

Teacher Mentoring

BY CRAIG KRUEGER

A white-haired, diminutive fifty-year teaching veteran, Mrs. Eleanor Stanhart, never seemed particularly intimidating. Then one day we were waiting for a faculty meeting together. As I sat, she looked down on me and demonstrated her tone of voice and her look for correcting wiggly first graders: “Now, you sit up!” she said quietly and with great command. Believe me, if I had not already been sitting up, I would have snapped to attention at that order!

There are some things you have to see and to hear to fully understand. Like Mrs. Stanhart’s astonishing conviction and authority, some things are *caught* more than *taught*. Observation and experience are certainly necessary for a teacher to build effective teaching skills. Student teaching is good, but it is not enough to facilitate a smooth transition into the independent routine and responsibility of a new school. Furthermore, each school has its unique features, and the student teaching experience in one school cannot touch all the unique policies and philosophies of a different school. The new teacher has much to learn, not only about specific policies and procedures, but also about the actual implementation of all the theory learned in college. That support and help can be provided by a teacher mentor.

The Teacher Mentor

The teacher mentor is a master teacher, a veteran of a particular school, who provides example, inspiration, and just plain practical help for a new teacher. The new teacher does not really come to a school as a finished product: he or she is a diamond, rough cut, and needing a final polishing. The theory and knowledge from college training are essential, but a new teacher can be best perfected by close contact with a master teacher.

In that transition from knowledge to experience, much hangs in the balance. Many a good teacher quits after the first year, disillusioned. Too many more plod on, “teaching as they were taught,” unaware of their greater potential. The teacher mentor is to education what the discipler is to spiritual growth.

The Growing Teacher

Two groups of teachers can benefit as learners in a mentoring situation. Mentoring should be a routine procedure for welcoming a new teacher into the teaching profession. Yet, there are many experienced teachers who would welcome the opportunity to grow through such a relationship. This experienced teacher deserves special consideration. Granted, accepting help requires some humility, but the benefits are inestimable for the teacher who has the desire to receive such help. The teacher mentor, in this case, comes alongside a colleague, sharing burdens, being a help. In this relationship, perhaps the lead teacher would better be termed *servant mentor*. The

mentor becomes like Christ washing the disciples' feet, most noble in humbly providing the most lowly of service as well as the lofty instruction.

The Administrator

The administrator is the educational leader of the school. Ideally, he or she is able to teach; in fact, the administrator should be a master teacher. Practically, he or she is at least continually learning and growing in knowledge and experience as an educator. As time allows, the administrator should be one of the mentors in the school.

Yet, sometimes that cannot be done because the administrator lacks the time or the classroom experience to be a teacher mentor. No administrator can be an expert in every subject and at every level. At that time the educational leader falls back on his administrative strength: delegation tool with accountability. Teacher mentoring is an available tool for encouraging, instructing, and supporting new and current staff members. It is a valuable tool, which should be effectively used.

The administrator, then, has twin challenges. First, he or she must provide mentoring, either as the teacher mentor, or as the one who establishes and oversees an effective system to draw on the wealth of talent the Lord has provided the school in the persons of the master teachers. Second, the administrator must continue growing in his or her own educational knowledge and skills.

Qualities of The Teacher Mentor

A teacher mentor is not the same thing as an experienced teacher. Some teachers manage to hold together a classroom, yet would not be the desired model for another teacher's growth. A teacher mentor must demonstrate several superior qualities:

- Be well organized and have a record of meeting deadlines.
- Have a positive, upbeat personality.
- Communicate well both verbally and in writing.
- Be considered successful in the classroom.
- Have demonstrated the effective use of teaching strategies, (DiGeronimo, 1993, p. 348).

