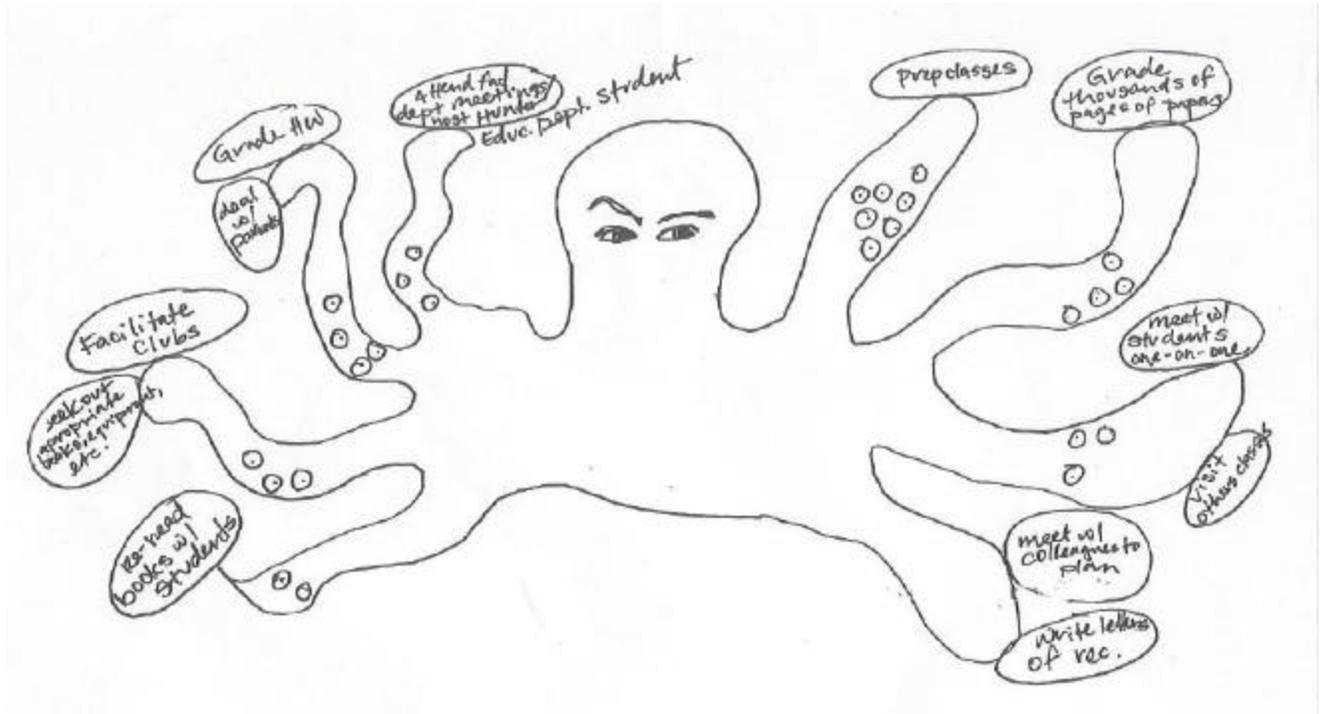


# A Precarious Balance:



## How Can We Help Support New Teachers?

*By Rebecca Hollander & Nell Scharff  
Hunter College High School  
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## ***What Do New Teachers Say They Need: Why We Asked the Question***

The current teacher shortage in America's schools is exacerbated by a staggering attrition rate among new teachers: nearly 30% of new teachers leave within the first five years with numbers rising up to 50% in urban and rural areas (TNPI, 2001). Increasingly, research demonstrates a link between effective professional development and teacher retention. When teachers actively participate in setting their own professional development agendas, when time and resources are allocated to support ongoing collaboration and conversation among colleagues, student achievement is increased and teachers are more likely to remain in the profession (TNPI, 2001; Darling-Hammond 2001).

