

DR. STIRLING MCDOWELL  
*Foundation*  
FOR  
RESEARCH INTO TEACHING



**TEACHING AND LEARNING  
RESEARCH EXCHANGE**

**Is Surviving Enough?  
A Study on  
Mentoring Programs**

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# Executive Summary

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The seed for this project was planted by discussions about new teachers who have to restart their careers due to a bad experience in their first few years of teaching. Marea Olafson, Ellen Owens and Darryl Elashuk were discussing what would help new teachers to be successful in their teaching careers and avoid having to start over. At first they examined ideas such as designing a mentoring program, until they realized that an abundant number of mentoring programs have already been designed. However, these mentoring programs were usually from the United States or other provinces. There did not seem to be a program specific to Saskatchewan. This apparent lack led to the idea of surveying Saskatchewan schools and school divisions regarding their mentoring programs, and it led these three teachers to apply for a research grant from the Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation.

The purpose of the research project was to collect information about mentoring programs that could be made available to school divisions and schools to help new teachers succeed in their teaching careers. The research questions addressed were:

What mentoring programs, if any, are being used in the school divisions and/or schools to support new teachers?

Are these programs helping teachers to operate productively in their teaching assignments to the benefit of both the teachers and the students?

To gather information relevant to these questions, directors, principals and teachers throughout Saskatchewan were contacted using surveys, phone calls and round table discussions. Survey questionnaires were sent to directors for distribution throughout their divisions.

From the survey responses, five areas of importance emerged. The most important concern expressed about mentoring programs was availability of time to mentor new teachers. The second concern addressed was the connection between mentor and mentee. The third concern prevalent throughout the research results was the orientation of the new teacher. Fourth, curriculum is a concern of all teachers, especially those who are new to the profession. New teachers need to be made aware of what is available in the school and school division to implement their curriculum. Finally, survival was a concern for those responding to the survey. They indicated that it is necessary for an individual's well-being to be able to balance teacher time and personal life.

Based on the results of the research project, six recommendations have been put forward for implementing a successful mentorship program within a school and school division. The recommendations are listed in no particular order, with the exception of recommendation one. This recommendation is essential for a mentoring program to be successful. A mentoring program can be a locally developed school program, a division-wide program, or a commercially developed

program. However, it is important to recognize the following recommendations addressed in any mentoring process:

1. A formal mentorship program should be made a priority at the school division level.
2. Mentors and mentees should meet on a scheduled basis throughout the year. Administrators and new teachers should meet periodically to discuss professional issues as well.
3. Administrators should give new teachers the opportunity to network with other teachers.
4. When choosing mentors, it should be kept in mind that they need to be positive role models. Mentors should not just be paired up with new teachers without regard to their teaching assignments.
5. The school division should prepare mentors with respect to roles and expectations and recognize their time and effort.
6. There should be an orientation day at the beginning of the year to deal with housekeeping concerns for new teachers.

In conclusion, some mentoring programs are being used in Saskatchewan. For the most part, they are informal and they happen within schools between teachers. To keep new teachers in Saskatchewan, it should be recognized that new teachers must have a successful experience. One way to ensure their success in the school-work environment is to use a formal mentoring program.

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# Research Objectives

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Is surviving enough? Teaching can be a rewarding experience but often new teachers experience difficulties that could be alleviated with mentoring programs. It is important to bring awareness to the teaching profession about the struggles of new teachers in their teaching assignments. If new teachers are struggling in their profession, it affects how the classroom environment operates. With the wide variety of mentoring programs available, struggles by new teachers could be minimized through the implementation of a mentoring program. The purpose of the research project was to collect information regarding mentoring programs that may be made available to school divisions and schools to help new teachers succeed their teaching careers.

# Research Questions

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The research questions addressed were:

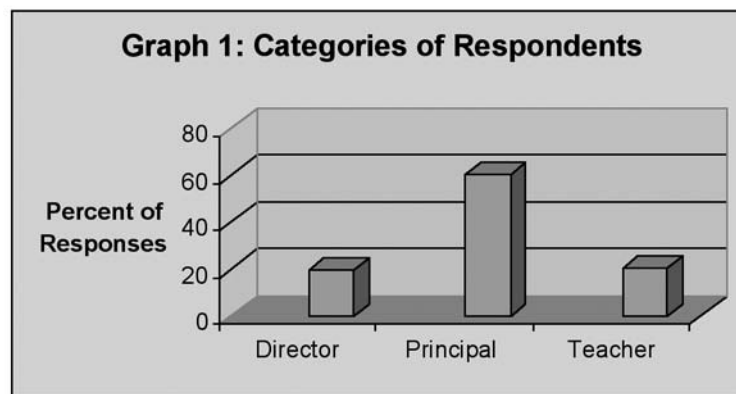
- What mentoring programs, if any, are being used in the school divisions and/or schools to support new teachers?
- Are these programs helping teachers to operate productively in their teaching assignment to the benefit of both the teachers and the students?

