

THAT: A Program to Support Early-Career Educators

By Heidi Chadwick

Chi state organization (California) of The Delta Kappa Gamma Society International developed and implemented Teachers Helping Another Teacher (THAT), a program encouraging members to support early-career educators in order to help stem the tide of teachers leaving the profession. The program is promoted as a model by DKG's new Educational Excellence Committee and can be readily replicated by any individual or group interested in supporting early-career educators. THAT not only supports such educators but also provides an opportunity for personal and professional growth for participants and a venue for positive public relations for an organization.

More than a decade ago, The National Commission on Teaching and the Nation's Future (1996) issued a groundbreaking report that focused on the current conditions in teaching and on the critical need to recruit and retain teachers. In defining "what matters most," the Commission stated,

This report offers what we believe is the single most important strategy for achieving America's educational goals: A blueprint for recruiting, preparing, and supporting excellent teachers in all of America's schools. The plan is aimed at ensuring that all communities have teachers with the knowledge and skills they need to teach so that all children can learn, and all school systems are organized to support teachers in this work. A caring, competent, and qualified teacher for every child is the most important ingredient in education reform. (p. 1)

As a result of this report and other calls to action regarding supporting teachers, including federal and state mandates, many school districts have implemented or strengthened induction and mentoring programs. Yet, in spite of these efforts, research supports the fact that teacher attrition rates have remained high: In 2008, the National Education Association (NEA) estimated that "some 20 percent of all new hires leave the classroom within three years. In urban districts, the numbers are worse—close to 50 percent of newcomers flee the profession during their first five years of teaching" (NEA, 2008, para.3). In 2010, the organization increased its estimate to assert that more than 40% of *all* new teachers—not just those in challenging districts—leave the profession within the first 5 years (NEA, 2010).

Clearly, school districts must do all they can to retain effective new teachers—but the challenge of supporting new educators lies with the entire educational community and extends beyond mentoring. "Teachers new to the endeavor require a great variety of quality supports to develop their confidence, knowledge and skills. There is no single factor — even a great mentor — that can provide new teachers with all the supports they need"

(The Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession [CSTP] & Inverness Research, 2009, p. 1). How, then, can educators supplement the efforts of educational systems to provide the kind of support that new teachers (and new administrators) need? Members of The Delta Kappa Gamma Society International (DKG) in Chi State Organization, California, developed a program

called Teachers Helping Another Teacher (THAT) that works to meet this need, even as it provides members—both active and retired—with ongoing personal and professional growth and heightens the visibility of DKG. California member Linda Guelfo's comments capture the value of the program for ongoing growth and learning:

As a high school teacher for 38 years, now retired, I treasure my THAT time in a kindergarten classroom observing a completely different teaching strategy and interacting with a completely different segment of school population. It is a treasure beyond measure. (personal communication, 2011)

Program Background and Goals

The **THAT** program was initiated in 2004 by the Chi State Leadership Team at their Summer Leadership Session after a full day of brainstorming. The primary goal of THAT is to provide support for educators in five focus areas:

- Individual teachers
- A particular school
- A particular school district
- Community, local government, and community agencies
- Higher education

A secondary goal is to quantify and celebrate the donation of time, materials, and money by members. Inspired by the 2008–2010 DKG *Collaborative Connections* focus, many chapters and state organizations initiated mentoring efforts. Still, many members have been helping other teachers in various other ways for years.

The third goal of THAT is to highlight the contribution of DKG in promoting excellence in education. The program offers a positive way to *get out the word* about the great work being done by key women educators.

Providing Support in Focus Areas

The flexibility of the program is one of its strengths, as chapters or individual members who choose to participate in THAT have a wide range of options available to them. They may work with individual teachers to mentor and give moral support; to volunteer in a classroom; to network with other teachers to exchange ideas; to provide materials, books, and care packages; to honor preservice or inservice teachers; to sponsor or *adopt* a teacher; or to donate money or provide grants-in-aid. Chapters may choose to work with an entire school, preparing treats for teachers, distributing *new teacher* bags of materials, or creating a tutoring squad during or after school. In some cases, chapters adopt a school and work with the administrators to assess and meet particular needs, including working school-wide programs.