Teaching is the only profession in which the demands placed on a brand new teacher, regardless of preparation, are the same as those of a 30-year veteran. Currently, there is a sink-or-swim, survival-of-the-fittest quality to new teacher induction. As the lowest on the totem pole, new teachers are required to teach the most difficult classes, to teach more sections, and often to teach in six or seven different rooms within one day. The profession as a whole does not nurture its new teachers, recognizing the particular challenges faced or creating opportunities for authentic learning to take place. It is no wonder that in New York City, for example, one out of four teachers leaves the profession after the first year (New York Times 2002).

We (Rebecca and Nell) remember our own experiences as new teachers at Hunter College High School as extremely difficult. I (Nell) began to teach at the age of 23 with absolutely no training—no education courses, no student teaching. I was completely overwhelmed by going from never having been in front of a class to being suddenly expected to have full responsibility for teaching five classes. The first year was a matter

of surviving from one period to the next, and from one day to the next. I (Rebecca) began teaching at Hunter with a Masters in Education under my belt and having had the opportunity to student teach at Hunter and receive mentorship from my cooperating teacher. But first year teaching was still overwhelming, as I was shifting from teaching one class in a sheltered environment to teaching six classes with no mentor or support. The only formal support was administration-led meetings that helped me with school procedures but did not support my teaching. Any other support I had to actively seek out. We both remembered, also, feeling isolated as new teachers. We got to know others in our own department, but didn't interact much with teachers in other departments, or with other new teachers in the school who were going through the same struggles.

Because of our own experiences and the crisis in the field, we wondered what the experiences of new teachers at Hunter were as a whole and what we could do to support them. We wondered as well whether it might be possible to shift the culture of our school to be more supportive of new teachers and their learning needs.

Our study addressed the question: *What do new teachers at Hunter say they need?* For this study, we define new teachers as anyone new to the school regardless of prior teaching experience. We wanted to find out from new teachers in our school what specific kinds of support they wanted, and then to explore what would happen if we tried to give them some of what they asked for. We also wanted to find out what their overall experience was. What we found was that all of our new teachers were struggling to manage an overwhelming task without much guidance or support.

## **The Setting**

Hunter College High School (HCHS), part of the City University of New York (CUNY), is a public school in New York City, but does not fall under the jurisdiction of

the Board of Education. Rather, it is a laboratory school serving grades 7-12 and technically part of Hunter College. Children, who come from all five boroughs in New York City, gain admission to the school based on passing a rigorous entrance exam in sixth-grade; therefore, the academic level of the school is incredibly high. In some ways, teaching at Hunter is less challenging than in many Board of Education schools: discipline, for example, is rarely a serious problem and children come to the school eager and ready to learn. On the other hand, the workload at this school is daunting for both teachers and students. Students have very high expectations for themselves, their teachers and the curriculum. The culture of the school exerts a pressure on teachers to move rapidly through a challenging curriculum, and to assign large amounts of reading and writing daily. New teachers at HCHS find themselves thrust into an exciting but fast-paced and competitive environment. Although the particular challenges at Hunter differ from those at many other public schools, the general experience of being overwhelmed as a new teacher is the same.

Before our study, school-wide new teacher support consisted of monthly hour-long administrative-led meetings held after school. A few departments implemented other kinds of support on an ad hoc basis: for example, the English department assigned a more experienced teacher on a particular subject level to meet regularly with a new teacher also teaching that subject; other departments invited new teachers to observe more experienced teachers within their department; and Social Studies and Science had regular 'team meetings' where all teachers of a certain level would meet to share lesson planning. However, none of these programs existed school-wide. It was not uncommon for new teachers to go all year without ever knowing the names of new or experienced teachers in other departments.

