

THE STRUGGLING STUDENT TEACHER

There are situations when a student teacher doesn't perform to the level expected by a cooperating teacher or a university supervisor. This may be due to uncertainty in skills, inaccuracy in knowledge, concerns about dispositions or inconsistency in growth over the placement. A cooperating teacher, at times with assistance from the university supervisor, must try to identify the cause of the incompetence, work on a remediation plan and assist the student teacher in solving the problem.

According to Morehead, Lyman and Foyle (2003), there are three categories of concern when working with a problem student teacher.

The *unskilled* student teacher may demonstrate less than proficient skills and abilities to begin with and is in your classroom to acquire and enhance the skills needed for successful teaching. Many of them are aware of their deficits but have no idea how to overcome or improve in these areas. Thankfully, these student teachers are willing to listen to and implement constructive feedback in order to develop their teaching skills.

Concerns with the *unaware* student teacher will most likely surface early in the placement through things such as refuted issues, overlooked problem areas or defensive responses. In these cases, remaining positive, supportive and focused on student learning is important.

Some things to remember when working with the unskilled or unaware student teacher are:

- Be specific in your statements when discussing areas that need improvement. Communicate with clear terminology, refer to the evaluation standards and use authentic examples from the student teacher's work.
- Create a plan for improvement, making sure that the purpose for improvement is clear, a time line for progress is set and strategies that would work well for the student teacher are brainstormed and discussed.
- Address no more than two, preferably one, concern(s) at a time so the student teacher can focus their energy on an attainable goal. Setting daily, and then weekly goals will help the student teacher gain a palpable sense of success.
- Encourage directed observations of veteran teachers in order to expand the student teacher's cache of relevant, applicable strategies. These can then be discussed and incorporated into planning and instruction.
- Hold daily, formative conferences targeting the goal areas. Again communicate specific examples of noted progress and discuss how they can be incorporated into other situations and content areas.
- Reassure the student teacher that all teachers struggle from time to time and that reflective practices will help address the issues as necessary
- Be aware of and honest when it is necessary to involve the university supervisor.

The most difficult situation to work with is with the *unable or unwilling* student teacher. Following the Significant Difficulty Policy: Addressing Performance and Dispositional Problems During Student Teaching, found at www.uwosh.edu/coehs/departments/OFE/handbook-for-student-teachers, and working with the university supervisor are critical in these cases.

Some things to remember when working with the unable or unwilling student teacher are:

- Even though discussing unsatisfactory performance may be difficult, it is your responsibility to deal with issues in a tactful, positive manner reflecting concern for and interest in your student teacher's success. Your approach will need to become more directive in creating a plan for improvement, specifying goal areas and outcome accountability.

- You need to remain focused on the problem, refer to the evaluative standards, use authentic examples illustrating the issues and reiterate the goal of student learning especially if the student teacher is refusing to acknowledge or minimizing the seriousness of the problem.
- If a student teacher questions your objectivity, offers up excuses or tries to redirect the discussion to other issues, you need to refocus the student teacher to the personal issues at hand and possible solution strategies.
- You may need to point out defensive responses if your student teacher becomes irritated, encourage personal responsibility if there is finger pointing or acknowledge the challenges facing the student teacher and possibilities for improvement if your student teacher “shuts down.”
- It is not your responsibility to ensure success for a student teacher; you can only provide every opportunity possible for success. That ultimate goal rests squarely on the shoulders of the student teacher.