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BRIDGING

By Erin Gilrein and Jennifer Wolfe

Growing up in rural America, we passed silos on our way to school filled with silage, a combination of whole maize plants, beets, grass, and alfalfa. While the ingredients varied from silo to silo, these products made a healthy and sustainable feed for livestock when nutrition was scarce. Indeed, they were the lifeblood of farms during winter.

As educators today in a suburban high school on New York's Long Island, we don't see too many silos on our way to work, but we see them in the prevailing structure of

public education: silos of disconnected departments, curricula, and personnel, each filled with committed, thoughtful, hardworking educators dedicated to student learning, but not often working together in the same space with the same vision.

This silo culture, in light of recent demands associated with teacher evaluation and student testing, stands in the way of cultivating healthy and sustainable environments for learning. Student learning thrives when all of these professionals share and work toward the same vision and support each other with cooperation and collaboration.

CAREER LADDER FOR TEACHERS

A 2014 report from the Alliance for Excellent Educa-



SILOS

**NOVICES PARTNER
WITH VETERAN TEACHERS
ON THE PATH
TO BOARD CERTIFICATION**

tion notes that half a million U.S. teachers either move or leave the profession each year because of inadequate administrative support and isolated working conditions (Haynes, 2014).

To stem the tide of new professionals leaving teaching, the Oceanside School District created a program that sees teaching as a six-year career ladder beginning with an internship and ending with National Board Certification, with board-certified teachers supporting new interns and residents.

Here's how the program works: A preservice intern student teacher comes to Oceanside during the last year of an education degree program. If hired, he or she becomes a resident teacher during the first four years of teaching, a

National Board Certification candidate in the years following tenure, and then a National Board Certified Teacher who advocates for public education and is a skilled mentor for the next round of interns and residents.

The district brought together three board-certified teachers, representatives from all levels of district administration, and faculty members from Adelphi University to create an internship that dovetails with the four-year mentoring program to create a five-year tenure attainment program.

RESIDENCY PROGRAM

The idea for this trajectory came from our experiences with internships and National Board Certification. We were also familiar with Ron Thorpe's vision that teachers

have to transform their profession from the inside out (Thorpe, 2014). Thorpe’s observations on the challenging nature of the teaching profession support why it is critical for a new teacher to be guided, mentored, and supported by an effective and accomplished veteran teacher. During our three years overseeing a residency program in our district, we saw how astute Thorpe’s observations were.

Resident teachers learn deeply with an effective and accomplished mentor guiding them toward effective teaching, tenure, and National Board Certification.

Our agenda was simple: Create a collaboration between the newest teachers and the district’s 19 board-certified teachers. This idea solved two perceived problems: first, not all new teachers qualify for a mentor under state regulations, and certainly not all teachers in years two to four; and second, the district’s board-certified teachers were ready to be recognized as formal, funded, district-supported teacher leaders.

In 2013, we introduced a districtwide program using board-certified teachers as mentors to teachers in years one to four using a virtual platform. Teachers in years one

to four became resident teachers, reflecting the culture change we hoped to achieve. Like medical residents, resident teachers are new to the job and learning in every moment. However, in this program, they don’t work alone in a silo. Instead, they learn deeply with an effective and accomplished mentor guiding them toward effective teaching, tenure, and National Board Certification.

THE MENTORING RELATIONSHIP

The mentoring program is a combination of online and face-to-face interactions. Online interactions happen via the Teaching Channel Teams platform (www.teachingchannel.org/professional-development), an extension of Teaching Channel that is locally controlled and offers a space for private, collegial group work with access to all of Teaching Channel’s resources, including an extensive video library of accomplished teachers.

From participant feedback and reflections in the pilot year, we learned that we needed to include face-to-face interactions in addition to the Teams virtual interactions. A mentoring relationship requires a critical element of trust, and this is best fostered when the mentor and resident teacher can sit side-by-side to discuss classroom experiences and learn together. Then the relationship can thrive in the online environment.

Another way that we gain the trust of participating teachers and the local union is by permitting resident teachers to decide what videos they share. We met with our local union to discuss issues of privacy and assuage concerns. Resident teachers film many more lessons than they share, and the act of self-reflection happens with each video, whether that video is ever shared with a mentor.

Resident teachers share 15- to 20-minute videos of their classroom practice with their mentors via Teaching Channel Teams using specific feedback protocols. Mentors watch the videos from resident teachers and give feedback and support to enhance effective practice. In a private group, resident teachers provide contextual information for videos and seek feedback based on their professional goals, classroom challenges, or observation feedback from administrators.

