



Learning from Philadelphia's School Reform

Philadelphia's First Year Middle Grades Teachers: Perspectives on Supports and Experiences, 2003-04

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Introduction

The School District of Philadelphia implemented several ambitious new initiatives in 2003-04 aimed at inducting and retaining new teachers. These efforts supplemented the existing in-school mentoring program and included the assignment of a New Teacher Coach to each new teacher, a summer orientation program, and a year-long after-school induction program.

As part of a multi-pronged research effort to assess the effectiveness of these initiatives, this report examines the new initiatives designed specifically for new teachers and documents middle grades teachers' dominant impressions of the first year of teaching in the district. This research is based on interviews with 20 new middle grades teachers in 16 middle and K-8 schools¹ who entered teaching through different routes.

The study was organized by Research for Action (RFA), a non-profit research and evaluation organization, and was carried out by a research team of five investigators affiliated with RFA. The interview data supplement quantitative data gathered from surveys of new teachers during 2003-04 by RFA and by district evaluators, focus groups with New Teacher Coaches, and a district-wide data set of teacher characteristics and teacher retention rates. We chose to focus on first year teachers in the middle grades, because those grades have traditionally had the fewest willing recruits and the highest rates of teacher attrition.

Data and Methods

The sample of new teachers we interviewed was drawn from respondents to the New Teacher Survey conducted by Research for Action in Spring, 2004 who agreed to be contacted again and provided their e-mail addresses. We identified a pool of 40 individuals who met our criteria and completed interviews with 50% of them.² The interviews, conducted by telephone, lasted between 30-60 minutes.

The sample included teachers from schools managed by a) the district itself; b) the district's Office of Restructured Schools (ORS); and c) external managers—Edison Schools, Inc., Victory Schools, Universal Companies, and Temple University. The new teachers included six Fully certified teachers, eight Intern-certified teachers (seven of whom were in Teach for America), five Emergency-certified teachers, and one certified graduate of the district's Literacy Intern Program.

¹Two of those interviewed were teaching 9th grade in a middle school that had just added that grade. Another interviewee was teaching 9th grade in a magnet high school.

²Some of the non-respondents' e-mail addresses bounced back; others never replied to repeated e-mail requests; and some made appointments for telephone interviews but broke them.

The new middle grades teachers we interviewed had the following classroom assignments:

Special Education – all varieties and grade levels	7
Middle School Math, Math/Science/9 th grade Math	4
English Language Learners (ELL), Bilingual, English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)	3
9 th grade English – in a transitional Middle School	2
5 th grade – self-contained	2
8 th grade Math and Social Studies	1
Writing – K-8	1

Findings

High 1st Year Retention Rates for New Middle Grades Teachers

Retention rates in this group of middle grades teachers are impressive, given the historically high rates of new teacher attrition in middle grades schools in the city. Seventeen of 20 new middle grades teachers were planning to return in Fall, 2004. Two were uncertain, and one was leaving the district to teach in a small alternative public secondary school in New York City.

Kudos for Many New Teacher Coaches

Of the teachers that we interviewed, half reported that their New Teacher Coach was *very* helpful. A quarter of them had mixed positive and negative opinions about their Coach's helpfulness, and the rest felt that their Coach was either minimally helpful or unhelpful. The interactions that new teachers most frequently had with their Coaches were observation and feedback and one-on-one meetings. Approximately one third of the teachers also had the opportunity to watch their coach model lessons and/or to communicate with their coach via phone or e-mail.

New teachers felt that their New Teacher Coach was helpful for varying reasons. Almost half of the teachers said that they appreciated the continuing encouragement and emotional support of their New Teacher Coach. New teachers also frequently mentioned advice and strategies regarding classroom management; help with obtaining curricular and test prep materials, text, and additional resources; and advice about relationships with their principal. A few teachers received help with lesson planning, and some also learned of certification programs and professional development opportunities through their New Teacher Coach.

She was a godsend. She was there the day I started. I came in to start the job one week after school started, and I was nervous as an Emergency Certified teacher. I had only had a few education classes. I felt like I was walking in cold, but I got instant support. ... She helped me set up my room and gave suggestions. She really was a mentor. She came by once per week, and we talked on the phone and e-mailed. She gave me words of encouragement and was amazingly supportive. She also modeled lessons and observed in my room and helped where she saw fit. She would ask, 'Can I try this?' and then she would have me jump in when I felt comfortable. ... She was a big help because she is familiar with Special Ed. (Middle School Special Education teacher, Emergency certified)

My New Teacher Coach saved my life, saved my sanity. She has shown up at the most appropriate times and is the most consistent. She has been a rock for me, helped me with everything. ... She cut out bulletin boards and ran interference with the principal. She was everything I needed. She covered classes when I needed to cry. ... My New Teacher Coach mostly supported, rather than showed me. She was a friend, as well as a coach. (5th grade bilingual teacher, Fully certified in Elementary Education)

Teachers noted the following reservations about their New Teacher Coach. Some felt that their coach was critical or condescending, while a few others felt that the feedback they received was not helpful. In a few cases, coaches who modeled lessons were characterized as interrupting the class. A few teachers requested specific help from their Coach but never received it.

