

STRUGGLES ON THE ROAD TO SUCCESS

**IF MY INTERN STRUGGLES,
WHAT SHOULD I KNOW, WHAT SHOULD I DO?**

**A Guide for Mentors and PDA's Based on Insights and
Recommendations from the Struggling Intern Study**

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Introduction

As you know, we have worked closely with more than 300 interns in the PDS for eight years. Most of the interns have been very successful in the program and have become excellent beginning teachers. What a tribute to your work!! A few interns, however, have struggled each year. One thing we have observed is that when an intern struggles, the mentor and PDA often struggle, too! We decided to look more closely at the types of struggles interns experience and identify effective ways to provide support to them and to you. The result was the two year Struggling Intern Study (2004-05; 2005-06) which included surveys of all interns and interviews with selected mentors, PDA's and interns. We are extremely grateful to the following mentors, PDA's and interns who participated in the study and provided valuable reflections, insights and suggestions.

Mentors - Bonnie Abrams, Brenda Hartman, Cheryl Isola, Kelli Keane, Donna Kondash, Lee McGann, Mary Robert, Rick Schulz, Lisa Spock, Kristy Stroschein and Linda Witmer

PDA's – Mary Beth Amond, Bernard Badiali, Patricia Begg, Bill Benson, Debbie Hankin, Ellen Key, Jim Nolan, Lynne Sanders and Marion Wheland

Interns – 2004-2005 Interns and 2005-2006 Interns

As a result of the study and our ongoing work, we have learned many things about what is needed for interns to have a successful year and ways to offer support when interns struggle. This guide is meant to help you if you see signs that your intern is struggling and you ask yourself, “How do I know for sure and what can I do?” The easiest thing to do, of course, is to just ignore the problem, hoping it will go away. Guess what! Most of the time, it won't. In fact, little struggles can become serious problems if they are not resolved. We know that you want your intern to have a successful year in the PDS. We hope that the information in this guide will answer some of the questions you may have if your intern has struggles while learning to become a successful teacher.

Lynne Sanders, PDA

“It’s really a long journey and it’s like having another student in your classroom and you are responsible for this student. You do it because you truly want to take somebody on this journey to become a teacher – to help someone become a teacher. But along the way there may be lots of frustrations and lots of challenges.” (Mentor)

What are the qualities needed for success in the PDS and what are the Red Flags that indicate a possible struggle?

Although it is impossible to create a list of all the qualities necessary for an intern to be successful in the PDS, we can identify attributes and behaviors that most successful interns in the PDS demonstrate. We call them the eight C's. If an intern has a struggle in any of the following areas, it should be considered a red flag and should not be ignored by the mentor or PDA.

Commitment – Everyone seems to agree that the one attribute that is critical for an intern to have success in the PDS is commitment. The intern is making a commitment to move from the life of a college student to the life of a professional in the workplace . . . a huge step for a college senior! The intern must realize that this commitment requires being dependable, reliable, sincere, trustworthy, focused, energetic, engaged, positive and always on time - - - with everything. If the intern does not make the PDS experience a central focus of his or her life, struggles will probably surface early in the internship. Do not ignore signs such as an intern always appearing tired, making excuses for being late, appearing disinterested in classroom activities or not making connections with the children and staff. If you notice any of these signs, talk about your observations and concerns with the intern right away and find out the reasons why!

Comfort with the School Culture – As soon as the intern enters the school, s/he will begin making impressions on others. Will these impressions be positive or negative? For most interns who have mature social skills, entering the world of the workplace will be a natural and positive transition. For a few, however, it is a difficult transition and can cause serious struggles from day one! It is important for interns to realize that others will judge them negatively if they are viewed as unprofessional. To prevent problems, talk with your intern during in-service days about appropriate dress, talk and behavior. For example, explain that it is not a good idea to talk about one's personal life in a public setting. Discuss the importance of being positive, pleasant and cooperative with everyone on the school staff. Explain that it is important for an intern to take the initiative by asking, "What can I do to help"? Point out ways the intern can help parents and visitors feel welcome in the school. In other words, teach your intern how to "fit in". As the year begins, observe how comfortable your intern is during these informal interactions. If your intern is shy or somewhat socially immature, all it may take is for you to be a good role model and help your intern feel like an important member of the school family. If the intern displays poor judgment or behaves inappropriately, however, this is a red flag that needs to be addressed immediately.

