

Training and Coaching Beginning Teachers: An Antidote to Reality Shock

Support for Lennox, California, teachers in their first and second years keeps instructional quality high and faculty turnover low.



Application and analysis are critical to program success. At left, a teacher applies a teaching strategy in a demonstration lesson, and at right, a trainee receives feedback from a trained observer.

In the Lennox School District we confronted two staff development issues. We saw the difficult adjustments beginning teachers were making as they moved from the academic world to the real world of the classroom. At the same time, we saw the district's need to maintain a strong teaching staff capable of implementing a complex and demanding curriculum in the face of high turnover and a steady infusion of new teachers.

To address both issues we developed an inservice training program for all first- and second-year teachers, as well as for a small number of experienced teachers who were new to our district. We worked from three premises.

- Since teaching style may be developed early in a teacher's career (Blase and Greenfield 1982), it is particularly important to monitor teachers' early work in the classroom (Darling-Ham-

mond 1984). This increases the likelihood that a teacher will develop a productive, professionally satisfying style that is consistent with district aims and philosophy.

- Since presentation of theory alone in inservice programs guarantees that only 5 to 10 percent of teachers will apply the new skills in their classrooms, it is important to follow the presentation of content with demonstration, practice, and individual

coaching. This pattern results in a 90 percent application of new skills (Joyce 1983).

• When teachers coach each other, it is possible to increase the number of "trainers" at each school and to build in a support system for teachers who want to continue to improve their skills.

Training and Coaching

We have developed a training and coaching program for new teachers that builds on six elements.

New teacher training. All teachers new to the district attend an intensive, week-long fall session that covers assertive discipline, clinical teaching, reading, and instruction in language and math curriculums.

Recruitment and training of peer coaches. Selected through a districtwide application process, coaches receive the same training as new teachers. They receive additional work in communication skills.

Release time or pay for training. Teachers who participate in training during their off-track time are paid at the standard daily rate for substitutes. Teachers who are trained during their on-track time are released from classes.

Practice and application. After attending training sessions conducted in the district board room, teachers practice with children in an adjacent elementary school. Immediately following the practice, trainees receive

feedback from observers and other trainees with whom they are paired.

Pairing coaches and new teachers. Each coach is paired with one or two new teachers, usually from another school in the district. The district attempts to match teachers with Lennox coaches who have taught similar grade levels and instructional programs.

Observations. Coaches visit new teachers at least twice a month, sometimes more often. During these visits, a coach may observe a lesson, demonstrate a lesson in a designated subject, or provide constructive feedback and suggestions.

Confidentiality and Support

Every effort is made to keep the coach-teacher relationship low-key and strictly confidential. Most useful to teachers has been the inclusion of a training component responsive to their perceived needs.

Monthly follow-up sessions provide ongoing support. New teachers use these meetings to share experiences and help one another. Coaches also continue training to improve their coaching skills. Thus, in addition to the fall training week, teachers and coaches are released for two to three days of additional staff development, including a mid-year, full-day follow-up session at which new content is presented and motivational speakers are featured.

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Teachers' Response

Response to the training has been enthusiastic. Teachers and coaches alike find in Madeline Hunter's clinical teaching model a useful framework for thinking and talking about effective teaching (Hunter 1984, pp. 175-177). The emphasis on positive reinforcement for appropriate behavior in the assertive discipline (Canter 1976) component of training has helped new teachers manage and discipline classes more effectively. Teachers report that the training sessions have either reviewed valuable material that has lain dormant, or have introduced knowledge and skills that, as one teacher commented, "We should have had ... in teacher training."

Coaching. Teachers see their coaches as sympathetic colleagues with whom they can share doubts and frustrations. Almost without exception new teachers view coaches as helpful, understanding, and available when they need them. Moreover, working with a coach usually generates little stress, since the coaches do not super-



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vise teachers. Their exclusive function is to help teachers assimilate and use what they have learned in the training sessions and to feel more productive and competent. One teacher put it this way:

The coaching idea is great! I like having another teacher available as a resource. My coach is terrific. For one thing, she’s modeled some lessons for me. It was extremely helpful to see her in action; it gave me a new viewpoint from which to present lessons.

Coaches see their role in fairly generous and expansive terms. One coach observed, “I’m working with three different teachers, and each has different needs.” She continued:

With one teacher, we’ve been refining discipline techniques, with another we’ve taken a close look at the reading program and how it might be improved, and with the third teacher we’ve spent time on how to make better use of her aide. The program is structured so I’m available as a resource, not as a judge. I hope the teachers I’m coaching feel free to ask me anything. (Goldenberg 1985)

From Novice to Professional

Our training program is an effective way to help new teachers ease into their professional roles by mitigating the reality shock and “loneliness of the workplace” (Veenman 1984). The training sessions and the continuing

teacher/coach relationships help to stave off new teachers’ isolation while increasing their competence. Although no single program can address all of a district’s staff development needs, a training effort that combines theory, demonstration, practice, feedback, and coaching can help new teachers survive—perhaps even flourish—while enabling districts to maintain higher levels of professionalism among all teachers.

1. Our district operates on a year-round schedule with four staggered “tracks,” each of which is in session for two to three months and on month-long break thereafter. At any given time during the year, one-fourth of the students and teachers are “off-track,” that is, on their month-long break. □

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