



Learning from Philadelphia's School Reform

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

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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. This report, based on interviews at the end of the 2003-04 school year with 20 new teachers in 16 middle and K-8 schools, examines new teachers' assessments of these supports and summarizes their dominant impressions as first-year teachers in Philadelphia.

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 from two universities and RFA. The interview data supplement quantitative data gathered from surveys of new teachers during 2003-04 by RFA and by district evaluators. The sample was chosen from a list of new middle grades teachers who expressed a willingness to be re-contacted when they filled out a new teacher survey in December 2003. The research team focused on the middle grades because it is those grades that have the fewest willing recruits and the highest rates of teacher attrition.

The research team conducted 30-60 minute telephone interviews with new teachers in grades 5-9¹ in 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 6 Fully certified teachers, 8 Intern-certified teachers (seven of whom were in Teach for America), 5 Emergency-certified teachers, and 1 graduate of the district's Literacy Intern Program. Half of the new teachers in this sample had assignments as Special Education or English Language Learner (ELL) teachers.

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 an alternative high school.

High 1st Year Retention Rates for New Middle Grades Teachers

- ◆ 17 of the 20 teachers were planning to return in fall 2004 to the school where they taught during 2003-04, an impressive retention rate for teachers in middle grades schools in the district. 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

- ◆ Almost all of the new teachers attributed one or more of the district's formal new teacher supports as key to their survival in the first year. New Teacher Coaches received the most consistent praise.
- ◆ Half of the new teachers found the New Teacher Coaches very helpful in providing emotional support, instructional assistance, and classroom management strategies. Most others expressed both positive and critical assessments of their New Teacher Coach.
- ◆ More than three quarters of the teachers met with their New Teacher Coach regularly (every one to two weeks), though in several cases the New Teacher Coach visits and meetings became less frequent during the second half of the year. A few new teachers wished they could have received more frequent visits.

In-School Supports: Colleague Mentors and Informal Supports

Colleague Teacher Mentors: Assistance, but Uneven Availability and Match

- ◆ About two-thirds of the new middle grades teachers were assigned to an official Colleague Mentor Teacher. In schools with large numbers of new teachers, mentors sometimes were not available.
- ◆ Many of the new teachers had Colleague Mentors but a third of the new teachers said that their Mentors were not matched by subject area and/or grade level. The Mentors, who were available on a more informal basis than New Teacher Coaches, were usually praised for providing similar kinds of supports as the Coaches.
- ◆ Assignment of the Colleague Mentors to the new teachers took place at different times of the year—from the beginning of the year through the spring. More than a third of those interviewed said that their Mentor was not assigned until the winter or spring. In some instances, the assignment formalized a supportive relationship that had already developed.

Informal Supports: Key for Many New Middle School Teachers

- ◆ Many new teachers discussed the value and importance of informal relationships with experienced teachers. The majority of the respondents said they sought out or were befriended by one or more teachers in their grade level or subject area.
- ◆ In some schools where teachers did not have established grade group meetings, new and experienced teachers in a certain grade or subject took the initiative to meet either during common preparation periods or after school.

District Summer Orientation: One Size Does Not Fit All

- ◆ Slightly more than half of the new middle school teachers attended the district summer orientation. Six of those who did not attend the summer training were hired too late to attend the orientation or were hired after school began.

- ◆ Half of those teachers who attended the training gave positive evaluations to the experience, particularly those for whom the material was new. For others, the training repeated content from their prior training, in either certification programs or TFA. Some teachers wished the summer orientation had provided additional information about district policies and paperwork requirements.
- ◆ Teachers assigned to teach Special Education or ELL students felt that the training was not particularly relevant to their assignment.

