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TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

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Building Bridges: Dual Mentorship Programs for CTE Teachers



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Building Bridges: Dual Mentorship Programs for CTE Teachers

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“Stay out of the copy room!”

“Avoid that teacher!”

“Don’t try to do anything over the top!”

These comments are all too familiar to most of us when we first start our careers in education. I heard countless pieces of similar advice similar when I started teaching. Why does this have to happen when an excited educator starts on a faculty? How can we keep our enthusiasm and momentum alive further into our careers? While the veterans sharing their experience may think they are being helpful, their negative spin perpetuates pessimistic views of education.

During our first year of teaching in New Jersey, teachers are required to have a mentor who serves to help them ease into their first teaching role, provide feedback, and increase their knowledge as they gain experience. As I met my mentor for our first meeting. I had few expectations or ideas about how we would spend our time together. I honestly expected it to be a therapy session! She provided a folder and notebook that I used to reflect, brainstorm, and remember key takeaways, along with a meeting schedule and journal prompts related to teaching. She turned into a lifelong mentor; someone whom I still seek out for advice. Since then, as I have moved on in my career and joined other organizations, I have found additional mentors along the way. The strong foundation mentors provide has provided constructive feedback loops that have made me a more reflective practitioner who sets higher expectations for myself.

Mentorship is an essential practice that helps shape educators at each stage of our careers. Effective mentoring establishes the kind of trusting relationships necessary for us reflect on our practice, seek collegial advice, and take risks in the classroom. Unfortunately, it is a common misconception that only new teachers require the support of mentors when they start their career. A collaborative work environment significantly improves a teacher’s mindset and outlook, which provides students with a stronger classroom experience. Not only does the continued partnership between a mentor and mentee have a strong impact on student learning, it increases a teacher’s self-worth and pride in their work. These two traits provide educators with the resilience needed to get us through difficult times and last us across the span of our careers.

“Choosing passionate, motivated, and trustworthy teachers is essential to sustaining a mentoring program. Look for teachers that find joy in coming to work every day, volunteering to help others, and pursuing their own growth.”



Dual Mentorship for CTE

My positive experience with my mentors encouraged me to explore more in Career Technical Education (CTE) teaching. CTE teachers often enter education with on-the-job skills from other industries and take alternative routes to teacher certification to begin their careers in the classroom. The lack of foundation in classroom management and instructional experience can be overwhelming and defeating for promising new CTE teachers. While they may be highly qualified in their trade, they may not come prepared with the specific strategies needed to impart their knowledge so that it is within the reach of students. Since they are tasked with teaching essential work theory and knowledge while engaging students in practical applications of the work, CTE teachers are entrusted to create rigorous work-based learning experiences, and the demand to constantly stay current with industry trends and practices can be exhausting.

Three mentorship benefits that can support CTE teachers, and teachers in general at any stage of their career are:

1. Combining specialized professional learning with real-world experience

CTE mentors provide teachers with understandings and strategies that help transform their teaching. Since CTE teachers serve specific pathways like welding, healthcare and computer science, a mentor helps bridge the gap between teaching theory and actual practice. CTE teachers often require specific training above and beyond that of traditional classroom teachers, plus mentors provide opportunities for real world learning to help keep up with industry trends. That having been said, CTE teachers may need to look beyond their school building to find a good mentor match, seeking out schools with similar programs and contacting teachers can be helpful. In the same way, joining trade organizations outside of the school district can provide additional ways to connect with likeminded practitioners.

It can be beneficial for a CTE teacher to have both education and industry mentors, providing opportunities to observe strong teaching practices, experience new industry innovations, and create authentic learning opportunities for students. These kinds of mentoring relationships convert into more robust networking leads, more sustained growth for educators, more meaningful learning opportunities for students, and increased self-fulfillment and satisfaction for the educators involved.

For example, a welding teacher makes use of his professional development time to shadow his mentor working in a welding shop, learning current industry standards, trying out new techniques, and building partnerships where students can potentially intern. Likewise, the welding teacher also has a teacher mentor who help him learn instructional strategies to reach students and help them learn necessary welding theories, techniques and safety practices.

Mentoring helps us take charge of our professional learning. Recently, my administration announced at a staff meeting teachers could pursue an externship and visit a mentor during our upcoming professional development days. I chose to visit a university and meet with education professors to collaborate on curriculum changes I want to make to my high school CTE program. I was able to gain insights on curriculum changes and current trends in education, and I acquired knowledge on how I could better prepare my students for field experiences and university level coursework.