We talked a bit after she observed my classes as we walked in the halls but it was not about my problems. She wasn't really helpful at all. She talked about herself a lot and interrupted my teaching and didn't interact with the children. (7th grade Math/Science teacher, Fully certified in Elementary Education)

At first, she was in weekly to hang out in the classroom and offer suggestions. But that didn't last long and then I only saw her at New Teacher Academy sessions. That was okay because there were so many interruptions ... and it was okay to have one less interruption. It would have been nice towards the end to have seen her more. (Middle School Special Education teacher, Intern certified/TFA)

More than 75 percent of the teachers met with their New Teacher Coach regularly (once every week or two), though in several cases the New Teacher Coach visits and meeting times grew less frequent after the first half of the year. About one quarter of the new teachers said they met only intermittently with their New Teacher Coach throughout the year and the support they received was inconsistent. Several of the new teachers who liked their Coach wished they could have received more frequent support.

I saw her once a week before the winter break and since then I have seen her only once. ... She was definitely helpful. Sometimes she came in just at the right time and saved me from walking out. It was a supportive feeling. (9th grade English teacher in a transitional Middle School, Intern certified/ TFA)

I saw her every two weeks. She rarely stayed in the classroom and observed. ... Other new teachers at school got more attention, because they had a harder time with classroom management. (7th grade Special Education teacher, Intern certified/TFA)

In-School Supports: Colleague Mentors and Informal Supports

Colleague Teacher Mentors: Assistance, but Uneven Availability and Match

Of the 20 teachers we interviewed, slightly less than two thirds were assigned an official Colleague Mentor Teacher. Nearly all of the new teachers whose Colleague Mentor shared the same subject and/or grade level felt that their mentor was helpful. The most common support mentioned by teachers was emotional support and encouragement. In addition, mentors were available to answer questions; observe new teachers; provide feedback; and assist with classroom management and lesson planning. Interaction with mentors was usually on a more informal basis than with New Teacher Coaches.

I met with my mentor whenever I needed to. She still stops in on her preps. I have to have individual conferences for my kids and she sat in on a lot of parent conferences. She helped out with all of my Special Ed questions and with IEPs. When I had problems with kids, she would come by. (6th and 7th grade Special Education teacher, Emergency certified)

She was an inclusion teacher with a smaller class than I had. She was awesome in that she never criticized. She was a sounding board and shared some of her crazy experiences. It was like a friendship and I needed that very much. We did not meet many times. We were not paired up until December. (Middle School Special Education teacher, Intern certified/TFA)

Teachers who did not feel their mentors were especially helpful often noted the mismatch between their classroom assignment and their mentor's. Some also found their mentor's personality problematic or worried that their mentor might be sharing information about them with the principal.

Someone was officially assigned to me, but I saw her very little. I barely talked to her once a month. We would see each other in passing on the fly twice a week. (7th and 8th grade Special Education teacher, Intern certified/TFA)

My mentor was in art. I'm not sure why they put us together. I got her in November. We had maybe like three meetings. ... We talked about issues that she thought were important: classroom management, lesson planning. I didn't ask her about issues. I didn't find her personality that appealing and she was an art teacher. (K-8th grade ESOL teacher, Fully certified in Social Studies)

Considerable variation existed in the time of year when the mentors were officially assigned. Some were assigned at the beginning of the school year, while others were assigned in the winter or spring. In many instances, the individual who was eventually assigned as an official mentor was already acting as an informal mentor to the new teacher, offering support, information, and advice.

I was appointed a mentor in May. She was really wonderful. ... Actually the same lady they appointed as my mentor was right next door and she was very helpful all year to me and to another 5th grade teacher who was new. She gave me ideas about lesson plans, what she had done in the past, suggestions about disruptive students. (5th grade teacher, Emergency certified)

She was assigned in April this year. She has been great. She taught in my hall and offered to help out. She had informally been helping me all year. We talked between periods. (5th grade teacher, Intern certified/TFA)

Some of the teachers who did not receive a Colleague Mentor indicated that too few mentors volunteered in their school, especially in schools that had a large number of new teachers that year. Some teachers who did not receive a mentor were disappointed that they did not receive this support, even after they had requested one.

