

# 13 TEACHERS TEACHING TEACHERS™

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## As parents hover, some new teachers flee

Gen X parents challenge  
young teachers

By Joan Richardson

**H**elicopter parents are landing in schools across the country — and often scaring off the newest teachers in the building.

For more than a decade, educators have been focused on issues of how to encourage parents to become more involved in schools. But, in recent years, schools have been reporting experiences with parents who are more demanding and less respectful of educators.

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“These parents are definitely different. The Baby Boomer parents and the Gen X parents have different attitudes and different expectations. The Gen X parents are not intimidated by teachers



and they view schools very differently from earlier generations of parents,” said Suzette Lovely, deputy superintendent of personnel services for the Capistrano Unified School District in southern California and co-author of *Generations at School* (Corwin, 2007).

The challenges of dealing with Gen X parents — parents who are between the ages of 25 and 44 — appears to be borne out by recent surveys of teachers. The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Expectations and Experiences (2006) documents that the quality of parent support is a significant factor influencing teacher satisfaction and likelihood to leave the

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profession (p. 82). New teachers view engaging and working with parents as their greatest challenge and the area they were least prepared to manage during their first year of teaching (MetLife, 2005, p. 5). New teachers also report that they are least satisfied with their relationship with students' parents. Only 25% of new teachers describe the relationship as "very satisfying" and 20% described it as "unsatisfying" (p. 5).

"For new teachers, parental involvement is a more common challenge than getting sufficient resources, maintaining orders and discipline in a classroom, preparing students for testing and getting needed guidance and support. Relationships with parents are also mentioned by many new teachers as their greatest source of stress and anxiety as educators," the MetLife survey reported (p. 29).

Teachers who say they will leave the profession are more likely than others to be dissatisfied with their relationships with parents (32% vs. 17%). "If educators did not believe that teachers' working in concert with parents was so important, perhaps these findings would not be that noteworthy. But teachers view parent involvement as a critical component of children's educational experience. The gap between educators' high expectations and their daily experiences may serve to heighten their dissatisfaction in this area," MetLife reported (p. 29).

The severity of the situation was highlighted by a recent article in the *Baltimore Sun* which reported that a survey by the Howard County Education Association revealed that 60% of its members had been harassed and that parents were the offenders in a majority of those cases. The situation has become so serious that the system has implemented a civility policy and the PTA has sent a warning letter to parents about e-mail communications with teachers. "Teachers are leaving teaching because of parents," said Ann DeLacy, HCEA president (Williams, 2008).

The clash between parents and young teachers becomes easier to understand with some background about the generational personality of each.

The bulk of the parents of today's schoolchildren are primarily Gen Xers between the ages of 25 and 44. Gen X parents have delayed child-

bearing longer than earlier generations as they pursued careers, said Helen Johnson, an educational consultant who specializes on issues of parents and education. Their families are smaller, rarely more than three children in a home. That means parents have more time to focus on fewer children. As a generation, Gen Xers tend to view the world as a dangerous place so they are striving to protect their children in a variety of ways. These parents tend to perceive their child's achievement as a personal achievement for the parent. That's been aided by brain research suggesting that parents can affect brain development and thus influence a child's intellectual capacity. "We have never been in this place before in American history," Johnson said.

"Parents are more involved with their children and that's a good thing. The bad news is that these parents are overprotective and overinvolved and truncating their child's development," Johnson said.

Suzette Lovely said the conflict becomes most obvious in schools because "we now have a generation of teachers who were raised by helicopter parents.

"They're not used to dealing with conflict. They didn't deal with that a lot as a youngster. Their parents rescued them from difficult situations," Lovely said.

Now, as professionals, they find themselves on the receiving end. And they are struggling.

### Helping young teachers respond

Coaches and mentors play a vital role in helping beginning teachers develop an effective partnership with parents. That applies whether young teachers are trying to encourage parental support or define an appropriate level of parental support.

**If working with parents is not one of your strengths, solicit the help of a veteran teacher who has good rapport with parents in your community.** "It's a mistake to believe that all veteran teachers or even mentors have had positive experiences with parents," said Wendy Baron, associate director of the New Teacher Center at the University of California-Santa Cruz.

**Be honest with new teachers about the**

✓ This issue of *Teachers Teaching Teachers (T3)* is sponsored by MetLife Foundation. This issue and other NSDC newsletters in the spring of 2008 draw on findings from the annual MetLife Survey of the American Teacher.

✓ MetLife began the Survey series in 1984 to bring the views and voices of those closest to the classroom to the attention of education leaders and the public.

