

Coaching Them Through It

How San Antonio Supports First-Year Teachers



Veronica Goldbach, right, a consulting teacher in San Antonio's Peer Support Partnership, talking with Kristen Watt, a first-year teacher she mentors.

BY JENNIFER DUBIN

Two months into her job teaching kindergarten at an elementary school in San Antonio, Texas, the new teacher was frustrated. Having to handle disruptive student behavior and plan lessons for those who struggled to pay attention was overwhelming. As a first-year teacher, she had neither the confidence nor the know-how to manage her classroom. By April, she was a different—and much better—teacher, even winning her school's Rising Star award for most promising new teacher. Who helped her make the turnaround? Veronica Goldbach, a 15-year elementary school veteran assigned as her mentor.

When the teacher grew most discouraged, Goldbach gave her the moral support to carry on. She decided to work on her

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instructional skills and to be receptive to constructive feedback and support.

Goldbach can tell other stories about such transformations. That's because she works as a consulting teacher (CT) in the Peer Support Partnership, an intensive one-year mentorship program in which 11 veteran teachers work with approximately 150 of the 300 to 400 new teachers hired each year by the San Antonio Independent School District (SAISD). A joint effort of the school district and the local union, the San Antonio Alliance of Teachers and Support Personnel, the program was created three years ago to improve teacher recruitment and retention.

It is modeled on Peer Assistance and Review (PAR)* programs in other places, such as Toledo, Ohio; Montgomery County, Maryland; and Albuquerque, New Mexico, where successful teachers leave the classroom for a few years to work full time as one-on-one mentors with new teachers as well as with veterans who need support. Just as doctors and lawyers set the standards

*For more on Peer Assistance and Review, see "Taking the Lead" in the Fall 2008 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/fall2008/goldstein.

for their professions, PAR enables teachers to guide and guard the teaching profession. That's because several PAR programs also allow expert teachers to evaluate colleagues and ultimately recommend the removal of those who, after receiving targeted supports, fail to improve.

Because the Peer Support Partnership in San Antonio is still relatively new, district and union officials designed it to be strictly supportive and not evaluative. The program pairs consulting teachers, who must have at least six years of experience, with first-year teachers in some of the district's highest-needs schools. Each consulting teacher works full time mentoring 12 to 15 brand-new teachers each year. After three years, consulting teachers return to the classroom; they also have the option to remain consulting teachers for an additional fourth year.

wanted to make a difference in children's lives. She enjoyed her years of teaching at a variety of grade levels: second, fourth, sixth, seventh, and eighth. But when the district announced it was looking to hire its first cohort of CTs for the Peer Support Partnership, she was intrigued and decided to apply. "Hearing that this job was a partnership between the human resources office and our union just kind of made me feel a little more comfortable with it," she says. "That I wasn't going to be out to get teachers. That I was really going to be supporting them."

A former SAISD Teacher of the Year, Goldbach was exactly the kind of coach the program needed. "One of the most critical things was to identify teachers who have mastered their craft," says Toni Thompson, the school district's associate superintendent for human resources. District officials chose CTs who had strong

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That a school district in Texas, a non-collective-bargaining state, has successfully created a PAR program speaks to the power of the labor-management partnership around this effort. It's a "really good example of something that we co-created," says Shelley Potter, the longtime president of the San Antonio Alliance. Although not officially part of any contract, the Peer Support Partnership is included in a handbook for school board policy and administrative procedures. Veteran teachers and school administrators see the program as a way to collaborate in improving the education experience for their students. The school district benefits because the program is a way to recruit and retain teachers who could earn more in neighboring districts. And for veteran teachers, the program is a creative way to strengthen their own teaching.

"I'm becoming an expert in what's expected of teachers in different grade levels," says Goldbach, who works with teachers in kindergarten through sixth grade. Even with all her experience, she readily admits that her own first year of teaching was tough. Although she had a mentor, she rarely saw her; that teacher was busy with her own classroom. Thankfully her mother, a retired teacher, helped her, as did her mother's colleagues. "I had that strong support system," she says, "but I know a lot of people don't."

Goldbach never intended to leave the classroom. A graduate of SAISD with a master's degree in education from Trinity University in San Antonio, she had always planned to teach because she



instructional backgrounds and also possessed what Thompson calls "the three Cs": communication, collaboration, and coaching skills. As mentors, CTs would have to know how to take what they observed and break it down so that new teachers could understand how and what to improve.

