

## THOUGHTS ON TEACHER MENTORING

Louise M. Lataille  
Cathedral High School  
Springfield, MA 01118

### Institution

Imagine yourself setting out on an Arctic Expedition. You have all you could possibly need, the right kind of clothing, lots of supplies, a map, sled dogs, a tent, backpack, and a team of experts around you. You've prepared yourself by reading about the Arctic, its cold temperatures, its hostile environment, and previous expeditions. You are fulfilling a lifelong dream for adventure BUT you have never left the shores of balmy Hawaii in your life.

Welcome to the world of a "new" teacher. This is the kind of setting in which beginning teachers often find themselves. Everything is in place! You are fulfilling a lifelong dream! You have prepared yourself well! You are surrounded by "experts." All the pieces lie before you, BUT you have never left the shores of your formal education and have little insight into the "dangers" and pitfalls of the challenging classroom expedition that you are about to undertake.

This is what new teachers have to face in today's conventional school environment. After a quick explanation of local procedures, new teachers are frequently left very much on their own. Veteran teachers, who are usually more than willing to help, become wrapped up in their own responsibilities, forgetful of their own early experiences, and thus, often oblivious of the beginning teacher "next door." This only adds to the new teacher's feelings of isolation and the sinking feeling of being overwhelmed by the entire process.

School districts are now beginning to realize that teachers even with a few years of experience who change grade level or area of responsibility often experience the same feelings as those of recent graduates. Teacher mentoring programs have existed for only about a generation, but they are making a difference in the lives of young, not so young, and beginning or transitioning teachers. The prevailing financial crunch, increasing student enrollments, and escalating rates of teacher retirements are

among current challenges facing all school systems. These pressing contexts eclipse the teacher mentoring need, but that fact does nothing for the teachers who are experiencing the need for guidance.

### General Thoughts and Reflections

Several ideas need to be considered when organizing a mentoring program. Mentoring is not a panacea, but it is a possible solution to several educational challenges. It can be used as both a recruitment tool and as a way to improve teacher retention. It can also improve communication among new and veteran teachers as well be a means of sharpening their knowledge of content, pedagogy, and the workings of the educational system.

Time investment and class proximity of mentors seem to be the greatest guarantees of success in a mentoring program. It is important to be faithful to the process and to have the personal investment of both the mentor and the protégé. Novice teachers need to know that they are not alone.

Mentoring is an essential element of lifelong learning and should not be limited to the novice teacher. Administrators, mentors, students, and parents can all be involved in the process.

Finally, the mentoring process needs to be separated from the evaluation process. This detachment allows teachers to be more candid and open with their mentors and freer to discuss the areas where they sense they are weak or deficient. It also encourages self-improvement without any fear of experiencing negative consequences affecting employment.

As the teacher shortage gets more acute, it becomes increasingly more urgent that educators rethink the important ramifications of a serious and all-encompassing mentoring program. This may involve rethinking the school day to allow for this to take place. It may require the preparation of mentors who can move this process along. There is a possibility that retired teachers could be drafted as part time professionals to enhance the development of this process.

## **Mentoring in Action**

Let's look at three scenarios that begin to illustrate the variety of forms that a teacher mentoring program could take. The first is a fairly small, independent school where about half the staff has been there for more than eight years. The yearly turnover of teachers is small, but it usually involves the younger teachers who have moved on to better paying jobs outside the district. For three years now, one Department Chair has taken it upon herself to meet with the new teachers once a week.

Their meeting is rather informal, but it is held regularly, every week during school time. The meeting format includes time for the new recruits to ask questions and to talk about daily problems. A small step forward in a problem that is really much bigger.

The second scene involves a larger public school where two teachers (3 and 5 years of experience) have taken the initiative of trying to help novice teachers. They meet weekly in a very informal setting with no set agenda. More experienced teachers are beginning to ask if they can be of service in any way, and the entire climate of the school has improved along with the rate of teacher retention. Here is another small success story for the cause of public education!

The third example is that of a larger private school where a group of veteran teachers, under the guidance of the Assistant Principal, hold a two day initiation program for new teachers in late August. This is followed by monthly after school meetings that serve to answer questions; explain school events, policies, and traditions; and give a sense of belonging to the new teachers.

This program is complemented within the departments by short weekly meetings that offer the new teachers additional opportunities for finding resources, discussing pedagogical methods, and discipline problems. Here, too, the camaraderie among the novice teachers is evident, as is their integration into the school. Hopefully, this too will prove to be a step in the right direction for teacher retention and overall satisfaction in their employment.

## **Final Considerations**

There is little doubt that dialog about teaching and mentoring needs to take place within each school and

district. Fostering this conversation can help teachers to experience collegiality, discover new resources, and develop the tools necessary for ongoing improvement. Perhaps mentoring is the needed instrument of reform, affecting education at every level. Do we have the courage and determination to make mentoring one of the keystones to teacher preparation and on-going professional development?

Imagine that all mathematics teachers continue to learn new mathematics content and keep current on educational research. They collaborate on problems of mathematical teaching and regularly visit each other's classrooms to learn from, and critique, colleagues' teaching. In every school and district, mathematics teacher-leaders are available, serving as expert mentors to their colleagues, recommending resources, orchestrating interactions among teachers, and advising administrators...

This is indeed a challenging endeavor, but it can be done. The next step is up to YOU!