

BARBARA GENTRY

Jordan School District

Mentoring and Invigorating New Teachers

My Vexation:

As a 25-year veteran of the middle school science classroom, I was given the opportunity to be the teacher specialist in the Jordan School District. One reason that I made this switch was because it would give me the chance to increase science teacher confidence and effectiveness. As a classroom science teacher, I felt successful in helping many students each year to learn science. To become a teacher specialist allowed me to multiply my influence. Part of the job required me to work with new teachers.

Jordan district is one of the 50 largest school districts in the nation and has a total student enrollment approaching 80,000 children. There is one person in charge of the secondary science teachers and their professional development — and that is me. Despite our size, we work hard to coordinate how science is being taught. This includes working with new hires to our district. It is a challenge but also exciting to try to shape the careers of science teachers just as they move into our district.

In my district, I am expected to mentor science teachers in twenty-seven middle and high schools. These schools are spread out over a considerable geographic area. Last year we had 30 new science teachers who were routinely assigned to a building-level mentor. However, the mentors are not given any extra time in their day to be a mentor. In some schools, one mentor may be responsible for up to three new teachers and, in some cases, the mentor was not a science teacher. Even with the best of intentions, it is extremely challenging to find the time and energy to provide new science teachers with the support and guidance they need on an ongoing basis.

My source of frustration is the apparently never-ending turnover of our science teaching staff. It has worsened this year due to my district's inability to offer competitive salaries to new teachers compared to surrounding districts. The low pay encourages the teachers to coach or have a second job. Between that and the stress of being a new teacher, they are exhausted. They are also required to take coursework for endorsements and district requirements.

The difficulties faced by new teachers are well known. It usually takes two or three years for new teachers to become effective in the classroom. When I was in the classroom, I did what I could to mentor the new teachers to my building. I helped them find equipment and learn how to use it, shared lesson ideas, and helped with frustrating students. But in my district role, I cannot be there for all the new teachers on a daily basis. Our buildings are so far apart I could not even drive to the front door of each building under my responsibility during the school day. And I have a few other responsibilities in my role including attending state level meetings, developing a web site and teaching after school inservice classes.

The issue is troublesome because it means that students may go for years without experiencing anything but a new science teacher struggling to survive his or her first or second year. The quality of their science teaching can only suffer. Our middle schools are particularly hard hit because the majority of our new hires are at this level.

Without resolution, our science staffs are becoming fragmented and ineffective. Students are not seeing science as it should be taught. If their chances of being in the classroom of an

BARBARA GENTRY

Jordan School District

Mentoring and Invigorating New Teachers

experienced, effective teacher are only going to be available in upper-division high school courses, many of them have already formed negative associations with science that will prevent them from taking additional science coursework.

My Venture:

In an attempt to help all teachers improve their instruction, I have offered professional development courses that meet once or twice a month. I call them Focus groups and they focus on a particular subject area (biology, chemistry, earth systems or new teachers) and we meet to discuss our instruction, learn new strategies and support one another. I have done this for the last two years and am finding them to be quite helpful for the teachers that are able to participate.

To attract teachers, they are paid to attend and also receive inservice credit. I target new teachers, but for reasons listed above, many cannot attend after school inservice. All teachers in my district are welcome to attend and the experienced teachers add a great deal to the group. Last year I had about 20 teachers participate in 3 different groups. It is not enough, but a start in the right direction, I believe.

Teachers are recruited through our staff development course catalog, fliers and I invite them any time I talk to teachers. I try to offer a high school group and a middle school group and the class is offered for two consecutive years although teachers may only participate one year. I determine the need for the subject area of the group by looking at students' state test scores and determining which areas we have many teachers with less training.

We rotate to teachers' schools to try and make the travel time fair for everyone. The teachers attempt to stay on the same schedule so that they are teaching the same topics and can discuss content and translate the State Core Curriculum together. The "hosting" school presents a lesson they have used recently and teach it to us, demonstrating use of the equipment and letting us do the experiment. The teachers all share ideas from their classrooms from the last couple of weeks and I bring a lesson to share (not always an experiment, often a literacy strategy or assessment idea). The classes are informal and in a couple of instances, teachers came so well prepared that I didn't need to present anything.

I take many of the ideas presented at the meetings and write them up for posting on my website. That way, teachers in my district can all benefit. My web site:

http://t4.jordan.k12.ut.us/teacher_resources/Science/modelclassroomroot/index.html

Each year, I see the eager young faces of the new science teachers and I wonder who will be back next year. I wish I could do more.