

EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

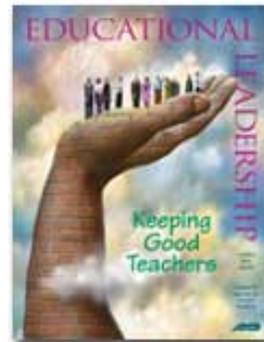
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Fostering Leadership Through Mentoring

At the Santa Cruz New Teacher Center, a comprehensive induction program for novices has also reinvigorated veteran teachers and created a new generation of school leaders.

Ellen Moir and Gary Bloom



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When the Santa Cruz New Teacher Project began in 1988, few California districts offered support programs for new teachers. Unless novices were lucky enough to attract the attention of sympathetic colleagues, they faced the tough challenges of their first teaching years alone (Moir & Gless, 2001). The project overcame this neglect by providing new teachers with an induction program delivered by trained mentors recruited from the ranks of our districts' best teachers. In 1998, the New Teacher Center was created to build on and disseminate the work of the project.

We were sure from the beginning that our model would improve the quality and retention of new teachers (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1996), but we were surprised and delighted by the unexpected benefits of offering a powerful new role to veteran teachers. We have found that mentoring offers veteran teachers professional replenishment, contributes to the retention of the region's best teachers, and produces teacher leaders with the skills and passion to make lifelong teacher development central to school culture.

Teacher Induction and Mentoring

Now in its 15th year, the project has served more than 9,000 beginning teachers and trained more than 90 teachers as full-time mentors. In addition, many school districts throughout the United States have adopted and adapted our program model.

Mentors work with individual novices for one to two hours every week and offer a seminar to their group of approximately 15 novices once a month. Mentors observe instruction, provide feedback, demonstrate teaching methods, assist with lesson plans, and help analyze student work and achievement data. This intensive support is possible only because participating school districts release veteran teachers to serve as full-time mentors for two or three years each.

Mentor Selection, Training, and Development

One key to the success of the project is our rigorous selection and professional development

process. Applicants for mentor positions must provide three letters of support and undergo an interview by a panel of teachers, administrators, and union leaders. During the interviews, applicants respond to hypothetical scenarios that draw on their knowledge of instruction and skills that they would need to navigate the complexities of induction work. In addition, applicants must have a minimum of seven years of classroom experience and should have coached peers and supervised student teachers; they must produce evidence—a record of contributions to professional communities and recommendations from principals and colleagues—that they are outstanding teachers; and they must demonstrate outstanding interpersonal skills, exceptional knowledge of subject matter, and success working with culturally and linguistically diverse students. This selection process has produced a highly skilled and diverse group of mentors with an average of 17 years of experience each.

Our mentors come to us as excellent teachers, but they need training to develop new skills for fostering the talents and teaching styles of others. Effective mentors must be able to observe and communicate; track a new teacher's immediate needs and broader concerns; and know when to elicit a new teacher's thoughts and when to provide concrete advice.

The project trains mentors to help new teachers assess their practice and develop systematic plans for improvement. Our three-day basic training covers such topics as creating a vision of quality teaching, identifying new teachers' needs, understanding the phases of new teacher development, selecting support strategies, assessing a beginning teacher's practice, and reaching professional standards in mentoring.

Our mentors participate in an additional two days of training in coaching and observation, which focuses on specific techniques for observing new teachers, collecting classroom performance data, using data to help new teachers develop improvement plans, tying classroom observations to the California Standards for the Teaching Profession, and establishing trusting professional relationships.

This training provides veteran teachers with initial skills so that they can step confidently into their new roles. Our weekly half-day mentor forums then provide them with ongoing professional development and participation in a community of practice that generates teacher leadership. Mentors share strategies, challenges, and successes. They deepen their understanding of formative assessment of new teachers by assessing their own development as mentors, including setting goals, conducting mid-year reviews of progress, revising their practice, and reflecting at the end of the year. The training and coaching that they receive mirrors the ways in which we want them to work with new teachers. Rather than filling them up with information, we help mentors construct their own professional development plans and identify the resources that they need to fulfill those plans. They then lead parallel practices with their novice teachers.

Mentors as School Leaders

In the New Teacher Project, the mentor role is usually a three-year position, with alumni typically returning to positions in K–12 schools. Of the 35 mentors who have gone back to K–12 positions during the past 14 years, seven are now principals or assistant principals, 14 are

teaching, and 14 are serving in professional development leadership roles. All speak highly of the formative role that their mentoring experiences have played in their careers. Classroom teachers believe that they are much more effective because of what they learned as mentors, and those outside the classroom believe that their mentoring experiences are a primary source of their effectiveness as leaders.

