

MENTORING OVERVIEW

The induction of new teachers is part of a systematic, integrated plan formulated by District administrators, teachers, union, and university. The induction process allows us to welcome the teacher, makes the teacher feel a part of the culture of the district, provides the teacher with workshops and demonstration classrooms to observe, and assigns a trained mentor for support. The purpose of this process is to help the new teachers become effective, professional educators who will remain with the school and the district.

In an induction process, the focus is on training and the pace is steady. The mentors assume the role of classroom teachers and the new teachers become their students. The early training concentrates on classroom management and instruction. The primary focus is on instructing teachers with techniques to allow their students to be successful.

MENTORING

Mentoring is the cornerstone of induction programs. All teachers in the building have a responsibility in reducing the beginning teacher's isolation by making a point of regularly interacting with the newcomer. The title of mentor holds something more promising and professionally rigorous than occasional companionship, casual tips, or help in a crisis.

The mentor is an experienced, practicing teacher who is responsible for providing direct assistance to the new teacher. The role of the mentor is to support and challenge, but not to evaluate the beginner.

Mentors are life-long, reflective learners themselves. They recognize and value their own preparation and acquisition of skills necessary to provide professional and personal assistance to beginning teachers. Of course, many of the teachers who are selected as mentors have offered their help informally to beginning teachers for years. However, the title "mentor" underscores the special expertise demanded of its holder.

MENTOR PREPARATION

In an effort to help mentors get off to a good start, the Bellingham Public Schools offers a 13-hour mentor training.

SETTING PRIORITIES

Not all of the demands of mentoring can be covered in the formal training. The priorities for this training reflect the District's strategic plan outcomes:

1. Development of teacher leadership

Teachers selected to be mentors are not sure of what is expected. Thus, the initial training should include a general orientation as well as introductions to techniques of classroom observation, conferencing and coaching.

2. Development of learning environments that maximize student learning

The most persistent problem for the first-year teachers is classroom management and organization. Classroom management has been the topic of research that has been well-translated into useful, practical advice. Thus, the training will include approaches that mentors can take to assist beginning teachers with classroom organization.

3. Development of teachers who use effective strategies for instruction and assessment that maximizes student learning

The district has identified effective practices for teaching in curriculum guides that are to be consistently implemented across all schools. The training program will emphasize these practices.

4. Development of a culture of learning and active inquiry

The training will concentrate on the mentor's relationship with beginning teachers. Activities that promote the understanding and implementation of adult learning are central to the training modules.

The Induction Team

The most important ingredients in any induction process are the people who give time and energy to support the new teacher. A team approach is more likely to provide the best chance for a beginner's success than any support person operating alone. The induction team should be made up of a number of agencies and individuals.

School Board Members and Superintendent: These individuals provide the political base and moral support for the induction process. They acknowledge publicly those who devote time and energy to assisting beginning teachers.

The Principals: The Principal's leadership is essential to the Induction Process. Principals have the right of approval over mentor appointments and selection. They are invited to attend the mentor preparation session and training modules. By attending these sessions, principals are

providing support for the mentors and are refining their own knowledge and skills. Principals are also invited to attend the orientations and workshops for beginning teachers. Their presence communicates to participants the high priority they assign to beginning teachers and the induction process. Building principals should not let the fact that mentors have been assigned to beginning teachers deter them from observing and conferring with those new teachers on a regular basis.

The Mentor: The mentor is an experienced, practicing teacher recognized for instructional expertise. The role of the mentor is to support and challenge, but not to evaluate the beginner. The focus of mentoring is learning. Mentors build capacity in professional vision. The mentor agrees to two major responsibilities: to continue to teach while serving as a mentor, to learn the skills necessary to provide professional and personal assistance to beginning teachers.

The Local Association: The Bellingham Education Association has been involved from the very beginning in the development of the induction process. Members have served on committees to create the mentor description, selection criteria, and training components. The Association has been instrumental in the delivery of information and support activities for beginning teachers. Association representatives will also be a part of the monitoring, evaluation, and revision of the induction program.

Role of the Mentor

The role of the mentor teacher is gaining popularity as a way of providing more effective on-the-job support for beginning teachers. By establishing a mentor teacher program, the Bellingham School District achieves two purposes: novice teachers are given a good start in their first teaching assignment, and experienced classroom teachers are recognized and rewarded for their knowledge and skills. Of course, many of the teachers who are selected as mentors have offered their help informally to beginning teachers for years. However, the title “mentor” underscores the special expertise demanded of its holder.

Mentoring differs from regular classroom teaching in a number of ways:

Mentors continue to teach while serving as a mentor to one or more beginning teachers. This arrangement is advantageous because it allows mentors to remain fully and credibly in touch with teaching. Mentors may also make their classrooms available to others. The disadvantage to this arrangement is that mentors are stretched thin in their efforts to do a good job of teaching and a good job of mentoring.

Mentors understand the typical needs and problems of the novice teacher. A mentor’s knowledge extends beyond memories of his or her own first year. Mentors are able to summarize in their own words the main lessons from research on the experience of the first-year teacher. They are able to assemble practical examples of problems and solutions from the experience of many teachers.

Mentors prepare themselves to be especially helpful in areas known to be difficult for novice teachers. Foremost among these are classroom management, basic lesson design and delivery, and evaluating student progress.

Mentors take teaching out of the realm of the intuitive. They have a conception of their work that is more than simply a bag of tricks. Mentors are able to describe and demonstrate underlying principles of teaching learning. They make teaching and learning less private and more public. Mentors make the accumulated wisdom of experienced teachers accessible to novice teachers.

Mentors prepare themselves for effective one-on-one consultation with individual teachers. They develop specific methods for the useful observation of classroom teaching. They organize their schedules to leave time for discussion, joint planning, observation, and feedback. They learn how to talk clearly and straightforwardly about teaching without offending the teacher or damaging the teacher's self esteem.

Mentors develop strategies for using a variety of resources on behalf of beginning teachers. They allocate release time, or serve as brokers or linkers to people and materials. They help organize for mutual support.

Mentors also prepare themselves for work with groups of teachers. Mentors begin to learn elements of effective meetings and skills of group facilitation. They learn how to plan and present at district workshops or at a staff meeting. They gain skills at making presentations. They are able to build teams of teachers to work on improvements in curriculum and instruction.

Mentors develop strategies for gaining acceptance and support for their work within a school. They establish clear expectations and ground rules for this work – with administrators, experienced teachers, and beginning teachers. They work visibly and usefully enough to earn the title of mentor.