Finding Good Teachers—And Keeping Them

To attract good teachers, one New Jersey school district developed an organized and rigorous selection process and provided new teachers with a structured and nurturing system of professional development and support.

Barbara Sargent

Montgomery Township, one of the fastest-growing townships in New Jersey, faces the daunting task of staffing classrooms in its schools. The district has nearly 4,400 students organized into one primary school (K—2), one elementary school (grades 3–5), one middle school (grades 6–8), and one high school. School districts in New Jersey are ranked according to socioeconomic status from A (least advantaged) to J (most advantaged). Montgomery Township is one of four J districts in New Jersey. The district has hired more than 60 teachers annually over the past three years to accommodate its growing student population. The result of this hiring boom is that more than 50 percent of the district’s teaching staff is nontenured. Yet the district enjoys a 99 percent retention rate for nontenured staff, a success it owes to a comprehensive program that it developed to attract and retain good teachers.

Montgomery's program

- Seeks out high-quality candidates;
- Provides support for new staff members and orients them to the district’s expectations for teaching and learning; and
- Establishes professional relationships that keep teachers empowered and eager to contribute to their school communities.

Attracting and Selecting High-Quality Candidates

To attract the best candidates, district administrators participate in area job fairs, take advantage of college recruiting opportunities, and advertise for teaching positions as far in advance of the school year as possible. This early commitment to the hiring process allows Montgomery Township to attract a large number of applicants for both elementary and secondary teaching positions.

A rigorous and thoughtful selection process is crucial in developing a quality faculty.
Interviewing candidates is one of the most important tasks that principals undertake each year. The careful selection of new staff members provides school leaders with an important opportunity to change their schools' social, instructional, and professional climate and to build and foster a nurturing school environment. Teacher selection is not a process to be rushed or delegated carelessly to others.

Montgomery's selection process involves a series of three interviews. Administrators conduct the first interview, which typically lasts 25–30 minutes, to identify good candidates who are worthy of a closer look. One principal in the district extends an open invitation to her faculty to participate on the interview committee. Including teachers in this process is a win-win situation: The principal gains additional perspectives on a candidate, and teachers are able to influence decisions that will have a direct impact on them and on their school.

The second interview involves a demonstration lesson taught by the candidate in a live classroom and observed by the principal and curriculum supervisors. Following the lesson, the administrators conduct a conference and interview. The observers review the lesson with the candidate and focus on instructional practice, instructional climate, and the candidate's ability to reflect on the lesson. Then the principal, in consultation with the curriculum supervisors and the committee members who conducted the interview, decides whom to recommend for an interview with the superintendent.

The principal accompanies the candidate to the final interview with the district's superintendent, which helps ease the candidate's anxiety and establishes a positive bond between the principal and the new teacher.

**Providing Support During the First Year**

To establish a supportive environment for new teachers, schools must offer teachers professional development opportunities and provide a social setting in which teachers enjoy working. Teachers who feel welcome in their new school environment form relationships that will tie them to the school for years to come. Evans asserts that

> Principals need to provide the same thing for teachers that good teachers give students: real challenges—goals that stretch you, but that you can reach; and real inspiration—encouragement to keep trying no matter what. (1996, p. 289)

The environmental factors that enable students to learn—structure, consistency, support, and the freedom to take risks—make up the same environment that teachers and principals need to teach, learn, and grow. A school that exists entirely in "crisis mode"—one that allows minor emergencies to rule its days—fails to provide that necessary supportive environment, which hinders students' learning and eventually drives teachers away.

**Addressing the Emotional Needs of New Teachers**

Certainly, all this relationship building takes principals' time and attention away from the many duties that they face each day. But principals who neglect this vital task are not taking enough time to reflect and plan for the future, crucial elements in building a strong school culture.
Principals can establish relationships with new teachers in a variety of ways. Here are a few ideas to help new staff members feel at ease:

- Include new hires in end-of-year meetings, student orientations, and classroom visitations.
- Invite new staff to summer professional workshops.
- Introduce new staff to grade-level and subject-area colleagues.
- Include information about new hires in staff and parent newsletters.
- Provide an orientation program for new staff.
- Assign a mentor to each new teacher.

