roads

The WSU-DPS initiative began in 1993 with its inaugural program called Alternative Pathways to Teaching (APT), which was designed to increase the number of K-12 teachers from minority and other under-represented groups. Funded by the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund of New York, the program was one of 10 created in the Midwest and Northeast.

The Detroit APT specifically targeted 40 substitute teachers, education technicians and other DPS employees who were excellent candidates for teacher certification, but who, for one reason or another, had turned away from traditional teacher-education programs, Dr. Elliott said. She co-directed APT, as well as the other WSU-DPS programs, with Beverly Schneider, executive director, DPS Department of Human Resources.

Within six years, Wayne State and the DPS expanded their recruitment efforts and added four new programs to prepare and certify male, minority teachers; teachers for children with learning disabilities; math and science teachers; and bilingual teachers. A sixth initiative focused on institutionalizing the successful components of the teaching programs and working with other school districts to adopt the WSU-DPS model.

"I want to emphasize that these programs provide an alternative route to teacher certification, not an alternative certification," Elliott maintained. "We designed them so that, ultimately, these students would end up with the same degree and the same teacher certification as our traditional students do, but they would

perhaps accomplish it in different ways or in a different time frame.”

Collectively known as the Pathways project, these teaching programs all share several unusual aspects: free tuition, flexible course scheduling, academic tutoring, leadership development opportunities, mentoring support and cohort groups. For the latter, assemblages of similar students came together to share learning or other experiences.

### **High success rate**

The Pathways project is a resounding success, according to Elliott. Of the 40 initial students in the APT, 37 completed their teacher certification, and all are now teachers in Detroit Public School classrooms. Of the remaining three, one is proceeding toward graduation, and the other two left the program for personal reasons. “At this point, of the 37 teachers, not one has dropped out of teaching,” she said. That compares to a 40 percent drop-out rate nationally for urban teachers within the first three to five years.

“The high number of teachers who choose to leave the profession is a significant problem nationally,” remarked Dr. Steven Ilmer, associate dean for research at the WSU College of Education. “APT’s success rate shows the power of a project like this.” The Great Cities Universities in Washington, D.C., is conducting the national evaluation of Pathways projects funded by the DeWitt Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund.

The question of why students are drawn to a Pathways program in contrast to a traditional program for certification is very important to answer, he remarked. Two of the most obvious difficulties that non-traditional students encounter in returning to college are paying tuition costs and

managing the added responsibilities of going back to school along with existing personal and family obligations. Pathways students are older than traditional students, they typically have greater family and financial responsibilities, and they work full-time during the days while going to school at night. Because of these circumstances, free tuition and flexible scheduling were crucial, he said.

Students also identified the cohort groups as an essential component of the programs. “For the cohorts, we had groups of Pathways students take one class together each semester for a year,” Elliott said. “They got to know each other, they began to study together, and then they provided personal support to each other.” The personal support was invaluable, she commented. The added pressures of family and work sometimes left the students feeling overwhelmed, but they were able to turn to others in their cohort group for practical advice, a sympathetic ear or just an encouraging smile. She added, “The idea may sound simple, but developing a cohort group was very important, because as a student at Wayne State or an employee in the Detroit Public Schools, it is so easy to get lost in the system.”

### **Cohort support**

The cohort groups have another consequential element, Elliott said. Each month, all the groups come together for a joint meeting to discuss general issues. “Mainly what we do in those joint meetings is talk about how to access the systems in the Detroit Public Schools and at Wayne State University,” she said.

For instance, a WSU project coordinator took the Pathways students on a tour of the university libraries to acquaint them with the computer systems and demonstrate how to use them. Little things like that can make a

monumental difference to an older student who may feel out of place and outdated around new technology, she remarked.

