



Leading through Learning
An Interview with Margie Billings, Social Studies Teacher, Rosemont Middle School
Glendale Unified School District, UCLA History-Geography Project

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By Emma Hipolito, Co-Director, UCLA History-Geography Project

The UCLA History-Geography Project has partnered with the Glendale and Burbank school districts on a Teaching American History (TAH) grant funded by the U.S. Department of Education. We would like to spotlight Margie Billings of Rosemont Middle School in Glendale for this issue of the Center XChange. Emma Hipolito, Co-Director of the History Project, interviewed her while they were on a field study in Boston and surrounding areas to explore the industrial revolution and the reform movements in U.S. history.

There are a couple of reasons why I was interested in interviewing Margie. She joined the TAH cohort in Glendale during the first year that we began grant activities, which means that she has been with us for two years. In addition, her reflective nature made her a stand-out among this group of dedicated professionals. She is often one of the last to leave our afternoon workshops because she is talking to a colleague or to one of the grant facilitators about an idea. She is not only listening but is quickly jotting down notes. I later learned that she recently had returned to the classroom after spending ten years working in the district office, which further piqued my interest.

Her teaching career began in 1986 in Fresno and then led her to Rosemont Middle School in La Crescenta. In 2000, Margie accepted a position as a teacher specialist focused on conflict resolution after attending the funeral of two of her students. She was convinced that she had to do something to prevent future violence but originally thought that it would involve “organizing some town meetings.” As a teacher specialist, she researched and adapted a violence prevention curriculum and worked with seventh grade social studies teachers to co-teach the lessons to every seventh grader in the district—approximately 3,000 students were served in a year. During this time she also wrote grants and started a Drug and Alcohol Prevention Program as well as an Anti-Tobacco Program. She also managed to obtain another master’s degree and two credentials—one in administration and the other in counseling. She credits her parental experience and the counseling credential with changing her perspective on working with students. She always believed that every child could be successful; however, “being older and having raised my own kids, I want them (her students) to know that I like them as people.”

District cuts and no desire to become an administrator lead Margie to request a reassignment to the school she had left. The easiest aspect of returning to the classroom was the students, however, a great deal had changed after her ten-year absence. She cited standards and technology but also mentioned that her ideas about what constituted good teaching had changed. She felt that her old lessons were no longer viable and was seeking new ways to engage students. This interest is what led her to the TAH grant. She sees the difference it makes to the students when she brings back the resources that she has gained from TAH activities. Moreover, the collaborative nature of the cohort makes her feel valued as a teacher, and she truly appreciates the “university level conversation.”

After a brief discussion about the impact of technology on the way that students learn, I asked Margie what teacher leadership meant to her. “There are a lot of different ways to lead. There are people who stand at the front of the room and direct; and some people lead by following.” When I asked her to explain what she meant by leading by following, she quoted from an audiobook that she listened to some time back, *The Tao of Leadership*. Leadership is “people not realizing you are leading until you are not there.” This is the approach that she is trying to take at her school, but understands the importance of leading from the front of the room. In fact, Margie and two other members of the Glendale-Burbank TAH cohort shared lessons that they developed at one of our afternoon workshops with teachers at the California Council for History Education Conference in November 2011.

We definitely appreciate Margie’s leadership in the TAH cohort.