Selection of the right teacher mentors is of primary importance. "Experienced teachers are not the same as master teachers. Some teachers lack the personality needed. Some lack the variety of experiences that should be shared" (Irvine, 1985, p. 128). The administrator may be the one to select the teacher mentors, or they may be selected by the whole faculty. Here is a very significant way of honoring, as well as fully

utilizing, those teachers who are excellent. “You can borrow brains, but you can’t borrow character,” Bob Jones, Sr., said; but the administrator can certainly “borrow” more than knowledge. He or she can provide opportunity for new teachers to observe and adopt attitudes, habits, and even character from successful veterans so that iron can sharpen iron and wise men may walk with wise (Proverbs 27:17 and 13:20).

Whether or not the administrator has help in selecting the teacher mentors, training or procuring training for them will be his or her responsibility. Training provides both direction and assistance for the teacher mentor. The administrator should carefully define the parameters of the program: who (who will meet with whom), what (what to do and discuss), when (when and how often to meet), and where (where to meet). While setting up the goals of the program, the administrator must realize that the teacher mentor and the new teacher will need to make modifications to accommodate the normal difficulties that come in coordinating the activities of very busy people. (Any adjustments should be subject to the administrator’s approval.) Training should include consideration of active listening and counseling skills (Irvine, p. 128). The “how to” of counseling, to be an actively pursuing (rather than passively available) discipler, is an expertise of a pastor. This, then, is an excellent opportunity for the pastor to be involved in the school.

Duties of The Teacher Mentor

Potential duties will vary from school to school.

Regarding procedures, the mentor:

- Reminds of deadlines.
- Informs of meetings and of what to prepare or to bring.
- Shows how to implement the school's grading procedures.

Regarding professional material, the mentor:

- Opens his or her files of resource materials.
- Guides in developing lesson plans and tests.
- Assists in developing effective teaching strategies.

Regarding pupils, the mentor:

- Counsels on discipline.
- Provides insights on meeting the needs of exceptional students.

- Directs in establishing and effectively developing rapport with parents.
- Helps to establish guidelines in subjective evaluation, such as citizenship marks.

Regarding personal growth, the mentor:

- Confronts and commends the new teacher in areas of character and attitudes that others may not be willing to address.
- Provides encouragement and comfort.

Jacqueline Irvine provides a list of forty-six potential tasks for the mentor (pp. 125-127). Beyond lists, though, the personal aspect of the mentoring relationship will allow it to flow in the direction of individual needs. In all mentoring relationships, though, the key is that the mentor models the behaviors that provide success, and that the mentor also supports the new teacher through encouragement, direction, and correction. Modeling, instruction, and support *are* mentoring.

Administering the Relationship

For a mentoring program to go beyond that which might spontaneously occur there must be administrative leadership. When the mentor-protégé relationship is defined, and the mentoring teachers are instructed, and teacher pairs are assigned, the job is only half done. The hard part is yet to come: keeping the program on course. Matt Williams (1992) summarized delegation in his book on staff relationships: “When we give someone a responsibility, we must always give the authority needed to get the job done. But with the authority there must be accountability” (p. 18). The administrator can delegate some of the work of integrating and supporting the new staff member, but he cannot delegate the responsibility for getting the job done.

The teacher mentor does not usurp the authority of the administrator: he or she facilitates it. The teacher mentor is an extension of the administrator and provides help and support as needed. One of the key issues the mentor must understand is the importance of working through the school’s organizational structure.

Another important consideration for all involved is the simple fact that teacher mentoring takes time. Littleton, et al., found that effective mentoring required one to five hours a week (Jarmin and Mackiel, 1995, p. 45). Meetings usually take place before or after school. Meeting once a week is a minimum commitment, with meetings up to five times a week being common (p. 47). These time considerations point to the fact that mentoring is a major responsibility. The administrator should consider this in the allocation of extracurricular duties for both the mentor and the new teacher. Duties such as taking money at ball games, study hall supervision, before- and after-school supervision could be shifted away from those involved in mentoring.

