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INTRODUCTION

BUILDING A NEW GENERATION OF EDUCATORS

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A Welcoming and Necessary Onboarding Process

It's the start of a new school year, and principal Kendra Watkins and instructional coach David Reese are reviewing plans for welcoming the three new teachers who will be joining their staff this year. And although all three are new to the school, they come from very different backgrounds. Angelina Franklin recently completed Teach for America training and is eager to have her first classroom. Melissa Vasquez taught for a few years but took several years away from the profession to raise a young family. She is now returning to teaching but is new to the state after the recent career transfer of her husband, a member of the military. Jonathan Hill is also new to the profession, having completed his teaching credential program at a local university, and this will be his first assignment. He and Franklin will be enrolled in the district's induction program for first- and second-year teachers. While all three have different support needs, one held in common: onboarding them to a new school organization.

Onboarding should not be confused with orientation. Orientation is typically performed at the district level by the Human Resources office and usually includes employment and insurance requirements and logistics. These are essential for new hires, but the orientation does not provide new teachers with information about the context of their daily teaching.

Onboarding should not be confused with induction. New teachers are required to complete professional learning experiences, known as an induction program, to develop their newly acquired skills. If we think back to our induction program, we certainly grew from our collaboration with new educators, but it did not fully prepare us for what we needed to know at the site level.

What Is Onboarding?

Onboarding is the employment process of integrating a new professional member into the site-level organization. Coherent onboarding processes have several characteristics: (1) planned activities aligned to the site's values and structures; (2) regular opportunities to network with other members of the organization, including those who perform similar job functions; and (3) extended experiences that last up to one year.

Each campus is unique, with its own set of curricular, instructional, and cultural expectations, hence the need for a robust onboarding process. As an example, it is likely that Angelina, who has not gone through an extended teacher preparation program, and Jonathan, who has recently finished one, are likely to be additionally enrolled in a district or state induction program. Melissa, a credentialed teacher who is returning to the profession after several years away, will not be involved in a formal induction program. But as school site leaders, newly hired teachers like Angelina, Melissa, and Jonathan can all benefit from coherent support and guidance about the school's ways of work.

An excellent onboarding process should provide new employees, regardless of experience, with guidance about how the site-level organization functions, why it does so, and what success looks like. Gallup, which specializes in analytics and advisory for other companies, has offices in dozens of countries around the

world. They recognized the complexity of onboarding at their sites and developed their own to integrate employees new to their offices. They advise that an effective onboarding process should help new members answer these five questions (Gallup, 2019, p. 12):

The Five Questions of Onboarding

1. What do we believe in around here?
2. What are my strengths?
3. What is my role?
4. Who are my partners?
5. What does my future here look like?

The onboarding process is developed at the site by instructional leaders and coaches. They begin by customizing what is broadly taught in teacher preparation programs. Then they articulate their localized expectations and coach new staff members so they can equitably contribute and serve students, their families, and the collective school community. Additionally, and arguably just as important, is the welcoming and collaborative spirit of onboarding. Protheroe (2006) found that teachers who are new to school organizations, regardless of experience:

- ▶ Want access to accessible leaders who provide assistance, guidance, and solutions
- ▶ Appreciate being observed in the classroom and getting direct feedback and guidance
- ▶ Want to be listened to and made to feel successful
- ▶ Benefit from a support group of teachers with whom they can collaborate, vent, and provide motivation during tough times
- ▶ Are eager to watch experts and develop their craft under guidance
- ▶ Want more information about the expectations of school leaders

As Gallup notes in their onboarding process, failed, laissez-faire onboarding moves new hires from “excitement to disillusionment . . . ‘This isn’t what I expected. Maybe there’s a better place for me.’” (p. 12). On the other hand, a successful onboard process moves those new to the organization from “excitement to long-term commitment . . . ‘This is better than I expected. I think I have a future here!’” (p. 12).

Principal Watkins and instructional coach Reese have a plan in mind to support each of these teachers during their first year at school, with the intended outcome of gaining long-term commitment. Using the monthly plan outlined in this playbook, they coordinate their efforts to ensure that each of these new

teachers—Angelina, Jonathan, and Melissa—is successful. This playbook offers instructional leaders, coaches, and mentors the tools to provide teachers new to your site with these valuable opportunities.

