

How can our committee make the administration aware of the importance and cost-effectiveness of a strong Teacher Induction Program? How can we convince the school board to provide more funding for the program when we can't entice our teachers — who are, granted, stressed to the max by the pressure of No Child Left Behind's high-stakes accountability — to become mentors? How can we influence others when we can't find the time in our overbooked schedules for our whole committee to meet and plan a sustainable, effective Teacher Induction Program? And, perhaps the most overwhelming challenge of all: How can our team of new teacher advocates engage the entire community in helping us “grow” local teachers who will be committed to staying in our district?

“*Survey says ...*” echoes in my mind. Don't I wish our survey data would answer these questions!

Questions for discussion

1. How do leaders balance the demands of multiple roles?
2. How can a leadership team recruit an “advocate” who has the influence to protect and expand its program?
3. How does an induction team use its expertise to influence district policy and focus?

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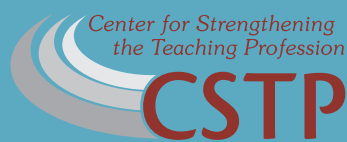
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NEW TEACHER SUPPORT

Without the quality teachers we hire and train, we wouldn't be seeing the improvement in student achievement scores we've had since 1994. Doesn't everybody on the committee — everybody in the district, for that matter — realize that?



SURVEY SAYS ... WE HAVE MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS

Katherine Cove

Survey says ... HELP!

“*Survey says ...*” How often I've watched “Family Feud” and enjoyed trying to guess the responses of the masses. Unfortunately, reading the results of the surveys developed by our Teacher Induction Committee is much more personal and way more frustrating. In meeting after meeting, we have spent countless hours trying to develop and implement a comprehensive teacher induction plan. We applied for a grant to develop the plan because we knew our district had problems with teacher retention and our mentoring program was more “miss” than “hit.” Today, as Bob (the technology coach), Sue (the curriculum director) and I (the special education director) comb through the responses, it feels like we haven't made any progress at all.

Sitting at the table and staring at the survey results, I think back to our committee's very first meeting. The full committee — Bob, Sue, myself, an elementary principal, a secondary assistant principal, a first-year teacher, the union president and a secondary literacy coach — was gathered around the table. With great anticipation, we began to analyze teacher exit data collected for the grant. “It's all here,” the elementary principal practically shouted, “look at the data!” *Survey says ...* most teachers leave because of the commute, not because they have issues with our district's policies and practices.

“Great,” I said, “we all know why 95 percent of our teachers commute 50 to 150 miles a day back and forth to work here. The economy of this community is in serious trouble. The wages are below poverty level [the average income being \$14,000 per year], and there is high unemployment and very limited, substandard housing. When teaching positions open up closer to home, teachers resign and accept positions in those districts.”

“Don't forget the bad reputation because of all the gangs,” added Sue, “I have no idea how we tackle that problem!”

“Well, we're doing something right,” Bob chimed in. “Even though the teacher turnover rate is high, our district has made significant improvements in student achievement on our state's annual high-stakes assessment.”

There was no doubt about that. At the time of the first meeting, our district had been making great strides in some respects. We improved from less than 10 percent of our

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students meeting standards in 1994 to greater than 75 percent meeting standards and a 96 percent graduation rate in 2000. It was — and is — clear to our committee that this increase is due to our highly structured professional development program. Yet while we invest at least \$30,000 in training each new teacher during their first three years, we knew then and we know now (*Survey says ...*) that a few years later they leave to work closer to home. Three years ago in that meeting, we were all tearing our hair out, poring over the data, trying to figure out how to change this pattern and hoping that the plan would solve the problem. Today, we are still tearing our hair out — or at least some of us are. More and more, it seems like “we” means Bob, Sue and me.

I first noticed this trend last May, when the committee met to plan an end-of-year celebration and work on our plan. Looking around the room and thinking about the past few meetings, it became clear that we were now a committee of three. I shook my head in frustration, “Why does this always happen to us? Where is everybody?”

“Hey,” Sue replied, “At least we are having *this* meeting. Most of our meetings seem to get cancelled and rescheduled by the administration so we can attend ‘more important’ meetings.”