Clear Communication – We all know that good communication is the key to all successful relationships. This is especially important in a year long internship. The three of you (intern, mentor and PDA) need to become a team with shared goals. During September and October, work together to develop clear and trusting communication with one another. Talk together about how feedback will be provided. Be aware that some

interns appreciate all suggestions for improvement while others are tender-hearted and easily demoralized. Explain to the intern that you will try to be honest but caring when providing suggestions for improvement and that the intern should try to accept your messages with a positive spirit. Observe your intern carefully to see how your messages are received. If you notice that your intern is uncomfortable, talk about “why” together. You may have to change your communication approach to be clearer or more diplomatic. If there is a lack of understanding, you may need to encourage your intern to ask you more questions. Or, you may need to spend more time explaining what you are doing and why. Also, if you set aside time just “to talk” each week, as Mardi McDonough suggests in her Communication Study, you will create a forum for maintaining quality interactions with one another. According to many interns, they rate a close working relationship with their mentor as the most important factor for their success in the PDS. Good communication is essential for this success. If communication breaks down, everyone will struggle.

Children First – Naturally, interns are concerned about their own growth in learning to be a teacher. It is very important, however, that everyone realize that we are all about children first. The students are our priority. If an intern is constantly focused on “my needs” rather than the needs of the children, the classroom climate and possibly the quality of instruction can be compromised. This is a struggle that must be resolved right away. Talk to the intern about what you have noticed and explain that every teacher has an outside life and life pressures. The children, however, deserve our full attention. Suggest that the intern put all personal worries in an imaginary suitcase each morning and place it outside the classroom door. It will be there at the end of the day just waiting to be opened! In the meantime, while in the classroom, focus only on the children and their instructional needs. Assign the intern to work with an individual child or small group of children and learn as much as possible about each child’s strengths and learning needs to share with you. Choose a child with challenging behaviors and have the intern try to get to know the child and identify ways to help the child be more successful. Have the intern start each day by asking you a specific question about a child or some aspect of instruction. Give the intern specific journal topics to write about that require focus on the children or instruction. Help the intern understand that successful teachers are always asking questions about children and instruction and are careful observers of children. Once the intern begins to bond with the class and gets to know each child in the classroom, the emphasis on “me” will usually diminish. If the intern remains self-absorbed after your best efforts to help the intern connect with the children, this is a serious red flag. Ask others in the PDS to help you.

Confidence - Interns enter our classrooms with many different background experiences and many different personalities. Some are much more confident than others. It is important that mentors and PDA’s understand how overwhelming this experience might appear to an intern. You can help the intern develop confidence. Explain and model what you do, point out the intern’s strengths, be positive and affirming and provide support and guidance, as needed. Make sure that an intern who lacks confidence has many opportunities to practice doing one thing well (examples: read aloud, morning

meeting, taking the children to lunch and specials, working with a small group) before being expected to take on more responsibilities. Before expecting the intern to try a new activity, ask the intern, “Do you feel confident doing this? If not, how can I help you?” If an intern is having problems with management or instruction after practice, ask the intern, “Do you think your lack of confidence is hurting your performance? What can I do to help you?” For example, you might want to model the activity one day and then let the intern try the next day. The intern and you might want to team teach before the intern teaches independently. The intern may require very specific feedback. You might need to “rehearse” the activity with the intern before it is taught. You will think of many other ways you can help your intern build confidence, just as you do each day with the children in your classroom. Always remember that an intern is a student to be taught as well as a colleague who works side by side with you in the classroom. An intern needs your daily support in order to become a confident, successful teacher. If an intern has serious problems with confidence after the first few months, you can be sure that the intern is feeling overwhelmed and probably needs an individualized plan in order to experience success.

Curiosity – In order to be an effective teacher, we must be curious about how children learn and how we can create the best classroom climate and community. We must ask questions and always be receptive to new ideas. This may be hard for interns as they are so new at all of this that they often don’t know the questions to ask or what to look for. You can help by learning to “think aloud” about your practice, being explicit in your talk, asking good questions yourself and creating a climate where the intern feels comfortable asking questions, too. If an intern never asks a question, stop and discuss this observation together. Is the intern too overwhelmed or ill at ease or are there other reasons? To help your intern become a careful observer of instruction, you might want to give the intern specific things to watch for as you teach. After the lesson, talk about those things together and develop new “wonderings”. Struggles can occur, especially during second semester when the intern begins serious planning and teaching, if there is a lack of curiosity about instruction and/or children’s learning.

