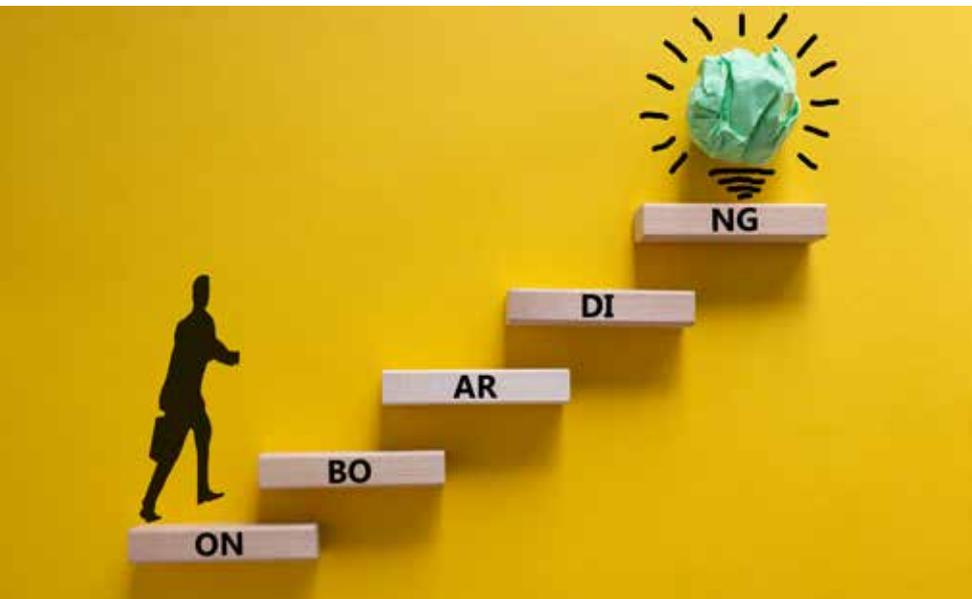


Transitions



Invest in Onboarding

Go step by step with an effective new-teacher onboarding experience

BY NATE WILLS

The teaching profession is infamous for being a high-turnover field. The stress of working with overcrowded classrooms, low salaries, and extensive hours that often lead into weekends has resulted in teacher attrition rates skyrocketing. Couple those high attrition rates with teachers who transfer between school districts in search of better pay and benefits, and the difficulty of teacher retention becomes apparent.

If you are an administrator in a district that can't offer the best salary, benefits, or small class sizes, you'll need to look at other factors that might influence top educators to remain in the district year after year. One of the elements to consider is the quality and adequacy of your teacher onboarding program.

Onboarding is a process that conveys a school district's professional culture, expectations, and community awareness, and provides essential resources for teachers who are new to a district. Onboarding is designed to successfully

integrate new staff into their positions with an organized plan of action.

A solid onboarding process can occur only if you already have a strong building culture that emphasizes collaboration and teamwork. Current faculty are an important part of the process and must be willing to participate.

Start With Hiring

When reviewing your current onboarding program, it is important to understand that onboarding does not begin with orientation; it should start with quality teacher hiring practices. One effective strategy is to have at least one current grade-level teacher assist with teacher interviews related to that grade level. This not only cultivates shared ownership, but also lends itself to determining chemistry between individuals who will be working closely together.

Onboarding is ultimately about establishing strong relationships, and strong relationships are the foundation of a thriving school culture. A thriving school culture increases your rate of retention; people want to be where they feel valued and appreciated.

Summer Sessions

This critical period should not be overlooked. Schedule a time to speak with each new teacher to answer any questions prior to orientation. Ensure that a new hire is invited to professional development opportunities or workshops offered by your district over the summer. Allow the new employee to visit and set up their classroom once cleaning and maintenance have been performed.

Be sure to include the new teacher on all building and district communications, including social media groups and email lists. It is vital that the new hire feels connected to the school community early to nurture

their excitement of being a part of the district and its positive culture.

Meeting Mentors

Onboarding programs should offer a mentor for each incoming teacher. The mentor should be an experienced, successful, and knowledgeable teacher. This teacher must welcome the opportunity to facilitate educator growth and willingly accept the responsibility of assisting and supporting a fellow teacher through a reciprocal professional relationship.

In an ideal scenario, the mentor will be a teacher in the same grade level as the new teacher, and if possible, it should be the same teacher who was asked to assist in the interview process. This mentor-protégé process should be organized to include a list of responsibilities for each person, logs of meetings and what was discussed, and a checklist of specific items to be addressed, such as grading procedures, benchmark testing, discipline procedures, etc.

