



Sink or Swim

— Jeanne Endrikat —

*Five lifelines
help new teachers
stay afloat*

New teachers often are given the most preparations, classroom moves, and demanding students. The rationale behind this is more experienced teachers “have done their time,” and therefore should be “promoted” to better students, newer equipment, and their own classrooms. In addition, new teachers are sometimes added to the roster at the last minute and never have a chance to tour the school and connect with colleagues. Bewildered and overwhelmed, no wonder new teachers often flounder and parents express concerns!

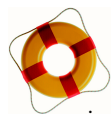
Frustrated and stressed new teachers can create unproductive and unhappy science departments. Not only does the new teacher struggle, but also the science team is pulled down with the effort to keep the beginning teacher afloat. These overstressed teachers have trouble planning if most of their free time is used to travel from room to room, set up activities, and find supplies. Instead of making creative plans they can use, new teachers sometimes resort to using standard worksheets and boring seatwork activities, or lecturing.

The competition for good teachers is tough, but making conditions favorable will help recruit stronger teachers. The department will run more effectively if new teachers are nurtured and eased into the school.

The background new teachers bring to the job also is important. Part of their success depends on their knowledge base and teacher training courses. In most cases, colleges are doing a great job of preparing teachers for classroom challenges and day-to-day interactions with colleagues, administrators, and parents.

A beginning teacher also needs to have patience, creativity, and flexibility. Unrealistic preconceptions can jeopardize their success. Many people do not realize the time investment needed during a workday. The following are five commonsense lifelines that veteran teachers and department chairs can give new science teachers to help them get off to a good start.

Lifeline 1: A good match



More of a new teacher's questions are anticipated and answered in the interview process if the department chair and science administrator interview the candidate together. They should show the candidate books and classrooms that will be used, describe how the school is set up, and discuss how the science department operates. Interviewers must be open and candid to give the new teacher a realistic picture of the teaching environment and administrative decision-making process. The candidate's style should complement the school's environment. For example, not everyone fits into a large school or one with many special-needs students. Some teachers don't like the constraints of working in a team.

Lifeline 2: Warm and welcoming



Once the interview is complete, interviewers should follow up with a phone call or e-mail to see if the candidate has any more questions or needs clarification. Once a new teacher is hired, administrators should make them feel welcome by inviting them to tour the building and meet teaching colleagues. New recruits should know the location of the teachers' workroom, library, and copy room. Another idea is taking them to lunch and giving them books, supplies, and their schedule to start planning.

Lifeline 3: A supportive schedule



New teachers need a schedule that allows them to thrive. If novices teach all classes in the same room, they can avoid moving equipment. They should be assigned standard classes, not special-needs or highly demanding classes. As new teachers start out, the department must allow them time to adjust. Experienced teachers are assigned harder tasks because they are better equipped to deal with them.

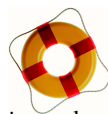
Lifeline 4: Safety in numbers



Our school is very large with about 22 teachers in the high school science department alone. For efficiency and communication, teachers are divided into teams of the same science subject matter. As a team, teachers agree on general grading methods, overall policies, and a final exam. This provides cohesiveness for students who need to switch classes in the middle of the year and offers support for teachers when parents question a particular policy. From a department point of view, the administration is reasonably assured that the necessary science content is covered.

A team is also great support for new teachers. Instead of inventing everything from scratch, teams share activities, labs, tests, and quizzes. The team activities are time-tested and fine-tuned for success! When new activities are needed, the workload is spread among several on the team. A new teacher can bring fresh ideas and invigorate the group. Most teams evaluate the success of activities, update files frequently, and store files on a disk—members have their own disk copy at the end of each year. If the new teacher becomes ill during the year, the team can touch base with the substitute to ensure classroom activities proceed smoothly. Science content and methodology become stronger, new teachers feel like they belong, and ultimately students benefit. Many of our beginning teachers have commented that being part of a structured team their first year helped them tremendously.

Lifeline 5: School and countywide support



Our county has new teachers arrive a day before experienced teachers to receive orientation. They are introduced to the school superintendent and important county policies. During the first year, new teachers take a course that meets three days before school starts, and then once a month for the rest of the year. The course provides an opportunity to share experiences at various schools and compare notes.

As a cooperative effort between the school and county, a mentor teacher is assigned to the new teacher. This veteran provides encouragement, answers questions, and shows the new teacher how to follow procedures within the school and county. Many professional development courses that enhance teaching and technology skills also are offered throughout the year for all teachers.

With all the lifelines in place, a new science teacher no longer has to flounder in the beginning sea of teaching. Looking back, veteran teachers probably wish they had access to all of these lifelines at the beginning of their career! ~

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