

Professional Development School (PDS) Building Liaisons: Going beyond Student Learning Outcomes

Alison L. Rutter, East Stroudsburg University

Amy Lloyd, Resica Elementary School

Susan Klotz, Kenneth N. Butz Elementary School

Kristie Intravaia, B. F. Morey Elementary School

Tiffany Maronpot, Chipperfield Elementary School

Stacey Leon, Governor Wolf Elementary School

Abstract: This action research study considered the role of professional development school (PDS) building liaison as a pivotal gear within the complex learning system of a PDS network. It is based on a series of discussions among a sample of veteran building liaisons as they reflect on the ways in which they have helped shape the learning of the pre-service teachers (PST) in their buildings and the ways in which this learning has been demonstrated in their K-5 students. The study helps to confirm the need for being memorable to students through building relationships and active role modeling. It also reinforces the benefits of sharing with other teachers in order to extend professional learning within a safe and trusting environment.

KEYWORDS: *active role modeling building liaison, building relationships, pre-service teachers, professional development school (PDS), teacher leaders*

NAPDS NINE ESSENTIALS ADDRESSED:

2. A school–university culture committed to the preparation of future educators that embraces their active engagement in the school community
3. Ongoing and reciprocal professional development for all participants guided by need
4. A shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants

The building liaison role is a pivotal role in our professional development school (PDS) partnership and, we suspect, in many other PDS programs. Working like smoothly functioning gears, the building liaison, representing the school site, interacts with the university faculty liaison who represent the university side of the relationship. They also interact with numerous individuals within their site. While a mechanistic analogy grates at our organic, relational sense of PDS work, the gear analogy helps us see the complexity of the relationship and the need for balance of workload, timing, and distribution of effort. The building liaison must be as knowledgeable and confident of operations in the school as the university faculty liaison is with those at the college.

Each must know from their individual perspectives how to source information, solve problems, and collaborate within and across the partnership. For this reason, the building liaison is essential to the success of the partnership, but even more importantly, to the overall objective of student learning at the pre-service and K-12 levels. As such, the building liaison is not only a teacher, but a teacher leader.

This action research study is based on a series of discussions among a sample of these veteran building liaisons as they reflect on the ways in which they have helped shape the learning of the pre-service teachers (PST) in their buildings and the ways in which this learning has been demonstrated in their K-5 students. The teacher leaders shared their ideas with the university professor corralling this overarching work and then reflected again on how their approaches did or did not mirror those of the other teacher leaders.

Background/Research Setting

The East Stroudsburg University (ESU) PDS partnership, 19 years young, includes 18 elementary schools in five districts located in northeastern Pennsylvania. Each school partnership consists of a principal, building liaison (classroom teacher), mentor teachers for PDS I and II methods level classes, cooperating teachers and university supervisors working with student teachers, and the university faculty liaison. While the building liaisons meet with the building principal, PDS mentor teachers, and university faculty liaisons informally as responsibilities demand, they meet regularly with the PSTs. They typically see the PSTs informally in the field each day as well as more formally bi-weekly or weekly (depending on the building site) for a total of 10 to 12 hours per semester for clinical seminars called Liaison Meetings. When also functioning as a mentor teacher or cooperating teacher, the building liaisons have direct interaction and influence over their own PST for one to three semesters evolving from one to five days per week. In addition to teaching the PDS methods courses, university faculty serve as liaisons to the PDS sites. They spend part of a day once a week at their sites interacting with the first two levels of PST and mentors as well as checking in with the building liaison. The overarching governance includes the university dean, the director of field experience and partnerships, the faculty PDS coordinator, all university faculty working with PDS courses and student teachers, school principals and district superintendents. This group, called the Coordinating Council, meets once a year to review major issues and new efforts. A sub-group, the Liaison Forum, which consists of building liaisons, university PDS faculty, and administration, meets twice a year to brainstorm, discuss issues within the PDS, and make suggestions for new initiatives or ways to improve existing ones.