✓ To read more about any of the MetLife Teacher Surveys and the MetLife Foundation, visit [www.metlife.org](http://www.metlife.org).



The bulk of the parents of today's schoolchildren are primarily Gen Xers between the ages of 25 and 44.

**challenges of working with parents in your community.** If your new teachers do not share the same cultural background as the families in your school, ensure that they understand the different perspectives of those families. Introduce them to a parent liaison or representative from the parent council before school begins. A tour of the community before school begins will also familiarize them with community resources and provide a glimpse of community expectations.

**Guide beginning teachers in developing a partnership relationship with parents.** Lay the groundwork for beginning teachers to help them understand the value of having parents involved in a child’s education. Share research with them that demonstrates the value of having an involved parent. Ask teachers to recall how their own parents interacted with schools when they were growing up.

**Be proactive about establishing strong communication with parents from the get-go.** Encourage new teachers to contact a parent or family member for every student soon after school begins and before any problems develop. This initial introduction allows the teacher to invite the parent to “tell me about your child.” Provide beginning teachers with templates they can use to create a classroom newsletter or e-mail letter to parents.

**Improve beginning teachers’ knowledge about child development.** Johnson believes that parents often lack sufficient information about what’s appropriate behavior at various grade levels. “Generally, they’re parenting in the blind,” she said. If teachers can develop more knowledge about child development, they can educate parents as they navigate challenging situations. Young teachers may also enhance their credibility with parents if they are armed with information that parents lack, she said.

**Prepare teachers to collect data about their students.** Although teachers may be prepared to go over test scores and report card grades with parents, they also need to be prepared to present other kinds of information about children to their parents, said Lee Alvoid, a former principal in Texas and now a senior lecturer at Southern Methodist University. Alvoid recommends that new teachers learn how to collect

**The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher:**

The Homework Experience (2007) examines homework as a frequent and specific topic of communication among teachers, students, and parents; compares their respective views; and documents significant differences in how new and veteran teachers view and use homework (p. 24).

work samples and informal observations about student growth and progress. “If you go into parent conferences without actual information, it can become too personal,” she said.

**Identify expectations for parents at the start of each school year.** Young teachers have to establish themselves at the beginning of relationships with parents, Johnson said. “Tell them immediately, ‘this is what I expect of you in your son or daughter’s education and this is how I will be interacting with you.’ If you don’t make it clear, they’ll run all over you,” she said. Being specific about expectations in the beginning — possibly including putting it in writing — allows teachers to remind parents of the agreement later if they overstep their bounds. Take advantage of parents’ interest in being involved and give them jobs to do that do not involve having them in the classroom, she suggested. “Involve them in appropriate ways so they can be part of the experience without taking over the experience,” she said.

**Plan extensively for back-to-school night and the first parent-teacher conference.** Write guides for beginning teachers to follow for their first conference and role-play a parent-teacher conference with every new teacher. Talk with new teachers about how to arrange their rooms and how to prepare materials for back-to-school night or parent-teacher conferences. Alvoid suggests including students in parent-teacher conferences as a way to ensure that the discussion is focused on student learning. See p. 5 for a preparation guide that new teachers could use for conferences.

**Prepare teachers to make home visits.** If parents are unable to visit school for a conference or if teachers would benefit from learning more

See the April 2008 issue of *The Learning Principal* to read about **principal support for beginning teachers.**

See the April 2008 issue of *The Learning System* to read about **using technology to ease new teachers into the profession.**



See the May-June 2008 issue of *Tools for Schools* to learn more about the unique characteristics of **the Millennials, the new teachers who are entering the profession.**

about their students' home life, then prepare teachers to visit their homes. Review Margery Ginsberg's article, "Lessons from the kitchen table: Visiting with families in their homes" (*Teachers Teaching Teachers*, Dec. 2007) to learn about one process for making home visits.

The New Teacher Center's Wendy Baron has one caution about home visits to consider. "If new teachers are doing home visits, hopefully, it's because veteran teachers have started this practice," Baron said. She does not recommend that beginning teachers introduce this practice in their communities.

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# Questions prepare parents for a parent-teacher conference

To better prepare parents for parent-teacher conferences, consider sending home a list of questions they might ask during a conference.

