Six Steps to an Effective Mentoring Program

*By Joshua T.D. Alexander and M. Wayne Alexander* <http://www.aasa.org/content.aspx?id=10502>

Most of us can remember our first teaching assignment. We were excited to have landed a teaching position and were determined to do well. But after a few months, the demands of the new job began to overwhelm us, and for good reason.

* We had too much to learn in too short a time.
* We had to draw upon an imperfectly developed set of classroom management techniques.
* We had yet to develop a discipline style: how much, when, what type?
* There was never enough time in the day to complete everything: teaching, lesson plan preparation, curriculum writing, assessment, grading, parent contact, and more.
* As the only adult in a self-contained classroom, isolated from fellow educators, we sometimes felt lonely and abandoned.
* We worried about retention and tenure. Would we pass muster or fail and wash out?

For all these reasons and more, by the end of the academic year, new teachers often feel frustrated, stressed, and disenchanted with the profession. And to top it off, the salary seems low compared to other professions.

Partly because of their first-year experiences, new teachers often leave one school for another and some even abandon teaching altogether. Indeed, nearly 20% of first-year non-tenured teachers flee the profession after their first year of service (Chase, 1998). And although first-year teachers are more likely to leave the profession than more experienced counterparts, 15% of beginning teachers will leave after their second year and another 10% after their third (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1995), with more than 30% leaving within the first five years (Halford, 1998; Easley, 2000; Darling-Hammond, 2003; Ingersoll and Smith, 2003).

In addition to putting an emotional strain on the new teacher, the resulting turnover detrimentally affects the school district. Administrators spend time and money to identify, evaluate, hire, train and acclimate new teachers to district protocol and policy. When new hires quit, the investment in them is lost. Further, discontinuity of staff through attrition can harm students’ development and success. Because the stakes are high, the problems new teachers encounter during their first years of teaching demand attention.

The task of finding ways to reduce the stress felt by new teachers and the accompanying turnover rests with the superintendent and the building principal. Both want to provide new recruits with all the help they need to reduce the anxiety and tension and ensure they can experience success during the first years in the classroom. To this end, many districts have set up mentoring programs for novice teachers.

**The Mentor and Mentoring**

In Homer’s *Odyssey*, Odysseus assigns Mentor the responsibility of watching over, protecting and advising his son and Mentor’s protégé, Telemachus. Like the eighth century B.C.E. Mentor, the teacher-mentor’s task is to watch over and advise the new-teacher protégé.

New-teacher mentors generally are chosen from the pool of experienced volunteer educators. These are senior faculty members who have collaborative and cooperative skills and can commit time to the process (see Shaughnessy and Neely, 1991; Freedman, 1993; Freedman and Jaffe, 1993; and Janas, 1996).

Mentoring is a process that can range from a set of structured assistance and support activities to an informal buddy system. Regardless of form, it is designed to answer a new teacher’s questions, provide emotional support, and fill in the gaps left by university teacher training programs. Done well, it consists of a comprehensive, coherent, and sustained professional development program to train, support and ultimately retain new teachers. It can also seamlessly transition the novice teacher onto a lifelong learning track (adapted from Wong, 2004).

Although principals technically are not mentors, they play a key role in the mentoring process. They are responsible for designing and administering the mentoring process. As well, novice teachers look to their principals for feedback, guidance and support.

The mentoring process doesn’t just benefit new teachers. While it provides beginning teachers access to veteran teacher’s expertise and wisdom, mentoring also gives the experienced teachers a way to validate their expertise and to pass the torch of their craft wisdom to a new generation of teachers (Ganser, 1999). In sum, it benefits mentors as well as their charges.

**Determining Success**

School districts generally understand the value of the mentoring process and many have set up formal mentoring programs. However, questions remain as to the structure and content necessary for a successful mentoring program.

How do new teachers perceive the mentoring programs they experience? More importantly, what do they want in a mentoring program? How do principals view the mentoring process? What do they perceive as necessary for a successful mentoring program?

To help answer these questions, I investigated non-tenured middle-school teachers’ and their principals’ perceptions of the mentoring programs in their schools (Alexander, 2007). I conducted interviews with 10 non-tenured, novice teachers, each with fewer than three cumulative years of teaching, from five middle schools in suburban school districts of a large, midwestern city. I also interviewed the five principals of these schools.

While 10 teachers and five principals comprise a small sample size for quantitative research, it can be adequate for a qualitative study. Data analysis consisted of identifying and reporting themes and patterns.

The study’s findings—which receive support from the literature (see Fullan, 2001; Moir, 2003; Wong, 2004; Ingersoll and Smith, 2004; and Boss, 2006)-- are condensed here into six recommendations for building an effective mentoring program.

**Six Steps to Success**

1. Novice teachers and principals agree that if one doesn’t already exist, a district-wide mentoring program should be set in place before the school year begins. At the initial meeting, teacher-mentors should meet with beginning teachers to set up goals and objectives for the year. To succeed, the process needs strong administrative support. Without it, neither mentor nor mentored take the process seriously.

