Supporting New Educators

Pages 30­34

Responding to New Teachers' Concerns

Thomas M. McCann, Larry R. Johannessen and Bernard Ricca

An in-depth study of novice high school teachers suggests key strategies to address their most pressing challenges.

It is as if we were pouring teachers into a bucket with a fist-sized hole in the bottom,” says the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future in its 2003 report *No Dream Denied*. As this startling image implies, teacher attrition is greatly outpacing the rate at which the system prepares new teachers and sends them into the classroom. To meet the monumental challenge of stemming teacher attrition, schools need to find strategic ways to reduce the frustrations and increase the rewards of teaching.

One noteworthy study of teacher retention (Boe, Bobbitt, Cook, Whitener, & Weber, 1996) looks at the characteristics of teachers and their teaching assignments to identify predictors of teacher retention. The researchers note that the teachers who are most likely to remain on the job fit the following profile: age 39 to 55; married, with dependent children above age 5; placed in a full-time assignment for which they are highly qualified; and receiving a competitive salary.

Of course, few schools can remain within the constraints of all these criteria in hiring new teachers. In fact, school districts that face financial challenges—and what school today isn't strapped for cash?—tend to hire candidates who have little in common with this profile. Schools, then, are bound to hire many new teachers who, by definition, are at high risk of leaving the profession before attaining tenure.

What Schools Can Do

During the last three years, we conducted an in-depth study to investigate what significant concerns induce beginning teachers to leave the profession and what supports schools can put in place to keep these novices in teaching (McCann & Johannessen, 2004; McCann, Johannessen, & Ricca, in press). As part of this study, we conducted structured interviews with 11 novice high school English teachers and then conducted follow-up interviews with 6 of them, 2 of whom had left teaching. We also conducted 23 interviews with additional new and experienced teachers.

Independent analyses of the interview transcripts identified nine major categories of concern expressed by the beginning teachers:

- Relationships with students (Will students like me? Will they accept me as a bona fide teacher?);
- Relationships with parents (What will I do if a parent is upset with me?);
- Relationships with colleagues (Will my colleagues believe that I know what I am doing?);
- Relationships with supervisors (Will I satisfy the expectations of an evaluator?);
- Workload/time management/fatigue (How can I get it all done?);
- Knowledge of subject/curriculum (What is really important to teach?);
- Evaluation and grading (What am I measuring? What should I do when the numbers don't match my subjective impressions?);
- Autonomy and control (Can I teach in the way that I believe is best?); and
In these conversations, we were struck by the many factors that affect the development of new teachers: their choice of college or university; the particular methods classes they take and the philosophical bent and theoretical framework of the instructors they encounter; the public school at which they complete their student teaching experiences; the match with a cooperating teacher and university supervisor; and the culture of the school and department in which they begin their first job. Prospective teachers thus come to the profession through varied and haphazard paths, yet many of them manage to thrive. The concerns expressed by new high school English teachers in our study suggest a few relatively simple strategies that schools can put in place to smooth the path and make the climate for new teachers more consistent and supportive.

**Provide Reasonable Teaching Assignments**

Novice teachers in the study often expressed feelings of hopelessness because their workload was overwhelming. For example, one teacher reported,

> I've had a high level of stress the whole year just in terms of worrying about planning, grading, and things like that. There have been a lot of 12-, 13-, and 14-hour workdays. I could tell going in that I would probably be doing a lot of that at the beginning of the year, and then at the end of the year that would taper off to 11-hour days.

Another teacher taught classes involving five different preparations in five different locations in the school, including one class held in the balcony above the swimming pool. Obviously, such a teaching assignment will impose debilitating fatigue and amplify frustration. We fear that some readers can report even worse teaching situations.

Although some battle-hardened teaching veterans may continue to embrace the pioneer adage that if difficult conditions don't kill you, they will make you stronger, this kind of survival-of-the-fittest rationale for giving new teachers the most difficult assignments has no place in a climate of teacher shortages—nor in any school culture that can provide more compassionate ways to induct new teachers into the profession. Novices find it hard enough to attend to the many details of the job without having to cope with multiple preparations and classroom moves. They will probably not perform well if they must worry about moving themselves and their materials to another side of the building as they field requests for washroom use, attend to questions about homework, present lessons, and attempt lesson adjustments.

Ideally, new teachers should have only a couple of manageable preparations, with a minimum of movement from classroom to classroom. The circumstances in each building and each department will dictate some constraints on teacher assignments. But school leaders should be guided by a general principle: For the new teacher, keep the workload as manageable as possible.

**Design Mentoring Programs Carefully**

Some consultants who make their living by training mentors contend that it is better for a school to have no mentoring program at all than to have a bad mentoring program. This observation is supported by the reactions of teachers in the study who experienced ineffective mentoring. One first-year teacher noted that “instead of being a support mechanism,” the mentoring program at his school “was another three hours a month of wasted time.”