# Research Methodology

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Directors, principals and teachers were contacted throughout the province of Saskatchewan by means of surveys, phone calls and round table discussions. Survey forms were sent to directors of education, who were asked to distribute them to principals and teachers throughout their divisions. In response to this request, forms were received back from 88% of the school divisions. Follow-up phone calls were then made to those divisions that had not responded to the survey. In the end, there was a 100% response rate to the survey from the school divisions in Saskatchewan.

As shown in Graph 1, of the 191 survey responses received, 19.3% came from directors of education, 60.4% came from principals, and 20.3% came from teachers.

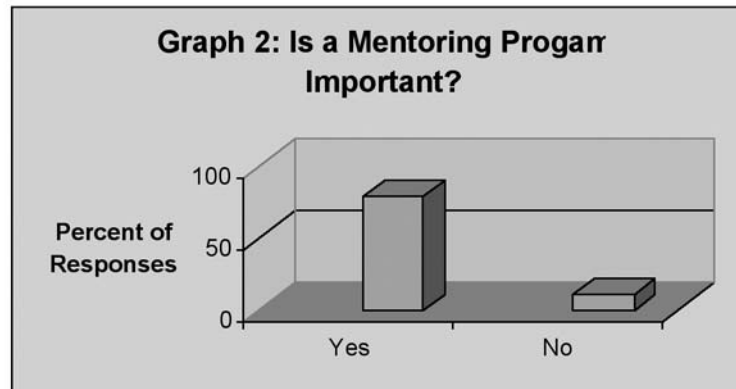


In addition to conducting the survey, the researchers held two round table discussions on the mentoring of beginning teachers. Participating in the discussions were individuals interested in the topic, including both new and veteran teachers, principals and directors of education. One round table discussion was held at the McDowell Foundation's Learning from Practice Conference in November, 2001, and the other discussion was held at the West Central Teachers' Convention in February, 2002. The round table discussions provided support to the research project by reinforcing the information already gathered through the survey. In addition, the discussions brought to the surface more ideas and thoughts about successful mentoring programs. Finally, they reinforced the researchers' belief that there is a need for mentoring programs in Saskatchewan.

# Survey Results

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The survey results supported the idea that mentoring programs are important to the success of new teachers. In the survey, 57% of respondents indicated that their school divisions have some sort of mentoring program in place. The majority of these programs are carried out on an informal and local level. As shown in Graph 2, many of those who responded felt that a formalized program would be beneficial.

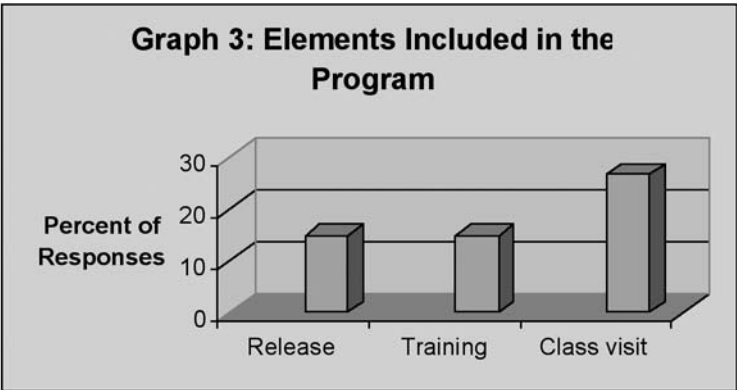


While conducting the survey, we received some copies of mentoring programs being used by school divisions in the province. Two of the school divisions that have a mentoring program in place gave us permission to list them by name in our final report. It may be beneficial for those interested in establishing or improving a mentoring program to contact these two divisions:

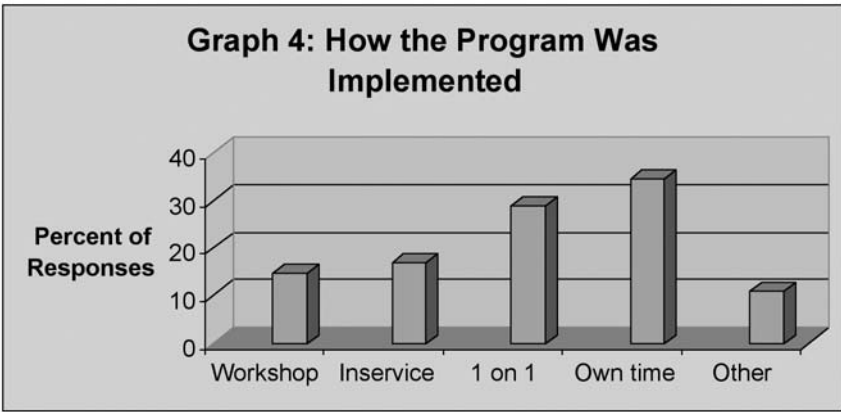
Parkland S.D. #63  
PO Box 100  
Shellbrook, SK S0J 2E0  
Telephone: (306) 747-2611  
Fax: (306) 747-2618

St. Paul's R.C.S.S.D #20  
420-22nd Street East  
Saskatoon, SK S7K 1X3  
Telephone: (306) 668-7048  
Fax: (306) 668-2935

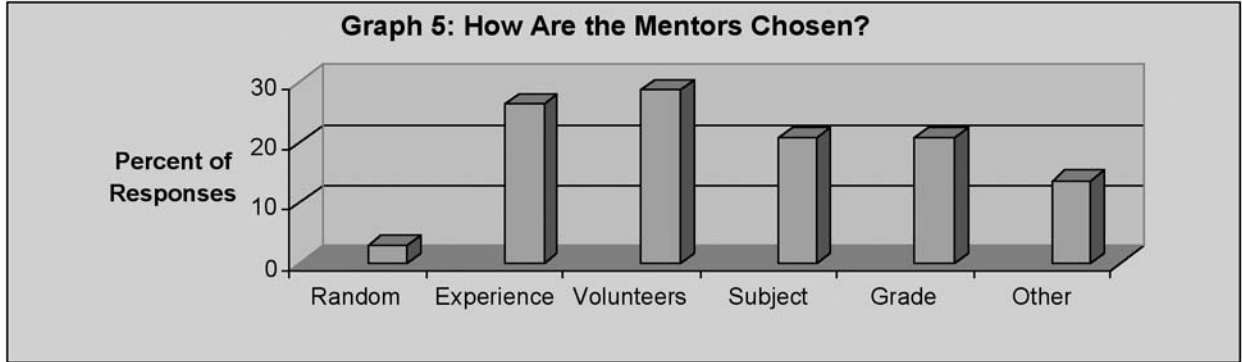
Graph 3 shows the prevalence of three key elements of mentoring programs according to the survey. While 27% of respondents said that their mentoring program involved a class visit by mentors or mentees, 15% said that release time was provided and 15% said that training was provided for mentors.



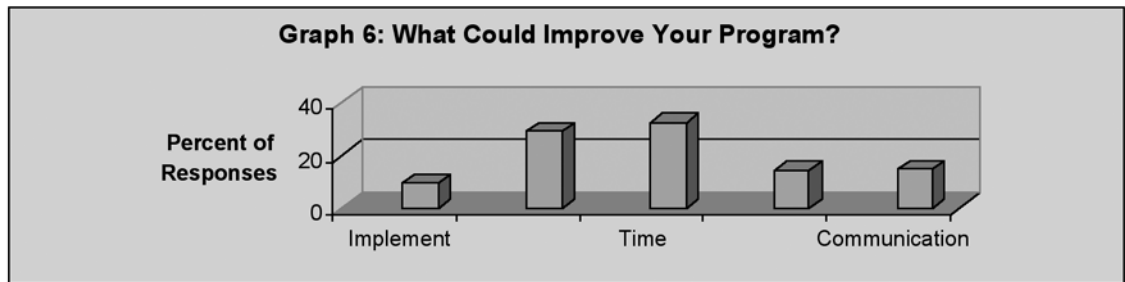
Graph 4 outlines how mentoring programs are generally implemented. Fifteen per cent of respondents indicated that mentoring was implemented through workshops; 17% percent indicated that in-service days were used; 29% said that mentoring took place one on one; 34% said that mentoring was implemented on the participants' own time, and 11% suggested other methods of implementation.



Graph 5 shows how mentors are generally chosen. Only 3% of respondents said mentors were chosen at random. Many respondents indicated that mentors are volunteers (29%) or are chosen because of their experience (26%). Respondents also suggested that mentors are chosen according to specific factors such as subject area (21%) or grade level (21%). For 14% of respondents, another basis not identified in the survey form was used to choose mentors.