2. Novice teachers reported that they need emotional support during trying times. They and the principals believe that mentors must conceptualize mentoring in terms of formal and informal support for the new teacher. Principals can provide formal, official support when warranted. The experienced peer should feel comfortable offering advice, guidance and emotional support when needed.

3. Both sets of respondents believe principals should offer systematic, district-wide, professional development training throughout the first three years for new mentors and beginning teachers. District-wide training establishes common mentoring practices so novice teachers assigned new schools their second or third year have familiar mentoring experiences.

Specifically, training is necessary in four areas: (1) observation techniques, (2) methods to identify classroom issues, (3) establishing expectations for the school year and (4) communicating these expectations (Fullan, 2001; Moir, 2003; Ingersoll and Smith, 2004; Wong, 2004; Boss, 2006; Alexander, 2007). With continuous training, mentors and novice teachers will develop an understanding of that which is expected of each of them and how to effectively work together.

4. New teachers want to observe model classrooms and receive feedback on their own practices. They believe principals should encourage new teachers to observe their successful colleagues’ classrooms. The effective model provides both a structure for observing and learning good teaching techniques and opportunities to observe these techniques in practice. The principals should also set up schedules for their own observations and for the mentors’ observations of mentored teachers’ classrooms.

5. Novice teachers want release time to interact with their principals and with mentors. They want time during and after the school day to receive feedback, discuss concerns and ask for advice. Principals agree they should schedule time during the school day for mentors and new teachers to meet, and that these times should be spaced out over the course of a school year.

Principals must also understand that novice teachers need extra time to prepare the curriculum, to develop grading protocols/configuration, to become more computer literate, to obtain answers to discipline questions, and to acclimate themselves to the organization.

6. Principals and new teachers believe regular study groups or meetings for novice teachers are useful. These groups can help foster a learning community--a support group of peers that can encourage open discussion about the trials and tribulations new teachers experience.

**Conclusion**

Principals and novice teachers believe that mentoring is a valuable activity for both mentor and mentored and should be supported by the administration. The new teacher wants emotional support during the year and experienced teachers can provide it. Principals and beginning teachers want professional development for the novice and mentors alike. Being able to observe experienced teachers in action is helpful to the neophyte, but more time is needed for this activity as well as to attend study groups and meetings.

Mentoring won’t prevent new faculty members from leaving the profession because of low salaries, district budget cuts due to declining/low enrollment, a lack of job security or the rigors of teaching adolescents. But by providing novice teachers with support, reducing their stress and allowing them some success, superintendents may help ensure that they remain with the district and become mentors themselves one day.

**References**

Alexander, J. T. D. (2007). *Investigationof middle school principal’s and novice teacher’s attitudes and beliefs about mentoring programs*. Doctoral dissertation, University of St. Mary’s, Minneapolis, MN.

Boss, S. (2006). Effective practices in new teacher induction. *Principal’s Research Review*, 1(1), 1-5.

Chase, B. (1998). Trial by fire. *National Education Association*. Retrieved from http//nea.org/publiced/chased/be981115.html

Darling-Hammond, L. (2003). *Keeping good teachers: Why it matters, what leaders can do*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University.

Easley, J. (2000). *Teacher attrition and staff development for retention*. Conference paper; ERIC search.

Freedman, M. (1993). Fervor with infrastructure: Making the most of the mentoring movement. *Equity and Choice*, 9(2), 21-26.

Freedman, M. & Jaffe, N. (1993). Elder mentors: Giving schools a hand. *NASSP Bulletin*, 549(76), 23-28.

Fullan, M. (2001). *The new meaning of educational change (3rd ed.).* New York: Teachers College Press.

Ganser, T. (1999, October) Under their wing: Promises and pitfalls of mentoring. *The High School Magazine*, 7(2), 8-13.

Halford, J. M., (1998). Easing the way for new teachers. *Educational Leadership*, 55 (5), 33-36.

Ingersoll, R. M., & Smith, T. M. (2003). The wrong solution to the teacher shortage. *Educational Leadership*, 60(8), 30-33.

Ingersoll, R. M., & Smith, T. M. (2004). Do teacher induction and mentoring matter? *NASSP Bulletin*, 88(638), 28-40.

Janas, M. (1996). Mentoring the mentor: A challenge for staff development. *Journalof Staff Development*. 17(4), 2-5.

Moir, E. (2003). Launching the next generation of teachers through quality induction. Paper presented to; *National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future*, Denver, CO.

National Center for Education Statistics (1995). *Which types of schools have the highest teacher turnover?* Washington, DC: United States Department of Education.

National Center for Education Statistics (1998). Toward better teaching: Professional development in 1993-94. Washington, DC: United States Department of Education.

Shaughnessy, M. F., & Neely, R. (1991). Mentoring the gifted children and prodigies: Personological concerns. *Gifted Education International*, 7(3), 129-132.

Wong, H. K. (2004). Induction programs that keep new teachers teaching and improving. *NASSP Bulletin*, 87(638), 5-27.