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What New Teachers Want from Colleagues

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Five new teachers spell it out: Work with us.

> *Statistics show that about half of all teachers leave the profession within the first five years. Many times I thought I would become one of them, but I never did. I am convinced that I made it to year six because of the camaraderie and collegiality I experienced during my formative years as a teacher.*
>
> *—Julia Thompson-Calio, teacher at Unionville High School, Unionville, Pennsylvania.*

As the school year winds down and many teachers make resolutions about what they hope to do differently next school year, my thoughts turn to the thousands of new teachers who are in the process of applying for their first teaching job—and the thousands more making a decision about whether they still want to be teachers. Given the grim statistics referenced in this quote by Julia Thompson-Calio (Ingersoll, 2002, 2003), experienced teachers and school leaders should consider adding *support new teachers* to their resolutions for the coming year.

Much of my work over the past 10 years has placed me in close contact with beginning teachers. I've mentored student teachers, taught pre service teachers at the college level, and conducted research with new teachers. I've listened with interest to their stories about the people and patterns that influence their decisions about whether to remain classroom teachers.

One of the main themes in these stories is community. A new teacher's story generally falls between two extremes: emphasizing the rich benefits of community-centered faculty life and bemoaning the difficulties of an isolative faculty culture. If community is central to new teachers' early experiences, what actions might experienced teachers take to promote solid, caring school communities?

For some answers, I asked five recent graduates from the secondary English Education program at the University of Delaware what kinds of actions and approaches experienced teachers could take to help new teachers acclimate to the profession, their students, their first classroom, and their school's culture. Their responses indicated a deep admiration for strong faculty communities and a desire to spend more time in community with fellow teachers. These recent graduates tell, in their own voices, what seasoned teachers did that helped them make it through.

Five Ways to Craft Community

Share Friendship—and Ideas

Experienced educators can't assist first-year teachers with all their challenges; unfortunate situations like not having one's own classroom or having to wake up at 5:00 a.m. each day can't always be helped. What experienced educators can offer new colleagues during that challenging first year is ongoing support and friendship. During my first year, I continually felt like my successes were few and my failures were many. I'm thankful that no experienced teacher ever criticized or harangued me when I fell on my face; instead, my colleagues listened to me vent, made me laugh, and offered tried-and-true suggestions for the future.

Some of my fellow teachers also graciously provided me with a bounty of teaching materials, lesson ideas, and resources with permission to use and adapt them. Before starting my first year, I felt overwhelmed by the idea of having to prepare lessons for 9th and 10th grade English courses, which contained some unfamiliar content. However, because my fellow teachers were so generous, I quickly found myself with so many quality lessons that I didn't have enough time to try them all! Hoping to reciprocate, I offered some of my lesson ideas to those who'd shared with me, and before long, valuable professional relationships developed. I cannot say year one was easy (I don't know any teacher who can), but the guidance I received from other teachers in my building made it bearable and, at times, even fun.

—Julia Thompson-Calio, Unionville, Pennsylvania

Navigate Curriculum Together

During my first couple of years of teaching, I taught in an under resourced school in Washington, D.C. These years were particularly challenging because, on top of acclimating to the pressures and responsibilities of my new job, I was constantly creating instructional materials from scratch and searching for engaging texts for a wide range of reading levels. Although I was given a curriculum map that outlined the order in which I was to teach certain English language arts standards, I wasn't provided with aligned instructional resources or suggested texts.

I believe new teachers could benefit from a collaborative professional learning community that shares instructional resources and ideas. Experienced teachers should guide new teachers through the existing curriculum. If a complete curriculum doesn't exist, I suggest that experienced teachers exchange instructional materials, resources, and ideas with new teachers. This would mean new teachers could focus more on their pedagogy and reflection and less on reinventing the wheel.

—Anonymous, Cambridge, Massachusetts

Grade Together

As a new teacher, and especially as a student teacher, I was comfortable writing lessons and teaching them. After I'd collected writing assignments, however, I found myself at a loss when I tried to evaluate them. How often does a college student read a 16-year-old's writing? I had no idea what to expect from my students, and therefore no idea where to praise and where to suggest improvements. Only now, batches of graded assignments later, after teaching grades 10, 11, and 12 across college prep, honors, and advanced placement levels, am I finally starting to see the big picture.

As a new teacher, it would've been incredibly helpful to sit down with an experienced teacher to evaluate class sets of papers together, placing them in the context of the department's goals for where students should be at the end of the year.