I was told that there were not enough mentors. We had about one third of our staff new this year. So, they did not have enough people volunteer to do it. (Middle School Special Education teacher, Emergency certified)

I mentioned that I did not have a mentor to the principal. She said that no one was really qualified with enough years of experience, and that the qualified teachers are already lead teachers. Fifty percent were new teachers or new to the school. (7th grade Special Education teacher, Intern certified/TFA)

Informal Supports: Key for Many New Middle Grade Teachers

While slightly more than one third of the new teachers did not have official Colleague Mentors, the culture of more experienced teachers helping new teachers appeared to be a frequent phenomenon. Most of the new middle grades teachers sought out, or were befriended by, one or more experienced teachers in their school, usually early in the year. The teachers who mentored them informally typically had a classroom close to their own and/or were teaching the same grade level or subject that they taught.

I have had support from bilingual grade teachers, who helped me implement an ESOL program. There are bilingual teachers in each grade, except 7th and 8th. I found that bilingual teachers appreciated the work I did. They realized that I wanted to help kids keep their Spanish, even though I was ESOL. They helped me keep my sanity. (K-8th grade ESOL teacher, Fully certified in Social Studies)

In some cases, where the teachers did not have established grade groups in their school, middle grades teachers in a certain grade or subject found ways to connect either during common prep periods or after school.

Unofficially, I had support from the other 5th grade teachers in the school. There are four teachers in 5th grade, one for 15 years, who is our unofficial grade group leader. We did lesson plans together. ... They helped me with grading. It would have been helpful to have regular grade group meetings, but we always met after school on our own time. (5th grade bilingual teacher, Fully certified in Elementary Education)

District Summer Orientation: One Size Does Not Fit All

Slightly more than half of the new middle grades teachers attended the summer orientation sessions offered by the School District of Philadelphia. Six of those who did not attend the summer training were hired too late to attend the sessions or were hired after school began. Half of those teachers who attended the training found it to be either helpful or very helpful while the other half found it to be minimally helpful.

Summer training was actually more helpful than my certification program because they dealt with things you'd see in the classroom and how to approach different problems. (K-8 Writing teacher, Fully certified graduate of the Literacy Intern Program)

I liked the approach they used. They did a lot of activities that showed you how students learn. (6th grade Math/Science teacher, Fully certified in Elementary Education)

Those teachers who were critical of the district's summer training gave the following reasons: the information was repetitive of they had learned in their undergraduate or TFA summer programs; the content was not relevant to the subject they would be teaching; and topics were not covered in as much depth as in their certification programs or Teach For America summer training.

The summer training in the core curriculum is not relevant for ESOL. There was educational theory we had covered in college courses. It was kind of useful, but I had learned most already. It would be more useful if it focused on district policies. A lot of teachers had questions about curriculum policies and procedures. (Middle School ESOL teacher, Fully certified in Social Studies)

TFA was much more comprehensive and harder than the School District training. There was much more theory, content, reality, and pedagogy. The School District did not do as much but did touch the bases. ... I think they needed to give us more info on paperwork for Special Ed teachers ... about the way the paperwork is done for Special Ed in the district. (Middle School Special Education teacher, Intern certified/TFA)

New Teacher Academy/Induction: A Lukewarm Appraisal of Sessions but High Praise for Mini-Grant Project

All of the new teachers in this sample but one attended the District's new teacher induction program held throughout the school year. They reported attending at least 15 of the 18 two-hour sessions, and some teachers attended all of them. Two thirds of the new middle grades teachers were disappointed with the bi-weekly two-hour sessions, while the remainder characterized them as helpful or gave mixed evaluations. In contrast, the mini-grant proposal/project they did with their students was described enthusiastically by almost all of the teachers. The portfolio project received mixed reviews.

Sessions

The majority of teachers reported that the bi-weekly sessions were not worthwhile for the following reasons: the topics were redundant with what they had learned in their certification or TFA summer coursework; the sessions were disorganized; and the topics, for the most part, were not directly relevant to their immediate needs in the classroom.

For what was given [at induction sessions], we could have wrapped it up in a few meetings. There was not enough good stuff. It is about the academy itself and how it was set up. I can't begin to describe it. You feel that as a new teacher, even if things are going well, that you are barely above water. (Middle School Special Education teacher, Emergency certified)

No help at all. ... We met every other Thursday, but our facilitators were not organized. They didn't seem to be teaching us anything. They gave us stuff to color on St. Patrick's Day! All the things we learned in the New Teacher Academy we had done in my undergraduate Education courses, like multiple intelligences and portfolios. (K-8th grade ESOL teacher, Fully certified in Social Studies)

Many teachers felt that the time spent on induction sessions was excessive, especially new teachers who were simultaneously taking course work after school that was required for certification. In this sample of 20 teachers, almost two thirds were simultaneously teaching and taking courses to become certified or to add a certification field in the subject they were currently teaching. All of these teachers had to take one or more courses a semester and attend the New Teacher Academy in addition to learning to teach on the job.