# What We Did

## A Place to Begin

At the start of the year, we handed out a survey (**Appendix A**) to all our first year teachers (12 in total). We hoped to a) find out more about their backgrounds and b) better understand their needs as new teachers. We asked about their expectations for the school, what they were looking forward to, what problems they might anticipate. We wanted to know why they went into teaching and also what questions they had about teaching and the school in general. We also asked about their prior teaching experience, teacher education and certification.

## Focusing In

One of our questions listed a selection of supports that we felt might be helpful to new teachers. We knew this would be an important question from the beginning since we were looking for ways to implement support. We asked our new teachers to check off and rank the supports that were important to them. The supports included:

- Administration-led information sessions for new teachers
- Teacher-led information sessions for new teachers
- New Teacher support groups/network
- Opportunities to observe other teachers
- Opportunities to be observed by other teachers
- Opportunities to attend conferences
- Procedural handouts
- Social Activities
- Professional Development Workshops

Of all these supports, teachers ranked three that were most important to them. The supports most frequently in the top three were: teacher-led information sessions, opportunities to observe other teachers and opportunities to be observed by other

teachers. Twelve out of twelve new teachers chose teacher-led information sessions as one of their top three choices. Ten out of twelve of our new teachers chose the opportunity to observe other teachers. Five out of the twelve new teachers requested opportunities to be observed by other teachers. The other supports were selected by a few teachers as important to them, but were not as overwhelmingly requested. For example, Professional Development Workshops were requested by three new teachers. New Teacher Support Groups, Opportunities to Attend Conferences and Procedural Handouts were all selected by two new teachers, and Administration-led information sessions was selected by one new teacher.

### **A Two-Pronged Approach**

#### **Observations:**

The support most requested by our new teachers was Teacher-led information sessions. We decided to implement those, but while we were deciding the best way to proceed, we decided to facilitate new teachers' observations of other teachers, as that was the second highest request. We asked department chairs to circulate a form throughout their departments asking teachers to volunteer to be observed by our new teachers. The response from the departments was mixed. Five out of seven departments returned the form. Most departments averaged between three to four teachers who were willing to open up their classrooms. All but one of the teachers in our department volunteered (10 in total). This was probably in support of our study. Two departments did not respond even after multiple reminders. When we asked one department chair for the form, he stated, "We're not doing it. Enough people observe us already," suggesting that in at least one department observation is seen as negative and probably linked with evaluation. We compiled this list and handed it out to our new teachers. However, as we checked in

with our new teachers throughout the year, it was apparent to us that most of them were not observing other teachers. Some of our new teachers did observe members of their own departments, but nobody went outside of their department.

### **Teacher-led Information Sessions:**

We decided to offer regular meetings in order to accommodate our new teachers' request for teacher-led information sessions. We spoke to the Assistant Principal who was already leading monthly after school meetings for the new teachers. He gave us permission to take over one of his meetings in order to formulate a plan for our teacher-led meetings. We wanted to involve our new teachers in the planning process.

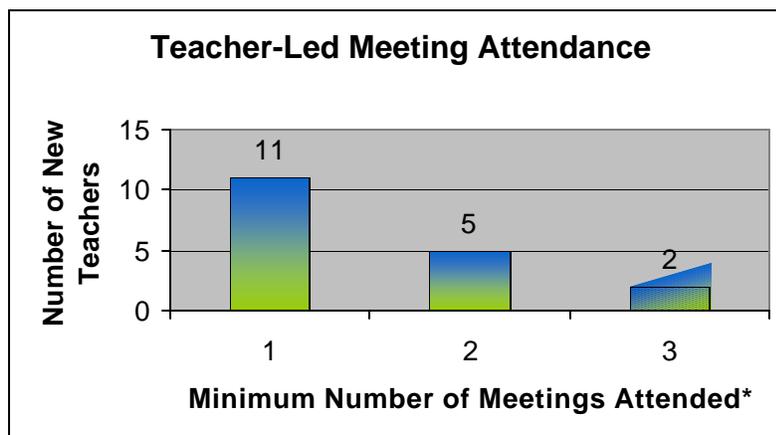
Therefore, at this first meeting (in November), we worked with the new teachers to determine what topics they wanted to discuss. We generated a list including school culture, disciplinary rules, school policies, classroom management, parent-teacher conferences, time management, peer pressure, evaluation and grading, classroom observations and teaching in the wake of September 11<sup>th</sup>. We decided that at each meeting, we would either dip into one of these issues or have an open discussion about what was on our new teachers' minds that day. We were sure to leave time after our planning process in order to address what was on our new teachers' minds that day.

