

## Teacher Mentors – A Concept Design

By George Pinniger, Penny Sheppard and Gary Tilley

### Rationale:

“What is common to see in the first day and first year of teaching is much anxiety and confusion.”<sup>1</sup> According to the Teaching And Learning International Study (TALIS) report, one of the perceived necessities most frequently listed by those Australian teachers of Science new to the profession is to have highly experienced mentors available for consultation during their first few years of teaching.<sup>2</sup> This need is echoed in the report written for the NSW Government by Dr Michele Bruniges (Director-General of the Department of Education), Mr Tom Alegounarias (President of the NSW Board of Studies) and Mr Patrick Lee (CE of the NSW Institute of Teachers), and presented by the Minister for Education, Mr Adrian Piccoli in the form of a White Paper called “Great Teaching, Inspired Learning”.<sup>3</sup> Prof. Ian Chubb, the Chief Scientist, singled this out as part of his paper “Mathematics, Engineering and Science in the National Interest”<sup>4</sup>

Universities are deeply involved in upgrading courses for teacher training according to this new model, but two essential tasks still remain to be carried out to assist teachers already in the profession, with a strong emphasis on K-6 teachers, many of whom consider Science to be a “difficult subject”.

One of these programs could be to provide access to highly-experienced mentors for all teachers, notably teachers of Science and Mathematics, especially those in their first few years, in accordance with their pleas expressed in the TALIS report.

Since the need for mentors is Australia-wide, it is clear that the ASTA should have an essential role to play in the organisation of such mentors, and management of any funding available, by working through the subsidiary STAs in each state and territory. Nevertheless, as with any program deemed to be scientific, it would seem prudent to conduct at least one trial before providing such a program. In terms of overseeing this, it would appear logical to

utilise the Science Teachers’ Association of a state as it already has access to all the state’s government and non-government, primary, central and secondary schools, and also has the capacity to oversee such a task. It is equally necessary for the appropriate Government Departments, such as BoSTES in NSW, to have a major influence upon the implementation of such mentors, especially when considering possible visits to schools, and even participation in classes, so formulation of guidelines and substantial frank discussion would be necessary prior to such a trial. However, as with all potential innovations, if people of good faith are prepared to consider all the possible opportunities as well as the challenges, ideas will be canvassed, discussed, accepted or rejected.

### The Mentors:



*A mentor may even share the classroom.*

Mentors would have to be experts in their fields, having extensive knowledge of the course work *including experiments*, lengthy experience teaching it, and involvement in setting and marking tests and examinations, keeping records, and with practical ideas concerning class control. Such mentors would need to be *contactable at fairly short notice* and also be *free to visit schools in their district* when necessary, in order to carry out all facets of their duties.

## Teachers Mentors – A Concept Design (continued)

Whilst very dedicated and effective mentors are already in action in many schools throughout NSW and the country, this work often seriously overlaps their normal commitments. This is particularly true of teachers of Science, since ‘free periods’ are so often required for preparation of equipment. That, and an ever-increasing load of other duties means that either the mentor function decreases in usefulness or that the mentor must be replaced from classes in order to continue the role, which can be detrimental to the classes he/she teaches, potentially leading to friction with students and parents. The other serious restriction to an internal mentor plan occurs in the case of schools where nobody on the staff has the appropriate qualifications to mentor the new/inexperienced teachers of Science.

### Potential use of Recently-retired Science Teachers as Mentors:



*Experience and encouragement are the key.*

“Mentoring and coaching by experienced teachers is a powerful way to support beginning teachers.”<sup>5</sup> Recently-retired school teachers could be ideally suited to act in the capacity of mentors, provided they satisfy the above criteria. They could be recruited by an organisation of their peers, e.g. the Science Teachers’ Association of their state, based on responses to suitable advertisements, production of a suitable CV, and of course the obligatory ‘Working with Children’ clearance forms.

Mentors would submit an annual report including each case to their responsible organisation, apart from telephone calls, email or text messages (more frequently if requested, especially in the initial years). Each early-career teacher requesting the support of a mentor (except for messages or calls) would also need to fill in and submit an assessment form to compare the twin views of the process.