The Research Base

This playbook draws from two bodies of research: supports for novice teachers in their first year, as well as those who may be returning to the profession after an extended time away, and the Visible Learning® database.

District, regional, and university induction programs are of value in continuing the professional learning of early-career teachers. However, most have little direct influence on site-based supports that new teachers need to cultivate their craft and build their self-efficacy. School site leaders have the unique ability to shape the collegial networks that exist in their schools, which is of vital importance in the lives of new teachers (Frahm & Cianca, 2021). The importance of a teacher’s sense of efficacy, which is to say their belief that they can act upon their individual goals, cannot be minimized. The efficacy of the teacher has been linked to student learning and job satisfaction, crucial for teacher retention in the first five years (Klassen & Chiu, 2010).

Hylton and Colley (2022) in their review of findings of a new teacher support initiative, offered four recommendations that we believe resonate for site leaders, coaches, and mentors who support new teachers in their buildings:

- ▶ **Novice teachers have a lot on their minds.** Being a new teacher is a bit like drinking out of a fire hose—there are so many stimuli coming all at once that it can be nearly impossible to sort out what is notable versus what is just noise. Site leaders, coaches, and mentors help novice teachers notice what is informative and act upon it. They prioritize, but they also help new teachers to filter.
- ▶ **Novice teachers are hungry for meaningful engagement.** Daily teaching can come as a shock to new teachers, especially those who experience it as a largely isolating experience. Not only do they need adult contact, but they also crave guidance from leaders that includes regular feedback. Most of all, they need lots of opportunities to see colleagues in action and to hold discussions where they can pose questions.
- ▶ **Novice teachers need safe spaces to explore and even fail.** Reflective teaching requires that we pay close attention to what is working and what is not and respond accordingly. But new teachers may hold a naïve belief that they need to somehow be “perfect.” Having a safe space to explore means that they have permission to take measured and informed risks, and to notice its impact. Without guidance, novice teachers can either fall into a pattern of blaming students or blaming themselves, with little insight into finding a path forward.
- ▶ **We all keep learning.** Perhaps this is the most exciting finding that Hylton and Colley (2022) reported: The benefits to leaders, coaches, mentors, and novice teachers in mutual. As a field, we often speak of the

new learning that novice teachers can bring to the building, but unless we are deliberate in building linkages between seasoned and new staff, the opportunity is never realized. Communication with new teachers makes these benefits possible.

The second research base we draw from is Visible Learning, which describes a constellation of efforts. It is a research database (www.visiblelearningmetax.com; Visible Learning Meta^x, 2021), a school improvement initiative (see Corwin, n.d., <https://us.corwin.com/en-us/nam/visible-learning>), and a call to action to focus on what works best to impact learning (Hattie, 2023). The Visible Learning database is composed of over 2,100 meta-analyses of the work of over 400 million students. That is big data when it comes to education. In fact, some have said that it is the largest educational research database amassed to date. To make sense of so much data, John Hattie focuses his work on interpreting the meaning of these meta-analyses.

A meta-analysis is a statistical tool for combining findings from different studies with the goal of identifying patterns that can inform practice. In other words, it is a study of studies. The tool that is used to aggregate the information is an effect size. An effect size is the magnitude, or size, of a given effect. To draw an imperfect but functional comparison, consider what you know about how earthquakes are measured. They are reported as an order of magnitude on a scale called a Richter scale. Some earthquakes are imperceptible except by specialized measurement tools. Other earthquakes have a minimal shake that results in a small, momentary impact but no lasting effects. A few register high on the Richter scale and have a definitive impact on an area. Just as numbers on the Richter scale help us understand the effect of an earthquake, effect sizes from meta-analyses of several studies help us understand the impact of an educational influence. Understanding the effect size lets us know how powerful a given influence is in changing achievement—in other words, the impact of the effort.

