3 Essentials to Motivate and Retain Veteran Teachers

In my 37 years as a teacher and administrator, I’ve found that the key to strengthening our schools isn’t implementing the latest reform technique or rigorous test—it’s supporting veteran, highly experienced teachers.

For 12 years, I have been principal of a Virginia elementary school that has been considered “highly successful" by almost any metric. We have over 965 kindergarten through grade 6 students who hail from 42 countries, and we thrive as a school by tapping into the vast experience of our veteran teaching staff. The average experience of our 65 certified professionals is 17 years; together, that’s more than 1,100 years of professional expertise.

With the myriad changes that have taken place in education over the past decade, retaining and motivating veteran staff can be a monumental task. So, how does a school administrator inspire and develop highly successful educators so they can continue to provide a world-class education? In my experience, there are three major strategies that are critical to keeping veteran staff performing at the top of their craft.

1. Empower teachers as leaders.

In our district, years have gone by without meaningful pay increases for our teachers—even though each year, there are greater expectations placed on teachers regarding student achievement and myriad other pressures. Despite these factors, morale and motivation remain high at our school. Staff turnover is virtually nil. This is, in large part, due to the fact that teachers feel empowered to make most decisions in their professional lives at our school and they are encouraged to lead.

Our administrative philosophy is that during a teacher’s day, almost every decision should be made at the level closest to the situation. Decisions—including choices about when and what to teach, behavioral interventions, communications with parents, and the frequency and weight of formative and summative assessments—are almost exclusively in the purview of each professional. I feel that if a veteran teacher needs to be “managed,” you do not want that individual on your staff.

Teachers who are highly experienced need to be encouraged to stay in the classroom. Many feel compelled to move into other non-teaching areas of the school system or leave the profession entirely. Sometimes, this decision is based on salary; but often, it’s because the teacher does not feel professionally fulfilled. Numerous dictates and mandates are heaped upon teachers; we, as principals, need to shield our highly skilled teachers from these encroachments as much as possible.

One way to help experienced teachers feel more fulfilled is to tap them as mentors. Unlike veteran teachers, new and less experienced teachers crave concrete and targeted support. Administrators may assist them, but since we wear the multiple hats of hirer, facilitator, and evaluator, it can be a challenge for us to also serve as mentors. The best mentors are our veteran teacher leaders. Their vast experience, expertise, and in-the-trenches wisdom are crucial to developing professionals new to teaching. The modeling that your most highly skilled staff can provide is a powerful tool to deepen new teachers’ professional growth.

2. Remember that one size does not fit all.

Professional development for veteran teachers needs to be individualized. Teachers with a rich background of experience, training, and knowledge need to be treated the way one would treat a specialized surgeon: update their training only in the areas of need. Principals must identify each particular teacher’s strengths and assist him or her to improve in growth areas. Authentic and specific feedback is critical to the success of this process.

Asking the entire staff, or even the teachers at a specific grade level, to work on identical professional development (such as reading the same book or creating the same lesson plans), are anathema to highly talented and successful professionals. We demand that teachers differentiate their instruction with students; likewise, principals need to ensure that every veteran teacher is engaged in suitable professional development.

The most effective way to plan differentiated professional development is to observe classrooms often and to speak frankly with teachers about what needs we can help them meet. Even the most skillful teacher thrives on knowing that their boss realizes their talents. It also allows administrators to pair skilled teachers with those who need support in a particular area.

Teachers new to the profession can,
however, benefit from cadres of teachers working together on similar materials. Inexperienced teachers often have similar learning needs, especially when it comes to discipline methods and dealing with challenging students and parents.

3. Create and support collaborative learning teams.
In my career, nothing has been more effective in enhancing student performance than teachers working together in collaborative teams. At least once per week, for a full hour, our most experienced teachers share data, unpack curricular standards, and analyze student work, lesson plans, and rubrics together with their grade-level and subject-level peers. Incredible breakthroughs can occur when colleagues have time to reflect, re-examine, and fine-tune what has and has not worked with their students. In these sessions, the teams use summative and formative data to assess children along the continuum from struggling students to highly talented and productive scholars.

This collaborative time is critical to all teachers’ professional development. In fact, some of our younger teachers are able to shine in discussions about technology; they can help bring their veteran colleagues up to speed with using interactive whiteboards, projectors, software, and messaging programs. As principal, I attend each weekly collaborative learning team meeting. I seriously protect this time and don’t allow other meetings, parent interactions, or district requirements to impinge on the teams’ 60 minutes of sacred time.

Your most treasured resources are the teachers in your school. And, if you can mine the nuggets of expertise and pearls of wisdom from your most veteran and experienced staff members, it will pay off huge dividends in the success of all students. P

Roger Vanderhye is principal of Spring Hill Elementary School in McLean, Virginia.

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