

Teacher Career Development in Charlotte-Mecklenburg

Built on the expectation that teachers' action plans coupled with mentors' feedback can stimulate more effective teaching, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg approach has won good first-year grades from both administrators and teachers.

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The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Career Development Plan has completed a most successful first year of operation. It all began in 1980, when three factors prompted school leaders to search for ways to attract and retain successful teachers:

1. Evidence from the National Education Association that a shortfall had developed between the number of college graduates entering teaching and the number of new teachers needed each year simply to handle normal growth, retirement, and the like.

2. Evidence from studies by Phil Schlechty and others, which indicated that the fewer college graduates who were entering teaching were not of the same high quality as had been the teachers of a previous generation.

3. The fact that the Charlotte-Mecklenburg system itself could anticipate the retirement of 70 percent of its teaching staff (4,200 teachers) over the next 15 years.

Thus began a four-year planning process designed to address the system's need. (See Schlechty and others, 1984/1985, for a description of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Career Development planning process and program.)

Program Overview

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg program is not a career ladder but a *career development plan*. It assumes that every beginning teacher, selected on the basis of appropriate preservice training, may become a successful, experienced teacher and be so rewarded



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financially. Thus, the heart of the program is staff development. All new teachers engage in training and practice over a four- to six-year period divided into four steps:

Provisional Teacher. Carefully supervised practice in those teaching activities that research has shown most likely to produce learning in students.

Career Nominee. Planned study of the philosophical and theoretical bases on which those practices depend so that successful teachers become informed decision makers concerning teaching strategies.

Career Candidate. Development of professional skills beyond the classroom that involve school- or system-wide activities, curriculum development, action research activities, and the like.

Career Level I, II, III. Attainment of Career Teacher status indicates performance as a truly professional teacher.

The training and evaluation process through which each teacher moves has two balanced parts. The first involves the use of an assessment-advisory team and an action-growth plan. The second part involves independent observation of teachers' performance by peer observers called observer/evaluators.

Each new employee has an assessment-advisory team composed of the building principal, the assistant principal for instruction, and a teacher mentor. The first task of the provisional advisory-assessment team is to review with the new teacher the competencies expected at the end of the two-year provisional teacher training period. The team's role is to help the teacher achieve those competencies through direct observation and feedback and use of an action-growth plan, which documents the teacher's achievement of competencies. Emphasis in the first year is on helping new teachers practice successfully those activities linked to student learning.

Experienced fast-track teachers also work with an assessment-advisory team, composed of an administrator and two or more teachers selected by the career candidate and the principal. These teachers conduct a self-assessment of the competencies expected of a career candidate. Their action-growth plan, then, is more elaborate and emphasizes the competencies be-

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yond direct teaching that are expected of a fully successful professional teacher.

Program implementation began in August 1984, with approximately 300 new employees and 150 experienced, tenured teachers. New employees were starting the six-year process leading to Career I teacher status, and the 150 tenured teachers were beginning a one- to two-year “fast-track” process also leading to Career I designation. Those participating in the “fast-track” program were selected through a lottery process from among all tenured teachers who applied to enter the program. Other experienced teachers will enter the program over the next five years until all have had an opportunity to earn Career I status.

During the first year of operation, an informal assessment was conducted

of the mentor role, the administrator role, the efficiency of the action-growth plan, and the impact of observer/evaluators. This article reports the results of the informal assessment of the role of mentors and administrators and the impact of the action-growth plan, obtained through conversations with participants. Although informal in nature, this approach has provided valuable information for further improvements in the program.

The Mentor's Role

Mentors, who play a key role in the staff development process, are released from teaching duties one-half day each month to work with new teachers. Mentors are chosen by the principal as role models who know and apply the principles of effective teaching, communicate effectively, and understand the implications of being an observer, advisor, counselor, and evaluator of the provisional teacher. Usually mentors teach in the same subject area or same grade level as the provisional teacher.

A mentor survey conducted by staff members at the end of the first year revealed the importance of several critical concerns: establishing rapport and trust, knowing when and how to provide “confronting” feedback, finding quality time to work together, and achieving a balance between evaluation and advocacy. Being expected not only to support and advise but also to evaluate was difficult for some mentor teachers, as was acknowledging that they were not personally responsible for a provisional teacher's failures or successes. The guidelines now being developed for choosing a mentor, clarifying expectations, and increasing continuous inservice and support for the mentors will assist teachers as they assume their new roles.

