



## How Do I

### HELP INTEGRATE BEGINNING TEACHERS INTO THE SCHOOL CULTURE?

Teachers new to a school building must quickly learn the culture and the related nuances that go along with the singular and collective personalities of the staff. A school's culture can have a direct effect on a first-year teacher's experience.

—Rob Danin and Margaret A. Bacon, *A Better Beginning*

“Who am I? How do I fit in?” Just as many students ask these questions during their adolescent maturation, so, too, beginning teachers often wonder, “Am I really a teacher? Is teaching a good career fit for me? How do I fit into this school system?” Each teacher possesses an individual personality, and each school district—and even each school building, grade level, interdisciplinary team, or academic department—displays individual strengths, moods, biases, and perhaps even quirks! Mentors can help beginning teachers navigate this new terrain by self-assessing the school environment or school culture and providing a picture of it to their mentees, introducing them to faculty and staff members, modeling respect for administrators, and following school procedures.

 · Self-Assessing the School Culture · 

Prior to thinking about how to discuss the school culture with the beginning teacher, the mentor may wish to make a school self-assessment using the following questions. The questions refer to “school,” but depending on the size or emphasis in your specific situation, you may wish to substitute “grade level,” “interdisciplinary team,” “academic department,” or “school district.”

1. Examine your school mission and vision statements. What are the central beliefs of these statements? Are these beliefs truly a part of your school? How do you see these beliefs enacted in daily life?
2. What other beliefs do faculty in your school building display toward students? Toward student learning? Toward colleagues? What is your major emphasis in student learning?
3. What are typical instructional strategies used in your school? Do faculty prefer to use individual work, small-group work, large-group discussions, multimedia, lecture, or a variety of these methods?
4. What are typical assessments used in your school? Do faculty prefer quizzes and tests, projects and presentations, essays and rubrics, portfolios and reflections, or other assessments? What does this say about the beliefs of the faculty?
5. What is the school philosophy toward working with parents? Are parents viewed as an integral part of the school or as an important but outside influence?
6. How are professional development and school change viewed by the faculty? As a whole, would the faculty be characterized as early adopters, change agents, critical questioners, or late adopters? Does the faculty give greater value to innovation or tradition?
7. What is the leadership style of the administration? Do most changes occur in a top-down (administration-initiated), bottom-up (faculty-initiated), or collaborative (administration-faculty cooperation) mode?
8. How do faculty respond to each other? Do instructors tend to close their classroom doors and work individually, or are successes celebrated and problems solved as a group?
9. What is the general mood within the school: positive? enthusiastic? happy? neutral? pessimistic?
10. How would you characterize a typical hour within the teachers’ lounge? Do teachers tend to be social on a polite or close-knit level? Do teachers tend to discuss students/

parents/administrators positively or negatively? How often is laughter an integral part of a teacher's gathering?

11. How often do the personal and the professional merge? Do faculty members attend school events regularly? Do faculty intentionally see each other outside of school hours?
12. What is a continual problem that surfaces in the school? How does this problem help characterize the school?
13. What are the expectations for classroom management? How does the school system handle extreme classroom management situations?

After you, as the mentor, have assessed your school system, you will be more prepared to discuss the school environment with the beginning teacher. Be positive, poised, and professional by explaining the expectations, describing the hopes, and being frank but tactful when questioned.

## ✧ • Respecting the Beginning Teacher's Perspective • ✧

Some educators believe that school climate is evident within the first three to eight minutes of stepping into a school building. The welcome signs, signage for main office and restrooms, staff demeanor, students' passage in hallways, and hallway and restroom appearance all present a quick first impression of the school. As the mentor, you may wish to ask the beginning teacher for his or her first impressions prior to initiating a discussion about the school environment.

In the following scene, Rhonna explains her impression of the teacher's lounge and of a particularly irate teacher:

**Rhonna:** *I just came from the teacher's lounge, and I couldn't believe what was happening.*

**Elyse:** *Tell me about it.*

**Rhonna:** *Well, usually people are talking about the weather or a sports event in quiet conversations. But today Mr. Blarsby came in, threw his books on the table, and started yelling profanities about a student in his class.*

**Elyse:** *What had happened?*

**Rhonna:** *I guess the student didn't have his work done, Mr. Blarsby yelled at him, the student yelled back, and he told the student to go to the principal's office. The student refused to go, so Mr. Blarsby called the main office and asked Mrs. Miller to come to his room to get the student. After Mr. Blarsby made the phone call, the student yelled more profanities and then walked out of the classroom and out of the school.*

**Elyse:** *What happened next?*

**Rhonna:** *Mr. Blarsby said Mrs. Miller told him she would contact the parents and would talk to the student after he returned and had calmed down. Mr. Blarsby was so angry he was calling the student names, throwing his books, and stomping around the teachers' lounge. Even his hands were shaking.*

