

# Leading to Success

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## PREVIEW

**Mentoring that serves as professional development must address content-area concerns as well as general classroom-management issues.**

**Pairs should be selected on the basis of shared beliefs about mentoring as well as similar content areas.**

**Mentors can help school leaders identify and eliminate school customs that threaten beginning teachers' success.**



**A**s a school leader, you will likely be called upon to guide the mentoring activities of teachers in your school. Because you are a secondary school leader, that guidance is complicated by your teachers' content specialties, each of which—whether it be science, mathematics, language arts, or another—has its own challenges when mentoring is considered. The challenges are often associated with teachers' efforts to engage students as active learners and portray the nature of the disciplines or domains that make up the content specialty.

Regardless of content specialty, however, all teachers face some challenges that you should consider when organizing and implementing mentoring in your school. Our recent investigation of teacher mentoring and extensive review of the mentoring and induction literature suggest three areas of potential importance:

- Mentoring content
- Mentoring practice
- Mentoring culture.

### **Content of Teacher Mentoring**

Mentoring to improve teacher effectiveness has tended to focus on beginning teachers' general needs, such as classroom and time management skills, basic teaching strategies, and school policies. But Britton (in press) recommends that the needs of beginning teachers be viewed as a

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continuum that ranges from content-specific to general. Even the general needs of secondary school teachers have content-specific aspects. For example, classroom management for science teachers includes guiding students' actions in the laboratory and during field study. Mentoring can certainly help beginning teachers learn the content that they do not understand, but mentors can also use their expertise to help new teachers make connections between course content and the lives of their students.

Less-obvious needs that also lean toward the content-specific end of the continuum include those that are related to course curricula. Beginning teachers often need assistance with sequencing and pacing, selecting and using resources, and aligning curricula with national and state standards. The need for assistance with course curricula was highlighted in the remarks of a beginning physical science teacher: "When I asked my mentor what I should be teaching next week, she told me fluid pressure, buoyancy, and hydraulics. I know a lot about these topics, but I needed her to tell me what the kids should learn and offer suggestions for the labs I should do and textbook pages I should assign. I really wanted to see her lecture notes and get copies of her PowerPoints and handouts. She didn't offer them, and I was afraid to ask."

Mentors and protégés are most often assigned by pairing a beginning teacher with a veteran teacher from the same content area. This practice has obvious advantages, but school leaders may sometimes overlook the fact that a single content area may be composed of multiple disciplines, each with its own knowledge base and unique pedagogy and curricular resources. For this reason, the preferred match for a beginning geometry teacher would be another geometry teacher, rather than an algebra teacher.

Sometimes, however, mentoring solutions must also consider how to help beginning teachers cope with teaching assignments that are outside of their primary content field. It is not unusual for a beginning high school teacher whose primary content field is biology to also be assigned to teach physical science or chemistry. In such cases, the teacher may benefit from working with multiple mentors or mentor teams who can provide assistance on the content and curricular needs that are specific to different courses.

### **Practice of Teacher Mentoring**

In addition to its promise of individual professional development, mentoring is a means of achieving institutional goals, such as those articulated in national and state standards. Regardless of the content area, standards-based instruction places greater emphasis on core concepts and principles, active student learning that involves thinking and finding out, and assessment that serves as feedback for learning and teaching—all of which are intended to support students' conceptual understanding. Unfortunately, such standards-based practices tend not to be important considerations in informal teacher mentoring or mentoring programs. Conversations between teachers and their mentors rarely, if ever, touch on topics of standards-based practice (Bradbury & Koballa, 2007). But addressing standards head-on can readily affect beginning teachers' abilities to implement standards-based practices (Luft, in press).

A significant challenge with mentoring that promotes standards-based reform is the understanding and skill of the mentors. Mentors who do not understand the expectations for student learning and teacher practice that are conveyed in standards documents or who are uncertain about how to teach in ways that reflect the standards may be reluctant to offer advice

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about those topics to beginning teachers. Giving mentors opportunities to participate in workshops, visit classrooms, or join learning communities to learn about the standards and what standards-based teaching and learning look like can go a long way toward helping them develop the expertise and comfort that they will need to guide beginning teachers.

