

A Lifeline for New Teachers

An after-school learning community helps new teachers improve their instruction as they learn the ropes.

Cynthia L. Carver

The invitation came several weeks into the new school year from Grant Chandler, the dean of students at Kalamazoo Central High School in Michigan.

Club Maroon, a group of new teachers who met every two weeks, was slated to begin the following week. As a field-based teacher educator, I had learned much from sitting in on these meetings the previous year.

In just one year, Club Maroon, a collaborative learning community with voluntary attendance, had become a lifeline for new teachers in a challenging urban setting. It was the talk of veteran teachers in the building and a model for other schools in the district.

Faced with the overwhelming challenge of effectively teaching all students, new teachers in under-resourced urban settings continue to leave the teaching profession at an alarming rate (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Ingersoll, 2001). States and districts increasingly have looked toward new teacher induction and mentoring programs as an intervening mechanism (Fideler & Haselkorn, 1999; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003). With an experienced mentor providing support and assistance, the beginning teacher may refine his or her instructional skills, feel more successful, and ultimately choose to remain in the classroom. But induction programs that rely on one-to-one



Photo courtesy of Cynthia L. Carver

Members of Club Maroon, a collaborative learning community of new teachers, are comfortable sharing with colleagues the challenges they experience in the classroom.

mentoring are limited in their ability to help new recruits navigate dense urban bureaucracies. These programs are typically removed from interactions with school administrators and offer few sustained opportunities for new teachers to learn from one another—both factors known to influence whether or not new teachers stay in the classroom (see Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Johnson & Kardos, 2002).

For 17 new teachers in Kalamazoo, Michigan, Club Maroon is filling the gap.

More Than Support

Elaine, a teacher participant, recalls Club Maroon's humble beginnings. Her honesty drives straight to the heart, articulating the desperation that many novice teachers feel.

We started out by calling it "Club Buffoon." It wasn't a slam on the group, but rather a reaction to our own fumbleings and insecurities as new teachers. Club Maroon provided a support group, something woefully lacking for many first-year teachers. We could problem-solve and not feel alone in the process.

Club Maroon operates as a professional support group, encouraging and motivating participants to not give up—either on themselves or on the challenging adolescents in their classrooms. And new teachers are not the only ones reaping the benefits of this professional learning community; Club Maroon also helps Grant Chandler, who participates in the meetings, sharpen his skills as an administrator and instructional leader. He explains,

Club Maroon encourages me to stay focused on classroom instructional practices rather than on management issues, and it establishes me as someone to whom these teachers can go for information, assistance, support, and expertise. In short, it provides a venue for me to do the work that I believe every administrator should be doing.

In an academically, racially, and economically diverse high school, in which as many as 60 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, the challenges of maintaining a rigorous academic program can be overwhelming. Kalamazoo Central High School enrolls approximately 1,350 students. In keeping with Michigan law, the school assigns mentors to work with new teachers for three years. District policy further compensates teachers for up to three days of released time each year for individualized work with these mentors. The district is also experimenting with a program of after-school seminars specifically designed for untenured beginning teachers. Club Maroon participants find that these support measures are valuable and needed.

But Club Maroon offers what one-to-one mentors and after-school seminars cannot—a regularly scheduled in-house gathering of like-minded colleagues devoted to learning about teaching and tackling real problems of practice. For all the emotional support the group provides, participants remain focused on their larger goal: improving student achievement. The keys to Club Maroon's success are trust and a meaningful work agenda.

Daring to Share

As with any successful learning community, Club Maroon's mission is clear—to improve teaching—and participants share a collaborative vision for accomplishing this goal. But something more fundamental enabled these new teachers to share the problems they experienced in their classrooms with a school administrator. And that was trust.

From the beginning, Club Maroon needed to be a place where teachers could share both success and failure. But if the school's newest teachers were

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going to risk opening their classrooms to scrutiny, they first needed to feel safe as learners. Grant noted,

Given that I formally evaluate the majority of these teachers, I wanted this to be a safe place to discuss questions and concerns openly and honestly. I wanted it to be a place to talk about our failures as teachers and how we could address these issues for improvement. I have been, and continue to be, mindful of encouraging open and honest reflection and dialogue. I want to be seen as part of the team and not simply as someone who casts judgment on the quality of teacher work.

Like novices everywhere, these new teachers initially believed that acknowledging the problems they experienced in the classroom was akin to committing professional suicide. Yet Club Maroon offered the combination of a clear mission focused on good teaching, a safe space in which to reflect, and a team approach where everyone was committed to one another's success. Kristine, a teacher participant, pointed out that the program helps new teachers deal with issues that are gener-

ally difficult for novices to discuss for fear of being considered incompetent or not in control of their classrooms. For Modhi, another teacher in the program, the shared nature of the group's work created a natural bond that counteracted his fear of being judged.

Collectively, these reflections reveal the vulnerability that new teachers experience when opening their instructional practice to review and critique. The deliberate efforts to structure Club Maroon as a safe space for talking about teaching laid a necessary foundation from which learning could grow.

