



## YOUNG TEACHERS BENEFIT FROM MENTORS, TOO

BY KELLY MATTHEWS

The word “mentor” comes from Homer’s *Odyssey*, in which Odysseus entrusts his friend Mentor with looking after his house and son as he departs to fight in the Trojan War. As some scholars have pointed out, however, Mentor actually wasn’t the most reliable guardian, because by the time Odysseus returned, his house was overrun with suitors who were vying to woo his wife despite her patient belief that her husband would one day reappear.

The idea of Mentor as a trusted and wise elder owes more to the writer François Fénelon, who popularized Homer’s tale with his romanticized retelling of it, published at the turn of the 18th century. By that time, guilds were flourishing across Europe, and young people were typically apprenticed into their future professions by skilled craftspeople who were older and wiser than they.

A form of the apprenticeship system survives today in trade unions and licensing systems for professions such as carpentry, plumbing, and electrical work. It thrives in vocational and technical high schools as well as in hospitals, where newly minted doctors are

gradually given increased responsibilities as they progress through an internship and then a multiyear residency.

Apprenticeship is a less familiar model for other fields. For the past two years, my colleagues and I have worked to bring it into our local field of education by establishing the Framingham Teacher Residency Program, where new teachers are mentored closely by those who are more experienced and highly skilled. We have found that this has benefits not just for new teachers, but also for experienced educators, who benefit from sharing their expertise and wisdom.

The federal government has praised the approach of teacher residency programs as an important model for teacher preparation programs. Similar to the scaffolded training that doctors receive during their first years in the medical profession, a teacher residency requires that teachers in training commit to full-time, hands-on service in a classroom alongside an experienced teacher. Teacher residents, as they are called, receive a stipend for their full-time service, as well as tuition offsets or full funding for the university courses required to attain teacher licensure.

In his *New Yorker* article “Personal Best,” the writer and surgeon Dr. Atul Gawande argues that even experienced practitioners can benefit from mentoring and peer feedback as they reach higher levels of their careers. As Gawande notes, even world champion tennis players and other athletes employ coaches so that they can fine-tune skills at which they already excel.

The mentoring or coaching relationship requires clear communication and precise recommendations to improve targeted skills. It also requires humility on the part of the person being mentored and the capacity to put feedback into action quickly. The art of receiving mentorship is just as important as the art of dispensing it, so that both the mentor and the apprentice can learn, grow, and work more effectively through all phases of their careers.



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