

The Principal's Role in Supporting New Teachers

Nancy Protheroe

A supportive principal can make the difference between success and frustration for first-year teachers.

IN BRIEF

The importance of the principal's role in making a teacher's first year successful is documented in this Research Report, which examines the needs of new teachers and how they can be addressed. It discusses problems related to their inexperience and how principals can instill in them the confidence they often lack.

Most beginning teachers come to the profession with energy, enthusiasm, high hopes, and the strong desire to help children learn. Yet, all too often, potentially excellent teachers are overwhelmed by their first year in the classroom, as reported by a well-trained and dedicated new teacher:

> *I had been warned repeatedly that my first year would be tough. Yet I still found myself dismayed by just how physically and emotionally exhausting teaching could be.… There were days when I felt overwhelmed, inadequate, and alone…* (Apakupakul 2006).

The importance of the principal's role in making a teacher's first year successful is highlighted in a report by the Public Education Network (2003):

> *New teachers working in schools run by principals they describe as effective and competent had a much easier*

transition into teaching. Teachers listed several attributes and behaviors of principals and other school administrators that made a difference to their introduction to teaching. The first was accessibility. Teachers gave high marks to principals who made it easy for them to ask questions and discuss problems, and those that provided them with assistance, guidance, and solutions.

In addition, the new teachers "greatly appreciated being observed in the classroom…[and] getting direct feedback and guidance." Finally, "support from principals for [teachers'] disciplinary decisions" was another important factor in job satisfaction.

The U.S. Department of Education conducted a series of focus groups with teachers as they completed their first year of teaching. These teachers were clear about the positive impact that principals could have—and what they want from their principals:

A supportive principal can play a key role in helping first-year teachers find a mentor teacher, take part in professional development, and make full use of planning time. In addition to giving teachers formal opportunities to learn and collaborate, principals boost morale simply by taking time to work alongside new teachers.…[In the words of one of the new teachers,] "principals should be accessible, not just someone in the building.… They should be more of a sounding board for teachers" (DePaul 2000).

"Although new teachers usually bring with them enthusiasm, high aspirations, and fresh ideas, they lack the expertise that can only come with experience."

Responses to a survey of new teachers conducted by McKerrow (1996) highlighted another need that principals should consider when developing support systems for new teachers. These teachers wanted "to be listened to and 'made to feel successful'" as they refined their abilities to teach and manage their classrooms.

Where Can Principals Help?

Researchers at the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers have studied factors influencing new teacher morale and, ultimately, retention. They found some consistent problem areas that could be addressed by principals:

As novices, [the new teachers] were eager to watch the experts and develop their craft under guidance, but only a small number of our respondents had access to the wisdom of experienced colleagues…Schedules rarely provided regular time for joint planning and observation, nor was such collaboration expected or encouraged. Meetings were



designed to dispense information to individuals, rather than to share struggles and strategies (Johnson *et al.* 2001).

Former teachers with no more than five years experience, who had left the profession for reasons classified as other than "life stage issues," felt the following would have been valuable:

- Daily time to interact with mentors or other teachers;
- Mentoring characterized as "non-judgmental, constructive and compassionate";
- More information about the expectations of school leaders in regard to student discipline, time management, and curriculum-related issues, such as lesson plan development; and
- A support group of teachers with whom they could "vent" and who would provide motivation during tough times (National Retired Teachers Association and Harris Interactive 2003).