—David Cavagnino, Wilmington, Delaware

Discipline Together

My first year as a teacher, I taught English on a small island in the Philippines as a Peace Corps volunteer. My students were highly respectful and responsive; I was greeted with a hearty "Good morning, Sir Daniel!" every day. One student I'll call Edgardo, however, giggled every time I came near him. Frustrated, I made a comment in the faculty lounge about his behavior, and the other teachers called Edgardo to the lounge immediately. This 18-year-old was brought to tears by the onslaught of shame that all 20 teachers heaped on him. It was clear my colleagues considered his behavior a personal insult. Although I felt terrible for him, I was touched by the communal nature of classroom management.

—Daniel Greenland, Yardley, Pennsylvania

Observe and Reflect Together

To help foster a more supportive environment for new teachers, experienced teachers should open their doors to informal, nonevaluative observations. By watching other teachers, I was able to validate my own teaching practices, generating a sense of confidence that is often hard to come by as a first-year teacher when your door is shut and you're in the thick of it! I also was able to see new systems and ideas firsthand.

It's especially helpful to observe experienced teachers who are known for specific successes (such as establishing effective behavioral consequences or implementing meaningful movement in lessons); who teach within your content area; or who share a group of students. As often as possible, observations should be followed by a conference between the experienced and new teacher. Collaboration is one of our greatest tools as teachers, but teaching often feels like a solitary battle waged behind closed doors. When we open the door, we allow teaching knowledge to be shared.

—Elizabeth Mayforth, Bel Air, Maryland

Open to Learning

One exciting aspect of these new teachers' perspectives is their movement away from the closed-door approach to teaching. It's important for teachers who entered the profession when the closed-door approach was popular to be aware that today's new teachers may have a different disposition toward collaboration. These five teachers longed for collaboration: They sought not only to take but also to give—ideas, resources, observations, encouragement.

Another encouraging sign is these teachers' conviction that learning doesn't end with student teaching. New teachers expect

to continue to learn to become a teacher after they've been awarded a contract. When experienced teachers take the initiative to spend time with new teachers, in spite of extremely busy schedules, it can make a world of difference—not only in the short-term sense of offering practical guidance, but also in the long-term sense of increasing the chance that a newcomer will remain in the profession past the crucial five-year mark.

School Leaders' Role

School leaders should set the pace in their buildings by devoting intellectual energy, time, and space to building a professional community. Heightening teachers' awareness of the benefits of functioning as a community makes a difference in how teachers choose to spend their time. Being intentional about how discourse shapes school culture is particularly important. When we speak of "our students," not "hers" or "mine," we send powerful messages about our collective culture.

Time, of course, is one of our most precious resources. There are many ways to use teacher meeting time to advance teaching and learning, but school leaders must be intentional in providing teachers with the resources they need—technology, data, and space, to name a few—to make such time productive. For example, administrators and teacher leaders might read together current research on teacher collaboration and discuss what it suggests about structuring teacher meeting time (Goddard, Goddard, & Tschannen-Moran, 2007; Moolenaar, Sleegers, & Daly, 2012). Research has confirmed the link between increased teacher community—whether through in-person meetings or online social networks—and increased student achievement.

When leaders set aside regular common planning time for faculty members to collaborate, such as through the professional learning community model, teachers often feel much more efficient and autonomous in their use of time. Professional learning communities not only make teachers' meaning-making a school priority, but they also create a school culture that values learning; both these effects enhance teachers' pedagogy and students' education (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008).

For example, all English teachers at Howard High School of Technology in Wilmington, Delaware, a Race to the Top funding recipient, currently engage in 45 minutes of common planning time each day. They also meet twice a week with same-grade teachers across content areas. During these periods, teachers study student learning and use what they learn to guide their instructional planning.

If teachers have few opportunities to observe one another's teaching, they might videotape their teaching to watch and discuss together. Asking another teacher to cover a class so a new teacher can observe a seasoned one and coordinating team teaching are other options that allow for mutual observations. Knowing that school leaders value such collaborative practices may be the incentive teachers need to take the first step.

Community building can also occur outside school hours—during summer faculty picnics, meetings at coffee shops, or potlucks. Such events can be particularly meaningful to new faculty, who may feel more comfortable asking questions or collaborating with peers whom they have come to know—and outside the time constraints of the daily schedule.

Experienced teachers know what it's like to affect students' personal lives and careers; many of us entered the field of education hoping to do so. When we make the most of our opportunities to positively change the career trajectories of new colleagues in the same way we change those of our students, teacher attrition statistics will change. *That's* something we can resolve to do, together.

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