THE JOURNAL

Professional Learning

4 Tech Tools That Support New Teachers

- By David Raths <http://thejournal.com/forms/emailtoauthor.aspx?AuthorItem={9B64E921-D38E-47A2-ADE1-FDE8975199AB}&ArticleItem={963B9003-C5F3-4D46-A45F-72790A6BDAAA}>
- 11/12/14

The statistics about the percentage of new teachers who stay in the profession are alarming. Several studies <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/05/16/kappan_ingersoll.h31.html> have estimated that between 40 percent and 50 percent of new teachers leave within the first five years of teaching. To combat this trend, most districts have developed formal induction programs that offer mentorship from principals and other teachers. But in both rural and urban areas, it can be difficult for districts to relieve teachers of their classroom responsibilities to give them the time to mentor newer teachers. This is where technology can play a role.

In his first year of classroom teaching five years ago, Lamont Hollifield, a mathematics teacher at the Urban Prep Charter Academy for Young Men <http://www.urbanprep.org/> in Chicago, found assistance through the e-Mentoring for Student Success <http://www.newteachercenter.org/services/emss> (eMSS) program offered by the nonprofit New Teacher Center. The online program brings together new and veteran teachers and university professors to share ideas and experiences within a structured curriculum.

Hollifield recalled, "My mentor phrased comments in a way that caused me to reflect on my practice. I found it was not the way the school was being run, but my failure to adapt to what they were asking me to do in the school that was the problem." Hollifield is now giving back by acting as a mentor in the program himself. Reflecting on his role as an online sounding board for new teachers, he said: "Once you build trust with teachers, they will talk about things they might not be comfortable sharing with a department chair, such as content they feel challenged to teach."

The eMSS program was created 12 years ago by the New Teacher Center in partnership with the [University of Montana <http://www.umt.edu/why/?gclid=CjwKEAjwtIShBRD08fKD1OWSik4SJAAuKLovsZ8pcv7lJd4jFFZmeg8ZS2QdKBk-uXIhpzoefyGAJhoCKsbw_wcB>](#) and the [National Science Teachers Association <http://www.nsta.org/>](#) (with funding from the [National Science Foundation <http://www.nsf.gov/>](#)) to connect new teachers with each other and with mentors. The program is built around a Facebook-like academic social platform where discussions and forums take place. Participants also can access video-annotation software that helps them comment on their own and other teachers' classroom activities. The fee is $1,500 per beginning teacher per year for the full program.

Alyson Mike, New Teacher Center's senior director for online professional development, said, "When we started 12 years ago, it was tough to find a platform to use for this work." Instead, she added, "We ended up using an online courseware platform. With the shift to mobile and social media, our technology shifted that way." Mike said that many mentors now use mobile devices, texting, Google chats and Skype "in ways they never could before, and because bandwidth has increased, they can share video content. Initially we had to use dial-up connections." One of the benefits an online mentoring program offers is its combination of synchronous and asynchronous communication. New teachers feel particularly time-challenged, Mike said, and they like the idea of a tool that is available 24/7.

Online Communities of Practice

Building an online community of practice among rural math teachers has been one of the goals of the [New Teacher Network <http://scimath.unl.edu/newteachernetwork/>](#) (NTN), a three-year mentoring and professional development program for new secondary mathematics teachers in Nebraska. In four years, 66 teachers have gone through the program, which offers them 24 hours of graduate credit at no cost to the teacher for tuition or fees. The program forms cohorts and has them work intensively together in person over the summer, creating a foundation for what they do online over the year. Wendy Smith, assistant director of the [Center for Science, Mathematics and Computer Education <http://scimath.unl.edu/csmce/>](#) at the [University of Nebraska-Lincoln <http://www.unl.edu/>](#) , explained, "Teachers can feel that it is risky to admit that they don't know something, so a big component is to develop that trust early on so they will feel comfortable sharing with each other."

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All of the teacher's reflections and responses are conducted in a password-protected online environment that allows group collaboration, discussion and sharing. Regular small-group meetings are also conducted online, using videoconferencing. "The teachers are able to shoot videos of their own teaching and annotate it, and have others provide feedback," Smith said. "They also get time off to observe other teachers and write evaluations."

Most of these new Nebraska math teachers work in rural settings, so they don't have much of a local support group. "We want them to retain the bonds they built in this program, and anecdotally we hear that they are," Smith said. "We don't have a control group, but we know that nationally 50 percent of high school teachers leave within five years. Of this group of 66 math teachers, only two have left. And over two-thirds have or are working on a master's degree. And in math, having a master's degree does correlate with better student outcomes."