Parent-Teacher conferences were the following day and our new teachers were filled with questions about policies and procedures as well as doubts about their abilities to converse with parents. So that was our first topic of discussion; the rest were to be discussed at subsequent meetings.

Our next meeting was held two weeks later. We had decided to offer monthly meetings so as not to overburden our new teachers. We found, however, that attendance was low. Some of our teachers had expressed concern over making the meetings, citing

other commitments and lack of time. We felt we needed to add more to accommodate our teachers' schedules and thus moved to bimonthly meetings on different weekdays. We had six meetings in total from November to March. In addition to Parent/Teacher Conferences, we discussed the observation process at the school, strategies for dealing with ninth graders, seventh graders, departmental expectations and school culture as well as their overall experiences of being new teachers.

After each meeting, we asked our new teachers to write a reflection discussing whether the meetings were helpful, and what other types of support they might still need. In their reflections, our teachers continually stated that the meetings were helping them both by informing them of important school policies as well as making them feel less isolated. However, we found that most of our teachers were not regularly attending our meetings. Eleven out of twelve of our new teachers attended at least one of our meetings throughout the year. However, when we looked to see how many teachers attended at least two meetings, the number had been cut by nearly half. Only five out of twelve new teachers attended two meetings. Finally when looking to see how many teachers attended more than two meetings, the figure was even lower. Only two of our new teachers attended at least three meetings. No new teachers attended four or more meetings. (See **chart below**).



In order to better understand why our teachers were not attending our meetings regularly, and to see what we could do to better help our new teachers, we reviewed our data from the year.

## **Data**

Our data includes responses to two surveys, one given in September and one in April. Both surveys consisted of multiple choice and open-ended questions. On the April survey, we asked teachers to characterize their experience in a number of ways, including writing a metaphor that captured their experience or drawing a picture, therefore our data also consists of some drawings. In addition, our data includes attendance records, our logs which were written after new teacher meetings, short reflections that we asked new teachers to write at the end of the new teacher meetings, and informal interviews.

## **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was ongoing; throughout the study, we used whatever results our analysis revealed to choose a future path. Immediately after getting back the September surveys, we tabulated responses to many of the multiple-choice questions. We focused in on the question described above, in which we asked new teachers what supports they thought would be most helpful to them. A simple tally revealed which forms of supports most new teachers wanted. Later in the study we also counted to determine attendance patterns at teacher-led meetings.

To analyze our narrative data (including informal interviews of new teachers documented in our logs, reflections written by new teachers during the last five minutes of teacher-led meetings, and narrative responses to survey questions) and our visual data

(drawings capturing a salient aspect of being a new teacher, from the April survey), we read over/looked at the data repeatedly and sorted it into the following categories: overall experiences of being a new teacher, reasons for attendance or inattendance at teacher-led meetings, responses/evaluation of teacher-led meetings, whether they observed other teachers, and what other supports they wanted as new teachers. We then reviewed the data within a certain category looking for both patterns and exceptions. We next winnowed down the data, looking for a quote or picture or metaphor that when presented, would capture an experience of many of the teachers overall.

Sometimes analysis snuck up on us. When making a chart to present some of the more concrete aspects of our data, we found that we were actually engaging in data *analysis*. In order to make an effective graph or chart, we had to figure out which information we wanted to highlight and in what form. Doing so—we learned—was actually a form of analysis since it helped us to discover what we thought was at the core or the heart of our data and thus, our study.