Mentors and resident teachers learn feedback protocols. We teach a warm and cool feedback protocol adapted from the National School Reform Faculty because it supports and encourages teachers while allowing room for growth (McDonald & Allen, 1999).

First, the resident teacher offers key contextual information about the class makeup and the scope and sequence of the lesson. Then the resident teacher states his or her focus and the specific topics on which he/she would like feedback. With warm feedback, the coach states exactly what is effective and why it is effective. With cool feedback, the coach asks probing questions to encourage the teacher to think about areas of improvement.

For example, resident teacher Kayla Toscano says, “Many times, the feedback started as just rhetorical questions, like ‘What could you have done here to ___?’ While that helps me to stop and reflect, I need to be able to respond and bounce ideas off of another person, and, in turn, hear their opinions about my ideas.”

We encourage questioning with cool feedback because that is where the transformative growth occurs. It is the probing questions that allow resident teachers to grow — to see areas of weakness and determine how they can best develop their practice to meet the needs of their students.

“The Teams mentoring process has helped me to become a more reflective and effective educator,” resident teacher Aileen Monks says. “As a new teacher, it is often hard to find the time to sit down and truly reflect upon every lesson deeply. Having the videos and being a part of this program has allowed me to develop as a reflective teacher so that I am able to do so with more ease. In turn, I find that I am a more thoughtful planner and well-rounded teacher.”

In these mentoring relationships, we encourage teachers to engage in conversations about effective teaching. As Jim Knight points out, “If we want reflective educators, teachers who think, we must make sure that teachers are free to make meaningful decisions about what and how they teach” (Knight, 2014). We remind mentors and resident teachers that there are many ways to be effective teachers who have a positive impact on student learning, and we need to guide each other to discover what effective teaching looks like in our own classroom.

Mentors also use the rubrics from Charlotte Danielson’s Framework for Teaching with correlated questions from the National Board Certification portfolio and existing videos from the Teaching Channel’s video library. For example, when con-

sidering Danielson's Domain 2: Classroom Environment, we ask questions from the National Board portfolio such as:

- What are the relevant features of your teaching context that influenced the selection of this instruction?
- What were the specific procedures and teaching strategies you used in this lesson, including those used to foster student participation in the whole-class interaction or small-group discussion?
- What were your reasons for those choices?
- How do you ensure fairness, equity, and access for all students in your class?

Questions such as these bring awareness back to the framework of National Board Certification — the Architecture of Accomplished Teaching (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2014):

- Who are my students?
- What do these students need at this time, in this setting?
- What are my high, worthwhile goals?
- How do I best implement, evaluate, and reflect on my instruction and the students' learning?

"One thing I learned from my mentor is that, regardless of how many times you might teach a given lesson, there is always room for improvement," resident teacher Tracy Malpigli notes. "My mentor has been teaching the same grade for quite a few years, but treats each year as if it is her first on the grade level. She designs her lessons around the students seated in front of her each year and is continually trying out new methods and approaches. It is very inspiring."

This reflective work is the work that teachers do every day and complements other models of effective teaching, such as Danielson. The growth mindset illustrated by mentors reminds resident teachers that there is always room for growth and improvement, especially when tailoring lessons to meet the needs of the students at this time and in this setting.

We purposely embed National Board questioning strategies in the mentoring process to propel teachers along the career trajectory. The most accomplished teachers support the newest teachers. The goal is that, after working with board-certified teachers for four years during residency, resident teachers will see board certification as the next professional step.

In fact, 70% of participants indicate they are interested in pursuing National Board Certification at some point in their career, and 76% of participants report the mentoring process helped them have a positive impact on students.

For example, elementary teacher Kelly George says, "During the review of a video I submitted, my mentor pointed out a student who requires regular refocusing/redirecting. In one part of the video, this student wasn't engaging and I had refocused/redirected him more than once, but I did not engage him in the dialogue. My mentor spotted this and brought it up to me. As I reviewed the video, I was able to clearly see what she meant. The next lesson, I continued to redirect this student *and* I made it a

point to engage him in the dialogue. I used a beach ball to toss back and forth with the class and made it a point to call on him, even if he didn't raise his hand. The result was that he engages more, and I do not need to redirect him as much."

High school teacher Deanna Confredo says, "My mentor teacher and I developed a concrete strategy for students to write thesis statements and evaluate the thesis statements of their peers. I have now adapted this strategy and use it regularly in my classroom. This was effective because the rubric is straightforward and simple for my students to apply."

