

Inducting and Mentoring Teachers for Long-Term Excellence

By Gary R. Fisher



Teaching isn't easy! While we all inherently appreciate this reality, it is easy to get busy with the work required to start the school year, and we sometimes forget the most important part of the process: ensuring teachers are ready to excel. Just as Christ modeled how to develop disciples, we must make sure that our schools have a transitional plan for beginning teachers as well as teachers who are new to the unique cultures of our schools.

The ability to do this is dependent on demographics, resources, and philosophy, but some common essential features include (1) a well-written faculty induction and mentoring plan, (2) redundant and constant support, and (3) doubling up efforts to provide spiritual assistance and support.

A Developed Plan

First, make a plan—not a boilerplate plan borrowed from another school, but a detailed document with specific strategies tailored to the unique features of your school.

Although larger schools and those blessed with greater resources are more likely to be able to hire experienced teachers, they still have the challenge of making sure the teacher is culturally aligned and able to integrate faith effectively into the classroom. Smaller schools or those with fewer resources will often have to employ teachers who are brand-new to the profession. Regardless, an excellent induction and mentoring plan should include the following features:

- The purpose and goals of the induction program, which align with the overall goals of the school
- A survey that assesses the individual training needs of each teacher
- A basic orientation plan for the first days of school

- A list of guidelines and expectations for the new teachers and mentors
- An overall calendar of mentorship activities
- Teacher feedback and assessment mechanisms
- Mentor/mentee communication and activity log
- Long-term and follow-up plans (linked to a professional development plan)
- Pertinent forms and resources

Keep in mind that mentorship is not confined to the first quarter or the first year of teaching. As part of the natural process of professional development, mentoring plans should also be established for subsequent years.

Constant Support

Second, make sure that every new teacher has ample support. Mentor interaction and collegial dialogue are the most important elements in acclimation to a new school. Make sure that you do not simply “check the box” when assigning mentors. Instead, strategically select master teachers. These individuals are invaluable for transmitting the academic philosophy, cultural values, teaching techniques, classroom management and discipline methods, and approaches to parent partnerships.

To solidify relationships and trust, consider hosting a longer “preseason” prior to starting the school year. This gives faculty a more manageable time frame to prepare for students while also encouraging deeper collegial relationships.

When possible, it is helpful to give newer teachers fewer subjects and class sections. This margin allows more time to prepare, observe other teachers, and meet with mentors for planning and feedback. Also, try to arrange for at least one of the classes to be cotaught with a mentor teacher. This support allows the mentee to see

a mentor interacting with students. If this is not feasible, think outside the box: perhaps you can enlist the help of a retired teacher (e.g., a student's grandparent) or a part-time teacher to share time in the classroom with newer teachers.

If possible, new teachers should be given space in the day where they can reserve time to spend with colleagues who are teaching the same subject or are in the same department or discipline. This arrangement allows collaboration, cross-pollination of thought, and development of similar approaches and assessments. When teachers walk in stride with each other, missteps are drastically reduced.

Throughout the year, there should be constant observation, dialogue, and refining by the mentor teacher and less frequent observation by administrative personnel such as department chairs, academics deans, and principals. Care should be taken to be vigilant but not overwhelming when monitoring the progress of newer teachers. Creating a culture in which all teachers expect frequent visitation and “fishbowl” classrooms takes the pressure off newer teachers; they feel part of a team that is always looking for ways to improve, rather than feeling singled out.

Spiritual Assistance

Finally, teachers cannot integrate what they do not possess. It cannot be overemphasized that teacher induction and mentoring for Christian schools must include (1) the process of supporting and developing the spiritual maturity and practices of each teacher and (2) the process of naturally integrating that biblical worldview into daily classroom instruction.

Double up efforts in this area, and refuse to accept teachers who are satisfied with merely teaching content without incorporating the general and special revelation of God's truth. Even teachers who come from Christian colleges or schools may have never learned this skill or may have become complacent, assigning biblical worldview integration to Bible teachers and pastors. This responsibility cannot be avoided, and we must be diligent to develop it in all teachers, particularly new ones.

One strategy is to host an induction or “preseason” time primarily devoted to principles and strategies for biblical worldview integration. As your school develops and archives digital tools for training, you can develop a cache of resources for all teachers to access. Newer teachers can also be given these resources, reading

assignments, and professional development opportunities in the summer before their inaugural year.

Giving each new teacher a prayer partner, spiritual advisor, or accountability partner is an intentional way of developing the teacher while communicating the importance of this unique type of professional development.

Biblical worldview integration and spiritual health can and should be evaluated. Throughout the year, consider meeting with newer teachers over coffee or lunch in order to gauge how they are doing. Also, consider developing rubrics and assessment tools for teacher development.

Lastly, faculty and staff meetings must include opportunities for new teachers to be a part of corporate prayer, Bible study, worship, and community. If Christ is not central to our operations, we communicate to teachers that education should be done apart from Christ.

We sometimes forget the most important part of the process—ensuring teachers are ready to excel.

The Model of Jesus

If you think about the model of Jesus as the master teacher, none of the above tools or techniques is new. Christ developed other teachers—His disciples—by having a personal relationship in which to mentor them. He instructed them patiently, evaluated their progress, and gave feedback, correction, and praise. He gave them practical advice and the opportunity to succeed and fail. While teaching them real-world skills and transferring pragmatic information, He tended to their hearts, understanding that the essence of what they needed to know was that they were to love God and others.

If we follow these principles, we should be well on the way to developing the next generation of disciples and teachers who can impact students—and ultimately the world—for Christ.

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