



# Teacher Perceptions of Cluster Information Specialists



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# **Teacher perceptions of Cluster Information Specialists (CIS)**

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eMINTS teachers identified interpersonal skills, willingness to find answers, investment in teachers' success, experience in the classroom, and going above and beyond their job description as the ideal characteristics for Cluster Information Specialists.

## **Context**

The information in this report is taken from a series of nine focus group interviews with participating eMINTS teachers conducted in the summer of 2000. One group was conducted in each cluster. The focus groups were moderated by eMINTS Evaluation team members. The purpose of the groups was to understand teachers' impressions of program services after their first year as eMINTS teachers. Teachers were asked to discuss their experiences with the Cluster Information Specialist (CIS), their experiences with the eTHEMES service, and their experience with eMINTS and GE Capital technical support. This report summarizes CIS practices that are perceived as effective for the teachers served in the eMINTS project. Other focus group reports from the evaluation team address these topics.

## **Value of CIS for teachers**

A major role of the Cluster Information Specialist (CIS) is to assist eMINTS teachers' in the development of their technical, curriculum, and instructional competencies. During the focus groups many teachers attributed their progress in using the eMINTS technology as effective teaching tools to the work of the CIS staff.

The majority of the teachers said that the CIS maximized their learning experiences by paying attention to their individual professional development needs. New eMINTS teachers had a range of experience in both computer use and teaching. The CIS are valued for being able to understand teachers' experience and skills. Teachers described how the CIS customized their lessons to teachers' abilities. That approach helped motivate them to try eMINTS software applications and teaching methods.

The focus group sessions addressed what qualities the eMINTS teachers thought a successful CIS must have. The remainder of this memo describes the necessary characteristics of an "ideal CIS."

## **Characteristics of ideal CIS**

eMINTS teachers saw the ideal CIS as someone who possessed positive interpersonal skills, was willing to work to find answers, who had an investment in a teacher's success, had experience in elementary classrooms, and was willing to go "above and beyond" their job descriptions to help teachers solve their technical problems. The description below summarizes comments made

about each of the CIS, no individual possessed all of these characteristics, although all CIS were valued for the assistance they gave teachers.

### **Possesses solid interpersonal skills**

The importance of social relationships to cognitive development should not be underestimated. It was found that first, the CIS needed to create a positive working relationship with the teachers. In all cases, teachers' cited the emotional support provided by the CIS as central to their success and continued motivation.

The character of this relationship is an important component in the learning process. Many teachers initially lacked confidence that they possessed sufficient skill to use their computers as educational tools. The actions of the CIS helped to create an environment where they could develop their skills and confidence. The teachers felt safe to take risks and use the CIS as their guide. The groups appreciated the CIS' nonjudgmental, sensitive responses to questions. They prized being complimented on their successful results. The terms the teachers used to describe the ideal CIS were "enthusiastic", "flexible", "approachable", "responsive", "reassuring", "accommodating", and "patient." One teacher talked about her CIS knowing her family and asking about them. This rapport was important to her, ". . .when you have a personal rapport with someone it gives you the confidence to come in and expose what your weakness is" In the words of another teacher, "She's so approachable. I don't ever feel dumb about asking." A third teacher spoke of this positive support giving her the freedom "to let our lessons flow in the direction that the children wanted them to flow."

### **Sharpens their knowledge and skills to improve knowledge and skills of teachers**

Having all the answers was not seen as an essential characteristic of a CIS. What was essential was the willingness and ability to find the answers. There were many examples like this one: "Even when [the CIS] didn't know the answer [the CIS] was prompt in helping us find that answer and getting that back to the kids." Often the teachers said the answer to their question arrived the next morning, "it's right there in front of me, and it's typed, how to do it, it's there, and it's quick." The successful CIS continued to grow mentally along with the teachers they were guiding. Instances were cited where CIS took additional training so that they could be of assistance. Another teacher commented that her CIS had received additional training so that she could be of greater assistance.

### **Invests themselves in teachers' success**

The successful CIS was viewed actively supporting teacher's learning and success. They responded quickly to communications, and made sure that a point was understood before moving on to something else. They helped in many ways to develop the teachers' unique, educational needs. In some cases they challenged the teachers beyond their own initial expectations about themselves. One teacher said that her CIS made her feel like she really wanted her to achieve, even though she felt, as did some of her cohorts, that she would never learn all that was required, "I'm not even sure if I'm going to learn a portion of it" But her CIS gave her the confidence that she would learn it and to just keep practicing.

