

# COLLABORATIVE TEACHER LEADERSHIP & DEVELOPMENT: Connecting the Education Pipeline



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## +++++ INTRODUCTION +++++

Through a four million dollar grant to improve educator preparation, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has laid out ambitious goals for the Commonwealth. The Department plans to work with the 71 teacher preparation programs to ensure that by 2022, first-year teachers are showing equivalent results to those in their third year of teaching. In order to achieve this goal, there needs to be a concerted effort by all stakeholders to understand and support the critical role of mentor educators and other support systems schools and districts can put in place to support those novice teachers. In doing so, not only are first year teachers supported by mentor educators, but mentor educators are provided with the recognition, incentives, and opportunities to help keep them in the classroom.

While teacher turnover rates have fallen recently, the percentage is still too high, and the reasons for the departures are too easily remedied. For example, the most recent 2015 study by the National Center for Educational Statistics, found mentoring can keep an additional 15 percent of teachers on the job<sup>1</sup> for an additional x years. Other strategies such as cooperative teaching practices, incentivizing strong teacher leaders to cultivate the next generation, and recognizing the value of their efforts are powerful tools for keeping teachers in the classroom. What follows are recommendations that we, as educators across Massachusetts, Teach Plus State Policy Fellows, and advocates, consider to be crucial steps to ensure that all teachers, regardless of their years of experience, are successful educators for all students in our state.

**RECOMMENDATION 1:** Encourage teacher residency programs to fully prepare novice teachers for the classroom through cooperative teaching.

Cooperative teaching opportunities are a necessary strategy if we want to ensure that K-12 students and teachers are learning in a way that rapidly closes the performance gap. Co-teaching is a partnership between student teachers and veteran teachers in which both professionals are learning and improving their practice. Student teachers benefit from being in the classroom with a knowledgeable teacher and getting priceless field work and practice that can't be taught in their program, while the lead teacher has the opportunity to keep up to date on the new theories and practices in education, as well to think metacognitively about their practice and be more intentional in their planning

and execution<sup>1</sup>. The biggest beneficiary is the students, who have two competent and qualified adults in the classroom to meet their learning needs.

Cooperative teaching is different than the traditional model of lead teacher and student teacher as both teachers plan the lessons and are expected to equally share the load from the beginning of the school year. The model has a more of a gradual release in terms of responsibilities for the student teacher. In terms of student achievement, a St. Cloud State University study found that teachers who taught in a co-teaching method as opposed

to a traditional method had “enhanced collaboration and communication skills, deeper self-reflection and enhanced understanding of curriculum and pedagogy

as a result of co-planning, enhanced classroom management skills, and enhanced instructional leadership skills”<sup>2</sup>.

In order to make the co-teaching model a reality for student teachers in Massachusetts, the school-based teacher should learn beforehand what the expectations for co-teaching are, and demonstrate a willingness to meet those expectations. Districts should have a clear way for student teachers to be partnered with school-based teachers, and provide basic training to teachers interested in how to teach collaboratively. The lead teacher should:

- + Have at least three years of experience in the classroom.
- + Present the novice as another teacher in the classroom in order for them to grow, and for the students to respect their authority.
- + Co-plan lessons and allow the student teacher to lead and be fully integrated in the classroom.
- + Provide targeted feedback to the student teacher.
- + Provide information about how the school operates, classroom rules, and information about individual student needs.
- + Be willing and able to collaborate and grow with the student teacher<sup>3</sup>.

**RECOMMENDATION 2:** Create an extensive induction program for new teachers before the start of the school year.

While first-year teachers may have completed a practicum, many do not begin this practicum until a few weeks into the school year. Because of this, it is nearly impossible for the novice teacher to be adequately prepared on day one if they do not understand how the school operates, including the community that they serve, resources available, and schoolwide procedures. Policies such as preferred methods to contact parents and where to find student information, such as Individual Education Plans and Behavioral Intervention Plans, and student records need to be available so student teachers are ready to meet the needs of their students upon entering the classroom. While most beginning teachers have been exposed to the curriculum frameworks, they need to know

how to access the curriculum materials from the district so they are ready to begin lesson planning.

A connection with a mentor should be made prior to the start of school so that there is a comfort level and a “go to” person for any needed questions or concerns. Mentoring programs often do not begin for weeks (or months) into the school year. The relationship with a mentor needs to be on solid footing well before a new teacher greets students on the first day. To enable novice teachers to be ready for their first year of teaching with the confidence and knowledge needed to start the year off with success, the mentoring program must show a novice teacher what preparing for day one involves.

