Better retention through mentors

Researchers agree a guiding hand for new teachers can help keep them in the fold. By Antonia Maio

Education experts are calling for greater support and mentoring for beginning teachers as mounting evidence suggests more needs to be done to keep them in the profession.

New research by the Queensland Education Leadership Institute (QELI) and Queensland College of Teachers (QCT) reveals that about 1-in-8 Queensland teachers are abandoning the profession within their first five years. The survey also found that one of the main reasons teachers left was because they didn’t receive adequate support.

In recent years, nearly half the graduating teachers in Australia have filled positions vacated by teachers who left with less than five years of experience, the study found. The US, the UK, Europe and Hong Kong, reported similar early career teacher attrition.

The research, conducted by Andrea Gallant from Deakin University and Philip Riley of Australian Catholic University, which was based on data gathered from beginning teachers in Victoria who left classroom teaching within five years of entering. It found that new teachers reported a lack of support, which included mentoring and coaching aspects.

“They all felt relatively well prepared to teach…but had great difficulty managing the micro-politics of schools,” Riley says. “Those with good mentors were helped enormously in this aspect of the job.”

The findings follow work by a University of a Canberra education researcher, Dr Misty Adoniu, in which she found that as many as 30 per cent of teachers left the profession in the first three years from her own graduating students.

Adoniu also found a lack of targeted support was a main reason new teachers were leaving. She has called for schools to improve their mentoring systems.

“Everyone’s had a good mentor, or maybe a number of them, in their life and they make the difference,” QELI/CHEF executive Dr Stephen Brown says. “As with all professions, new teachers require support to develop into proficient teachers.”

By creating education leaders and mentors within each school, we can create a professional community that nurtures new teachers.” He says this approach can ensure the next generation of top teachers isn’t lost to other professions.

A report released by the Graitian Institute, Making Time for Great Teaching, supports this, as it found that the highest performing schools and school systems heavily invest in mentoring. “Teaching and learning significantly improve when mentoring is intensive, with regular interactions over sustained periods of time,” the report states.

QCT director John Ryan says mentors can help with all three domains of the Australasian Professional Standards for Teachers: professional knowledge, professional practice, and professional engagement.

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HINTS FOR BETTER MENTORING

The University of Sydney’s Sandy Schuck highlights some of the key points experienced teachers should remember when looking to establish a mentor-mentee relationship.

Spend classroom time together – invite the newcomer into your classroom and ask if you can observe in their classroom.

Be a good listener – sometimes all the teacher needs is a chance to talk to a supportive, more experienced colleague.

Be discreet – treat everything your mentee tells you as confidential. Do not discuss it with any other teacher unless you have the permission of your mentee.

Sandy Schuck, professor of education at the University of Technology, Sydney, agrees, saying that teaching can be an isolating experience.

Sandy Schuck names two major challenges many new teachers experience that a good mentor could help with. One is managing the classroom – engaging students and managing behaviour. The other is fitting into the culture of a school.

“We found that new teachers who had good mentors were able to settle into the school more easily and were more confident and able to grow into the job,” Schuck says, pointing to her research on the topic.

Often different mentors will work better for different teachers, so it is important to ensure that the mentor and the teacher are able to work together.

“Sometimes there are personality clashes or the teacher is not comfortable with the chosen mentor,” she explains.

“Principals should be aware that the relationship needs to work and they should be ready to change the mentor of a new teacher if necessary.”

Schuck says it’s also important for principals to support mentors by giving them time release so they are able to work with the new teacher.

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