**Addressing the Professional Needs of New Teachers**

The best way to support, develop, and cultivate an attitude of lifelong learning in beginning teachers is through a new teacher induction program focused on teacher training, support, and retention. (Wong, 2002, p. 52)

Montgomery Township Schools' annual four-day New Teacher Orientation program is designed to convey the district’s vision of teaching and learning to new staff members. The orientation's theme is effective classroom instruction, and its workshops demonstrate the constructivist philosophy of teaching and learning that teachers are expected to implement in their own classrooms.

The program begins with a workshop that presents the Montgomery Township Schools mission statement. This workshop and others during the orientation are presented using the 4MAT model of planning and instruction, which embraces multiple learning styles and promotes differentiation of instruction.

The district administrators and supervisors have worked hard over the past several years to refine the orientation program. Our most recent (and most effective) orientation included sessions on such topics as brain-based teaching and learning, classroom management, lesson planning, differentiating instruction, reading and writing strategies across the curriculum, and building community partnerships.

In addition, new staff members had the opportunity to meet with grade-level or content-area specialists to review their curriculums and ask questions regarding their specific assignments. They also met the central-office administrators, key support personnel, and building administrators to further acclimate themselves to their new workplace. The orientation concluded with a bus tour of Montgomery Township to help new staff members get acquainted with the area; long-time staff and community members acted as tour guides for the trip.

Presenters incorporated successful instructional techniques in each orientation session in order to model—rather than merely lecture on—those techniques. Each workshop provided district administrators with the opportunity to teach using varied instructional strategies, including

- Think-Pair-Share: The teacher first poses a question to the students, asks them to think
about their answer for a moment, and then directs the students to pair up with their neighbors and share their responses.

- **K-W-L:** This strategy is often used at the beginning of a unit to determine what the students already know about a topic, what they want to know, and—at the conclusion of the unit—what they have learned about the topic.

- **Carousel Activity:** Students work in groups and show their work and ideas on a large piece of chart paper, which is then posted on the classroom wall. The students then walk around the classroom to look at the charts and write questions and comments on the charts for others to see.

- **Gallery Walk:** In this extension of the carousel activity, students revisit the posted work using colored dots or markers to indicate points that they have questions about. The teacher uses the highlighted areas on each of the charts to lead a discussion for further clarification.

The fact that administrators as well as teachers participated in these workshops demonstrated to the new hires that the district’s principals, vice principals, and curriculum directors are knowledgeable in instructional strategies, are able to work together as a team, and have shared expectations of the first-year teachers.

The orientation also provided new teachers with the opportunity to prepare their classrooms or meet with colleagues. The elementary school teachers could not wait to visit their rooms to hang posters, prepare students' desks, and perform other beginning-of-the-year tasks, and the secondary school teachers appreciated having the time to consult with colleagues in their teaching teams or departments, review the curriculum, and plan for the first days of school.

As a culminating activity, the new teachers participated in a hands-on workshop to sample a variety of technologies. Among other activities, teachers created videos using the video production facilities; designed a Webquest, an inventory of Web sites for further investigation that contained sites of interest to new teachers; used the Smart Board, an interactive tool that allows computer images to be projected and manipulated on a "whiteboard"; highlighted differentiation of instruction using Inspiration Software (a mind-mapping software); and designed a PowerPoint presentation to address reading in the content areas.

**Establishing Positive Mentor Relationships**

What new teachers want is experienced colleagues who will watch them teach and provide feedback, help them develop instructional strategies, model skilled teaching, and share insights about students' work. (Johnson & Kardos, 2002, p. 13)

Montgomery Township principals take mentoring seriously. New teachers in the elementary schools are placed in family groups, or teams, of grade-level colleagues. Each family group comprises 5–6 teachers of the same grade level who share a common daily schedule. Weekly family group meetings ensure that no new teachers are left to flounder on their own.