**RECOMMENDATION 3:** Calibrate mentoring programs across all districts and clearly define the expectations for mentors.

School districts in Massachusetts are expected to have a mentoring and induction program for all first year teachers, along with opportunities for new teachers to complete their 50 hours towards professional status within a five-year period. Mentoring and the amount of training, if any, the mentor has received vary greatly depending upon where you teach in the Commonwealth.

In 2015, Massachusetts updated its statewide Guidelines for Mentoring and Induction. Mentoring plays a vital role in introducing new teachers to their district and acclimating them to the field of education. Education is an evolving entity and mentors and district mentor trainers must be properly trained for their role. In order to best prepare mentor teachers, districts should:

- + Develop job descriptions for Mentor and District Mentor Trainers that clearly stipulate the mentors expected role, qualifications, hours required for mentoring, and what the mentor's responsibilities will be in that position.
- + Update their district-wide Mentoring and Induction Guidelines to align with the 2015 State Mentoring and Induction Guidelines.

**The state should also require districts to add the following to their annual Mentor and Induction report:**

- + District-wide job descriptions for mentors and mentor trainers.
- + District-wide plan on how mentors are trained for their role.
- + An updated district-wide Guideline for Mentoring and Induction that aligns

with the 2015 Massachusetts Mentor and Induction Guidelines.

- + An endorsement in conjunction with

**Supporting First Year Teachers, the Right Way**

By Siobhan Gearty

When I started teaching, I was overwhelmed by the sheer amount of practical knowledge that I lacked. I could spout off facts about the history of American Education, I could discuss No Child Left Behind and other policies, and I could describe, in clinical language, the changes to an adolescent brain.

However, nowhere in my undergraduate classes did we discuss the politics of teaching - the art of navigating my way through the top-down changes made at a school, district, state, and federal level. Nowhere did we research techniques and strategies for identifying gang symbols and colors, or how to respond to a crying parent who is overworked and at a loss for how to handle her rebellious child.

Some will argue that colleges cannot prepare every teacher for every problem that will arise - that this is a job better suited for district mentor programs. However, mentor programs differ greatly from school to school and even from mentor to mentor, and all too often new teachers are left without any guidance in that first year.

My first classroom was set in the far corner of the building, separated from other classrooms by the long hallway, the lunchroom, and the district's maintenance department. I was physically cut off from most of the people who had more experience than myself. I did not even know where the teacher's lunch room was until February. I was one small cog in a giant machine, and it was all too easy for well-meaning administrators to overlook my orientation to the teaching profession.

My mentor, who was a wonderful and inspiring teacher, was busy running her own classroom and an after school job. While I knew she was available to me if I asked, the district never carved out time from the school day for us to meet, and there was no mandated plan for how our mentor/mentee hours would be filled. This left me feeling guilty and bothersome every time I interrupted her work to ask for advice or aid.

the teacher's certification for mentors who complete a graduate course on mentoring.

**RECOMMENDATION 4:** Create incentives in order to retain highly-effective teachers as mentors and teacher leaders.

Excellent teachers work hard be skilled at their craft. They improve student learning and change children's lives, often as a result of staying beyond the school bell and put in extra hours during their time off. Once identified by building administrators as being "great at their job," these outstanding

teachers are soon encouraged to take on additional responsibilities and leadership roles within the building. Our state and districts should provide incentives to our best teachers to ensure that these highly-skilled educators continue to take advantage of such opportunities.

**Districts should:**

- + **Offer stipends.** Teacher leaders carry the burden of providing the extra work that a school system needs in order to maintain a high level of functionality. This additional work should be rewarded with stipends that could increase annually based on job performance.
- + **Provide time during the school day to work on additional responsibilities.** For a teacher leader to effectively lead their fellow colleagues, as well as to continue being effective in the classroom, time must be built into their schedule. This could include eliminating teacher duties from these teachers' schedules or creating a 60-40 schedule split, where 60 percent of the day is for teaching and

40 percent is allocated towards these additional responsibilities.

- + **Publicly recognize teacher leaders.** Schools and districts should honor the work of teacher leaders. They should be presented to the school committee board members and the public should know when they are selected. These teacher leaders should have opportunities to contribute to monthly district newsletters in order to highlight their work. Superintendents should make an effort to meet with them on a regular basis. This would also help extend the communication lines between individual schools and the entire district.

