Collaborating with Colleagues to Improve Student Learning

This expert on the preparation of new teachers recommends a comprehensive induction plan that enables teachers to become life-long learners and leaders in their profession.

by Harry K. Wong, Saratoga, California

Collaborating with colleagues to improve student learning centers around three major questions:

1. How do we improve student learning?
2. How do we improve teacher learning?
3. How and why is collaborating with colleagues the best way for teachers to learn?

How Do We Improve Student Learning?

Let’s get away from discussing the fads, philosophies, and politics that pervade education and get right down to the nitty-gritty. Let’s pay respect to the dignity and importance of the teaching profession:

• More than 200 studies have shown that the only way to improve student achievement is with a knowledgeable and skillful teacher.
• Differences in teacher quality account for more than 90 percent of the variation in student achievement.
• The most effective teachers produce as much as six times the learning gains as the least effective teachers.

Students who have several effective teachers in a row make dramatic achievement gains, while those who have even two ineffective teachers in a row lose significant ground.

More specifically, the research states that as a teacher’s competence improves, lower-achieving students are the first to profit.

Therefore, it is the teacher, what the teacher knows and can do, that is the most significant factor in student achievement. Improve the teacher and you improve student learning—period!

Harry K. Wong, a former high school science teacher, is the author of the book The First Days of School, which has been adopted by many universities and school districts as a resource for preservice and new teachers. Related articles on new teacher induction are available online (www.newteacher.com).

All citations for the statements made in this article can be found in Harry Wong’s latest book New Teacher Induction: How To Train, Support, and Retain New Teachers, co-authored with Annette Breaux. Both of his books can be ordered online (www.EffectiveTeaching.com).
How Do We Improve Teacher Learning?

Even graduates of excellent teacher education programs acknowledge that much of what they know about teaching was learned on the job. Therefore, districts and schools must systematically provide teachers with sustained professional development. This begins with an organized, multiyear induction process. The primary purpose of induction is to train new teachers to become effective teachers—the kind who improve student achievement. A related goal of the induction process is acculturating new teachers to the importance of lifelong learning. In addition, well-inducted teachers better understand the responsibilities, missions, and philosophies of their districts and schools.

A successful induction program consists of several elements, beginning with an initial four or five days of training in classroom management and effective teaching techniques before school begins. It continues with systematic professional development over a period of two or three years. Throughout those years, the school administration must show strong support by providing a structure for modeling effective teaching. Inductees need to have the opportunity to visit demonstration classrooms. A supportive mentor is another important component of the induction process. Perhaps most important, the school must provide study groups in which new teachers can network and build support, commitment, and leadership within a learning community.

Successful Induction in New York

The Islip, New York, Public Schools implemented a three-year induction program for new teachers in 1999. They saw a concomitant improvement in student achievement, which they view as resulting from improved teacher performance (See box below.)

The Islip Public Schools’ induction program features collaborative study group activities, led by veteran teachers and district curriculum leaders. Study groups focus on skill-building strategies such as conducting parent conferences, managing the classroom, crafting lesson plans, and implementing cooperative discipline. The groups constantly work on team-building and problem-solving techniques. They use model lessons and hold sharing sessions in which teachers learn from each other and build respect for one another.

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<th>Results of Islip Public Schools Induction Program</th>
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<td><strong>Before Induction Program</strong></td>
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<td>• 40 percent Regents diploma rate</td>
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<td>• 80 students enrolled in Advanced Placement classes with 50 percent achieving 3 or higher</td>
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Successful Induction in Louisiana

In the Lafourche Parish, Louisiana, Schools, new teachers are trained to meet the challenges of the classroom and to comply with their state standards. The benefits are obvious: More than 99 percent of the new teachers who participated in the district’s induction program successfully completed the performance-based Louisiana Teacher Assistance and Assessment Program, required for teacher certification in the state.

The district’s newly structured curriculum is solid, detailed, and well organized; new teachers receive specific training in what and how to teach. The Lafourche induction program is so successful that the Louisiana Department of Education has adopted it as the model for the entire state. More information is available on the Internet (www.doe.state.la.us/DOE/OQE/certification/LaFirst_rl.pdf).

