

STRENGTHEN STUDENT TEACHING

Principals and teachers should work as a team to assist teacher candidates working in their schools.

By Jamilah R. Jor'dan



Supporting the emotional needs of teacher candidates and smoothing their transition in your school is essential. This important milestone, which is considered the most valuable and memorable experience candidates have as they develop into teachers, is both exciting and challenging because it places the teacher candidate in unfamiliar situations.

During student teaching, candidates will determine their perceptions of students' capacity to learn, shape their expectations for their own performance, and help determine the type of school in which they will choose to teach. This assignment is often met with apprehension and fear. Candidates may feel isolated if they are the only candidates assigned to a school. They are often concerned about how the children, students' families, and other teachers and personnel will respond to them. Given these mixed feelings, they may be afraid to ask for help.

Principals, who are experienced observers of teaching and teachers, are important members of the team responsible for ensuring excellence in the student-teaching program. "For principals to intentionally open the doors of their schools for teacher candidates means they have taken an invested interest in the process of establishing a strong partnership with the student teacher and their institution," says Jerome Ferrell, an assistant principal at Chicago's Arthur R. Ashe Elementary School.

Principals might not be involved in the daily supervision of the teacher candidate, but they have a very important role in the teacher candidate's success. Student-teaching handbooks don't always outline the role of the principal during the teacher candidate's placement. Principals should consider the following elements to help the teacher candidate become a member of the school community.

A Welcoming Environment

Teacher candidates consistently express the need to feel "welcomed" when they arrive for their placement. Experiences that make teacher

candidates feel welcomed are a meeting with the principal, a tour of the school, and an introduction by the principal to the cooperating teacher and other personnel.

“The principal sets the tone and it filters down to teacher candidates, cooperating teachers, and families,” says Barbara Leys, an assistant professor and university supervisor who has supervised teacher candidates over 25 years in various educational settings. “In settings where there is a leadership style where everyone is valued, the entire staff is welcoming and willing to go the extra mile to support teacher candidates.”

Teacher candidate Ericka Kilgore-Knighten recalls, “The principal convened a meeting with the cooperating teacher, my university supervisor, and I before school started. She provided an



orientation that included background information of the children, a tour of the building, and she gave me a welcome gift. This made my first day easier.” Teacher candidates realize that principals have competing priorities, but note the “principal’s welcome” sets the tone for their student-teaching experience. Kilgore-Knighten also notes “that a smile goes a long way as well.”

Teacher candidates can feel disheartened if he or she arrives at a school and the principal has not informed the cooperating teacher about his or her placement. This can make the initial contact with the cooperating teacher awkward and possibly challenging for the teacher candidate. In this case, the candidate may feel like a burden

to the cooperating teacher, and not a partner. Informing the cooperating teacher provides an opportunity to prepare for the candidate’s arrival, including informing the students, preparing materials, and providing a space for the candidate to use.

Cooperating Teachers

Surveys by the National Council of Teacher Quality (NCTQ) reveal that the majority of principals are conscientious in their efforts to choose the best cooperating teachers, but some principals select cooperating teachers who volunteer for the job or who need an aide. However, not all effective teachers can mentor a teacher candidate. The mentoring process is critical to student-teaching success. Individuals need specific skills to be an effective mentor.

Principals can work closely with the professional learning community to assist in identifying cooperating teachers using the NCTQ Standards for Student Teaching and the qualifications for cooperating teachers:

- They are themselves *not* brand new. The cooperating teacher must have at least three years of teaching experience.
- They are effective instructors. The cooperating teacher candidate must have the capacity to have a positive impact on student learning.
- They have the capacity to mentor other adults. The cooperating teacher must have the capacity to mentor an adult, with skills in observation, providing feedback, holding professional conversations, and working collaboratively.

Cooperating teachers typically welcome the opportunity to mentor teacher candidates. Their participation provides an opportunity to explore teaching approaches, share resources, and reflect on their teaching and areas to improve. Principals can strengthen the collaboration between the cooperating teacher and the candidate by serving as a resource, and meeting with both the cooperating teacher and teacher candidate to discuss expectations, observations, and feedback, for example.

The University Supervisor

Each teacher candidate is assigned a university supervisor who is a key point of contact. University supervisors are available upon request during the semester when the administration, cooperat-

SMOOTH THE TRANSITION

Principals should use the following checklist to help teacher candidates become members of the school community:

- **Review** a copy of the student-teaching handbook. Become familiar with the criteria for the student-teaching experience.
- **Meet** with the teacher candidate prior to the placement. If this is not possible, plan to meet the candidate on his or her first day.
- **Provide** a tour of the school and introduce the teacher candidate to school personnel. In the introduction, avoid stating the teacher candidate is “here to help out.” Set the tone that the candidate is a member of the teaching team.
- **Provide** an orientation to the school; include an overview of the resources that are available, school policies, procedures, and safety protocols.
- **Assemble** a welcome packet that includes information about the student population, and school community background information (e.g., the history of the school name, community demographics, and school calendar including holidays, half-days, parent conference dates and meetings). Also include the name and bio of the cooperating teachers.
- **Provide** a letter of introduction for the teacher candidate that is sent to families.
- **Provide** teaching materials, supplies, and equipment that are available to other teachers.
- **Ensure** the teacher candidate is included in instructional and other professional development activities.
- **Create** a professional learning community that supports both cooperating teachers and teacher candidates. A formal program within the school community can be beneficial to both.
- **Visit** the classroom to conduct observations. Follow up with the cooperating teacher and teacher candidate to provide feedback.
- **Meet** with the teacher candidate to determine how the student-teaching experience is progressing.
- **Conduct** mock interviews with teacher candidates to prepare them for future interviews.
- **Write** letters of recommendation and make referrals on behalf of the teacher candidate.

ing teacher, or the teacher candidate feel that a visit is needed. Plan to meet with the university supervisor to discuss the expectations and goals for the student-teaching experience.

Exchange contact information for future reference. Let the university supervisor know if teacher candidates will be included in your classroom observations and how feedback will be provided to the candidate and the supervisor.

Student-Teaching Handbook

Review the university’s student-teaching handbook to become familiar with the expectations of the university placing the teacher candidate. This will help you provide stronger support for the cooperating teacher and teacher candidate. The handbook should explain student-teacher requirements as well as roles and responsibilities of the teacher candidate, cooperating teacher, and principal. The handbook should also include copies of the student teacher evaluation report forms, schedule for student teaching, and other relevant information. If the handbook is not available online, request a copy from the university supervisor.

A High-Quality Experience

The student-teaching experience provides an opportunity for teacher candidates to apply their academic concepts in an authentic setting while striving for personal and educational growth and development. They have only one opportunity to experience the best possible placement.

The principal’s role is significant in supporting teacher candidates from the first day of their placement. It is important to convey a message of partnership between the principal, cooperating teacher, and the teacher candidate. These efforts will contribute to the development of a high-quality student-teaching experience within the school building and the community at large. □

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