## **The Heart of What We Learned**

### **1. New Teachers at Hunter are overwhelmed and struggling to survive on their own.**

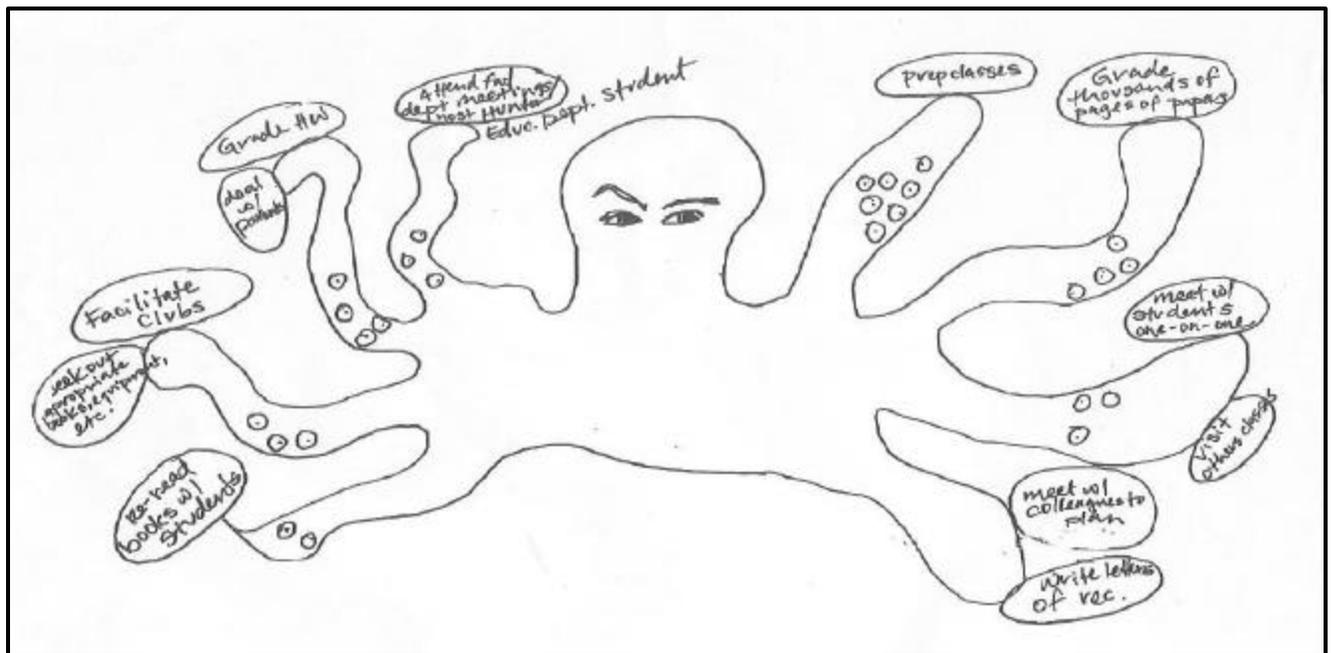
In the April survey, we asked new teachers to characterize the overall experience (or one salient aspect) of their year. We gave them the option to answer with a written explanation, a metaphor that captured the experience, and/or to draw a picture. Eight of the twelve new teachers returned the April survey. (Two who did not return the survey specifically told us that they were simply too swamped to find time to fill it out.) Every survey painted a picture of being overwhelmed and of struggling to manage a seemingly impossible set of tasks. One new teacher wrote:

- *At particularly trying times it has felt like I was swaying on a tight rope while things were being thrown at me and I was juggling.*

Many of the responses captured this same feeling of being overwhelmed, but also indicated that teachers felt they had to navigate the journey alone, without adequate guidance:

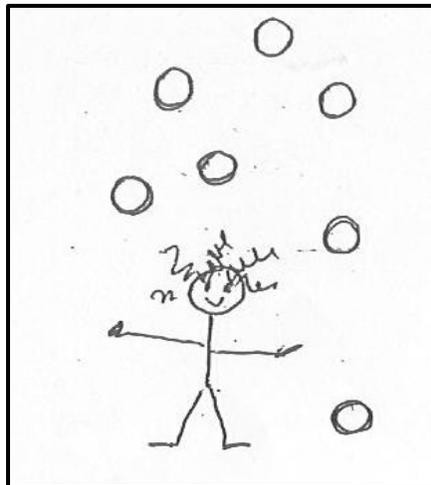
- *It's like having a lawnmower to assemble with no instruction booklet.*
- *It's like being at the controls of an elaborate machine that is responsible for the well being of smaller people.... Unfortunately, the instruction manual is written in Sanskrit and there is no one around to decode it for you so you really better figure it out quick.*

The two drawings that we received capture these feelings in visual form. The picture below was drawn by a teacher new to Hunter. This teacher actually had two years of prior teaching experience.



When we asked the creator of the octopus to explain its sinister expression, she told us that the octopus (a metaphor for herself as the teacher) had not yet completely given up, but that she was skeptical about whether teaching was even a doable task. We found it interesting that with all those tentacles, the one task missing was the actual teaching of classes. When we mentioned this to her, she was shocked she'd left it out.

The following picture was drawn by the one new teacher in our study who described her overall experience as positive. As you can see, this juggler (though smiling) is still unable to keep all the balls in the air; doing so is—as her picture reflects—an insurmountable task.



**2. New teachers at Hunter want support, specifically, the opportunities to observe other teachers and to be observed in a non-evaluative way and opportunities to attend teacher-led meetings.**

On the September survey, we listed a selection of supports and asked new teachers to check off the supports that they thought would be beneficial to them and to rank their top three. Options included:

- Professional development workshops
- New teacher support groups
- Opportunities to attend conferences
- Opportunities to observe other teachers
- Opportunities to be observed by other teachers
- Procedural handouts
- Teacher-led information sessions
- Administration-led information sessions
- Social activities.

Twelve out of twelve new teachers picked teacher-led information sessions as one of their top three choices. Six teachers selected this as their number one support. Ten out of twelve teachers selected Opportunities to observe other teachers within the first three, with six putting this as their number one support. As we stated earlier, we offered these supports and did not get the results we had anticipated.

### **3. New Teachers are Helped by Teacher-led Meetings, But cannot attend due to time constraints.**

We wondered why teachers weren't coming to our meetings. We thought, "Maybe we're not helping them. Maybe these meetings aren't useful to them." So we asked them in the April Survey, "Were these meetings Helpful?" We looked over their answers and again at their post-meeting reflections and found that in fact – yes – the meetings were helping them. In fact, ten out of twelve of our new teachers specifically said that the meetings helped them. Their reasons were varied. Many teachers expressed a need for a place to discuss with their fellow new teachers.

- *I attended a couple of Nell and Rebecca's meetings which were honestly the only time I felt supported or like I got to discuss issues which concern me as a new teacher here at Hunter.*
- *[The meetings are] very helpful because just being able to talk and see that others are having very similar experiences lets me know I'm not the only one.*
- *I thought today's discussion was extremely helpful. It was so comforting to hear that I am not alone in my feelings of frustration with 7<sup>th</sup> graders.*

It seemed our meetings were helping them. But still they weren't coming. Research conducted by Frances Rust confirms the dramatic impact that professional conversations among new teachers can have on their practice and their sense of professionalism (Rust 1999); in fact Rust and Orland find that "authentic conversation" is in fact, "essential in the continuing professional development of teachers" (Rust & Orland 89). We were bolstered by this research but still had to ask ourselves (and our new teachers), "Why didn't they come?" We wondered if it would be possible for authentic conversation among new teachers to exist within the framework of our school day. So again, we looked at our new teachers' surveys and we reviewed their post-meeting reflections. We also informally interviewed some of them. And we found one reason over and over again. And that was time. Six out of twelve of our new teachers specifically said they weren't attending the meetings because of time. Some of our teachers cited specific reasons for their inattendance, such as other commitments to students and their teaching.

