

EDUCATION WEEK TEACHER

Elite PD Program Seeks to Build Top Teachers' Expertise

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For many teachers, the term “professional development” invariably brings to mind monotone speakers, PowerPoint slides, and poorly lit meeting rooms.

There’s plenty of low-gauge fluorescent lighting at the hotel where two dozen teachers have gathered for a five-day training through the **National Academy of Advanced Teacher Education**. But apart from that, the horror is gone.

The teachers here are busily debating a case study of one “Mr. Chen,” an award-winning teacher praised for his ability to reach all of his low-income students, but who in the lesson in question nevertheless seems to come down harder on certain male students than others. The topic of discussion: Do Mr. Chen’s perceptions of his teaching match his own practices? How would a principal trying to point out such disparities approach such a conversation?

These teachers, all top-performing—some even hold local teaching awards—are no shrinking violets. The conversation flows rapidly, respectfully, and sometimes emotionally. It’s also deeply engaging.

Much like an executive business program, NAATE is built on the idea that the best teachers need opportunities to wrestle with cognitively challenging professional work to improve their craft, remain engaged in the profession, and spread their expertise.

NAATE Founder and President Tony Klemmer, a former business executive, said he was inspired to launch the initiative after the shock of discovering that there were few elite, advanced programs for the best U.S. teachers. In his view, that oversight represents the failure of the profession to invest in

its top talent and has contributed to high teacher-turnover rates.

“[In] every other profession, there are opportunities to engage in advanced professional learning with high-octane peers with all sorts of professional and social supports,” Mr. Klemmer said. “This is a program of study for teachers—not for budding [administrative] leaders, not for policy wonks—differentiated by experience level and performance level. That does not exist anywhere [else] in the country.”

Case Studies

NAATE, founded in 2009 and based in Newport, R.I., brings together cohorts of about 60 core-content teachers from traditional public, charter, and private schools for intensive, 350-hour programs that take place either mostly within a school year (in designated week-long sessions) or over two summers. More than 300 teachers have completed the academy, which is now recruiting its next two cohorts.

Selection criteria are intended to be strict: Each participant has to be identified by his or her principal as a top-performing teacher and have at least three years of teaching experience. That’s in part because one of the program’s aims is to propel teachers who have already made their mark in some sense—many are already serving as department or grade-level chairs. But it’s also because, put simply, NAATE’s curriculum is designed to be intellectual and demanding in a way much of what currently passes as professional development generally is not.

Rather than lectures on the latest policy shifts or a garden-variety pedagogical topic, NAATE’s programming hews closer to business school methodologies. Each “fellow” is given a thick notebook of articles and research studies to read before arriving.

The actual sessions consist of the fellows analyzing case studies of pedagogical challenges, such as the one involving Mr. Chen, or of other leadership qualities (one case study focuses on the Arctic explorer Ernest Shackleton) during which participants are encouraged to synthesize knowledge from the readings and apply it to K-12 settings. The conversations also continue in smaller study groups to which each fellow is

assigned at the beginning of the program.

Challenging Conversations

It's the deep dialogue about the craft of teaching that most appeals to Emilio Solano, a teacher at the Sandra Cisneros campus of the Camino Nuevo Charter Academy, located in the diverse Echo Park neighborhood of Los Angeles.

A six-year veteran tapped for NAATE after winning a teaching award from Teach For America, Mr. Solano said he was initially somewhat skeptical of the program and more than a little intimidated by its demands. But his first five-day session changed his mind.

"I loved the conversations with people," Mr. Solano said. "I think I learn really well from other people's insights, and as I always tell my students, 'That's how we grow—by understanding people's different perspectives, by discussing, by disagreeing.'"

Even so, being around so many top-performing peers can be eye-opening—at times, uncomfortably so.

"For teachers who have been told they're the best, coming into a room full of high-performing teachers can be earth-shattering," said Deborah Levitzky, the academy's chief program officer and founding director. "It can be difficult for those who have not had their opinions challenged."

The conversations with equally talented peers may be the heart of the NAATE program, but there are other important components, too. Each teacher's interactions are observed by staff or graduates of NAATE, who then provide daily written feedback.

"We hear from so many teachers that in the part of their career that they're in, they get very infrequent feedback other than, 'You're doing a great job,'" Ms. Levitzky said. So the reflections they receive during their program focuses on topics of relevance to their school interactions.

"Are they rooting comments in evidence? Are they able to see the nuance in the cases? Are they helping move the conversation, making way for other peers who are quieter to speak, thinking about the implications of their participation?" she said.

Future Goals

At \$12,000 per teacher, NAATE is not cheap, though it's a bargain in comparison to similar offerings in business and even some master's degree programs in education. Additional support for the program comes mainly through philanthropies. The group has received support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, and the Walton Family Foundation, among others. (*Education Week* also receives funding from those philanthropies to support coverage of academic standards, innovation, and parent empowerment, respectively.)

Participating districts include the Shelby school district in Memphis, Tenn., and the New Haven district in Connecticut, in addition to several large charter-management organizations, such as Rocketship and Achievement First, and at least two Catholic archdioceses.

Where NAATE's model fits within the **broader policy apparatuses of K-12 professional development** remains somewhat in flux. Its voluntary nature stands in contrast to much teacher training in the United States, which tends to be inscribed in contracts, school schedules, and state licensing rules. As its leaders acknowledge, NAATE's philosophy of change is a bottom-up one, and the program likely would not work as a mandatory exercise.

But its leaders' long-term goals are nonetheless bold. NAATE officials have begun to pilot a second program for school leaders. And one day, they think that a critical mass of NAATE-trained educators could truly "turn around" a struggling school.

For now, though, Mr. Solano is simply looking forward to the end of the month, when his cohort will reconvene for its second five-day session.

"They've gotten me hooked," he said. "It's just so different."

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