



[Buy this issue](#)

- [Read Abstract](#)

May 2012 | Volume 69 | Number 8

Supporting Beginning Teachers Pages 74-77

A New Teacher's Plea

Brian K. Jones

A beginning teacher needs a manageable workload, a good mentor, and a community.

I'm a novice teacher, and I think about quitting at least once a month. When I talk with friends about work, I get the impression that the only reason they believe my stories is that they're so horrible that I can't possibly be making them up. Who could make up such stories about what that one kid in 5th period did this week, how late I had to stay to coach soccer practice and then supervise a football game, or what a new law about high-stakes tests means for my job security?

But it's not all bad. I *love* teaching and learning about science. There are few greater pleasures than watching a student studying cells intensely in class—drawing them, identifying them under a microscope, creating analogies for the organelles' functions—and then seeing that student's well-earned look of pride when he or she makes an *A* on the test. Even watching a perennial slacker's face show some excitement when I mention that *Star Wars* lied (because there's no sound in space) can make teaching seem like one of the most fun jobs in the world.

The problem is that sometimes I'm too overwhelmed to get excited about my work. I'm too busy with routine tasks to give a few minutes after school to a student who needs help. I'm too burdened with planning my next lesson to reflect on the lesson I just gave. I'm too worried about students' test scores to remember that students also need time for creative and critical thinking. I need help.

Many new teachers struggle with knowing what to teach, what resources they have to teach it, how quickly to teach it, how to engage different kinds of learners, and how to prepare students for high-stakes tests (Kardos & Johnson, 2008). And if that weren't enough, new teachers also have to build relationships with colleagues, learn the ins and outs of administrative tasks like grading, know where to go for a fire drill, and figure out how to purchase resources through the school—all the while knowing teaching evaluations are looming.

With so much to think about and plan for, how can a rookie teacher be expected to succeed? New teachers need a comprehensive system of supports that includes a variety of field experiences in preservice programs, a manageable workload, thoughtfully matched and organized mentorships, and a community of practice.

Start with Preparation

Teacher preparation programs should bring experience, practical wisdom, and theory together (Rust, 2010). One field experience—typically only one placement, with one mentor teacher—is simply not enough. Having more field experiences would give preservice teachers more time to adapt theoretical knowledge to pedagogical practice. Requiring more of students during these field experiences—particularly an action research project—may also increase graduating teachers' feelings of readiness (Capraro, Capraro, & Helfeldt, 2010).

At the school where I teach, I have been part of a new program with a local university that offers students interested in the high-need area of science a short field experience during their first year in the education program. Students observe a few lessons and then work with their professors and local teachers to develop and deliver three standards-based, hands-on inquiry lessons that professors and teachers evaluate. Before their culminating student-teaching assignment, these students will participate in more hours of observation and assist a different local teacher. The variety of experiences helps new teachers learn to adapt to different school environments, student populations, and teaching strategies and gives preservice teachers more opportunities to develop good relationships with mentors.

Make Workloads Manageable

New teachers often have the most difficult teaching assignments, with more classes to prepare for and at more disadvantaged schools—all while they are developing an entire year's worth of lesson plans for the first time (Panesar, 2010). In addition, some are encouraged to take on extracurricular activities. Even with only one curriculum to plan for, in my first year I found myself routinely leaving school at around 6:00 p.m. after working on paperwork, arranging for differentiation and accommodations, and gathering materials for the next day's lesson.

A reduced or more manageable workload can alleviate some of the stress of planning and leave more time for setting up the classroom, collaborating with colleagues, and completing the multitude of administrative tasks that are entirely new to these teachers. New teachers should be encouraged to simplify and focus on creating and delivering great lessons. A lighter workload that takes into account the fact that these teachers are developing new lessons each day will improve new teachers' sense of well-being. It might also raise their students' achievement because the teachers will have time to prepare more effective lessons and hone their teaching skills. Less outside-the-classroom responsibility means more planning and reflection time for new teachers, who need it most.

Plan Mentorships Carefully

One of the most common supports for new teachers is a mentorship, but mentorships are not always effective. Kardos and Johnson (2008) found that 78 percent of new teachers surveyed had mentors, yet of that 78 percent, fewer than 60 percent had three or more conversations about instruction or classroom management with their mentor over the course of a year. Only 41 percent actually observed their mentor teaching, with even lower percentages for new teachers in low-income schools and those in math, science, or technology.

Administrators should select mentoring pairs cautiously—the same grade level or content area are good starting points—and create a schedule for meetings (Kardos & Johnson, 2008; McCann, Johannessen, & Ricca, 2005). Meeting agendas should require that mentoring pairs spend some time on instructional issues but be flexible enough to give new teachers time to air other concerns. New teachers' stress and frustration can lead to burnout, so they need time to talk about and work through their difficulties (Mandel, 2006).