Connections – As teachers, we help children make connections between one subject and another, between what they already know and what they are learning and between their life and the world around them. Interns may have been educated in traditional programs that taught each subject separately. Or, they may not have enough life experiences to know how to help children make these connections. You will need to model lessons, demonstrate best practices and discuss the “whys and hows” of what you do. If an intern can’t help children make connections after completing the methods courses, having practice with initial planning and teaching, and observing quality instruction, the intern will probably struggle becoming an effective teacher during second semester and will need a lot of guidance from you. Be patient and provide very specific examples of ways to think about making connections when planning lessons. Have high expectations, however, that the intern begins to weave important connections into instruction. Talk together about all the connections we need to make as teachers: how science relates to social studies, how inquiry is related to good teaching, how reflection is essential for improved practice, etc. It is important to remember that this is a way of thinking and a

way of teaching that we continue to develop and refine throughout our teaching careers. The intern is just starting on this journey, but the seeds for knowing how to help children make connections need to be planted now!

Curriculum Understanding and Fit – To be an effective teacher, one must understand the curriculum. Hopefully, interns have good background knowledge and understandings. They are limited, however, in actual teaching experience so they need your expertise when planning instruction. For example, an intern may be strong in a subject area such as Social Studies but know little about Japan, the unit to be taught. This is a common problem for interns and you can help prevent struggles by providing the background materials needed by the intern during planning. If an intern has a general weakness in a subject area, however, there will be more serious struggles when planning or teaching that subject. This is a red flag that needs immediate attention so that no student's education is compromised. Throughout the year, you will need to determine how competent and experienced your intern is with each curriculum area and how much guidance is needed. In addition, our curriculum requires that teachers learn to plan and teach using multiple resources instead of a single textbook. We have curriculum support teachers and other specialists available to assist even experienced teachers as they plan effective instruction for every child. An intern just learning to teach may experience struggles putting it all together - understanding the curriculum, planning effectively using multiple resources, managing materials, instruction and children, assessing student progress and being reflective . . . a huge task! Observe the intern carefully as the first lessons for methods classes are planned and taught during November. You will get a good idea of how well the intern organizes and implements instruction. As you move into second semester and the intern takes increasing responsibility for planning and teaching, please remember your first year teaching in the district and the stress you felt. If your intern struggles, stop and realize that s/he may need a recipe (a clear plan and step by step directions) before being expected to be a gourmet cook (ease with using many resources). If struggles become so serious during second semester that the intern can't plan and teach independently by March, and it is taking many hours of your time to assist the intern with planning, this is a very serious red flag. Don't wait, hoping the problem will go away. Seek help from others in the PDS right away.

What do I do if I See a Red Flag?

As an experienced teacher, you know when something is not right. Never ignore those feelings. It is important for the PDA and mentor to form a close working relationship early in the year and discuss any concern as soon as one or the other begins to see or sense a struggle, even if it is a minor one. Decide together how you will address the concern with the intern. During interviews in the Struggling Intern Study, it was mentioned that sometimes struggles were not addressed early because no one wanted to hurt the feelings of the intern or it was awkward to do, or it was hoped that the struggle would just go away. It's always better, however, to be truthful and specific. When talking with the intern, be diplomatic but clear and honest about the worry. Provide specific ways that, as a team, you can help the intern be successful. Even if the message is hard for the intern to hear, and it often will be, it is important information to receive. If the

intern becomes upset, defensive or confused, make sure you document your concerns in writing (trip sheet) and always meet together (PDA, mentor, intern) to discuss ways to resolve the struggle and to point out improvements made. The intern needs to hear the same message from both of you and realize that you work together as a team to help the intern be successful.

Is it my fault if my intern struggles?