2. Building a strong teacher pipeline

Mentors are often the first, best impression a teacher has about a school and its support community in an era when we are watching many teachers leave the profession. Mentors help to recruit and retain strong teachers, instilling confidence, self-reflection, motivation and success that helps them commit to the profession long term. Growing and developing as a professional keeps teachers in the classroom, even when the mundane and difficult days can seem like a never ending cycle for a teacher going it alone.

A mentor can provide emotional support, helping teachers cope with the stresses of the job, reducing the risk of cumulative burnout. Serving as positive role models, mentors not only demonstrate effective teaching practices, they inspire us to strive for excellence.

The mentorship cycle perpetuates itself as new teachers join schools and the mentee eventually becomes the veteran mentor. Through these strong mentoring relationships, we build a pipeline of educators with increased self-worth who want to give back to new teachers when the time comes. The sense of empowerment builds a sense of purpose and supports ongoing sustained learning as members of a proud profession. When our design teacher first started, he was eager to learn everything and improve his practice. He listened to others, tried new strategies and attended professional development. After several years of working with his own mentor, the design teacher had the opportunity to mentor his first CTE teacher. Using his experience and wisdom, the design teacher was able to pass his knowledge on and continue forward the cycle of mentorship.

In the same way, I have had the opportunity to serve as a mentor for preservice teachers, taking the same steps my first mentor did with me. I provided a dedicated schedule, a folder with journal prompts, and a notebook for them to write down their reflections. I also met with student teachers monthly to help shape the initial stages of their careers, provide support and encourage self-reflection.



3. Promoting growth for all

Mentorship provides opportunities for everyone to grow. The mentor and mentee both benefit, and students benefit from their educator engaging in constant feedback, reflection, and personalized professional development.

The best epiphanies often happen when two passionate educators are discussing the work, and the results often directly transfer to students. This cycle furthers when students enter the workforce with their learned skills. Preparing students who are career ready with both hard and soft skills acquired from their teachers benefits everyone involved. This was demonstrated when a Law & Public Safety teacher was mentoring the new Computer Science teacher. In one of their scheduled meetings, the topic of cybersecurity came up. The teachers organically planned a collaboration for the computer science students to teach the law students different hacks, but as a result of the collaboration, students also created computer safety awareness posters.

Of course, there can be challenges to mentorship. Unaligned schedules, lack of training and personality conflicts may hinder the experience. Clear expectations and norms, ongoing training and support for both mentors and mentees, and ongoing open communication can all help mitigate potential issues proactively, fostering a positive and supportive mentorship environment. It is also critical that school administrators provide clear guidelines and training for mentors. Creating a calendar for the year with specific times and protocols leads to less confusion and stronger partnerships. Finally choosing passionate, motivated, and trustworthy teachers is essential to sustaining a mentoring program. Look for teachers that find joy in coming to work every day, volunteering to help others, and pursuing their own growth. Also, encouraging teachers to pursue externships, take time to observe other classrooms, and shadow industry professionals are additional dimensions of successful mentoring programs.

Conclusion

The powers of positivity and relationship go a long way in starting a mentorship. In order to make any mentor relationship work, clear expectations and guidelines should be in place. Clear and consistent schedules that allow for self-reflection, discussion, and feedback are strong foundations for mentor relationships. Schools can support their mentoring program by providing training for mentors to learn meaningful protocols and strategies.

I urge all schools to make a formal mentorship program for teachers, including externship opportunities for staff members, observing peers, and leadership opportunities. Mentors can connect teachers with a network of experienced educators, opening doors to new opportunities and collaborations. By boosting teachers' confidence and self-esteem, mentors can help them feel more empowered in their roles. Modeling mentoring relationships promotes the same benefits for students, fostering a culture of collaboration, support, and continuous learning within the classroom and beyond.



Samantha Shane is an innovative high school career and technical education (CTE) instructor, shaping relevant and engaging experiences that empower students to take charge of their learning. Her goal is to ensure that each lesson equips students with meaningful, real-world learning that prepares them for their chosen career paths, bridging the gap between theory and practice. [in](#) [X](#) [✉](#)

Legacy is the official journal of The Worthy Educator, elevating the good work being done by leaders in education who are working to change the narrative on the profession and actively plan for impact that transforms its future to serve the needs of a diverse, decentralized, global society that is inclusive, equitable and open to all people as next generations adapt, evolve and contribute by solving problems and creating solutions that meet the needs of a world we have yet to envision.

Submissions are accepted on a rolling basis from educators who are implementing new and innovative approaches in the classroom and at the building and district levels. Information on specifications and instructions to submit can be found online at theworthyeducator.com/journal.

