

Working with Gen Y Teachers: Dealing with a Changing Teacher Workforce

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A significant change is coming to American classrooms. As Baby Boomer teachers retire and are replaced by members of Generation Y (born between 1977 and 1995) there is growing evidence that they come from a far different set of experiences, experiences that will shape their lives and their careers (Coggins, 2008).

Characteristics of Gen Y Employees

- Highly educated, value education and attribute their success to education;
- Very comfortable using technology and expect it to be available in the workplace;
- Tend to be creative, innovative and self-confident;
- Committed to making a difference and contributing to positive social change;
- Want to be connected, updated and included and involved in their work;
- Desire relationships with co-workers and supervisors;
- Looking for opportunities for growth, challenging work and assignments and flexibility in work schedules;
- Possess collaborative skills, are committed to team-building and are not afraid of accountability;

Members of Gen Y share several characteristics. They tend to be highly educated and concerned with the quality of education. As a result they value education and “attribute their success to their educational opportunities” (Wong & Wong, 2007). They are also very comfortable using technology and avoid disconnected or technologically inferior workplaces. “They were the first generation to grow up in a society saturated with electronic technology” (Rebore & Walmsley, 2010). They tend to be creative, innovative and very self-confident and enjoy working in small groups. Significantly, they are committed to making a difference

and contributing to positive social change (Carter & Carter, 2001; Shaffer, 2008; Yuva, 2007). In a study conducted for the Educational Research Service, Marx (2006) found that Gen Y teachers are committed to addressing long-standing social issues including diversity and greater inclusiveness in the workplace.

Employment specialists in the private sector also found that Gen Y employees desire relationships with co-workers and supervisors, look for opportunities for professional growth, enjoy challenging assignments and recognition for quality work and performance (NAS Recruitment Communications, 2006). Gen Y employees generally want to get ahead in their careers in a short period of time. Thus they seek opportunities for leadership and to make a difference in their career (Rebore & Walmsley, 2010).

The complexity of schools and the challenging issues faced by schools begs public school systems to do things differently. For example, the National Staff Development Council suggests that schools need to utilize technology more in the educational profession in order to retain Generation Y teachers and engage younger learners (Oblinger, 2003).

Strategies for Retaining Gen Y Teachers

A perennial problem for schools is the attrition of teachers. When teachers leave the profession, schools lose their experience and incur additional costs in training new teachers. While the supply of new teachers is large, the number of new teachers skilled in several key content areas (mathematics, science, special education) is far less.

Research on teacher attrition consistently identifies both organizational and personal factors for attrition. They include lack of support from administrators, lack of autonomy or control over one's work, isolation from colleagues, and inadequate opportunities for involvement and advancement (DeAngelis, Peddle & Trott, 2002; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003), exactly the sort of employment conditions that Gen Y teachers seek. Gen Y teachers are not afraid of change or innovation. They are comfortable making numerous career moves in efforts to advance their career (Rebore & Walmsley, 2010).

A recent report from the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality (www.tqsource.org) identified 10 strategies that school leaders can use to support and retain Gen Y teachers. While the strategies are not new they are accompanied by ideas for adapting them to meet the needs of Gen Y teachers.

Strategy 1: Establish a Shared Vision and Set Goals

Gen Y teachers want to be involved in developing a vision and setting goals. They want to participate in decision-making and to be heard and appreciated. Use the opportunity to revisit your school's vision and revise or re-commit as appropriate making sure to incorporate Gen Y teachers' thoughts and ideas.

Strategy 2: Encourage Shared Leadership

Find ways to empower Gen Y teachers and encourage them to assume responsibilities. Gen Y teachers don't subscribe to the idea that they must "prove" themselves before they can assume leadership roles. Gen Y teachers are anxious to be involved and make a difference early in their career and are excellent multi-taskers. Identify ways to utilize their energy and skill.

Strategy 3: Create a Positive and Supportive School Culture

Celebrate the generational diversity among your teachers and acknowledge the unique contributions of Gen Y teachers. Create cross-generational teams to work on school issues. Find time to talk with and mentor Gen Y teachers. Use Gen Y teachers to share their technological skills and knowledge.

Strategy 4: Select and Assign Teachers Effectively

Recognize that the career aspirations and loyalties of Gen Y teachers differ from those of other generations. Consider their needs when selecting and

assigning teachers. Long-standing traditions, like assigning the most challenging classes to the newest teachers should be reconsidered. Gen Y teachers appreciate a challenge but look for balance in teaching assignments.

Strategy 5: Improve Teachers' Skills, Knowledge, and Capabilities

When arranging professional development, focus on opportunities for teachers to work together on collaborative activities. Use and embrace technology as a teaching and communication strategy. Traditional professional development experiences may not meet the needs of Gen Y teachers.

Strategy 6: Adopt Effective Tools for Teacher Evaluation

Provide in-depth feedback to Gen Y teachers. Praise them when appropriate. Use evaluation as an opportunity to talk with Gen Y teachers about their instruction and instructional decision-making. Know that Gen Y thrives on feedback because of their desire to contribute to the success of the organization. They expect to receive feedback to improve performance.

Strategy 7: Use Time Effectively

Find time for regular collaboration among all teachers but specifically for Gen Y teachers. Examine the school schedule to identify ways that you can provide for team, department or course collaboration. Gen Y teachers enjoy working in small groups to solve complex instructional issues. Such collaborative activities build on the Gen Y need for developing friendships with colleagues at work.

Strategy 8: Use Data Effectively

Gen Y teachers value the use of data to guide decisions and embrace the use of technology. Use technology to help Gen Y teachers use data for

improved instructional decision-making. Gen Y teachers will appreciate having comprehensive but user-friendly data systems designed to improve effectiveness.

Strategy 9: Ensure that School Facilities are Adequate and Functional

Work to ensure that school facilities are adequate and incorporate the latest technology available. Such technology can contribute to improved classroom instruction, a high value for Gen Y teachers.

Strategy 10: Provide Effective Instructional Leadership

Gen Y teachers want honest, open, and personalized support, guidance and mentoring from their leaders. Their urgency to make a positive contribution in their school will make them receptive to this feedback. They also don't want to be taught something they already know.

Adapted from: Behrstock, E. & Clifford, M. (2009). *Leading Gen Y Teachers: Emerging Strategies for School Leaders*. Washington, DC: National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality (www.tqsource.org/publications/February2009Brief.pdf) and Rebores, R. & Walmsley, A. (2010). *Recruiting and Retaining Generation Y Teachers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Final Thoughts

Just as the Baby Boomers changed American society so will Gen Y. The evidence is clear that they are committed to making a positive impact and changing American schools (Marx, 2006; Wong and Wong, 2007).

It is crucial that school leaders acknowledge their powerful motivation, recognize their unique learning and working style, and find meaningful ways to engage and involve them in school leadership. Gen Y teachers hold tremendous potential for making a difference in the lives of American students.

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