[Combining full-time teaching and course and New Teacher Academy requirements] makes for long weeks. I am at school from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the earliest, but some nights I am there until 7:30. I have classes twice a week for three hours, New Teacher Academy for two hours every other week. I have bi-monthly two-hour TFA meetings, IEP meetings, writing lessons plans, grading, and calling parents. On average, it is 10-11 hours a day, but sometimes longer. (Middle School Special Education teacher, Intern certified/TFA)

I am in classes as well so to have that load and then every two weeks to have an additional two-hour class where we have work to do for it. Well, it is too overwhelming. (Middle School Special Education teacher, Emergency certified)

Those teachers who liked aspects of the New Teacher Academy mainly noted the opportunity to interact with other teachers and to have informal discussions about how things were going in their classes. A couple said topics new to them were valuable.

The most helpful thing was the chance to interact with other new teachers. Half of the sessions were helpful and half were not. One session was on Howard Gardner and I already knew that from college. I appreciate more now the chance to reflect and see now the value of reflection that was stressed in the New Teacher Academy. (Middle School Special Education teacher, Intern certified/TFA)

I attended 15 sessions. I think they were helpful. Definitely gave us ideas—learned something new each time we went. Multiple intelligences—I had never heard about it. ... I enjoyed the induction sessions. My friends who are not teaching in Philadelphia said they didn't have this. (7th grade Math/Science teacher, Fully certified in Elementary Education)

Mini-Grant Project

Most of the new teachers energetically and enthusiastically discussed the mini-grant projects they did with their students. They expressed excitement about being able to purchase materials (e.g. a video camera, grade-level appropriate children's literature, graphing calculators or class sets of disposable cameras) for use with their students. They described designing inquiry-oriented or enrichment lessons or projects that were qualitatively different from the regular curricula in their school. Most reported that their students responded unusually positively to these projects. The only criticism some reported was that the \$250 grant did not arrive in time and the projects were rushed as a result.

One of the best parts of New Teacher Academy was the project. Kids got disposable cameras and did photos of 4 themes ('all about me,' 'home,' 'community,' and 'future.') They took six pictures of each theme and put them in a book. For each of 4 themes, they did a writing assignment—a poem about the future, a letter to the President about a community issue, a family interview and a narrative about their life. They typed everything up. It was great to have this project after testing. The kids were really involved. (Middle School ESOL teacher, Fully certified in Social Studies) [At this school every teacher did a variation of this project alone or in pairs.]

For my grant proposal I worked with E., a teacher I met in induction. My kids didn't really know a lot about the neighborhood. Some kids were bussed in, but some walk. I thought it was amazing that kids didn't know where they are. E. found the same thing with her kids. So, we made up something that we called 'You and me and the great big world.' We did a pen pal project. We incorporated Social Studies activities. We mapped out the school. We wrote letters back and forth and audio-taped the kids. We chose four trade books and read them. Each class wrote their opinions and questions and sent them to the other class. Then we had a culminating event at the aquarium. ... We worked on this for 16 weeks. Of course, we only got the money after it was already done. (Special Education teacher in a K-8 school, Emergency certified)

Portfolio

The New Teacher Academy portfolio included “topics of significance,” personal professional development goals, a child study and reflections on their classroom. The portfolio was required to be presented at the end of the year. While most new teachers only talked briefly about the portfolio assignment, about half discussed the assignment in mainly positive terms, describing it as an opportunity to reflect on what they had done during the year. The other half characterized the portfolio as unhelpful and time consuming. Several indicated that they did not take the portfolio seriously and devoted minimal time to it.

The portfolio, to be honest, was not all it was cracked up to be. I was pleased how mine turned out, however. I did mine in detail and found some interesting things. I am happy that I did it in the end. I was stressing over it, because they said that if you didn't do it you couldn't pass induction. So, I really worked on mine, but some teachers just put together 3-5 pages. (5th grade teacher, Emergency certified)

In contrast,

I felt it was not a good use of my time. It was just one more obligation. An established teacher might have benefited from it. It was just too much. (Middle School Special Education teacher, Intern certified/TFA)

Challenges of the First Year

The specific challenges new middle grades teachers described came from responses to a specific question about what they found most problematic during their first year as well as from answers to questions about other topics in the interview. The most frequent challenges are discussed below.

Frequent Out-of-Subject or Grade Level Placements

Almost half of the new teachers felt unprepared for the *subject matter* they were teaching, despite having passed middle-level Praxis tests in one or more content areas. For example, two teachers who had undergraduate majors in math and business were teaching English. Only one of the Special Education teachers had a degree in Special Education. All the other Special Ed teachers were learning on the job and taking certification courses simultaneously. Two teachers with Social Studies certification were teaching ESOL, for which they had no preparation.