Feeling as though it's your fault is natural when you are a conscientious person. You can't deny those feelings. And if you think it is your fault, you are not alone. In the Struggling Intern Study, both veteran mentor teachers and PDA's blamed themselves when an intern struggled. Why? As teachers, we want all of our students to be successful and that includes our interns. When an intern doesn't succeed, we blame ourselves. What am I not doing? What could I do differently? Is it a good match? It is important to ask these questions as there might be things that can be changed or done differently. Fault, however, is not a productive issue to deal with and blaming is a waste of time. During interviews, mentors admitted that they often worried excessively, were in a bad mood at home with their spouse and/or children and lost sleep when an intern's struggles became serious. Please know that anytime your worries about an intern start to interfere with your own physical and emotional well being or take too much of your time away from your students or family, you **MUST** ask for help from others in the PDS. Never blame yourself, suffer in silence or think that you are "expected" to resolve the struggle alone. We will address the problems together as a PDS family and you will have support!

What is my role (as a Mentor of PDA) if my intern struggles?

1. **Identify the struggle** and clearly communicate the concern to the intern.
2. **Develop a plan** to help resolve the struggle. Small struggles require small plans. Big struggles require big plans. Start this way: have a chat; make a little plan together; make a bigger plan if the little plan doesn't work. Call for help if your best plans as a team don't work. It is important that everyone (mentor, PDA, intern, PDS group) is part of a total team and works together.
3. **Be specific.** The intern needs to know the steps needed for improvement and **HOW** to improve. The intern, like any student, needs to be taught.
4. **Model** for the intern, let the intern try, and then model again. Always point out what the intern should watch for as you teach and what the intern should try the next time.
5. **Provide lots of time for practice** – Allow the intern to focus on doing something over and over until the intern is successful. Help the intern do one thing well at a time. Give lots of feedback. Again, remember that the intern is a student who needs to be taught.
6. **Talk a lot together** – Realize that the intern may take your suggestions as criticisms or become defensive at times or not understand your expectations. Listen to the intern's point of view and try to remember how hard it is to learn to be a teacher. The intern may need more or different guidance or clearer

- expectations. Ask the intern, “What additional help do you need from me to be successful? Is there anything you don’t understand? In most cases, the better and more often you communicate together, show support for the intern and point out strengths as well as needs, the more likely the struggle will be resolved. In our study, it was mentioned over and over by mentors, PDA’s and interns that building strong relationships through clear communication was the most important factor in creating the climate needed for resolving any type of struggle.
7. **Be positive and patient** – Focus on the positive rather than the negative and realize that learning new skills takes time. Provide encouragement whenever you see improvement.
 8. **Celebrate** – Don’t take little improvements for granted. Celebrate all successes and help the intern see that learning to teach is like climbing a stairway. We reach the top step by step!
 7. **Ask for help.** If struggles persist after you’ve tried and tried to help, or if you are spending a significant amount of your work and personal time focused on the intern, ask for more help from others in the PDS.

What advice do other mentors have for me if I am a mentor of a struggling intern?

During interviews with mentor teachers who had worked with struggling interns, we asked them what advice they had for their colleagues. Following are some of their replies.

Don’t Ignore Red Flags

“If you see a red flag, go with your instinct and tell your PDA early. Do not wait for the problem to just go away. Document what you see that is worrying you and discuss with both the PDA and intern. Communication is vital.”

Think Aloud

“We have to be very explicit about explaining how we plan and how we think about things in the classroom because the interns don’t know what’s going on inside our head. We have to think aloud.”

Explain, Explain

“I think I’ve been a teacher my whole life. I think I was meant to be a teacher – to do this. It just comes natural to me. It doesn’t come natural to everyone and I have to learn to explain. That’s my worst quality at being a mentor. That’s advice to others, too.”

Provide a Road Map

“Sometimes the interns are intimidated by watching us. I know my intern is because she told me it’s all so easy for me to do. I have a list for my intern of

everything that happens from the moment the kids arrive to the end of the day – all the things I think about, all things that have to be planned, all the things that have to be ready. I gave it to her the first week of school and as the year goes by, we are highlighting things she is taking over and doing.”

Help them Notice

“We have to help interns watch for all the ‘little things’ that we do automatically and don’t think about. We have to help them notice.”

Be Positive

“My best advice about working with a struggling intern was: Stop giving negative feedback. Focus on strengths and building self esteem. Then, slowly try to approach different areas.”

What advice do other PDA’s have for me if I am a PDA of a struggling intern?