**The state should:**

- + **Develop endorsement certifications for mentors and teacher leaders.** In order to be a teacher leader, teachers must stay up to date on current trends in education. Whether it involves attending a training, workshop, conference, or simply doing additional readings, a teacher leader is continuously learning new material and developing ideas for educators. This continuing education that teacher leaders participate in should be rewarded through professional development points (pdp points), count

towards recertification, and used as a stamp of endorsement on that teacher's license.

- + **Utilize teacher leaders as the "communication pipeline" between state and districts.** Teachers who are selected to serve as teacher leaders and mentors should also be the mediator between state and districts. Utilizing identified teacher leaders as "communication pipelines" will allow for teacher voices to be heard at the state level.

## Recommendation 5: Create a new leadership position in order to better communicate with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

As teachers, we want to understand the intended outcomes and benefits of new programs, standards, and practices before we commit to adopting them. For example, while many educators approved of the new Common Core standards which the Department of Education rolled out in 2010, there was some pushback to such widespread change. Some teachers were wary of adopting new curricula. Some adopted the attitude that the Common Core was an education fad and would certainly be phased out in a few years, so why go through the challenge of redesigning entire curriculums? Some saw it as just another top-down change. This mixed reaction impacted the way that the Common Core was implemented, with some districts and teachers faithfully implementing the standards and others feeling unsupported or even hostile to them. As a result, many new teachers were placed in the difficult position of learning how to teach to the standards on their own because their district or their mentor did not make Common Core a priority.

In order to avoid this kind of hardship in the future and in order for the communication between districts and the Department of Education to become more clear and meaningful, each district should have a

teacher liaison to DESE. The liaison would be a qualified teacher of professional status who would remain in the classroom (at least part time) and serve as a contact for all questions concerning statewide initiatives and mandates. This teacher leader would act as both a guide to the teachers in his or her district and a teacher voice representing the needs of that district to the state department.

### Mentor Training is Key to Successful Induction Programs

By Mary-Margaret Mara

I work as an integrated preschool teacher for the Worcester Public Schools. When I first started in the school system there were no mentors. I remember feeling overwhelmed as a new teacher in a classroom with 29 children. I was lucky that Ann, a veteran teacher whose classroom was next to mine, offered me guidance and was there to listen. She shared information about the school and gave me support on how to manage challenging behaviors in the classroom. Ann's support helped to me survive that first year in teaching. When mentors were formally introduced into schools, I was happy to take on the role to help another teacher through that first year.

Becoming a mentor was more difficult than I thought it would be. We were asked to guide and support a new teacher, yet were not provided with the training on how to do so. Through quite a bit of trial and error, I began to slowly grow as a mentor.

Last year, I was given the opportunity to take the Mentoring in Action graduate course and then became a District Mentor Trainer for the Worcester Public Schools. After completing the course, I felt like I finally understood my role as a mentor and was provided with applicable resources to grow in this important role.

If each district had at least one DESE liaison per 100 teachers, then school districts would be able to support all teachers in understanding the philosophies behind changes, learning the ins and outs of new policies, finding resources that would be most valuable in implementing change, and executing better teaching practices in the classroom. New teachers would not have to struggle to learn about the nuances of DESE's agenda on their own and instead

would be able to focus on the challenges of establishing and managing a classroom. Additionally, the DESE liaison would be one more contact person in the building for novice teachers who are in need of a network of experienced and supportive educators.

Furthermore, the position of DESE liaison would promote a different pathway to

teacher leadership and introduce a new way to have teacher voices represented in state policy. Both of these concepts are critical to teacher morale and retention. Exposing novice teachers to a career ladder where teachers are considered valued professionals will have only positive effects on their desire to stay within the field of teaching.

## +++++ CONCLUSION +++++

Mentor educators will play a critical role in supporting the state's plan to improve educator preparation. This focus on educator preparation presents a significant opportunity to re-imagine how to best utilize and support mentor educators. Adequately supporting student teachers to be prepared for day one is possible through established mentoring programs, induction programs, cooperative teacher strategies, and through the creation of a DESE liaison. There should be multiple modes of support and many different teacher leaders who offer a network of advice and guidance. With this support and acknowledgement of mentor teachers, we can work together, as one teaching force, to ensure that all students are succeeding, regardless of the number of years their teacher has been in the classroom.