One mentor could be delegated by each organisation to select mentors and supervise the program. This would include arranging temporary or permanent replacements for unavailable mentors.

### Potential Benefits for All:



*Mentor helping to prepare a class*

Consequently, it would appear that a system to establish a program of mentors could be beneficial to the target group. However, consider also its benefit for potential ‘Professional school mentors’:

1. Eventually Science teachers with long experience and sound mind decide to retire, for a range of reasons, such as deafness. Such teachers may have worked in a variety of schools, and have taught to HSC level in senior subjects, been efficient classroom managers, program writers, exam setters and markers, and be accustomed to ‘school politics’.
2. There is an ocean of talent currently being wasted by the non-use of retired experts.

## Teachers Mentors – A Concept Design (continued)

- Governments have talked about it, but so far without moving to employ retirees in fields such as this, where experience really counts, especially when assisting teachers in their first two or three years.
3. The majority of retired teachers with active minds would like to be more useful in retirement. Many are still active in their day-to-day lives, and miss the contact with students. Given the chance to use their skills and knowledge in a productive way, such as with an ongoing classroom presence, would assist their physical and mental health, and thus reduce the burden on the health system. With fewer older Australians on the pension as well, the government would benefit both ways.
  4. The Government is planning to have Australians working until they are aged 70+ to become eligible for a pension – what more valid and useful role could late-career school teachers perform?
  5. The OECD's TALIS report cited a plea for mentors as being one of the highest priorities amongst new teachers of Science and Mathematics in Australia. So did the 'Great teaching - Inspired Learning' white paper by Dr Michelle Bruniges et al, presented by the Hon. Adrian Piccoli, NSW Minister for Education, nearly three years ago.
  6. Many retired teachers have time aplenty – they could serve regular hours daily on the Internet, providing assistance by email or telephone when requested. Some even have the time and flexibility to visit (reasonably) local schools given notice, to observe teachers in practice, present classes in arranged situations, and provide ideas or material developed over many years. Given adequate notice, some would be willing to visit regional or remote centres to assist.
  7. Retired teacher mentors would require no replacement teachers.
  8. Retired teachers would be paid substantially less than full-time teachers.
  9. While there are mentor programs already established in many high schools, by necessity they use experienced colleagues who have to give up 'free time'. Nevertheless, the tasks expected of school teachers continues to increase at a phenomenal rate, with increasing numbers of tests to mark, reports to write, meetings to attend, etc. 'Free time' for most current practising Science staff cannot cover all the needs of those new to their career, despite the best will and endeavour of staff mentors.



*A mentor may also assess the teacher's work in a friendly way.*

10. Some advocates have suggested a system similar to 'Work for the dole' for older Australians. This may sound good – but where are all the proposed tasks coming from? Becoming a mentor would be ideal work for some people, provided the reward for assisting inexperienced teachers is sufficient to attract the best possible candidates.

## Teachers Mentors – A Concept Design (continued)

11. Some mentors might be invited to schools regularly to present specific subject matter relating to their own specialties, undoubtedly with related material to display, PowerPoints with appropriate slides to focus the students on the presentation, and time for questions afterwards. As the scheme developed, more former teachers, each with their dossier of special presentations to be requested, might be available to K-6 and 7-12 classes. Each event would be assessed to ensure there was an actual benefit, probably using generic assessment forms for both the class teacher and the students.
12. Such experiences could be very successful for all students of Science, especially those in K-6, as they would observe activities that their normal class teacher may be unaware of, or nervous to try in case they failed to work. The students would gain greater interest, and meanwhile the teacher could learn by observation, and in time would gather a good array of activities to use.



*Some mentors may move around the class assisting individual pupils.*

13. Class behaviour is likely to improve as a further benefit. Interested, interesting professionals, invited to display their favourite experiments,

can have a profound effect on young people, exciting their interest – the huge advantage of Science. Explanations, and answers to the inevitable questions would be available for classes of older students – while the visitor should have a range of prepared questions to ask, appropriate to each specific group, to stimulate their concepts as well.

