



Mentoring in the 21st Century

Issue XII

by Paula Rutherford

This newsletter provides advice, insights, and suggestions helpful to mentors and induction program coordinators as they strive to support new teachers. Also included are timely instructional tips mentors can share with new teachers. This month's newsletter focuses on strategies for helping new teachers deal with the paper flow.

Dealing with the Paper Flow

This time of the year many new teachers are saying things like:

- I started the year organized, but I can't seem to stay that way. How can I keep from getting bogged down?
- I am stumped by the amount of paperwork I am given. I do not know how many files to make or when to get rid of stuff.
- When will I ever feel like I am organized?
- How do you keep track of finished assignments so that you are not shuffling papers all the time?
- How can I catch up when I'm so behind and have lots of piles to go through?
- How do I manage my time to leave time to organize? My papers are currently exploding all over my desk!

Some mentors are organizational wonders but others of us experience the same feelings and face some of the same organizational challenges that novice teachers encounter. We have to be honest in assessing our own organizational skillfulness. That way we can decide if we are the appropriate coach or if we need to reach out to colleagues for guidance with organizational systems. However we do it, we need to provide support for our protégées in their fledgling attempts to manage the incredible paper flow that is a part of their professional lives.

A successful system for dealing with the paper flow means that we can find what we need when we want it. There is no one right way to organize the thousands of pieces of paper that are a part of our lives. Some of us are three-ring binder people, some of us are color file folder people, and some of us know exactly what is in each of our many piles. Whether novice or veteran, when we cannot find what we need, feel overwhelmed by the inadequacies of our current systems, or experience a loss of instructional time searching for needed paperwork, we need to seek alternatives to our current practice. This loss of instructional time is often accompanied by unfocused or inappropriate student behavior which leads to a whole other set of problems that could have been avoided.

Below you will find strategies for helping new teachers deal with the paper flow. Select the ones that are the best match for those you are mentoring.

Ask staff members to participate in a **Paper Flow Graffiti** at a faculty meeting, collect the suggestions listed, and prepare a list of suggestions for each area of paper management to send via email to each teacher. Email

the list instead of copying it to avoid yet another piece of paper to put in a pile or stuff in a book bag! .

Suggested headings for charts include:

- Memos and bulletins from the school and school district
- Professional papers
- Forms to be completed
- Completed forms
- Receipts for taxes
- Instructional materials
- Lesson Plans
- Papers to be reviewed and graded
- Papers to be returned
- Communication from parents
- Communication to parents
- Personal papers
- What to keep and what to toss
- Generic tips

Structure a conversation on managing the paper flow. Some key ideas are:

- Identify three main categories: professional, instructional, and personal.
- Identify a storage space for each category and, upon receipt, do an immediate sort by filing or tossing the paper in the file (or pile) for that category. Do not co-mingle!
- Further organize the three main categories into information items and actions items. Some teachers find that weekly, monthly, or quarterly tickler files help them access documents that have due dates or require action in a given time period.
- Note the date received on all documents.
- Highlight the title of the original copy with a yellow highlighter. The yellow will not show if you need to make more copies and it minimizes the chance of accidentally throwing away the original. Consistent use of this highlighting process facilitates the throwing away of additional copies without fear of tossing the original.
- Organize a tour of classrooms to see what organizational systems other teachers are using. If the protégé has a position such as librarian, music teacher, art teacher, or AP teacher and is the only one in your building, check with your mentor colleagues in other schools to identify a model situation to visit together at that site.

For mid-year paperwork crisis situations where disorganization is leading to stress, loss of instructional time, and inappropriate student behavior, arrange to have lunch with your protégé or schedule an after-school work session. Work with your protégé to organize the current mess. In preparation for the work session, create appropriate labels for file folders as well as cover and spine inserts for three-ring binders. Go with these materials plus a hole punch, yellow highlighter, tabbed dividers, and green garbage bags in hand to create a sense of order. There is no guarantee that the protégé will continue to stay organized so just as we have to scaffold learning for students, you may have to scaffold organization by checking in frequently to see how the systems are working.

Create a visual catalog of organizational systems by taking photographs of desks, bookcases, cabinets, crates, etc. that are organized in a way that the teacher who uses the system is satisfied. Ask the teacher who uses the system to write a brief statement that explains the thinking behind it. Place the photographs and explanations in plastic sleeves in a three-ring binder and use it to structure conversations about alternative systems. Other ways to create visual menus include using a camcorder to capture organizational systems in your own school or

collaborating with other mentors in the district to put together a web cast focused not only on paper flow but on all classroom organizational systems.

New teachers who have well-functioning organizational systems in place are far less likely to face on-going student behavior issues. As we all know, the best management program is a strong instructional program. Organizational systems are one of the important keys to higher levels of student learning.

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