Orientation Activity

There is a difference between teacher onboarding and teacher orientation: Teacher orientation is an activity, and teacher onboarding is a process. Onboarding doesn't end with orientation; in fact, it should be a part of the beginning. Orientation is rarely sufficient to provide all of the information necessary to be successful in the classroom.

One nice touch is to prepare a gift basket loaded with school supplies to give to new faculty members at the beginning of orientation. Include a personal note welcoming the new teacher to the district. A feeling of belonging and inclusion is a critical component of the onboarding

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process, so consider providing the new teacher with some logoed school gear and maybe a T-shirt.

Activities for teacher orientation should begin with a tour of campus buildings and introductions to key support personnel, including human resources staff who can assist with payroll and insurance questions. This is a good time to introduce building secretaries to new hires. Identify common areas during the tour, such as restrooms, the nurse's office, the cafeteria, the gym, the library, and faculty parking.

Following the tour, a brief overview of policies and procedures is appropriate to make new staff aware of expectations in professional appearance, teacher hours, emergency drills, student discipline, and substitute plans. Include instructions for computer use, voicemail, photocopiers, and internet access during the orientation event. Go over district policies regarding teacher evaluations and observations; new teachers will need to know how often they will be observed and what types of observations to expect—scheduled, formal, informal, etc.

Consider treating your incoming staff to lunch at a local restaurant. This will give new hires an idea of nearby eateries if they're new to the area and allow community members to interact with the teachers. Invite the mentors along so they can get to know their new protégés.

The First Week

The first week can be one of the most difficult times for any teacher, and being a newly minted employee only adds to the strain of beginning the school year. Administrators should offer an abundance of support during this period; popping in daily during the first week of classes just to check how things are going is a great idea. New teachers can get overloaded with so much information that they easily forget to take lunch counts and attendance, or where the restrooms are located.

A Post-it note offering encouragement during the first week can go a long way toward building congeniality with staff. During one of those brief pop-ins, I would follow up with an email that shares a genuine compliment about an aspect of their instruction that you noticed.

The First Month

As routines become established in the first month, new teachers will need support that lends itself toward understanding student performance and polishing their classroom management skills. Follow to find out if the new teacher has outstanding questions regarding curriculum, pacing, or technology to ensure that students get the required level of instruction.

I like to schedule a “mini observation” during the teacher’s first month. This is a 10- to 15-minute observation—essentially a trial run for what a typical observation might look like. This exercise is mostly to soothe any anxiety that can occur when being observed for the first time in a still unfamiliar school building.

The mini observation helps you acquaint the new teacher with your observation style and the specific lesson components you are looking for. The observation notes are given to the teacher, and the administrator does not keep a copy, so that the teacher understands that this observation is only for their continued development.

The Second Month

The second month is really when things become routine for the new teacher; they should be getting into the groove of school operations. Any time you spend with a new teacher now should focus on scheduling formal and informal observations as part of the evaluation process. Make guarantees to give immediate feedback, and follow through. Observation should have positive, constructive comments for the employee to build upon. Encouragement is important during this time. New teachers lack confidence in their skills, so an administrator’s reassurance is vital.

The new teacher should work regularly with a grade-level team to

review data that can direct instruction. Another aspect to incorporate at this point is peer observations: Mentors and protégés can take turns observing each other’s lessons to learn and provide positive feedback about what was observed.

The Second Semester

A thorough review of instructional expectations and previous observations is a good starting point for the second semester. This establishes that the teacher has retained the lessons and skills learned during the first semester. Grade-level team planning and data review should maintain the collaboration built to foster those professional relationships. Continue regularly scheduled observations and feedback, and don’t forget those valuable written notes of encouragement.

The End of the Year

The end of the school year is a time of reflection. Develop a comprehensive, summative evaluation that includes clear feedback on performance and identified areas of growth. Make the teacher aware that you support their continued skills advancement. Ask the teacher to identify professional development supports and resources needed over the summer. Ask them to share how they felt the year went and what they enjoyed most. The mentor-protégé relationship only grows stronger after the first year, so it’s pivotal to sustain that structured relationship through Year 2 at least.

Teachers who go through a strong onboarding program understand the positive impact it can have and will want new teachers in their buildings to have a similarly supportive process. This can lead to higher job satisfaction and lower levels of anxiety. A successful, effective onboarding program can lead to a more enjoyable experience for new employees and result in an enhanced school culture and longer tenures. ●

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