

# Supporting Beginning Teachers in Adventist Schools

## *An Urgent Need*

BY BETTY T. MCCUNE

**W**hen Adventist beginning teachers were asked whether professional support was helpful during their first year of teaching, they emphatically agreed. Here is what they said:

“Extremely important! I would have quit the profession after six months if it had not been for the support I received.”

“I believe support is very important. If I didn’t have it when I first began, I probably would have either quit during the school year, or just changed jobs (with psychiatric help).”

“As a new teacher, you have so many questions and doubts. You really need someone to go to.”

“It is key to our survival!”

“It is very important—without it, you could very easily go crazy.”

“You put forth so much effort and hear the bad stuff more often than the good. Positive reinforcement is so important.”

Not only is support critical, but the *type* of support beginning teachers receive is crucial to their successful entry into the profession. Novice teachers may receive quite different support, as illustrated by the following “Tale of Two Teachers.”

### **A Tale of Two Teachers**

Joanne’s\* principal told her he would provide input on a weekly basis to help

*\*Names have been changed to protect teacher privacy.*

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improve her teaching skills. He faithfully sent her a letter each Monday identifying the mistakes she had made during the past week. Much of his information was provided by students in her classes, whom the principal encouraged to report to him. The negative comments week after week so depressed Joanne that she soon despaired of ever developing the necessary skills to become an effective teacher. By early spring, she had decided to leave the classroom, never to return.

In contrast, John\* began his teaching career in a school large enough to have two classes for each grade. The other experienced fifth-grade teacher remembered horror stories from her first year of teaching, and had committed herself to helping novice teachers avoid similar trauma. She met with John most afternoons to answer questions about school policies, keeping

students attentive and on task, discipline problems, and the many other questions and concerns beginning teachers face. When John mistakenly gave a good student an “F” in math on the first report card, she consoled him and helped him to assuage an irate parent without losing face with the administration, faculty, or parents. John became a master teacher in a relatively short time and committed himself to a lifetime of teaching.

Beginning teachers’ welfare and success are of special interest not only to school and conference administrators, but also to college and university teacher educators and the church at large. After all, a great deal of time, energy, and money is invested in preparing these young people for teaching.

Beginning teachers in American public education fail at an alarming rate. Nationwide, 30 percent of new K-12 teachers leave the profession by the end of their first or second year. Another 10 percent leave after the third year, and by the end of the fifth to seventh year, a full 50 percent leave the profession.<sup>1</sup>

But what about teachers in Adventist schools? Although attrition rates for Adventist K-12 teachers in North America are difficult to obtain, experience suggests that far too many of them also become discouraged and either transfer to public schools or leave the teaching profession entirely.

Why does this happen? After all, many have planned to become teachers for almost as long as they can remember

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and have spent four or five expensive years in colleges and universities preparing for their chosen work. If administrators and teacher educators look back on their own introduction to the classroom, and the problems and discouragement they experienced, they will better understand the nature of the profession and needs of new teachers.

The California New Teacher Project Report (1992) sheds some light on the major causes for the dissatisfaction and high attrition rate of many beginning teachers. While all factors may not apply to Adventist schools, many of them probably contribute to teacher dissatisfaction in any school setting—public or private.<sup>2</sup>

- **Lack of Assistance.** New teachers may hesitate to ask for help with discipline, curriculum, parent conferences, or other problems. They believe their principals see them as trained professionals, so during their first probationary year, they must demonstrate their competency.

While many school principals and experienced teachers would like to help, they are often too busy with their own responsibilities to spend significant time with new personnel on their campuses.

- **Isolation.** Schools are organized differently from most professional workplaces. Teachers are assigned a classroom where they work alone with their students for most of the school day. They rarely

have the time or opportunity to consult with their fellow teachers. In addition, many Adventist teachers work in small schools, where they are often unable to interact with other professionals on a daily basis.

- **Difficult Work Settings.** First-year teachers are assigned the same teaching load as their more-experienced colleagues. New teachers are often assigned the most difficult classes, along with extracurricular activities, and may lack adequate equipment and supplies. Every teacher makes hundreds of conscious decisions each day. One or two poor choices can cause problems that translate into an

### **TEACHER RATING OF SUPPORT SERVICES**

<b>Support Type</b>	<b>Percent of Teachers Who Received</b>	<b>Rated Very Satisfactory</b>	<b>Somewhat Satisfactory</b>	<b>Unsatisfactory</b>
Principal	78%	50%	22%	28%
Conference	77	31	44	27
College/Univ.	68	29	35	36
In-Service	68	21	33	46
Observations	61	15	45	38
Mentor Teacher	45	40	26	34
Dept. Chair	38	21	28	31
Overall Support	95	18	40	43

(Percentages under "Very Satisfactory," "Somewhat Satisfactory," and "Unsatisfactory" represent the ratings of those receiving each type of support.)

