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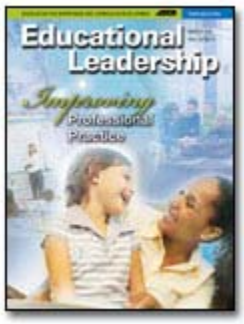
What New Teachers Really Need

Scott Mandel



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What first-year teachers say they need to survive on the job is often markedly different from what schools provide.

Monica quit. One year of teaching was more than enough for her. She had looked forward to teaching for years and did quite well in all of her education preservice classes. But she couldn't take it anymore. When her principal questioned her decision, she told him it was the stress. He nodded, shook her hand, wished her luck, and led her to the door.

However, it wasn't the kids. Monica related well to her students and truly enjoyed most of her classes. The stress was the result of everyday frustrations associated with her first year of teaching. No one seemed to understand what she was going through; no one was there to help her survive that first year.

Sure, the district offered her special workshops designed for new teachers. They had impressive titles and dealt with what the district considered important subjects for a teacher to master, including “Aligning Your Curriculum to the State Standards” and “Analyzing Student Data to Achieve Proficiency on State Exams.” Monica dutifully went to all of these mandatory workshops. She took the handouts and placed them in the trunk of her car. Then she sat on her couch at home and tried to figure out the problems she really needed help with—how to set up her classroom for the first day, or how to teach five hours of material in three hours.

Sadly, in the long run, Monica became another first-year teacher who didn't survive. It wasn't problems with the students that did her in; it wasn't the parents. It was the inadequacies of today's system of preparing and supporting new teachers.

New Teacher Mentoring: A Crucial Support

Regrettably, Monica's story is becoming commonplace. Since No Child Left Behind was enacted, school districts have felt forced to focus solely on testing. Virtually every statewide and districtwide curricular decision today is based on raising test scores. Consequently, nearly every education decision at the local school level involves “teaching to the standards.” This excessive focus on testing and standards has led to a lack of focus on the practical guidance and support that would help first-year teachers stay afloat.

New teachers are not thinking about raising scores on the standardized test in May; they are more concerned about getting through fifth period tomorrow. First-year teachers have one basic goal in mind—survival. Experienced educators tend to forget what it was like when

they were new to the classroom; they tend to get out of touch with what new teachers really need. And much of what new teachers need can only be provided through supportive interaction with veteran teachers.

Help from a trained, caring mentor is a crucial ingredient in helping new teachers survive their first year. Yet teacher mentoring programs are being eliminated in many states because of budget shortfalls; in California, state-funded mentoring programs have been eliminated entirely. The Los Angeles school district used to assign one experienced classroom teacher trained in mentoring to meet with every two new teachers 10 hours a month each. With recent budget cuts, the district now assigns 1 teacher to meet with 30 new teachers in a group once a month. New teachers in this district are clearly not getting the individual attention they used to get.

Even when mentor programs are well staffed, mentors can't help first-year teachers unless they understand and provide the kinds of information and support that new professionals really need. For mentoring to truly help new teachers, the agendas for mentoring sessions need to come more from the new teacher than from the mentor. A mentor is there to make the teacher's first year easier, not to teach the new professional how to teach or to push the school district's agenda.

What New Teachers Want to Know

During the last 15 years, as I have mentored new teachers and trained teacher mentors in Los Angeles schools, I asked approximately 50 other mentors about what kinds of help new teachers had requested, and what skills they had asked for help with. I also asked approximately 50 teachers in their second, third, or fourth year on the job what information and skills they had needed help with during their first year.

None of the first-year teachers said they wished they'd had more information on how to align the curriculum to state standards or on how to analyze standardized test scores. Rather, they wished that they'd had help with specific practical information and skills. The concerns of the new teachers fell within five broad areas:

- Setting up the classroom and preparing for the first weeks of school.
- Covering the required curriculum without falling behind or losing student interest.
- Grading fairly.
- Dealing with parents.
- Maintaining personal sanity.

The Classroom and the First Weeks

The information provided in the school handbook or in orientation meetings rarely goes far enough in addressing the myriad of questions that most new teachers have in their first weeks. The new teachers I interviewed most often mentioned such questions as,

- How do I arrange the physical classroom for the first week?
- What books and supplies do I need, and where can I get them? Do I have to buy them with my own money?
- What should I put on my bulletin boards? Do I leave them blank until I get student work?
- To whom do I go for help with discipline problems?
- How do I decide what to teach the first days and weeks of school? Should I give homework? When and how should I test students?

- Who is going to evaluate me—and how?

When I mentored new teachers in our district, I suggested they keep a notepad with them at all times during their first few weeks and jot down every practical question that occurred to them. Even in the absence of a formal mentoring program, schools should at least assign a veteran teacher to each new teacher to answer practical questions like these throughout the year—and, ideally, to answer questions that the teacher doesn't yet know to ask.

Covering the Curriculum

As the school year progresses, new teachers' questions turn to the mechanics of everyday teaching—specifically, how to keep students interested and maintain control in their classes while still covering the required material. New teachers often sense that what they are doing is not working but don't know how to fix it. Teachers begin to notice that they are calling on the same students during each class discussion or that discussions are not as rich as they had hoped. By the third month of school, new teachers realize that they are already behind in teaching the curriculum. Feeling pressure to cover the required curriculum in any possible way, teachers may cut out creative ideas they had planned to try. Deleting creativity often leads to student boredom and discipline problems.

