The Old College Try

Can't find good mentors for new special education teachers in your area? Look to colleges and universities

By Lisa Burke and Linda Dauksas

Each spring and summer, many principals spend an inordinate amount of time hiring new teachers. Due to a smaller pool of candidates, finding the right special education teacher is often an even more difficult task, and the principal often needs to recruit beyond his or her own expertise.

Similarly, finding the perfect mentor to support a novice special education teacher is not easy. Considerations will go beyond teaching excellence, grade level, and communication and collaboration skills. Who will be able and willing to help the new teacher navigate federal mandates, litigious situations, demanding families, indulgent advocates, and one-of-a-kind classroom challenges? Many districts have few options.

Traditional mentoring relationships can be stressful, too. The mentor has to set aside time to teach the novice the ins and outs of being a new faculty member. He or she must be a willing, nonevaluative problem-solver to help the novice teacher grow professionally and learn as much as they can in their initial years. Novice teachers need to feel comfortable sharing the challenges they might experience concerning classroom management, instructional delivery techniques, students and families, and other building personnel.

Mentorship and Retention

To help retain a novice special education teacher, select a mentor whose teaching experiences are closely aligned in terms of preparation and content area expertise. Principals should consider an e-mentoring model to transcend the limits of the building, district, or geographic region of the mentor and novice alike.

E-mentoring allows the mentoring relationship to develop through electronic communication, including email, Skype or Facetime, texts, and phone calls, and it can help pair a novice special education teacher with a mentor who has similarities in preparation, licensure, and assignments when such a person can't be found locally.

To foster e-mentoring relationships, tap teacher preparation institutions such as colleges and universities. They have networks of alumni who are often looking for opportunities to continue their own professional development, and e-mentoring is a way to do so independently of location.

Commonalities of institution, role, and preparation will help the mentor and novice develop a relationship based on similar experiences. The novice teacher might feel more comfortable sharing questions, challenges, and points of frustration in such a relationship. And having a safe space to be honest about their day-to-day experiences in a new teaching role can help combat the retention challenge.

Benefits to Both

All teachers need mentors. And while the principal wears many hats, it might be difficult to provide the time and attention a novice special education teacher needs. Garnering support for novice teachers from institutions of higher education is one way to strengthen the novice teacher, promote a professional network, and broaden the scope of professional development for the learning community.

If a teacher is going to leave the profession, it will likely happen within the first five years of their career. Maintaining a relationship with a mentor from a college or university at the beginning of a person's teaching career can support teacher retention and, in turn, positively impact student growth and the school's special education culture.

Special education is a challenging assignment for the novice teacher, but a professional network that includes a mentor who has been in a similar situation—never mind where—can fortify the skills of the novice and the learning community. **P**

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