

Mentoring Program Supports Collaborative School Culture

Students are not the only ones expected to learn in schools these days. Increasingly schools and districts are under pressure to ensure ongoing *teacher* learning. Given the advent of rigorous new Common Core State Standards, the ongoing drive to close achievement gaps, and increased focus on teacher evaluation, the need to ensure teacher effectiveness has never been greater.

A mentoring program that serves new teachers offers them the opportunity—starting with their first days in the classroom—to purposefully build their instructional skills. Aimed at developing and retaining novice teachers, this model was developed and refined over the past 20 years by Kathy Dunne and Susan Villani, teacher induction and development experts in WestEd’s Learning Innovations program.

“We lose between 30 and 50 percent of new teachers in this country within their first three years,” says Villani. “The goal of our mentoring model is to help novice teachers become intentional about building knowledge and skills, so that they grow, experience success, and stay in the profession.”

At the same time, the model offers an opportunity for exemplary teachers to expand their role by training to become mentors to new teachers. And the collaborative coaching dialog between mentor and novice that defines the model “has a way of spilling over into the broader school culture, transforming instructional conversations among experienced teachers and school leaders, as well,” says Villani.


Using Collaborative Coaching to Drive Effective Instruction

Dunne and Villani’s model, based on the Cognitive Coaching approach developed by education professors emeriti Art Costa and Robert Garmston, of California State University, Sacramento, is premised on a simple idea: to get off to a strong start, a new teacher collaborates with a skilled mentor to build the new teacher’s classroom knowledge and skills in a carefully structured approach.

To launch a sustainable mentoring program in a school or district, Dunne and Villani first train a group of highly effective teachers to serve as mentors, focusing heavily on developing their collaborative coaching skills. The most successful trainees from that group are selected to apprentice to Dunne and Villani over the next two years to become trainers of future mentors.

While mentoring is a long-standing approach to new teacher induction, traditionally the mentor’s role has been to show her or him how to navigate the practical aspects of teaching, often without

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opportunities to talk about teaching practice. A collaborative coaching approach, on the other hand, addresses practical concerns, but also emphasizes structured, focused conversations about developing instructional skills. The novice teacher's questions and ideas, along with the mentor teacher's classroom observations, help set the agenda for his or her development.

The mentor is trained to listen actively and ask probing questions to help the new teacher clarify and deepen her or his own thinking about challenges, and also generate ideas for becoming more effective in helping students learn. "These conversations between mentor and novice support the new teacher to become intentional in her or his practice," Dunne explains. "When teachers are intentional, they are self-reflective about their teaching goals, methods, and outcomes, so that when they have completed a unit of classroom instruction, they know what they did, why they did it, what they would do differently next time, and why."

Wendy Siebrands, a retired associate superintendent in School Administrative Unit #6 in New Hampshire, who coordinated a mentor program for her district, observes: "The [mentor trainees] learn how to act as mirrors for the mentees, reflecting back to them what the mentees are learning...And that reflection piece is extremely important because if the mentee does not own the change in the instruction that's taking place, then very little will change."

Melissa Lewis was in Siebrands's first group of mentor trainees. A former new teacher mentor and lead mentor trainer who is currently principal of Disnard Elementary School in SAU#6, she recalls that, "One of the greatest skills I learned during mentor training is how to be an active listener, how to probe into the thinking of others rather than just share my own thinking. The leadership skills I gained in the mentoring program impact me every day as a principal."


Being an exemplary teacher doesn't automatically translate into being an effective mentor. Dunne and Villani have identified a set of knowledge, skills, and dispositions for effective mentors, ranging from the practical—such as understanding new teacher needs and knowing how to ask effective questions—to the more theoretical, such as understanding the structure and value of the collaborative coaching model.

As mentors begin to work with new teachers, Dunne and Villani guide them in navigating among various approaches to coaching conversations—non-directive, collaborative, or directive—depending on how confident a new teacher is about the particular goal he or she is working on. "The mentor's ability to adapt her or his approach to the specific needs of the new teacher," Dunne says, "is the art of effective mentoring."

To support a new teacher's continuous skill improvement, the collaborative coaching cycle includes three steps: a planning conversation about a lesson the novice educator will teach, a mentor observation of the lesson, and a reflective debriefing conversation following the observation. Through successive coaching cycles, mentor and new teacher are each developing or honing their own reflective teaching practice.

Addressing the Broader School Culture

Many teachers who leave their school—or the profession—report having been "dissatisfied" with such issues as having too little prep time, lack of faculty influence, too little parent support, no opportunities for professional advancement, and too little time for collaboration.



“We are proactive in addressing some of these issues, not just by providing support and professional development for individual teachers, but also by thinking about the development of a school culture that is conducive to teachers wanting to stay,” says Dunne. “As mentors start learning and practicing coaching skills—such as reflecting on teacher practice, gathering data, asking questions without judgment—they often remark that ‘everyone in the building should be doing this work.’”

“We’ve discovered that the role of the teacher leaders starts to expand beyond the mentoring program,” says Villani. For example, school administrators often ask teacher leaders to play a role in expanding the mentoring program to provide professional development in content areas, and to take leadership roles beyond the mentoring program to address the needs of the school and district.

Teachers are not the only ones whose roles shift when new norms take hold in the school. Working out new roles and responsibilities for mentors and new teachers requires learning for principals as well. “It is a culture shift to ask principals to move away from a paradigm of praising and judging, to one of coaching,” says Villani. “Many principals don’t know how to ask questions that promote reflection. We frequently provide them training in these skills.”

Setting the Basis for a Sustainable Program

High-quality teacher mentoring programs can be linked to reducing new teacher attrition by as much as 90 percent. Research, such as that reported on by Thomas M. Smith and Richard Ingersoll in the September 2004 issue of the *American Educational Research Journal*, shows that the duration and quality of mentoring programs matter, and that a high level of commitment by a school or district is an important determinant of that quality.

Dunne and Villani recommend that schools invest resources in providing sustained high-quality training for mentors. For example, in addition to a commitment to the initial three-year training cycle, they may recommend that beginning mentors meet before school starts for a week of intensive training, including several joint sessions with administrators and new teachers, so that all constituents learn the same information together. They may also suggest periodic meetings among mentors over the academic year so they can be a source of support for one another as they encounter new challenges.

Witnessing the positive effects of their mentoring program among the thousands of educators across the country with whom they’ve worked has affirmed Dunne and Villani’s beliefs that mentoring relationships and the reflective conversations about teaching that occur within them can move a school culture toward one focused on collaboration between and among teachers and the leaders who support them.

“Implementing our mentoring model is like planting a seed from which broader change can potentially grow,” says Villani. “When educators become intentional about improving teaching practices, and when their colleagues have the skills to help them reflect on how to become more effective, they grow individually and as a learning community. That’s good for teacher development and retention, and it’s good for enhancing collaborative culture.”

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