1. What is my child's class schedule?
2. What do you expect my child to learn this year in reading? Math? Science? Social studies?
3. Are children grouped for reading, math, or other subjects? What group is my child in and how are children selected for that group?
4. Is my child working up to his or her ability?
5. In what areas is he or she doing well?
6. In what subjects does he or she need to improve?
7. What are the most important things for the children in your classroom to learn this year? What can I do at home to encourage that?
8. How is my child's work evaluated?
9. Can you show me examples of my child's work — classroom projects, tests, special assignments?
10. How much time should my child spend on homework each night? How can I help with homework?
11. What can you tell me about how my child seems to learn best? Is he or she a hands-on learner? Does he or she need to move around? Does he enjoy learning in a cooperative group or prefer working alone in a quiet place?
12. How do your classroom strategies complement my child's preferred learning style?
13. Does the school have a code of conduct? How do you discipline students in your classroom?
14. Does my child get along with other children? With you?
15. How can I reinforce classroom learning at home or learn more about my child's progress in school? Are there opportunities for parents to be involved in classroom activities?



**Source:** Adapted from *Learning Together*, a publication of the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 800-441-4563.



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# Keys to a learning community

I got an e-mail not long ago from a buddy working as an assistant principal in a California middle school. “Hey Bill,” he asked, “We’re thinking about starting this PLC thing. Have you got any advice for us?”

Mark’s question isn’t unique, is it? After all, many schools have begun to embrace the concepts behind professional learning communities in the past decade with remarkable results. Teachers working collaboratively and focusing on student achievement are identifying instructional practices that work and rediscovering a sense of professional empowerment that is nothing short of rewarding.

But, just as often, schools seem to struggle with the transition to professional learning communities. Teachers trained in isolation resist collegial work or are overwhelmed by new tasks they are poorly prepared to handle. Administrators interested in immediate results implement top-down decisions instead of waiting for change driven from within — and before long, well-intentioned efforts are abandoned.

So what’s the difference? What key factors are essential to ensuring that professional collaboration takes hold in a building?

First, school leaders must recognize that collaboration is a complex process that teachers may initially struggle to master. Early meetings are often messy affairs as learning teams structure their work with one another. Personality conflicts are likely to arise and consensus may be hard to come by.

School leaders can support novice teams by providing specific, achievable tasks to tackle. Consider asking your teachers to develop a common assessment together or to create a list of essential questions that students should master before the end of a semester — and then cele-

brate the products that are created. Teachers need to feel successful in their early collaborative efforts in order to continue moving forward.

But school leaders must also recognize that sometimes the professional learning community process is more important than any product from an individual team. Schools often put so much attention on outcomes that we undervalue the work that leads to tangible results. This tendency tempts principals to require that learning teams always complete tasks from lesson planning to grade reporting in predefined ways.

The consequences of such constant control are relatively extreme. While teachers are likely to “follow the rules” — and may even believe that administrators have made their work easier by specifying outcomes — critical conversations about teaching and learning are lost. Educators move from being experts wrestling together with content and curriculum to blue-collar workers investing little mental energy into automated assignments.

In many ways, the learning teams in your building are a lot like the students in your classrooms. They are unique and take great pride in their individual identities. At times, they’ll have every tool they need to be successful, and at other times, they’ll need more support than you’d ever expect.

Your goal — just like a good teacher — should be to differentiate the support that you offer, helping each learning team to develop into self-sustaining, thoughtful, and accomplished groups that are passionate about their work together.

Sounds easy, right? ◆



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# Demonstrating opens doors

**Q** What's the most valuable tool you use as a coach?

For me, it's demonstrating lessons. I observe teachers and see where things are not going just right for them. I give them feedback, and sometimes they ask me to observe again. Or it may be that they need to observe me teaching a lesson. Feedback and demonstration lessons are very powerful.

I was the new kid on the block (at College Lakes), and I had to build relationships — being supportive, just standing back, not too pushy. There were teachers who were National Board Certified who thought they knew — and they probably did — as much or more about literacy than I did, so I had to prove myself and start slowly, asking them, "May I teach a lesson?" It wasn't really demonstrating at first. I'd go into a class and make sure I had strategies, make sure the kids were actively involved, where they could tell their friends on the bus, "Boy, we have a good time when Mrs. Brown comes." As the

kids started talking, that made kids in other classrooms ask why couldn't I come and teach in their classrooms. So that's what I started doing, asking, "May I teach a lesson?"

When I'd go into a classroom where the teacher was a little skeptical, I made sure the kids were actively learning and were having a good time doing it. Before I knew it, the teachers were sitting down watching; they weren't just checking papers — they were watching me teach! And then they would start talking: "Oh, my kids really enjoyed Mrs. Brown when she was in our class last week." "When are you coming back?" Then they told other teachers on their grade level about me, and those teachers would ask me to do a lesson, or I'd ask them and they'd say, "Yes, I heard the kids really enjoyed your lesson across the hallway yesterday."