**Elyse:** *It sounds like he was pretty upset.*

**Rhonna:** *Yeah, but I didn't like how he was handling it. He seemed to be just as immature as the students.*

**Elyse:** *Sometimes teachers view the teachers' lounge as a safety zone where they can release their feelings and frustrations so they can return to the classroom in a calmer mood.*

**Rhonna:** *Well, I didn't return in a calmer mood! I was having a good day until I heard him ranting and raving.*

**Elyse:** *The mood of the teachers' lounge varies from school to school. In my last school, the teachers always brought treats to share, they asked about each other's families, and there was constant laughter.*

**Rhonna:** *I don't think that describes this teachers' lounge.*

**Elyse:** *[laughs] No, sometimes it doesn't. When I first came here, I was shocked—like you—at how negative some teachers were. I decided to avoid the teachers' lounge completely. Then I decided that that was just avoiding the problem and that I wasn't part of the solution.*

**Rhonna:** *So what did you do?*

**Elyse:** *I now do a "walk-through" every day. I walk into the lounge, speak to people using their first names, find something positive to say, get a cup of coffee, and walk out.*

**Rhonna:** *Is it hard to always be positive?*

**Elyse:** *Oh, not really. If Sid, the basketball coach, is reading the sports section, I find something good to say about the last game, the next game, the new uniforms, or a specific player. If Marilou is there, I ask about her garden or how her son is doing at college. Maya and Stuart are both film buffs, so I often ask about a specific film or for a video recommendation.*

**Rhonna:** *I get it. You try to make the lounge a more positive place.*

**Elyse:** *Yes, I try to control it instead of letting it control me. [Laughs] Sometimes it's hard. One of the teachers who is now retired used to be very grumpy. If I said, "It's going to be a sunny day," she would reply, "Yes, but it probably won't last long." That used to really upset me until I decided to make it into a game. I tried to see if I could coax her into saying something positive! If not, I'd just walk out and laugh internally. I decided I couldn't let one person ruin my day.*

**Rhonna:** *So what would you have done if you had heard Mr. Blarsby explode?*

**Elyse:** *I might stay long enough to say, "I'm sorry that you had a bad day. I hope the rest of your day goes better." Then I'd walk out. It depends, though. Sometimes people just need someone to listen to them and empathize with the situation.*

**Rhonna:** *Thanks. I might try some of those things. While I'm driving home today, I'll try to think of something positive that I could say to some of the teachers.*

**Elyse:** *That's a great plan!*

## ☾ • Introducing the Faculty and Staff • ☽

As a mentor, you can help acquaint the beginning teacher with the school culture by introducing your colleague to faculty and staff. Be sure to start with your team or department, the colleagues with whom the beginning teacher will have the most interaction. Then progress to other important personnel, such as guidance counselors, librarians, special education faculty and aides, ELL teachers, and other faculty. The secretaries and custodians also deserve immediate introductions since all teachers know that they often prove to be the best allies in providing assistance. As you are talking, try using the first names of both individuals multiple times to aid each person in remembering the other's name in the next encounter. To help the new teacher remember all of these individuals, mentors might create pages of photos and names, possibly from a yearbook or website.

After getting to know the teachers by name, the next step is to help the beginning teacher locate people who may be informal mentors: those of similar age and experience, teaching styles, or philosophies. Experienced teachers realize that knowing students on an individual basis often promotes more student motivation; similarly, becoming better acquainted with faculty can aid our own interactions, as shown by the following scene that Adela relates to Ricardo:

One year I hated taking my fifth graders to the computer lab because Margie, the computer lab instructor, showed little patience and often yelled at my students. I didn't know how to handle this, so I asked Mrs. Williams, our principal, for advice. She listened and then said, "I think you need to get to know Margie better." I couldn't believe it! I expected Mrs. Williams to tell me how to approach Margie about her teaching, or I thought Mrs. Williams would volunteer to talk to Margie herself. I was completely floored. I thanked her and walked out of the office, thinking that had been a waste of my time.

But since I didn't want to talk to Margie about her poor teaching, I decided to try Mrs. Williams's advice. Each day I found a few moments before school, during lunch, or after school to talk briefly with Margie. Once after I asked if Margie had seen a certain TV program, she told me that she couldn't watch TV because her husband badly needed a kidney transplant and she spent her evenings and weekends taking care of him. When I learned this, my attitude changed. I realized that I had judged too quickly. I now understood that Margie's lack of patience with the students was simply a release of her own pent-up emotions.

When Margie's husband died a few weeks later, the other teachers and I provided support for Margie. We took food to her house, attended the funeral, and did other things for her, but I think what she appreciated the most was that when she returned to school, one of us would stop by her room and just listen to her as we grieved together. And an amazing thing happened. Because she no longer had this tense life of worrying about her husband, she became a calmer, more patient teacher. I realized that Mrs. Williams was right. I did need to get to know Margie better. And that's probably true of many situations. I learned that we can't make assumptions and that we should tread lightly and get to know others.

Mentors can show beginning teachers that many conflicts of interest can be resolved by simply getting to know others. Mentors can be role models of good listening, as shown by the following scenario:

"Wow, that was one long meeting!" Nancy declared to her mentor, as they exited a committee meeting in which teachers debated whether grade-level teams or "techie" teachers should be the first ones to receive Smart Boards in their classrooms.

Steve smiled. "Well, I'd rather have one long meeting that is calm than have one with people yelling. Sometimes people only keep repeating the same arguments, so I tried to get them to listen to each other."

“Uh, huh,” Nancy said. “I noticed that you asked a lot of questions.”

“Yes, I wanted everyone to have an opportunity to express their views and for us to see the pros and cons to each method.”

Mentors can role model being a questioner and listener during staff or committee meetings, and they can encourage the beginning teacher to speak during these meetings:

“But, I noticed that you didn’t join the discussion, Nancy. Were you unsure about your own opinions or were you unwilling to talk in front of such a large group?”

“Oh, I thought the teams should receive the Smart Boards. That’s what happened during my practicum, and the ones who were knowledgeable about technology taught the others on the team.”

“That’s an important point. You had an experience that you could have shared with the group. I hope you share your experiences next time.”

Sometimes staff meetings or committee meetings can be overwhelming for the “new kid on the block.” Mentors can encourage beginning teachers to feel comfortable in these situations by getting to know the other faculty, listening to others, and not feeling afraid to speak. Often beginning teachers have had practicum experiences in multiple school districts, possess more technological background, and have seen experimental programs in practice. Once the new teacher speaks at a faculty gathering, perhaps with the mentor’s encouragement, she will be more likely to share her opinions and receive the respect of other faculty members.

## 🐟 . Modeling Respect for Administrators . 🐟

Often beginning teachers will share administrative gripes or concerns with a mentor or team mentors. While it’s easy to blame others, mentors often need to show that teachers should respect the position the administrator holds. When Carlotta, a new fourth-grade teacher, complained that the principal had criticized her for not being in the hallway between classes, Francie told her the following story:

I realize that you were probably busy, but Mr. Jurillo has been here a long time, and he knows that having teachers in the hallway sometimes prevents problems. One time a parent complained to Mr. Jurillo and wanted her son moved from Corrie's room into my classroom. Corrie and I told Mr. Jurillo that Matt's friends are in my room, so we didn't want the move. We thought he was just bowing under the pressure of the parent. However, he said that the times that he didn't move the child after an extremely adamant parental request, the parent had become overly critical of the teacher during the rest of the year, and everyone suffered. I realized that even though I might not agree with him, Mr. Jurillo usually has a reason behind his decisions. Sometimes he knows more about family situations, sometimes he's had similar experiences, and sometimes he knows more about the underlying problems. I've discovered that he usually tries to treat students and faculty fairly, and I respect that. Yesterday Mr. Jurillo told me that he really likes how you have used group work in teaching fractions. I know that he respects your teaching talents.

By taking an objective stance, mentors can often role model best practices for appreciating others' opinions; by sharing overheard praise, mentors can help new teachers see their own strengths.

## ✂ • Explaining School Norms and Traditions • ✂

Rob Danin and Margaret Bacon advise that “the culture of a building consists of not only the individuals inside its walls, but also the school's governing norms and procedural structures” (1999, 205). Mentors can help prepare beginning teachers for some of the norms and traditions of a school district or school building, allowing the new teacher to feel acculturated rather than constantly being surprised. For instance, it's helpful for a mentor to explain that the teachers usually stay at school and have pizza delivered prior to a parent/teacher conference evening, that during homecoming a half-day is devoted to float building to provide a student collaborative experience, that the eighth graders are invited to the high school play matinee, that students are often absent on the first day of deer hunting season, or any number of other school oddities that may be peculiar to a particular school or town. Telling the beginning teacher about common jokes around school will help her join in the laughter and be a part of the “inside joke.” Mentors need to be attuned to a school culture to help beginning teachers move quickly from being an outsider to an insider.

 · Summary · 

Mentors can acclimate beginning teachers to the school culture by asking about first impressions of the school, doing a self-analysis of the school culture, providing introductions to faculty and staff, encouraging listening and getting to know colleagues on a personal level, urging participation in staff and committee meetings, and respecting other faculty and colleagues. Just as teachers discover ways to motivate recalcitrant students, so, too, mentors can help new teachers navigate the culture of a particular school and become a viable participant in school decisions.

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