John was able to demonstrate that influences, strategies, actions, and so on with an effect size greater than 0.40 allow students to learn at an appropriate rate, meaning at least a year of growth for a year in school. While it provides an overall average, often specific conditions can be more critical—such as whether you are measuring a narrow construct (like vocabulary words known) or a wider construct (such as creative thinking). Throughout this playbook, certain practices are supported with descriptions of their effect sizes. In doing so, we want to support your efforts in guiding novice teachers with research-backed findings. The Meta^x website at www.visiblelearningmetax.com provides further information about the particular influences mentioned.

Who Is This Playbook for?

The support of teachers new to the site cannot be left to chance, yet too often, it happens anyway. The repercussions of what occurs when support is left to chance are profound and long lasting. Eleven percent (11%) of novice teachers leave the profession within the first year (Zhang et al., 2019). Nearly half will leave before their fifth year (Burke et al., 2015). And keep in mind that these were

pre-pandemic findings. In an era where teacher recruitment and retention are crucial for the profession, we must develop more coherent webs of support that ensure we don't lose early-career educators. Relying on an induction program is not enough. And here's a bit more encouragement if you're not quite sold on the idea of creating a coherent onboarding process for those who are new to your site: "Employees who describe their onboarding process as exceptional are 3.3 times more likely to strongly agree that their job is as good, or better, than expected" (Gallup, 2019, p. 7). Importantly, these are the product of human interactions that together create a relational network for new teachers. A comprehensive web of site-based new teacher supports includes the following:

- ▶ Central office induction leaders
- ▶ School administrators
- ▶ Department and grade-level chairs
- ▶ Instructional coaches
- ▶ Mentor teachers who are welcoming a new colleague into their department or grade level
- ▶ Expert teachers who care about the future of the profession

Is this you? If so, this playbook is for you. You'll find ideas for how to support teachers new at their school sites, systematically and intentionally, during their first year of teaching.

Using This Playbook

The playbook is designed for instructional leaders, coaches, mentors, and expert teachers to design and implement an effective onboarding process for new staff. We will use the term *new teachers* to include novice teachers who are new to the profession as well as more experienced professionals who have been away from teaching for several years and are now returning. There are eight cycles based on focused themes specific to the needs of a first-year teacher:

- Cycle 1: Setting up the physical environment, routines, and procedures
- Cycle 2: Invitational teaching, student engagement, and universal classroom management
- Cycle 3: Teacher credibility, high-expectations teaching, and family communication
- Cycle 4: Teacher clarity
- Cycle 5: Fostering student ownership of learning and using evidence-based instructional practices
- Cycle 6: Monitoring progress through formative assessment and feedback
- Cycle 7: Mastery of standards and grading
- Cycle 8: Closing the school year and moving forward

Each cycle has several interactive features, designed for you individually (the instructional leader, coach, or mentor), for you to do with the new teacher, and for the new teacher to experience on their own. Each cycle begins with a Context About the Theme section that serves as a brief summary of the current research on the topic. We believe that leaders, coaches, mentors, and expert teachers will find these summaries useful in deepening their own expertise. In addition, features include coaching scenarios, coaching reflections, checklists for implementation, self-assessments, applications to practice, review of the previous learning, as well as learning walk, observation, and debriefing tools. In addition, we have short reviews written for you to ground the cycle's theme in the context of current research.

The cycles are intended to be presented in sequential order but can be used as standalone topics. Similarly, although each one is designed for four-week cycles, some themes may understandably go beyond that timeline. You'll find specific coaching questions aligned to the cycle, and activities designed to help the novice teacher return to previous themes as they acquire new learning and experiences. Each onboarding process is unique, so we encourage you to modify the learning such that it aligns with your district or schoolwide focus and meets the needs of your new teachers.

We fully recognize that these topics are not one-and-done; they cannot be fully covered in the span of four weeks. Rather, we hope that this incremental approach provides you with opportunities to spotlight district and site initiatives, while also establishing the evergreen nature of these topics. They remain relevant throughout one's teaching career.

Leaders are the second greatest influence on student learning, and teachers have the greatest impact. Equity-driven leaders make it a priority to coach all teachers because of their undeniable impact on students, but they also differentiate their support and develop a welcoming learning environment for the new adult learners on their staff. Our hope is that this playbook will serve as a guide, but we also hope that it reminds you of why you became an educator in the first place. We play an incredibly important and undeniable role in mentoring the next generation of equity-driven teachers.