

COACHES IN THE CLASSROOM

Schools are beefing up training for novice teachers, stressing teamwork, mentoring to improve instruction

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HECHINGER REPORT

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Bliss Maki, a new teacher at the Bradwell School of Excellence on Chicago's South Side, has yet to develop that all-important trait of her more seasoned colleagues: eyes in the back of her head.

Not much bigger than some of the fourth-graders she teaches, Maki is also still working on her "strong voice," a tool essential to keeping a class of wiggly 9-year-olds focused on the reading assignment at hand. But on a recent Tuesday afternoon, she had help — the voice of a veteran teacher giving pointers through a transmitter in her ear.

Melissa Monaco, a "coach" with many years of experience as a teacher, sat in the back of the room whispering advice into a walkie-talkie. It was Monaco who noted that two boys in the back row were beginning to talk. Instantly, Maki was beside them, suggesting that they get back to work or consider detention.

"There's not much that a 10-year-old can pull I haven't seen before, but she's new and there are 30 of them," Monaco said. "A fresh set of eyes helps."

The Academy for Urban School Leadership — which manages 19 schools in Chicago, including 12 that were designated for "turn-around" because of poor academic performance — employs the technology to speed up the time it takes new teachers to learn the basics of classroom management.

Underlying the new gadgetry, however, is a deeper innovation

that is spreading across the country. Schools are hiring instructional coaches and master teachers to work with new and struggling teachers. Principals are spending more time in classrooms. Teachers are collaborating to help low-performing students, writing lesson plans and sharing ideas that have worked. All of these efforts are pieces of a growing effort to open up classroom doors and transform teaching from a solo endeavor into teamwork.

It's a quiet reform in an era of more extreme moves such as firing principals, opening charter schools or splitting dropout factories into smaller schools. But in the quest to improve achievement, many educators say the job of teaching can't continue to be modeled on the idea of one adult standing alone in front of 30 students.

Instead, it has to be a group effort, where newcomers can benefit from the wisdom of experienced colleagues and senior teachers can be exposed to innovation and new ideas from young recruits.

"We're not working as independent operators anymore," said Stephanie Hirsh, a former teacher who now leads Learning Forward, a nonprofit association that promotes professional development for teachers.

The idea has been gaining steam. Since 2004, Illinois has required that schools develop mentoring and training programs for teachers in their first two years on the job. The Illinois New Teacher Collaborative also was launched that year at the

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to attract and retain new teachers.

Just last year, state officials intensified the requirements for districts that receive state funding to train new teachers. In all, \$9.4 million was awarded to 1,208 schools that applied for the state grants.

In those schools, mentors must spend at least 60 hours of "face-to-face contact" with the new teacher every year, whether observing in class, planning lessons or prepping for parent conferences.

"We think it's essential," said Linda Tomlinson, an assistant superintendent with the Illinois State Board of Education who oversees teacher training. "In the past, there have been comments that it takes a new teacher three years to really get up to being equal to an experienced teacher. We can't wait three years."

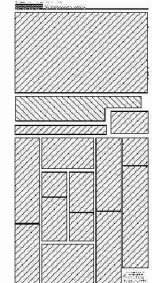
Many schools across the state have responded to the increased attention on teacher training by hiring consultants or recruiting veteran educators to coach new hires full time.

Carolyn Smolinski traded her classroom for her car last year.

The Schaumburg Elementary District 54 teacher is a full-time mentor to 16 educators in the northwest suburban district. All but one are new to teaching.

Smolinski sits down with each of her mentees for about two hours a week. She observes them in class and, if asked, models lessons. She said it helps that the quick, continuous evaluation comes from a fellow teacher.

"When their principal comes in, it's great feedback, but at the



end of the day, that's the person who decides if they stay or go," Smolinski said. "When I give them feedback, they don't take it as personally."

Last month, Smolinski led a reading group with five third-graders in Kelli Hufstедler's class at Lakeview Elementary School. "Guided reading" is the lesson she's most asked to model.

Smolinski quizzed the students about some of the new words in a book — vocabulary like "drab" and "bluff" — and urged them to make inferences and predictions about what might come next.

