

# On your marks



‘Best practice’ mentoring and induction programs are helping new teachers get off to a good start—and may encourage them to stay in the profession. **Carolyn Rance** reports.

**C**hris Sheehan says his first term as a provisionally registered science teacher passed so quickly, he was surprised when the holidays arrived. “In some jobs you just wait for the day to end, but not here,” he says of teaching at Koonung Secondary College, in Melbourne.

Sheehan, 33, had considered training as a teacher when he completed his initial degree after leaving school. Instead he opted to work for the Victorian

He appreciated the constant supervision and support from more experienced teachers. This year he is building on his skills through the school’s program of induction, professional development and mentoring.

It’s the type of positive early career support that training institutions, state and territory education departments and individual schools are introducing in their efforts to get new educators off to a good start and encourage them to stay in the profession.

**“Mentoring relationships need to engender feelings of safety and support for both parties and the mentor needs to be prepared to provide assistance.”**

government and Australian Quarantine Service before three years of travel and casual jobs.

Last year he was among the first intake for the University of Melbourne’s new Master of Teaching, an internship-style course that places participants—known as teacher candidates—in a host school for two days a week plus a three-week block late in the year.

Getting into the classroom early and often built his confidence.

Koonung’s mentors have all undertaken the Victorian Institute of Teaching’s training program and the school gives them a small time allocation to help them fulfil their additional role.

“We’ve always run induction, mentoring and professional development programs, particularly on classroom management which is something new teachers often struggle with,” says assistant principal Julie Cain. ►

**Briefly**

- Training institutions, education departments and schools are introducing much-needed early career support for new teachers.
- The degree of support varies greatly and many new teachers still undergo a ‘baptism of fire’.
- Effective mentoring benefits both the mentor and the new teacher, but it requires sufficient time and resources.

(Left) Chris Sheehan appreciated the support of more experienced teachers, such as assistant principal Julie Cain.



Chris Sheehan is part of a new, internship-style course that places teacher candidates in a host school for two days a week.

## How many other professions expect a newly qualified person to do the equivalent work of someone who has 20 or 30 years of experience?



Koonung Secondary College was one of the first schools to host teacher candidates from the new course, says assistant principal Julie Cain.

► “We want people to tell us if they are stressed. We don’t want them to just close the door and hope the problem will go away.”

Koonung was one of the first schools to host teacher candidates from the new masters course. It was so impressed, it offered seven of them a mix of part-time, contract and full-time teaching positions.

Sheehan knows he has had a gentle introduction to teaching compared with many of the new educators who responded to an AEU survey last year and reported feeling under-prepared for the realities of being in charge of a class with only informal support from time-pressed principals and colleagues.

Dr Julianne Moss, senior lecturer, curriculum, teaching and learning, at the University of Melbourne, says that although the Victorian Department of Education supports formal induction and mentoring for new teachers, case studies still show wide variations in the early career experience. “Our broad concern,” she says, “is how we can enable changes in the culture of schools that will prevent the first-year teaching experience from being a baptism of fire.”

### Safety and support

Effective mentoring requires time and preparation. Approaches can vary, but mentors needed formal recognition, training and a time allowance to carry out their duties, says Dr Ann McCormack, a senior lecturer in education at the University of Newcastle.

“Mentoring relationships need to engender feelings of safety and support for both parties and the mentor needs to be prepared to provide assistance with both the professional and personal aspects of teaching,” she wrote in a paper prepared for the 2007 Conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education. Mentors need to engage in professional dialogue with the early career

teachers to encourage reflection and provide constructive feedback, affirmation and encouragement as well as challenging them to build on the professional learning acquired pre-service.

McCormack says a robust and effective mentoring program also contributes to the mentors’ professional growth and development. Both parties in the relationship continually inquire into their own practice and build their professional capacities. As educational leaders and agents of change, they strengthen the profession and promote quality teaching and school improvement. New teachers feel they are valued ‘insiders’ something that motivates them to remain in teaching.

professional development workshops, and teachers outside the metropolitan area are entitled to an extra hour of relief time each week to participate in professional development, prepare lessons, get advice and guidance from more experienced teachers, provide extra one-on-one time with students, or talk to parents.

### Stepping up

In schools without a head teacher mentor position, some experienced teachers are stepping up to assist their early career colleagues.

On the senior campus of Chifley College, in Mount Druitt, Sydney, classroom teacher Michael de Wall volunteered to take on mentoring duties two years ago. De Wall, who was involved in developing the NSW Teachers Federation policy on early career teachers, describes it as a positive experience at a time when the teaching profession is facing an unprecedented period

of politicians' awareness of the issue. Fatema Sowaid, from Parramatta High School, in Sydney, says one of the aims was to highlight the varied experiences of new teachers. Now in her seventh year of teaching, Sowaid says many newly qualified teachers face challenging school environments in their first year out. "Principals and other staff members who try to support them really don't have enough time. At my first school the other staff were wonderful, but it was still a nightmare and I used to go home sometimes and cry.

"When you are a student, you go into classrooms where someone has already established the rules and a learning environment, and where there is always an experienced teacher to advise you. When you go into your own class, it can be very stressful if you have no access to support.

"The reality is that people are not leaving the profession because they are not capable teachers. They are leaving because they don't get the support they need."

