

CONNECTING WITH TEACHER COLLEAGUES AND OTHER BUILDING EMPLOYEES TO UNDERSTAND THE SCHOOL "ECOSYSTEM"

What is this about?

The school community encompasses students, teachers, education (ELL, SpEd, STEM, etc.) specialists, administrative staff, nurses, security and cafeteria personnel, maintenance experts, volunteers, and others. Every one of them is there to support students' well-being and learning. Connecting with teaching colleagues and other school employees is a good way for you to find out more about the culture and workings of your school community, and about the families and neighborhoods it serves.



Why is it important?

Everyone in the school community has a unique role and perspective you can take into account when forming your own understanding of how your host school works. Everyone's job is interdependent on everyone else's, which is why we refer to the workings of a school as an "ecosystem." For example, one TC we interviewed decided to talk to the security officer for a course assignment. She asked him about his take on disciplinary procedures and how they work for the students. She was surprised to learn how well he knew the students, and their siblings—if they were former students—and the families. He regularly talked with them about their interests and ideas, about sports, their difficulties in their lives. So it was easy for him to intervene in a productive way, should one of his students be in trouble. This caring stance of a security officer surprised the TC and made very clear to her the importance to learn to know your students informally *before* they require your attention in a more targeted and official way.

Tips for doing this

When it comes to supporting your students, the staff and fellow teachers can offer important resources. When choosing with whom to connect, make sure you include ELL and special education specialists, counselors, and instructional coaches. They are all part of the ecosystem. Prepare a brief introduction about yourself and your role as a TC and use this prepared "quick-intro" whenever you meet someone new at your school.

Of course, it is common sense to use courtesy and a professional demeanor when interacting with other adults at the school (as it is when interacting with students). For example, people are busy with their professional tasks, so if you want to connect with someone from administration, like the assistant principal, find out what the best way would be to set up a brief meeting. Maybe email is best, or you could arrange a meeting through the secretary. Make sure you specify date, time, and location, and the duration of

the meeting. If the meeting is arranged for 20 minutes, stick to it! Prepare the questions you want to ask beforehand to be very targeted in your approach. And do not become discouraged when not everyone welcomes you with open arms and stops in their tracks to answer your questions. Remember, school is a complex place and people have a lot on their minds.

Other employees might be approached in a more informal way. But it is always a fine line between them happily sharing what they know with you and their need to continue with their job. Be sensitive!

Where to start?

A. Teacher colleagues:

- You may ask other teachers what they see as important for setting up their classroom culture at the beginning of the school year and how they introduce routines and norms. You may also ask how they learn to know their students and their background / cultures.
- A good place to start conversations is the teachers' lounge. After introducing yourself, you may simply ask how ones day had been going so far. If you had made your acquaintance already, you could ask questions like "Were there some interactions with students today that stood out for you? Why was it special? Is there something I should consider when encountering something similar in the future?"
- Find out from your mentor, your students, or another colleague, which teachers are using innovative teaching methods or are considered as especially successful with students and with teaching their subject. Ask these teachers if you could observe them. Sometimes, they have special activities planned (e.g., role plays in history, computer research in ELA) and will be happy to let you know when there is a good time to come to their classroom. Past TCs found such opportunities to observe other classrooms and different subject areas as highly informative.

B. Administrators and staff:

- A good way to get various staff sharing their insights is to ask what is special about the school, about the students, about the neighborhoods.
- Questions you could ask administrators: About their vision for their school and their students; about their experience with TCs and what they have seen as good learning opportunities for them; or about challenges they recognize for teachers and for students. You should also ask if they would be willing to observe you (especially later, when you've started taking the lead in a classroom). The assistant principal will most likely write you a letter of recommendation, it would be very beneficial if she or he knows you well.
- Make sure you become acquainted with the school's secretaries and to know their names. You will interact with them frequently.

C. Specialists:

- For more in-depth meetings with ELL and special education specialists, counselors, and/or coaches, arrange a meeting; make sure you tell them why you want to meet.
- Share prepared questions in advance, so that the specialists can think of specific information and resources to share with you. Questions may be about specific students you are concerned about and what course of action they would recommend. Specialists can offer you as a novice teacher about students and families who might need help. You could also ask about what challenges they encounter in their role, and how they work through them. You will surely have other/more questions you want to ask.
- Try to contact at least one specialist per week. Even a very brief meeting makes it easier later to connect when you have more specific questions or concerns.

Summing up

- Do get out and about the classroom you share with your mentor to learn more about your school and your students!
- Develop your own line of inquiry into your school's culture and inner workings.
- Mix professional courtesy with professional curiosity.

An afterthought: Take all the stories you hear about students with a grain of salt. Stay skeptic/alert (not all what you hear is unbiased) and at the same time stay open to having your own ideas and perspectives challenged.