

Good beginnings, great teachers



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Half of new teachers quit in five years. But the New Teacher Center is changing that with a mentoring program that gives beginning teachers a good start on the path to excellence.

MONDAY, JULY 2, 2012

Last September was a blur of tears for first-year teacher Sarah Coute.

Armed with a degree in early childhood education, student-teaching experience and boundless enthusiasm, she arrived at Hugh Cole Elementary School in Warren, R.I., confident that she was ready for her own kindergarten classroom.

Then 24 children showed up. By the time the 3 p.m. bell rang that first day, her faith was shaken.

As soon as her students left, Coute cried -- a pattern she would repeat daily for weeks.

"I wondered if I could do it," Coute, 23, said. "I was overwhelmed."

Coute was still learning her way around the school. She struggled to cope with the children's short attention spans and their wide range of abilities. She wasn't accustomed to interacting with parents -- something kindergarten teachers do daily.

"It was the students' first day of school, but it was mine, too," she said.

In the United States, most new teachers work in isolation. Apart from a few visits from their principal and maybe an occasional encouraging word from a colleague, they are left to struggle on their own.

Disillusioned and drained, about half abandon the profession by their fifth year.

Fortunately for Coute and thousands of teachers like her, the [New Teacher Center](#)(link is external), based in Santa Cruz, Calif., is working to prevent that outcome.

Conceived 24 years ago by Ellen Moir, the center is a nonprofit organization that seeks to improve student learning by accelerating the effectiveness of beginning teachers.

Questions to consider:

- What investment does your organization make in mentoring? Is it enough? If not, how can it be increased?
- Write a job description for a mentor in your field. What qualities would be essential?
- How can you open yourself and your organization to exposing weaknesses, talking about what's not working well?
- Obvious parallels exist between new teachers and new clergy. Do you know a pastor who needs a mentor? Could you be that person?

At the heart of the center's work is a sophisticated one-on-one mentoring program that enables new teachers to learn from the best, inspires them to stay in the profession and enhances their growth as educators.

"Teachers can transform lives," Moir said. "And I'm determined to make sure every kid, regardless of their ZIP

code, gets a great teacher. I want to make sure these new teachers are successful.”

Programs in 50 states

The New Teacher Center has programs in all 50 states, working with local school districts, state policymakers and educators to launch coaching programs for novice teachers.

In 2010-11, the center trained more than 7,500 coaches who mentored more than 24,000 teachers around the country.

Nowhere has the center’s work been as extensive as in Rhode Island. In the program’s first year, 2011-12, it included 262 teachers, almost every first-year teacher in the state.

Throughout the year, the state’s new teachers were intensively mentored by 17 veteran teachers selected for their classroom expertise, strong “people skills” and passion for teaching. Next year, about 300 beginning teachers and 20 coaches will participate.

The investment includes \$650,000 to the New Teacher Center, the coaches’ salaries, and materials and other costs associated with overseeing the program through the Rhode Island Department of Education.

Already, the induction program seems to be paying off, with the first-year teachers, their principals and the coaches all giving it high marks in a survey. Eventually, the state hopes to see the same results others using the center’s induction programs have documented: increased teacher retention, improved teacher performance and -- the most critical indicator of success -- gains in student learning.

It’s too soon to have such comprehensive data for the Rhode Island program, but Sarah Coute’s principal, Chuck Mello, is already a believer.

Under the weekly guidance of her coach, Gino Sangiuliano, a veteran elementary teacher from a nearby district, Coute has greatly improved her classroom effectiveness, Mello said.

“I won’t call Sarah a seasoned teacher yet, but she’s gained a lot more ground and confidence in a much

shorter amount of time than most first-year teachers,” he said.

Backyard dreams

The New Teacher Center was dreamed up in Moir’s backyard in 1988, when she was director of teacher education at the University of California at Santa Cruz. Every year, her program sent out promising young student teachers with all the qualities and training required to become great educators.