Compatibility between beginning teachers and their mentors can also influence the effectiveness of mentoring. Similarities in content area and teaching assignment are natural considerations for compatibility because national and state standards tend to articulate the disciplinary foci and depth of understanding for different courses and grade level bands. Yet compatible conceptions of mentoring are also an important consideration. When beginning science teachers and their mentors think about mentoring in the same way, such as believing that it can be a means of enacting standards-based reform, their experiences tend to be more harmonious and productive than when their conceptions of mentoring are discordant (Koballa, Bradbury, Glynn, & Deaton, 2008).

### **Culture of Teacher Mentoring**

Teacher mentoring is part of the culture of schools, and the expectations that are conveyed through the culture can affect its success. For example, mentoring that supports standards-based teaching may run counter to the traditional culture of teaching, in which mentoring involves giving advice, not overtly questioning another teacher's practice or requesting evidence of student learning (Feiman-Nemser, 2006). Such practices represent a dramatic shift for a culture where personal courtesy, tolerance, and harmony are the norm.

In the spirit of standards-based reform, mentors are being called on to function as change agents, engaging beginning teachers in conversations that may be uncomfortable. Mentors who have this nontraditional vision of mentoring will need the support of like-minded school leaders and colleagues who

understand the purpose of their work and trust their decisions.

Culturally based expectations also seem to contribute to a problem that a number of mentors face: resistance from beginning teachers. Overwhelmingly, mentors attribute beginning teacher resistance to misunderstandings about mentoring. Far too many beginning teachers wrongly believe that mentors report what they see and hear to school administrators and that seeking advice is a sign of weakness that may lead to their dismissal.

Often coming to the forefront of mentors' work are school practices and traditions that benefit veteran teachers and school leaders at the expense of beginning teachers, such as assigning beginning teachers to courses outside of their primary content field, filling their classes with academically and socially challenged students, and insisting that they take on coaching and other cocurricular duties. Without identifying such practices and traditions, mentor teachers are not poised to learn about ways to make improvements. Once the threats to beginning teachers' success have been recognized, mentors can use their knowledge of their own school's culture and their collegial relationships with school leaders and fellow teachers to improve the working conditions of beginning teachers.

### **Recommendations for School Leaders**

The following recommendations may help you realize a mentoring program in your school that benefits beginning and veteran teachers in all content specialties and, most important, their students.

**Identify what beginning teachers should know and do.** Work with veteran teachers to generate a list of what a beginning teacher needs to know and be able to do to be successful at your school. Map the list along a continuum ranging from content-specific needs to general needs. Then decide who is the best person or persons to help a beginning



teacher develop the identified knowledge and skills. This activity may lead you and the teachers at your school to consider alternatives to the tradition of pairing one beginning teacher with one mentor.

**Support the mentors.** Recognize that veteran teachers who agree to serve as mentors may need help to ensure that the focus of their guidance is reform-based practice as conveyed in national and state standards. Help may come in the form of an expert-led workshop or a teacher learning community where standards documents are explored in depth and model lessons are prepared, tested, and discussed.

**Consult the experts.** Convene a group of veteran teachers and ask them to identify school practices and traditions that may threaten the success of beginning teachers. Then work with a group composed of staff members from different areas of the school to develop an action plan that addresses the threats and increases the likelihood of beginning teacher success.

**Clarify expectations.** Help beginning teachers and teacher mentors clarify their expectations for mentoring. One way to do this is to have beginning teachers and mentors write and exchange belief statements about course content, teaching and learning, and mentoring. For example, one teacher might write that teaching should be teacher-centered and primarily use lecture and that mentoring should involve the mentor telling the beginning teacher what to do. Another teacher might write that teaching should be student-centered and involve many questions and activities and that mentoring should be an opportunity for learning for both the mentor and the beginning teacher. This kind of information will suggest what mentoring arrangements should be attempted.

## Conclusion

Teacher mentoring has its unique challenges that are often associated with the teachers'

content specialties. For this reason, the involvement and support of school leaders is essential to teachers' mentoring success. There is much that school leaders can do to ensure that mentoring is an instrument of

teacher learning that leads to instructional effectiveness. Considering teacher mentoring through the lenses of content, practice, and culture can improve school leaders' effectiveness when guiding the mentoring activities of all teachers. **PL**

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