14. Once contact is established between a successful mentor and a practising teacher, from then on that teacher would have a confidante not directly involved within the school yet with the experience to advise, unofficially counsel, even mediate in certain rare situations.

#### Interested?

So much for the theory.

In order to initiate a trial, it appears essential first to suggest it to those it would affect, and ask what they consider is necessary, useful, unnecessary or unwanted, so the concept plan has as much input as possible. By comparing the viewpoints of as many of the stake holders as possible the plan can be identified as useful or otherwise. STANSW members (and readers) are invited to contribute to the plan prior to its presentation to the ones who would have to implement and finance it, so with your input we hope to achieve something that I believe could be of great assistance to colleagues with less experience, without being too expensive to establish.

Please send your input to [editor@stansw.asn.au](mailto:editor@stansw.asn.au) with your ID and stake holding (e.g. HOD, primary teacher of Science, prospective mentor, etc.). All submissions will be saved and forwarded to an independent collator. Subsequently the outcome is intended as an article in SEN for all to read.

[Please note that this is a concept plan only; how many mentors, how much they could be paid, how long would they sit at a computer/phone per day, etc. are not to be considered at this early stage.]

## Teachers Mentors – A Concept Design (continued)

A few ideas for submissions:

What do members think about it? – positive and negative opinions – with reasons – are invited.

Suggest other ways mentors might be of assistance to teachers and their students.

Opinions from new and/or inexperienced teachers of Science would be especially useful.

Similarly, opinions from those already acting as school mentors could be of great importance.

Opinions from teachers of Science at regional or remote schools are also really important here.

All ideas and opinions from K-6 teachers of Science are strongly encouraged.

What do recently-retired teachers of Science think about this? Would you consider working as a mentor in the proposed scheme?

### References:

1. Wong, H., and R. Wong. *The First Days of School: How to Be An Effective Teacher* (Mountain View, Calif.: Wong Publications, 2009).
2. “The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2008 data shows us that Australian teachers are likely to say they need extra professional development and support in classroom management when they start teaching in a school.”
3. The Hon. Adrian Piccoli, Media Release, 31st July, 2012, “Asking the Tough Questions about Teacher Quality in NSW”.
4. Former Chief Scientist, Prof. Ian Chubb, A.C., May, 2012, “Mathematics, Engineering and Science in the National Interest”.
5. Kortman, S., and C. Honaker. *The Mentor Teacher: Guiding You Through the Mentoring Process* (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt, 2004)

Other relevant quotes from “Great Teaching, Inspired Learning”:

“With new teachers joining the profession every year we have an obligation to our students to ensure those teachers are given the support and direction they need in their first few years.” [Page 7]

“Like any professional, new teachers need the support of other, more experienced colleagues to work with them to identify which teaching practices work well in what contexts and which ones don’t. Teachers who are now entering our schools have grown up in a world of social networking and collaboration. If we get the balance right, teachers starting in our schools should be able to use technology to get support from other teachers.” [Page 7]

“We know that the support and guidance a teacher gets in the first years of their career is critical.” [Page 7]

“Feedback from many new teachers is that they don’t feel like they get enough support in the first few years of teaching.” [Page 7]

“Some teachers spend their first years in classrooms teaching without the sort of mentoring, professional learning and support we offer new permanent teachers.” [Page 7]

“The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2008 data shows us that Australian teachers are likely to say they need extra professional development and support in classroom management when they start teaching.” [Page 8]

“The OECD (2011) reports that the best induction programs involve giving new teachers a reduced teaching load, support from a trained mentor teacher and close partnerships with teacher education institutions.” [Page 8]

“How can we strengthen induction and early career mentoring support for beginning teachers in schools? For instance, should they be attached to a teacher mentor?” [Page 9]

“High performing systems have career paths through which their best teachers support the teaching practices of other teachers.” [Page 14]

“The OECD (2011) suggests that providing more support for teachers in their first years of teaching may be of more value than having them undertake longer university degrees.” [Page 8]

“The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) 2008 data shows that increases in the effectiveness of a teacher between the first and second years of their careers are much larger than improvements in their following years as a teacher.” [Page 8]