Many new middle grades teachers were also concerned about their placement in a middle grades classroom. Almost one third reported they were “unprepared” for the *grade level* they were teaching, and another half indicated they were only “somewhat prepared” for the middle grades. This sentiment was common among elementary-certified teachers who were assigned to teach the middle grades. For example, three teachers who had done their student teaching in primary grades in Philadelphia were teaching in grades 6, 7, or 8. Several TFA teachers who did summer teaching in elementary grades knew they would be placed in Special Education classes in Philadelphia. TFA told them during the summer, however, that they would be teaching elementary Special Education, but they ended up in middle school Special Education classes.

The first weeks were difficult because I had no experience in either English or secondary school teaching. We all taught summer school in Los Angeles, but that was a lot easier, especially the classroom management part. Here it is a lot more difficult. So it was tough. I had to get used to a new English curriculum. (9th grade English teacher in a transitional Middle School, Intern certified/ TFA)

I wasn't prepared at all. I had been expecting an elementary Special Ed class. In LA I taught regular 4th grade and I had been told my placement would be elementary Special Ed. ... I didn't have any experience. I sort of grappled with that for a while. It was an awful situation, but I always wondered, “Am I better than nothing?” ... It is quite ironic. I passed all the Praxis tests even though I never had any Special Education courses. I thought it was ridiculous that I passed. I took the Special Ed core content test. I studied for it. I went to the bookstore and got a Special Ed text. TFA encouraged us to do this. (7th grade Special Education teacher, Intern certified/TFA)

Lack of Prior Teaching Experience in Comparable Urban Schools

Many new teachers felt unprepared for the problematic climate in the Philadelphia school in which they were placed. While just over half of the new teachers reported they had some prior teaching in urban settings (either as a student teacher or in TFA summer school) they nevertheless did not feel completely ready for teaching in the Philadelphia school in which they were placed. Almost all TFA teachers reported that their summer teaching experience in Los Angeles did not fully prepare them for the kinds of issues, especially classroom management and school climate, they faced in their particular Philadelphia schools. New teachers who had student taught or were Literacy Interns in Philadelphia said they had all experienced much less disruptive schools, with greater student diversity, than those in which they were now teaching.

I was in culture shock. To me, it was completely unfamiliar. The summer experience we had in Los Angeles was not comparable. I am struggling with classroom management and behavior. Setting the tone was hard. ... The training in LA did not prepare me for my school, which is a much tougher environment.” (9th grade English teacher, Intern certified/TFA)

My certification program was pretty helpful on the whole. I wasn't familiar with an urban setting, though. I wish I would have had urban information so I would know about things like classroom management. I wish I had been middle school trained. (7th grade Math/Science teacher, Fully certified in Elementary Education)

Problems with Classroom Management and Overall School Climate

Classroom management and dealing with students who were described as disruptive, emotionally disturbed, and even violent in some cases was the area most frequently mentioned as challenging. Issues of individual classroom management were often exacerbated by the overall level of disruption in the school. Several schools with middle grades were described as being highly disorganized and raucous, with students running and yelling in the hallways and cafeterias out of control. In some schools, teachers complained that their school did not have consistent procedures for dealing with disruptive students and that their principals did not respond to requests for help with individual students. Disruptive students were often sent back to the classroom with no consequences, a process that frustrated many new teachers.

School climate and classroom management were the most challenging. The school is very violent and there are very inconsistent policies in the school. Outside of the classroom there is no consistency in discipline and administrative approaches to students and policies would change from day to day. A lot of fire alarms—on a daily basis. (5th grade teacher, Intern certified/TFA)

The climate is very negative and teachers are frustrated. The support systems are not there. There is no back up plan and I didn't have that next level of support. Kids would say, 'Go ahead, send me to the principal.' They knew that nothing would happen to them. Literally nothing got done. (Middle School Special Education teacher, Emergency certified)

A couple of new teachers reported that classroom management was not an issue for them, despite the chaotic climate in their school.

The overall climate didn't affect my classroom. I told the students that 'this is our [my] house and the rest of the school is the world.' Even though crazy things happened in the school they didn't affect my class. 5th graders were on the 4th floor and that is where the cafeteria is and until lunch was over kids were banging on doors and screaming. If a fight broke out, most children in the school would rush to see what happened. But in my class a student got up and closed the door and we went on with the lesson. (5th grade teacher, Emergency certified)

Inadequate Supplies of Texts and Curricular Materials

Almost half of the teachers reported challenges regarding their ability to effectively instruct their students. They said that they lacked some, or any, curricular materials, mostly at the beginning of the year, and/or they felt the curriculum materials they were supposed to use, or adapt, were inappropriate for the academic level or type of students they were teaching.