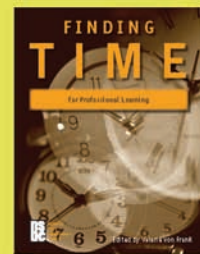
It was really building relationships and demonstrating meaningful lessons with rigor to let teachers know that I wasn't just telling them, but was using some of the strategies I was sharing with them. ♦



## Finding Time for Professional Learning

*Edited by Valerie von Frank*

A compilation of articles and tools about time published in NSDC's newsletters and *JSD* in the last decade. The most comprehensive collection of articles you will find anywhere. Includes suggestions about how to use the articles to guide the discussion about time in your school and district.



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# Turn parents into partners

**T**eachers say interaction with parents is one of their greatest sources of stress. Most teachers want more parent involvement in their children's education and want parents to demonstrate the importance of education. Occasionally, some teachers wish for less parental involvement. Teachers know that working together with parents in active partnership is key to students' academic success.

Parents and teachers have the same goals: success for every student. Parents think less about all students and more about their children as students. Parents want teachers who are willing to see each student as an individual, who recognize each student's strengths, and are willing to communicate with parents about what is going on in the classroom. In today's technology-rich era, parents and teachers have more ways to communicate including e-mail, text messages, fax, and phone, yet the structures of families and communities make it increasingly more challenging for parents and teachers to communicate. Parents will have no reservations about reaching out to teachers when it is convenient for them. Their primary motivation is to support their child's education.

Remembering that they share the same goals parents do is important to teachers. Teachers sometimes find parents intrusive especially if they are contacting teachers beyond the workday. Yet, teachers want parents to be involved in their students' education, to show interest in their schoolwork, ensure that they complete their homework accurately and thoroughly, and help students understand the importance of an education. They want parents to help in the classroom, yet not to meddle in what is going on. The line is a fine one.

Teachers have a responsibility to establish

## FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

Staff development that improves the learning of all students provides educators with knowledge and skills to involve families and other stakeholders appropriately.



clear parameters and expectations for parents. While some of these may seem difficult, parents will appreciate the clarity.

Here are 10 tips for building successful parent-teacher partnerships so that all students learn.

**1. Find strengths in all students and communicate those to each student's parents.**

When parents know that teachers see their student as they do, they will have greater confidence in the teacher. Students have both strengths and areas for growth, yet communications should



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For more information about NSDC's Standards for Staff Development, see [www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm](http://www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm)



focus on the strengths.

**2. Clarify expectations.** Teachers will want to be precise about what they want parents to do to support students' learning. For example, teachers can specify whether they expect or want parents to review or assist with homework, help with projects, etc. When teachers give parents specific tasks that are time-bound, specific, and focused, parents are better able to complete them.

**3. Communicate frequently via classroom newsletters, e-mails, or phone calls so that parents feel connected and can ask appropriate questions about their child's class work.** Parents can be more supportive of classroom learning when they know the key concepts students are expected to learn in lessons and units and important dates for assignments, projects, events, or tests. Teachers can provide parents with a list of questions to ask children about their schoolwork.

**4. Remember that family situations differ dramatically.** What one family is able to do is not what another might be able to do. The challenge is to understand how families differ. Parents want to help, yet what constitutes help for one family will not be the same in another. Be flexible and understanding with expectations to accommodate the difference among families.

**5. Enroll parents in their child's learning.** Help parents know how to support the content or processes of learning. Parents will be glad to lend a hand provided what is being asked of them is within their time and comfort zones. Make the tasks short and interactive. Focus on those things that are difficult for you to accomplish in school and that need family and community reinforcement, such as responsibility, respect, character education, etc.

**6. Assign homework some of which can be interactive.** Homework is a must today for practicing and refining learning. Teachers don't assign homework as often as they might because they know that too many students do not complete it. Yet, increasingly, students need more time for practice and for application of their learning and that means extending their learning time by providing homework.

**7. Invite parents to visit the school and classroom.** Parents of young children will be

eager for an invitation to visit. Parents of older children will not. Regardless of the age of their child, parents want to know that they are welcome to visit the classroom with advance notice.

**8. Set parameters.** Help parents learn how to respect your non-work time by setting and communicating parameters for parent communication. Parameters might include evening time when it is acceptable to call and when it isn't, how you prefer to be contacted to talk about students, when you are available and when you are not during the school day, and what to do if there is a problem and they can't reach you or feel that they need to speak to someone else.

**9. Keep the student out of the middle.** Students are not reliable go-betweens for either parents or teachers. Direct communication is best. Parents worry that teachers may take something out on their child if there is a problem between the teacher and parent. This can never be the case.