“And every October, a student teacher would call me and say, ‘I’m quitting. I never thought it would be like this. I can’t get discipline in the class, and I can’t teach my content,’” Moir said.

Beginning teachers often get the hardest assignments in the toughest schools, where resources are scarce and burnout is common.

“New teachers were really given a sink-or-swim approach,” Moir said, “and I could honestly see that some of the best candidates in our program weren’t making it.”

Moir and her colleagues decided to change that.

Mentoring 101:

- *Leadership buy-in is essential.* Educate your organization’s leaders about the importance and goals of intensive mentoring.
- *Quality is everything.* Mentors should be masters of their profession who are chosen through a rigorous selection process. Determine the qualities you want in a mentor, develop an application specific to those goals and screen top candidates face to face.
- *It’s a full-time job.* Informal mentoring leaves little time for deep discussion. Ideally, mentoring is a paid, full-time job focused exclusively on helping novices. Coaches should receive ongoing training and support.
- *It’s the right thing to do.* Mentoring is humane. Leaving novices struggling is not.

They began working with teachers, principals, superintendents and union leaders in nearby school districts to develop an intensive mentoring model. Great teachers -- the best in the district -- would work with novices, dispensing practical advice, emotional support and hands-on assistance with analyzing student work. That fall, they rolled out their fledgling program in a handful of schools. The results were almost immediate. “We saw better retention right away,” Moir said. “Principals were saying first-year teachers looked like third-year teachers.”

Within a few years, education philanthropies such as The Noyce Foundation and the Walter S. Johnson Foundation took notice, giving multimillion-dollar grants that helped the center refine its techniques and training for mentors.

The small, local program with fewer than a dozen staff began to grow. Educators from other states came to Santa Cruz to see the coaching program, often contracting with the center.

In 2009, Moir spun off the center from UC Santa Cruz to become an independent nonprofit and expand the center’s work as far as Canada and Scotland. Today, about 200 people across the country work for the center, still headquartered in Santa Cruz, with key offices in Chicago, New York and Durham, N.C.

Core principles

Over the years, the New Teacher Center has continued to tweak its approach and refine its training program for mentors. But the core principles have remained the same, Moir said.

To the center, mentoring is a full-time job, requiring a particular set of skills in which the mentors must be trained. Coaches are granted a leave of two to three years from classrooms and paid their full salaries.

Throughout the year, they receive ongoing instruction from the center.

The quality of the program's mentors is paramount. The coaches must be masters of their profession who are nonjudgmental, good communicators and adept at building relationships. Selection is by a rigorous application process. Out of 100 applicants in Rhode Island, a panel of state education officials, principals and center staff selected only 17.

Once the mentoring program is in place, everyone gets one-on-one attention and immediate feedback. Coaches are assigned a maximum of 14 to 16 beginning teachers a year and spend at least 90 minutes a week with each one, observing a class and debriefing the teacher that same day. The coaches, too, are observed by center staff throughout the year.

"It's humane," Moir said. "What we want is not just a teacher but someone who is on the path to excellence. Why would we leave these novices on their own, struggling?"

Undergirding it all is the support of key leadership. It may take time to educate leaders about the details and goals of a coaching program, but their buy-in and support is essential, Moir said.

In the spring before the induction program began in Rhode Island, state education officials, aided by center staff, held a series of informational meetings with superintendents, principals, teacher union officials and others so they would understand what was expected of them and how they would benefit.

Coaching for the coaches

Under the New Teacher Center's system, even coaches need coaching. So every other Wednesday, Gino Sangiuliano, Coute's mentor, drives to the Sheraton Hotel in Warwick, R.I., for his own dose of inspiration and guidance.

He gathers with the 16 other induction coaches, state education officials who oversee the program, and two center staffers who fly in for the sessions -- senior director Jan Miles and senior program consultant Fred Williams.

