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New teachers get wise support

By JOE ROBERTSON
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Marlene Goring could have used someone like herself when she was stranded in front of a Kansas City first-grade classroom seven years ago.

Kellee Ransom has it better, no doubt.

Ransom, a second-year teacher, has an adviser — Goring — dedicated to helping her with lesson plans.

She has someone to help her hone those routines that herd her fourth-graders out of the coat closets, in from the bathroom, away from the pencil sharpener and into their seats ready to learn.

Someone to help her with the quiet boy slumped in his chair, hiding tears.

Ransom is a big fan of a collaboration between the Kansas City School District and the University of Missouri-Kansas City that brought Goring into her classroom.

Fifteen advisers — paid by the district and trained by the UMKC School of Education — circulate regularly throughout the district, each serving a cadre of new teachers, observing instruction, modeling lessons and meeting one on one to talk strategy and buoy emotions.

Goring knows about those first years. She knows why statistics show that nearly half of new teachers nationwide leave within five years.

For her, it was “sink or swim,” she said. Of six new teachers in her original circle of colleagues, she’s the only one still standing.

“It wasn’t a romance,” Goring said. “It was a hard experience.”

Support programs for new teachers are catching on across the country.

Research shows that the percentage of schools providing some level of extra training has risen over the past 15 years from roughly 35 percent to 85 percent, said Richard M. Ingersoll, who has conducted years of national research with the University of Pennsylvania.

But questions remain. The models and intensity of programs vary widely. And evidence is still lacking that affirms schools are getting results in return for the costs.

The Kansas City district has budgeted \$1.6 million to provide high-level support for all of its first- and second-year teachers, and some third-year teachers.

“In our heart of hearts ... common sense tells us that this helps,” Ingersoll said.

Doctors get internships and residencies, he said. New attorneys aren’t given the difficult cases. Teachers thrown into classrooms need support.

Many studies have tracked why teachers leave the profession early. One of the dominant reasons is job dissatisfaction.

A study released in 2007 by the Consortium on Chicago School Research found that new teachers receiving strong levels of support were two or even three times as likely to report a good teaching experience than their

peers.

But a study released in August by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute on Education Sciences did not find that early support programs have yet had a significant influence in reducing teacher attrition or boosting student achievement.

It's hard to isolate the effects of the programs in data, Ingersoll said. Teachers who might not have formal support are usually getting something, even if they seek it out on their own. And the variety in the scope and quality of support programs clouds research as well.

UMKC's advisers say they have found that Kansas City teachers want the help.

Kristen Ross is glad that Sean Saunders drops in and watches her teach her middle school music classes at the Southwest Early College Campus.

He's the one who told her she should post a ladder of behavior consequences on her wall and display classroom routines.

He suggested that she rearrange the chairs to create a center aisle, which she was using recently while her adviser watched from the back of the room.

She glided down the aisle and subtly laid a hand on the shoulder of a boy while still addressing the whole group, calming him before he became a distraction.

Soon she was pulling off a risky lesson strategy — having the sixth-graders test their knowledge of the elements of songs by marking shifts in pop tunes with alternating dance moves.

"Let me tell you, this is a quality dance party," Ross exclaimed as the students shook and bounced.

All the while Saunders scribbled notes for a debriefing session that would come later.

Originally, UMKC had approached the Kansas City School District about providing an intense advisory program for its own graduates — the handful of new teachers hired by Kansas City from UMKC's Institute for Urban Education, said program coordinator Sherry Eastin.

But the interim superintendent at the time, Clive Coleman, didn't want it to stop there, she said.

The district saw an opportunity to increase support for all of its new teachers.

Ross, a first-year teacher from the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, likes the extra help.

"I recognize things I could do better," she said, "but other things I'm oblivious to."

This advisory work is separate from the district's performance evaluations of its teachers, Eastin said.

Second-year teacher Lissa Geiger from the University of Pittsburgh didn't need to feel threatened when she sat down with Darrell Alnutt at Southwest to talk about her frustrations with her seventh-grade science classroom routines.

"They're all over the place," she admitted. And she's still figuring out the best way to deal with so many students breaking pencil points in the middle of lessons.

Alnutt showed her Web resources to help her design clear lesson objectives.

"If you can tighten it up, this class will do the work," Alnutt said.

Success goes a long way in boosting job satisfaction.

As Ransom's students were finishing their writing lesson, she walked around the room putting red checkmarks on the papers of students who completed the work.

"They're *getting* it," the University of Alabama graduate exulted with Goring after her fourth-graders marched off to lunch.

The moment capped a recurring conversation, where Ransom, who says “I’m hard on myself,” tells Goring, “I want them to get it.”

And Goring says, “It will come.”

It’s a nice exchange a new teacher needs, Ransom said.

“She’s helped me calm my nerves.”

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