

## Role Models

### *Mentoring Beginning Teachers*

Providing new teachers with formal mentors can greatly improve their chances of early success. This article offers tips for helping new educators feel less alienated and overwhelmed in their classrooms.

When Amreen Ali started teaching in the fall of 2008, her biggest challenge was figuring out how to manage her classroom. It's a common stumbling block for new teachers, one that can take years to overcome. Luckily for Ali, the Austin (Tex.) Independent School District provided her with a mentor.

"We've offered mentoring in the district for many, many years," says Laura Baker, senior associate for teacher development. The district offered informal mentoring before 2007. In 2007, the highly structured program began with 11 mentors (4 full-time) at the 4 highest-need schools; this year, 27 full-time mentors serve 16 schools. By 2013, there will be full-time mentors at one-third of the district's 124 schools.

Each mentor works with a total of 10 first-, second-, and third-year teachers. Baker says she looks for mentors who are reflective about their practice and are naturally drawn to collaboration, since "it's the mentor's job to make [his] work fit the new teacher—not the other way around."

That was certainly the case for Ali and her mentor, Tammy Phuong.

"Tammy came to my room and modeled appropriate classroom management," says Ali. "She'd say, for instance, 'Let's try to use this strategy. If it doesn't work, let's move on to this.'"

Ali loved having a sounding board. "Tammy was very good at pointing out things that might be challenging, and we would plan for them together. When we developed lessons, she'd help me come up with alternate ideas if one activity did not get their attention."

Phuong helped Ali with differentiation, another challenging area for beginning teachers. "Tammy helped me set high goals for every one of my students, track their growth, and create spreadsheets," Ali says.

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# QUICK TIPS

## Tips for Mentors

- **Be a good listener.** “The best way to help a beginning teacher is to listen and ask questions,” says Donna Niday, coauthor of *Mentoring Beginning Teachers* and *Mentoring Across Boundaries*. “Sometimes, mentors want to give the solution to all of the problems, but it’s more helpful if the mentor can help the beginning teacher come to her own conclusion.”

- **Focus on the positive.** New teachers often start off talking about the negatives, says Niday. She advises mentors to take this approach: “Tell me about something successful that happened today or this week.”

- **Understand your role.** A mentor’s job is to help the new teacher grow. “I try to be more facilitative and lead the new teacher through inquiry,” says Frank Pantano, a new teacher developer for Boston Public Schools. “There are times I want to say, ‘No; do it this way,’ but I don’t, unless I see a student in danger or some major misstep. Instead, ask, ‘What are the alternatives? Where do you think the student is coming from?’”

## Tips for Administrators

- **Select the strongest mentors.** “Careful selection is the key to making sure you get the best, most capable, people. Remember that not all great teachers make great mentors,” says Ellen Moir, chief executive officer at the New Teacher Center.

- **Work the schedule.** Moir advocates for mentors to get full- or part-time release so they can be in the new teacher’s classroom and serve as an instructional guide.

- **Establish trust.** “Our mentorship coordinator has no evaluative responsibilities of any staff member, so he is able to build strong relationships based on trust and confidentiality,” says Douglas Reisig, superintendent of Hellgate Elementary District. “No one would be comfortable talking about issues if they felt it might affect his evaluation.”

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Mentors at Austin ISD receive robust training from the New Teacher Center (NTC), with whom the district partnered to develop the program. “Being part of the NTC network lets us work with other districts and exchange ideas, which is terrific,” says Baker. NTC provides ongoing training, and mentors meet twice a month to share ideas, goals, and plans.

In the four years the program has been in place at the highest-need schools, teacher retention has risen from 67 percent to 89 percent.

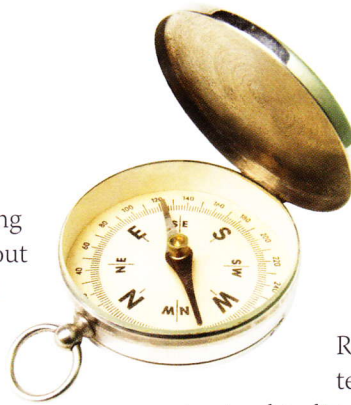
## Help Wanted

As an alternatively certified teacher, Katherine Koehler was especially grateful to have a mentor. “Having someone you know is there for you, that you won’t be bothering, is enormously helpful,” says Koehler, a 6th grade language arts teacher in the Escambia County (Fla.) School District. “Mentors make it obvious that they want to help you. Because of the support I’ve had from my mentor and the rest of the staff, I don’t see myself leaving any time soon.”