Mentors should model curriculum planning and time management. I often share with new teachers two strategies for keeping up with required content material while keeping lessons interesting. First, I recommend combining several teaching goals in one lesson or assignment, even across disciplines. For example, if one of your language arts goals is to teach research paper writing, use one of your social studies topics for content. Second, teachers can use homework not only for review, but also to introduce new concepts. If you have four sections of a social studies text to cover, cover three in class and assign one as homework. Review the basic concepts in class the next day.

Grading Fairly

Many teachers I interviewed said that they wished they had had more guidance on grading during their first year. New teachers want to grade according to school policy, but still be fair to their students. They want the grades to be accurate, but not to hurt a student's self-esteem. And they don't want to have to spend hours figuring out grades.

Efficient and fair grading, one of the most fundamental teacher tasks, is not a skill normally taught in education classes or new teacher workshops. Somehow, our education system seems to assume that new teachers already know effective grading techniques or can easily learn them on their own. But fair grading is complicated, as the following example shows:

> A new teacher gave five tests, each worth 100 points. She graded on a scale in which 90 or above = *A,* 80–89 = *B,* 70–79 = *C,* 60–69 = *D,* and below 60 = *F*. One student scored as follows: 95 (*A*), 85 (*B*), 30 (*F*), 80 (*B*-), 20 (*F*). With an *A,* two *B*s, and two *F*s, the student expected an overall grade of *C*. However, when the teacher numerically averaged the five grades, she came up with an average of 62, which figured out to a grade of *D*-. The teacher knew that this result was mathematically correct, but it somehow didn't seem fair to this student and she didn't know why.

So they are not regularly stymied by grading dilemmas like this one, new teachers need explicit, practical training in grading techniques from professional development early in the school year or from a teacher mentor. The inexperienced teacher in this example did not realize that by using straight averages with grades, she unfairly weighted the *F*s. If she converted all *F*s below 50 to a straight 50 for averaging purposes, she could recalculate the student's test scores as 95 + 85 + 50 + 80 + 50 and divide the sum by 5. This would result in a grade of 72 or *C*-, a much fairer grade for this student.

Dealing With Parents

Many of the new teachers I interviewed said they had wanted more guidance for dealing with parents, especially at conference time. Professional development for new teachers should address this need early in the school year. Mentors might, for example, role-play possible parent meeting scenarios with new teachers. I also share with new teachers the following principles for dealing with parent conferences:

- Think of the parent as an ally, not an enemy (the golden rule of conferencing).
- Always begin the conference with a positive comment about the student.
- Insist on the presence of the student. When parents report to their child what the teacher said in the conference, the child may contradict or object to what was said; miscommunication and mistrust may result.
- Use positive statements when discussing the student's personal qualities. If you must make negative statements, make clear you are talking about the student's behavior, not his or her character.
- Be objective. Use numerical facts more than adjectives.
- Do not say anything you cannot defend objectively.
- Do not take verbal abuse. If you are not treated with respect, end the conference or send for assistance.

Maintaining Personal Sanity

One of the central concerns of new teachers is dealing with the daily stress of the job. New teachers need to learn how to deal with their stress as much as they need to learn how to teach. Otherwise, they burn out and leave the profession. Notice how many new teachers you see in your school's teacher lunchroom during breaks. Instead of taking breaks, new teachers often are in their rooms, trying to keep their heads above water with grading, planning, and paperwork. Working in the classroom without a break ultimately leads to physical and mental exhaustion.

A supportive mentoring relationship can ease stress, and mentors should help new teachers learn to reduce anxiety. I share the following strategies for alleviating stress with every new teacher:

- Prepare well for your lessons.
- Keep your grading and paperwork up-to-date, even if you must do so before school or on a weekend. Allowing paperwork to accumulate is a great source of stress.
- Seek advice from experienced teachers. You will learn that your classroom problems are not unique, and that others have successfully resolved similar problems.
- Make a list (realistically short) of what you hope to accomplish in a day or throughout the week. There is great mental satisfaction in crossing off items.
- Avoid becoming isolated. Socialize with your colleagues, talking about nonschool subjects, every day.
- Accept your mistakes as learning experiences. New teachers who never fail in their lessons are the ones who never try anything new.

Practical and Ongoing Teacher Prep

Ideally, new teachers should be taught some of these practical “survival skills” in their teacher preparation programs. Teacher education courses should address new teachers'

concerns and give preservice teachers strategies for finding the answers to these kinds of questions on their first teaching assignment. Too many new teachers are being thrust into classrooms with minimal practical teaching knowledge or even actual student teaching experience. This is especially true in accelerated credential programs.

After new teachers begin teaching, their schools should continue the process of helping them meet practical classroom challenges. In addition to mentors, schools might provide monthly professional development workshops on timely issues: for example, a workshop on conducting a positive parent conference in the weeks before conferencing or a session on how to figure out grades before the first report cards are due. The content of professional development workshops must derive from the expressed needs of new teachers themselves.

New teachers' needs differ markedly from those of more experienced teachers. Keeping the status quo will only result in continued new teacher attrition. We must provide new teachers with the kind of information they most need to make it through their first year. Otherwise, we will continue to lose the Monicas of our profession.

Scott Mandel teaches English, history, and musical theater at Pacoima Middle School in Pacoima, California; 818-970-7445; **mandel@pacificnet.net**. He is author of *The New-Teacher Toolbox: Proven Tips and Strategies for a Great First Year* (Zephyr Press, 2003).