This past spring, Goldbach worked with 13 teachers at five different schools. Usually, she visited two schools each day and checked in with her teachers twice each week. Sometimes her morning began as early as 7 a.m., when teachers asked to meet with her before school. And sometimes her workday ended at 7 p.m., if teachers wanted to meet with her after school. Mostly, she meets with teachers during their 45-minute lesson-planning time. "It just depends on what the teachers need," she says.

Often, she helps them in the classroom. She may offer coaching strategies while the new teacher leads a lesson. Or, if a teacher is trying to improve student engagement, Goldbach will help her monitor that by standing near students who may be disengaged. She can then give the teacher "a signal, like, you're losing these kids," she says.

Because she taught fourth grade for many years, Goldbach has deep knowledge about curriculum and teaching strategies for that

specific grade level; she can easily help her new teachers who teach fourth grade. “But if I am not the expert, I find the expert to come and help them,” she says. For instance, when her kindergarten teachers needed help with classroom management strategies and how to teach phonics, Goldbach worked with their principal to schedule a time for them to observe a veteran kindergarten teacher during her literacy block at another school.

Given all the miles they put on their cars, CTs receive \$100 each month to help defray their travel expenses. Besides earning the same salary as they did as classroom teachers, the job comes with a \$5,000 yearly stipend.

Once a month, the CTs meet with their own coach, a trainer from the Education Service Center, Region 20, in San Antonio, which is a state-run facility that provides professional develop-

who didn’t have their own classroom.” Other districts she considered applying to in the state offered new teachers mentors who also had their own classrooms. In San Antonio, Nathan especially liked the fact that she would be paired with a CT whose sole job was to mentor her and other novice teachers.

Nathan, now a fifth-grade teacher at Benjamin Franklin Elementary School, says that working with Rosa Barrera, her CT, last year was extremely rewarding. Barrera showed Nathan, then a third-grade teacher, how to add rigor and depth to her lessons. “I was fine planning something very baseline, but she kind of helped me kick up the challenging parts of it.”

Barrera also showed Nathan how to make her lessons cross-curricular. For instance, when she taught a unit focusing on biographies of Rosa Parks and Ruby Bridges in reading, Barrera



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ment. There they spend half the day discussing coaching issues as well as the book they are all assigned to read, *Get Better Faster: A 90-Day Plan for Coaching New Teachers*, by Paul Bambrick-Santoyo.

CTs also meet monthly with each other to discuss mentoring challenges and to bounce instructional ideas off each other. And they meet regularly with the principals at the schools where they’re supporting new teachers. It’s “nonevaluative,” Goldbach says. “We just check in and see what the principal is seeing in the classroom. It kind of helps us to see if we’re seeing the same things” and “what we need to work on.”

As part of their job, CTs also travel to nearby job fairs to promote SAISD and to highlight its Peer Support Partnership. In April 2017, at a job fair at the University of Texas at Austin, Goldbach met Eugenia Nathan and convinced her to apply to the school district. For Nathan, a University of Missouri–Columbia graduate who grew up in Dallas and wanted to move back to Texas, the program was a unique selling point. “I was really confident with my teacher prep,” she says. “But I knew I’d need some support and someone

helped her extend the topic to social studies as well. “The students see those passages during their reading, and they recognize the same person,” Nathan says. “They’re building background knowledge.”

Another time, Barrera came into her classroom when she was teaching a lesson on spelling. Afterward, she suggested Nathan try dictation with her students. “She gave me a whole packet of resources, and she actually modeled for me how I would teach it to them,” Nathan says. “That was really helpful.”

Her students formed their own relationships with Barrera. Nathan says they were eager to see her when she came in, often waving hello and even hugging her. “The way I introduced her in the beginning of the year is I told them ‘I’m new to Franklin,’” she says. “They were very used to the idea that a lot of people come in to observe me because it was my first year.” Barrera’s job, Nathan explained to her students, was to help her so she could best help them.

Asked if she wished Barrera could spend another year coaching her, Nathan gives a sensible answer that would make her CT proud. “I would love another year, but I know that in the classroom, we’re big on the gradual release of responsibility—which is I do it, then we do it as a class, then eventually you do it on your own—for those independent skills,” Nathan says. “The nice thing about the program is that we have the professional relationship now, where she has shared so many resources and so much of her experience, that I feel very comfortable just shooting her a text and saying, ‘Hey, I’m having this issue. What can I do?’” □