

The following testimony and letter was delivered to the House Special Committee on Education in compliance with NBI 99-48 and NBI 95-51.

To: The Hon. Rep. Con Bunde, Chair
House Special Committee on Education

From: Mark Jones, Staff
National Education Association of Alaska

Date: March 4, 2002

Re: Mentoring, testimony presented to the committee, Feb 6, 2002

Introductory remarks

The state of Alaska is debating numerous questions related to education. How can we attract and retain the kind of teachers we need for our children? How can we improve student outcomes on standardized and high-stakes tests now being mandated by federal, state and local regulations? In an atmosphere of ever increasing accountability how can we increase teacher job satisfaction that can lead to higher levels of teacher retention? The issue of teacher retention is even more important in a state that cannot produce more than a small fraction of the teacher candidates needed to meet demand. How can we create an atmosphere in our schools that will support continuous learning and improvement by all our teaching staff? The answer is mentoring.

Historically, the culture of teaching has forced teachers to work and survive in near total isolation. Unlike many professions that allow new professionals to learn their craft gradually and incrementally in the atmosphere of nurturing guidance, teachers are thrown into the deep end of the pool. The assumption is that those who are fit will survive; those who are not fit will drown. A new teacher often finds himself or herself entering a classroom that has little or no furnishings or instructional resources. The class list given to new teachers often contains problem students removed from other classes. This is not an overt attempt by existing staff to jeopardize the success of their newer colleagues. It is the natural product and reflection of a culture of isolation. Teachers will do what they can to maximize the success of their students. Senior teachers often ignore the survival needs of new teachers because that has not been considered in the past. One of the first things new teachers learn is that good evaluations depend upon keeping students quiet and not sharing issues and concerns with administration or colleagues. Soon, the door of the classroom is closed to the world. Inside that isolated classroom is a young teacher desperately trying to cope with all the demands of a challenging class. To ask questions and seek help is sign of weakness and inadequacy.

Contrary to the notion that the fittest will survive, research has found that the most sensitive and talented of new teachers are the first to acknowledge their own weaknesses. They feel overwhelmed by frustration and concerns that they are not up to the task. The best and the brightest are, by virtue of their capacity to assess their own successes and failures, their own harshest critics. Ultimately, the best and the brightest are the first to leave the profession in frustration and defeat.

NEA-Alaska supports the notion that mentoring ought to be a part of the support structure provided to all new teachers in Alaska. That being said there are some considerations that must guide the adoption and implementation of any mentor program.

Selection of mentors

Mentoring is not a casual relationship. It is an extension of any good teacher's preparation program. Mentors should be selected for their capacity to work well with and understand adult learners. Mentors should be capable of demonstrating best practices. Mentors should be able to observe, diagnose and prescribe instructional solutions for the new teachers in a warm and constructive manner. Mentors should embody the best professional practices and attitudes available. In order to ensure that the best mentors are selected, criteria for selection ought to be developed prior to selecting mentors.

Good mentors are not just the most convenient teachers to pair up with the new teacher. They are not just the teachers most willing to take on the added responsibilities of mentoring. Good mentors are not simply the only other teacher of that subject or grade level in a given building or site. Good mentors have definable characteristics and skills. Those characteristics and skills ought to provide the basis for any mentor selection criteria.

Training

Mentors need to be trained. Mentoring is a specialized set of skills. It requires an understanding of adult learning and communication styles. Mentoring involves all the skills of clinical observation, assessment and diagnosis required of school administrators. Mentoring requires consulting and dialoging skills comparable to those developed by psychologists and counselors that will enable them to debrief observations and deal with concerns faced by the new teacher. Mentors must be trained and prepared to have difficult conversations with conflicted new teachers. Mentors must also have mediation and conflict resolution skills that will assist the new teacher in dealings with colleagues and administrators. Mentors must also have a mastery of multiple strategies for dealing with classroom management.

Time

Mentoring requires time for observations, planning, conferencing, review of lesson plans and debriefing of observations. All too often existing mentor programs rely upon after school conferences as the sole opportunity for the mentor and protégé to confer. Many of the most valuable components of a mentor relationship rely upon observations of instruction. If a mentor is unable to observe the protégé in practice they cannot give meaningful advice or guidance. The value of advice in an after hours consultation is only as good as the ability of the new teacher to assess their own strengths and weaknesses. The most difficult and persistent problems are those that elude self-assessment. The trained observer can often see things that the new teacher will never see. Experience and training are essential diagnostic tools that a new teacher does not yet have. In addition, mentoring cannot help if it is perceived as an added responsibility to an already over loaded workday. Both the mentor and the protégé need to view the mentor relationship as an essential part of their daily responsibility. Clinical observation and demonstration teaching cannot occur at all if time is not made available during the work day.