Though the coaches are seasoned teachers, they are now in the world of adult mentoring, where different skills

are required.

Instead of disciplining and lecturing, the coaches must excel in the art of sensitive conversation. Like therapists, they must be able to elicit self-awareness, gently pushing the novices to identify and articulate their successes and struggles.

They discuss “adult learning theory” and adopt phrases like “equity of voice,” which essentially means listening to their beginning teachers with respect and an open mind.

The coaches are trained not to “fix” new teachers but to help them become better on their own terms, using their particular strengths. Coaches have to be patient and remember that they are not trying to clone themselves, Miles said.

“Not every good teacher can be a good coach,” she said. “You need to mentor every beginning teacher differently.”

As full-time mentors, the coaches spend four to five days a week in schools with their beginning teachers.

Much of their time is spent alone, working independently, following a grueling schedule.

They visit three or four new teachers each day, observing them in the classroom and debriefing them during free periods, at lunch or before or after school. At night they write reports, conduct research and respond to emails and phone calls from their beginning teachers.

The twice-monthly forums at the hotel provide the coaches with support and essential data they can use every day. Four times a year, Miles and Williams also lead the coaches in intensive three-day sessions on key topics.

The sessions are “invaluable,” said Sangiuliano. “Our time together is about learning from each other and reflecting.”

In the meetings, Miles and Williams give the coaches strategies to use. As former teachers and mentors, they know how to dig into the nitty-gritty of the classroom and explore the complexity of the split-second

decisions teachers make each day.

The entire process is aimed at improving the coaches' ability to cultivate trust and collaboration.

“The mantra is ‘relationship,’” said Williams. “How are you going to work with someone to make them open to exposing weakness? That’s not something people are comfortable with. It’s hard to open yourself up to an examination of what’s not working well.”

‘Look at her now’

One recent June morning, as the school year drew to a close, Sangiuliano was back in Coute’s classroom.

Squeezed into a chair designed for a five-year-old, he leaned forward as Coute read to her class.

“Let’s play one of our absolute favorite games,” Coute said. “Opposites.”

She opened a book, hiding a page with her hand.

“Up,” she said, calling on a girl in the front row.

“Down,” the girl said, as Coute revealed the word “down.”

“Left,” Coute said to a boy who was getting restless.

“Right,” he replied.

In, Out. Near, Far. Push, Pull.

“That’s right,” Coute said. “Kiss your brain.”

The students put their fingers to their lips and then lightly touched the tops of their heads.

Some children started to wiggle. A few shouted out answers.

“No calling out, please,” Coute said. The class settled down.

During the lesson, Sangiuliano took notes using a form created by the New Teacher Center. He “scripted”

her lessons in 5- to 10-minute increments, logging how many children paid attention and the strategies

Coute used to keep them on track, address discipline issues and answer questions.

“One, two, eyes on me,” Coute said as she effortlessly transitioned the children to a game.

“Look at her now,” Sangiuliano said. “She’s so relaxed and confident. I didn’t expect to see so much growth in a year.”

After the children left for music class, Coute and Sangiuliano had 45 minutes to discuss the morning’s lesson.

Over the year, Sangiuliano helped Coute identify her struggling students and analyze their growth on tests and other assessments. Together they developed routines for the children to follow, and ways for Coute to transition between lessons.

During one math lesson last fall, Sangiuliano recalled, Coute asked the students 46 questions in 10 minutes.

“I don’t think I’ll ever forget that,” Coute said. “I had to learn how to slow everything down, and pace it.

My voice was too loud; I had to bring the volume down. But without Gino, would I have picked up on those things?”

The first time the two met last September, Coute burst into tears. By Halloween, Coute wasn’t crying every day. Now, tears are rare.

“I am so excited for next year,” Coute said. “We’ve worked out some kinks, and I’ll be that much better.”

Sangiuliano will have a new crop of first-year teachers to coach.

“But she has my cell number,” he said. “She knows I’m here.”