

# **Confidentiality And University Collaboration: Keys To A Successful Entry-Year Teacher Mentoring Program**

**Judith A. Cochran**

**Wright State University-Lake Campus**

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## **Abstract**

School districts are required to provide mentoring programs for first-year teachers. The successful Celina City School District entry-year teacher mentoring program makes three unique assumptions: university education professors can address novice teachers' instructional needs, education professors will be more accessible than public school administrators and teachers, and professors can address first-year teacher problems collaboratively with the beginning teacher and school administrators and maintain confidentiality. During the 12 years of Celina's entry-year programs, three probationary teachers have not been renewed. The cost of the program is \$5,000

**a year to mentor approximately 18-20 first-year teachers. This program's successes and its unique approaches to the mentoring of first-year teachers are discussed.**

Would you appreciate having your department head and principal discussing your incompetencies? In most entry-year teacher mentoring programs, that is exactly what happens. Those individuals responsible for first-year teachers' returns are also the individuals who "mentor" novice teachers. If the department or grade level chair values confidentiality and does not discuss teachers' problem with anyone else, those inadequacies are known only by those who hire and fire the teachers. However, if mentors happen to mention the "problems" a teacher is having around secretaries, student workers, or other teachers, the difficulties are no longer confidential. Celina School District's first year mentoring program has maintained the confidentiality of first-year teachers and supported their development through a unique collaboration with Wright State University and its education faculty. The program has been conducted for 12 years, during which all indicators of program success have far surpassed those of other first-year teacher mentoring programs.

The prototype for first year mentoring programs has been that school districts assign master teachers to help new teachers become more knowledgeable about teaching and school policies. These master teachers may be paid an extra stipend or obtain released time for helping their new colleagues. Not as frequently, retired teachers may be hired on a part-time basis to observe, conference, and support first-year teachers. In either case, novice teachers do not have an assurance of confidentiality, as retired teachers have usually worked in the school district for a number of years and more than likely know principals and department chairs. If their mentor is the principal or department chair, novice teachers risk renewal by confessing to inadequacies. The master teacher prototype has flaws which have been addressed in Celina City Schools' entry-year program.

### **Program Structure**

Celina City Schools offers a contract to Wright State University education faculty to visit the teachers at least four times a year providing them with any support they request. Because of the flexible scheduling of universities, the six professors have been available to visit or talk whenever the teachers request them. They do not report to the school administrator and have no evaluation responsibilities. The university professor's role has been part of a three-pronged approach of department head, school administrator, and university professor. The new teacher's department or grade level head provides as much support as full-time teaching loads and additional administrative responsibilities permit. The school administrator evaluates the teacher and identifies areas of needed development. The university professor then continues the natural role of advisor that traditionally has existed between university professors and college students.

As a university mentor, the author has provided diverse support for new teachers. Teachers have requested research on the effectiveness of going from half to whole day kindergarten, handouts to assist in collaborative grouping, and assistance in developing discipline systems. Teachers have asked for observations of problem classes, identification of master teacher resources, and help in setting up computers in classrooms. Other first-year teachers have asked for feedback on student learning difficulties, instructional processes, and teacher/pupil interaction. The author has helped with testing decisions and supported beginning teachers as they struggle with five preparations in four content fields and shift grade level assignments after the first four weeks of school. And finally, mentoring has meant helping with grading systems, career planning, and giving assurance that all are proceeding in the best manner possible. Wright State University faculty who have been mentors since the program's inception have found mentoring to be as rewarding for them as it has been for the Celina City Schools.

Dr. James Uphoff, Professor of Education, was the first Wright State University mentor. He found he was able to help with both the speech remediation and language instruction in kindergarten and improve student success in mathematics. Wright State University mentors have had diverse backgrounds as former elementary and high school teachers, reading specialists, school psychologists, elementary principals, and district superintendents. For approximately \$5,000 a year, Celina schools accessed educational expertise that would have otherwise cost the school many more thousands of dollars.

### **Benefits for University**

As faculty responsible for providing instruction for pre-service teachers, mentoring professors are reminded of the difficulties encountered by first-year teachers. Being a mentor to public school teachers involves listening, advising, and assisting them in making decisions in the morass of ethical choices inundating new teachers. For example, how does a first-grade teacher who uses whole language reading instruction evaluate students on a grade card built around the adopted basal reader? College instruction in the required elementary reading course may focus on whole language instruction, but may not address this very real dilemma for first-year teachers who prefer to use whole language instruction. As a result of public school mentoring, the professor may reconsider the content of the elementary reading methods courses.

Another first-grade teacher has no discipline system in place as she goes through the first month of school. University classes provide content on assessment or testing and classroom management skills. Often such classes do not require students to develop their own discipline program as a part of the course work. However, discipline plans must be in place for first-year teachers to be effective. Mentoring professors may provide time in their courses to construct discipline plans or address the testing and classroom management problems in such courses.