Confidentiality

One of the masters of private sector mentoring, Marshall Goldsmith, has conducted studies in which connections to evaluation were the primary distinguishing factor. He found that, given that all other factors are equal, the measured growth toward desired goals is improved by as much as 35% when the mentor/protégé relationship is protected from the evaluator. In other words, the potential for success of any protégé is improved by as much as 35% if they know that their relationship with their mentor is confidential. The explanation of this phenomenon is very simple; effective mentor/protégé relationships are all about trust. When a protégé feels they are safe to

reveal their inner most concerns and weaknesses without fear of consequence, they will do so. If, on the other hand, the protégé fears that whatever they share with their mentor will be shared with their evaluator, they become more circumspect and guarded. If an employee is unwilling to reveal their weaknesses to a mentor, there is no way that that weakness can be effectively remediated. Growth and improvement is all about honesty and trust. Honesty and trust can be encouraged if the mentor and protégé don't have to worry about disclosure of their conversations and observations to evaluators.

Compensation

Mentor relationships are time consuming and labor intensive. The teachers who make the best mentors are also those teachers who are the busiest and most dedicated. These teachers are the least likely to have the free time or energy to invest in a mentor relationship. Free time is essential if the mentor and protégé are to have observation, debrief and planning time. This free time does not account for the predictable workload that will be deferred to later evenings and weekends. If school districts are to attract their most valuable teachers into mentor relationships they will need to offer fair compensation as an incentive. Compensation is another way of showing how much the service is valued. When mentors and protégés are told that they are to conduct their business after hours and free of charge they understand that the district does not value what they are doing. If the system does not value the mentor/protégé relationship, why should the participants? Effective mentoring relationships consume hours of work for the entire first year. In fact, effective mentor relationships will continue to be a time and labor commitment for several years. If mentoring is to become an important part of Alaska's solution to teacher recruitment, retention and quality problems it must be compensated like any other real professional endeavor.

Community involvement

One common theme of exit interviews is teachers found themselves alone and unprepared for the culture and practical realities of their new community. They felt they had little or no support in making their adjustments to this new world. At the state level attempts have been made to introduce teachers to native culture and history. Though this broad information is helpful, it does not address the unique character of specific villages. NEA-Alaska has proposed a program that would pair an Alaska Native paraprofessional with a new teacher as a cultural and community mentor. Like any other mentor program, the mentors in this program would be trained and compensated for their efforts. The effectiveness of these mentors or any mentor for that matter, in dealing with cultural issues is dependent upon the degree to which the community becomes part of the support structure. One solution often recommended by supporters of programs called "*Beginning Teacher Assistance Programs*" is to form a coalition of community leaders and parents to assist in the planning of a support program for new teachers to the community. Part of the support program would then include community members and agencies. The committee would establish community awareness of the support program so that they could become active participants in the support process. If community members felt like they had some part in welcoming and orienting new teachers to the community and culture they would also take some ownership in the ultimate success of that teacher. Relationships are active and bilateral. Communities ought to develop strategies for establishing their half of the communication. By establishing a mentor relationship with Alaska Native paraprofessionals or teachers, the new teachers can be assisted in culturally appropriate ways to engage in their half of the relationship.

Coordination with the University

Mentor programs are natural extensions of the teacher preparation program. Effective mentor programs ought to have established relations with faculty services of the University of

Alaska. The special grant program called Alaska Partnership for Teacher Enhancement (APTE) has defined a complex set of relationships that the ideal mentor program should entail. Though this grant program is designed as a fifth year masters program using mentoring as a pillar of the training process, it has tested and established a mentor preparation program as well as a university and school site support structure. Some variation of the APTE approach ought to be considered for inclusion in the model mentor program. The university could view this support service as an opportunity to review their teacher preparation program, monitor the transition of a graduate from the teacher preparation program into the practice of teaching and determine what modifications might be considered in order to improve the university's preparation program. From the school site view, effective mentoring is a challenging and high stakes endeavor. No entity in the state has as much experience in working with adult learners than does the university. Mentors, particularly new or first time mentors, will find that working with adult learners or assisting first year teachers to overcome instructional problems is a complicated instructional issue for which they have little preparation. University support can help the mentor translate their initial mentor training into practice. The university faculty becomes, in this relationship, the mentor's mentor. Of course the university could also incorporate this support into a course of study that would involve both the mentor and protégé in work that is designed to strengthen and support their relationships. In this context the collaboration between the university and school mentors is mutually beneficial.