“Honestly, what meetings could be more important than teacher induction meetings?” I vented. “I volunteered to be on the committee because I know how important it is to support first-year teachers with strong mentors. Without the quality teachers we hire and train, we wouldn’t be seeing the improvement in student achievement scores we’ve had since 1994. Doesn’t everybody on the committee — everybody in the *district*, for that matter — realize that?”

“Well, I guess the School Data System meeting, and the high school construction meeting, and the Higher Education Grant meeting and the Parent Advocacy Committee all trump keeping new teachers,” Sue quipped. “Our directors always seem to schedule required meetings during our time slot without notice. School improvement meetings also take precedence over our work. It is almost as though teacher mentoring is not important in our district. Let’s get this meeting going,” she continued. “I have to get home. It’s my husband’s birthday and I have to bake a cake.”

“Okay,” Bob started the meeting, “what was the agenda for our celebration last year?” The end-of-year celebration last June had involved only the first-year teachers and their mentors. Our plan had included providing mentors for second- and third-year teachers, but we didn’t do it. Yikes! It’s one thing to write a plan, but it’s entirely another thing to find the time and people to implement it. Every member of our committee is on multiple committees and is accountable for full-time job responsibilities. I don’t remember reading about the theory of “competing priorities” in the education reform literature!

“Next topic: Getting more mentors,” Bob rolled his eyes. “No problemo!” *Survey says ...* some staff didn’t even know we *had* a mentor program.

“How can this be,” I lamented. “We need to tell our staff what we’re doing. Let’s create a presentation describing the grant and our five-year plan and present it at each of the eight buildings. We can include slides showing our teacher retention data and put in some ‘recruitment’ slides inviting staff members to apply to be mentors.”

Notes:

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“That’s a great idea,” Sue added. “We need more grade-level and content area mentors. Our survey data show that people would rather have someone mentoring them who understands the developmental characteristics of their students, as well as the content area knowledge, to help them with their planning.” (Our district uses literacy, math and technology coaches as mentors because we don’t have enough interest from our experienced teachers.)

Fast-forward to today’s meeting. The “committee of three” moved forward with our plans for a districtwide marketing campaign, and our final presentation was in late April of this year. It took us almost an entire school year to present our plan at all eight buildings. Our outcome: three staff members signed up for *Mentoring Matters* training and will join our mentor cadre next school year. Now, we’re taking stock yet again.

“That was a whole lot of time and effort for an increase of only three mentors.” I cannot hide my disappointment. “We could have used five more. Back to the drawing board! We need to develop a more effective marketing plan.”

“Yes,” Sue agrees, “but where are we going to find funding for the stipends for our mentors when the grant is over?” Sue has been struggling with this since the beginning of the grant. The state’s Teacher Assistance Program provides \$800 per new teacher, but this does not nearly cover the cost of mentoring new teachers. We need to pay our mentors stipends for the support they provide outside school hours, cover the cost of training mentors and pay induction committee members for their time outside contracted hours.

“We are going to have to lobby very hard to have the School Board approve additional funding for our work,” she sighs. “The bottom line is the administration needs to support this program so we can sustain the momentum in our school improvement efforts. We can’t afford to lose teachers after all the resources we invest in training them.”

“Did I tell you that a superintendent from a neighboring district actually thanked us for training all his new staff?” I ask, pounding my fist on the table. In our three-year trainings of new teachers — starting before school begins in the fall and continuing throughout the year — we use the same programs as most of the districts in the region. When our teachers move to those districts, they come fully trained, highly skilled and ready to improve student achievement.

Sue and Bob stare at me in disbelief. “Maybe we could begin charging districts for training expenses to raise money for our Teacher Induction Program,” Bob mutters under his breath.

“We’ve got to do *something!*” I reply emphatically. “When can we meet to begin planning how to get additional funding?”

After the meeting, my frustration lingers as I reflect on the many challenges we face to improve our Teacher Induction Program. As a district leader, I don’t know how to convince the powers that be that my passionate support for this initiative is in their best interest, too.

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