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Guest Editorial

NABT Convention Is a Treat

I ordered my plane tickets for Fort Worth this morning. I've been waiting for the rates to go down like they always do at the end of the summer. So, I'm all set: I have my room, my roommates, my registration, and a workshop on image analysis all lined up. Now, all I have to do is get through the first two months of school, which are always the busiest and most difficult, since students have very limited experience in the language and methods of biology when they enter high school.

Attending the annual NABT Convention is my treat to myself each year. It's a respite from the responsibilities of teaching and family, almost like being back in college. I get to be the student but I don't have to take tests or do homework. The biggest decisions to make are which sessions to attend and where to have dinner. I have no meals to cook, no laundry to wash, no kids to shuttle somewhere. Best of all, I get to spend three or four days with people who have the exact same interests as I: biology and how to teach it. I return to my students revved up and exhilarated by what I've learned, seen, and done. I share with them activities and information that have not made it into the textbooks, and sometimes, have not yet been published. Things like the latest on the Human Genome Project (straight from Francis Collins), telomeres and aging, homeobox genes and development, newly emerging diseases and antibiotic resistance, PCR and DNA fingerprinting (long before the O.J. Simpson trial), retroviral research, environmental updates, bioengineered food, and on and on. Imagine how parents and students feel when they see something "new" on television or in the newspaper that the students already know about. Better yet, imagine how good you feel when a parent or student relates that experience to you, an event that happens to me several times each year.

These selfish reasons for attending NABT are my secret. For any professional educator, staying current in one's curriculum and networking with other teachers are an important part of the job. Good administrators know this and encourage it. No one who attends an intense learning and sharing experience like the NABT Convention can be apathetic about his or her job or students. It's proof to the community that you, as the teacher of their children, are willing to grow in your job and give their kids your best efforts.

I've had teachers tell me that they can't get release days from their school to attend the NABT Convention. The best principals will bend over backwards to make it possible for their teachers to avail themselves of top-notch professional opportunities. If "school policy" hinders your efforts, write or call a school board member and ask to have the issue discussed. Frequently, there is miscommunication between administrators or simply lack of knowledge by school board members as to the importance of off-site professional development for science teachers. Very few local or state systems can provide the high-level presentations, workshops, and lab experiences needed by today's biology teachers. This is complicated stuff. Give them a demonstration of gel electrophoresis or talk about the potential impact on every family, both good and bad, of research resulting from the HGP.

A+ *Coalition for Better Education*, a non-profit, non-political educational reform organization in Alabama, recently commissioned a study by an independent firm to find the most effective and economical way to improve the education of our youth. The finding? Intense, ongoing professional development for teachers has the biggest impact on academic instruction, bigger even than lowering student/teacher ratios, bigger than providing the most up-to-date technology, or mandating teacher testing for certification. For life science and biology teachers, the annual NABT Convention provides the highest caliber educational experience and the biggest bang for the buck. You owe it to your students, your profession, and yourself.

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