All Early Childhood Education (ECED) and dual Special Education/Early Childhood (SPED/ECED) teacher education majors (the PSTs) begin their elementary PDS experience as Primary I students the second semester of their junior year when they take methods courses in reading, special education, art, and social studies, and work at their PDS site one day a week. The PSTs progress to their first semester of senior year as PDS II students, continuing to take methods courses in science; math; language arts; special education; and advocacy, leadership, and collaboration, while learning to teach in their PDS site classrooms twice a week in a different classroom and grade level band from PDS I (either K-2 or 2-4). PSTs meet informally each week with both the university faculty liaison and the building liaison. During their final semester, each

ECED PST completes student teaching back at this same PDS site for one quarter each with their PDS I and II mentor teachers. SPED/ECED PSTs student teach for one quarter in with a PDS I or II mentor teacher and for one quarter in a special education placement. Concurrently, these students take their capstone course, Teacher as Researcher, investigating practice and conducting a Student Learning Outcomes (SLO) inquiry project.

Literature Review

When PDSs encourage teacher leadership, they are effectively engaging the intellectual capital of the school (Basile, 2009). No longer is leading the sole responsibility of one administrator but distributed across those who are closest to helping students learn. Teachers have the practical knowledge and experience of knowing their students, the curriculum being taught, and the strategies to teach it successfully. It makes sense for them to assume a leadership role to ensure that teaching and learning is optimized (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Levenson, 2014; Wenner & Campbell, 2017). These teacher leaders have the capacity and influence to harness the power of other teachers, work collaboratively with them, and recognize and translate the teacher perspective when communicating with administration (Harrison & Killion, 2007). In doing so, they are able to build relationships, which in turn help them lead (Silva, Gimbert, & Nolan, 2000). This is recognized within PDSs in which teachers are often encouraged to take on multiple roles and often act as boundary crossers between the school and university (Holmes Group, 1990). In PDS, it is accepted that some teachers will take on roles such as Liaison to help the PDS function optimally. It is hoped that within a PDS, the teacher leader will have the support of both the school administration and the university PDS faculty. This helps create the professional conditions necessary to distribute leadership, particularly instructional leadership (Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson & Hann, 2002). As teachers take on this role, they are able to help shape the professional communities needed to systemize learning.

In Pennsylvania, the capstone project for teacher education students is a SLO inquiry study (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2009). At ESU, this is part of a course taught at the university but implemented at the PDS sites. The building liaisons exemplify the Domains IV and V (data evaluation and assessment) of the Teacher Leader Model Standards (Rutter & Barry, 2017; Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium, 2011) when they work with the students and cooperating teachers on this project. The building liaisons also exhibit the teacher leader competencies (Rutter & Leon, 2017; NEA, NBPTS, & CTL, 2018) through their leadership roles and responsibilities in creating a professional learning community that systematically works to improve student learning. The building liaison role of teacher leader often equates to professional developer, facilitator, and critical friend. The teacher leader informally assumes the leadership responsibility with mentors for ensuring these projects culminate in improved K-4 student learning. These teacher leaders become accepted by their professional learning communities as those who will not only develop their personal PST, but help all of the PSTs, and by extension, the mentors and themselves. Katzenmeyer and Moller (2016) referenced this in stating, “Teachers who are credible to their peers, who are continuous learners, and who pass relevant information about best practices to others influence their colleague teachers” (p. 126). This is a sound model of instructional leadership being distributed throughout a school and the professional, intellectual

capital of the school transforming teaching, learning, and leading. In doing so, it enhances teacher, as well as student, learning.

Research Methods

This qualitative action research study was conducted by a small sample of PDS building liaisons along with a faculty professor who doubles as a university supervisor and former PDS coordinator. The research consisted of a number of reflective discussions among the faculty member and the building liaisons. Due to difficulty getting everyone together at the same time, some discussions were one-on-one and others were small group online Zoom video discussions, based on their role as teacher leaders, interacting with mentors, PSTs, university faculty, and school administrators. Additional information was gathered during informal discussions in the building liaisons' classrooms. The building liaisons also referenced the notes and other artifacts they collected throughout the spring. This study was IRB approved.

Data Collection and Interpretation

The researchers asked themselves the following questions: If our job is to prepare the best future teachers possible – teachers who know their students, know how they learn, and to what extent they are learning, and in what context – how are we accomplishing that? In what ways do we as teacher leaders help the PSTs in our schools learn to teach with the end goal of developing students as engaged and productive learners? To answer these questions, a number of discussions were held to first determine what the questions really meant: What do we mean by teacher leaders, what do we mean by teaching versus learning, and what is the difference in learning as a PST and as an elementary student?

