

Program helps new teachers

By Lori O'Brien
Correspondent

HOLYOKE – As new teachers hit the ground running in most cases, a unique nonprofit is available to provide guidance and support in what can be an especially challenging first year.

The Teachers' Loft, based in Studio 421 of the Open Square Historic Mill in the downtown area, is run by Executive Director Paige M. Bray. Bray is a co-founder of The Teachers' Loft with Jennifer Cook. The nonprofit organization supports new teachers through inquiry and collaborative groups, and professional growth opportunities beyond the first year.

"Our NEW (Next Educational Wave) Teachers' Collaborative supports new teachers so that they not only survive their first year of teaching but learn to thrive as educators who support lifelong learning in their students and themselves," said Bray during an interview with *Reminder Publications*.

Bray explained that the program addresses the 'usual suspects' that occur for most teachers in the first year, while keeping in front the importance of - and professional satisfaction found - in student success.

"By attending to the needs of new teachers with a comprehensive induction model that research shows keeps teachers from leaving the profession, The Teachers' Loft is part of addressing the attrition problem now," said Bray.

Over the long-term, Bray noted that The Teachers' Loft is part of establishing teacher leadership and learning communities that provides key professional development across the teaching career.

Bray serves as a facilitator and teacher educator for the NEW

Teachers' Collaborative, assisted by Tawnya K. Tiskus, an English teacher from Westfield High School. In addition, a Researcher-in-Residence is acting as an outside evaluator to help the women build on and improve their future programming.

"New teachers entering today are not just new bodies to fill vacant slots or place holders to be used up and replaced every year or two," said Bray. "We know that the revolving door of new teachers not only lacks professional care of the newest teachers but it is costly for schools to continually bring in new people. Most importantly, the educational effects on students who may have new teachers for their entire educational career in underresourced schools where new teachers are typically hired can create a cycle of unproductive learning environments for all."

Bray explained that students and the educational profession need the energy, passion and talents of new teachers but they also need reasonable support, the same kind given in almost every other profession, in order to succeed and stay in the classroom.

"These new teachers are the next educational wave who will not only effectively teach our children but grow into leadership roles and contribute to schools and educational communities that will shape the future of education," added Bray.

Tiskus has been teaching since the fall of 2003 and still remembers the difficulties she experienced in her first year.

"Teaching does get somewhat easier but it's a hard profession and even in the best of circumstances it's often grueling," said Tiskus "Many of the first-year teachers we see at The Teachers' Loft are not in easy assignments and they need a place where they can vent but beyond

that, they need to know how to overcome the obstacles so they can feel positive about their decision to move into the teaching profession."

Tiskus relishes her role because being an educator is immensely fulfilling and every day brings new challenges and lessons.

"While I am teaching my students, I also learn from them," she said. "I've realized that this is the right place for me to be right now, and I'm also happy to share my ideas with other new teachers. They need so much support and encouragement in their situations."

Prior to teaching English, Tiskus added she was employed "in the business world."

There are six participants in the current Teachers' Collaborative program, representing schools throughout Western Massachusetts. Educators gather on the second and fourth Tuesday of each month from 4 to 6 p.m. In addition to surviving all the newness of being a teacher - the students, school culture and the district - teachers want to know how to be the best teachers they can be.

"Without fail, teachers want to spend time with children and adolescence and want to help them learn," said Bray. "While this sounds simple, it is a hard thing to keep in front of you with all the technical tasks of teaching. They also want to know about grading, discipline issues, the constant quest for curriculum resources and, of course, how to make friends in the teachers' room."

For more information on future programming for educators at The Teachers' Loft, visit www.teachersloft.org or contact Bray at (413) 221-0111.