Beginning teachers were asked, as part of the first-year assessment, to rank the most beneficial aspects of the mentor teacher. Among the many possible functions performed by mentors, the highest rated items were:

- informal conversation: 67 percent;
- management of student behavior: 29 percent;
- instructional presentation and content: 19 percent each; and
- management of instructional time: 14.5 percent.

The Administrator's Role

The *administrative* role was a second area reviewed carefully at the end of the first year. The administrators involved are principals and assistant principals for instruction. Many principals initially feared that they would lose authority if advisory-assessment duties were shared with others. Informal discussions with principals revealed that their role is, in fact, *strengthened* by working from a large amount of data gathered by the mentor and observer/evaluators.

Serving as a member of the advisory-assessment team has given clarity and direction to assistant principals for instruction. In the past, their duties had, in a general way, included responsibility for new employees. This program gave that responsibility priority and set into motion frequent observations and conferences. It also brought into focus available resources of the system beyond the individual school to aid the assistant principal for instruction and the teacher. These assistant principals report, informally, a greater sense of confidence in their role as leaders of teacher improvement.

Impact of Action-Growth Plans

The *action-growth plan* for the provisional teacher has a simple format and is included in quarterly formative evaluations. It concentrates on the skills necessary to successful classroom performance, such as management of instructional time and student behavior, instructional presentation, instructional monitoring and feedback, and effective communication skills.

For the career candidate in the fast track, the action-growth plan takes on added importance. Combined with observer/evaluator reports and ratings, it provides most of the documentation used to determine whether the teacher should advance to Career Level I.

If any of the competencies assessed in the initial self-evaluation are not met, if the evidence is insufficient or of limited quality, or if the teacher is interested in additional growth in a certain area, the action-growth plan is developed accordingly. With the team, the teacher defines goals, identifies activities, and lists evidence that can be expected along an appropriate timeline.

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During the first year of program implementation, frustration, excitement, and pride accompanied development of the action-growth plans. Some plans addressed the school system's annual objectives, such as improved student writing, critical thinking, and standardized test scores. Others developed and analyzed materials, units of study, or teaching techniques. The competency that caused the teachers the most concern, yet proved to be the most rewarding, involved classroom action-based research. Many of the projects merit further study or dissemination.

Informal Evaluation

Program participants were asked for informal comments about the program's first year. The following statements are representative of the many comments received from provisional teachers (new employees):

I was accepted as a full staff member much sooner. I wasn't looked upon as new. I felt a part of the school.

Since I came in frustrated, it eased that feeling by the vast amount of help that I received.

It gave me confidence to change those things that were needed.

The mentor became my friend, seeing that I did it right.

Career candidates (fast-track, tenured teachers) were also positive:

The experience has been exciting, rewarding, and motivating.

It has made me put "on paper" my goals and objectives as they should be.

It has demanded of me a higher expectation level than I would normally have had.

... better preparation, better organization, better time management.

The program helped us focus on and improve weaknesses.

Now I know what I'm doing right—*or* wrong—and why.

Team support is crucial.

Observer/evaluators were very professional, thorough, and nonthreatening.

Finally, employment decisions are a vital indicator of the year's work. Of the more than 300 new employees, only three were not rehired because of inadequate performance. A dozen others voluntarily withdrew from teaching, saying that the program was too demanding of time or that they were unhappy with so much "supervision." Of the 150 original fast-track, tenured teachers, 137 completed the program successfully and became Career I teachers for the 1985-86 school year with a \$2,000 per year increase in salary; only six requested to continue for an optional second year. Two were not recommended for Career I status, and the remaining five withdrew for personal reasons.

All in all, the first year went smoothly. Indeed, the success has been far greater than the plan's developers had anticipated. Enthusiasm among participants for teaching and the teaching profession is exceptionally high, and that enthusiasm in turn has had positive benefits for the entire school system. □

Reference

Schlechty, P. C.; Joslin, A. W.; Leak, S. E.; and Hanes, R. C. "The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Teacher Career Development Program." *Educational Leadership* 42 (December 1984/January 1985): 4-8.

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