She is shocked by the federal government's idea of fast-tracking graduates from other disciplines into schools after only a short period of preparation.

### Thinly spread

Australia, like other western nations, loses a significant number of teachers early in their careers, and governments, researchers and teacher educators struggle to counter the mix of alternative prospects, disillusionment and burnout that prompts people to walk away from the profession.

In *Time and Tide*, a paper on the need for greater investment in the renewal of the public school teaching service, ▶

Moss believes strong leadership and a supportive culture are features of schools where early career teachers thrive rather than merely survive. But time and inadequate resources often limit good intentions, she says. "Schools are necessarily very complex and task-driven organisations, so managing new teachers is likewise a complex human resource issue."

She says supportive professional development should be offered for a number of years after people begin classroom teaching. "How many other professions expect a newly qualified person to do the equivalent work of someone who has 20 or 30 years of experience?"

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### How realistic is it?

In NSW specially designated head teacher mentors help new teachers ease into the profession. Late last year education minister Verity Firth announced that 50 full-time equivalent teacher mentors would work in 90 schools this year. Their positions are part of a four-year \$273 million program that includes structured induction and orientation programs to help new teachers settle in.

Public school teachers in NSW have access to mentoring and

of generational change.

However, he stresses that many more dedicated head teacher mentor positions are needed to support teachers with temporary and casual status, as well as the early career full-time teachers who are moving into the profession to replace retiring baby boomers. "In NSW around 40 per cent of teachers will retire in the next five years, so there will be a huge increase in new teachers," he says.

An AEU deputation travelled to Canberra early this year to raise



**Getting into the classroom early and often built Chris Sheehan's confidence.**

► Lyndsay Connors, an honorary associate professor at the University of Sydney, says effective pre-service programs and the commitment to early career teachers' continued professional learning are too thinly spread. "There are certainly schools which are centres of excellence and energy in providing teachers with the conditions for professional growth, but there is a need to look for ways to embed these conditions across all schools," she says.

Meeting the challenge requires building on progress already made, says Ian Daw, an organiser with the State School Teachers Union of Western Australia who has a special interest in the union's new educator group. Conditions have improved for WA's new educators in recent years, with better pay and allowances, a formal professional development and learning program, and a time allocation out of the classroom for non-teaching duties, says Daw. "But we still hear of new teachers facing issues of overly heavy workload and poor behaviour, and even violence from some students."

A persistent problem for the state's graduating teachers is that they often start their careers in schools a long way from Perth. "Some of the places are not only many kilometres from their homes but are like a different country."

Daw says WA has a mentor

system, but too often experienced teachers aren't given time to carry out the paperwork and duties associated with the role. While principals and colleagues in rural and remote schools are often supportive of early career teachers, it doesn't equate to a formal mentor relationship "because if

**...if time for mentoring was incorporated into the school staffing formula, it could be more effective...**

a person has line management responsibilities, they may feel obliged to act on information that is given as part of the mentoring relationship". Some teachers in remote schools are linked to mentors many kilometres away, which also has limitations. "We feel that if time for mentoring was incorporated into the school staffing formula, it could be more effective," he says.

### **Continuing support**

Like Chris Sheehan in Victoria, May Darwin had another career before moving into teaching. She was an agricultural science researcher and tutored students at the University of Adelaide before completing her diploma of secondary education in the Northern Territory. She taught at kindergarten, primary

and secondary levels before taking up her current role as a science teacher at Kapunda High School, in the Barossa Valley.

Darwin is in favour of programs that provide continuing support and professional development over a number of years. She suggests that if they are not offered, new teachers should seek them out.

"The reality of managing a classroom is often quite different from the pre-service environment," she says. "Once you graduate, you start behaviour management from page one. It's a massive task to learn how to interact with the different types of kids in a class. At university you learn how to modify assessments, but not how

to deal with children who are completely off the rails and think science is about blowing things up. I've been to workshops on how to manage students and found them rewarding, but it was something I had to seek out for myself."

She worries that new educators are left to sink or swim. "When you hear that something like half of all new teachers leave within 10 years, you realise that a lot more needs to be done. The public thinks that all teachers want is more money, but what I want is fewer than 30 kids in my science class. I'd like to see children streamed so I don't have someone with a Year 10 reading age sitting next to someone with a Year 2 reading age, because they don't help each other."

Victoria Ogden, a member of the AEU deputation that travelled to

Canberra, is enthusiastic about her work with Indigenous students at Nyirripi Primary School, in the Northern Territory. "I feel privileged to do what I'm doing, but I have realised that a lot of people in remote schools don't access things they are entitled to. I'm supposed to have relief time and a mentor who spends time with me each week, but that's not possible because we don't have enough staff."

Ogden says the NT's new teachers would benefit from a new educators' network modelled on those in other states. "New educators come to the Territory because it's an interesting experience, but we need to be

**I think new educators everywhere would like more training in classroom management.**

supported. It would be good to have a trained Indigenous educator to work with, and I'd like to have spent time with the previous teacher who was here, getting to know the community and how everything works."

She says the orientation week for new NT teachers was interesting and useful, and she has enjoyed interaction with the local community. "But I think new educators everywhere would like more training in classroom management. Pre-service training needs to prepare people for the classroom dynamics they will face wherever they are teaching." ●

**Carolyn Rance is a freelance writer.**

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