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

- ◆ All but one of the new teachers in this sample attended the District's 18-session New Teacher Academy (NTA) during the school year, an after-school induction program run by a team of New Teacher Coaches who were trained by Teachers College, Columbia University. Two-thirds of the new teachers were disappointed with the bi-weekly two-hour sessions. They enjoyed meeting other new teachers at the sessions and liked implementing the mini-grant project with their students, but most said that the sessions were either too long, disorganized or duplicated prior education or teacher training.
- ◆ Teachers who were simultaneously enrolled in courses for certification often complained about the time required for the NTA sessions.

Challenges of the First Year

Poor Preparation for Subject or Grade Level Assignment

- ◆ Almost half of the new teachers felt unprepared for the *subject* they were teaching, despite the fact that most had passed middle-level Praxis tests in their content area. Close to one-third reported they were unfamiliar with the *grade level* they were teaching, and one half said they were only minimally prepared for their grade assignment. This sentiment was common among elementary-certified teachers who were assigned to teach the middle grades.

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. This was true even though more than half of the new teachers had some prior teaching in urban settings, either as a student teacher or in TFA summer school.
- ◆ New teachers who had student taught or were Literacy Interns in Philadelphia said their prior placements had been in schools with greater student diversity and fewer disruptions.

Difficulties with Classroom Management and School Climate

- ◆ New teachers typically mentioned classroom management problems as their greatest challenge. These problems included dealing with students whom they described as disruptive, emotionally disturbed, or even violent.
- ◆ Issues of individual classroom management were often exacerbated by the overall level of disruption in the school. Many of the new teachers described their schools as disorganized and raucous, with students running and yelling in the hallways—both during and between classes—and with cafeterias "out of control." In these schools, teachers complained that their school did not have consistent procedures for dealing with disruptive students, and their principals did not respond to requests for help with individual students.

Inadequate Supplies of Texts and Curricular Materials

- ◆ Almost half of the teachers reported their ability to instruct their students was hampered by a lack of key curricular materials or texts, especially in the first months of the year.

- ◆ Several of the teachers who did not have curricular materials took the initiative to create or find 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.

Daunting Challenges for Special Education and ELL Teachers

- ◆ Almost all of the new middle grades Special Education teachers in the sample were either Intern or Emergency-certified teachers and were learning on the job. ELL teachers were certified in fields other than English as a Second Language and thus were also learning on the job.
- ◆ Most Special Education and ELL teachers said they did not have curricular materials at the instructional levels of their students and received little or no guidance on how to adapt them to the needs of their students.
- ◆ Several Special Education and ELL teachers reported that they had not been trained in writing or filling out required paper work, including Individual Education Plans. They also said they were confused about grading policies for their students.
- ◆ Virtually all of the Special Education and ELL teachers described their students as fearful and/or angry about taking required grade-level tests that were beyond their instructional levels.
- ◆ The schedules and assignments of several Special Education and ELL teachers changed during the year as new students were identified and as staff was reconfigured.

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

- ◆ The overwhelming majority of new teachers described making rewarding and powerful personal connections with students in their classes. They also were pleased with ways in which they saw students improving academically and/or behaviorally.
- ◆ Several new middle grades teachers noted positive working and emotionally supportive relationships with other teachers in their school.

Plans for the Future

- ◆ The majority of Teach for America (TFA) teachers 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 commitment.
- ◆ Several teachers felt that they would still be teaching in five years, but they were not sure they would remain in Philadelphia. When asked what factors might influence their decision to leave the district, the most common reasons were: 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 their students' learning.

Summary

The good news from this study is that nearly all of the teachers we interviewed intended to return for at least one more year. 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. Most reported that they had "connected" with many of their students and gained pleasure from observing their academic and behavioral progress.

The experiences of these new middle grades teachers, however, provide further documentation of the long-term staffing problems that have plagued the middle grades, especially middle schools, in the School District of Philadelphia. 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. Most felt unprepared for the difficulties they faced in managing their classrooms, and they talked about the lack of adequate and appropriate curricular materials. Many described serious climate and leadership problems in their schools that undercut their desire to remain in the district.

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

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