

## *The Power of Mentorship for Student Teachers*

by Andra Collins Johnson

**A**s I always tell my chapter officers, you can use your powers for good or for not, the choice is up to you. That's the same philosophy I have when mentoring young teachers. I think of the gift of mentorship and leadership as beams of light that radiate from person to person. Without proper mentorship, traditions are lost and at the same time, there are no new innovations to project us forward in our teaching goals.

### **Giving Up Control**

Let's dive into the cause and effect of mentorship and how it should work. Over the past 16 years, I've had a few student teachers. I've produced agriculture science teachers and choose to mentor new teachers who ask for my advice. When I am blessed with a student teacher, I get super excited! I get to pass down my traditional beliefs about the National FFA and my belief that solid classroom instruction is the key to linking your Supervised Agricultural Experience program with your FFA chapter. I allow my student teachers to have creative control over their teaching experience. If I were to try to control every aspect of their student teaching they would not even be remotely prepared for their first job. As a new teacher, you are never fully prepared; it does not matter if you were traditionally certified or sought out an

emergency certification. It takes about 5 years to earn all of the badges on your agriculture teacher vest. I allow them to use their own scope and sequence, be as wild in their lessons as they like, and do everything that I would do as a full-time teacher. I advise them to find balance in all their tasks so they do not forget their birthday during student teaching, like I did. Student teachers should be involved in every aspect of decision making for the program for the duration of their experience. I also like to be their mother, friend, spiritual advisor, life coach and source of knowledge. I hope that after student teaching we can stay in touch and always hold each other in high regard. You should never put down your student teacher in deed or word. That is counterproductive and will result in a new teacher having a bad experience. They may or may not continue on their agriculture journey; no teacher should be left behind.

### **Finding Joy in Cultivating the Profession**

It is not every day that a seasoned agriculture teacher helps build another agriculture teacher, but when you do, it feels like you have won the World Series. Being a part of cultivating agriculture teachers has been one of my greatest professional accomplishments. I pride myself in keeping up with the majority of my students' life journey. I am with them for the long haul. They reach back and ask me for profes-

sional and personal advice. When one of my past students becomes an agriculture teacher, I get to be involved in their lives on a deeper level. I have the personal joy of one of my students that I taught for 4 years, now being one of my teaching partners. Or another student changing her life plan to become an agriculture teacher. We catch up frequently, talk about curriculum and FFA and why we all still remain in the profession. I always help them to see the big picture, their students' success. Being an agriculture teacher is a calling. No one quite understands the joys and discomforts of the profession like another colleague and I get to be a sounding board for them as they matriculate through the process.

### **Building Supportive Spaces**

Along the way, I may adopt a few teachers and we build relationships. They may be younger or my same age, but we are drawn to each other because we care strongly about our daily goal: to change the world one student at a time. I communicate with a cohort of teachers that I give advice to and they also give me advice. No question is off limits. I think administrators and other agriculture teachers believe that a new teacher should know everything about the FFA, SAE and classroom. Those are just unrealistic expectations. There should be safe spaces for young teachers to ask for every little piece of information needed to be successful.

If they are willing to do the work I am more than willing to give them information, support and ideas. When one teacher wins, we all win.

### Tips and Tricks

Mentorship is the key to keeping our profession alive and thriving. Every teacher, whether you have one year or twenty years under your belt, should offer advice, correction and guidance to a new teacher.

What does mentorship look like to have measurable success?

1. It is consistent. Even with our busy schedules we should check on our mentee to see how they are balancing life and work. All it takes is a 5-minute Facetime or Google Duo call to check the pulse of your mentee.
2. We should be open to sharing information, but not doing the work. Collaboration should be a two-way street. Your mentee should not email and say, “send me all of your equine lessons.” If you give them just the lessons without walking them through your thought process in preparing the lessons, they will not be able to fully deliver instruction that will service each child. It is also good for new teachers to share teaching methods and lessons with more seasoned teachers because they can help you update some of your older lessons with new knowledge

they gained from “the block” and student teaching.

3. Mentorship should include correction when your mentee has missed the mark. Explain to them how to change their mindset about not advancing at Leadership Development Events or about their officer team not performing at high levels. Encourage them to interject some positivity and replanning into their teaching plans to get different results.
4. Show your mentee how to be professional and humble by not speaking coarsely about others in the profession. Be the compass, salt and light for your mentee so that they will stay in the profession until retirement. Teach them when to fight certain battles and when to be at peace with certain situations.
5. Always be proud of their accomplishments and compliment them.

I hope this school year you will mentor at least one new teacher. You do not need a special program put on by your state’s teacher union or your campus to fulfill this duty. Be reflective and show some compassion to the new kid on the block. If you see a new teacher at a conference or competition say hello and ask “Do you have a mentor?”



*Andra Collins-Johnson teaches agricultural education at Benjamin O. Davis Jr. Senior High School in Houston, Texas. She has been teaching for 16 years and has one son, Jeremiah.*