

Use Coaches, Not Mentors

Many districts now understand that a critical component of a successful induction program is a coach. Read why in the **Going Beyond** folder for the *Epilogue* at EffectiveTeaching.com.

The research is very specific: Well trained, proficient and effective teachers produce student learning. Unfortunately, our schools do a poor job of training teachers to be proficient and effective.

Instead of training teachers, we give new teachers a mentor—or none at all—and no one monitors or assesses the relationship. The mentor is given no goals or directions and the principal has no idea what transpires. After a year of sporadic help from the mentor, the new teacher retires to a classroom to work in isolation.

The cycle repeats itself, decade after decade, and no one stops to reflect on the fact that new teacher attrition remains the same and student achievement does not improve. Why?

We have been giving new teachers mentors for over 30 years, yet there is absolutely no research to support this strategy to improve teacher effectiveness.

One-on-one mentoring does not improve student learning. [Click here](#) to see the research.

Leslie Huling at Texas State University says, “Simply assigning a mentor teacher does little to remedy the situation of teachers becoming discouraged and leaving the profession. Induction and mentoring must go hand-in-hand. You cannot do one without the other.” (Note that induction and mentoring are not the same.)

Susan Wynn and her colleagues at Duke University found there is no consensus on what mentors should do, what they actually do, and what novices learn as a result of mentoring. Their results did not find a relationship between mentoring and teacher retention—much less improved student achievement.

Mike Schmoker, author of the best-selling book, *Results: The Key to Continuous School Improvement*, says of mentoring:

“So called ‘mentors’ are everywhere these days, but they aren’t often given release time or a clear, compelling charge. Research has not been found that supports the systematic formation of effective teachers solely through the use of mentors, especially mentors who show up after school begins and may not have been trained, compensated, or given direction or goals to attain.”

Ted Britton, Senior Researcher for WestEd (www.WestEd.org), a nonprofit research, development, and service agency, reports this about mentors:

“Mentors are more typically assigned to respond to a new teacher’s day-to-day crises and provide survival teaching tips. Mentors are simply a safety net for the new teachers. Mentoring, in and of itself, has no purpose, goal, or agenda for student achievement, and, thusly, one-on-one mentoring has failed to provide evidence of the connection between well-executed professional learning communities and student learning.”

The North Carolina Teaching Fellows Commission reports, “Giving a teacher a mentor only is a convenient and unconsciously foolish way for an administrator to divorce himself or herself from the leadership required to bring a beginning teacher up to professional maturity level.”

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The same Commission also found that principals and new teachers rated mentors the least effective way to help new teachers. One out of four new teachers claimed they received either “poor” or “no support” from their mentors. Simply assigning a mentor teacher does little to remedy the situation of teachers becoming discouraged and leaving the profession.

The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future reports, “Unless we move beyond the traditional one-to-one mentoring model, we will continue to reinforce the industrial-era practice of stand-alone teaching in isolated classrooms.”²

In Every Aspect of Life, Except Education

Today the best districts coach—not mentor—their new teachers and place them in learning teams to develop their teachers toward state-specified proficiencies.

Common sense dictates that in every aspect of life, people are given a full complement of activities and people to train and support them, from the day they start a job until the day they leave it.

Comprehensive training programs are the norm for most jobs. Ask the fire chief, the store manager, or hospital executive what they do with new employees. Ask the baseball manager, construction foreman, or senior partner in a law firm what they do. Ask the workforce at Domino’s Pizza, Starbucks, The Cheesecake Factory, and McDonalds. They all will tell you that every employee is trained. And in most cases, the training continues until the employee leaves the company.

Even the best-educated new employees need on-the-job training. Despite completing college and medical school, doctors spend years working as hospital residents before entering private practice. Newly elected judges, armed with law degrees and years of experience, attend judicial college before assuming the bench. Pilots receive initial training and recurrent training every time they advance from co-pilot to pilot, or change planes, say from a 737 to a 757.