Focus on Instruction

The beginning years of teaching are overwhelming. What pulls these new teachers out from under a pile of papers at the end of the day to gather in an already-darkened school library? The answer varies with each participant: new classroom tips and strategies, the opportunity to troubleshoot common problems, a chance to learn from other participants' strengths, or spending time getting to know one another. As Elaine notes,

I've gotten advice on getting students on task at the first bell—have them place notebooks face up in the center of their desks, pens on the right, planners to the left; rituals really do help—how to share more of myself (Ryan telling his class how he met his wife), how to transform a bad substitute teacher experience into a real learning experience in restorative justice (Tracy's class meeting). We bring both ourselves and our interests to students (Clifton's love of Japanese culture), and students are sparked by the passions that we share (Joanna's Mexican heritage).

Elaine's comments highlight the open sharing that occurs in Club Maroon meetings. Typically, Grant opens each session with an invitation: How are you doing? Is there anything we can help you with? There are times, especially now that the group members are comfortable with one another, when the meeting doesn't get beyond this point. Questions often revolve around school policies and procedures. As a member of the administrative team, Grant can offer useful insights on a variety of school practices, such as the role of security staff in the building, what to expect from the district evaluation process, and the status of impending budget cuts. Case by case, Grant is helping these new teachers understand, appreciate, and navigate the bureaucracy of a large urban district.

At the same time, the group continually focuses on classroom teaching and learning. To reinforce their commitment as a learning community devoted to improving practice, participants complete homework assignments. For example, last year each participant shared a copy of a lesson plan. As group members became more comfortable with this task, they looked at their instructional purpose and linked it to student behavior in the classroom. The discussions that took place were lively and positive and included a good deal of idea swapping. Soon the teachers began to observe one another in the classroom. Gradually, these discussions took on deeper layers of insight, suggesting the group members' growing comfort with critical reflection on practice.

For Tracy, another participant, these conversations have forced her to think hard about her own classroom practices.

Mr. Chandler really pushes us to look at the goal, the product, the whole point to the day's lesson—and it's something I struggle with terribly. Much of it has to do with the time crunch. By the time I have everything together, I don't have the time to decipher what my purpose is. . . . I know that what I am doing and teaching is valuable and has a

purpose, but I'll be darned if I can sit down and tell you directly "The Purpose."

Maria, now in her second year of teaching, stopped attending Club Maroon last year when the routine tasks of beginning teaching became too demanding. Now that she feels more settled, she has returned with renewed enthusiasm. As for the homework assignments, she has come to appreciate what she can learn from these extra tasks, and she notes that

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it's good to have some pressure to do the assignments. I've wanted to observe other teachers, but I never did anything about it before. This year, with the pressure of a [homework] deadline, I got into a couple of classrooms and have really enjoyed watching other teachers teach.

Agendas and Administrators

Although these teachers can elect to receive credit toward their mandated district professional development hours by attending Club Maroon, attendance is not required. Those who choose to come do so willingly. Largely because of Club Maroon's overwhelming success, the district is now thinking about mandating participation in new teacher professional learning communities.

Equally important, the pressing needs of those in attendance dictate the substance of the meetings. For example, a recent incident in the building led to a lengthy discussion of security measures. Another meeting was devoted to cross-class problem solving about a student who took three of four classes from Club Maroon teachers.

Beyond the immediate concerns that the group tackles, a purposeful long-term plan is unfolding as well, which began with lesson planning and

continued with classroom observation. The group will soon begin to analyze student work.

Many would suppose that having an administrator in attendance might alter the dynamic of the group. Perhaps it did at the beginning, when motivations were unclear and trust had yet to be earned. But the group clearly overcame this obstacle. The insight that the administrator brings to the table helps teachers see the school and its students through experienced eyes. Moreover,

administrators can act on new teachers' concerns and frustrations in ways that mentors cannot. The result is a school culture in which students, teachers, and administrators learn together.

Teacher Power

The story of Club Maroon is powerful in its simplicity. Faced with 17 new and untenured teachers in the school—all of whom he had helped to hire—one administrator decided to gamble on a venture. He could not possibly work with each new teacher individually, but he could meet periodically with those who might be interested. In one year, participation in Club Maroon has grown from half a dozen new teachers to all 17 of the new teachers. Respect, trust, and professionalism reign, and everyone counts. The goal is clear; the work is authentic, meaningful, and collaborative. As Elaine commented,

Community building in the classroom makes teaching, and, hopefully, learning, a lasting and powerful experience. With this as a premise, how could I ignore the power of being part of a developing community of teachers? It makes sense to me that if I do what I ask my students to do—get to know peers, share knowledge,

help one another in myriad ways—it will make my teaching more lasting and powerful. I go to Club Maroon because it makes me a better teacher.

Over time, these new teachers have gained confidence through helping one another. By solving their own problems, they have become empowered as professionals and responsible for their own learning.

Despite pressing administrative duties, Grant keeps coming back to Club Maroon. He points out how rewarding it is to watch the teachers find their place at the school, establish friendships, and discuss issues central to student achievement and to their success as teachers. All the new teachers returned to the school the following year as well, an important fact to note at a time when school districts are carefully watching new teacher retention rates. ■

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Author's note: Grant A. Chandler, Dean of Students, Kalamazoo Central High School, and active Club Maroon participants Elaine Sayre, Tracy Tull, Modhi Alsheri, Kristine Sholes, and Maria Stapert contributed to this article.

Cynthia L. Carver is Assistant Professor of Teacher Education at Western Michigan University; (269) 387-1722; cynthia.carver@wmich.edu.

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