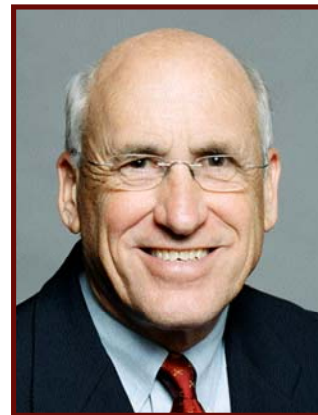


## President's Message

# It All Begins—Right Now!

Francis (Skip) Fennell



New teachers are setting up their classrooms as we speak. Yes, it all begins, right now! This is especially true for new teachers, since for you, this is the beginning of a career—yours.

With far too many teachers leaving the profession very early in their careers, we must offer ways to support mathematics teachers at every level. Although finding highly qualified teachers may be a challenge, retaining them is even more of a challenge.

It is my hope that anyone reading this President's Message will pass it along to a first-year teacher or to a school administrator.

A few months ago, I read *Teacher Man* by Pulitzer Prize winning author Frank McCourt. Prior to writing *Angela's Ashes* and *'Tis*, McCourt taught English for 30 years in the city of New York. In a passage early in the book, he indicates what it was like to be a teacher. Anyone who has spent any time in the classroom can relate to his words.

"I didn't call myself anything. I was more than a teacher. And less. In the high school classroom you are a drill sergeant, a rabbi, a shoulder to cry on, a disciplinarian, a singer, a scholar, a clerk, a referee, a clown, a counselor, a dress-code enforcer, a conductor, an apologist, a philosopher, a collaborator, a tap dancer, a politician, a therapist, a fool, a traffic cop, a priest, a mother-father-sister-brother-aunt-uncle, a bookkeeper, a critic, a psychologist, the last straw."

What do we know about teaching? Well, we do know that teaching is complex. As many of us know, there are many things that a teacher needs to get used to and confront daily. The most oft-discussed concerns of beginning teachers involve managing their classrooms, motivating students, dealing with individual differences among students, assessing students' work, and developing relationships with parents. However, keep the following thought in mind. The brand-new teacher, typically a recent graduate of a teacher education program, assumes the *same* responsibilities as the 15-year veteran teacher in the next classroom.

Schools and school districts should consider the following strategies for supporting new mathematics teachers, whether such colleagues are brand-new teachers or teachers new to a district or grade level.

**Plan to support new teachers.** An important early goal is to begin the process of getting new teachers grounded in the unique culture that exists within their own classroom and school. So, as a starter, if you are a first-year teacher, get to know the master teachers in your building. Use them (yes, use them!) for ideas about managing time, organizing instruction, planning, finding materials, and handling other teaching or learning issues.

**Provide mentors.** If you are a principal or supervisor, consider providing a mentor teacher for each new teacher. Make this decision carefully. A mentor teacher needs to be comfortable as one who shares, listens, and is always accessible. Mentor teachers can furnish the assistance new teachers typically need when problems just pop up. This includes issues that occur when teaching unfamiliar courses,

topics, or grade levels. Assistance may also extend to dealing with individual student needs and interpreting assessment data. This type of ongoing, readily accessible support is essential to the success of beginning teachers at any grade or school level.

**Encourage reflection on practice.** It is important to create opportunities for the staff to meet with new colleagues for regularly scheduled "best practice" discussions. The emphasis of these discussions must be on what works and why. Also consider getting new teachers connected to their professional development options early. As teachers become comfortable, they will begin to step back and reflect on students' progress, their own teaching, and next steps in meeting classroom and student needs. Study groups that focus on specific topics, such as improving mathematics instruction, can provide beginning teachers with collaborative professional development models.

Additional considerations for easing new teachers into their first year include the following: adjusting positions to make sure that class size, courses or levels assigned, and even actual classroom space are appropriate for first timers and providing release time for professional development opportunities, which may include observing other teachers, doing lesson study, or attending conferences. Experienced teachers, do you remember when you finally seemed to "get it" as a teacher? If so, you will agree that the knowledge that good mathematics teachers possess consists of more than knowing mathematics well or understanding how children learn—it's knowing how to apply mathematical knowledge, quickly, in ways that make sense to students (paraphrased from Deborah Loewenberg Ball in Viadero 2004).

To this day I still remember my first year of teaching. How did we all get through that? For me, it was bulletin boards that took a week to create, assignments that were way over the heads of my students, and on and on. Those first few years, "the induction years," are "critical to teacher development and, to a large extent, shape the attitudes and behaviors that are maintained throughout a teacher's career. These first years are when teachers decide if they will remain in the profession..." (Center for Research on Learning and Technology 1999). *We need them to stay* and become the next generation of mathematics leaders, and we need to foster the kind of love for teaching that makes it possible for many veterans, including this one, to continue to love the dialogue, the interchange, and the challenges of classroom teaching. Have a great year!

### References

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