



Having access to a network of scientists helped science teacher Sean Kiffe get through his first year of teaching.

The Art of Teacher Retention

Schools are moving beyond traditional one-to-one mentoring and adopting one-to-many mentoring and a variety of innovative tools.

By Claudia Graziano

FOUR YEARS AGO, THE DALLAS Independent School District (ISD) was in crisis. Nearly 62 percent of the newly hired K-12 teachers left the district within their first five years. Dallas certainly wasn't alone in its quandary—nationwide, the new teacher attrition rate is nearly 50 percent over five years. So it's no surprise that the frightening statistic spurred the district into action.

Dallas hired a consultant to survey teachers who had left the district and gain candid feedback on their first years of employment. Despite an existing mentor program that paired newcomers with experienced teachers to guide them through their first year, many of Dallas'

newly hired teachers completed the initial year of teaching feeling isolated and overwhelmed.

"New teachers were leaving the district because they felt a lack of support on campus," says Suzie Fagg, director of the Dallas district's New Teacher Support and Development Department. "The old model of simply matching a new teacher with a mentor wasn't effective. We found it takes a more broad-based and structured network of support, and we set out to create that."

Her department, which is part of Dallas' New Teacher Initiatives program, was created in 2002 and has gained national recognition for its successes.

New teacher guru Harry Wong, author

of *The First Days of School*, points out that the traditional one-to-one mentoring model for training new teachers was developed in the United States in the early 1980s.

"One-to-one mentoring was better than the previous support system—which was

nothing—but it needs to evolve," says Wong. "Our PCs have been upgraded from 16-megabyte hard drives to two gigabytes, but most of our schools still expect new teachers to succeed with the help of a single mentor."

"One-to-one mentoring does only one thing: It helps new teachers survive in the classroom," Wong adds. He advises districts to adopt broad-based "new teacher induction" programs, such as the one adopted by the Dallas Independent School District in 2002.

"All of the big U.S. companies have structured orientation and training programs for new employees," he says. "Shouldn't schools have the same?"

Fagg of the Dallas district agrees. "I started out as a teacher in 1973 when we didn't even have mentors," she recalls. "You walked into the school on your first day, the secretary handed you a key and it was 'Good luck, see you later.'"

In contrast, teachers new to Dallas ISD now receive three years of instruction and support from trained mentors; they have a full-time staff of 10 instructional coaches available to observe classrooms and help them craft lessons on request; they're part of a new teacher support team that hosts regular meetings, training and social outings; and they have a New Teacher Center that's staffed after school by mentors and is full of resources they can use to design and print lessons.

In its three years the program already boasts impressive accomplishments, says Fagg. While Dallas lost 29.4 percent of the new teachers it hired between March 2000 and February 2001, that figure dropped to just 16.1 percent by the

TEACHER RETENTION

2003-2004 school year.

"Supporting our teachers isn't just about stopping the revolving door of teachers," Fagg says. "In the end, it's about improving the education for students. Our research shows that having an ineffective teacher for two years has a negative impact on student performance and achievement that can never be regained."

Support on the Web

Dallas' new teachers are now required to pass a computer competency test and receive a notebook PC on their first day of class, which is an added source of new teacher support. Using the notebooks, teachers can access online curriculum and state educational resources in the classroom, and can e-mail their mentors and post questions at the district's New Teacher online forum.

The Internet will clearly play an important role in the future of mentoring and new teacher training. Many colleges and teacher associations offer online chat boards for beginning teachers to exchange advice and lesson plans.

In 2002, the National Science Teacher Association (NSTA) took the trend one step further with an ambitious national

TEACHER INDUCTION MODELS

Aiming to encourage more schools to rethink how new teachers are trained and mentored, the Washington, D.C.-based National Commission on Teaching and America's Future has issued a policy paper highlighting the nonprofit group's research on teacher induction models in the United States and abroad, and how those models impact teacher retention.

"It's time to end the practice of solo teaching in isolated classrooms," the paper states. Specifically, U.S. teacher induction must move beyond traditional one-to-one mentoring as a primary tool for training and adopt an array of induction techniques.

The paper, *Induction Into Learning Communities*, is available at www.nctaf.org/documents/nctaf/NCTAF_Induction_Paper_2005.pdf.

project: e-Mentoring for Student Success (eMSS). With a \$7.5 million grant from the National Science Foundation, the NSTA, in partnership with the University of California at Santa Cruz's New Teacher Center and Montana State University's Science/Math Resource Center, began a pilot project to e-mentor first-, second- and third-year secondary school science and math teachers.

"We believe it's crucial for a science teacher in his or her early career to have the support of a seasoned teacher in the same field and grade level," says Gerry Wheeler, NSTA's executive director. "That's much more important than being in the same building with a mentor who, say, teaches reading instead of science."

In addition to providing individual mentors, the eMSS

Web site involves different scientists in various fields who have not only designed content for the site but will answer new teachers' questions that are posted in discussion areas.

"One of the huge advantages to e-mentoring, in comparison to face-to-face mentoring, is that it's asynchronous, and beginning teachers are not only mentored, but can immediately

engage in a community of dedicated science teachers," says eMSS project director Roberta Jaffe, a science education coordinator for UCSC's New Teacher Center.

A Far-Reaching Opportunity

In Big Timber, Mont., eMSS mentor and veteran junior high science teacher Rolland Karlin is working with a third-year teacher, Sean Kiffe, who lives 258 miles away in Bonner, a rural school district outside of Missoula.

"My first year was overwhelming," recalls Kiffe, who teaches seventh- and eighth-grade science. "There are 17 teachers in my building, and I'm the only science staff. [With eMSS] I'm part of a network of about 100 professionals and scientists who, in a normal setting, I would not have met."

However, there is a downside, Kiffe says, as it can be initially difficult to build trust with a mentor you haven't met in person. But that changed when Karlin and Kiffe met at an eMSS conference.

"I think the mentors get as much or more out of the program than the mentees," says Karlin. "This is now Sean's third year, and we are working together as a mentor team assigned to three new early career teachers as mentees. It's exciting to see Sean functioning as a mentor. He is great." ❖

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Veteran teacher Rolland Karlin communicates online with science and math teachers across Montana.