Graph 6 indicates those respondents who believe there are areas in which their mentoring programs could improve. Nine per cent identified implementation as an area for improvement; 29% identified preparation for the mentor; 33% identified time for the mentoring program; 14% identified evaluation of mentorship; and 15% identified communication between mentor and mentee.



# Analysis of the Data

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From the study, five important areas of concern emerged:

1. The most important concern related to the availability of time to mentor new teachers. It was felt that a time commitment from directors, principals and teachers was a necessary component of a successful mentoring program. Scheduled meetings are needed between new teachers and their mentors and between new teachers and members of the administration in order to build a strong teaching team. Also, a balanced provision of in-services is an integral component of mentoring for new teachers. The need for new teachers to be given the opportunity to visit other teacher's classrooms in order to network and share ideas was apparent throughout the survey responses. Supervision of the new teacher should be carried out early in the school year so that beginning teachers may be supported and encouraged in a positive manner. Time to carry out all these activities is a key concern.
2. The second concern addressed in the study was the mentor-mentee connection. Survey responses indicate that mentors need to display a positive attitude, which aids in the creation of a safe environment for the mentee in sharing genuine concerns. If possible, mentors should be assigned to a similar grade and subject area as the teachers they are mentoring. If there are no mentors with similar assignments within the school, the mentor needs to make a connection with such individuals outside the school on behalf of the mentee. Mentors should not be in a supervisory role so that mentees feel comfortable in sharing their difficulties and uncertainties. It is a concern that mentors are chosen or volunteer without any guidance or training in this role.
3. The third concern prevalent throughout the research related to the orientation of the new teacher. Policies and practices with respect to orientation vary between school divisions and schools. For new teachers, there is a need to address matters such as school procedures and forms, the mission statement, school culture and climate, and division policies and procedures. A new location and career are overwhelming for most new teachers. They need support in the various routines of the school division and school, and they need to be made aware of the culture of the community and school.
4. Curriculum is a concern of every teacher, especially those who are new to the profession. New teachers need to be made aware of what is available in the school and school division to help them implement the curriculum. Teachers who are familiar with the curriculum need to act as support persons for the new teacher. Time and financial support to attend curriculum workshops are necessary to alleviate the stresses of learning to implement new curriculum. There also needs to be a process for teachers to share materials and ideas related to curriculum implementation in schools and school divisions.
5. Finally, in the view of those responding to the survey, survival is a concern for new teachers. Learning to balance teacher time and personal life is necessary for a teacher's well being. New teachers should not be expected to take on responsibility for a lot of extra-curricular activities. They should be allowed to focus their attention on their teaching duties without feeling overwhelmed by a heavy extra-curricular assignment. New teachers should feel comfortable in saying "no" when necessary.

# Recommendations

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As a result of the research project, six recommendations have been identified that support a successful mentorship program within a school or school division. These recommendations are listed below in no particular order of importance, with the exception of recommendation one. Recommendation one is essential if any mentoring program is to be successful. Although mentoring may be delivered successfully through a locally developed school program, a division-wide program, or a commercially developed program, it is important that the mentoring process addresses the points raised in the recommendations.

## **RECOMMENDATION ONE**

A formal mentorship program should be a priority at the school division level. In the survey, respondents explained that although informal mentoring seems to take place, a formal program would be more beneficial. Some respondents felt that if a mentorship program is left to “just happen”, it is forgotten amongst all the many demands there are on teachers and administrators. There are certainly many mentorship programs available for school divisions to implement; however, a school division does not have to purchase an expensive program to give priority to mentoring. This recommendation simply underlines the need for each school division to make mentoring important within its own framework.

## **RECOMMENDATION TWO**

Mentors and mentees should meet on a scheduled basis throughout the year. Also, the administration should meet periodically with new teachers to discuss professional issues. The research shows that allotment of time is important for a program to work successfully. Meeting times may take place every week after school, or every two weeks, or whatever works for the mentors and mentees, but there should be scheduled meetings. If a set time is not established, then the mentor and mentee get busy with other educational demands and mentoring is ignored. Their scheduled meeting time may be used for questions or concerns, or it may just provide an opportunity for interaction. However, the time together is important in making the mentee feels supported throughout the school year, not just at the beginning of the year.

## **RECOMMENDATION THREE**

Administrators should encourage new teachers to network with other teachers. The teachers who responded to the survey indicated that networking with other teachers is helpful in acquiring new teaching ideas and strategies. According to the research, networking ranged from visiting other teachers' classrooms to collecting resources from other teachers within the school or from another school. Since some schools and school divisions may not have many teachers in the same teaching areas, it may be necessary to look outside the school division for networking opportunities for new teachers.