## **Involves the teachers as active participants and planners in their own learning**

The involvement of the learner is significant as a teaching strategy for adults. When involvement is low, educational effectiveness is reduced. Knowledge is constructed as a result of the dynamic interactions between the teachers and their environment. Activities that are based on teacher's interests provide intrinsic motivation for learning. The CIS role is one of supporting, guiding, and facilitating learning, as opposed to transmitting knowledge: "One thing that I've always appreciated was that when we had our cluster meetings, he was a facilitator, not a leader." The CIS was noted as someone who focused the sessions on things that were wanted by the teachers. They knew how the computer programs could be applied in the elementary curriculum.

## **Has experience in the classroom**

Every cluster confirmed that experience in the classroom was necessary for a CIS to be effective. An insider's knowledge of the challenges, patterns, and obligations of the classroom teacher were described as a strong asset. With classroom experience, the CIS could relate well, "she knew where we were coming from." A tongue-in-cheek retort from a teacher "I think if someone from GE Capitol were our CIS . . . we'd have quit a long time ago, I mean, they aren't teachers. That's how important it is to have a teacher." Many echoed this point: that it is not just important to know how to use technology, but how to tie it to the elementary curriculum.

[With] experience in the classroom –[the CIS will] come in and dig right in and help out with the kids.

We need someone with not just high school experience, but elementary experience.

I think if you have someone come in that has no idea what a teacher does, with the responsibilities they have, that there's ten thousand other things going on when you're doing this, then they may not be very understanding.

I think being an educator, or at least having educational experience is almost a foundation for it. Because if you bring a person in that's out of the business world, they may have these fantastic ideas, but . . . what can work for us.

## **Goes above and beyond their job description**

Teachers used the exact words "above and beyond" when describing specific instances with their CIS. Several examples of this come from the group sessions:

- An offer to go to the teacher's home over the summer to help the teacher catch her up after a medical leave.
- CIS resurrecting a "dead" computer and returning it to a classroom.
- CIS scheduling extra training days when warranted, e.g., helping teachers design web pages.
- Scheduling extra time in the classroom, leading classroom activities when a teacher was absent, helping after school computer clubs, etc.

## **Possible areas for improvement**

In the course of the focus group discussion, teachers had the following suggestions.

### **Improving the method of evaluating CIS performance**

Although the majority of teacher's reactions to the CIS and their activities were positive, there was at least one episode where evaluation comments were not kept confidential. One of the teachers said that the cluster was confronted following a written comment that was made on an evaluation form. The CIS asked who wrote the comment. When the teacher said that it was her comment, the CIS responded that she (the CIS) would get in trouble. After that incident, the rest of the cluster was very careful of their written comments, as the CIS would sit in the front of the room and read them.

### **Scheduling of cluster training sessions**

The teachers' time is valuable and many have to drive over an hour to get to the training site. One cluster relayed that sometimes their training sessions were delayed by an hour. The CIS need to schedule their sessions to account for travel time, and make sure that this schedule is adhered to.

## **Summary of teacher opinions of CIS**

The teachers believe that the Cluster Information Specialists offer important and competent guidance. They provide meaningful assistance in the proficiencies the teachers' desire. The overwhelming sentiment among the teachers was that the CIS play a crucial role in teachers' development. The character of the relationship between the teachers and the CIS was key to teachers' learning to use the technology and applying the technology to their teaching. In most of the clusters the teachers felt that the CIS made a personal commitment to the teachers' learning and professional development.

CIS were active role models and set realistic, specific and attainable goals. The result was that the teachers gained confidence in their abilities and felt they had acquired the skills necessary to use the eMINTS technology in their teaching. Most teachers felt that without the CIS, this transformation would not have occurred.

## **Possible implications**

Because the perceived interpersonal credibility of the CIS is so central to the teachers it is important for the project to further this development. In part that means flexibility and CIS support. It may also mean adroit oversight. On the one hand it will be important to carefully understand whether a CIS and Cluster teachers are "connecting." On the other hand, the involvement of Area Specialists must not infringe upon the perceived trustworthiness of the CIS. This will take some deft team building and the development and support of appropriate communication channels.