Criteria and strategies for pairing mentor with protégé

Relationships between two adults can be effective or totally unproductive based on personality or communication styles. Two capable adults can seem to be incapable of working together if they think, process information and communicate in incompatible ways. The compatibility issue is often considered a coincident matter of relative unimportance. In truth, the success or failure of a mentor/protégé relationship may hinge on these issues more than upon the skills of the mentor or the capacity or potential of the protégé. All too often pairings of mentors and protégés are made for haphazard reasons. In reality, there are considerable information and resources available to assist schools and the university is establishing criteria for pairings and assessing participants prior to making the match. Assessment instruments are readily available and easy to administer. Use of data, once the assessment has been administered, should be based upon carefully defined predictors established during the planning process. In the case of establishing the ideals experts should be consulted. In the end, careful selection and pairing can do more to guarantee success than almost any other factor. Logically, two people who work well together will work productively together. Two people who are incompatible will avoid each other or, worse yet, fight each other every step of the way.

Issues addressed through mentoring

Pedagogy: It has been said previously in this paper that both the mentor and protégé benefit from the pairing. Protégés have the advantage of accessing years of experience by working with a mentor. They have opportunities to observe experienced teachers perform their magic. They can dialog about instructional issues to gain an insight about what might or might not work based on an experienced view. Finally, the protégé gains an objective perspective about their instructional strategies when their own practice becomes too close to see from an emotional point of view. Mentors, on the other hand, would seem to have been selected for their skill and experience. It is an often said axiom that the best way to learn something well is through teaching it. Experienced teachers who have a chance to observe other teachers, have an opportunity to reflect upon their own teaching practices as a part of their assessment process. Through this reflective process experienced teachers learn to become critical self-evaluators. They observe practices in the new teacher that inspire innovation in their own approach to instruction. They learn to put into words

concepts that seemed illusory and vague to them in the past. Through the process of verbalizing and analyzing their own teaching strategies and practices they become better and more confident teachers in their own right.

Cultural awareness and sensitivity

The concept of pairing an experienced teacher with a new teacher has obvious value in gains related to instruction and content. The subtler, yet, perhaps more potent factors related to culture, language and tradition are often never openly addressed by anyone. Success or failure in a classroom or community relates directly to the ability of a teacher to connect with the students and their parents. Failure to establish a connection will result in both student and teacher failures. In Alaska the effects of culture and language are more evident than in most any other state in the union. It is essential that a component of any mentor program directly address the issues related to culture and language. A mentor relationship utilizing Alaska Native paraprofessionals is one possible solution. It is clear that some strategies to deal with the culture and language issues are essential. Some of the factors leading to turnover in the bush relate directly to conflict related to culture and language. It is clear that job satisfaction is affected by culture and language issues. Finally, instructional effectiveness is clearly affected by cultural and communication problems. Regardless of the method employed, mentoring around the concepts of culture and language must be a component of the overall mentor program.

Classroom Management

No complaint is more common or deadly to the success of a new teacher than classroom management. No skill has a greater capacity to enable learning to occur than does effective classroom management. No weakness can cripple a teacher's effectiveness or the capacity of students to learn than one related to classroom management. All too often strategies of managing student behavior result from years of painful trial and error. Effective strategies are often contingent upon the culture of the community. Student learning, unfortunately, plays second fiddle to conduct and behavior until that new teacher hits upon a strategy that works. Mentoring alone has the capacity to overcome classroom management problems in a timely manner. Experienced master teachers have worked through many of these management issues. In addition, mentors bring a wealth of site and cultural specific experience that can assist the new teacher to sift through the options for a strategy that will work in his or her classroom. Mentoring can assist the district in gaining more value out of that first year teacher than any other approach. Investments in a comprehensive mentor program will pay off in classroom management. Failure to gain control of a class can cause more young creative teachers to walk away from a promising career than almost any other factor.

For all the reasons listed above NEA-Alaska strongly supports legislation that would encourage and fund mentor programs in the state of Alaska. Mentor programs are a cost effective investment in both the quality and stability of education in our state.

Response to question by Representative Porter during oral discussion

During the oral presentation Representative Porter asked how goals were set during a study conducted by Marshall Goldsmith. Specifically, in the study by Marshall Goldsmith it was learned that progress toward goals was 35% better when the relationship between the mentor and protégé was confidential. By confidential the study referred to mentor relations where the observations and communications between the mentor and protégé were not to be shared with the evaluator versus circumstances where the results of the relationship were known to be shared with the evaluator. In all cases the goals of the mentor relationship were developed using a process called the 180-degree feed back. This method requires the protégé to seek input and assessments from supervisors, peer

colleagues and subordinates. The data from all these sources is used to create a set of goals that address the feedback received from all categories of employees. Once the goals are set the participants in each identifiable group participating in the assessment are given follow-up opportunities to assess the behavior most applicable or observable to that group. Finally, success in meeting goals is determined by a second assessment of the same individuals who were a party to the first assessment at the beginning of the mentor relationship.

Copy:	Representative Green	Representative Wilson
	Representative Porter	Representative Joule
	Representative Stevens	Representative Guess