However, the time required for mentoring drops off dramatically as the school year progresses and the new teacher becomes established and has fewer needs (Jarmin and Mackiel, p. 45). As a body, the staff, under the direction of the administrator, shifts and flows with the needs and strengths of each member for maximum efficiency. The goal is not that some be burdened and others be at ease, but that each teacher contribute his maximum for the benefit of the Lord's work, although in different ways at different times.

Establishing the Mentor/New Teacher Communication

Usually the burden of initiating contact falls upon the mentor. As the year progresses there are more mutually initiated contacts, but it is uncommon for the new teacher to be the one who asks for a time together. The mentor who waits to be called will not be as effective as the one who takes the initiative (Jarmin and Mackiel, p. 45).

Compensation for the Teacher Mentor

The teacher mentor role is one way of recognizing and rewarding effective teachers. The Daly City, California, project provided a \$300 per year stipend for mentors in 1992 (DiGeronimo, p. 348), whereas a Los Angeles County, California, school offered a \$4,000 salary bonus in 1984 (Irvine, p. 129). While teachers are more than willing to share their expertise with new staff, and the given examples are from public schools, still, "the workman is worthy of his hire" (Luke 10:7).

Benefits of a Teacher Mentoring Program

"I don't mind that pa threw me into the mill pond to teach me how to swim. The hard part was getting out of that burlap sack full of rocks." For the teacher just learning to swim in a "new pond" (to teach in a new position), those rocks include everything from insecurity in discipline to knowing how to run the copier. Teachers who have a thorough network of support are more confident and successful and are more likely to continue in teaching after that first year (DiGeronimo, p. 348).

While the mentor gives knowledge and support, he or she gains something equally beneficial: the enthusiasm of the first year teacher is contagious. The relationship works both ways. As the mentor teacher considers how to help the protégé, he or she has the opportunity to reexamine and refine his or her own teaching. Finally, the mentor-protégé relationship often fosters personal friendship that extends beyond those introductory months. When the teacher mentor gives, it shall be given unto him "good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over" (Luke 6:38).

Several benefits to the school are implied in the above paragraphs: staff retention, training, and teacher revitalization are primary. These things may even translate into monetary gain as improved teaching and positive staff relationships build school enrollment.

The administrator bears the burden of knowing he or she must provide for the success of each staff member. Especially as the administrator is facing problematic situations where the best interests and good testimony of the school are at stake, teacher mentoring can be the relief that is needed, especially if he or she lacks the time or experience needed to help a given teacher.

Conclusion

Mentoring is nothing new. Yet, the careful maximization of the potential of mentoring has not been widely developed in Christian education, even though thoughtful concern has been given to mentoring for over a decade in some businesses and in some public schools. No administrator has the time or expertise to be everything to all members of the staff. It is time Christian educators begin implementing some of the richest gifts the Lord has given us in Christian education: dedicated, godly, and competent master teachers.

Craig Krueger is the Academic Coordinator and an English teacher for Tri-City Christian School in Blue Springs, Missouri.

References

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Attempts to give a coherent definition Many attempts have been made at defining the term "mentoring." The definitions are so diverse that differences rather than similarities could be said to characterize mentoring as a concept. However, a few general descriptions have been made which can encompass a broad variety of definitions. For instance, according to Ole L'w (2009) mentoring will always be a goal-oriented activity. In the professional mentoring conversation, the mentor has much of the How do teachers get started? If you are interested in working with an TMT volunteer, send us an email at teachersmentoringteachers@gmail.com or call Mary at (907) 957-8105. When do the teachers and TMT volunteers meet? Meetings are based entirely on both the teacher and mentor's schedules, for short, specific times (a quick drop-in) or for the duration of an instructional unit. Some teachers may want to meet during the day when class is being held, and others may want to meet after the school day has ended. Mentoring as a form of strengthening the competencies of teachers is widely accepted in the educational system of the Republic of Macedonia. Generally, experienced teachers and those who are new perceive this process as inevitable for strengthening and retaining quality staff. The goal is to explore what teachers think about mentoring novice teachers in teaching.