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WHO HELPS THE “NEWBIES”? SUPPORTING NEW TEACHERS

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It's late August when the dreams begin again, each one signaling summer's end and school's beginning. Each dream is a variation on the same theme: the combined exhilaration and anxiety that accompany each new school year.

Jim Burke, *The English Teacher's Companion*, 2nd ed., p. 1

Nightmares in August may be a recurring phenomena of classroom teachers or a story we all (like Burke) like to tell to new teachers. True or false, however, the reality is that starting school each year can be as anxiety-producing as it is exciting. And while that may be true for experienced teachers like Burke, the anxiety is multiplied manyfold for new teachers. That is why I have been concerned about the decline of mentoring programs for new teachers that blossomed during the heyday of “School Improvement.” I was surprised to hear some first-year teachers say that they weren’t assigned to mentors. If a department chair or kind-hearted teacher in the department doesn’t take on this role, first-year teachers may be left without support or guidance. Some new teachers I talked to reported finding help given willingly whenever they asked, and some reported feeling like intruders. Even when help was forthcoming, these new teachers found the weeks between their hiring and the first day of school to be the time when they most needed the help of a mentor; whereas, even when a school had a

mentoring program in place, that help was rarely available before school started.

I teach and mentor pre-service teachers, but I rarely had the opportunity to keep in touch with them after they graduated. By then, my attention had turned to the next group of students. I did not know what my former students were experiencing unless we happened to make contact at a conference or by chance. I am now being purposeful about keeping in touch with some of these new teachers, and I am finding that their immersion into teaching often feels like being thrown into cold water. While the message isn’t “sink or swim,” the feeling is sometimes the same as if it were. Furthermore, even when teachers get their bearings, there is still much to learn.

New teachers especially need planned support during the first semester. The learning curve is treacherous and it is a time when many find themselves going “off the road.” In addition, support should continue to be available by invitation during the first year. Ideally, mentoring programs should be planned and carefully set up and explained when a teacher is hired. Sadly, this is rarely the case. The hiring process is time-consuming for administrators and once the job is done, they often look forward to some time off before they begin the next school year. Veteran teachers also have their summers planned. Unfortunately, newly hired teachers are often left to communicate with office secretaries.

Furthermore, during the school year, administrators are spread thin, and sometimes their connection with first-year teachers comes only with the required periodic observations. These might result in positive, non-judgmental critiques or they may feel to the new teacher like receiving a report card with “Areas for Improvement” not being options. In a few cases, new teachers have learned too late that requests for help are seen by some colleagues and administrators as signs of weakness or lack of preparation.

Teachers already on the staff, whether recently hired themselves or long-time veterans, may not feel comfortable sharing their own lesson plans and ideas for many reasons. Too often, schools lack a clearly defined curriculum even for courses with

multiple sections. It is a lucky first-year teacher who feels fully informed and well supported. There are some schools with mentoring programs firmly established even for the summer. There are schools with curricula well-defined and in writing so that the new teacher has a guide for planning, and there are administrators who are always there and always supportive. These are not the norm, however, and new teachers are paying the price.

A 2002 report by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, *No Dream Denied: A Pledge to America's Children*, reported that America's schools lose about the same number of teachers as they hire each year. In the 2000-2001 school year, there were 539,778 departures. Of those 287,370 did not move to another school, they left teaching completely. Retiring was only the fifth of the top reasons given for leaving. The NCTAF study determined poor salary was the number one reason, but poor administrative support was number two. In addition, the report indicated that "beginning teacher attrition is a serious problem" (NCTAF). By the end of the fifth year, 46% of new teachers have left teaching. NCTAF recommends three remedies: high quality teacher preparation, mentored induction during the first three years, and small professional learning communities (NCTAF).

NCTAF's three recommendations hit home with me. I feel I am part of a high quality teacher preparation program, and I volunteer time to review other programs in the state, but I began to realize that my responsibility for my students might not end when they are handed their long-sought diplomas and professional certification. I decided to see if the university's influence could be extended beyond graduation. Using a model that I had observed at another university, I applied for funds to form a cohort of recently graduated and certified English teachers whom I had worked with over several years while they prepared to teach. My main goal was to help them form a small professional community. I was gratified to receive the grant from a program at my own university, the GVSU Faculty Teacher and Learning Center.

My first step in forming the support community was to establish a listserv open only to me and members of the cohort. I felt it was important to give the new teachers a broader community, too, however, so I used grant funds to provide membership in the Michigan Council of Teachers of English. They would receive journals and newsletters with ideas and information about their profession. I also allocated funds for each teacher to attend a literacy conference.

The listsev began when the ten members were still student teachers. If a printout of every message were made, the first four months would reveal concern about job openings, questions about schools, advice on applying, and announcements of success in the search. Leanne Falconer describes those months of the search:

Although I was a little dubious about the idea of a cohort initially, I am so very glad that I joined! I liked the idea of interacting regularly with a group of professionals and having the opportunity to speak and write publicly. However, I did not anticipate that during the frantic search for a job this summer that the cohort would be such a system of support and encouragement. From discussing the frustration of having no job opportunities or having too many choices to make to debating the pros and cons of charter schools, the cohort has been invaluable to me both professionally and personally. Being a recent grad, I was not only new to the education profession, but also to professional life, and I found that I relied heavily on the cohort to help me evaluate the benefits and pitfalls of the various salaries, benefit packages, and political messes that accompanied

the various schools I was interested in.

During this initial period, six members of the cohort were elated to find teaching jobs. They quickly experienced the anxiety of struggling to understand curriculum, resources, and lesson plans. The month before and after the start of the school year is a stressful time in the life of a new teacher, yet many schools aren't prepared to provide much help. One new teacher reported asking other teachers for ideas, getting promises, but getting little of use. Those who did have mentors didn't establish a solid relationship with them until several weeks into the school year, and several found themselves with no formal mentoring program. (All of them, now in their second semester of teaching, however, feel solidly a part of their new staffs) While the teachers reported being made to feel welcome and being given help, they were surprised to find that they had a lot of responsibility when it came to what to teach. Kim Stover remembers those first weeks:

Anticipation, frustration, excitement, and exhaustion are the feelings that have become a reality for me as a first year teacher. Working in a new school, with new students, new staff and new curriculums to deal with can become overwhelming at times, and although I have been lucky to have a good support system to help me in times of need, I'm thoroughly satisfied with my decision to be a member of the GVSU English Cohort.

Speaking from my own experience, it is so nice to be in contact with those that I was close to during the early stages of teaching. It is a comforting feeling when I can call on my former classmates, now mostly teachers, to help me with any question I may have. I have used

the cohort to my advantage this past year in several ways. As a first year teacher, it is hard to find time to read for other purposes beyond preparing materials to teach, so there have been more times than one that I have consulted the cohort for titles of young adult literature and novel choices that my students may enjoy.

I also used the cohort in the early stages of job hunting to inquire about any openings that others may have heard of. I believe the most productive aspect of being a part of the cohort is when we are able to meet together informally to talk about our experiences –our triumphs, our struggles, and most importantly, the different teaching strategies that we have found to be successful or unsuccessful. It is helpful as a first year teacher to be able to speak with other first year teachers. Teachers remember their first year, although most just want to forget it, so to be able to talk to those that are treading the same path is very beneficial. I'm thankful that I am still in contact with those that I began the journey of teaching with, as I feel that these friends will be there forever to lend a helping hand and will understand completely my feelings throughout all the stages of teaching.

Our cohort is now almost a year old. We have gathered twice this school year for talk and lunch. Requests for teaching ideas and titles of novels have gone through the listserv. The new teachers have gained their stride and settled into a routine that while still rigorous is at least accomplishable. They are starting to recognize that in their second

year they will have a year's worth of work, experience, and materials to rely on, and that they will be able to accomplish more. As Kim said, they look to one another for the support that can only come from someone going through the same experience. Sara Taylor also stresses how important that support is:

Participating in the cohort program has been a positive experience. Oftentimes new teachers are not given the support they need to be successful their first few years of teaching. When students finish college, the support group of fellow students formed during those years can often disappear as people find jobs and become engrossed in the first year of teaching. As a new teacher, I am faced with struggles every day in my classroom. The program has given me the opportunity to share ideas with other new teachers, and also to devise solutions to problems that may occur in the classroom. Oftentimes a conversation with these other teachers will spark an idea that I can format to fit into my classroom. I also enjoy the opportunities provided to attend various conferences. As schools become more budget conscious, funding for these activities may suffer. The cohort program provides the opportunity to attend these conferences, and to learn fresh ideas and methods to use in the classroom.

Six members of the cohort are employed as teachers, one is working for VISTA and another is attending graduate school. The other two members of the cohort did not find teaching positions and made themselves available for substitute teaching. As a substitute, Lindsay Thueme feels the cohort helps keep her involved in the profession.

I value the cohort because I am able to stay connected to individuals who have had similar experiences. The women of the cohort are comforting

and encouraging to me. I do not have a full time teaching position like most of the cohort members. However, their experiences keep me connected and help me maintain focus on my quest to work in the education field. I feel that I am lucky to be able to offer advice regarding teaching methods and tools when a cohort member writes to our listserv. It brings me joy knowing that I have helped a member with the complex task of teaching language arts.

When the cohort does come together, members share their stories. The responses are supportive and helpful. They can discuss similar experiences and tell how they handled a situation. Schools are compared and ideas given for possible programs, resources, or materials. At our last meeting, talk turned to future schooling, getting masters degrees and the pros and cons of starting those degrees soon. There was talk of how to handle the workload and family obligations. Book titles were shared and both YA novels and professional books were passed around the group. In May I plan to make visits to each of the six teachers in their schools so that I can better understand their situations. I hope that this will help me provide more specific suggestions to them as they move into their second year of teaching.

With so many other factors to consider, it may be difficult to conclude whether the cohort can have an effect on teacher retention, but the women in this cohort feel it has been one positive as they launch their new careers or continue in their quest for their niche in the educational field. I'll leave it to Sarah Welch to sum up.

I am a first-year teacher and the youngest staff member at my school. I teach high school students whose ages are only slightly removed

from my own in the grander scheme of life. I am often mistaken for a student in the hallways on casual Fridays, although the error is typically accompanied by a respectful apology. I have been referred to as a “newbie” on numerous occasions, and once as “kiddo” in a conversation with the principal, who no doubt meant it good-naturedly. I am sure that most new teachers, as well as many seasoned veterans, can relate to these experiences.

This is not to say that the transition from college student to educator has been harsh and disappointing. On the contrary, I feel a clear sense of satisfaction with my chosen direction. I simply want to emphasize my belief that the real value of belonging to the GVSU English Cohort is not in the prestige of being associated with a leading university, the dedication of its members to the field of English, or the grant that provides opportunities for development in the face of budget woes. It is much more personal. It is the knowledge that despite the forces that daily threaten too outweigh the joys of teaching, I can walk into my classroom and say with confidence the two things I most need to hear: I am a professional and I am not alone.

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