- *I want to take part in the Monday lunches, but will not be able to ...I am the moderator for (a student club) and we meet on Mondays.*
- *I am concerned that I won't be able to make as many lunch meetings as I would like to due to extra rehearsals with choir members.*
- *[There's] no time to do anything. My teaching suffers for it. I am the limit of what I can do as a human being.*

New Teachers said they were being helped by teacher led-meetings, but that they didn't come because they could not come; they didn't come because of time.

#### **4. Authentic Teacher Growth Takes Time.**

There is a theory that we find useful as an analogy when thinking about our new teacher's experiences. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, humans need food,

water and safety before they can strive for knowledge and higher understanding (Gleitman 733). Our teachers were stuck in survival mode. In survival mode teachers don't have the time and space for the kinds of reflection that we know lead to knowledge and understanding. Linda Darling-Hammond describes teacher knowledge as the single most important factor in increasing student achievement (Darling-Hammond 1997, 2001).

The teacher in our study who compared teaching to being an overwhelmed octopus with too many tasks to juggle is leaving the profession. Perhaps if she had been given more time to accomplish this overwhelming task of teaching, she might be better prepared to face the rigorous challenges required of all teachers. We started our study with the one question, "What do new teachers say they need." We expected for them to tell us the different supports that they wanted. What we found was that the particular nature of these supports was less relevant to our study than the fact that our new teachers did not have the time to engage deeply in any of them.

## **Recommendations**

### **Implications for Policy**

One out of four New York City teachers leaves the profession after the first year (Greenhouse). To retain qualified teachers, schools must acknowledge the unique challenges new teachers face and provide time for the kinds of ongoing support and reflection that we know lead to real teacher growth and thus to improved student achievement. We recommend:

1. Reduced teaching load or substantial release time for new teachers.
2. Reduced teaching load or substantial release time for mentor teachers.
3. Opportunities for new teachers and mentors to formulate a professional development plan tailored to their particular needs.

### **Implications for Practice:**

Given our sense of the reality of time and budget constraints in our school, we recommend the following, all of which could be implemented for next year:

1. That teacher-led new teacher meetings replace administrative-led meetings.
2. That first year new teachers be released from having to serve on school-wide committees in order to attend regular new teacher meetings.
3. That a listserv be developed to facilitate on line discussion among teachers new to Hunter within the last 5 years.
4. That teachers new to Hunter within the last 5 years be eligible for one full day of release time per semester in order to observe their colleagues teach.

### **Questions For Further Research**

Our study leaves us with questions about the extent to which meaningful collaboration and conversation among teachers can actually take place within the current structure of most schools. The ongoing conversation group described and researched by Frances Rust (1999) takes place for 3 hours on Friday evenings. Many teachers are

willing and financially able to spend hours of unpaid, personal time on their own professional growth. However, widespread educational reform is marked not by the exception, but by the general rule. Currently, few schools allocate the resources necessary to ensure that time for meaningful professional development is integrated into work in a regular way. On the contrary, “there is a persistent perception that teachers are ‘working’ only when they are in front of children” (TNPI 17). After completion of our study, then, we are left wondering how effective it is—after all—to seek to create small spaces of teacher collaboration within a larger structure that will not ever fully support it. It feels that we are working against the tide. Though at times we have felt skeptical (not unlike our new teacher’s octopus) about whether or not real progress can even be made within the existing structure, we feel that more research needs to be conducted examining ways to support new teachers both within the current structures and by reforming these very structures.

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