During interviews with PDA’s, we asked them what advice they had for their colleagues. Typical responses follow.

Look for Red Flags

“I think the mentor and I saw red flags in the first semester that we thought would lead to serious struggles. Take these signs seriously!”

Build Relationships

“Building strong relationships with mentor teachers is most important.”

Offer to Help

“With mentors, we need to ask all the time – What help do you need from me? What can I do to better support you?”

Learn to Listen

“You have to listen to the interns melt down from time to time, and the mentors, too. You have to listen carefully. Know that this journey is not a straight road. There are hills and valleys. There are meltdowns and celebrations.”

Help them Reflect

“Helping interns learn to reflect on their practice may be our top priority as their guides”

Be Realistic

“Remember that we don’t have to teach the interns EVERYTHING. They are going to continue learning when they graduate and they’re going to continue learning all through their teaching career . . . it’s a journey.”

Will the intern understand and accept the help we provide when there is a struggle?

That’s a tough question to answer. When reviewing responses of struggling interns and their mentors and PDA’s, we realized that each intern responds differently when there is a struggle. Some interns are highly appreciative of all advice and suggestions and work diligently to overcome any struggle. They are open to help and positive and resilient. Other interns have difficulty admitting that there is a problem or just don’t see the problem. You must remember that you are an expert at what you do and the intern is a novice. To understand why there can be miscommunication or misunderstandings, read the following scenarios and try walking in the shoes of an “unsure” intern for a moment.

Mentor/PDA - The intern doesn’t ask for help.

Intern - I don’t know what questions to ask.

Mentor/PDA - The intern takes my suggestions as criticisms.

Intern - I take criticisms as criticisms and they hurt!

Mentor/PDA - The intern is very uncomfortable when anyone observes.

Intern - I never had to learn with so many people watching everything I do.

Mentor/PDA - The intern does not take risks.

Intern - I don’t want to make a mistake.

Mentor/PDA - The intern doesn’t have a lot of energy

Intern - This is so different from college. I never stop. I’m exhausted all the time.

Mentor/PDA – The intern has difficulty with ambiguity.

Intern - I’m not sure what they want. I need clear explanations and expectations.

Mentor/PDA – The intern is so easily overwhelmed.

Intern - The burden of planning and teaching is overwhelming.

Mentor/PDA - The intern doesn’t have good management skills.

Intern - The children don’t listen to me like they do to my mentor.

Mentor/PDA – The intern doesn’t seem to learn just by watching me.

Intern - I don’t know what I should be watching. There’s so much to take in.

Mentor/PDA – The intern doesn't understand why the lesson didn't go well.
Intern - Did I do something wrong?

How much time is reasonable for me to spend resolving a struggle?

When interviewing mentors and PDA's for the Struggling Intern Study, we learned that some of you have spent many, many hours during the work day and during evenings and weekends assisting interns when they struggled. As with everything, you have to use good judgment about how much time is reasonable to spend helping your intern. What is 'reasonable time', you ask? For all interns, it is essential to have scheduled planning times together every week. It is also important to set aside time each week just "to talk" about whatever is on your minds in order to strengthen communication. It is also necessary to work together during the day and after school so that your intern learns from watching you. If your intern has a struggle, it is also reasonable for you to schedule some additional time before, during or after school each day/week to meet or work together to resolve the struggle. It is not reasonable, however, for you to spend so much time helping your intern that you are taking planning and preparation time away from the students or considerable personal time from your family or yourself. If you start to resent the time it takes to help the intern, there is a problem! You need to let others in the PDS know that more or different support is needed for the intern and for YOU!

How much help can I expect from others in the PDS?

In the PDS, we are like a family and we help one another. Whenever there is a problem, you can expect as much help as you need from others in the PDS and you will receive it. You must, however, let others know that you need help. The first step is for the mentor and PDA to work closely together and have good communication. Mentors in the study stated that when struggles occur, it is important for the PDA to spend more time in the classroom, to deliver the tough messages to the intern, if needed, and to provide as much support to the mentor as to the intern. It's also important at monthly meetings for the PDA to let other mentors know why more time is being spent in one classroom than in another. PDA's pointed out that talking about struggling interns at PDA meetings and getting suggestions from others was extremely helpful. It is very important for the mentor and PDA to work closely together and to be in agreement as to ways to help the intern. Sometimes this is enough. Sometimes it isn't. If a struggle becomes serious or lasts a long time, it is often very helpful to have a third person involved. This third person is another PDA who can offer additional support in the classroom or at meetings or a fresh perspective on the problem.