In addition, new teachers are each assigned a teacher mentor. Kimberly, a new elementary
school teacher, met with her mentor at least once a week throughout the year to collaborate on plans for lessons, activities, and units. Together, we planned differentiated math lessons, supplemental science lessons, guided reading strategies, and writer's workshop lessons.

Heather, another first-year teacher, praised her mentor, who not only "helped me get acquainted with the new curriculum and the school environment," but also "shared with me every fiber of her teaching quilt."

Principals can nurture mentor relationships by providing newly hired teachers with access to their colleagues. Both of the new teachers introduced above met their mentors at summer workshops. The new teachers and their mentors naturally "drifted toward each other," making the mentor relationships successful and natural. This type of teacher-led relationship prevents potential problems later in the school year.

**Continuing Professional Support**

The district encourages new, nontenured staff members to continue their professional development over their first three years with a series of workshops that reinforce the orientation topics and provide continued support. The district provides first-year teachers with six workshops throughout the year that focus on maximizing student learning, including *Instructional Strategies for Effective Classroom Management, Instructional Strategies to Promote Student Involvement, Effective Partnerships, Online Databases as Instructional Tools, Reading in All Content Areas, and Reflection and Professional Growth*.

Second-year teachers can participate in two workshops that focus on broadening and fine-tuning instructional strategies to meet the needs of all students, including *Differentiation of Instruction: Theory and Differentiation of Instruction: Theory into Practice*.

Finally, the district conducts two workshops for third-year teachers that focus on assessment, including *Teacher as Assessor and Teacher as Researcher*. These workshops encourage teachers to engage in projects and action research, thereby adding to the district's cumulative body of knowledge about effective teaching and learning.

**After the First Year**

The challenge of professional development . . . is to create optimal collaborative learning situations in which the best sources of expertise are linked with the experiences and current needs of the teachers. (National Academy of Sciences, 1996)

Because Montgomery Township teachers are involved in the development and refinement of new approaches to their teaching, assessment, and curriculum, we often find the best sources of expertise among our own staff. "In-an-hour" workshops—one-hour workshops that address teachers' learning needs while accommodating their personal schedules—allow teachers to be both the targets and the facilitators of professional development. These workshops are carefully aligned with the district's professional development goals and the staff's immediate needs. Some recent workshops include *How to Write a Newsletter, Using the Literacy Group*.
Model, and Enhancing Mathematics Instruction Through Children's Literature.

Presenters receive compensation for their one-hour presentations and for two hours of preparation time. The workshops run after school, and participation is voluntary (although attendees receive credit hours for professional development). These workshops provide a collaborative, informal environment that enables teachers with expertise to support the professional development of their peers.

Finally, we invite all our teachers—tenured and nontenured—to participate in a variety of book study groups. The groups typically meet weekly for 4–8 weeks. Books that our elementary school teachers have previously read and discussed include *Mosaic of Thought*, by Ellin Keene and Susan Zimmerman (Heinemann, 1997); *The Art of Teaching Reading*, by Lucy Calkins (Longman, 2000); and *Guiding Readers and Writers*, by Irene C. Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell (Heinemann, 1996). Middle and high school language arts teachers have read *Image Grammar: Using Grammatical Structures to Teach Writing*, by Harry R. Noden (Boynton/Cook, 1999). The district not only awards participating teachers with professional development credit hours, but also purchases the books for the teachers to keep in their own professional libraries. Participation in the study groups is voluntary and is a popular activity among our faculty.

**Looking Ahead**

Teachers who feel connected to a school—who feel that their work is important and recognized—are more likely to remain vital, dynamic, and contributing members of the school community. By approaching the hiring process with a clear and thoughtful purpose, and by providing an organized system of support for new staff members, school leaders can build a staff of lifelong learners who will share their knowledge about teaching and learning with future generations.

**References**


**Barbara Sargent** is Principal of Village Elementary School, 100 Main Blvd., Skillman, NJ 08558; bsargent@mtsd.k12.nj.us.

Copyright © 2003 by Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development