Mentors are guides. They lead us along the journey of our lives. We trust them because they have been there before. They embody our hopes, cast light on the way ahead, interpret arcane signs, warn us of lurking dangers, and point out unexpected delights along the way…

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National research data reflects that one out of every five novice teachers leaves the teaching profession after only three years – and about fifty percent of new teachers leaving within the first five years. North Carolina data reports a slightly lower attrition rate, thirty-three percent for beginning teachers within the first five years. What a dismal outlook! Educators would not allow thirty-three percent of their students to fail. Why should we accept the fact that thirty-three percent of our novice teachers fail? If this trend continues, it will be the teachers who are left behind.

It should come as no surprise that numerous beginning teachers become frustrated and overwhelmed at the transition between student teaching and “the real world.” From the very first day, they are held to the very same expectations and accountability standards as their veteran colleagues. Let’s face it, teaching is not easy. The reality of classroom management, testing and meeting the needs of all students (and their parents) can be overwhelming. Learning to teach is hands-on learning at its best. The induction years serve as a kind of on the job training. They are the formative period in which novice teachers should gain a deep understanding of how to teach. Unfortunately, it is during these beginning years when many potentially talented young educators decide to leave the classroom in search of greener pastures.

One of the major reasons new teachers leave the profession is lack of support and guidance. Admittedly, teaching is an isolated profession. Once that morning bell rings, there is little time for teachers to converse or to bounce ideas off each other. The answer to these feelings of isolation and lack of support starts with assigning an effective mentor teacher to guide the novice teacher.

Being a successful mentor takes work and, just like teaching, it takes practice. Quality mentors put time and effort into the practice of helping new teachers develop into independent educators. The following are just a few of the things that mentors can do to increase their effectiveness.

There is a connection between support in the first year and teachers’ moving between schools and leaving the profession. A helpful mentor (as reported by teachers) significantly reduced the chances of quitting in the first year. Common planning time and collaboration with other teachers were also strong predictors of staying in the school and profession. In 1999-2000, 66 percent of all teachers surveyed had a mentor, and 87 percent of those found the mentoring helpful.

Source: National Center for Education Statistics Schools and Staffing Survey
• **Be prepared.**
  o Have a clear understanding of the roles and the responsibilities involved with being a mentor.
  o Keep mentor training up to date.
  o Become familiar with the *North Carolina Mentor Program Standards* (approved by SBE, February 2004).
  o Design a system for documentation.
  o Have an understanding of adult development.
  o Understand state mandates regarding beginning teacher induction. They change frequently and vary for lateral entry teachers.

• **Build a helping relationship with the novice teacher.**
  o As soon as possible, have a getting acquainted conference in which the two of you share information about yourselves. Meet somewhere away from campus for lunch or dinner.
  o Define your role and the role of the novice teacher. Be sure to emphasize that the role of the mentor is not to serve as an evaluator but as a guide or a coach.
  o Schedule a specified time each week to meet with the novice teacher.
  o Actively listen. This will probably be the most difficult part of mentoring; however, it may have the greatest impact. Active listening encourages novice teachers to identify the problem themselves and to reflect on strategies for solving it.
  o Maintain a relationship of respect, caring, trust and openness. Confidentiality should be discussed and adhered to.
  o Encourage the novice teacher to come a reflective practitioner.
  o Stay patient and keep a positive attitude.

• **Conduct observations with a purpose.**
  o In the previous “How to…” article (How to Begin a Peer Coaching Program), the three steps of the coaching process were identified: the pre-conference, observation and the post-conference. The mentor’s cycle of assistance involves these same three steps with the addition of creating a coaching plan.
  o Together with the novice teacher, identify the teaching behavior strategies that are necessary to improve the teacher’s and the students’ success in the classroom. Use this information to create a coaching plan for the novice teacher. The coaching plan should focus on **one** teacher behavior at a time. Once the teacher has mastered the identified focus, a new coaching plan should be developed. The coaching plan should be aligned with the novice teacher’s growth plan.
  o Set a time for a pre-conference. During the pre-conference, use the coaching plan to identify the focus of the observation. Being observed is stressful for even some veteran teachers. Some of this stress can be eliminated for the new teacher by sharing information about the types of data that will be observed. The novice teacher can be involved in helping to design instruments for data collection.
Hold a post-conference to discuss the data collected. Use active listening to allow the beginning teacher to be reflective.

Decide during the post-conference whether the teaching behavior has been mastered or whether it needs more practice time.

Create a new coaching plan and begin the cycle again.

Remember that the role of the mentor is not to evaluate – but to support and coach.

- Model effective teaching practices.
  
  Allow the novice teacher time to observe the mentor and to take notes during the observation.
  
  Find other master teachers who would serve as good role models for the new teacher. Set up times for the two of you to observe them together.
  
  Help the new teacher develop unit and lesson plans.
  
  Locate and develop relevant instructional resources.
  
  Encourage the novice teacher to continually reflect on her/his teaching.

Good teachers have an understanding of teaching and learning. They have developed the “with-it-ness” which enables them to be able to read and flex with the differing needs of their students. Successful educators know when to encourage their students to go out on a limb and when to intercede. To be an effective mentor, one must be able to use those same skills while encouraging their protégée to develop and grow into a master teacher. Good mentors encourage reflection in their novice teachers but they also demand it of themselves.

No Child Left Behind and North Carolina mandates recognize the importance of quality mentoring for beginning teachers. There is no doubt that mentoring is a vital part of teacher development. If the same type of mentoring program was implemented not only with teachers but with administrators as well, North Carolina would have no problem reaching its goal “First in America by 2010.”

References:


