
Preface

Obstacles to success have a habit of presenting themselves early in the career of every teacher. Even novice teachers are veteran students, and as such they are often capable of inferring from their own experiences exactly what obstacles will need to be dealt with, sidestepped, or otherwise overcome on the way to a successful first year in the profession. Other impediments to success may come as a surprise, and on occasion they come not in single spies, but in battalions. However and whenever they come, the question for every teacher is this: How much frustration can she take before she decides the resultant pain is not worth the effort?

New teachers, of course, react to challenges differently. Yost (2006) affirms that “some teachers are both resilient and persistent, remaining in the profession despite being confronted with the same challenges and obstacles of those who leave” (p. 59). But there are those who leave, and those who leave are departing in droves. Yost cites figures from the 2004 National Center for Educational Statistics that estimate that one-third of teachers leave the profession within three years (p. 59). Estimates may differ by a few percentage points, and in urban schools the rate is higher, but the sad truth is that *teacher retention is a significant problem in the United States*.

Obstacles are part of teaching, as they are part of life. The sheer size, number, and scope of these challenges can short-circuit an otherwise productive and satisfying teaching career in its infancy. Bobek (2001) lists an ability to solve problems as one of five factors keeping teachers in the classroom. In fact, there are many thousands of new teachers who, left on their own, will work their way through even the most difficult challenges that confront them on a daily basis; there are many thousands more who, when faced with myriad obstacles in the schoolhouse, will simply make the decision to walk away from a profession they once believed held great promise.

Still others, unwilling to give up on teaching, give up on a particular school environment that is not supportive or conducive to learning, and search “for schools that [make] good teaching possible” (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003, p. 21). Those teachers simply leave a bad environment for a better one. For teachers who are persistent and determined to succeed, shifting from one school to another voluntarily can be refreshing and reinvigorating.

The truth is that the obstacles encountered by new teachers may seem new and surprising to them, but such obstacles are not new to the profession. In working with teacher mentors over the years, a colleague and I often asked them what problems are faced by new teachers, and we made an extensive list. Not surprisingly, even though we were brainstorming with new groups of mentors each time, the lists looked the same. Classroom management, process management, discipline, dealing with parents, and other timeless (and time-related) issues always made the list. Teacher preparation and teacher induction programs (including a mentoring component) should prepare prospective teachers and new hires for what we know lies ahead. If the system is hemorrhaging teachers at the rate of one in three every three years then the system is in need of some attention and a great deal of repair.

Mentoring new teachers should involve helping them anticipate, understand, and overcome obstacles to success in the classroom. Too many teachers are left in isolation to try and figure all this out on their own. As a new teacher, my mentor encouraged me to “call him if I had questions,” and informed me that “his door was always open.” Unfortunately, I did not even know enough about teaching to know which questions were worthy of taking the time to knock on his door. Any support system worthy of the name helps teachers surface questions, answering some and, more important, equipping them to come up with ways to solve their own problems.

Helping new teachers understand a mandatory lesson-plan format requires a bit of modeling, and is easily accomplished in a short period of time. On the other hand, getting new teachers to understand what to do when a student talks back or is highly disruptive requires more reflection and a much deeper conversation about how the brain works in moments of high stress. I might have asked my mentor about the lesson-plan format, but I would have balked at approaching him about backtalk or disruptions. I simply did not know him well enough to open up on sensitive issues that might reveal my own shortcomings or lack of knowledge and experience.

In the absence of a real mentor-protégé relationship, a teacher is likely to find answers only after a confrontation with a student has led to a good deal of emotional discomfort and some real doubts about whether or not the situation was correctly handled. The sad thing is that everyone in education understands that such confrontations will come, yet we may do little to prepare the new teacher for that eventuality and the pain it causes. A teacher who is handed the room key and told to “hang in there” is quite likely headed for trouble not too far down the road. Teachers who are left to operate in relative isolation with little support may find themselves taking a “whack-a-mole” approach to problem solving.

The cost of not serving the needs of new teachers is high, and not only in human terms. Portner (2005b) cites a 2004 Alliance for Excellent Education report that estimates that \$2.6 billion is spent annually in this country replacing teachers who have left the profession (p. xxi). That same report affirmed that “only 1 percent of beginning teachers currently receive the ongoing training and support that constitutes comprehensive induction when they enter the teaching profession” (p. xxii). Researchers, according to Portner,

reinforced what had already become evident to practitioners: When these programs were well designed and implemented, novice teachers were not only staying longer; they were also developing into better teachers—and doing so at a faster rate—than had many before them. (p. xxii)

There can be little doubt that new teachers need substantive support so that they can avoid becoming casualties. We need to simultaneously reduce the teacher attrition rate and serve the needs of 21st-century students who have been essentially rewired by technology, suffused with information, and presented with obstacles of their own. If the role of the teacher is essential in facilitating the progress of students today, then the teacher support system must be up to the task. Schools and school districts need to commit to providing the kind of systemic support that will reduce obstacles and assist teachers in dealing with those that arise during the first two or three years of teaching. Effective schools build leadership capacity and interdependency by developing a collaborative structure within which new *and* veteran teachers feel safe, supported, and valued.

Below are descriptions of the eight chapters of this book, arranged in what I trust is a logical sequence:

Chapter 1: The Need for Heroes

If we as humans often have a need for heroes, for teachers that role is often filled by other teachers from our past who possessed various basic principles that were apparent right away or perhaps later, when we took the time to reflect on what defines such greatness. In this first chapter, I have identified and elaborated upon nine qualities highly effective teachers demonstrate on a daily basis.

Chapter 2: The Need for Speed

As we have seen, too many teachers leave the profession all too soon. They work against strong headwinds and encounter seemingly innumerable obstacles until they just turn in their keys, pack their belongings in a box, and leave the profession they had always thought would be their life's work. Teachers leave for many reasons, not the least of which is a lack of support on the part of administrators and colleagues in schools where isolationism has become a well-established fact of school life. In this chapter, we'll examine the need to create more support in order to stem the flow of teachers out of the profession.

Chapter 3: Clarity and Substance

Given the need for induction programs that provide new teachers with the support they need, how does mentoring fit into that system? Who should be a mentor? What, exactly, is the task of the teacher mentor? This chapter will explore the role of the teacher mentor in facilitating the continuous-improvement journey of new teachers in the schoolhouse.

Chapter 4: Ramping Up Relationships

A mentor who teaches the same subject as his protégé needs to know more than his subject area. Building a solid and productive professional relationship with the new teacher is critical if the pairing is going to click. In this chapter, we'll look at the inner workings of a successfully developed relationship. The kind of reflective conversations that will help mentors and protégés come together with a shared

vision are possible only in strong relationships where trust and respect are mutual.

Chapter 5: A Place for Everything

Once the relationship-building process is underway, mentors and protégés need to set aside time during the summer to plan for the fall. My sense is that one reason new teachers have problems is that they enter the school year simply reacting to events. Someone—too often a well-meaning mentor—hands the new teacher a curriculum guide, the teacher’s edition of the textbook, the keys to their classroom, and a class list and locker assignments—and encourages the new teacher to call if she has questions. The teacher subsequently heads into the school year with this logistical checklist completed and totally unaware of what is going to happen when 120 seventh-graders—veteran students all—descend on her over the course of four class periods. In this chapter, we’ll suggest some ways to put the process horse before the content cart.

Chapter 6: Everything in Its Place

The focus of every teacher ought to be instruction. Once teachers have procedures, rules, and routines established—and understood—by students, it is time to facilitate the learning process in a way that gets results. In this chapter, we will suggest that the essence of powerful and effective teaching is to get the students to do the work. Too many kids come to school to watch teachers lecture, entertain, and generally do most of the work themselves. We’ll explore ways mentors can help their protégés shift the workload from themselves to the students.

Chapter 7: When Good Gets Better

Induction programs need to stress continuous improvement on the part of everyone in the building. No one—no matter how senior—is at the stage where improvement is not possible. Mentors working with new teachers can help them establish a system for improvement that is self-sustaining. Administrators need to model this systemic improvement by creating a professional learning community dedicated to helping Eddie do tomorrow what he could not do today.

In this chapter, we'll explain how goals and benchmarks are critical signposts on the continuous-improvement journey of new teachers and, not coincidentally, students.

Chapter 8: Perspiration and Inspiration

New teachers work incredibly hard in an environment unfamiliar to them, but hard work is not enough to ensure success. Administrators, mentors, and colleagues need to be enlisted in the cause of keeping new teachers functioning effectively throughout the course of that first year. Before and during that first 180 days, new teachers should see great teachers in action, and they should be challenged by mentors and inspired by principals and colleagues dedicated to their success. A new teacher looking back on a rewarding first year may credit many heroes with providing the inspiration that in part at least helped them make progress while keeping their sanity. In our pursuit of excellence using diagnostic tools, instructional strategies, data analysis, and effective assessment techniques, we should not underestimate the power and influence of inspiration.

In the Prologue, we'll continue a story begun in my second book, *The Active Teacher* (2010), with a visit to a fictional middle school where the main—and wholly fictional—characters are Mr. Crandall, the school's principal; Trey, now a veteran teacher and outstanding teacher mentor; and Shellie, a new social studies teacher on the Cardinal team. Throughout the book, we'll call on this supporting cast in order to emphasize a point or provide context.