

Teaching to Learn and Learning to Teach

toolkits

Mentoring New Teachers

Most everyone can agree that only the most-suited and best-trained professionals should be teaching our nation's children. But existing teacher training and professional development often fall short of addressing the evolving needs of education. By using the academy model, schools can provide new teachers and administrators with a built-in support system and the training to become true winners at their schools.

Typically, new teachers enter the education system after five years of college and less than 500 hours of actual classroom experience. In contrast, doctors begin internship and residency programs after completing their course work. The time spent working with experienced doctors and honing their skills is essential to producing capable and committed doctors.

According to National Commission on Teaching and America's Future¹, collaborative reflective practice, an allocation of significant time, and action research are all essential components of effective professional development for teachers and administrators. Teacher preparation and professional development must be reinvented to ensure that qualified teachers are placed in every classroom. Teachers must be allowed to hone their craft and work with experienced educators while building a network of supportive professional peers in order to develop expertise and excellence.

This level of support and training for new teachers and principals that utilizes experienced instructional mentors to help build professional capacity and capability requires both an investment of time and money. But if one considers the return on investment—not to mention the expense of untrained and unsupported educators with limited content mastery in the classroom—the cost is insignificant.

A Laboratory of Learning

Outcomes for both teachers and students have been improved by organizing mentorship programs comprised of small professional learning communities. The results include the following:

- Increased commitment, higher morale, and lower rates of absenteeism
- Shared responsibility for the total development of students and their success
- Powerful learning that defines good teaching and classroom practice
- Higher likelihood that teachers will be well informed, professionally renewed, and inspired to inspire students
- Significant advances into making teaching adaptations for students, and changes for learners made more quickly than in traditional schools

In-the-Trenches Mentoring is the Key to Strong Teaching Skills

Attracting, supporting, and retaining the best and brightest classroom teachers is essential in order for our educational system to flourish. The modeling of skilled professional behaviors in instructional leadership, assessment, teacher support, evaluation, and culture-building cannot be duplicated. The following is an example of how mentorship can help turn a new teacher into a force to be reckoned with:

1. A school has opened and is in desperate need of a new teacher. Resume submissions and interviews have not been successful. The year begins with a substitute teacher in the classroom.
2. The principal learns that the substitute teacher is enrolled in a teacher-credentialing program. Though he has no formal teaching strategy, he has skills and a strong desire to teach.
3. The principal feels that if the teacher had true mentoring support daily, he could learn strategies faster than from college course work.
4. An experienced teacher/coach for student teachers offers to be the sub's mentor.
5. The sub and his mentor teach four classes per day, and have one conference hour and one hour of collaboration daily.
6. The sub begins each day watching another very skilled teacher and stays a day behind in his lessons.
7. The sub and mentor collaborate, coach, observe, study student work, plan lessons, and reflect on student progress and teaching strategies. They also discuss the sub's class observations. At the end of the day, the sub is clear about next steps for the following day. Strategies for managing class time, materials, and student activities are studied, and changes are made to enhance the effectiveness of student learning.
8. The network of support grows. A special education teacher provides support and shows the sub other ways to approach problems. The principal and assistant principal visit the sub's room frequently, leaving simple notes of specific observations.
9. Whether in the break room or at lunch, informal conversation is a regular routine. The sub trusts that the administration is there to support, coach, and reinforce his improved skills. Every day he is able to discuss each class with his coaches in detail.
10. Once the sub becomes familiar with daily routines, he focuses on individual learning styles and how his teaching supports those styles. Analyzing student work, holding special "help" sessions, and watching his mentor and other teachers work with students all help to build his expertise.

Mentoring Plan

Before School: Discuss professional growth goals

1st Month of School: Curriculum Implementation

- Grade level curriculum/state standards
- Pacing schedule for instructional planning
- Lesson plan framework and development
- Available resources to support instruction
- Protégé observes mentor (half day)
- Discuss professional growth goals

1st Semester

- Mentor observes protégé
- Mentor facilitates reflection and self-assessment
- Mentor observes
- Assessment development
- State and local assessments, district test schedule, and teachers' roles and responsibilities for assessments
- Utilizing testing data to plan instruction

- Developing student academic goals and plans based on assessment information, classroom performance, and ELL or IEP needs with parent/student
- Grading review
- Discuss professional growth goals
- Observation of a professional expert

2nd Semester

- Protégé peer group
- Mentor observes Protégé
- Discuss professional growth goals
- Mentor facilitates reflection and self-assessment
- Data from mentor observation of the protégé on protégé's priorities

End of year

Develop professional growth goals for next year

Peer Groups

Many schools and districts find it helpful to conduct peer-group meetings once or twice each semester, either in person or online. If starting a peer group, ask all peer group members to honor confidentiality and respond to issues in a professional manner. While your school or district will have its own unique issues relevant for discussion, the following questions are provided as a starting point.

For mentor groups

- What do we need to know and be able to do to help new teachers meet district performance standards?
- What are the conditions we need to create in order to promote retention of new teachers?
- How can we use resources to support our mentoring program?

For protégé groups

- Words are very powerful. How are you using words positively?
- If you could advise college students who are preparing to be teachers, what would you tell them?
- Do you feel that every child can learn?

Mentor Observation Tips

The following will assist you as a mentor to inventory your experiences and areas of need:

Pre-conference

- Determine the objectives for the lesson to be observed.
- Define the activities of the new teacher and students to achieve the objective.
- Use non judgmental, open questions to guide lesson improvement.
- Clarify what the teacher wants to learn from the observation experience.
- Determine the data that needs to be collected to support that learning.

Observation: Collecting the data while observing

Post Conference:

- Prompt the teacher's recall of the lesson taught, student responses, and lesson success.
- Prompt the teacher's reflection on differences between the planned and predicted lesson.
- Ask questions to prompt reflection on what went well and what needs improvement.
- Ask questions to prompt feedback about the coaching process.

Teacher Needs Assessment

The following will assist you as a protégé to inventory your experiences and areas of need:

- Previous educator experience, including student teaching or internship
- List your three strongest assets as an educator.
- List your three areas of concern as a new educator.

How would you rate your skills in the following?

- Lesson planning
- Dealing with crisis in the classroom
- Planning for a substitute teacher
- Addressing student learning standards
- Large group instruction
- Establishing rapport with faculty and staff
- Small group instruction
- Understanding of teaching/learning styles
- One-to-one instruction
- Parent conferencing and communication
- Creating and administering informal assessments
- Understanding of cultural or ethnic differences
- Planning instructional units
- Planning for students with special needs, including “at risk” and “gifted”
- Ability to set appropriate levels of expectations for student achievement
- Planning and producing instructional materials
- Supporting school improvement goals
- Behavior management
- Addressing teacher performance standards

¹ National Commission on Teaching & America’s Future. (1996). What matters most: Teaching for America’s future. Retrieved from <http://nctaf.org/wp-content/uploads/WhatMattersMost.pdf>