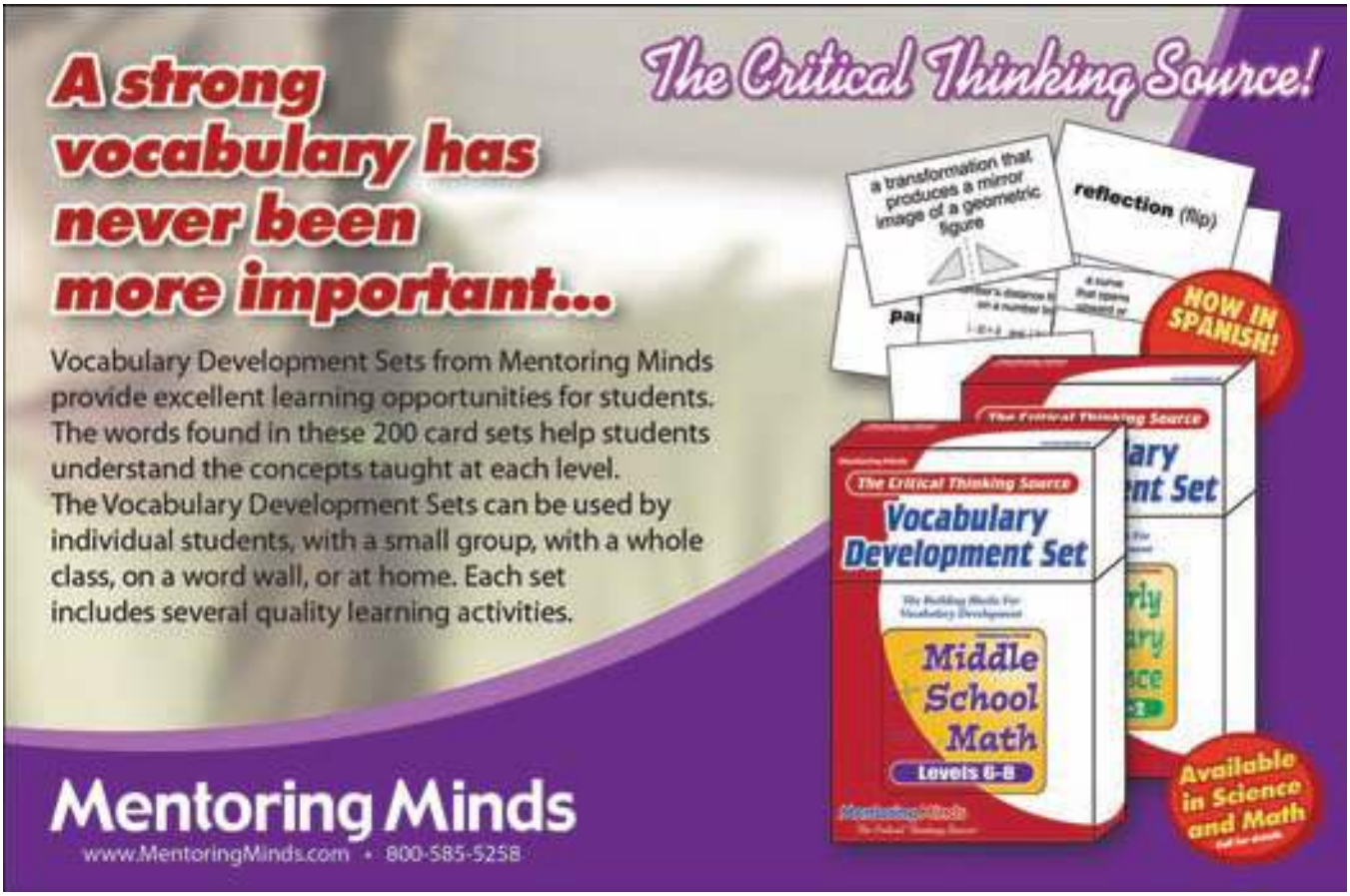
Both principals and new teachers responding to a survey conducted as part of the MetLife Survey of the American Teacher project emphasized the importance of mentoring and learning from more experienced teachers. However, two in 10 new teachers (19 percent) were not assigned a more experienced teacher as a mentor when they began teaching. About one in 10 new teachers had no one to go to for advice and guidance about teaching the curriculum (12 percent), classroom management (9 percent), or administrative responsibilities (9 percent) (Markow and Martin 2005). While many districts have mentoring programs, principals must be prepared to fill this need if one is not available—or if the mentoring provided is ineffective.

Limitations of New Teachers

Although new teachers usually bring with them enthusiasm, high aspirations, and fresh ideas, they lack the expertise that can only come with experience. Reynolds' (1995) review of research on "learning to teach" identifies four common limitations of beginning teachers that can be addressed and remedied with effective support. These teachers often:

- Have difficulty seeing the pedagogical implications of student differences and tailoring materials and instruction accordingly;
- Are not able to "read" a class environment and establish appropriate rules and routines;
- Do not know a subject in ways that allow them to provide explanations to their students; and
- Analyze their own teaching in ways that appear to be less focused than experienced teachers' reflections.

Confidence is another critical component of successful instruction that new teachers sometimes lack. Traditionally, "novice teachers have been expected to accept initial feelings of inadequacy, isolation, and helplessness as a normal 'rite of passage' into teaching" (Mitchell



et al. 1997). However, more effective approaches provide support to help beginning teachers more quickly develop a sense of growing competence, which in turn can have a significant impact on their effectiveness in the classroom.

For example, a concern expressed by many new teachers is their sense they are not well prepared to provide effective instruction to all students in today's increasingly diverse classrooms (Johnson, Berg, and Donaldson 2005). For such teachers, additional on-the-job training related to working with students from a variety of cultures may increase their effectiveness *and* increase their satisfaction with teaching.

