



Eight Qualities of a Great Teacher Mentor

By Kimberly Long

Papers are spilling off the desk. The voicemail light is blinking. Your email inbox is never ending, and little smiley face stickers are somehow stuck in your hair.

We've all been there. When it comes to teaching, there are always those days when the final bell rings and you just want to vent about the day, interact with someone older than age six, or simply have someone to talk to.

One of the most important—and overlooked—aspects of education is having mentors who help you manage the grind of daily struggles and the challenges of the profession. As an early career teacher, I have been blessed to work with many incredible teachers who have salvaged my sanity, dried my tears, and challenged me to be more than I thought I could be.

Mentors may be formally "assigned," or they may informally walk into your life. Mentorship can occur in a mandated mentor program, when one teacher is looking out for another, taking a struggling teacher under your wing, or simply welcoming a new person to the team. Mentorship doesn't have to be a formal process—but it is a crucial form of support for new and early career teachers.

Interested in becoming a teacher mentor? Here are eight qualities to focus on:

1. **Respect.** First and foremost, there must be respect between the mentor and the mentee. But respect doesn't form overnight—it takes time. As I tell my students, respect is earned.

Showing respect is all about the little things. For example, when a veteran teacher with more than 15 years of experience embraces my new idea for a unit at a staff meeting, it tells me I am being taken seriously. Or, when another teacher comes to your room to just say hi, they are acknowledging that the relationship is about both of you. New teachers feel worthy when their colleagues reach out to make sure they are involved. This can take many forms—having lunch, sending an email, or even going to a union meeting together.

2. **Listening.** By truly listening, you get to know me. You get to know me in a more personal

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way than I may even realize I am letting on. For example, a good mentor can pick up on when I am stressed out, when I am in the zone, when I am having a good day, and so on.

When a mentor puts all the verbal and nonverbal clues together, they synthesize what I need—even when I may not be able to even say it myself. And once they recognize what I need, good mentors come to my aid. If you think I need a sanity lunch, plan one. If you think I need some advice on dealing with misbehaved students, lend some advice. The magic of listening allows mentors and mentees to get to know each other and informs the mentor on how they can be of assistance.

3. Challenging. Great mentors push your thinking and help you grow in new ways. They alert you to new teaching methods and provide tips for how to handle various situations throughout the year.

Most importantly, though, these “tips” are often posed as questions. Questions require new teachers to discover and learn for themselves. I want to grow and develop as an educator, but it’s hard. Please—push me outside of my comfort zone. I want to improve, but it’s hard to do alone. Be there with me as I learn.

4. Collaboration. This critical step benefits everyone within the support system. By helping refine my ideas, you remind yourself of all the things that make a truly great teacher. It’s also mutually beneficial for teachers to work together because everyone will walk away with new and improved strategies, lessons, and ideas.

Remember, you don’t have to wait for a mentee to seek out your wisdom. In fact, it can go a long way in strengthening the bond between teachers when *both* bring ideas to the table.

5. Celebration. Success comes in a variety of shapes and sizes. Some days it may be making a dreaded phone call home with a disgruntled parent, while other days it may be the implementation of a new idea that the whole team tried and loved. Be genuinely happy when I succeed, no matter how big or important it is in the grand scheme of things. Besides, I wouldn’t have the experience of success without your guidance. Tell me congrats and share in the happiness!

6. Truth. Honesty is the foundation of any relationship. Tell the truth; criticism is how we all learn. You have the opportunity to coach me through changes that will positively impact me for the rest of my life. Help me learn the do’s and don’ts of school politics, communication, and the million other little things they don’t teach you in educator preparation programs.

7. Safety. Does your mentee feel it’s OK to make a mistake and tell you about it? Knowing that I can trust you is monumental. I worry what you will think and say; your opinion matters greatly to me.

Pause for a second and think about how you’ll respond to me when I tell you what’s going on because I will remember your words much longer than you will. Trust forms when I know you will stand up for me—both in front of me and behind my back. If I am dealing with a challenging situation, walk the fine line of protection by providing me with tips you learned in a similar situation and give me some questions to ponder.

8. Empathy. Don't forget your mentee is human. Life is tough, and we're all in it together. Sometimes life events—joyous, tumultuous, and all those in between—linger with us into our classrooms. Lend an ear, a smile, and at times even a hug.

Whether you knew it or not, by being a mentor you have also become my personal life coach. I want to hear your advice. I want to hear your similar stories. I need someone to bounce ideas off of when I shut the door at lunch and sob over a broken heart, dance for joy over an engagement, worry about family drama, and learn to deal with stress.

When it's all said and done, the papers may still be spilling off my desk. Hopefully I've found time to listen to some voicemails and answer a few emails.

As for the stickers, I might just wear those with pride because it means the day is over. I survived. I couldn't have done it alone, without you—my mentors.

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