The first weeks were definitely rough, thrown into the classroom, with no materials, no guidance, nothing. I had to learn everything on my own, and did not have any grounding in middle school. It was a shocker. It took a few weeks to get materials. There was a shortage of materials in our school. Other people had taken the supplies. Right now I am teaching Math in Context and there is a lack of supplies or manipulatives. (7th grade Math teacher, Elementary certified)

What was frustrating was that the administration wanted 7th grade textbooks adapted to the students' levels. Just trying to find materials was frustrating. Administrators said they ordered materials, but they didn't know where they were—five different times putting in orders and never saw any results. It was extremely unprofessional. (7th grade Special Education Math and History teacher, Intern certified/TFA)

Several of the teachers without curricular materials described creating their own—going to the public library, searching on the Internet and borrowing resources from other teachers or from Content Leaders or New Teacher Coaches.

We didn't receive texts at the beginning of the year. Because I had family [teachers in the district], I went begging and crying for information. I found some literature texts that [the provider] was going to throw out and rescued them from the trash. ... I also had a partial set of math materials. I got them in November. ... I didn't get the full materials. It didn't seem to bother anyone—not the provider or the principal. I started teaching and was really gung ho...but had no materials. So, as a teacher, you do what you have to do. I went to the Free Library and Book Bank. (5th grade teacher, Emergency certified)

I felt like I was ready for 1st grade, [as a former Literacy Intern] but because of my training they stuck me in K-8 Writing. The principal said she wanted me to follow the core curriculum – that means K-8 curriculum – and I thought that was unreasonable. She gave me a writing textbook. I tried it and the kids were turned off. ... I ended up doing my own thing. She didn't say if she approved or not, but it worked. It was easier to do it that way than to try to follow everybody's curriculum. I teach all 450 kids in the school! (K-8 Writing teacher, Fully certified graduate of Literacy Intern Program)

Other challenges, each mentioned by more than one-fifth of the new teachers, were: the amount and complexity of required paper work and insufficient training to complete it; lack of communication about school policies and routines such as grading; lack of time to meet with colleagues to plan and/or reflect; pressures related to testing; range of ability levels in classes; lack of content knowledge; and the “coverage” system in their school.

Daunting Challenges for Teachers of Special Education and English Language Learners (ELL)

The special challenges reported by Special Education and English Language Learner (ELL) teachers in middle grades schools were especially daunting. Almost all of the teachers in these groups were teaching out of field and most Special Education teachers were either Intern- or Emergency-certified teachers

A significant majority of Special Education teachers said they had no curriculum materials when school began, and in some cases no materials until much later in the year. In addition, the district's core curricular materials in literacy and math or those of the provider were not at the instructional level of their students. Moreover, these teachers got little or no guidance on how to adapt them. In many cases the district or provider seemed to overlook the curricular needs of students outside of regular classes. In several instances Special Education teachers with no background in the subject were largely on their own but managed to find or develop materials that worked for their students.

With [the provider's] literacy framework, I felt improperly trained. I was not knowledgeable enough. What I did know did not suit the needs of my students. Almost every other Professional Development the staff was asked about concerns that we might have. I raised my hand and asked, 'How does it work with special needs kids?' Every other Friday we met with other teachers at the same grade level from the [provider] schools. So we'd go to different places. ... There was no Special Ed group to go with, so I was

told to attach myself to a group that was near the same level of the kids I worked with. That didn't make sense because I was working with so many different levels. (3-6th grade self-contained Special Education teacher, Emergency certified)

In the beginning of the year I didn't get information about the curriculum. When the new curriculum came, IEPs didn't seem to matter. People from the District came and wanted to see the new curriculum being taught. It is doable but with 1st grade reading level it gets hard. You have to find materials that match the curriculum, but at their level. People help you find materials, if they can, but a lot of stuff, I had to buy. For example I had to buy 2nd grade level books. (6th and 7th grade Special Education teacher, Emergency certified)

The bilingual and ESOL teachers also had problems obtaining materials, especially at the level that was appropriate for the students they were teaching. Again, they found ways to cope.

I went to the Reading Specialist at our school for books, when I didn't have materials. In the beginning, even the regular teachers weren't getting any materials. She got me books from another school. I had three levels of materials in March [Beginning, Intermediate and Advanced]. Also in March the V.P. said he found some ESOL materials on the 5th floor...in a closet with lots of old books. ... There is no actual ESOL curriculum for middle school. Regular materials with ESOL support for Intermediate and Advanced levels might have worked, but I didn't know how to make accommodations and adaptations. (Middle School ESOL teacher, Fully certified in Social Studies) [This new teacher took initiative to get supplies and learn about teaching ESOL.]