Koehler’s mentor, who is also alternatively certified, understands the specific challenges Koehler has had to overcome—from setting up the classroom to determining how much time to spend on various subjects. “I can e-mail her any time or run into her classroom for quick advice. She created an open-door policy for me,” Koehler says.

Every first-year and alternatively certified teacher in the district is assigned a mentor. Mentors receive clinical educator training that includes learning about different observation techniques. Hundreds of teachers are trained to be mentors; the principal and a team leader make the match, typically by content area or grade level.





One of the keys to being a good mentor is being able to discuss what needs to be worked on without hurting the relationship. “In training, we work on building rapport and respect with your developing teacher,” says Kathy M. Smith, a teacher on special assignment in the Escambia County School District’s Office of Staff Development and Curriculum Training.

“If they don’t trust you and aren’t willing to open up and share their struggles, it’s hard to make progress. It’s not easy to tell someone who is struggling how to improve. You have to be diplomatic, yet willing to say, ‘We need to work on this,’” Smith says.

Mentors receive a small honorarium to recognize their commitment. Smith says the average mentor and mentee meet 15 times or more during each nine-week period.

## Mentors Make New Teachers Feel Welcome

Princeton (N.J.) Regional Schools is another proponent of mentoring. “We wanted new teachers to receive support, advice, and direction to make the formative years of teaching as successful and meaningful as possible,” says Lewis Goldstein, assistant superintendent for human resources, public information, and community relations.

In Princeton, each mentor works with one first-year teacher. The pairs are required to meet weekly for a total of 30 hours by May 1 (15 hours for second- and third-year teachers). Mentors earn professional development hours for their participation.

New mentors go through an intensive half-day program at the beginning of year, run by paid mentor coordinators who discuss expectations and program goals. Each mentor gets a detailed manual filled with articles, timetables, and suggested topics.

When Kimberly Carson came to Princeton three years ago—after teaching 5th grade for six years—she was hired to teach 1st grade. As a new teacher in the district, she was assigned a mentor, a kindergarten teacher who had taught 1st grade for a decade. “I needed help getting acclimated, learning how to navigate and work with this age group,” says Carson. “We saw each other almost every day and met for at least an hour a week.”

Carson says feeling supported and having a nonjudgmental colleague to walk through the process with you is critical. “These pieces help you feel supported and connected to your district.”

## Mentors Become Stronger Teachers

A superintendent for 23 years, Douglas Reisig grew tired of watching many young teachers “get eaten up by the system.” As a way to stop his district—Hellgate Elementary School District in Missoula, Mont.—from losing a high percentage of young teachers within the first five years, he initiated a districtwide mentoring program.

“The program has had a very positive impact on our young teachers—their attitude, philosophy, and support for the administration,” says Steve Harris, vice principal at Hellgate Middle School and coordinator of the district’s mentorship program. “Our retention rate is close to 100 percent.” Mentors in the Hellgate district use the 10 principles from the Interstate New Teachers Assessment and Support Consortium ([http://cte.jhu.edu/pds/resources/intasc\\_principles.htm](http://cte.jhu.edu/pds/resources/intasc_principles.htm)) as the basis of their discussions with their teachers.

Nita Kattell, who teaches 5th grade, has mentored fellow 5th grade teacher Erin Ellis for three years. In her first year, Ellis was unsure of how to make sure her students were listening. Kattell helped Ellis learn how to work with diverse learners and develop a comfortable classroom management style.

“Erin saw how I dealt with the children, and we were able to give each other ideas. The new employee has to embrace guidance, and the mentor has to be willing to put someone else’s needs ahead of her own,” says Kattell. “Being a mentor has helped me be a better teacher. You have to constantly reflect on your own teaching style, your actions, and how you handle things.”

For Ellis, the mentoring experience was life-changing. “I would’ve been so scared without her, but thanks to her help it went smoothly and I was excited to start,” says Ellis. “It would’ve been like barely coming above water if I didn’t have her. Without Nita, I’d have been by myself and not part of the team. Now I’m part of the team.” **EU**

—ELLEN ULLMAN

## → MORE ONLINE

Read this month’s internationally focused online-only article, “Making the Most of Mentors,” at [www.ascd.org/publications/newsletters/education-update/jul11/vol53/num07/toc.aspx](http://www.ascd.org/publications/newsletters/education-update/jul11/vol53/num07/toc.aspx).