

# Mentoring the First Year Teacher

Mike Miller

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At every convention there are many clinics for first year teachers. There are not always clinics for experienced teachers to help first year teachers. After five years of being the least experienced on staff, I had to help a first year teacher. I found out I had quickly forgotten what it was like to be **new**. I discovered I was comfortable doing my job, but not helping someone do theirs. As I reflected on that year I realized I had learned many things that are important in becoming a mentor for first year teachers.

Mentoring is a very important process for new teachers. A mentor is defined as a wise and trusted counselor or friend. A mentor can be anyone who works with a new teacher not always just the head director. Even if you do not consider yourself a mentor you are an influence, for better or worse. Just like teaching, it takes practice to become a good mentor. I believe effective mentors can help relieve the teacher shortage; if young teachers have someone to help them, they may not quit. Even students thinking about becoming a band director would be encouraged to know help is available for them when they get their first job.

Effective mentoring starts with finding the right person. This begins with the interview process. I was most comfortable interviewing with the band directors I would be working with. This gives everyone a chance to get to know the person. Some teaching styles work well together and some do not. The students will know if the directors respect one another. If not, it can have a negative impact on the program. The first year teacher also needs to find the right job for them. If they find the right situation they will be more likely to stay with that job and be successful.

All effective mentors have certain qualities. One is **patience**; it is vital for teaching kids, but also important for helping people new to the profession. A mentor must be **honest**; sparing feelings will not fix problems. A mentor should be **tactful**; there are ways to say things without being hurtful. A mentor should **be available** because sometimes advice is needed after school is out. A mentor should be **realistic** in helping a first year teacher

reach goals. **Communication** is important. A first year teacher will need your **undivided attention**. No one likes feeling like a game of solitaire is more important than them. A mentor should remain **open minded**, what works for you may not work for someone

else. Be **positive**; when problems occur look for a solution, don't just complain. Be **supportive**; it is easy to feel ineffective as a first year teacher.

A mentor provides experience in many areas of the job. Sometimes things veteran teachers do automatically need to be explained to a new teacher. Discipline is one of the biggest struggles for first year teachers. A veteran teacher can help them devise a plan for discipline. Communication is a difficult area for first year teachers. Sometimes they are intimidated by parents and administrators. A good way to overcome this is to call all the parents at the beginning of the year; that way the first contact is a positive one. Principals do not always want to hear problems, talk to them about positive things happening too.

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Get to know the classroom teachers, they will be more helpful for someone they know not a band hall recluse.

UIL Contest is a scary event for everyone, but especially first year teachers. They will need help picking music that fits the band, not just something they want to play. Preparing the music is also difficult, one thing that really helps is recording the band. When things start to sound good to me I record my band for a reality check, it is a great way to learn. Also they will need help getting buses and planning for the day of contest. Sight reading makes contest worse. Just like the students, first year teachers will have to have confidence in the sight reading room. Help them go through the procedure. Time them so they will know how fast seven or eight minutes can be.

Other things that take experience are paperwork, PDAS, ARD, IEP, TEKS, TAKS, ISS, AEP, etc. Requesting checks and purchase orders can be confusing. Also how to recruit and retain kids for the band program can be difficult for first year teachers. Talk to the new teacher about how to place kids on the right instrument and convince them they do not want to play drums (also convincing their parents they do not want to play drums.) The logistics of concerts, pep rallies, football games also take experience.

There are different ways to introduce first year teachers to their jobs. One is the “throw them to the

wolves approach.” This can be detrimental to the teacher and the students. Take the time to introduce the new teacher and let him or her get to know the kids. You should also remember that the first year teacher’s band is probably yours next year. You want them to be taught correctly, so set them up for success. Mistakes happen; don’t overreact; help to correct them. The students must respect the first year teacher, not just the veteran. Avoid being the disciplinarian for the first year teacher. If things go badly the veteran might take the band over. If this happens it is hard to give the band back. If things go well the first year the new teacher will want to come back - which is great! So many feel they have to suffer through a year or two to find a job they like.

Finally, learn from the first year teacher. They have many fresh ideas that you may want to use. Many veterans are stuck in a rut and seem bored with their job trying something new can relieve that. New teachers are not afraid to try something new because of fear of failure. The excitement of a first year teacher can reenergize someone who is old and cranky.

First year teachers are the future of our profession. Many young teachers get frustrated early and want to give up. Talented mentors are needed to help continue their education after they leave college. Mentoring is a rewarding experience and one I hope you will not pass up.

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