

Wanted: Mentors

A Paper and Project

by

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### Wanted: Mentors

In my 13 years in the public school classroom I taught several different subjects in several different middle schools all in the same school district. Each campus included grades 6-8. Each campus was vastly different. Each had its own culture; its own way of doing things. In my administrative work I served on a high school campus with over 4,900 students in grades 9-12. I moved to lead a Christian high school of about 350. I left that school and came to my present position with 350 students in grades PK-12.

As I started the third year in my current position I began to consider how to improve the transition from college or from another school as teachers come to ECA and work. In my work at two different Christian schools, I found that there is a general assumption that just because a person is a believer, and that person happens to be a teacher, the wonder and power of biblical integration will just happen. It was while pondering this assumption, and noticing that this integration was not 'just happening', that I thought of developing a structured mentoring program for teachers at ECA. It seemed that prior to my accepting this position, teachers had been hired and then treated almost like independent contractors. They had been given the keys to the classroom, and turned loose to teach. It was as if these folks were expected to find their own way on the path of what it meant to teach and what it meant to teach at this Christian school.

In addition to not knowing what it means to teach at a particular school, the biblical integration component is new to almost every teacher I have ever hired in the Christian setting. The mentor program would need to address, not just what it means to teach, but, specifically,

what it means to teach at ECA; a Christian school that works to instill Christian values and growth in our students through what we call biblical integration, while at the same time striving for excellence in academics, the arts, and athletics. What this means is that the program is a school culture project.

There are just about as many definitions of school culture as there are researchers writing about it. For my work, culture will be simply defined as the way we do things on campus. This mentor program will lean toward addressing key components of teaching at a Christian school as well as answering questions a new teacher might have related to teaching in general. A driving consideration is that if we work to teach the cultural aspects of ECA, (the way we do things) we will increase the number of staff who are bought-in, onboard, and on the same page. This unity of purpose and effort has a strong chance to bear good fruit down the road.

Daresh (2003) has suggested that a traditional understanding of the term ‘mentor’ may not be strong enough and that a good mentor will need to understand that this is a “...developmental relationship that is tied to an appreciation of life and career stages” (pg. 13). It would seem that the ability to share information simply about working at the school is not going to be enough. The relationship part, including a personal side to that relationship, is critical to the development of a strong new member of the teaching staff. They need someone to connect with from the beginning. In the packets they are given, mentor teachers are encouraged to develop this beyond-the-classroom relationship.

While many topics will be discussed, direct assistance be provided, and demonstration teaching be used as a tool, the heart of the mentor program is the ongoing relationship between the mentor teacher and the mentee (Glickman, Gordon & Ross-Gordan, 2010). This program has the goal of developing these important relationships with new teachers so that they don’t feel like

they come to work each day surrounded by strangers. If not strangers, people who seem to be so busy that the new teacher feels out of place by asking a question or seeking advice.

While being interviewed, an award winning teacher suggested that a mentoring program should be flexible and one-on-one in design (Towne, 2009). That is the initial plan for my project and it is so indicated in the packet given to the mentor teacher. For example, while there are certain topics that need to be discussed in the meetings, and even a timeline given for some of the topics, the mentor is given a lot of flexibility to change the order or add discussion topics as they are appropriate or come up in conversation with the mentee. If a relationship is to develop, the formula of the program cannot be strictly run on a predetermined schedule that does not allow for unscripted or unpredictable conversations that may need to take place. While it is not listed as a topic to be covered, many teachers new to the profession find personal time management to be an issue; grading papers at home, planning over the weekend, etc. A good mentor will address this if (when) it comes up in discussion or is mentioned in a brief conversation.

It is in this flexibility that some of the most powerful connections can take place. In a review of the mentoring process, Daloz (1999) acknowledges that most of us have been influenced by a teacher who said or did something at just the right time, but that the timing of these ‘mentoring moments’ is a mystery. The mentor teacher will need to be one who is able to connect quickly with the new teacher and begin to discern what it is that needs to be addressed the most. This connection, this relationship, will be most genuinely developed through dialogue that is both formal and informal in nature with short conversations in the hallway between classes and scheduled meetings with defined starting points for topics.

Jonson (2002) lists the following broad categories as important to the efforts of the mentor teacher:

- Direct Assistance
- Demonstration Teaching
- Observation and feedback
- Informal contact
- Assistance with an action plan for professional growth
- Role modeling

These categories give some structure to the thinking of the mentor in that they offer some direction to both what is included and how information can be shared and discussed. In the packet given to mentors, they are asked to reflect on their first year in the classroom or on a new campus. A driving factor to developing conversation starters could be what mentors remember when reflecting back to their first year in the classroom or their first year on a new campus.

Since teachers are at their best when they develop strong relationships with other teachers and education professionals, Zachary (2000) indicates that the mentor teacher should purposefully make connections for the mentee to establish relationships with other people who could then assist in the growth process of the mentee. For this program, that should include the areas of professional, personal, and spiritual growth. Not very many mentor teachers will shine in all of these areas, but the mentor knows someone on staff who does stand out in these areas. It is with those people the mentor should look to help the mentee build relationships by acting as the gatekeeper.

The effort to take the first steps toward the creation of a mentoring program has taught me (reminded me of) the enormity of the task at hand. We as school leaders are charged with

many things in the fulfillment of our duties to our students and families as well as our staff. I learned again the importance of purposefully developing our newest staff members to be the very best teachers on our campus. Just trying to whittle down the list of ‘required’ topics was a mental wrestling match. What would have helped my first year? What will help a new teacher 35 years after my first year?

Rather than assuming that these new educators will figure it all out, this mentor program will help show them the ropes, so to speak. There is a lot to learn in that pivotal first year of teaching. The classic and proverbial thought that we all learned more in our first year of teaching than we did in the four years of our degree work still holds true. No degree program can completely prepare someone for that first year in the classroom. The ‘live’ work is much different than the practice lessons taught to one’s peers or the student teaching work we all completed. This mentor program is a start in the right direction to helping that first year on the ECA campus be a great first year professionally, personally, and spiritually.

I hope that this program will make a difference in several ways. First, in teacher satisfaction with their chosen career in Christian education. Second, in staff morale and comradery by building relationships and personal connections among staff members. Third, I look for these first steps at a mentor program to improve the quality of the biblical integration that is evidenced on campus. Finally, I hope that a program like this would be one step toward helping create a Christian school that can be likened to the idea found in Zechariah 8:23 where families will want to send their children to ECA because they have heard that God is with us.

## References

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