Hufstедler, who graduated in May from Illinois State University, took notes. She said it helps to watch Smolinski because it affirms her confidence — "I always preview the vocabulary and do a picture walk, so right away, I jotted that down," she said — and gives her ideas for how to challenge the students or ask questions in different ways.

"It's one thing to prepare in school and another thing to actually do it," Hufstедler said.

In recent years, Chicago has become a staging ground for several efforts to make teamwork an integral part of the teaching job.

Only 16 percent of Chicago fourth-graders were proficient at reading on the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress. Part of the problem is a lack of communication and collaboration between teachers in the early grades, said Christine Maxwell, interim director of the New Schools Project at the [Erikson Institute](#), a graduate school for early childhood development.

The project is working with six Chicago elementary schools to connect the dots between preschool and third grade, when students are expected to have mastered reading.

At Fulton Elementary School on the South Side, preschool through first-grade teachers meet once a week for an hour, while

second- and third-grade teachers meet separately. They can end up in "hard conversations," Maxwell said.

She said teachers ask each other questions such as, "What are you doing down there in pre-K? I didn't see a lot of my kids coming in at grade level, what was going on?"

Higher-performing schools are also moving to incorporate these ideas. Amy Mims is a former principal who transformed a failing South Carolina elementary school and now leads Area 1 for Chicago Public Schools. Although the schools in her zone do well on state tests, Mims said she saw room for improvement.

"We all know that teaching is not a private practice. But traditionally it has been, 'Here's your books, here's your classroom, have a nice day,'" Mims said.

Under her leadership, five schools in the northern section of the city have brought in a California-based consultant, Brad Darling, to make their weekly teacher meetings more productive and more focused on students.

Darling works for Learning Teams, a division of the for-profit education company Pearson. In other schools where Learning Teams has worked, mostly in California, test scores have risen significantly. In some cases, schools have gone from performing below the district average to surpassing it, according to a study by Claude Goldenberg, a professor at Stanford University.

"You don't just tell teachers to share and get together," Goldenberg said. "You need a structure at the school. ... Without these structures, (professional learning communities) wither and die on the vine."

On a Wednesday this fall, a group of third-grade teachers at Chicago's Peterson Elementary School gathered during their planning period. The meeting kicked off with a discussion of a

student who spit at a peer earlier that day. But Tina Pak, a teacher who has trained with Darling, quickly steered the conversation to the group's task: figuring out how to improve reading comprehension.

After some back-and-forth, the teachers decided that one of their students' biggest struggles was identifying the personality traits of characters in their books. They decided that by January, 75 percent of the school's third-graders should be able to connect a character's actions to his personality traits, and that they would start designing lesson plans at their next meeting.

Not all of the sessions go so smoothly. Another group, which had a history of not getting along, accomplished very little, according to the group's leader.

Darling said progress can be slow. "We're not about quick gains," he said. That can be a problem in a political climate where education reforms are expected to work miracles within a year or two.

One new issue for the movement is that a parallel effort is pushing for merit pay, to reward teachers for their individual efforts, potentially discouraging them from working together.

Advocates for teacher collaboration models say schoolwide incentive structures work better.

"Let's tie it in a way that helps the student," said Hirsh, the former teacher; "not in a way that has teachers hold back from the teachers next door because their compensation is tied to their performance in comparison to the other teachers."

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Guidance for rookies

More than 4,000 new Illinois teachers were paired last year with seasoned educators who could offer tips on everything from lesson plans to communication with parents. Mentors received \$1,200 for working with their proteges for at least 60 hours.

ILLINOIS NEW TEACHER MENTORING PROGRAM

School year	New teachers*	Mentors	School districts
2006-07	495	270	40
2007-08	2,062	1,443	195
2008-09	2,881	1,813	204
2009-10	4,389	2,538	301

*In first or second year

SOURCES: Illinois New Teacher Collaborative, Illinois State Board of Education

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Mentor Carolyn Smolinski, back to camera, works with third-graders as teacher Kelli Hufstedler takes notes. STACEY WESCOTT/TRIBUNE PHOTO



Melissa Monaco coaches teacher David Bencivenga by walkie-talkie at Chicago's Curtis Elementary School. The radios, below, enable instant guidance. ANTONIO PEREZ/TRIBUNE PHOTOS

