

## W-BEST will help support new teachers



COLUMBUS, Miss. --Even though she had two years of experience as a teacher, Melinda Lowe struggled to control and to engage the students in her fourth-grade class. As a result, she had migraines, doubted her career decision and often left school crying.

But Lowe hung in there and learned how to establish routines and to develop procedures for students to know what was expected of them and how to do certain things on their own. Instead of quitting, Lowe worked harder and implemented a classroom management system that allowed her and her students to flourish because there was more time for meaningful instruction.

“There were so many people who helped, encouraged and supported me when I was learning how to be a teacher,” Lowe said. “Working with first-year teachers allows me to share my 27 years of experience and to give them the resources and support that will help them avoid the obstacles that got in my way those first few years.”

Lowe and the Mississippi University for Women have devised a new way to help teachers this fall. The W’s Beginning Educator Support and Training (W-BEST) is an innovative collaboration between the School of Education and school districts across the state of Mississippi that will provide support to teachers that is strategically aligned to the stages of their development. It offers multiple services designed to increase teacher effectiveness, enhance professional growth and reduce attrition among beginning teachers.

“Ultimately, W-BEST will not only help recent graduates make the transition from college student to successful classroom teacher, but it will increase our ability to strengthen and expand P-12 partnerships,” said Lowe, who is director of The W’s Office of Outreach & Innovation and the School of Education’s coordinator of Education. “We also see W-BEST as a unique recruiting initiative since no other university in Mississippi is currently offering this level of individualized support after graduation.”

Dr. Martin Hatton, dean of The W’s School of Education, said W-BEST is a product of an on-going statewide conversation about how to support teachers once they graduate. He said 50% of teachers leave their jobs within the first three years of employment in part due to the lack of professional support they receive early in their careers. Hatton said the idea to extend field experience support for teachers for an additional year after graduation, which was initially called “Residency 5,” grew out of that concern.

Lowe’s role at The W allows her to lead the charge to help new teachers. She spent six years managing the Strategic Training for Academic Results (STAR) New Teacher Induction program

for the Columbus Municipal School District prior to coming to The W, so she has worked with teachers who experience some of the same struggles she did when she started in the profession.

Lowe said W-BEST will provide each first-year teacher with individualized cognitive coaching. Cognitive coaching uses a three-phase cycle similar to teacher evaluation through clinical supervision: pre-conference, observation and post-conference. The primary difference between cognitive coaching and evaluation is that cognitive coaching uses these cycles for the sole purpose of helping the teacher improve instructional effectiveness by becoming more reflective about teaching. The ultimate goal of cognitive coaching is teacher autonomy: the ability to self-monitor, self-analyze and self-evaluate.

Lowe said W-BEST fits perfectly with The W's mission of collaboration, innovation and growth. She said the School of Education is dedicated to innovation from early childhood through post-graduation in a complete lifelong learning model of education.

“Excellence in teaching is a journey, not a destination,” Lowe said. “Ongoing professional growth is essential to cultivate this excellence and to maximize student achievement. Masterful teachers continuously add to their repertoire through deliberate efforts to improve their instruction, classroom management, content and curriculum knowledge, assessment, technology integration and leadership skills. W-BEST participants will have the opportunity to participate in quality professional development that targets the new teacher needs.”

To prepare for the start of W-BEST, all students near the end of their internships were introduced to the program and were asked if they wanted to participate during their first year of teaching. Specific topics covered included: (1) phases of first-year teachers; (2) cognitive coaching; (3) mentor/mentee program; and (4) professional development. Lowe said 15 recent education graduates will be selected to participate in the first year of implementation. Applications can be submitted by going to <https://rfwcccl.wufoo.com/forms/20212022-wbest-cohort-1/> and are due by June 15.

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