Coaching Is Job-Embedded

Every baseball season begins with Spring Training. At training camp, the camp is crawling with coaches. They have coaches for pitching, hitting, catching, base running, outfield play, infield play, sliding, base stealing, taking signals, and warming up drills, just to name a few. They do not give each player a mentor.

Each coach has the responsibility to bring out the best in every player under the coach’s tutelage. In turn, the coaches meet with the manager on a regular basis to assess the progress of each player. **Baseball, like a school, is a team function, and everyone needs to know the culture of the team and how it operates in harmony and unison.**

The most effective schools have coaches. In many schools we find literacy coaches, math coaches, science coaches, technology coaches, instructional coaches, and even coaches (not mentors) for principals.

The coaches meet with the principal on a regular basis to assess the progress of every teacher and student. **In an effective school, everyone functions as a team and there is a laser focus on student achievement.**

Coaches are in the classrooms with the teachers and the students. The work is job-embedded, which is how teachers learn best to become skilled and effective.

The reason coaches succeed with improving student learning is because coaches have a defined responsibility. Just as a sports coach or an executive coach has responsibilities, educational coaches have similar responsibilities of producing proficiency, too.

Responsibility as a Reading Coach

When a new teacher joins the staff at Caldwood Elementary School in Beaumont, Texas, he or she will find coaches such as **Angie Romano**.

Angie is a reading coach with a strong knowledge of providing effective reading instruction. She also has received training in how to work effectively with peer colleagues.

These are her responsibilities:

- First and foremost, to assist teachers to improve the reading instruction in their classrooms.
- Model lessons and strategies.
- Observe reading lessons and provide POSITIVE feedback.
- Advise and support teachers with instruction (materials, planning, instruction, and assessment).
- Team teach.
- Collaborate with teachers in grade level and vertical team meetings.
- Provide professional development.
- Help with organization and management of their materials.
- Develop intervention plans for struggling readers.
- Assess each child, K–3, four times a year.
- Provide professional development on assessments and decide the next step to take.
- Meet with principal and go over assessments, progress, concerns, etc., with reading teachers.
- Provide POSITIVE support for a teacher’s needs and a shoulder to cry on.
- Meet with parents and teachers to discuss children’s progress or concerns.

Improved Reading Scores

Angie provides bi-weekly professional development meetings with each grade level. Meetings include looking at student data, looking at strengths and weaknesses of the kids, creating make and take for the reading stations, etc. She usually does walk-throughs three days a week and sits in classes for the 90-minute block twice a week. She visits in rooms to observe a particular child or problem a teacher is experiencing.

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For new teachers, she participates in modeling lessons, sometimes piggybacking off the teacher. She also helps with lesson plans, classroom organization and management, and procedures for the stations.

K–2 students participate in two reading stations plus a teacher station each day. Angie helps the teachers focus particular attention on the kids who are struggling, and she follows their station activities to make sure they can do the work or provides activities for the children to do at their own achievement levels. It may be as simple as teaching them an easier way to play a game or help with a reading assignment out of the book.

The teachers know that when Angie is in the room it is only to help, and they feel comfortable asking her questions. As a coach, she is constantly reinforcing great teaching—complimenting, writing notes, putting little gifts in the mailboxes (without her name) so they will know they are loved and appreciated.

Angie says, “I find the more I can do for them, the more they give back to me! I truly LOVE my job and look forward to going to work each day.”

Does Coaching Work?

Working collegially, the staff of the Caldwood Elementary School is proud that their 3rd grade Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) scores improved in reading for the past two years, with a passing rate of 93–96% over the past three years.

The Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI) scores have increased within the past three years, with most children scoring at grade level.

Angie is proud to share, “In kindergarten, I have seen kids come in and behave like they have never been out in public, or given a pencil or book. They can’t speak full sentences, don’t know their names, or how to write them. The kids do not know their letters or sounds. A few days later, I see that same child beginning to bloom—talking, writing, participating in station activities. At Caldwood, we take what we get and work hard to make them into successful learners!”

