
2023

In Consideration of New Teachers

Brian Dunnell
bdunnell@lewistonpublicschools.org

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/wellspringlled>

Recommended Citation

, B. (2023). In Consideration of New Teachers. *Wellspring: A Practitioner-Oriented Journal of Literacy and Language Education*, 1(1). Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/wellspringlled/vol1/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by USM Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Wellspring: A Practitioner-Oriented Journal of Literacy and Language Education by an authorized administrator of USM Digital Commons. For more information, please contact jessica.c.hovey@maine.edu.

In Consideration of New Teachers

Cover Page Footnote

Brian has been teaching secondary social studies for the past 20 years, first in Virginia, and now in Maine. He lives beside the Saco River with his partner and their two cats.

In Consideration of New Teachers

BRIAN DUNNELL

Lewiston Public Schools

Email: bdunnell@lewistonpublicschools.org

After graduating with a bachelor's degree in education and a minor in history, Mr. M joined the Social Studies Department at a mid-size, urban high school. He took over the schedule of a veteran teacher, which included multiple subjects taught at different levels. As a novice educator, Mr. M taught academic, non-academic, and Advanced Placement (AP) government and psychology. While Mr. M took over the veteran's course load, he did not inherit the veteran teacher's classroom. Instead, lacking seniority, Mr. M traveled between six different classrooms. As no other teacher in the department taught AP government, so Mr. M received no meaningful support for that subject. So, to summarize, at 22, as a new graduate and a first-year teacher, Mr. M taught multiple subjects in six different rooms.

Furthermore, Mr. M taught at a large, diverse school which included a significant immigrant population with many students learning English as a second language, a high percentage of students living in poverty, and students requiring support for a wide range of physical, intellectual, and emotional needs. Practically, this meant that in a single class, Mr. M. might have students reading at a 2nd grade level in the same room with students reading at college-level and beyond. Yet the administration's expectation was that Mr. M differentiate his instruction so that every student achieved academic success.

In the same social studies department, veteran teachers with ten, fifteen, or twenty years of experience taught the same subject every period in one classroom that was effectively

theirs. This situation might be based on real or perceived ability, or perhaps institutional or bureaucratic inertia. In the case of this particular high school, how subjects were assigned was an opaque process at best. Responsibility for building the schedule and assigning subjects rested almost solely in the hands of the guidance department, despite the fact that the director of guidance possessed no classroom experience, no background in history instruction, and limited, firsthand knowledge of a given social studies teachers' education or experience, let alone teaching preferences. This despite the fact that the department possessed a content leader and an assigned administrator.

In my professional experience teaching at the high school level for 20 years, the challenging course load given to Mr. M was not uncommon. New high school teachers are regularly asked to teach multiple subjects often with classes of the most challenging students. New and inexperienced teachers are expected to master multiple subjects both in terms of content knowledge and skills as well as delivery. They must develop lessons which can be differentiated in such a way that they reach all students, regardless of the breadth of student ability, interest, or background knowledge.

An all-too-common misconception is that new educators are subject experts as soon as they graduate from college and earn their teaching credential. While new teachers are armed with a theoretical framework of pedagogical knowledge, a broad range of instructional techniques and limited classroom experience as a student teacher mentored by an experienced educator, the stark reality is that most new teachers learn their subject, let alone determine how best to deliver their subject effectively, just ahead of their students' learning. For example, there is a world of difference between mastering literary analysis as an English

language teacher and teaching students how to conduct literary analysis on a prescribed text that the new educator may or may not be intimately familiar with. A freshman social studies teacher may have an in-depth knowledge of the American Civil War, but such knowledge does not immediately translate into well-developed and appropriate lesson plans. Many inexperienced teachers possess only an initial cursory knowledge of the subject they are assigned.

As a first-year teacher, I was lucky enough to be assigned just one subject, World History I, a survey course in ancient history spanning from the Paleolithic Era to the early Renaissance. While I majored in history as an undergraduate, the last time I studied ancient history was in 7th grade. I researched topics, prepared presentations, and developed lesson plans just ahead of covering the material with my students in my first year. As a matter of necessity, new teachers spend hours researching and reviewing materials, developing lesson plans, gathering materials and creating assessments. This, in addition to the rigorous demands of the profession including grading assessments and providing feedback, communicating with students and parents, participating in professional development, attending meetings, and numerous ‘other duties as assigned’ ranging from sponsoring after-school activities to hall duty and more.

Then there is the challenge of classroom management, which is more an art than a science. While all teachers possess varying degrees of “natural ability” when it comes to managing a classroom full of students, educators need time to develop effective and appropriate management strategies suited both to their personal style and temperament as well as the unique needs of their students. The process of learning how to effectively manage a room full of students during a wide array of activities takes time and experience. While

effective mentoring can make a world of difference, the simple fact is this is yet another challenge that inexperienced teachers face. Despite this situation new teachers are often assigned the most challenging groups of students in terms of management to teach.

