Facing first-year blues

Education Coaching new teachers

The Providence Journal - Providence, R.I.
Author: Jordan, Jennifer D
Date: Nov 28, 2011
Start Page: A.1
Section: Local News

Document Text

The excitement of the first months gives way to the sheer volume of work, fears of failure for teacher Samantha Medeiros

The state Department of Education this year launched a program that gives virtually every new public school teacher a coach chosen from among the state's finest educators. This is the second story in an occasional series about the program.

WARREN -- Samantha Medeiros didn't sleep much this month.

A new history teacher at Kickemuit Middle School, Medeiros, 25, had to correct term papers and exams, and submit first-quarter grades by the middle of November for each of her 100 eighth graders.

She stayed after school nearly every afternoon -- for faculty meetings, school-improvement team meetings, common planning time with other history teachers and twice-weekly tutoring sessions for students.

She also started teaching a new writing class in mid-November, and had to grade 24 writing tests in a single night.

Just two days after grades were due, an administrator dropped by to observe her performance, part of the state's new educator-evaluation system that will determine if Medeiros is good enough to remain a public school teacher.

"All that happening in one week -- that was stressful," Medeiros says.

She is experiencing first-year teaching blues that typically hit right before the holidays.

For Medeiros and Rhode Island's 250 other first-year teachers, the excitement of the first couple of months has given way to the sheer volume of work, fears of inadequacy and a growing realization that the task before them -- to help every student progress -- is nothing short of daunting.

Fortunately, these new teachers have a source of support that no cadre of teachers in the state has ever had -- experienced coaches who regularly spend time with them in their classrooms, lend a sympathetic ear and dispense valuable insights.

Gino Sangiuliano, a veteran Barrington teacher, is one of 18 "induction coaches" hired by the state Department of Education to help guide new teachers through what is for many the toughest, most isolating year of their career.

Rhode Island's coaches are considered among the most effective teachers in the state. They attend their own training sessions every other week, to learn how to guide new teachers, swap tips and support each other.

Their salaries -- the same they would have received in their districts -- are paid from the $75-million federal Race to the Top grant Rhode Island is receiving to improve the school system. After two years as induction coaches, most will return to their classrooms.

Perhaps most important, Sangiuliano knows just how Medeiros feels. He experienced the same anxiety when he started as an elementary teacher two decades ago.

Sangiuliano visits Medeiros every week in her second-floor classroom, observing her at work. They talk before and after class, and e-mail frequently. By now, he knows her students, her challenges and her strengths.

"Samantha is already a good teacher," he says as he watches her launch into a lesson on the original 13 Colonies one day last week. "My job is to help her get better faster."

Medeiros starts her day early on a recent Thursday. She arrives at 6:45 a.m. to organize her notes, set up a projector and prepare for the day's lessons.

By 7:30, students trickle in for homeroom and school announcements. She and Sangiuliano talk briefly about her plan for the 45-minute class, so her coach can assess how successful she is at hitting her goals.

Every minute is precious.

As 22 students enter at 7:50, Medeiros immediately directs them to a "warm-up" question that reviews the previous day's lesson. "What are the four middle colonies?" is written on the whiteboard.

"Open up your binders," she says. Within a minute or two, the class is quiet, heads bent toward notebooks.

The class quickly establishes the Colonies: Delaware, New Jersey, New York and Pennsylvania.

Then for a few minutes, they read about the Southern Colonies, who founded them and why. Georgia, Maryland, North Carolina and South Carolina ... the class has already studied Virginia.

Medeiros breaks the students into small groups and tapes the name of a Colony on each of their backs. Students have to walk around, asking their classmates questions based on what they have read, and figure out which Colony they represent.

"Was I founded by Puritans?" one girl asks a classmate.

Yes, the student responds, after checking that she is wearing Massachusetts on her back.

The students have fun. But that section of the class runs longer than Medeiros had anticipated.

Sangiuliano checks the clock and makes notes.

Next, the class breaks into small groups that deliver short reports on the Southern Colonies. This exercise takes up less time than Medeiros had estimated, so she is again on schedule.

But with just three minutes left, Medeiros speeds up her questions, as if nervous that she failed to impart all of the important information in her lesson plan.

She repeatedly calls on the first student to raise his or her hand, instead of waiting for her line of questioning to penetrate into the entire class.

The bell rings, the students leave. Medeiros and Sangiuliano sit during Medeiros' one free period to discuss how it all went.

Sangiuliano praises her ability to weave previous lessons on the New England and Middle Colonies into today's lesson, and the way she reached out to the students.

"What could you have done differently toward the end of the class?" he asks, after the two of them have dissected the lesson plan.

"I could have taken more time and slowed down, and referred back to the book," Medeiros says, as Sangiuliano nods.

He suggests she consider using visuals such as a map of the Colonies to help some students focus.

"You could leave a minute or two at the end of class to recap a little bit at the end," he offers. "I know you want to be efficient when you only have 45 minutes, but if there is a pause, that's OK. You are giving them a moment to get what you want them to get."

The two discuss six students with special needs who need extra support. Now that she knows all of her students better, Medeiros has begun making elaborate charts on the progress of each one. She and Sangiuliano will spend a considerable portion of their time together figuring out ways to help each of the students advance substantially throughout the year.

"At the beginning, I felt nervous around him," Medeiros says after their conference. "Now, I feel really comfortable with him. We can talk about anything."

Sangiuliano was particularly helpful to her during the hectic days of mid-November.

"He's helped so much, just by being a person I can vent to," she said. "You do get overwhelmed so fast sometimes by all you have to do. And, he can say, 'Stop for a second and prioritize. Write down a list. Here's a better technique.'

"I think the biggest thing he did for me is just help me catch a breath, and make me realize it's OK, and I can do it."

Credit: Jennifer D Jordan, Journal Staff Writer