University faculty may also be reminded that public school facilities are not the same as university facilities. For example, one first-year math teacher had no prospect of getting windows open during a steamy September day. The windows were improperly installed, and there was no air conditioning, so the teacher and her classes sat in sweltering heat. This is not an unusual anecdote. A first-year teacher is not guaranteed his or her own office, a telephone, or even one classroom to store supplies. Thoughtful veteran teachers may provide a drawer in their room when used by a new teacher, but others lock desk drawers, making the new teacher carry supplies on carts pushed from room to room. Likewise, preparation periods may be spent in open concept libraries, noisy teacher preparation rooms, or cafeterias. How to be an effective teacher in different facilities and working conditions could become a part of a university course of teaching styles or classroom management. Professors who mentor begin to reach beyond their university roles of teaching, service, and research and grow in their understanding and knowledge of today's elementary and secondary schools.

The most difficult problem confronting new teachers is what and how to teach. Required university courses in curriculum address how to structure lessons, units, use media, and multiple resources. In all this instruction, the university education student may not have been given much practice in the pacing or selection of material to match student needs. The new teacher tries to follow the book and feels guilty about not using multiple resources. She looks across the hall and learns she is one week behind the other math teacher in covering the text. She also knows she has students who aren't paying attention to her well-thought-out explanations. Is she giving too much detail or not enough? Is the material too difficult or too easy? Is this what she should be teaching? University professors develop methodology courses where students practice presenting their subject matter. With university professors learning the novice teacher's needs firsthand, the instruction in methodology courses has the potential of becoming more relevant to the new teacher's needs. Professors, who may not have remembered to teach specific curriculum problems, confront them again as they help new teachers develop technical skills and understand their students.

And finally, teachers are always faced with ethical decisions. Should they try to make things easy for themselves knowing they are short-changing the students? Are they mandated to follow what seems to them to be illogical policy? Introduction to Education is a required education course that addresses ethical issues and could easily use concrete examples from ethical choices required of first-year teachers. In short,

university instruction benefits from the professor's increased awareness of existing public school dilemmas and instructional needs.

### **Benefits for School Districts**

Not all first-year teachers are willing to confess their ignorance to a colleague or administrator who might someday be charged with deciding whether or not they keep their job. Neither are they willing to reveal how little they know in certain areas. The professor is naturally one who has guided the teacher as a student. In the Celina mentoring program, the university mentor does not report to any school administrator. The confidentiality and support from the school system, without evaluation, enables teachers to be more open and honest as to their needs.

I am in my 10th year of teaching and came to Celina three years ago to teach English at the high school. Dixie Barnhart was assigned to be my mentor. It wasn't clear to me what her purpose was at first, and I was a bit skeptical of the reasons she would be observing my classes. As the year went along, though, it was apparent that she was there to provide support, information, background, and encouragement, and was available to discuss any aspect of the teaching experience. It was a very positive experience that gave me, among other things, a better understanding of the depth of support for teachers in this school system. *Chuck Smith, Celina High School*

A second condition that contributes to a more positive relationship between the new teacher and university mentor is that the novice teacher has recently been in classes where professors are experts. The novice teacher is comfortable with the university professor as a person who provides advice.

Four years ago when I first began teaching in Celina at the high school, I had all the anxieties that any new teacher would have. I did not have a classroom, textbook, or files. I did have six different preps.

Jim Trent visited my classroom often to observe my teaching techniques, methods, and communication skills in the classroom. He gave me worthwhile advice and much needed encouragement. He suggested changes in my approach to teaching that would make my lessons more effective. He let me know that if a lesson did not go as planned, that was okay, and it would always improve tomorrow. He told me that my style of teaching and energy in the classroom, combined with self-evaluation, would make my career a successful one. *Martin Lucas, Celina High School*

In this period of partnership schools and community collaboration, university professors mentoring public school teachers increase communication and collaboration of school districts and universities.

I had previously been involved in Special Education for approximately seven years. Upon accepting my new position as a seventh grade language arts teacher, I was assigned a Wright State University mentor. His regularly scheduled visits were eagerly anticipated. He would greet me with a smile, shake my hand, ask how things were going, and ask if there was anything he could do for me. Many times we would discuss current research regarding some aspect of teaching. In addition, we would relate such research to the practical applications appropriate to my teaching situation. I miss our discussions.

*Kris Winget, Celina Junior High School*

There is a very easy linkage between university professors of education and their former students. Likewise, partnerships expand the access to facilities not available to either the public school or the university. Computer networks, library facilities, or research references are made more accessible through the university and public school collaboration.

