



8 Tips for Successful “Teacher as Mentor” Programs

Whether or not we know it, teachers serve as mentors every day. Missy Wilkins, a seasoned educator who now directs CFES mentoring programs, is reminded of a teacher she worked with at a school in southern Vermont. “A former student the teacher barely remembered returned years later to tell her how she had inspired and motivated the student,” Wilkins explains, “not just to do good work but to be the best person she could be and to include college in her future. Today that student is a teacher herself because of the compassion and mentoring of her former teacher.”

Teachers are mentors, sometimes they know whom they mentor and other times, as in this case, they don’t. When students talk about a person who has positively influenced them, someone who has made a huge impact on their lives, two out of five students identify a teacher – and most teachers don’t even know it.

Here are eight tips for teachers who aspire to be successful mentors:

- 1. Effective Listening:** As mentors, teachers should spend two-thirds of the mentoring time listening. It’s okay to have silence between what was said and the response. Effective listening means doing nothing else but listening, giving one’s full attention to the mentee. A mentee once remarked, “As mentors, teachers need to listen. I mean really listen, not halfway listen while they’re doing something else. We know the difference – we just don’t tell them we know. They would think that’s rude.”
- 2. Meeting Location:** Setting the right atmosphere and tone for mentoring is critical. The teacher’s classroom is not the place to meet. Try the library, gym, or even another classroom. The key to location is finding a neutral site, and a convenient one for both mentor and mentee, to meet. Some teachers change their attire – take off the tie or put on a sweatshirt. They do something that sends the message, “I am not teaching right now, I am with you.” In one school, teacher mentors and their mentees have nicknames for one another; in another they have invented a special handshake. Teacher mentors and their mentees have routines and traditions that send the message, “This time is different from school – it’s mentoring time.”
- 3. Think Win-Win:** Mentoring is not about “saving” students. Both teacher mentors and their mentees should benefit from the relationship. Teachers who mentor often say that mentoring is like a breath of fresh air: it reminds them of the reasons they chose to go into education in the first place. Some teachers say mentoring feels good when school gets so busy they can’t connect with their students in a meaningful way. The experience gives them empathy, and actually in some cases, teachers begin to see school from their mentees’ perspective.
- 4. Make It Voluntary:** Mentoring rarely works when teachers are told they must mentor or when students are assigned a teacher as mentor. If it is a school-wide program, teachers

need to see it as voluntary – they need to show that they want to be doing it. On their own, students often seek out a special teacher to serve as a natural mentor. Schools have been very successful noting these natural mentoring relationships and focusing extra time and effort on expanding them. Teacher mentors like to have input in selecting students they feel they can mentor effectively. Likewise, students desire input in selecting their teacher mentor. Some schools ask students to write down the names of several teachers they would like to have as a mentor, and teachers do the same. In making matches, please remember that it can stress the relationship when a teacher mentor is also the person grading the mentee’s schoolwork.

- 5. Time Together:** Mentoring is not doing something the teacher mentor has planned out ahead; it is together finding and planning things that both mentor and mentee enjoy doing – those common interests. Be the guide. Teachers are conditioned to drive the process of learning; great mentors guide it. Mentors who attempt to hold, own, or control the process, deprive it of the freedom needed to foster discovery. Part of getting to know each other is deciding and figuring out what to do. Examples of activities include sewing a graduation dress, rebuilding an engine, knitting, prepping for a learner’s permit, applying for college, painting, building models, gardening, and making music.
- 6. Mix It Up:** Mentoring doesn’t need to be one-on-one. One teacher mentor to three student mentees is a great way for young people to make new friends. Those who don’t have contact with other students outside of school love it, and students who might never get to know one another otherwise, become friends. Teacher mentors at North Middle School in Westfield, Massachusetts, mentor several students. Mentees report that this makes the time together “more fun and interesting for everyone.”
- 7. Overcoming Obstacles:** Mentees must learn to solve their own problems. Telling and solving for them is a “quick fix.” Mentors guide and suggest but leave it to mentees to create their own solutions. Goal setting is a proactive strategy! Successful mentors and mentees focus on attaining winning outcomes and employ useful steps to get there. Socrates knew the secret to mentoring: effective questioning brings insight, which fuels curiosity, which cultivates wisdom.
- 8. Design Mentoring that Engages Other CFES Core Practices:** Give mentoring purpose. Don’t think of mentoring as an “add-on.” Mentoring can make life easier! At Sport & Medical Sciences Academy in Hartford, Connecticut, teacher mentors focus on pathways to college.