

10 Tips for Mentoring New Educators

By Jody Barker

When it comes to learning, every student deserves an effective teacher that can help them grow to meet their highest potential. The same is true for adults. Educators in the beginning stage of their career deserve leaders who are focused on nurturing their skills and talents to ensure that they are the best they can be. While this is a process that takes time, it also requires urgency and attention. We have come to assume that new teachers will take a while to find their feet, and accept the fact that they are overwhelmed. However, this is a passive form of student neglect and educational malpractice. No child should ever have to suffer socially, emotionally, psychologically or academically because they have been placed in the classroom of a novice teacher. They deserve experts in their classrooms guiding the process from day one.

Mentoring can have a direct impact on novice teacher development and increased student growth. Here are some tips to consider if you have the privilege, honor, and opportunity to coach a new teacher.

1. Understand your role as a mentor

Mentoring is a privilege that impacts not only teachers' skill sets and mindsets, but their personal identities, sense of value, and vision for themselves as educators for the rest of their career. The beliefs you hold about the people you support will impact their beliefs about themselves. It is imperative that you hold aspirational visions for novice teachers and truly believe in their ability to grow, solve problems, and become leaders in your school. If you do not have positive presuppositions to your core, it will come through in your mentoring. Part of your job is to hold up a vision that believes in people even when they don't believe in themselves. It is also critical to understand your role as an advocate for students. Every student deserves an effective teacher in the classroom. Your expert eyes and input are critical in ensuring student needs are being met while a novice teacher is developing their skills.

2. Establish partnership agreements

Be intentional from the very beginning about outlining your role and the expected outcomes of your partnership. Build trust not only through relationship and rapport, but through clear expectations of what your work together will look like. Ensure that your principal is on the same page with these agreements and is willing to protect your time to allow you adequate planning, observation, and collaboration time with novice teachers.

3. Make time

It is imperative that you establish credibility as a mentor, grounded in your clarity and consistency. This is immediately undermined if you make promises that you cannot keep. Most teacher leaders wear many hats in their school, but you must make every effort to set time aside for your new teachers and hold it sacred. Balance formal observations and instructional discussions with frequent unannounced walk throughs. Your presence in their classroom sets the tone for your school's collaborative culture.

4. Gather data

Become a learner of your learner. The most important factor in successful growth is being able to identify their proximal zone of development, which comes from being keenly aware of their existing schema. Many new teachers come with existing funds of knowledge, but as their knowledge is challenged by new experiences they are tempted to throw it all out. You are wise to help identify what they know and help them to hang onto and build upon it.

5. Keep the learner at the center

Focused instructional coaching, direct feedback, and intense technical support may be appropriate when working with a new teacher, but always remember the end goal is self-regulation and independence. You will

move between roles as a mentor, coach, consultant and collaborator, but always remember to build their ability to reflect and be metacognitive. This will have a more lasting impact on their career. Ensure that they are always the one carrying the cognitive load and doing the thinking.

6. Prioritize action steps

While we want new teachers to do the thinking, we also know they can easily experience cognitive overload. Utilize resources that will help you name and identify the next best thing to work on. Be very granular and concrete when you provide feedback, identifying goals that are simple, clear, and easily achieved in a short period of time.

7. Celebrate success

There are a lot of mixed reviews about the use of praise. However, let's recognize that no one in education gets enough of it. New educators especially tend to hear a lot more about what is not working than what is. Be intentional about setting goals that equate to a lot of "small wins" and helping them track their improvement over time. Affirm and validate, especially when they are going through the [disillusionment phase](#). Think of how a house "appreciates" in value over time because of small, timely investments. When you notice anything positive, appreciate it and it will grow into something with substantive value.

8. Nurture innovation

I often use the analogy that getting a new teacher in your building is like having a heart transplant. You have an opportunity to have a new infusion of life-pumping energy, but it only works if the system takes anti-rejection drugs. While novice educators may appear to have a lot to improve upon, they also bring clarity, passion, new resources and efficiency to our schools. Identify their strengths and allow them to be dreamers. Being able to influence and inspire others may give them the boost of energy they need to address the changes they need to make in their classroom. Allow them to lead from the beginning and avoid the pitfall of expecting them to get everything perfectly together before they can play a bigger part in the story.

9. Support special service providers

We often make the mistake of supporting new classroom teachers without considering all of the new educators in our buildings. Mental health providers, speech language pathologists, occupational/ physical therapists, and nurses experience a change process similar to classroom teachers when they come to a new school, but are often more isolated and feel less supported because of the uniqueness of their role. Make sure that SSP support is not an afterthought, but that you have an intentional plan in place. Often these extremely gifted specialists have extraordinary training in their field, but are put into leading groups of students with no instructional background or classroom management experience. In addition, they are asked to provide resources for your entire staff and student body without common planning times to develop relationships and rapport. Providing them support and collaborative entry points at your site should be a top leadership priority.

10. Consider your influence

Acknowledge that you are in a position of authority when you work with a novice teacher. They see you as an expert, which you are in comparison. If you do not acknowledge this and take it seriously, you could unintentionally contribute to an abuse of power. Take the time to identify your own belief system in regards to [Influence and Impact versus Power and Control](#) and consider the outcomes that you want for students in terms of owning their own learning process. Ensure your philosophies transfer to the adults you work with as well.

Jody Barker is the Coordinator for Clinical Teacher Education at CU Denver. As a passionate advocate for students and educators, she has addressed audiences from varying backgrounds to inspire leadership, equity and service. She previously served as the Teacher Induction Coordinator for Jefferson County Public Schools in Colorado, creating support structures and professional development for approximately 400 novice teachers annually. Her prior experience includes work as a peer evaluator, instructional coach, classroom teacher,

Executive Director of a 501(c)3 non-profit organization, and youth minister. She lives in Lakewood, Colorado with her husband and dogs, and is the proud mom of three adult sons.