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Mentor Letter

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Letter to Mentor

Dear Mentee,

Congratulations on your new job as a technology facilitator at the Primary School. This job will require you to know a wide variety of skills and knowledge about your clientele, which include both children and faculty. It also requires that you have a background in teaching, as well as knowledge of technology. The children’s ages range from late four through nine years old. The faculty ranges from middle twenties through early sixties. With this variety of ages, you may need to have several approaches to instruction. The ethnicity is diverse including white, African American, Asian (eastern and middle-eastern), and Hispanic, and they also include a variety of religious affiliations. This is true of the faculty and students. The students are relatively equal in gender; however the faculty is heavily female with only 4 males out of approximately 80 staff members.

The students at this school are primarily in the higher socioeconomic echelon. The large majority come from families with higher education degrees. The bulk of the faculty also has college degrees with approximately one-third holding a master’s degree or above. Many of the students come to us with enormous prior knowledge and learning experiences. The majority of students have completed some type of preschool program, and all have been through a series of assessments to be admitted to the school. Woodward likes to accept students with intelligence quotients in the high average and above range. Many of the students have had extensive traveling in their short lifetime. Both the faculty and the students are highly motivated to learn. You will find that with technology, students are excited about learning. Most of the teachers are willing to learn the technology skills, but need tremendous encouragement.

Behavior of the students is easily controlled by the use of behavior management systems. In the lab, the students sit on the floor in front of the SmartBoard to receive instruction and directions or are directed to a computer when entering the room. The only issues of incorrect behavior are usually when a child does not follow directions. To avoid this problem with the younger students, I use the “finger” method. I say a direction and hold up a finger. Next, I give another direction, with another finger. I try to stay at 3 or less directives. After I have given all directions, the students repeat them with me, using their fingers. If they forget, I will say, “Hold up your fingers. What were the directions?” Usually, the students can remember. It is a school policy that either the paraprofessional or the classroom teacher must attend the lab with their students. They use their classroom behavior systems to encourage good behavior in the lab, too. Since there are 22 classrooms, there are many different behavior modification systems to learn.

The cognitive abilities in our school vary due to the developmental and age range of our students. Some of the kindergarteners will come to us reading and others are only at the beginning of phonemic awareness. Some have letter and number recognition and others do not. This is an important factor to keep in mind when planning and implementing lab instruction and activities. At the beginning of the school year, most do not know capital letters and keyboarding is difficult. The use of storyboards or concrete plans is helpful, and I encourage them for all age groups at our school. An example of a kindergarten activity would be to allow students to draw a picture using Pixie2. The students would dictate a sentence to the teacher. The student would use the dictation to type the text onto their Pixie drawing. By the end of the year, they easily transpose the capital and lowercase letters. Some activities will include the use of audio recording to work on oral expression.

Most of our first and second grade students are reinforcing their phonics, reading comprehension, sentence construction, grammar, and concrete math skills. During these two years, research is introduced by using prepared and chosen web sites. Scaffolding is used to increase their research skills. In the lab we use guided research questions or a graphic organizer and encourage one or two word answers. This helps to prevent copying.

In third grade we move the technology into the realm of publishing and production. The students create factual and creative writing for a global audience. All of the third grade classes have their own blog and each contributes to grade level projects. The use of wikis and other web 2.0 tools are also used. The cognitive focus is applying the skills of writing, grammar, editing, and research to create and publish. Many of the publications are published in an oral form, which aids in the fluency and language development. It is with the third grade student that you will see a change in cognitive thinking. They are still in need of concrete activities, but their problem solving skills are beginning to form. They are still very literal, but abstract concepts can be explained with some understanding.

We also use other programs to enhance and reinforce curriculum. Kindergarten and first grade classes have a subscription to Click-n-Read Phonics, which is a self paced phonics program. Accelerated Reader and Math Facts in a Flash (Renaissance Learning) are used to promote reading comprehension and a self paced math skill enhancement. Please keep in mind that all web programs in our school must be COPPA compliant. Students are not allowed to login to websites without the approval of this federal law.

The art department and science department use technology and require assistance from time to time. The science teachers like to have technical support when they use the COW (computers on wheels) for projects. The third grade classes attend science three times per week and create several technology enriched projects during the course of the year. In first and third grade art, students use the cameras and photo editing software to create edited photographs mimicking Georgia O’Keefe and Andy Warhol.

At times you will need to make accommodations for students with special needs. If a student has a psychological, it can be obtained from the counselor. You will be notified by the teacher of accommodations that were determined to be necessary. These may range from chunking information, one-on-one computer use, one step directions, or changing of assignments. Some of our students attend private tutorial sessions or occupational therapy. The tutors use the multi-sensory program Orton Gillingham for private instruction. Our students are physically average, but the occupational therapy helps those that struggle with either fine or gross motor skills. The Transition program consists of two classes of third graders. These students have been identified with a learning disability and are in smaller classes with specialized instruction. One of our first grade students wears a hearing aid in both ears, so you need to place him in close proximity to oral instructions. Be aware of students who wear glasses; they should have them on in the lab.

The faculty is at varying ranges of technology abilities and has different learning styles. Your staff development will need to consist of large group, small group, and individual instruction. After teaching a class, always have the presentations available for teachers, as well as a written synopsis of the content. I place these on the network. For our visual teachers, I provide video instruction with the use of Jing. Many teachers refer back to these aids, so that you will not need to re-teach.

In addition to the instruction portion of your duties, there are administrative and technology responsibilities. You will be responsible for leading the technology committee which includes representatives from each department or grade level. Ordering supplies, replacing damaged or missing technology, and renewing and purchasing software and web site subscriptions will need to be done. You will also need to be proficient at computer maintenance, installation, and troubleshooting.

You are going to thoroughly enjoy your new position as a technology facilitator. There will be times that you will be frustrated, but remember to put the children first and enjoy teaching them. Simplify and scaffold their instruction, but never underestimate what they can accomplish. It is important to accept that you will never leave work with everything on your desk completed, so prioritize each day. Build bridges with the teachers and remember they are also your students, but sometimes they will defer technology responsibilities to you; don’t let them take advantage. Plan and teach with your teachers. It should be a collaborative and cooperative effort. Reflect each day on the efforts that were successful and be happy with those successes.

Sincerely,

Kim Mulkey

Recommended References:

Warlick, D.F. (2007). Classroom blogging: A teacher’s guide to blogs, wikis, and other tools that are shaping a new information landscape. Raleigh: The Landmark Project

Ohler, J. ( 2008*). Digital storytelling in the classroom: new media pathways to literacy, learning, and creativity*. Thousand Oakes, CA: Corwin Press

Examples of projects completed at the Primary School: <http://blog.woodward.edu/waps/>

<http://www.measuredprogress.org/assessments/classroom/childrensprogress/Developmental.pdf>

<http://www.iste.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=NETS>