



Is Surviving Enough? A Study on Mentoring Programs

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The seed for this project was planted when three Eston teachers began to discuss the significant number of teachers who have a difficult time in their first few years of teaching. Some new teachers leave the profession as a result of this initial struggle, and while others manage to survive, the stress they experience often has a negative effect on the learning environment in their classrooms. What could be put in place to help new teachers succeed in their teaching careers?

The answer that came immediately to mind was mentoring. At first the Eston group considered the idea of designing a mentoring program for beginning teachers, but they soon realized that numerous mentoring programs already exist. However, these programs generally seemed to originate in the United States or other provinces. There did not seem to be a program made in and specific to Saskatchewan. This apparent lack prompted them to develop a McDowell project that involved a survey of Saskatchewan schools and school divisions regarding their mentoring programs and practices. The purpose of the survey was to collect information on mentoring that could be made available to schools and school divisions to help them minimize the struggles of new teachers.

A survey form was developed and sent to all Directors of Education in Saskatchewan with a request that they distribute the form to principals and teachers in their school divisions. Eventually, completed survey forms were received back from every division, providing province-wide information about mentoring programs and practices. Sixty percent of the responses came from school principals, with the rest evenly divided between teachers and Directors of Education.

The survey found that some mentoring programs are being used in Saskatchewan, but for the most part, they are informal and involve mentoring by teachers within the school. Approximately 80% of respondents felt that a mentoring program was important. Several important concerns related to mentoring emerged from the survey data:

- The lack of time available for mentoring new teachers
- The importance of the connection between new teachers and their mentors
- The need for an adequate orientation for new teachers

- The need to support new teachers in meeting the challenge all teachers feel in implementing the curriculum, e.g., by providing information about curriculum resources in the school and school division
- The difficulty teachers experience in learning how to balance their professional and personal lives

In addition to conducting the survey, the researchers held two round-table discussions on mentoring with a variety of teachers and administrators in Saskatchewan. On the basis of these discussions and the survey data, six recommendations were developed to improve the quality of mentoring received by new teachers.

1. A formal mentoring program should be a priority at the school division level.
2. New teachers and their mentors should have scheduled meetings throughout the year. Also, administrators should meet periodically with new teachers to discuss professional issues.

3. Administrators should give new teachers the opportunity to network with other teachers.
4. Mentors need to be positive role models for new teachers and should be paired with them with due regard to their teaching assignments.
5. School divisions should prepare mentors with respect to roles and expectations and recognize the time and effort they invest in mentoring.
6. An orientation day for new teachers should take place at the beginning of the school year to deal with their housekeeping concerns.

To keep new teachers in Saskatchewan, it needs to be recognized that these teachers must have a successful initial teaching experience.

A school division does not have to purchase an expensive mentoring program to give priority to mentoring, but if a mentorship program is left to “just happen”, it is forgotten amongst all the many demands there are on teachers and administrators.



The research team presents the results of their project at the 2002 Learning from Practice conference.