## **RECOMMENDATION FOUR**

When choosing mentors, it is important to keep in mind that they need to be positive role models. An individual should not just be paired up with a new teacher as a mentor without a careful look at their respective teaching assignments. If possible, assignment to similar grades and/or subjects should be a factor in matching teachers to form in a mentoring relationship. Also, it is important that the mentor wants to be involved in the new teacher's initial teaching experiences and does not regard mentoring as just another duty that has been assigned.

## **RECOMMENDATION FIVE**

The school division should prepare mentors with respect to their role. If mentors are going to be successful and helpful to new teachers, they need to know what is expected of them. Preparation of mentors could be carried out through an in-service at the school division level, a meeting with other mentors at the school level, or the provision of a package of information by the school division. The Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation has developed two documents that may be used by mentors and mentees: *Taking Your Place in the Professional Community: A Handbook for Beginning Teachers* and *Creating a Supportive Environment: An Administrator's Handbook for Working with Beginning Teachers*. These documents have also been distributed to schools in Saskatchewan.

The school division should also recognize the time and effort that mentors devote to the important task of supporting new teachers.

## **RECOMMENDATION SIX**

There should be an orientation day at the beginning of each school year to deal with housekeeping concerns related to new teachers. Teachers leave university with the general information that they need to be successful teachers, yet each school division and school has policies and procedures that are different. An orientation day would address the uniqueness of the school and school division in a way that cannot be duplicated at the university level.

# Limitations of the Research

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A number of limitations were recognized in conducting this research project. For example, while compiling the results of the survey responses, the researchers found that some of the survey questions could have been framed differently. When the survey was being designed, the focus was on keeping the questions short and easy to answer so that a larger number of responses would be returned. Also, concerns about ethics led to changes in the way that the survey was set up and the questions were asked. As a result, when the survey results were tabulated, it was realized that a few more questions would have been beneficial

Another limitation in conducting the research was finding sufficient time among three researchers to work together on the research project.

However, these limitations were outweighed by the successes of the research project. The number of survey responses returned was exceptional. Having sent survey forms to all school divisions in Saskatchewan, the researchers were pleased to receive feedback from a high percentage of the school divisions. They were even more pleased when a few follow-up phone calls resulted in attainment of the remaining responses. Also, the two round table discussions that the researchers sponsored provided them with affirmation that an exploration of mentoring programs was important and worthwhile.

# Conclusion

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In conclusion, the researchers found that some mentoring programs are being used in Saskatchewan. For the most part, mentoring programs are informal and happen at the school level between teachers. However, to keep new teachers in Saskatchewan, it needs to be recognized that these teachers must have a successful initial teaching experience. One important way to assist new teachers to succeed in a school work environment is through the provision of a formal mentoring program.

# Appendix A:

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## SURVEY FORM SENT TO SCHOOL DIVISIONS AND SCHOOLS

Name of School Division or School \_\_\_\_\_

Do you hold the position of: \_\_\_\_\_ Director of Education

\_\_\_\_\_ Principal

\_\_\_\_\_ Teacher

1. Does your school or school division have a new teacher mentorship or induction program within the system?

\_\_\_\_\_ yes, if yes do Questions 2-7  
is the program previously developed \_\_\_\_  
or locally developed \_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ no, if no, do questions 8-9

2. What are areas that are included in your program?

\_\_\_\_\_ release time    \_\_\_\_\_ training of mentor    \_\_\_\_\_ classroom visits of  
mentors/mentees

\_\_\_\_\_ others \_\_\_\_\_

3. How is it implemented?

\_\_\_\_\_ Workshops    \_\_\_\_\_ In-service Days    \_\_\_\_\_ one on one

\_\_\_\_\_ on your own time    \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

4. How are the mentors chosen?

\_\_\_\_\_ Random    \_\_\_\_\_ By experience    \_\_\_\_\_ Volunteers

\_\_\_\_\_ Subject Area    \_\_\_\_\_ Grade Level

\_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

5. Who is mentored?

first year teachers to the profession (rookie)

new teachers to the school or school division (with some experience)

both of the above

6. What could improve your program?

implementation       preparation of mentor

time for program       evaluation of mentorship

communication between mentor/mentee

areas dealing with specific problems, please list them.

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7. Would it be possible to have a copy of your program?

Yes

No

8. Do you feel the need for this type of program in your school or school division?

Yes

No

Why, or Why not? \_\_\_\_\_

9. What types of things do you feel would be important to help new members on your staff?





