

Working with Veteran Teachers: Advice for New Teachers

"I strongly urge first-year teachers to utilize those master instructors around them to learn ways of managing time, organizing instruction and evaluating students materials that are the most efficient and beneficial for them." —Colleen Abbott (Eagle, Colorado)

First-year teacher Shalon Cole (South Bend, Indiana) is not likely to forget walking into her classroom and finding a table covered with presents from her fellow teachers—a supply of much-needed classroom materials.

New teachers like Shalon appreciate any effort—large or small—that veteran teachers make to welcome them. "All staff members at the school need to make new teachers feel welcomed," says Susan Woodward (Merrimack, New Hampshire). "Just showing a smile helps."

Yet, many first-year teachers said they sought more than an open door and a friendly greeting. They wanted to sit down with veteran teachers regularly and work side by side, gaining real-world insights from their more experienced colleagues.

"I set up a relationship with a veteran teacher before I started my first year," says Claudia Crase (Helena, Montana). "We set up a time every day. We would talk and listen to each other and set goals for the next week."

Getting access to knowledgeable veteran teachers can be a challenge. Some first-year teachers we interviewed initiated a relationship with a mentor rather than waiting for a veteran teacher to step forward. In an unusual case, one first-year Sallie Mae teacher drove 500 miles to meet with another first-grade teacher. She felt the teachers at her own school did not share her instructional philosophies, and she was not comfortable turning to them for support.

Rich Rewards

The rewards of new teachers' outreach efforts to their more seasoned colleagues were rich.

"I quickly discovered the importance of discussing curriculum and problems with other educators," says Kristy Spencer (Cedar City, Utah). "Their willingness to share ideas and give advice was a great help."

"Experienced teachers have helped me with problems ranging from dealings with parents to working through mid-year weariness and fatigue," writes Robert Gress (Lexington, Kentucky). "They are an invaluable resource to the [first-year] teachers who are willing to admit that they have much to learn."

Finally, veteran teachers provided their rookie counterparts a vital head start in their professional development, according to Luann Brazill (Santa Fe, New Mexico), who began her career "working long hours during and after school and depleting my creative energy trying to reinvent the wheel!"

Then Brazill realized there was a better way to come up to speed. "I was fortunate to have chosen a career where I am surrounded by excellent veterans [and] professional mentors with a variety of resources and experiences," Brazill writes. "I realized that it was time to ask questions, put my time and energy to better use for my students and myself. Today, I wouldn't dream of beginning a new unit without inquiring about resources and possible models."

The Negative Side of the Veteran Teacher Equation

In worst-case scenarios, veteran teachers represent negative energy—holed up in the proverbial faculty lounge that many young teachers go out of their way to avoid, and with good reason.

"Needless to say, my first experience in the faculty lounge was very interesting. I truly did not know that I had what some would call a 'problem child' until I got in the lounge and heard every teacher complain about that child," recalls Dionne Bennett (Little Rock, Arkansas). "If the teachers in the lounge were not complaining about their children, they were either griping about the facilities, or even about the teaching profession. I knew I had to do something!"

The "something" this teacher chose was to stay out of the lounge whenever possible, avoid negative conversations, and maintain a positive attitude throughout the day.

The Toughest Students

Several first-year teachers said that being assigned a class of all the most challenging students with the most complicated learning needs could be overwhelming. One lucky first-year teacher avoided this fate:

Mara Esposito (Seattle, Washington) said she avoided being assigned many students with learning and motivational problems largely because the other teachers knew her from the time she spent interning at the school. It was harder for the other staff members to assign to a fellow teacher whom they knew and liked students with learning and/or motivational problems, or students who lacked support from their families.

Encouraging Best Practice

Mara says her school's monthly "best practice" meetings reduce the opportunity for negative thinking and instead focus teachers on improvement.

But when veteran teachers don't take an interest in new practices, first-year teachers feel discouraged. The challenge is to keep negative teachers' lack of enthusiasm from dampening their own, first-year teachers said.

"I was told, 'Don't rock the boat.' This isn't great advice for teachers. We all rock the boat. Every day," says Claudia Crase (Helena, Montana). "Veteran teachers don't always like this. I say, 'Take a risk. Deal with it.' "

Firsthand: Teachers and Mentors Make It Happen

Lori Williams (Clarksville, Tennessee) remembers the excitement of visiting her classroom before the first day of school. She can picture the bare bulletin boards, empty chairs, and vacant filing cabinets. How would she fill them, and how would she fulfill the awesome responsibility that awaited her?

With a lot of help from her mentor and veteran teachers.

"As for those five, empty filing cabinets—they are now full thanks to the generosity of my esteemed colleagues who have shared materials with me," Williams writes. "I have utilized many suggestions from these veterans. [In addition,] the mentor program to assist new teachers turned out to be a tremendous advantage. I was paired with a seasoned teacher who has taught for 31 glorious years. She guided, encouraged, and assisted me to help me become successful. Somehow, with the help of others and a willingness to do whatever it took to make things happen, I have managed to keep up with the challenges of three preparations of differing grades and abilities. I would advise a new teacher to choose a mentor, design a plan for success, implement a plan, and ask for help when needed. Looking back this year, I realized that I am like the *Velveteen Rabbit*—I am finally REAL."

Look to Veteran Teachers to...

- Share lesson plans that put curriculum guides into practice
- Support and participate in a new teachers' planning process

- Offer tips on the practical problems new teachers didn't learn about in school—make do with fewer resources, classroom management, bureaucracy
- Show respect and collegial support
- Observe new teachers' classes and let them observe yours; and
- Help teachers locate materials

Tips on Building a Relationship with Veteran Teachers

- Ask to visit colleagues' classrooms so you can learn about different approaches to teaching and find one you admire
- Seek the help of a mentor who has skills and knowledge you would like to develop
- If your assigned mentor is not helpful, seek out an informal mentor relationship that provides more support; look to your team teachers for help
- Don't reinvent the wheel: before you begin developing a curriculum unit, find out if any veteran teachers have materials or insights that would jumpstart your efforts; and
- Be willing to admit you have a lot to learn from experienced teachers