We analyzed the teacher leader frameworks (NEA, NBPTS, & CTL, 2018) and the pathways to becoming a teacher leader individually and collectively to identify particular ways they applied to our work and to gain a better understanding of possible ways of being a teacher leader. Mostly, we found that our building liaisons did not fit neatly into any of the specific pathways but had strengths in a number of them. In looking at how our PSTs make sense of becoming a teacher, we examined the major assignments of the Teacher as Researcher capstone course that were tied to course student learning outcomes, as well as to PSTs' university and PDS field assignments. In the capstone course, situated during the student teaching semester, the PSTs plan and implement a Student Learning Outcome (SLO) inquiry project; develop a student information analysis called Kid Notes related to the students they are responsible for in their elementary classes; conduct a Teacher Leader study; and develop formative assessment plans related to their teaching. The mentor teachers, and by extrapolation, the building liaisons, are asked to assist with and help guide these projects as well as those in the preceding methods courses designed as the foundation for these capstone assignments. For instance, in the preceding courses, in addition to lesson plans, the PSTs each complete the following: an informational case study on one student, a reading case study, a behavioral SLO, and a group advocacy project based on their PDS site's needs. These assignments are referenced in the interviews.

The researchers analyzed the transcripts of the building liaison discussions based on these questions. We specifically looked for patterns in which the building liaisons reflected on their

interactions with the PST and mentor teachers working with the PSTs. The faculty researcher coded the transcripts for further rounds of analysis and discussion, highlighting patterns as findings.

Research Findings and Discussion

The PSTs' SLOs provide evidence each term of their ability to accomplish short term student achievement during their student teaching. These SLOs are typically two week-long interventions with a small group of students based on a specific learning goal in literacy or math. For instance, the SLO could be on increasing phonemic awareness by two letters or increasing addition fact recall by 10%. Rarely, no more than 5%, does a PST not meet their given goal with their students. These projects are supported indirectly by the building liaisons and directly by the mentors. Given this data, as well as success with individual lessons, the building liaisons felt comfortable agreeing that the PSTs do help increase student learning and that the building liaisons, especially as mentors, deserve some of the credit in bringing this about. However, the building liaisons' reflections also revealed two findings of note from their discussions about being teacher leaders, helping pre-service teachers become better teachers, and enhancing student learning for the long haul. Across the board, they emphasized the importance of their role in 1) developing relationships by which strong bonds of knowing and trust are created and 2) being active role models to ensure that the learning takes hold.

Multiple Layers of Gears Functioning in a Complex Machine

To understand this better, we came to think of it as the inner workings of a machine, developing a myriad of relationships that resembled the multiple layers of gears functioning in a complex machine (see Image 1). The relationships (gears) each connected directly to their own central gear or to another gear which has its own offshoots, some revolving in tiers above and below, making the machine of the PDS function optimally. Try to visualize the links necessary for them to build relationships with all of the following: On one level, the university PDS faculty and administration; then other building liaisons; on another level within their buildings, administration; the teachers not directly mentoring PDS; and those that were mentors; PSTs on three levels – PDS I, PDS II, and student teachers who were in their buildings; and then more intensely with those in their own classrooms rooms; and possibly on a third level, their own classroom students. Peripherally, they also maintained relationships with other community stakeholders such as the PTO. All of these moving in sync, with some coming into play like a second hand on a clock with others in contact more like the passing of a day.



Image 1: Multiple Layers of Gears Functioning in a Complex Machine

Building Relationships

The building liaisons described their various ways of scaffolding learning through active role modeling for the PSTs and to some extent, their fellow mentors. In preparation for active role modeling, two important, but less frequent relationships (hence bigger gears) sync between the building liaisons and their university counterparts and between the building liaisons and their own administration. In terms of the university, the building liaisons indicated that they need to sustain strong connections with their faculty liaisons, serving as a resource for the mentors, arranging liaison meetings, and managing advocacy projects. While they mostly meet weekly during faculty visits, they might also reach out by phone or email for direct questions or consultation. Knowing you have a faculty liaison that can provide information and possibly help with issues or challenges can save the day. For instance, Beth recalled a school community project that was driven by the PSTs but needed more hands-on support. When the building liaison called for help, the university liaison not only came and helped out herself but brought another faculty member and her teen-aged daughter to help with activities. This was seen as an example of modeling for the PSTs the strength of a professional community that supports one another for the benefit of students.