These new school leaders are at the forefront of significant cultural shifts in their schools and school districts, creating schools that will keep teachers in the profession because of their commitment to developing a supportive school culture (Ingersoll, 2001; Johnson & Kardos, 2002). To investigate how these mentor alumni differ from administrator colleagues with other backgrounds, we conducted interviews and school observations. The following five themes emerged.

Former mentors have a deep understanding of teaching and learning. As mentors, they spent thousands of hours in dozens of classrooms focusing on instruction. Former mentor Jane, now an elementary principal, said,

When I walk into a classroom, I am able to tie what I observe to teaching and content standards, and I have plenty of experience working with teachers to make the connections among curriculum, instruction, student work, and assessment data.

These new administrators report that they look to their veteran administrator colleagues for advice about "buses, beans, and budgets," but their senior colleagues often look to them for expertise in instructional matters.

They know how to help classroom teachers grow. Former mentors have extensive experience in classroom observation, in leading reflective conversations, and in working with teachers with a variety of learning styles. Margaret, who became a principal right after spending two years as a mentor, commented,

I observe and know how to construct a conversation about what I have seen. . . . There is constant communication about what is happening in classrooms, and teachers trust and respect me.

The former mentors' work in various schools and across grade levels and subject areas enables them to offer valuable insights to their teaching staffs. Their experience working with adult learners enables them to nurture teacher growth in a nonthreatening way, as a coach rather than a know-it-all.

Former mentors are attuned to the needs of beginning teachers. New teachers find supportive working conditions and an administrator who wants to help. Monica attributes to her mentoring experience her knowledge of how to help new teachers:

I make sure they get support from others, I get them resources, I open the school for them on weekends, and I know what they and what I can expect.

They know how to participate in and create learning communities. As mentors, they were part of a community that met weekly for ongoing professional development. They participated in the design and facilitation of these weekly sessions, and they bring these skills to their new

leadership roles. They report a high degree of confidence and success in designing and facilitating staff meetings and professional development activities. They have shifted the focus of these gatherings from logistics and top-down direction to collaborative work on instruction. They value and build teacher leadership within their staffs.

Our new principals have a head start in dealing with such issues as time management and communication. As mentors, they had to cope with complex calendars and relationships similar to those that they now face as administrators. Amy said,

More than preservice or National Board Certification, the advisor experience taught me to multitask and to deal with high-stress, high-stakes issues. It also helped me to build a network in the region that I draw on all of the time.

These former mentors don't dismiss the value of preservice programs, but they do state that the content of these programs was often distant from their day-to-day needs and did little to help them work effectively with teachers. This sentiment is consistent with Public Agenda's finding that principals and superintendents believe that typical graduate programs are out of touch with their needs and that future principals need more effective professional development on effective education practices (Farkas, 2001). Amy suggests that such content as school law and finance would be more helpful once candidates are in administrative positions rather than in advance of such service. She also reports that her experience with teacher observation, supervision, and development was so much greater than that of her professors that she ended up teaching a portion of her preservice administrative program.

New Principal Support

Many of these new principals are receiving intensive induction support through the New Teacher Center's New Administrators Program. In a program that parallels that of the Santa Cruz New Teacher Project, beginning principals receive expert coaching and seminar support during their first two years on the job. Because these new principals understand the coaching process, they value it. Early research indicates that they are emerging as instructional leaders more quickly and with more confidence than colleagues who lack mentoring experience and induction support.

These principals, assistant principals, and curriculum leaders believe that their mentoring experience has been crucial to their effectiveness as education leaders. They believe that their mentoring experience was the single most formative factor in their development. Jack said,

As a classroom teacher, I learned how to do the right thing for kids in my own little universe. As an assistant principal, I mostly learned how to manage activities and discipline. It was as a beginning teacher mentor that I learned what good teaching really looks like and how to work with other adults to grow as an individual and as a community.

The Key to Student Success

All students deserve competent and caring teachers, all beginning teachers deserve competent and caring mentors, and all teachers deserve competent and caring administrators. When

induction programs tap the experience and wisdom of veteran teachers to improve the experience of new teachers, they also open the door for the veteran teachers to emerge as school leaders with an unusual depth of experience in teacher development. Teacher development is the key to student success. We encourage school districts to look to induction programs to develop teacher leaders and administrators capable of placing teacher development at the center of school improvement.

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Ellen Moir (moir@cats.ucsc.edu) is Executive Director and **Gary Bloom** (gsbloom@cats.ucsc.edu) is Associate Director of the New Teacher Center, University of California-Santa Cruz, 725 Front St., Ste. 400, Santa Cruz, CA 95004; www.newteachercenter.org.

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