And elementary teacher Kenneth DiDonna says, "Mentoring had a profound effect on my students' learning. I was able to use ideas from colleagues to give more choice and empowerment to the students. My questioning techniques also improved greatly, which allowed for a more student-centered classroom."

The National Board has extensive research on the impact of board-certified teachers on students, available at www.nbpts.org/advancing-education-research.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR EXPERIENCED TEACHERS

The mentoring program provides leadership opportunities for seasoned teachers as well. Board-certified teachers and their accomplished colleagues enhance resident teacher practice through video reflection and peer support.

What began as an experiment in supporting new and board-certified teachers became an opportunity to reshape professional learning in the district on a larger scale than the mentoring program. After the program's pilot year, the district combined the program with the district's formal mentoring program, creating a four-year tenure attainment mentoring program that helped new teachers earn tenure with feedback and ongoing support from board-certified teachers and other accomplished teachers for the four years of their residency.

Administrators also created a private Teams group, sharing videos of faculty meetings, presentations, and teacher conferences with each other to get feedback and improve practice. Diane Provvido, assistant superintendent for curriculum, instruction, and research, observed, "It's the one 'room' we can go to virtually at any time to enhance our professional growth and, ultimately, the growth of our students."

In the program's second year, Oceanside's board-certified teachers and district administrators participated in an all-day session to explore the Teaching Channel's potential to transform professional learning. By the next year, in fall 2015, a team of teachers and administrators devised a "choose your own adventure" professional learning experience that combines in-person instruction on how to use the Teaching Channel Teams platform with opportunities for participants to individualize the

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most meaningful activities on the Teaching Channel to earn professional development hours and credits.

Teachers can form groups and earn hours as Teaching Channel novices exploring the platform and as Teaching Channel advanced users digging deeper into features and learning plans. Their plan is “symbolic of how building trust and community in the best interest of students is the only way to be an effective educator these days. And better yet, our plan supports the building of trust and community among teachers of all grades and subjects” (Manning & Ziropiannis, 2015).

Then departmental, grade-level, and building groups appeared. Teachers and administrators were sharing ideas, commenting on Teaching Channel videos, reflecting on personal classroom videos, annotating articles, and developing a closer professional community. This tool, combined with administrator trust and support, has encouraged board-certified teachers to become teacher leaders, trusted mentors, and change agents in the district.

PARTNERS IN EDUCATION

We have been partners in education for almost 13 years. We teach two 9th-grade humanities classes together, run National Board Certification candidate cohorts together, are co-regional directors of the National Board Council of New York, are founders and directors of the Long Island National Board Network, and present at local, state, and national conferences together. We list these to illustrate the value of collaboration.

Our personal experience has shown that what supports new teachers is healthy for all teachers, no matter the stage of their career. We’ve bridged our own departmental and grade-level silos to come together as collaborative teaching partners. As teacher leaders, our vision extends beyond our classroom walls, and we consciously try to unite teachers in the spirit of cooperation and collaboration.

ONE LAST THING

This cooperation and collaboration between resident and experienced teacher cannot work without central office, building-level administrator, and Teacher Center support. Robert Fenter, former assistant superintendent for curriculum, instruction, and research, adds that our board-certified teachers “provide us with an army of resources to help us to achieve goals that aren’t feasible any more just to be done by administrators and probably never should have been done solely by administrators.”

For this to work, teachers and administrators must build trust. When we first discussed the idea of this program with our superintendent, we added this caveat: Administrators will not be allowed access to the administrative rights of the Teams page.

We feel that teachers are the most vulnerable in their early years, certainly those before tenure. New teachers would not feel comfortable submitting videos for growth if they knew ad-

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ministrators were watching what they submitted, how many times, and what kinds of videos they watched, not to mention if administrators could see the questions they asked their mentors.

The administrators agreed without hesitation to our condition, illustrating their trust in teacher leaders, especially board-certified teachers.

Knowing the critical importance of maintaining trust, we asked administrators in an end-of-year survey why they agreed to let board-certified teachers work with resident teachers without their direct supervision. The responses: “No matter how strong our relationship is with our teachers, we are still their evaluators. ... They will freely talk to another teacher.” “I trust in the instructional expertise of my National Board Certified Teacher.” “It sends a message of solidarity and trust ... that can yield more authentic results.” These answers can only come from an environment that is ripe with high expectations and deep trust.

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