Mentors are generally either fellow teachers at the school or full-release mentors provided by the school system, and both have value. A full-release mentor can help new teachers understand the needs of the school system, provide both a model and a critique of classroom teaching, and demonstrate how to use formative assessment data to measure and modify instruction (Moir, 2009). However, a full-release mentor will not be as readily available as a site-based mentor who could be as close as next door.

Common planning time with same-subject mentors can give new teachers content-specific strategies as well as a perspective on how students at the school are being taught to think within a specific discipline (Martin, Andrews, & Gilbert, 2009). In my experience, even hallway brainstorming sessions between classes have led to new insights. Together, full-release and site-based mentors provide a level of availability and expertise that individually they could not.

Create a Community of Practice

A community of practice made up of both experienced professionals and other new teachers can provide new teachers with an entire network of help and encouragement. Within such a community, administrators might suggest professional development activities to strengthen weak areas in a new teacher's technique or give new teachers extra time to observe veteran teachers in the school.

One such informal observation revolutionized my assessment strategy. An experienced teacher showed me how he used clickers to give quizzes and tests, tying each question in those assessments to standards so he could measure his effectiveness in teaching specific topics. By offering his classroom for observation and taking time during his planning period to explain his strategy, he saved me hours of grading time and demonstrated how I could better use my own formative assessments to drive instruction. More formally, many schools meet together by department for professional learning community meetings. Such a network of same-subject teachers offers multiple perspectives for a rookie teacher.

A community of practice need not be restricted to the school building. An online community of teachers, administrators, and local college staff could provide constant support, near-instant feedback, and a centralized location for shared resources (Moir, 2009). Alger and Kopcha (2011) created an online discussion board where preservice teachers could interact with classmates, mentor teachers, and university supervisors. The preservice teachers reported that the support was useful for planning instruction and sharing ideas on how to handle tricky management situations. If such a tool could also include a file exchange for project ideas, differentiated lessons, lesson plans, and other similar resources, new teachers would not have to go about reinventing the wheel during their first year. If schools are truly composed of individuals working together for the common goal of giving children a high-quality education, why shouldn't we share our best ideas?

Teach with Me

I want to be a good teacher. But creating and delivering lessons, managing students, and juggling administrative responsibilities can feel like too much to handle. I need help. Better preparation through a variety of field experiences, a manageable first-year workload, organized mentorships, and the support of a community of practice would provide a system of support that relieves stress while encouraging new teachers to build on their best ideas.

Work with me, and together, we can serve our students better than I could on my own. Teach with me, and we will make a difference.

References

- Alger, C., & Kopcha, T. J. (2011). Technology supported cognitive apprenticeship transforms the student teaching field experience: Improving the student teaching field experience for all triad members. *Teacher Educator*, 46(1), 71–88.
- Capraro, M. M., Capraro, R. M., & Helfedt, J. (2010). Do differing types of field experiences make a difference in teacher candidates' perceived level of competence? *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 37(1), 131–154.
- Kardos, S. M., & Johnson, S. M. (2008). New teachers' experiences of mentoring: The good, the bad, and the inequity. *Journal of Educational Change*, 11, 23–44.
- Mandel, S. (2006). [What new teachers really need](#). *Educational Leadership*, 63(6), 66–69.
- Martin, E. P., Andrews, S. P., & Gilbert, L. S. (2009). New teachers and support: An examination of ratings of significant agents. *Research in the Schools*, 16(1), 25–31.
- McCann, T. M., Johannessen, L. R., & Ricca, B. (2005). [Respond to new teachers' concerns](#). *Educational Leadership*, 62(8), 30–34.
- Moir, E. (2009). Accelerating teacher effectiveness: Lessons learned from two decades of new teacher induction. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 91(2), 14–21.
- Panesar, S. (2010). Exploring disparities between teachers' expectations and the realities of the education profession. *Research in Higher Education Journal*, 8, 1–19.
- Rust, F. O. (2010). Shaping new models for teacher education. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 37(2), 5–18.

[Brian K. Jones](#) is a science teacher at Blackman Middle School in Murfreesboro, Tennessee.

KEYWORDS

Click on keywords to see similar products:

[beginning teachers](#), [teacher burnout](#), [teacher recruitment](#), [teacher retention](#)

Copyright © 2012 by ASCD

Requesting Permission

- For photocopy, electronic and online access, and republication requests, go to the [Copyright Clearance Center](#). Enter the periodical title within the "Get Permission" search field.
- To translate this article, contact permissions@ascd.org