My ESOL coach gave me samples of a book from Heinle. She also told me about an ESOL conference where I also got samples of materials from Heinle. Ultimately I pieced together a class set. ... I volunteered to be on the Language Policy Review Team. We have ESOL professional development meetings once every other month [where they are deciding on text series to use in ESOL next year]. ... Philadelphia just wrote a new language policy, implementation plan and handbook. Something is happening, but it would have been useful for me at the beginning of the year. (Middle School ESOL teacher, Fully certified in Social Studies)

The extra documentation and testing demanded by law for Special Education and ELL teachers was also stressful for many of these teachers. Several reported that they had not been adequately trained how to write IEPs and that it took a considerable time to learn how to do them. One new middle school ESOL teacher single handedly tested approximately 250 students twice during the year to comply with government guidelines.

Over the course of the year the most overwhelming part was learning how to do the paperwork for Special Ed. We were never taught that in one fell swoop. It was piecemeal. I just learned how to do an Evaluation Report, which is done every 2-3 years for each Special Ed student. I am now reevaluating a lot of students to see if they are eligible for Special Ed, and it is a lot of work. (Middle School Special Education teacher, Intern certified/TFA)

People recognized that I was only a first year teacher, but I had to coordinate a program. I could have done better later on, but your first year on the job, you don't want to be coordinating anything. ... I had to give all the ELL kids the required tests, to place them, theoretically. In the end, it became an exercise in looking good. It served the cause because kids were getting tested, [but results were never used to place pupils]. ... The last few weeks have been all about testing. It is eating up any time I have for teaching. (K-8th grade ESOL teacher, Fully certified in Social Studies)

The schedules of several Special Education and ESOL teachers changed frequently during the year, as new students were identified and new staff was hired. Some also appeared to be used more frequently than classroom teachers for "coverages," and in some instances their regular classes were cancelled.

My classroom assignment changed three times—6th, 7th, and now 7-8th Special Ed. It was pretty rough. The first change I had less than a day's notice around October. The second changed happened in March, but I knew it was coming. The first class was math and science, then self-contained, then math and social studies. (Middle School Special Education teacher, Intern certified/TFA)

I had a different schedule until October. ... I worked with K in the beginning but that was changed because they wanted me to do SFA reading. ... My schedule is still up in the air. It gets changed regularly. ... Most frequently the 7th and 8th grade ESOL classes get cancelled ... and I am used as a substitute. (K-8th grade ESOL teacher, Fully certified in Social Studies)

ESOL teachers described their concern and confusion about grading students and they said that other teachers in the school often asked them about policies regarding their students.

How are grades given for ESOL students? Can they fail? I got different messages from the district and [the provider] has their own way and everyone was confused in the school. Every day a teacher would ask me, 'Can ESOL kids fail?' If the course was in Spanish, of course they would fail, but they have to take the PSSA in English and then there was the issue of the Terra Nova vs. the Supera. I was told they would take them in both, but it was haphazard if they were given the Supera. (K-8th grade ESOL teacher, Fully certified in Social Studies)

Report cards are due at the end of the month. Eighth grade promotion is stressful. Intermediate students need grades but I can't give them A's or B's. I have to give them C's and D's. ESOL students can't be failed. The grading policies are so messed up and based on the core curriculum. The stupid policies make my life more constrained. (Middle School ESOL teacher, Fully certified in Social Studies)

Virtually all of the Special Ed and ELL teachers expressed dismay and frustration over the fact that their students were unable to access the grade level tests that they were expected to take, albeit with accommodations in some cases. They described their students' reactions to the testing as ranging from anger to fear.

They took the Benchmarks and didn't get anything right. They can't read that kind of stuff. ... It was difficult since my kids were not at their grade level. I had to try to teach at their instructional levels. ... The benchmarks were a source of torture. I would have to explain to them that it was a test. At all other times, cooperative learning is okay. They didn't understand having to work on their own. I had to separate them and put up blinders. Then I had to explain, 'You have to read this and answer this.' It was mean and gave them anxiety. Someone would always run away. ... You know with the benchmarks, I would give it to them and I would add another page that the kids could do. That way, at least the kids were familiar with some of the stuff they were learning. They would cry about the stuff they didn't know or couldn't do. (Special Education teacher in a K-8 school, Emergency certified)

Oh, my God, the Benchmark tests were horrible. First of all they were all given on grade level and some of my students are at the second grade level but they hate tests anyway, so it was not a fun experience. Someone said we should do grade-appropriate level but kids freak out because it says third grade on it. They feel bad about themselves. It was a lose-lose situation for the students. ... Kids did random answers during Benchmark testing and others acted out pretty vehemently, throwing papers and walking out of the room and cursing. ... So many guessed and finished in under three minutes. (Middle School Special Education teacher, Intern certified/TFA)

Rewards of the 1st Year: Connecting with Students and Seeing them Learn

Despite the variety of stresses detailed above, almost all the new middle grades teachers we interviewed were planning to return in the fall. When asked what they were most pleased with during their first year, the overwhelming majority of new teachers described making rewarding and powerful personal connections with students in their classes. They noted ways in which they saw students improving academically and/or behaviorally. Several also said they valued positive working and emotionally supportive relationships with other teachers in their school and the fact that they felt they had made a difference.

