

Lifesaving 101: How a Veteran Teacher Can Help a Beginner

Veteran teachers don't need to be official mentors to help their new colleagues. Experienced educators can be lifesavers for isolated novices simply by reaching out informally and being compassionate critics.

As an experienced teacher of 30 years, I am disheartened when I hear a new teacher say, "I'm a failure." Sadly, I hear this all too often from new teachers in my 850-student urban middle school. First-year teachers are at risk no matter where they teach, but after a few months, some actually declare failure—even after entering the profession full of enthusiasm. They may have had quality academic training and a successful student-teaching experience. But statistics show that one-third of all new teachers nationwide leave the profession within five years. Some pundits go as far as to say that "education is a profession that eats its young."

What happens in such a short time to shatter goals, diminish spirits, and destroy self-confidence? In a word: Isolation. New teachers are left alone in a classroom, often for the first time, with no significant support. We should not underrate the shock they experience. It's real, and we need to deal with it. When I say *we*, I mean all competent, experienced teachers who work in the same building with beginning teachers.

Many districts have instituted official mentoring programs to motivate new teachers and keep them from leaving the profession. These endeavors are laudable, but in urban districts such as mine, there aren't enough mentors to support all new teachers. Veteran teachers must pick up the slack. The two most practical ways experienced teachers can help new teachers are through chance meetings in the hallways and through scheduled discussions during common preparation times.



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In the Hallways

Some of us, particularly in middle school settings, may be unit partners with new teachers. Some of us simply latch on to new teachers at the first few faculty meetings, or they reach out to us as we're walking down the hallway. Even a friendly "Good morning" from an experienced teacher can elicit an anxious "Could you please come into my room for a minute? I need help arranging my seating chart" or "I had trouble with a student last period and don't know how to handle it."

We know that we need to get to our own rooms in two minutes. The problem then becomes one of time. Everyone in the building has a full teaching load. But what happens on the spur of the moment in the hallways can provide new teachers with the immediate input they may need. These meetings of new and experienced teachers are crucial and must be honored, not ignored. As unstructured as they may seem, these hallway meetings are effective and productive—if the experienced teachers are considerate of the new teachers' needs. Experienced teachers may be hesitant to initiate a conversation with new teachers for fear of sounding patronizing. The fear is natural, but it is usually overcome when we realize that new teachers really do need our support.

Chance meetings in the hallway break down communication barriers because new teachers are soliciting the help. The responsibility then rests upon experienced teachers to accept the challenge to mentor new teachers—or to walk away.

During Preparation Times

Once experienced teachers have made a commitment to be helpful, they should be attentive to the feelings that new teachers experience when totally responsible for a classroom for the first time. Focusing on their feelings can take place during quiet moments, such as preparation periods. Shared preparation periods enable productive discussions to take place. Issues that cause chance meetings in the hallway can be discussed calmly and at length.

New teachers experience a kind of culture shock that can express itself in nervousness and anxiety. They can get to the point of not being able to make decisions about even small matters. They may ask, for example, "How can I get my students to the cafeteria quietly?" or "Should I put these questions on the overhead or the chalkboard?" Most of us would respond with "whatever works best." But when new teachers are distraught over some small matter, we need to focus on their reasons for asking the question, not on a glib answer. Veteran teachers can guide new teachers in two important ways: tuning in to their goals and asking the right questions.

Tuning In to the Goals of New Teachers

New teachers usually know their teaching goals. Sometimes, however, they simply cannot (for whatever reason) articulate these goals at a certain time. They may also be too new to a situation to be able to see their goals clearly until they take the time to discuss them with a colleague.

The only way new teachers will succeed is by tapping into their own talents—which may or may not be visible in the very beginning of their career. Early on, they focus on how to

get through the next hour, to the end of the day, and then through the next day all over again.

During calm moments, experienced teachers can draw out of new teachers what their goals are—both for themselves and for their students. New educators need to articulate at this juncture why they wanted to be teachers in the first place. Their reasons for teaching may become lost in the flurry of a new, challenging, and, in many cases, rocky beginning.

Asking the Right Questions

What new teachers need is someone they can trust not only to "tell it like it is," but also to guide them to their own solutions to problems. Experienced teachers need to ask the right questions

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to start new teachers on their own quest. After the new teachers have experienced some successes with the students, however small, the experienced teachers can point out the abilities of the new teachers that allowed them to be successful. This kind of mentoring takes perception and patience. It also takes the constant presence of experienced teachers on whom the new teacher can lean.