Another teacher commented,

> The mentoring program is such a sham. It is the most ridiculous thing I've ever participated in. It would actually drive people out of teaching. There are meetings on Friday nights from 5 to 8, and we don't get paid for it. For example, they read to us out of the discipline code. My mentor did not want to be a mentor. She hates me; I hate her. I wanted to be with another teacher with whom I have more in common and who is a good teacher.

Several sources can guide schools in devising an effective mentoring program (see Lipton, Wellman, & Humbard, 2003; Villani, 2002). Such programs can take many different forms, but a meaningful program should include the following: (1) careful selection and training of mentors, including training in communication and peer coaching techniques; (2) attention to the expressed concerns of beginning teachers; (3) special consideration for the inevitable exhaustion and decline that teachers experience after the first 9–10 weeks of school; (4) a program of regularly scheduled contacts between the new teacher and the mentor; and (5) assistance in acclimating the new teacher to the school community.

**Provide a Comprehensive Induction Process**

Most schools provide some sort of orientation for new staff, but this training too often consists of a set of talking heads enumerating the rules, policies, and procedures of the school. One teacher reported that his orientation conveyed such information as “bringing your grade book with you during fire drills and things like that . . . just procedure stuff.”

In contrast to a one-shot orientation session, an effective induction process provides support throughout the year. One useful strategy is to help new teachers anticipate difficult times and recognize that feeling some fatigue and frustration is normal. Our case studies of first-year high school teachers reveal a common pattern of experience. As the school year opens, the new teachers are excited about the prospects for the year, but also worried about how they will be received by students, parents, and colleagues. By early October, the honeymoon period with students ends, and daily management of duties becomes more stressful. By the beginning of November, the new teachers commonly feel
overwhelmed by the daily grind of planning, grading, supervising, and meeting; fatigue and illness often take a toll. The holiday breaks in November and December provide a time to become reenergized, and the new teachers typically experience a sense of renewal and determination in January and February, as the second half of the year begins. In March, the prospect of spring break provides hope and breaks up the second half of the year. It is easy, however, to be misled into believing that spring break means that the end of the school year is near. April, then, can be a cruel month, when the teacher realizes that the completion of the school year is actually nine weeks away. The end of the year in May or June brings a sense of relief and provides a time for reflection.

By engaging new teachers in conversations about their own projections for the school year and reviewing the common pattern of experience, supervisors or mentors can bring expectations into alignment with the actual experience of teaching. This process can ease the stress that comes from the shock of unexpected events and challenges.

The induction process should also provide new teachers with detailed curriculum guides and abundant instructional materials. Many teachers in the study said that they lacked such support. One recalled,

I really didn't have a department chair. Meanwhile, there was this reading program we were supposed to be doing all year, but it didn't start until mid-January. It was chaos.

New teachers benefit especially from sitting down with someone who can help them discover the underlying principles that drive the curriculum. With this knowledge, the new teachers become empowered to make decisions, to adjust existing materials and activities to fit their particular teaching situations, and to unleash their creative energies.

Another important element of induction during the first year is a meaningful staff development program that supports the new teacher's professional growth and conveys the idea that the school's staff takes the craft of teaching seriously. None of the beginners in the study reported having the benefit of such a comprehensive staff development program. Instead, they pointed to individual colleagues or supervisors who provided assistance. For example, one teacher noted,

I developed relationships with veteran teachers who either took a liking to me or I really liked what they were doing; I would ask them for advice. They had no problem saying, “Here's a strategy you can use.”

Build a Network of Collegial Contacts

Many educators think of new teacher induction as a process in which older, more experienced people impart their wisdom. The word mentor conjures the image of a wizened master guiding the novice. There is certainly value in the guidance and advice that mentors and supervisors offer. But new teachers can also benefit from a broad network of contacts with their peers and with external resource people to serve the many needs that novices inevitably have. The new teachers in the study spoke with appreciation about the informal relationships through which they found support:

On a couple of occasions, the teacher who taught next door was able to come over and conference with me. She came over and helped me talk through the case of one student who was racist, which was helpful because it was a scary situation.

Supervisors have the official responsibility to provide guidance and assistance. But new teachers might hesitate to report troubles to a supervisor out of fear that admitting that they need help could lead to a negative evaluation. And even though many schools carefully define the role of mentor as one with no evaluation responsibilities, some new teachers naturally hesitate to admit failures and weaknesses to their mentor, whom they admire and respect as a professional authority.

Sometimes new teachers simply need to vent frustrations or to confide their doubts and challenges to an objective or disinterested person. A first-year teacher who was the focus of one of our case studies noted that her conversations with one of the university researchers were therapeutic. Her perception of the series of interviews was enlightening: We had thought of her participation in the study as a service to us, not imagining that this participation would also serve her needs. In the interviews, the researcher did not judge or advise the teacher—she simply inquired about the teacher's experience, conveying her genuine interest in the nature of the teacher's first year. Schools might consider providing such an objective observer to round out the network of other sympathetic listeners—fellow first-year teachers, friends, former classmates or instructors, family members, and veteran colleagues.