Beyond the school level, members may make themselves available to a district to mentor nontenured teachers or to conduct professional development sessions for targeted groups. They may also help with special events, including such things as judging student competitions or acting as independent assessors of student projects. In the community, they can network to help government

officials understand educational issues; can attend board meetings to promote positive agendas; and can solicit the assistance of community agencies in working with new teachers. Members can also network with those in the area colleges and universities and the department of education to mine their resources to young teachers—either through direct programming or through policy suggestions. THAT program has also outlined a process to partner with local institutes of higher learning in order for members to *adopt* student teachers.

Quantify and Celebrate

Those who donate time or resources in the above ways often fail to realize the extent of their contributions. Therefore, THAT asks members to report volunteer hours and donations at the chapter and state organization level. Chi State Leadership Team members designed charts for chapters to use to keep track of their members' hours spent supporting early-career educators and money spent in this support. The completed charts are sent to the state organization educational excellence chair or other state organization-designated person. After all the hours and money spent have been compiled, the results are reported to international. Charts for this purpose are found on the DKG Web site (http://www.dkg.org/site/c.meJMIOOwErH/b.6521289/k.5FAA/Early_Career_Support.htm).

Highlight DKG

THAT provides great public relations as members' efforts can be publicized through the usual routes of the local media. However, the final unique component of THAT is the culminating activity of quantifying state organization contributions and presenting a faux check for the total amount in a given year to a government official. At the 2011 California State Organization Convention, Chi presented a 6-foot by 3-foot check in the amount of \$1,150,514.64 to a government official from Sacramento, signifying the amount of money that Chi state organization members saved the government by giving their support to early-career educators. The amount of the check was the result of calculating the hours accumulated from 2006–2011, multiplied by the minimum wage of \$8.00 an hour.

Resources and Outcomes

Resources for THAT are largely the time and talent of DKG members, both active and retired. For active educators, participation provides a way to share the trials and tribulations of daily teaching with early-career educators who may not yet have the skills and strategies needed to navigate those first difficult years. For retired members, participation provides an excellent way to continue a lifelong connection with education and educators and to share hard-earned wisdom and experience with others. Via the Society's support, our members are able to

- help new teachers maintain enthusiasm and joy for teaching;
- inspire networking among new teachers in different districts and also with long-term teachers in their own districts;
- offer mentoring;
- lessen the feeling of isolation;

- provide tactics for overcoming frustration;
- give a token of esteem and appreciation for the work done by teachers;
- provide recognition for new teachers and teachers-to-be;
- introduce new educators to Delta Kappa Gamma Society International.

Moving Forward

After meeting in the fall of 2010, the International Educational Excellence Committee established goals of promoting international projects, encouraging programs and activities that further educational excellence worldwide—and supporting early-career educators. The members of the 2010–2012 committee believed that such support can be a unifying theme across the varied membership of DKG.

Having heard about THAT program and its success in California, the committee decided to promote the program as a model for the Society to use. As part of the Educational Excellence Committee, a Support for Early-Career Educators Subcommittee was established to promote THAT, as well as to provide ideas for programs, create networking with members, establish a blog, highlight successful chapter practices, and assure that our Society is doing a phenomenal job with much-needed support for new educators. A multitude of resources on the DKG Web site (www.dkg.org) and DKG Network (www.dkgnetwork.org) will allow each member to add more *tools* to her bag of strategies to help move forward successfully with support for early-career educators.

The current goal of the Educational Excellence Committee is to present a gigantic faux check to a government official in the summer of 2012, representing the accumulated hours and money spent by members throughout the entire Society supporting early-career educators. The amount of the check will be calculated by multiplying the total number of hours of support by the U.S. minimum wage at the time and then adding that to the total amount of money spent.

THAT program can be easily duplicated in any organization. This *treasure beyond measure* provides an avenue for ongoing personal and professional growth for DKG members and is a great way to highlight the enormous contributions made by key women educators to the growth of early-career professionals.

References

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