Even though I have a lot of behavior problems, I love my kids. I have a personal connection with them, even more than I thought. I am so young, and look even younger. ... Once I got to know the kids and realized I am a stable thing in their life, it was really rewarding. Almost everyone at the school was great. When I picked the school, it had only opened up that day. ... It was a last minute decision and I got lucky. (Middle School Special Education teacher, Emergency certified)

I was pleased with the students and making relationships with them, some fabulous. It has been really nice to see lesson plans be successful and whenever students retain and apply information it is rewarding. The best thing is when a student can apply something you have been working on. (Middle School Special Education teacher, Intern certified/TFA)

Several of the teachers also mentioned the leeway and flexibility they had, or took, to adapt the core, Special Education or ESOL curricula used in their school to their students' instructional levels or to completely develop the curricular materials they used.

I was pleased with the leeway I got. I didn't think I would be able to run my own program the way I did. I was expecting to have to use the core curriculum, and I was able to design my own program, and no one ever looked over my back. (5th grade teacher, Emergency certified)

I am really going to miss my kids. I really enjoyed working with that population. I had flexibility to set up the ESOL curriculum. The bilingual teachers in my school were supportive of what I wanted to do. (K-8th grade ESOL teacher, Fully certified in Social Studies)

Plans for the Future

Seventeen of the 20 teachers were planning to return in fall 2004 to the school where they taught during 2003-04. The majority of the seven TFA recruits we interviewed indicated that they planned to return to graduate school or work in another type of public service position after completing their two-year TFA commitment.

Several teachers felt that they would still be teaching in five years, but they were not sure they would remain in Philadelphia. The reasons for thinking about leaving the Philadelphia School District included: lack of administrative support; negative and/or chaotic school environments; higher salaries elsewhere; long commutes; and frustration arising from their inability to make a significant difference in the learning of their students.

Probably it would be based on not making a difference, feeling that nothing matters. That would be the main thing. (5th grade teacher, Emergency certified)

I am not from this area. The school culture is so different from what I'm used to. ... The two big things are 1) strong leadership in the school; and 2) the motivation and attitude of the students. These are the two things I would look for in a school placement. (9th grade English teacher in a transitional Middle School, Intern certified/ TFA)

My school administration really needs to be proactive. An incentive to stay would be greater resources next year. Reasons to leave would be if the grading policy is still the same, if I feel unsafe, covering classes, if teacher support isn't there. ... if I can't do what I want to do. (Middle School ESOL teacher, Fully certified in Social Studies)

Summary

The good news is that nearly all of the teachers in this sample intended to return for at least one more year, and they praised the support they received from their New Teacher Coaches and from Colleague Mentors and other teachers who taught the same grade and/or subject level. The great majority were pleased that they had “connected” with many of their students and gained pleasure from observing their academic and behavioral progress.

The experiences of the new middle grades teachers interviewed for this study, however, provide further documentation of the staffing problems that have plagued the middle grades, especially middle schools, in the School District of Philadelphia. Many teachers felt unprepared for the subject and/or grade level they were teaching. New recruits with little or no formal training often were assigned to Special Education and ELL classes or to subject areas with which they had little familiarity. Many new teachers reported difficulties they faced in managing their classrooms, and they talked about the lack of adequate and appropriate curricular materials. They also described serious climate and leadership problems in their schools that undercut their desire to remain in the district, because they did not feel they were making a difference.

A final observation from this study is, despite variations in responses to some of the questions we asked, these new teachers -- entering the system with differing types of credentials and assigned to schools with middle grades run by varying management organizations and the district -- told stories that sounded very much alike. Indeed the research team was struck by the similar ways in which they described their experiences and the rewards and challenges of their first year of teaching in Philadelphia.

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This report is part of a larger four-year research and public awareness project, led by Research for Action in Philadelphia, that is providing data and analysis on education improvement efforts in the School District of Philadelphia. The initiative, funded by the William Penn Foundation, The Pew Charitable Trusts, the Carnegie Corporation, the Surdna Foundation, the Samuel S. Fels Fund, and others, brings together a consortium of scholars from area institutions to examine key issues associated with Philadelphia's current wave of education reform.