A Better Beginning:

10 Ways Principals Can Support Student Teachers

Steven L. Turner

An effective student-teaching experience begins long before the student teacher’s first day at school.
Student teaching is the culminating event for a teacher candidate enrolled in a teacher education program. Successful student-teaching experiences are established through extensive planning and collaboration between the principal, mentor teacher, and university faculty. Currently, the level and types of support school principals provide to student teachers vary greatly. For many principals, involvement with student teachers may not often extend beyond an initial interview or occasional disciplinary support. Other principals take a hands-on approach and devote significant resources to supporting student teachers.

What’s at stake here? A teacher candidate’s student-teaching experience can significantly influence whether a new teacher decides to pursue a career in education or, conversely, chooses to leave the profession. But the stakes are even higher for principals. In the current climate of standards and high-stakes testing, turning an experienced teacher’s

**IN BRIEF**

Principals have a unique opportunity to mentor and support student teachers and greatly reinforce the culture of the school. The author outlines 10 methods principals should use when working with student teachers in their schools.
class over to a novice teacher is a risky endeavor. The good news is that the elements of an effective student-teaching experience do not need to be left to chance. Consider the following practical strategies.

Know who’s teaching your students. The university seeks to place student teachers in schools that will provide authentic classroom experiences and increase practical instructional knowledge. One of the best ways a principal can assure a quality student-teaching experience is to first interview prospective student teachers and determine if they are a “fit” for classroom, school, and district goals. A joint interview with the mentor teacher may yield valuable perspectives.

Select effective mentor teachers. An effective mentor teacher (cooperating teacher) for student teachers should have a record of at least five years of successful teaching experience and can support students’ learning with strong standardized test scores. The old custom of assigning a student teacher to enhance the instructional skills of a weak staff member has rarely proved successful.

Promote effective communication between the mentor teacher and university faculty. Establishing a procedure for communication between the mentor teacher and the university student-teaching supervisor will pay dividends later. The initial contact with the university faculty is an opportunity to clarify the student teacher’s classroom responsibilities, present procedures for feedback, and establish schedules for observations and site meetings.

Provide the student teacher with knowledge of school policies and procedures. Student teachers need to know what they don’t know, including information about district procedures for confidentiality and discipline and permission to view individualized education programs and other sensitive documents. Student teachers will appreciate being contacted before the placement begins and receiving information concerning classroom and school schedules, a copy of faculty and student handbooks, dress code information, and maps of the building and parking areas.

Integrate student teachers within the school community. Principals can offer opportunities for the student teacher to become involved. For example, a student teacher could monitor study hall, tutor, offer remediation, proctor exams, and attend faculty meetings and after-school events. All are opportunities that will deepen student teachers’ connection to the school community.

Stay involved. Principals can stay informed throughout the student-teaching experience by meeting with the triad of mentor teacher, student teacher, and university liaison. Principals can seek feedback on the student teacher’s lesson plans and may choose to directly observe the student teacher’s instruction and interaction with students.

Occasionally evaluate the student-teaching experience. While delegating day-to-day supervision of the student teacher to the mentor teacher, principals can ensure student teachers have an opportunity to accomplish three primary tasks throughout the semester: acquire knowledge of how students learn, use that knowledge to modify and construct their personal identity as a teacher, and develop standard procedural routines that integrate classroom management and effective instruction (Kagan, 1992).

Conduct exit interviews. One of the best ways to improve the student-teaching experience is to debrief both the student teacher and mentor teacher. An exit interview is an opportunity to begin the process of refining and revising aspects of the student-teaching experience. An exit interview also facilitates the development of a rationale for changing and improving student teaching.

Supporting the Newest Members of the Profession

The role principals assume in teacher education is an important reason why the student-teaching experience works. School principals greatly reinforce the institutional culture of the school, provide guidance, and offer instructional and institutional resources. This doesn’t mean a school principal has to directly supervise the student-teaching experience, but it does mean principals have a unique opportunity to support student teachers. When a principal is significantly engaged in the experience, the opportunity exists to do more than establish a better beginning; principals introduce student teachers to the culture of schools, groom new faculty, and directly influence the learning experience of generations of students they will never meet.

Expect the best, plan for the worst. Principals can establish an intervention protocol with the mentor teacher before the student teacher begins his or her internship. Early and clearly, the mentor teacher should document his or her concerns. If an intervention plan is in place, remediation can begin as soon as problems appear.

Involving the university student-teaching supervisor. If a significant pattern of ineffectiveness is documented, begin the university’s procedure for supporting a teacher candidate who is struggling. Regular meetings can be scheduled between the student teacher, mentor teacher, principal, and university supervisor. Together, the group can develop ideas and instructional strategies that address areas where the student teacher is struggling.

Supporting a Struggling Student Teacher

The student-teaching experience is tough; it is designed to introduce those newest to the profession to the important work of schools. Unfortunately, student teaching is not always successful for each student teacher. What can be done?

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