**10. Be professional.** Parents may be uncomfortable speaking to their child's teachers because they feel inadequate. Use language that is appropriate for parents, clear, specific, and free of "educationese." Parents appreciate being spoken to as adults rather than students. Teachers might catch themselves sounding as if they are speaking to students rather than adults.

When communicating with parents is not as easy as making a call in the evening, teachers can reach out to school district and community services for help. School districts typically offer resources to help teachers connect with parents when language or other access challenges arise. These services might include parent advocates, parent resource centers, social workers, and translators. Teachers can tap into community resources as well. Sometimes, community services, churches, and housing units have advocates who can help teachers reach parents.

For all teachers, building healthy relationships with students is an important part of their work. This work extends to building healthy relationships with parents as well. Reaching out to parents is an important part of teaching. When parents and teachers share the same goals for students' academic success, communicate frequently, and support one another, students benefit. ♦



**Clarify expectations.** Teachers will want to be precise about what they want parents to do to support students' learning.

# What new teachers need

By **Carla Thomas McClure**

**M**any first-year teachers find themselves “on their own and presumed expert,” according to researchers Susan M. Kardos and Susan Moore Johnson. Their recent examination of how new teachers experience the professional culture of their schools — coupled with findings from other studies — yields useful insights about how schools can better support and retain able and committed teachers.

## What interested the researchers in doing this study?

Researchers Kardos and Johnson had found in a previous study that a school’s professional culture seems to influence whether new teachers stay or leave. In that study, new teachers seemed more likely to stay if the school had what the researchers called an “integrated professional culture.” The current study takes a closer look at this phenomenon.

## What is an integrated professional culture?

Kardos and Johnson define it as a culture that (a) promotes frequent and reciprocal interaction among faculty members across experience levels, (b) recognizes new teachers’ needs as beginners, and (3) develops shared responsibility among teachers for the school.

## How was the study conducted?

The researchers surveyed a representative sample of 486 first- and second-year K-12 teachers in four states: California, Florida, Massachusetts, and Michigan. These states are experiencing teacher shortages and vary in geographic size, average school size, and composi-



tion of student populations. The survey (which included 136 items, including 18 general questions) was based on a review of the research literature and had been pilot tested in an earlier study. Survey responses were received from 65% of the sample. The researchers analyzed the results according to the three main features of integrated professional cultures.

## What were the findings?

Among teachers surveyed in the four states, one half (in California and Michigan) to two thirds (in Florida and Massachusetts) said they plan and teach alone. Less than half reported that extra assistance was available or that all teachers

In integrated professional cultures, veteran and novice teachers learn together, new teachers’ needs are recognized, and all teachers share responsibility for student success.

**EDVANTIA™**

Carla Thomas McClure is a staff writer at Edvantia ([www.edvantia.org](http://www.edvantia.org)), a nonprofit research and development organization that works with federal, state, and local education agencies to improve student achievement.

in their school share responsibility for all students.

**How can schools develop an integrated professional culture?**

The researchers observed that California’s state-funded mentoring program did not guarantee that new teachers got the support they wanted or needed. Adequately supporting new teachers requires leadership at the school level, they say. The researchers suggest that principals and school leaders foster a sense of shared responsibility across the school; engage veteran teachers in the “sustained induction of new teachers and in their own professional growth”; and earmark resources to support collaborative planning, mentoring, and classroom observations.

**Is this approach supported by other studies?**

Yes. In 2007, RAND researcher Cassandra Guarino and associates analyzed recent Schools and Staffing Surveys. They found lower turnover rates among beginning teachers in schools with induction and mentoring programs, especially when the programs emphasized collegial support. Researcher Ken Futernick (2007), after surveying 2,000 current and former teachers in California, concluded that both novice and veteran teachers felt greater personal satisfaction when they believed in their own efficacy, were involved in decision making, and established strong collegial relationships.

Research also underscores the important role of school leaders in helping new teachers succeed. “Teachers often leave high-poverty, low-performing, at-risk schools because they have not been adequately prepared to teach in such challenging environments and lack much-needed support from administrators,” says Sabrina Laine, director of the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality. Interview data from a 2006 study conducted by Pamela Angelle suggests that principals’ involvement in teacher induction can improve retention, especially when principals provide “professional socialization” in the form of frequent discussion, monitoring, and feedback.

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Interview data from a 2006 study conducted by Pamela Angelle suggests that principals’ involvement in teacher induction can improve retention, especially when principals provide “professional socialization” in the form of frequent discussion, monitoring, and feedback.