As she reflected on her first year of teaching, one teacher offered the following advice for principals:

- *Remember that this is not only a professional transition for the new teacher, but also a transition into a new culture and social setting. Encourage, reinforce, and praise the beginning teacher often.*
- *Remember how vulnerable new teachers can feel and how hard it can be for them to ask questions. Do everything you can to assure them that questions are not a sign of incompetence or weakness.*
- *Stress practicality in the information you supply to beginning teachers. New teachers need "how to" information for their school and district. Although these questions may be addressed in procedural guides, the beginning teacher may not have the time to read them all. These concerns need to be addressed verbally and in concise written form for easy reference.*
- *Faculty meetings can be confusing for new teachers—for instance, when acronyms or abbreviations for program names are used. A handout with an explanation of these terms, current projects, and other pertinent information will help the new teacher to participate more actively in faculty meetings.*
- *Recognize the extra work that new teachers must do and the extra stress that they experience. Often, new teachers are overloaded with the most difficult classes or special extracurricular duties. This is exactly the wrong approach! By giving new teachers every break possible with their workload, you will help preserve the valuable enthusiasm and idealism that they bring to the classroom* (excerpted from McInnis 1990).

"...two in ten teachers... were not assigned a more experienced teacher as a mentor when they began teaching."

Davis and Bloom (1998) feel one aspect of principal support should be to "help the new teacher to focus his/her professional growth activities. Inservice is best when it is relevant to day-to-day practices." Finally, they suggest principals should "be clear about expectations and perceptions. New teachers need to know what is expected of them and what kinds of support they can expect from you." ■

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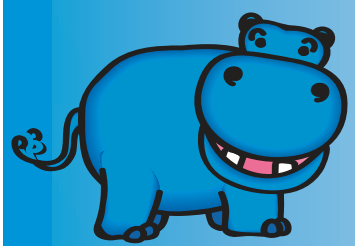
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WEB RESOURCES

Summarized in this brief report, *Supporting New Teachers: The View from the Principal's Office,* are responses from principals concerning questions about recruiting, hiring, and retaining new teachers. The principals discuss problems of new teachers as well as supports they believe would help.

www.rnt.org/resources/supporting+new+teachers.pdf

The opinions expressed by new teachers in five districts are summarized in *The Voice of the New Teacher.* Major topics include participants' views on school leadership, induction programs, mentor teachers, and the challenge of teaching diverse learners.

www.publiceducation.org/pdf/Publications/Teacher_Quality/Voice_of_the_New_Teacher.pdf

Tapping the Potential: Retaining and Developing High-Quality New Teachers provides a brief overview of teacher retention from the perspective of new teachers.

http://www.all4ed.org/publications/TappingThePotential/TappingThePotential.pdf

Part of the ongoing effort of MetLife to survey teachers about the conditions of their schools and of the teaching profession, *Transitions and the Role of Supportive Relationships* includes feedback from both principals and new teachers.

http://www.metlife.com/WPSAssets/161764185911187561 28V1FATS_2004.pdf



A PRINCIPAL'S DAY

Prayer Helps

I get up at 5 a.m. and begin my day with a prayer to St. Francis. I listen to a guided meditation CD, do yoga for 20 minutes, eat breakfast, and drive to school, where students have been arriving since 6:30 for our before- and after-school program. I arrive around 7 and check with the health assistant to find out if there are any teacher absences. I try to find a sub for regular education classes and if I can't, we rotate our art, music, P.E., and literacy specialists into the classrooms.

I check my e-mail and then do playground duty for around 30 minutes before making announcements and leading students in the Pledge of Allegiance. After delivering detention notices to students who have received discipline tickets, I walk through classrooms for short visits. I check my e-mail periodically during the day and answer phone calls from parents about issues related to their children.

Each Monday, I eat lunch with students who have been selected by their teachers for good behavior. For those whose behavior has not been good, I do detention duty at least once a week.

Much of my time each week is taken up by planning meetings and agendas for various school groups: a team leader group of 10; a reading leadership team of six; a school climate committee of six; a site council of six; office staff meetings of five; whole-staff meetings; and professional development meetings.

I conduct formal observations of every teacher twice a year, a process that requires three meetings: a pre-observation conference; the actual observation of 30 minutes; and a post-observation conference. If the teacher is on an improvement plan, I take the time needed to supervise intensive intervention and provide documentation.

During a typical day, there are always a few students who need to be removed from classrooms for disruptive behavior. These students must fill out a behavior reflection sheet, get a discipline ticket, and miss recess. I often have to call their parents. Students who display excessively aggressive behaviors on the playground are remanded to the front office and face in-school suspension.



Since I am the only bilingual person in the front office, I often handle questions and telephone calls from Spanish-speaking parents.

My day ends with PTO meetings, service commitments in the community, swimming, reading, and then a final period of meditation around 11 p.m. I reflect on how I have been of service to my students, parents and teachers that day, and pray that I can find ways to help those who are struggling. I also reflect on the abundance of love in my life, the gifts I have been given, and how I have used those gifts. I pray that I have used them wisely and that I may have the courage to change myself in positive ways tomorrow.

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C.W. Harris Elementary School is an urban school serving 1,095 students in grades K–6, of whom 90 percent are of Hispanic origin. It is a Title I school with 87 percent of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch.