Mentoring and the Impact of Local Teacher Organizations

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The influence of all the forces and factors that affect education today are numerous and widespread. They include: accreditation agencies, state departments of education, foundation, civil rights groups, publishers, state policy makers, colleges and universities, state and national teacher organizations, media, research establishments, and many others. Perhaps overlooked, but the one that often has the most impact on the implementation of many educational aspects is the local teacher union/organization. They can, in effect, bring success or failure to an idea through local interpretations, negotiations, and implementation details.

Mentoring is one area where the local teacher union input seems to have great latitude. While there has been much written regarding the roles of mentors and the impact of mentoring programs (e.g., Little, 1990; Bendixen-Noe and Giebelhaus, 1997; Ganser, 1994; Huffman and Leak, 1986), how these roles are played out in the local school systems are often determined by local teacher organizations. These entities often negotiate the 'nuts and bolts' of the mentoring role as defined in local contracts.

The importance of mentoring programs have been addressed by both national and state teacher organizations. The 1998-99 National Education Association's (NEA) Resolutions emphasizes the impact of these programs. It states:

> The National Education Association believes that mentor programs are a means of enhancing the professional expertise of employees. The Association also believes that the planning, implementation, and evaluation of such programs must be negotiated or cooperatively developed and maintained by the school district and the local affiliate.

> The Association further believes that the duties and responsibilities of all parties must be clearly defined and uniformly administered. Mentors must be selected through a defined process with articulated criteria, be properly trained and compensated, and be provided with adequate time to fulfill their responsibilities. The state or local authority has the obligation to provide hold-harmless protection.

> The Association further believes that any documentation that results from the mentoring process must be confidential and the sole property of the person mentored, and must not be included in the participant's personnel file (p. D-9).

This resolution seems to emphasize a movement in the past decade by the NEA and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) towards the idea of professional unionism. This perspective views teachers as professionals who uphold high teaching standards and who understand the interdependency of workers and local school authorities. Helping local unions take a more active role in educational reform is fundamental in this movement (Peterson, 1997). Mentoring is viewed as one element in this "union led effort to restructure the nation's teachers' unions to promote reforms that will ultimately lead to better learning and higher achievement for America's children. The primary goal . . . is to create a new union model that can take the lead in building and sustaining high performing schools for all students in an increasingly complex and diverse world" (NCEA, 1994).

Beginning in 2002, Ohio law mandates that every school district who hire entry level teachers establish and maintain an induction year program that will aid these individuals in their professional development (Ohio Administrative Code 3301-24-04). Guidelines and specifics are minimal and are left to the local school district. To help facilitate this program, grant monies have been available so school districts have an opportunity to develop and refine their interpretation of what mentoring programs look like and how they are effective.

At a recent leadership conference of the Ohio Education Association (OEA), I was invited to help conduct mentor training. The OEA (1997) has identified the development of mentoring and peer assistance programs as important to having and maintaining well-trained teachers. The leadership conference is comprised of local teacher organization members and officers who gather information to take back to their respective school districts. Many of these items are often newly legislated elements or current issues and/or trends which will probably be negotiated in future contracts. During the mentor training, concerns and issues emerged emanating from the mandated mentoring soon to be required of school districts who hire entry year teachers. The influence of the local teacher union/organization was highly evident.

To no-one's surprise, the local contract appears to hold an important key to the operation of the mentoring program. Many individuals felt the need to become better informed as to the intent of the legislation so they would meet compliance standards. While many saw the benefit of mentoring programs for beginning teachers, the concerns seemed to center around several areas, which included: money, defining the mentoring role, mentor selection, training, scheduling, and administrative support. While there appears to be very little written on teacher unions and their role in mentoring programs, there is an abundance of literature on mentoring available. This should help inform

local teacher organizations in their quest to develop, refine and implement mentoring programs. As a result, this paper will attempt to address issues that unions will face as they work through this process.

Finances

Money was mentioned as the vehicle necessary for the true success of local mentoring programs. Teachers felt they were already having difficulty in finding time to complete all their current tasks and that the aspect of taking on one more job, such as mentoring, was daunting. Receiving pay for what was being mandated as a critical component in a beginning teachers' professional development is viewed as vital for a favorable mentoring program. Teachers fear money, or rather the lack of money, will limit the amount of release time necessary for completing the duties seen as essential to their role as mentor. One of those roles is observing beginning teachers in their new role and providing constructive feedback. Without adequate release time, the coaching element of mentoring could become nonexistent. Since many schools are already struggling with inadequate funding, the issue appears insurmountable. Teachers voiced the opinions that this could result in lower pay and pay raises, fewer resources for their classrooms, and little or no money available for professional development for teachers beyond their entry year. With much nodding of agreement from others, one local representative said, "There is only so much money. If we negotiate that money to serve mentoring programs and mentors, it has to come from somewhere. Something will have to give. Something else, equally as important, won't receive funding because of this new mandate—especially since there are currently no line items in the state budget to help support it."

Relying on outside funding sources may lead to the future demise of mentoring programs once those monies are gone or no longer are allocated to induction programs. This type of mentality often stops individuals and school systems from conducting creative problem solving and reduces their sense of ownership in a mentoring program. Reality tells us there will never be enough funding available or allocated for all the programs deemed important in education.

Perhaps the bigger issue is can schools afford to not financially support their mentoring programs. A lesson from business may be one we need to adhere. Many organizations are instituting formal mentoring programs as a cost-effective way to upgrade skills, enhance recruitment and retention and increase job satisfaction (Jossi, 1997). Since recent reports have indicated we lose up to of all beginning teachers to attrition and we may be facing teacher shortages in many content areas due to retirements, we may need to look at the area of financing in a different way. Instead of saying "How can we afford mentoring programs?", we probably should be saying instead, "How can we NOT afford mentoring programs."

The Mentor Role

Defining the mentoring role beyond the vague legal mandate will also be important to local teacher organizations. Individuals stressed the need for each school district to personalize the mentoring program to fit their local needs and situations. Concern was voiced about the mentoring role becoming too cumbersome for a person to handle, if additional responsibilities were added to it. They say this was a real possibility, especially if money was allocated to mentors. They also wanted assurance that they would be seen as a mentor, not an evaluator.

Roles of teacher mentors have been addressed in the literature. Huffman and Leak (1986) found effective mentors provided positive reinforcement, moral support and someone who would listen with understanding. More recently, Ballantyne, Hansford and Packer (1995) identified four important roles mentors must undertake in order to be effective. These include: (1) task related assistance, (2) problem solving assistance, (3) personnel support, and (4) critical reflection and feedback on teaching. In several studies (Wilkinson, 1994; Ballantyne, et al., 1995; Harnish, 1994; McNamara, 1995; Huling-Austin and Murphy, 1987) beginning teachers noted areas in which mentors were most helpful. Information regarding school routines and policies was deemed necessary. Additionally, help in lesson planning, management and teaching strategies were highly valued.

Mentor Selection

Mentor selection will be critical to a program's success. Many local union representatives were concerned how mentors would be chosen so that indeed the 'master' teachers would be available to help beginning teachers. Discussion emanated that obvious selection criteria such as seniority or "just the desire" to serve as a mentor was not always appropriate. Representatives were very honest in stating that number of years teaching or the interest in helping others often would not constitute a good mentor. Many examples of practicing teachers who fit these elements were presented. Additionally, others were mentioned who would probably want to become a mentor especially if additional money was attached to that role. Individuals were concerned how the mentor's role could be rotated so that training was available, everyone would get a chance to participate in that role, and no-one would get "burned out". It appeared that the same individuals usually volunteer at many local school districts for everything. The problem of mentor selection being viewed as a political decision was presented, since many seemed able to identify teachers who often were selected for knowing someone in a position of power rather than for their expertise in the classroom. Finally, apathy was mentioned as a problem for many of the teachers in their local school systems. The participants feared that perhaps they would get no volunteers for the mentor role since it often

appeared that no-one seemed to want to do more than what they were required to do.

Identifying individuals who will be good mentors is vital to the success of a mentoring program. Literature once more may guide local unions in deciding how selection of mentors can be handled. Much has been written regarding characteristics and skills identified as necessary. Competencies mentor teachers need to possess include: knowledge about and use of effective classroom management, good communication skills including the ability to give constructive criticism and provide positive feedback, successful teaching, willingness to commit time, knowledge of progressive teaching strategies, ability to help beginning teachers in critical reflection, ability to be flexible about their role as a mentor as the novice teacher develops, knowledge about their school's and district's policies, procedures, curriculum and courses of study, and remaining open to their own personal and professional growth and development (Wilson and Ireton, 1995-96; Butler, 1987; O'Dell, 1987; Fletcher, 1995; Ballantyne, et al., 1995; Rowley, 1999; Gordon, 1990; Heller and Sinder, 1991).

Mentor Training

Mentor training was also identified as an item that could be impacted by contract negotiations. Comments dealt with the amount of money available for training, the quality of training and how much training was necessary for a successful mentoring program. Many ideas were tossed about regarding this area but remained even more elusive than some of the other areas. Most did agree, however, that training was essential.

Training for mentors is critical. Research has found that when these individuals receive no formal training or compensation they often dis not follow through with their assigned tasks (Kilgore and Kozisek, 1988). However, mentors who were part of formal training programs with follow-up activities were more successful not only in their role but in helping beginning teachers in becoming more effective in their teaching (Ganser, 1995; Hawley, 1990; Warren-Little, 1988; Theis-Sprinthall, 1986; Giebelhaus and Bowman, 1997; Kennedy, 1991). Areas in which mentors should receive training include supervision (Hart, 1985), teacher development, beginning teacher problems, and adult development (O'Dell, 1987), and knowledge of and skill in recognizing effective teaching practices (Giebelhaus and Bowman, 1997).

Scheduling of Mentor Visits

Scheduling of classes so a mentor could observe the beginning teacher was seen as a potential obstacle. Teachers were concerned as to how this would or could occur if observations were indeed part of the mentor's responsibility. If release time for mentors was difficult to obtain, scheduling was touted as the next best option. There were,

however, several looming limitations. If the mentor and protégé were in separate buildings it would be extremely hard to use one's planning period to travel to another school, observe the beginning teacher and then return to one's classroom in time for the next class period. Often, in elementary schools, specials such as art, music or physical education are not in a block of time but are often in 20 or 30 minute segments scattered throughout the day and the week. This would make is extremely difficult to arrange suitable schedules. Middle school practitioners stressed the possible hardship of giving up team planning time so they could observe. They felt that as team members they would be 'letting their team down.' Teachers concluded that while observations could work through careful planning, it would be important to explore other options so the best alternative could be utilized.

Creativity in scheduling will certainly become a necessity as schools either begin or continue programs in mentoring. While teachers identify scheduling as a potential barrier (Osten and Gidseg, 1998), many school systems have been able to work around this obstacle with much success. Perhaps through discussions with schools who have been successful in this area, other local unions will be able to identify how the potential problems of scheduling could not only be overcome but actually become an asset. One example could be in how schools compensate teachers when they "sub" during their planning time. Instead of actual payment, perhaps compensation time could be gained. For example, if there were eight class periods in a day, each time a teacher subbed for another teacher they could earn of a day in compensation time. This could then be used in addition to any other accrued time. Teachers may see this as more of a benefit than the often times paltry monetary sum given for subbing one class period. In this way teachers could sub for mentors and also be compensated for it. Mentors would then be freed up to visit and observe a entry year teacher.

Administrative Support

Administrative support was also indicated as important. Teachers said they wanted their administrators to understand the value of mentoring and to be flexible in defining individual mentor/protégé relationships. They expressed the desire that administrators be able to keep teacher evaluation very separate from mentoring but were afraid administrators at "crunch times" would want to combine the two, either through mentor input or by disregarding the 'true' role of the mentor. Conversations became a very "us against them" approach when talking about this element. Teachers felt administrators would use the mentoring program as just another bargaining chip when it was contract time.

The role of administrators in mentoring programs has not been addressed with much frequency in the literature. However, they can play an important role in the mentoring program's and beginning teacher's success. Brock and Grady (1997) found that often once mentors were assigned to en-

try year teachers, principals often discontinued their participation in the beginning teacher's induction year. Apparently they are assuming that things are under control since the new teacher has a mentor to go to when needed. Since many schools yield a high attrition rate of beginning teacher, administrators need to remain as a vital and visible entity in those first years of teaching.

Final Thoughts

Teacher organizations will have a powerful impact on mentoring programs. While certainly these organizations at both the state and national levels can help by giving guidelines and information, ultimately it is up to the local organizations to figure out a system that will work for them. While nothing mentioned is new, it bears remembering and revisiting. Often, educators who have moved from the local level fail to remember that regardless of how good an idea is, it is up to those teachers who are actively "in the trenches" to make things work. Local teacher organizations have a major impact and investment in developing and maintaining mentoring programs. This entity can easily be overlooked or underestimated, but are a 'real power' in vital decisions at the level where it counts.

In an address to the AFT/NEA Conference on Teacher Quality, Linda Darling-Hammond (1998) emphasized the importance of quality mentoring for beginning teachers. She stated those schools who provided expert mentors and gave them release time to coach beginning teachers have reduced attrition rates of beginning teachers by more than . She further encouraged unions to "work with school district officials to develop induction programs for beginning teachers, incorporating internships in professional practice schools and mentoring through peer review and assistance programs" (p. 10).

Local teacher unions/organizations are one of the key players in the successful implementation of mentoring programs. Additional key players include administrators, state legislators, colleges and universities, state department of educations, and other parties involved in education. By working together, these vital elements should be addressed so that it becomes a win-win situation for all.

While many local unions may be new in negotiating the how's, what's and why's of their mentoring programs, much information is readily available to assist them in their journey. Mentoring programs need to be designed based on informed decisions. In this way they have a greater chance of success. Research also needs to be conducted that would investigate the local unions role in these programs.

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