Alice (a fictitious name) entered my school four years ago with the vim and vigor of a first-year teacher. I passed her room one day after school at the end of September and saw her sitting at her desk, head in hands, crying. I had some rapport with Alice because we had conversed casually in the halls on several occasions, so I ventured a question: "Are you all right?" Immediately she looked up and wiped her tears away, embarrassed that I had caught her

crying. She apologized for her unprofessional behavior and blurted out that she felt that she was a failure with these students. "Nothing I do is accepted. I keep trying and trying. I prepare my lessons well, but nothing works."

A long conversation ensued. Alice described her classroom management approaches, her daily lesson plans, and her rapport with students. I listened and gave advice whenever it fit. We started out by discussing a new seating arrangement. One of Alice's problems was that students would act up whenever her back was turned. I suggested arranging her class in a U-shape so that she could attend to any student in the room and not turn her back on the rest. Another suggestion was to use the overhead projector more effectively, allowing her

to teach, write, and watch the class all at the same time.

Alice had experienced a successful student-teaching assignment and had gotten As in her college education courses. But being the sole person in charge of her own classroom was overwhelming. The new seating arrangement and the proficient use of the overhead projector were revelations to her. She decided to give them a chance and agreed to meet again in one week.

At our second meeting, Alice felt more at ease. She said that she felt "less a failure. Things were better, not perfect, but better." This time we concentrated on her lessons and how she delivered them, including the difficulties encountered in each approach.

We met once a week for about four weeks. With each meeting, Alice showed more confidence. Many days were rocky, but she felt as though she

was making headway. After four weeks, we decided that we didn't need weekly meetings anymore, but that we would continue our short discussions in the halls between classes.

At the end of the year, Alice and I went out for coffee. She thanked me for my help and said that she had made a decision. My first thought was, "Oh, no. She's going to quit." What she said was, "I'm switching to elementary. I've discovered that what I want to do as a teacher will work much better with younger children." Alice is now in her third year of teaching elementary students. It took only a few chance hallway encounters and four weekly meetings to get this new teacher on track—and on the road to a lifelong teaching career.

Building Confidence

Once new teachers understand their abilities and strengths, they begin to build confidence through their practice. Concrete suggestions from an experienced teacher can pave the way. For example, new teachers often have difficulty beginning a class lesson. Experienced teachers can suggest a simple, but successful, procedure to start a class—putting pertinent information on an overhead transparency for students to follow while giving a 5- to 10-minute introduction to the lesson for the day. If the teacher follows this procedure regularly, the students are engaged because they realize that they will need this information to accomplish the lesson; the teacher is relaxed because the students are listening attentively. This sounds like simplistic advice to an experienced teacher, but it's a revelation for a new teacher.

Once new teachers establish comfortable procedures, they have the confidence to branch out and try new techniques. It is crucial that experienced teachers be available at this time to listen to the ideas of new teachers and to guide them in their implementation. Again, this can and does take place in the hallways and during common preparation periods. What happens next is trial and error, but because the new



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teachers have already experienced a sense of accomplishment, they won't feel that they have failed when something they try doesn't work.

A new teacher may still utter, "I'm a failure" after a long and frustrating day. But perhaps the experienced teacher in the building who has helped and guided the new teacher for a few months will step in and say, "What happened? If it has to do with a lesson, you didn't fail. The lesson did. Let's talk about what went wrong, why, and what you can do the next time to make it work." This timely kind of mentoring can happen only when experienced teachers take it upon themselves to encourage new teachers. An outside mentor may not be in the building at the crucial time to discuss this matter with the new teacher.

Compassion with a Critical Eye

"Compassion with a critical eye" is a motto I have used when I mentor new teachers in my school. *Compassion* because we are working with human beings who are fledglings in a new profession—people who have a strong commitment to teaching but may be having a difficult time starting out. *A critical eye* because we have the knowl-

edge and expertise to point out issues and to ask the right questions to guide new teachers through the first difficult years.

Whether through chance meetings in hallways or scheduled discussions during planning periods, as experienced teachers we must do all we can to stop the feeling of failure that new teachers inevitably experience. By helping new teachers build a strong foundation, we are giving back to a profession that has nourished us intellectually, psychologically, and emotionally. By mentoring new teachers, we are brought back to our own first years of teaching when someone may have guided us through the rough times. We will remember our failures, but we will also remember our successes. T. S. Eliot in his *Four Quartets*, expressed this feeling best: "We shall not cease from exploration/And the end of all our exploring/Will be to arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time." ■

Mary Delgado is an English as a Second Language teacher. She may be reached at Edison Middle School, 5372 N. 37th St., Milwaukee, WI 53209 (e-mail: del224@worldnet.att.net).

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