Mentoring Is Not Induction

Before we answer the third question, “How and why is collaborating with colleagues the best way for teachers to learn?” let’s deal with a misconception. Many educators believe that all a new teacher needs is a mentor. They try to portray mentoring as an effective stand-alone method for supporting and retaining teachers. In far too many instances, a mentor is simply a veteran teacher who has been haphazardly selected by the principal and assigned to a new teacher. Sharon Feiman-Nemser, in her ERIC Digest article, writes that after 20 years of experimenting with mentoring as a process for helping new teachers, few comprehensive studies validate its effectiveness.

Mentoring is not induction.

Induction is a collaborative process, one that organizes the expertise of educators within the shared values of a culture. In contrast, mentoring is a one-on-one process, concerned with supporting individual teachers. Induction is an organized, sustained, multiyear program. Mentoring may be used as a part of that program.

Mentors are important, but they must be carefully selected and highly trained, have a clear understanding of their purpose, and serve as contributing members of a comprehensive induction program. Any educator seeking to improve the retention of new teachers must understand that mentoring is only one component of a successful induction program.
How and Why Is Collaborating with Colleagues the Best Way for Teachers to Learn?

How do teachers best increase their knowledge and skills? According to a study of the American Institute for Research (AIR), reported by the American Educational Research Association (AERA, 2002), teachers learn more in collaborative teacher networks and study groups than with mentors or in traditional classes and workshops. The study showed that teacher learning is most effective when staff development includes six factors. (See box below.)

The project also found that much professional development currently lacks the six factors. Michael S. Garet, chief researcher at AIR, says, “Professional development largely has been a voluntary activity where teachers can pick and choose from a collection of offerings, but it needs to become a more significant part of schools’ and districts’ plans of what teachers do. If we are serious about using professional development as a mechanism to improve teaching, we need to invest in activities that have the characteristics that research shows foster improvement in teaching.”

Districts with sustained induction programs can serve as models. Several, including Islip, New York, and Lafourche Parish, Louisiana, are chronicled in the book, New Teacher Induction: How To Train, Support, and Retain New Teachers. Because of the success of these districts in producing effective teachers, we know the following:

• The era of isolated teaching is over. Good teaching thrives when teachers and school leaders work together in strong professional learning communities.
• Teachers thrive when they feel connected to their schools and colleagues. They want more than a job. They want to contribute to a group, to make a difference.
• The trademark of effective schools is a high-performance culture, in which all teachers take responsibility for the learning of all students.
• Teachers remain with a district when they feel supported by administrators and have strong bonds of connection to a professional learning community that has, at its heart, high-quality interpersonal relationships founded on trust and respect.
• Administrators, staff developers, and teacher leaders must have the knowledge and skills to direct a results-driven, collaborative culture that is part of every teacher’s work day.

A structured, sustained, multiyear induction program is a critical element in reducing the exceedingly high rate of teacher attrition we are facing today. We must work together to create a professional culture in which teachers thrive and grow throughout their careers. The result will be quality teaching and improved student learning in every classroom.

Six Factors for Successful Staff Development

The American Institute for Research (AIR) identified six factors that make professional development effective and improve instruction in math and science.

**Form:** Teachers learned more in teacher networks and study groups than with mentors or in traditional classes and workshops.

**Duration:** Sustained, intensive programs are better than shorter ones.

**Collective Participation:** Activities designed for teachers in the same school, grade, or subject are better than programs that target groups of teachers who do not work together.

**Content:** Programs that focus on how to teach and also what to teach—content knowledge—are key.

**Active Learning:** Teachers need to observe and be observed, to plan for classroom implementation, to review student work, and to be involved in cohort groups where they are actively writing, presenting, and leading.

**Coherence:** Teachers need to perceive professional development as a coherent part of other activities at their schools, such as meeting state standards or adoption of new textbooks.

These findings were reported in the winter 2002 issue of the *American Educational Research Journal*. The study was based on responses from a nationally representative sample of 1,027 public school math and science teachers in kindergarten through grade 12. The project was conducted at the American Institute for Research (AIR) with funds from the U.S. Department of Education’s Planning and Evaluation Service. It was carried out as part of the National Evaluation of the Eisenhower Professional Development Program.