Likewise, building liaisons also emphasized the need to have strong relationships with their building administration to ensure the trust and respect for autonomy in managing the PDS which in turn, allows the PST to have the opportunity to enhance student learning. For example, Emma, who teaches in a relatively small school, has been asked by her principal to assume a number of key leadership roles, often providing the teacher perspective. “I think I support my principal by giving her as much feedback as I can,” Emma explains, “My principal counts on me to lead the PDS. She knows I can handle it. She trusts me with leading the PDS program in our building.” Meg is also an important member of her principal’s leadership team who provides a teacher perspective. Tapped by her principal to be the building liaison, Meg recalls, “She sees things in me that I don’t necessarily see in myself, so I’m grateful to her for that, but I do feel [in a positive way] she uses me to help her in those different areas.” These relationships and the respect they engender help support the work of the PDS.

Similarly, the building liaisons reiterate the importance of having strong connections with their fellow mentors and other building teachers to be sure the PSTs are getting every opportunity to learn, to ensure the support of the other teachers, and to provide an open door for questions and suggestions. It is a means of getting the mentors to also think of themselves as teacher leaders. While not every teacher serves as a mentor for a variety of reasons, some teachers will assist with PDS work by holding liaison meetings in an area of their comfort or expertise. Beth suggested encouraging participation by “just inviting them to be part of the process, inviting them to think about their strengths and help out with liaison meeting and things like that.” Otherwise, the interactions vary in frequency and degree of formality. The building liaisons mention “checking-in” with their mentors regularly, but also frequently talking with them informally. Kailani indicated that she is “in contact with her mentor teachers all of the time. Whether it’s a day the PSTs are there or not, I’m always touching base with the mentors.” Emma cited that “many one-on-one conversations with the mentors in my building because it’s so personal to help them be the best leaders they can be.” Emma does walk-ins to touch base with the mentor teachers and stay connected because “it can be a bit overwhelming for mentor teachers at times, so it is important to be there and show appreciation for them.”

Sometimes these interactions entail the building liaisons bringing back information from the university. Emma continued, “If I go to Coordinating Council and we talk about co-teaching, I’ll go back and share the materials and talk to [the mentors] about how they can use that co-teaching model [with the PSTs].” Sometimes there is also vicarious professional development when the building liaisons hold workshops on something like technology for the PSTs. When the PST uses the technology in the mentor’s classroom, the mentor can learn along with the PST and it is a win-win for students. Similar to what Meg said in relation to her principal’s trust in her, Meg recognized that she too puts faith in her fellow mentors: “Our support allows them to recognize skills they don’t even realize they have.” She elaborated on the importance of the mentors accepting what is best for their own style of teaching: “It’s not always going to be how I would do things...they need encouragement, just like our students.” Emma observed that knowing her fellow teachers allows for the best matches to be made with the PSTs. To accomplish this, Kailani suggested asking the mentors, “Are things good?” explaining, “If we know things are good, we know communication is happening.” When good matches and good communication translate into good teaching and learning, the gears click.

One of the first things the building liaisons address with the PSTs is developing relationships with them, knowing them the way they would know their classroom students. They then emphasize the importance of the PST, knowing the classroom students as well. Emma explained that having strong relationships with your elementary students:

...allows you to know them not only on the academic level, but also a personal level and enables the teacher to identify what needs each child is bringing to the classroom with them, and how that affects their learning in the classroom...because when you’re in elementary, those social and emotional needs sometimes come before the academics.

Part of being a teacher leader is modeling for the PSTs how to connect with their students— helping them as Emma stated, “ to open their eyes, ears, and senses to what is going on around them with these tiny people instead of solely focusing on ‘I have to teach a lesson in reading today.’” Beth reiterated the importance of building these relationships stating:

If the kids aren’t feeling it, if they don’t feel comfortable with you, if they don’t feel connected to you, [what you’re teaching] is not going to necessarily have an impact on them...It’s not likely going to stay with them long term.

Beth continued, “If they don’t believe that you believe in them, it’s really hard to teach them how to multiply fractions or find the main idea and supporting details.”