What if the struggle doesn't go away even when everything possible has been done to help the intern?

We must remember that there aren't perfect solutions to all problems, even when considerable support is provided. There are ways, however, that issues can be resolved in the best interests of everyone.

1. **Third Person Involvement** – When the mentor and PDA haven't been able to resolve the struggle with the intern, the next step is to request the involvement of another PDA. This person can provide more support in the classroom, help design a contract for improvement (if that hasn't been done), listen to the concerns of the mentor, PDA and/or intern, and help with decision making of “What should we do?”
2. **Consider Other Options** – If there are serious struggles that you can't resolve after including the support of an additional PDA and doing everything possible to help the intern, you and your PDA should request a meeting with the PDS Director who represents the university. Do not be embarrassed to ask for this type of help if you need it, as it is not your responsibility to resolve serious intern struggles alone. After listening to your thoughts and suggestions and meeting with the intern, the Director of the PDS will consider all possible options and find a way to help the intern become successful if it is humanly possible to do so. Always remember that we are a Penn State and PDS family and we work together to resolve all problems!!

Do struggles always cause unhappy endings?

No, they don't. Struggles can present both challenges and opportunities. Consider the following thoughts from mentors who have worked with struggling interns and interns who have experienced and grown from struggles while in the PDS.

Thoughts from Mentors

“When we talk about struggling interns, it is their personal attributes and a positive personality that matter the most. I think that all of us have struggles and all of us are going to be life long learners. As long as interns approach struggles as life, as a process of learning, then the struggles can affect them positively.”

“Here's my advice to a struggling intern: We all struggle at different points in our lives and our careers. Look at struggle as a challenge. Struggle presents an opportunity to really learn something new and maybe to change and reevaluate. In the end, you'll come out better.”

Thoughts from Interns Who Survived Struggles

“I believe any struggle I have encountered throughout this experience has only made me a better teacher. It has allowed me to learn more about teaching and what it takes to become an excellent teacher. I look at any negative aspect, or struggle, as an opportunity to improve.”

“My relationship with my mentor has become stronger as a result of my struggles. We have developed a trusting bond as we’ve discussed and coped with the issues together.”

“My mentor and I couldn’t be more different. We think differently, teach differently, and have different temperaments and different discipline styles. I honestly thought I was not going to survive being in the same room with someone so different from me for so many hours a day . . . Despite the difficulties, I have gained a lot of strength, have become more in touch with my feelings and have gained confidence and relationship skills.”

“Struggles are hard, but when you look back on them, you see how much you have grown. They aren’t fun to work through, but so many positive things happen because of them. You grow as a person, you develop gifts you never thought you possessed, and you learn so much. I wouldn’t change any struggle in my life because they have made me who I am today”

Conclusion

In your role as a mentor or PDA in the PDS, you are preparing the next generation of teachers. You are doing an outstanding job as evidenced by the feedback we receive from school districts praising the performance of PDS graduates. We all need to remember, however, that struggles are part of life and learning to become a teacher involves struggle. According to results from intern surveys, most interns (even the most successful) worry a lot and are hard on themselves. They want to do well and meet your expectations. Sometimes they don’t know what they need to do to be successful. Sometimes they stumble and become discouraged. Sometimes, they just don’t seem to “get it”. Because you are dedicated educators, you struggle yourself if your intern is experiencing problems. The fact that most of the interns in the PDS work through the normal struggles of becoming a teacher and are highly successful is a tribute to your dedication and commitment. In conclusion, we are most appreciative to all of you for the important work you do each day. We are especially grateful to the mentors, PDA’s and interns who participated in our Struggling Intern Study and provided insights that will help all of us as we support interns on their journey to become successful teachers. It is their voices that are included in this guide. We hope you find the guide useful as you reflect on ways to help your intern overcome any struggles encountered during the year long PDS internship. Let us know if it has been helpful to you or if there is anything else we can do to support you as you mentor the next generation of elementary teachers. In closing, we again thank you for all that you do to make the PDS successful.

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