

The *Tirones* Project: Mentoring New Teachers

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Teacher attrition is a significant problem nationally. For a decade, retention of teachers has been a greater challenge than teacher recruitment (Johnson 3). For even longer, at least ten percent of first year teachers in public schools have failed to return for a second year; by the fifth year, nearly another ten percent have left (Gray and Taie 3).¹ Novice teachers leave at a much higher rate than do more experienced ones, at least until they approach retirement age (Guarino, Santibañez, and Daley 185). While specific statistics about Latin teachers are hard to find, it is reasonable to believe that their attrition rate is similar to what studies of teachers across the country have revealed. In order to support new Latin teachers as they make the transition from novices to experienced educators, the National Committee for Latin and Greek has launched the *Tirones* Project.²

Why is this issue important? Constant turnover of teachers is expensive, because school districts use dwindling resources to recruit, hire, and train new faculty. The annual total costs of teacher turnover for Chicago public schools, for example, were estimated at over \$86 million nearly a decade ago (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future 3). Teacher turnover undermines student performance, too, and is felt throughout the whole school. In fact, high faculty turnover is a good predictor of poor student performance (Ronfeldt, Loeb, and Wyckoff 22). Because their earliest years in the classroom allow teachers to become increasingly competent, when they leave while they are still honing their skills, students miss the benefits of the greater proficiency that would come with time. Teacher attrition rates, moreover, are greatest in schools with high numbers of students living in poverty (Brill and McCartney 754), that is, with high numbers of the very students who most need stability and experienced, highly skilled instructors. Initiatives that encourage teachers to remain in the classroom, it is clear, could be beneficial for both students and school systems in many ways.

¹ Ingersoll 15 and figure 4 cites a considerably greater rate of attrition. On the other hand, Hanna and Pennington 2015 find less reason for anxiety.

² The NCLG is a standing committee of the American Classical League; our website is www.promotelatin.org.

Teachers leave the profession for such varied and individual reasons that no single solution will stop the high attrition rates, or guarantee better instruction. Higher salaries, for example, do predict better retention but do not improve the quality of teachers (Guarino, Santibañez, and Daley 194). One consistently useful strategy, though, slows teacher attrition and improves the quality of instruction: offering new teachers a formal induction and mentoring program (Ingersoll and Strong 25). Even better: it's cost effective (Villar and Strong 14-15).

Much has been written about the characteristics of the best such programs, and *Tirones* can implement only some of them. We cannot provide in-building face to face mentors, or release time for beginners to meet with mentors, or classroom observations followed by suggestions for improvement.

Instead, we've undertaken two initiatives. The first aims to offer a small scale mentoring opportunity through a series of free webinars presented by master teachers on a variety of topics. Piloted in spring 2015, the series had two sessions focused on preparing students for the A. P. exam, Dawn LaFon addressing writing essays and Jill Crooker, literal translation. The final webinar of the semester was called "Evaluating this year, planning for the next: Things I wish I'd known in my first years of teaching"; in it Keely Lake and Linda Montross reflected on their own experience as teachers and things they had found valuable. In fall 2015 Maureen Lamb shared her strategies for employing technology and Vicky Jordan explained how she teaches her students the skills for reading complex prose. The audiences asked specific questions, or sought advice for applying new ideas in their own teaching. Participants were invited to offer comments after each session and they ranged from expressions of appreciation for the usefulness of a talk's utility to quite moving responses, like these: "It was a good reminder of the nobility of the profession," and "As an isolated Latin teacher, I am surprised how much the enthusiasm and sound judgment reflected in the voices of the presenters affected me." All six presenters willingly shared their email addresses, paving the way for ongoing relationships. It's hard to say what the line is between friendship and mentoring; as Latin teachers we all have the ability to provide one another support and assistance even over great distances, and one goal of *Tirones* is to facilitate the growth of a community of teachers.

Our second activity has been to sponsor panels at professional meetings, focused on personal experiences of having a mentor or acting as a mentor for someone else. The collection of papers that follows represents the first such panel, at

CAMWS in Boulder, CO, on March 28, 2015. The presenters were Alison Orlebeke of the University of Colorado, Kendra Henry of Colorado College, Daniel Leon of the University of Illinois, and Ben Burtzos of the Thomas MacLaren School. While the experiences they described were varied—directing a teaching methods course, team-teaching with a senior or junior partner, learning Latin while teaching school—each speaker emphasized the intergenerational nature of the mentoring process, beginning with a tribute to his or her own mentors, and sharing a sense of responsibility to their own students and of gratitude for the generosity of their teachers. The panel resembled a family reunion; Kendra, a skilled and experienced teacher, and Dan as a post-doctoral fellow had taught a class together; Dan in turn had been Ben’s mentor. I’d like to quote here a paragraph from Kendra’s presentation, where she gives an example of the reciprocity involved in mentoring.

In a professional relationship we all have much to give to a colleague and we learn from each other. For example, my co-panelist, Dan Leon, asked me as a “seasoned” teacher, to observe him in a class we co-taught at Colorado College. I was really looking for ways to help him, but I think I ended up receiving the benefit. His guidelines to students for their oral presentations were excellent and his idea of having the students write a continued story in Latin was a new one for me. The stories are passed around for corrections and a new group adds to the story. Mentoring is a **reciprocal** activity.

All the reflections were thoughtful and inspiring; I am very grateful to John Gruber-Miller for making them available to a wider audience. The participants’ enthusiasm has been contagious. The final paper in the collection, presented at the 2015 ACL Summer Institute, is a status report on a new mentoring project in California: Katie Robinson describes her collaboration with Katherine Chew to develop a mentoring network through their regional classics organization.

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