A new teacher, an experienced educator, and a 'master' teacher with decades of experience are all expected to teach the same number of classes, multiple subjects at varying levels and the same range of students regardless of their preferences, background, education or experience. For example, both a new teacher and a twenty-year veteran might be assigned the same advanced placement course or the same class designed for interrupted learners, students who have missed a significant portion of their education because they were unable to attend school for a variety of reasons. Mr. M, as a first year teacher, was expected to teach the same AP government class as the veteran teacher that he replaced with regard to content, effectiveness, and result. This is akin to a newly graduated medical student performing the same advanced procedures that veteran surgeons perform, or a police officer newly graduated from the academy being assigned as lead detective on a murder investigation. Is it any wonder that many teachers describe their first few years as an educator as among the most challenging and stressful years of their professional lives? Or that significant numbers of new teachers leave the profession early in their careers?

While there are diverse opinions about the percentage of teachers who leave education early in their careers, there is wide consensus that retention in education is an ongoing challenge. A recent survey conducted by the National Education Association found that 55% of respondents considered leaving the profession earlier than planned (Walker, 2022). Citing Bureau of Labor Statistics data, a recent article in *Wall Street Journal* stated that 300,000

teachers left the profession between February 2020 and March 2022, a 3% drop in the workforce (Dill, June 2022). According to *Education Week*, based on federal data, roughly 8% of teachers leave the profession each year, with the majority of them being first year teachers or educators early in their career (Loewus, 2021). Clearly the profession faces a challenge of retention.

There are many reasons why teachers chose to leave the profession ranging from retirement to life events like parenthood. One of these factors is stress. And who faces more stress than a new teacher? Therefore, the question becomes: what steps could be taken to ameliorate the pressures new teachers face?

Students

Rather than being assigned a schedule with courses targeting the most challenging students, would it not make more sense to reserve those classes for the most proficient and experienced teachers who have had time to hone their craft? Certainly part of teaching is developing the ability to adapt to and differentiate for a wide range of learners, but well-considered scheduling can limit how broad this range is for a teacher early in their career. This in turn provides the opportunity for the novice teacher to develop confidence and classroom management skills, before being dropped into the proverbial 'deep end of the pool.'

Course Load

The newest teachers should be assigned minimal courses in their first year, ideally a single subject such as American History, and taught at only one level rather than say AP US History and general education US History. Having novice teachers focus on one course or subject would allow them to focus their time and energy on learning that subject, to develop

course materials and lessons, and to meet with mentors and peers for support. Teaching the same subject multiple periods will give them the opportunity to reflect on their lessons and revise them.

Classroom

Having a classroom versus traveling can make a world of difference in any teacher's morale and overall level of stress, let alone in organization, planning, and classroom environment. Creating a classroom environment conducive to learning, having a point of contact where students can easily find their teacher and where the instructor can meet with students free of distractions, and simply having a quiet, personal space to plan and reflect carries many positive benefits. Having a classroom allows for the development and implementation of more complex lessons and activities.

Time

The most precious resource for any educator is time. Does it make sense that a veteran teacher of 20 years and a new teacher on a probationary license both carry the same course load? What if new teachers were assigned fewer teaching periods? For example, rather than teaching five classes, what if a novice only taught four or even three? Such a change would require a commitment of resources and staff by the school, but what would be the impact on a new teacher? They would have more time to learn their subject, develop lessons, meet with their mentor, reflect on their teaching, and more.

In short, we need to do more to support new and inexperienced teachers if we wish them to stay in the profession and reach their full potential. If we want them to develop the knowledge, skills, and confidence to succeed, providing such support only makes sense. It is

only logical to assign courses and course loads based on experience. Giving thoughtful consideration to new teachers' teaching load, schedule, and teaching situation, reduces the pressures new teachers face. This, in turn, will give them the time they need to develop into confident, competent educators with the long-term benefit of giving them the support they need to not only stay in the profession, but to thrive and excel as teachers.

References

Dill, K. (2022, June 20). School's out for summer and many teachers are calling it quits. *The Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/schools-out-for-summer-and-many-teachers-are-calling-it-quits-11655732689>

Fensterwald, J. (2015, July 16). Half of new teachers quit profession in 5 years? Not true, new study says. *EdSource*. <https://edsource.org/2015/half-of-new-teachers-quit-profession-in-5-years-not-true-new-study-says/83054>

Loewus, L. (2021, May 4). Why teachers leave-or don't: A look at the numbers. *Education Week*. <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/why-teachers-leave-or-dont-a-look-at-the-numbers/2021/05>

Walker, Tim. (2022, February 1). Survey: Alarming number of educators may soon leave the profession. *National Education Association News*. <https://www.nea.org/advocating-for-change/new-from-nea/survey-alarming-number-educators-may-soon-leave-profession>