In addition, the school district does not lose as many new teachers with this form of a mentoring program. New teachers with new preparations do not have time to also develop supportive relationships with other teachers. They can feel free to call their university mentor at home or any time during the day. Teachers who might have quit or been asked to leave are monitored and "saved." With this program, Celina rarely has had the expense of again hiring new teachers and replacing those that "didn't work out." Neither has Celina lost instructional time as new teachers flounder without guidance to solve educational dilemmas. The frustration of new teachers is reduced when they learn solutions to difficult problems.

Coming to Celina in 1993 was both rewarding and a great challenge. I was hired as a one-half-time kindergarten teacher and a one-half-time elementary principal. My teaching background, although varied regarding subject and grade level, was not extensive in either of the two assignments. The support that I received through the mentor program was tremendously beneficial. My mentor not only provided information/feedback regarding my performance in the classroom and as a building administrator, he became a trusted friend and confidant. I truly believe that the assistance provided by this program enhanced my first year experience and aided my transition into the Celina system.

*Sally Tatham, Principal East Elementary School, Celina*

The placement and success of mentors are often a reflection of both the teacher and the mentor.

I was recently discussing the mentoring programs with some colleagues, and it was very clear that the benefits, however small they may be, vary greatly from person to person. This seems to depend on everything from who your mentor was to your subject area, and even the amount of confidence you may already have in your teaching ability.

Personally, as a confident and enthusiastic first year art teacher, I felt we could find a better way to spend our resources. I believe I met with my mentor three times and never for more than 20 minutes. Each time I felt as though my time and hers could have been better spent. Although she came up with a suggestion or two for me to work on, they were minor and something I had already been aware of. (Now in my second year, they also seem to have naturally solved themselves.)

It may, presumably, be different for those teachers who may be teaching in a subject area or grade level which may be more familiar to their mentor. Yet, I believe that their purpose is to look for problems and be available to "bounce" ideas off of, both of which could be (and often are) covered by supportive administrative observations and cooperative colleagues.

*Lori Baker, Art, West Elementary and Franklin Elementary*

As stated in this observation, the mix of "people skills" and content background of the mentor, new faculty, and administrators contribute to a successful mentoring program.

### **Conclusion**

States are now requiring entry year mentoring programs. As an example, the State of Ohio is preparing to send Praxis evaluators into first-year teacher's classrooms. Each evaluator will be paid \$500 a day for two observations of every new teacher. Should entry teachers not pass the observations, their contracts will not be renewed. The Praxis people are also prepared to present a program, Pathwise, to remediate teaching deficiencies. The cost of the Praxis and Pathwise programs are unidentified, but guaranteed to be far more than \$5,000 a year per school district.

What have been the benefits to the teachers who have experienced this program? Generally, they have been grateful for any assistance given them on their own schedule. The mentor arrives when they call, watches the classes they feel are not progressing well, provides suggestions, and follow up. Teachers have felt comfortable calling the mentor at home to discuss problems. This personal attention is not possible when public school teachers mentor each other. They must have the same planning period and also the time to observe and provide the support that comes more easily in the flexible schedules of university professors.

From the Celina Superintendent's perspective, the results have far exceeded the investment. In the past 12 years, only three new teachers have not been rehired. Compared with other local school districts of equal size, this is a remarkable record. For example, another comparable school system was involved in three probationary teacher dismissal cases in the 1995-1996 school year. The Celina Superintendent feels that the university mentorship reduces new teacher isolation and helps experienced teachers with personal entrenchment in career stages that contribute to burn-out. The mentoring program has also been successful with teachers who have lost their enthusiasm for teaching. Although Celina is willing to believe that the district hires better teachers than all the surrounding districts, the pay scale, working conditions, and similar student populations argue against this belief and for the effectiveness of the mentoring program.

The success of the program has been the result of a three groups interacting teacher development. The administrators and grade level or department heads provide orientation to the system, support, and sometimes pressure to improve teaching. With administrative pressure applied, first-year teachers then have a person to turn to who can help them and provide suggestions for change without threatening their future. The new teacher also develops techniques and confidence with the help of a university mentor. The final result of this program has been a level of trust, confidence, and positive relationships among all mentoring participants.

Unfortunately, this highly successful program was discontinued for the 1996-97 year. A budget deficit and a freeze on hiring resulted in the new superintendent eliminating this \$5,000 program. There is little benefit in mentoring new teachers when there are no new teachers. Even so, two Wright State University education professors have volunteered to continue mentoring without pay. When the school district again has a balanced budget, the new teacher mentorship program can easily be reinstated. This flexibility to discontinue and re-start a program is another asset. Until its reinstatement, the residual of this program will be the positive relationships, mutual trust, and appreciation of expertise that has developed among Wright State University professors and Celina City Schools educators.

### Suggested Readings

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