Pathways students who had at one time enrolled in a traditional educational program often cite systemic barriers, like the unfamiliarity with technology or paperwork tangles revolving around transferred credits or records, as at least part of the reason they ultimately dropped out. “The bureaucracy of any large institution, I think, just becomes a little more cumbersome for returning people who work full-time,” Ilmer said. Through the joint cohort meetings, however, the students learn how to navigate through the system more easily.

Elliott related that individual cohort groups hold their own meetings to cover specific issues and to help the participants enhance leadership skills. “We taught them things like parliamentary procedure, how to run a meeting, how to develop an agenda and how to facilitate discussions.” Everyone had a turn at the different roles, like chairperson, timekeeper or process observer. She clarified, “The process observer sits quietly and observes the interactions taking place, determines what made this a successful meeting, and really starts to understand some of the subtleties of leadership (e.g., how you handle someone who keeps jumping in all the time during discussion or someone who never speaks in a large group, but might speak in a small group).”

### **Mighty mentors**

Pathways students also pointed to their mentors as integral to their success. “The students all selected teachers from their DPS schools as mentors, and these mentors turned out to be wonderful,” Elliott said, explaining that the mentors helped the students with the rules of the school or the completion of confusing forms. The mentor

also assisted with the development of curriculum and provided feedback on classroom organization and management.

She saw for herself the role that mentors played in the APT students’ lives: “Our students invited their mentors to a graduation celebration. The mentors talked about how proud they were of these new teachers that they had helped bring into the profession; the students described the great deal of time and assistance they had received. Many stated that they wouldn’t have made it without their mentors. It was very moving to hear them all speak.” She added, “We thought that having mentors was a good idea, but we didn’t realize the impact it really would have.”

Elliott also credits much of the Pathways project’s achievements to the healthy, cooperative relationship between DPS and Wayne State. “Beverly Schneider and I were in positions to make decisions. I could change some things in the curriculum, and she could change some things in hiring and other practices in Detroit to advance the programs.” She noted that this teamwork has made the WSU-DPS Pathways project one of the most successful of the 10 original and five later Pathways projects. “Of all 15, we were the only university that didn’t have problems. Universities in other areas were trying to work with the school districts, but they hadn’t brought them in as full partners, so they were always going to the district and requesting help. In our case, we were making decisions together from the start.”

The Detroit project had another advantage in that the DPS contact has remained the same throughout the project; Ilmer said “One of the real difficulties nationally in working with large urban schools is the turnover in the lead administration in many of these districts. In our case, however, we had stability in addition to exceptional coordination and communication.”

## **The future**

WSU and DPS now hope to share what they have learned. Already, the U.S. Department of Education has used information gleaned from the Pathways programs nationwide to further develop quality standards in teacher preparation.

The spotlight also fell specifically on the WSU-DPS Pathways Project recently when it won a Best Practices Award from the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education. Imer declared, “This is a national award from the top professional association in the field of teacher education.” With this prestigious honor, the WSU-DPS program has become a model for urban school districts around the United States.

On a more local level, Elliott said they hope to expand Pathways-like programs to recruit teachers from other non-traditional sources.

## **Biography**

*Dr. Sharon Elliott earned three degrees from WSU: a bachelor’s in elementary education, a master’s in early childhood education and an Ed.D. in curriculum and instruction. She joined Wayne State in 1964.*

“We might look to people who are retiring from Chrysler or one of the other automotive companies, or who may have started out with one degree and then found through volunteering as a coach or Sunday-school instructor that they’re really more interested in working with children,” she said. “We’re no longer looking at just 18-, 19- and 20-year-olds going into teaching; we’re really casting a wider net.”

She remarked, “We know that in order to diversify the pool of teachers, we’ve got to have some alternative ways of working with them and supporting them. Now, each time we work on something with Detroit Public Schools or with other school districts, we’re building on what we’ve learned out of these Pathways programs.”

Of the WSU-DPS project, Imer added, “When I go to a meeting of Pathways alumni, it is really impressive to hear what an obvious difference this program has made in their lives professionally and personally.”