

# Mentoring: Your Opportunity and Responsibility

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Each fall teachers gather and meet new people in their school. Some schools have developed a formal mentor program. Other schools have informal expectations. In some areas little thought is given to the needs of new staff.

Let's start with the least organized program. You are introduced to a new staff member whose room will be close to you. The principal says nothing more. Before you read further, find some paper and brainstorm what you could do to create a positive relationship. (Come on, do your thinking before reading further.)

First, how can you get to know the person? Can you suggest breakfast or lunch together? Ask about family? What is his/her educational background and previous experiences? How are you both planning to welcome students on the first day? Share what your normal day will look like.

On a higher level, your principal may ask you to mentor a new staff member. Clarify... How does s/he define mentoring? Together make a list so you are both clear, then the three of you meet so all understand the expectations.

The idea of mentoring can be traced to the eighth or ninth century BC. It is mentioned in Homer's *Odyssey*. A mentor is a wise counselor who guides a protégé through a developmental process. In 2004, thirty percent of new teachers leave teaching within two years and half leave within five years. These are teachers with promising academic records. Schools must fill new voids year after year. Somehow, these bright, capable individuals were not gaining enough satisfaction and success.

What makes a good mentor? First the person has an excellent understanding of the curriculum and effective teaching strategies. The person must have good self-understanding, or intrapersonal intelligence and also interpersonal intelligence. S/he needs to be empathetic and have a good sense of timing to support another's achievement and listen to frustrations. First, the mentor must listen to understand the other's mood. Only then can the mentor realistically know what to discuss and how to proceed. The mentor needs to be clear on meeting dates and time.

Discussing a future lesson using imagination can be very helpful to a new teacher. Help your mentee relax with eyes closed and use prompts to visualize the perfect lesson. "Describe the day and time along with you're the purpose of your lesson. Describe the class atmosphere as students come in and get settled. Reflect on your arrangement of space and room design. Describe the beginning of your lesson, reflecting as you go. Now hear your lesson and students' interactions. Continue to your conclusion. Reflect on how students show what they know. When you are ready, open your eyes." (Notice

that you are coaching not asking direct questions.) Debrief and discuss the experience and current feelings.

There are many reasons to match teachers in a school. It may be in the school's best interest to match people of different cultural background. It may be a match between an ELL teacher and a special education teacher. There are reasons to match a 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher with a second grade teacher, to match a physical education teacher with a kindergarten teacher, an art teacher with the media specialist. There could be three-way matches. Thoughtful matches enhance the community of a school.

Author Kathleen Johnson explains the attitudinal phases of new teacher development as anticipation, survival, disillusionment, rejuvenation, reflection, and back to anticipation. Teachers are excited to begin a new career but run into unforeseen problems. A mentor is important to nurture the new through the rocky times. Hopefully, the relationship between you and another continues a second year. As the new teacher's grows your relationship will change but it is still very important.

Formal mentoring relationships for all new teachers would significantly improve the quality students' experience thus facilitating greater learning. It is our hope you are in a position to support and be supporting in others' growth.

Resources:

- *Mentoring New Teachers, third edition* by Hal Portner has many wonderful ideas including a Learning Style Inventory that will help teachers understand how their style impacts their teaching.
- *Being an Effective Mentor: How to Help Beginning Teachers Succeed* is written by Kathleen Feeney Johnson. This book has many charts to help organize a new teacher. There are many examples from districts across the country.