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awful day.

• **Lack of Orientation.** Many new teachers are hired just before school begins and have no time to get acquainted with their schools or communities. Teachers' meetings at the beginning of the school year are usually planned for the entire staff, with little attention being given to the beginning teacher. Meeting planners sometimes forget that what they consider routine and "something everyone should know" may be a mystery to the

beginning teacher.

• **Exhaustion and Depression.** Beginning teachers must spend many hours each week preparing for classes and grading papers. Although teaching is hard work for everyone, it is especially so for the new teacher. Preparing each lesson is a new experience, with no file of last year's lessons to use. New teachers become exhausted and frustrated with the amount of time necessary to do the required work.

Most other professions do not expect those entering the field to "hit the ground running." They provide assistance and time for novices to gain the skills needed in a particular work setting. Teaching is a complex, demanding profession that is mastered over several years of study, consultation, and reflective practice. The induction of teachers into the profession must include support during the crucial first year of teaching.

## **Beginning Teachers' Perceptions of Support**

La Sierra University, in Riverside, California, did a study of beginning teachers in North American Division (NAD) Adventist schools to see whether they think they are receiving support, and if so, how helpful it is. Graduates of NAD colleges and universities who had just completed

their first or second year of teaching were surveyed to determine (1) the types of support they had received, (2) how effective they rated this support, and (3) the types of support they believe would have been most helpful. Seventy-seven teacher questionnaires were compiled and included in this study.

While 95 percent of the beginning teachers indicated they had received some type of support, only 18 percent rated it as "very satisfactory" and 39 percent described it as "somewhat satisfactory." Forty-three percent considered the support to be "unsatisfactory." Clearly, Adventist educators need to make a greater commitment to the successful induction of beginning teachers into the profession.

**Types of Support Provided.** Beginning teachers most often received support from their school principals and/or conference supervisors (78 percent and 77 percent respectively). Less frequently, support came from college professors (68 percent), in-service meetings (68 percent), observation of experienced teachers (61 percent), mentor teachers (45 percent), and department chairpersons (38 percent).

**Rating of Support Services.** These novice teachers rated support from the school principal as most effective, with one-half of those receiving principal support deeming it very satisfactory. Receiving less enthusiastic ratings, in descending order were: (1) mentor teachers, (2) conference personnel, (3) college/university teacher educators, (4) conference in-service and department/grade-level chairs, and (5) observation of experienced teachers. (See table titled, "Teacher Rating of Support Services.")

## **Types of Support Beginning Teachers Wanted**

Beginning teachers desired more than one method of support during their first year of teaching. The overwhelming choice was a mentor teacher, followed closely by the school principal. Support at the school level was most helpful. However, four types of support tied for the third-highest ranking: classroom observations, conference personnel, college/university teacher educators, and in-service meetings held specifically for beginning teachers.

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Joys and Problems of Beginning Teachers. Although 18 percent of the new teachers surveyed described their first year of teaching as “unsatisfactory,” the ma-

majority said it was either “very satisfactory” or “satisfactory” (almost evenly divided between the two responses). They described the greatest joys of teaching as the feeling of closeness with students and the excitement of observing their students learn (“light bulb expression” and the “aha” experience). Several respondents said their greatest joys were experiencing success as teachers and knowing they had chosen the right profession.

The problems most frequently experienced by these new teachers dealt with discipline, classroom management, and planning, followed by problems with parents and time demands.

**Summary**

Based on this study, as well as on national and state studies, it is apparent that beginning teachers in Adventist schools need an organized support system. These teachers need help to make a smooth transition from educators-in-training to effective professionals in the classroom.

In an extensive California study of support services for beginning teachers, several key elements were identified as critical in a support program for beginning teachers.<sup>3</sup>

These include:

- **Involvement of experienced teachers**—carefully selected and specially trained in guiding and assisting teachers.

- **Structured time** for experienced and beginning teachers to work together.

- **Training for new teachers** that relates directly to their immediate needs and their current stage of professional development.

- **Individual follow-up** by experienced teachers, so new teachers can use their new skills effectively in the classroom.

Through implementing these strategies, conference administrators, school administrators, and college/university education educators can work together to ensure that every new teacher becomes a successful educator. ✍

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REFERENCES

1. The California New Teacher Project (1988-1992), *Success for Beginning Teachers*, California Commission on Teacher Credentialing and California Department of Education (1992), p. 5.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 5-7.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

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