Active Role Modeling

The building liaisons typically meet with the PSTs every day they are at the PDS site, sometimes casually and sometimes in formal liaison meetings. They mentioned holding sessions that touched on this idea of getting to know children, modeling how to conduct interest inventories, and doing things like checking in with their students at the beginning of each day. The gears click in nicely. The PSTs see the real-world value of the Teacher as Researcher Kids Notes assignment in which they have to collect information on their students and tie it into their teaching. It also demonstrates for the PSTs that what is being done at the PDS site is valued back at the university.

While learning to know your students is a first-line lesson, the building liaisons also work with the PSTs on all things related to teaching, many attached to assignments from the university

related to behavior management, writing lesson plans, implementing the plans, understanding curriculum, assessing learning, and differentiating learning. Such assignments are traditionally thought of as having a direct impact on student learning. To do this, building liaisons engage in active role modeling. The difference between being a role model and an active role model is typically the inquiry and scaffolding process as well as the mediating of their thinking to the PSTs in everything they do. Jo provided very detailed feedback in an ongoing inquiry/response notebook with her PST, asking questions about what she noticed about Jo's lessons as well as her own. These often became discussion starters or means to source answers.

Often, this involved helping them interpret curriculum and assessments. Beth explained how the teachers have had to work at the challenges of a new reading curriculum, which includes continuous assessment: "The program is very directed with dynamic small groups based on the assessments. The PSTs are planning it regularly with their classroom teacher." They are seeing the entire cycle of teaching and assessing." PSTs in these classrooms you cannot escape having this process modeled, scaffolded and explained as they work alongside their mentor teachers. Beth personally "would always have them stand behind [her], watch [her progress monitor], and ask, 'Did you hear [the student] misread that word?'" Beth further expounded, "I take them through the whole thing because it's all there. I can access all of their data from the entire year...we can map it, we can see it...there's a trend." She further stated, "there's no way a student teacher is not experiencing that level of separation and implementation, especially literacy differentiation."

Kailani and Emma described their mediating process as being "teacher whisperers." They work to get past the "apprenticeship of observation" by thinking out loud and whispering into the PSTs' ears about things that are being done in the classroom as they are happening. Emma talked about getting PSTs involved in what she was doing: watching, discussing it, and then doing for themselves. Kailani mentioned that she spends nearly half her time mediating in the beginning: "Every time I give an instruction, a reward, or a reminder, I turn and whisper to the PST." Kailani also discussed the scaffolding she does with her PSTs using Class DoJo, by first giving rewards and consequences and having the PSTs post comments. As the PSTs feel more comfortable, she has them come up with ways to show learning happening "to promote something we're doing, to promote a child or promote a tool, such as a student's writing piece or art piece." Similarly, Kailani scaffolds her morning student check-ins with the PST sitting with her as she meets with each student. Eventually, the PST takes over and shares back with her. Kailani and Emma also discussed the benefits of the PSTs learning to co-teach and take on small groups of learning. Do these things help student learning? Emma emphasized this in her statement:

The differentiation part, the co-teaching - I teach, you assist - we swap roles. It's immeasurable the amounts of help it provides...Do I know that the PST sitting with those three students in the small group while I'm doing whole group helped those students? Of course it did, because if it were just me...there's no way I could have given that intensive support!

Emma reinforced this by stating, "On the days that the PST is there, the students who really struggle have more success...just by having a knowledgeable person there who's helping." Kailani also described the inquiry process after she has modeled a certain aspect of teaching:

At the end of the day, I ask, 'What things did I have today that enhance the lesson? What are the materials I needed? What different resources did I use?' Then I brainstorm with them about their own next lessons.

Beyond active role modeling alone, Beth explained that she and her team members do this with one another, often with the PSTs present. They have think-aloud conversations where they “process things, talking out loud with each other” so that they all share and learn together. The PSTs benefit from “hearing how we talk to each other as professionals, use our resources in the building, use each other as resources, and reach out for help when we need it.” This was often the process used to scaffold the SLO project with the PSTs.

When the PSTs conduct their SLOs for the Teacher as Researcher course, the building liaisons often become involved. They, in addition to the mentors, help them think about the very specific objectives they will need to set as well as the best practice they will be using. Emma came to the university to describe the overall process she goes through for her own SLO and shared ideas for their mini SLOs with the entire class. Jo met with her grade level teachers and PSTs to discuss their SLO plans. They met and actively modeled the process for selecting the students, the topic, objectives, and possible lessons. Jo’s PSTs benefitted from an entire team working and mediating the process with them and each other. As mentors of their own PSTs the building liaisons also helped them identify topics and times throughout the day when they could hold their small group learning experiences. For example, Kailani discussed modeling how she assesses and sets goals in math and language arts. These were then used as potential topics for her PSTs’ SLOs.