Design Supportive Evaluation

Imagine two baseball managers each sending a relief pitcher into a crucial game when runners are in scoring position and the game is on the line. One manager gives the pitcher the ball with this instruction: “Don't goof up!” The second manager tells the relief pitcher, “You have the support of the team behind you. We have confidence that you can do the job. Now go get 'em!” We would like to see supervisors of new teachers act more like the second manager.

In interviews, novice teachers identified satisfying the expectations of their supervisors as one of their major concerns. One said, “I respected my supervisor and my administration like a kid respects a parent.”

New teachers are best served by a supportive evaluation plan that focuses on professional development and discourages punitive approaches to teacher evaluation. Realistically, evaluation must provide a framework for making decisions about continued employment. But it should also guide and encourage teachers in their professional growth.
Formal and informal observations form the basis of effective evaluation of novice teachers. We have worked in schools where the supervisors made cursory observations once or twice a year. No supervisor will have a strong sense of a teacher's performance and experience after conducting just one or two observations. To support growth, supervisors and mentors should observe teachers on separate occasions and engage in professional conversations about the observations.

Observations will be worthwhile as formative assessments only if everyone involved proceeds in a spirit of coaching and support. The observations should be planned and accompanied by reflective conversations. The teacher being observed should work with the observers to identify the focus of the observations and to specify what information the observers will collect and how they will collect it. The teacher and the supervisor should meet afterward to discuss the meaning and significance of the information.

Prepare New Teachers for Challenges

Inevitably, the new teacher will encounter some difficulties: an unruly class, an angry parent, a tough evaluation, a curriculum conundrum, and so on. For example, one teacher reported,

I knew what I was supposed to be doing. I thought I knew how to do it, but the students' behavior was so poor. I had a really hard time dealing with it, because I had no experience. It was a shocker. When I went into the room every day, there was an overall sense that "I am not in control of this class." Feeling like that can be particularly frightening.

Another teacher noted,

I had to call home about a student who was failing. It was the first time I had called a parent . . . and I was kind of nervous about it.

The testimonies of these two teachers suggest that supervisors, mentors, or peer coaches should proactively help new teachers anticipate crises that might confront them in school and explore and assess possible courses of action to meet each challenge.

Often, problems and their solutions are specific to a particular school. For example, perhaps an especially intrusive and powerful group of fund-raisers for the school band triggers a proliferation of fund-raising that spills over into instructional time. Even though a new teacher might not face this specific problem, discussing such problems and possible solutions can help the teacher think about ways to solve similar problems within a particular organization and to realize that there are resources available to provide help.

Encourage Connection to the Profession

Some schools convey the expectation that teachers will be involved in a larger community of education professionals outside school. Teachers who join such organizations as the International Reading Association, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, or one of their affiliates are making a professional commitment. Being part of a network of teachers across a state or across the country suggests that the new teacher sees himself or herself as a professional educator who is determined to keep growing as a teacher.

The teachers in our study who were most likely to remain in teaching beyond their induction years had a keen interest in developing their knowledge and skills as teachers. They talked about how they had grown over the course of their initial year, and they could account for the factors that had helped them grow.

In some schools, a wealth of talented, positive colleagues serve as models and provide numerous immediate learning resources. For example, one teacher attributed much of her growth to the influence of her department chair:

I've become better at creating meaningful lessons, especially in teaching skills in a procedural way. I never knew how to do that at all until I met the department chair here.

In schools with smaller faculties and more limited resources, however, establishing professional links outside the school becomes crucial. New teachers may engage in substantive dialogue by exchanging e-mails with teachers several states away or by reading and responding to professional journals. Schools need to support such efforts and recognize that the teacher's attendance at a conference or investment in a membership is an essential part of professional development.

Teacher Satisfaction

Teacher satisfaction depends on a complex mixture of internal attributes and external conditions, some of which are beyond the control of schools. Most school leaders are not in a position to guarantee lucrative contracts, pristine working conditions, or model students. But many strategies are available to provide support in the crucial early years of teaching, and the most positive approach for school leaders is to attempt to improve as many conditions as possible.

References


Thomas M. McCann is Assistant Principal for Curriculum and Instruction, Community High School, West Chicago, Illinois; 630-876-6333; tmccann@d94.org. Larry R. Johannessen is Associate Professor of English, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, Illinois; 815-753-6601; ljohann@niu.edu. Bernard Ricca is Assistant Professor of Education, Dominican University, River Forest, Illinois; 708-524-6488; bricca@dom.edu.

KEYWORDS

Click on keywords to see similar products:

teacher retention, teacher motivation, motivation, teachers

Copyright © 2005 by Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

Requesting Permission

- For photocopy, electronic and online access, and republication requests, go to the Copyright Clearance Center. Enter the periodical title within the "Get Permission" search field.
- To translate this article, contact permissions@ascd.org