Angie says the school is a hodgepodge of cultural, socio-economic, and transient students, but she proudly states, **“Our teachers in K–3 work very hard to ensure all students can read and succeed.”**

On a Personal Note

Angie shares that about ten years ago, when her own son was having reading difficulties, she couldn’t find anyone to help her ‘fix’ him. Frustrated, she began taking extensive reading courses such as Reading Recovery[®] and Master Reading Teacher (MRT). Both courses proved to be the help she needed to diagnose his reading problems. She also found strategies to help improve his reading comprehension and fluency.

She didn’t stop with her son. She began grabbing kids people told her couldn’t read, and she began a second job as a reading tutor.

About ten years ago she had a humbling experience. A father came into her classroom to thank her for helping his child learn to read.

Angie relates, **“With tears rolling down his face, he told Angie that he had given Joshua the gift of life, but I had given Joshua the gift of a lifetime of success—the ability to read.**

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“What an awesome job our teachers of K–3 have to make the difference in so many lives.”

Coaches Have Responsibilities

Mentors are important in providing emotional support and answering basic questions for survival. That is their role, whereas coaches have responsibilities.

Mentors have **Roles**.

Coaches have **Responsibilities**.

The major responsibility of a coach is to help maximize personal and professional potential, while concomitantly upgrading their own professional proficiency. Mentors are under no obligation to upgrade their role as a mentor.

Coaching is customized and focused on providing instruction on what needs to be accomplished. Coaches tailor support, assess each teacher’s progress with observations, use interviews and surveys, and conduct follow-up visits. Teachers feel more motivated and responsible to act on new skills they’ve learned because coaching is personalized, customized, and ongoing.

Just as a tennis coach, a fitness coach, or an executive coach has a responsibility, educational coaches have similar responsibilities of producing proficiency, too. Coaches have a ‘big-picture plan’ for student achievement. To accomplish this they suggest or show teachers what to do and assess for progress.

Tom Guskey, an expert in evaluation design, analysis, and educational reform, found that coaches focus on student-learning goals, identify small measurable steps to tailor goal accomplishment, and plan professional development that differentiates for each teacher based on their needs. **The emphasis is on student learning, and coaches coach for learning.**

Differences Between Mentors and Coaches	
Mentors	Coaches
Are available for survival and support	Help teachers improve student learning
Provide emotional support; answer singular procedural questions	Coach to improve instructional skills on a sustained basis
React to whatever arises	Focus on student learning goals
Treat mentoring as an isolated activity	Part of job-embedded induction and staff development process
Just a buddy	Have a leadership responsibility

In many districts, mentors have taken on some coaching responsibility for teacher proficiency.

Proficiency is essential if there is to be a concomitant improvement in student learning because the research is very specific. It is the teacher.

The more proficient the teacher, the more the students will learn.

In these districts, where the mentors are working to improve instruction skills for improved student learning, by definition, mentors should be called “coaches.”

What’s Your Game Plan?

If you are a pre-service teacher hoping to be hired this fall, you know the support you’re looking for in a school district. **Coaches!**

If you are an administrator dealing with low test scores and fleeing teachers, you know the kind of support you need to establish in your school district. **Coaches!**

If you are a teacher in a non-supportive school district and want to move, you know what to look for in a caring school district. **Coaches!**

We’ve shared with you the structure for success with coaches. It’s time for you to execute a winning game plan.

¹*A Profession in Jeopardy: Why Teachers Leave and What We Can Do About It and Keeping Talented Teachers.* (1995). Raleigh, North Carolina: The Public School Forum of North Carolina, 3739 National Drive, Suite 210, Raleigh, NC.

²Fulton, K., I. Yoon, and C. Lee. (August 2005). “Induction into Learning Communities.” *National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future.* Available at www.nctaf.org and www.NewTeacher.com.