Just as these building liaisons scaffold and actively mentor their PSTs, the next step is to have them do the same thing for the new PSTs coming up. By doing so they can see how their own modeling is being applied. Emma dubbed this “Circle of Life Teaching.” The gears go around and around.

Implications for Practice/Next Steps

These reflective discussions highlighted ideas we had some inkling of but had not formally expressed or confirmed. The findings of this action research study made us realize a few things we would like to emphasize. One is the importance of knowing your students, your teachers, and one another; and being willing to actively model teaching knowledge and skills for PSTs and one another. In addition, this action research helped us recognize how much talking about these topics helped us realize the power of learning together through directed discussions. Emma, in particular, mentioned how much she enjoyed sharing with the other liaisons at the semi-annual liaison meetings and how much that helped her grow as a teacher leader. But those only occur twice a year during school hours. While a number of the liaisons have presented action research topics at these meetings, these were more formal than open discussions.

Our recommendation is to find ways that allow for these discussions, these connections, without excessive time demands on already busy schedules. Carving out time to share ideas and experiences about teaching and learning can be enriching to all. These discussions were mostly conducted via the online conferencing tool, Zoom, which enabled a number of people to talk at once and to see one another while doing so. The conversations typically lasted under an hour in length, with some people coming and going during that time. It seems reasonable for these types of opportunities to be scheduled more regularly and opened up to a wider group without strings attached. Building a professional learning community run by teachers for teachers could also benefit the PDS. More informed and connected teachers and faculty that have learned to trust one

another through interactions such as these will help develop PSTs who enhance student learning for the long run.

Limitations

While the knowledge gained from these building liaisons illuminates the role played as teacher leaders, it is very specific to our PDS and our particular approach to PDS. The actions of these teacher leaders are not necessarily generalizable to those of others in liaison roles with PDS partnerships. In addition, these teachers work within the confines of their particular districts with very specific curricula within their schools and very specific curricular demands from the ESU methods courses. The relationships they have with their building administration, fellow mentor teachers, PDS partners and even the pre-service students add a layer of ever-changing complexity that further entangles any notions of generalizability. Furthermore, we need to remember that these are stories, reflections of actions taken over time, and therefore colored by overlapping and interwoven experience.

Conclusion

Knowing one's students is a foundational concept for teaching and for learning to teach. Getting this concept to click into place like a gear involves actively modeling for PSTs and by extension, for mentors. University PDS faculty also need to model this skill in their own classrooms and in their relationships with their PDS partners. While learning to create strong learning objectives and lesson plans is essential, knowing one's students and how and why they learn comes first. Knowing and connecting with students makes learning memorable. Being memorable to students – from K-5 to PSTs – means you are having an impact on them and their learning. This action research study helps to confirm the need for being memorable to students through building relationships and active role modeling. It also reinforces the benefits of sharing with other teachers in order to extend professional learning within a safe and trusting environment. As Emma summed it up:

I don't think the program would run as well if there wasn't a liaison in the building...I think there is a comfort zone in having a teacher leader they can come to, whether they are PSTs or mentors...And I value the role...it really makes me reflect on my own practices [so that I can] be certain that I'm practicing what I preach.

As a result of this action research study, ESU's PDS building liaisons' contributions and impact as teacher leaders became explicit, and now their important work is documented.

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Alison L. Rutter is an associate professor at East Stroudsburg University in East Stroudsburg, PA. *Amy Lloyd* is a second grade teacher at Resica Elementary School in East Stroudsburg, PA. *Susan Klotz* is a second grade teacher and K-6 science and social studies teacher leader at Kenneth N. Butz Elementary School in Nazareth, PA. *Kristie Intravaia* is a third grade teacher at B. F. Morey Elementary School in Stroudsburg, PA. *Tiffany Maronpot* is a fourth grade teacher at Chipperfield Elementary School in Stroudsburg, PA. *Stacey Leon* is a fifth grade teacher at Governor Wolf Elementary School in Bethlehem, PA.