Data-Based Professional Development

Providence Public Schools <http://www.providenceschools.org/pages/ProvidenceSchools> (PPS) had 82 new teachers this fall; the previous fall it had 106. Like other urban districts, Providence faces challenges retaining these first-year educators. Nkolika Onye, the district's executive director of performance management, said, "We want to make sure we are providing them with the tools and foundation they will need to make progress in their schools and give them the confidence they need to mature and stay with us."

In the last several years, the district has supported new teachers in part by helping them interpret data that can inspire them to reflect on their teaching, said Onye. The district uses the Teachscape <http://www.teachscape.com/> system, which offers software tools, online content and services designed to allow educators to assess their skills, collaborate and build their expertise.

Six years ago, PPS, which has approximately 2,000 teachers and 100 administrators, started with a Teachscape classroom walkthrough tool that gives principals the ability to take notes on what is happening in their schools during four-minute data-collection visits. Eventually PPS and Teachscape developed a customized tool set to manage the district's evaluation process from beginning to end.

Last year, PPS started a teacher induction program that includes a four-day summer seminar. "We include online video professional development that is available to us through Teachscape," Onye said. "We plan to spend a lot more time using Teachscape tools with the new teachers. Last year was the launch. This year we plan to integrate more technology. We focus on having data-rich

conversations with teachers," she added. "We have become proficient at conducting evaluations. We are looking closely at how all our teachers, particularly new teachers and challenged teachers, are faring in terms of results and receiving learning that meets their needs."

PPS is also working on incorporating video-annotation tools. It is piloting Teachscape's cameras in some elementary, middle and high schools. Teams made up of one administrator and a new or experienced teacher went through training last year and developed small projects that they will launch this year using the cameras.

Onye said the district uses the Reflect tool to manage the evaluation process, and the Learn tool for professional learning. Users can select the professional learning they would like to take, and their results are documented. The library of online professional learning is connected to the Common Core. Onye added that, based on their own evaluation results, teachers can select the PD that is most relevant to them.

"All the research shows that students need effective teachers long-term," Onye said. "We don't want people to come for two or three years and then leave because the work is so difficult that they are unable to cope. So we are looking for ways to support them. We want to see if induction is making an impact on teacher effectiveness and student achievement."

Extra Credit

Screening Teacher Candidates Online

Tech tools can help new teachers connect to mentors, colleagues and professional development materials, but they also can help districts find teachers most likely to succeed in the classroom. If you open up a third-grade teaching position in a large urban district, you might get 800 applications. If you require two years of experience and a master's degree, that may whittle the number down to 300. But how do you narrow it down further? Some districts are using online screening tests such as [TeacherMatch <http://www.teachermatch.org>](http://www.teachermatch.org) or Applitrack's [Teacher Fit <http://www.applitrack.com/frontlinek12/solutions.aspx>](http://www.applitrack.com/frontlinek12/solutions.aspx) or to help principals and superintendents prepare questions for prospective hires.

TeacherFit claims to measure adaptability, communication and persuasion, concern for student learning, cultural competence, fairness and respect, and planning and organization. A report by the [Sioux Falls School District <http://www.sf.k12.sd.us/>](http://www.sf.k12.sd.us/), which began using TeacherFit in 2012, found that the tool was an accurate indicator of teacher performance on 84 percent of new

hires, with an additional 7 percent of teachers performing better than predicted.

THE Journal asked Alison Coker, executive director of human resources in North Carolina's [Guilford County Schools <http://www.gcsnc.com/pages/gcsnc>](http://www.gcsnc.com/pages/gcsnc), how her school system uses TeacherFit to help hire 350 to 400 teachers per year.

THE Journal: What are some ways the TeacherFit tool aids with the hiring process?

Alison Coker: The TeacherFit tools provide us with more information about candidates than we have received previously. The online assessment poses questions that help determine applicants' potential competency in several areas that are important to us — cultural competence being one of those areas. While we do not use the assessment to disqualify applicants, we can use the information to help inform our face-to-face interviews and to guide professional development that may be offered once a teacher is hired. We are looking at ways we can extract the information from the online assessments to potentially use to help inform administrators' professional development as well.

THE Journal: Could you give an example of how the assessment helps generate interview questions?

Coker: Continuing to use cultural competence as an example, if an individual's rating indicates that she or he may not possess a strong understanding and awareness of cultural backgrounds and their influences on students or other staff members, we may ask additional interview questions to gain a better sense of the applicant's capacity in this area. Planning and Organization is another competency area assessed in TeacherFit. If an applicant scores low in this area, we can pose scenarios or ask about previous experiences that would give us a better idea of the applicant's ability to develop and implement long- and short-term planning.

THE Journal: Do you have any data to assess the impact of the tool, such as improvement in teacher retention rates?

Coker: Not yet. We just started using the tool in May 2014. We are hoping to collect data for a couple of years to determine if it is correlated closely with the performance of our hires.

About the Author

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