Podcast: Supporting New and Untenured Teachers

Amber Chandler, the author of "*Everything New Teachers Need to Know But Are Afraid to Ask*," shares a program her district implemented to address that 140 out of its 478 teachers have been with the district four years or less—and the ranks of untenured teachers are expected to swell to 250 in the next five years. That's approximately half of the teaching staff needing support, not just in year one, but also in years two, three, and four. Chandler sees the challenge but also an opportunity to create a community of educators from the ground up. How do instructional coaches support new teachers and mentors?

Red Amber's Ed Week Article, *"Going NUTs: How One District Supports Its 'New and Untenured' Teachers"* here.

Find *"Everything New Teachers Need to Know But Are Afraid to Ask"* here.

Contact Amber and visit her website here.

Podcast Transcript:

[00:00:00.000] – Steve [Intro]
Welcome to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast. As instructional coaches and school leaders, you are tasked with guiding continuous teacher growth to create student success. This podcast looks to support you with strategies from experienced guests, as well as my own insights that I've gathered over the years. I'm thrilled to have you with us. Thanks for tuning in.

[00:00:30.000] – Steve
Supporting New and Untenured Teachers. The author of, "Everything New Teachers Need to Know but Are Afraid to Ask," Amber Chandler, is our podcast guest today. She is a National Board Certified Middle School ELA teacher with a master's degree in literature, and she's certified as a school building leader. I was introduced to Amber in an Education Week article that described a program that she has designed to support new and untenured teachers in her district. Amber identifies that teaching can be a lonely business, but if new teachers can build community and become committed together, they can strengthen education. Welcome, Amber.

[00:01:18.780] – Amber
Hi.

[00:01:19.760] – Steve
Glad to have you with us. The article in EdWeek described the situation regarding new and untenured teachers in your district. I'm wondering if you'd share that with us. I'm guessing that it's representative of what many school districts are facing in the coming years.

[00:01:38.080] – Amber
Absolutely. It's what I've been hearing across the state, at least in New York anyway, that we have this bubble of teachers who are going to be retiring in the next five-ish years. And

already in my district, we have 158 new and untenured teachers out of around 460. And so that number, if it's going to I think we're going to flip our district in the next five years of having more untenured than tenured.

[00:02:06.800] – Steve
Wow. How do you see that impacting both those new teachers as a group and the rest of the staff?

[00:02:19.000] – Amber
Well, it's interesting because the teachers who've been there for a long time, the veteran teachers, I've been teaching with the same people for over 20 years. You get comfortable and you know each other's strengths and weaknesses. You work together as a team. With that many new and untenured teachers, it's really important to me that we connect them together so that they can lean on each other. Like you said, it's really lonely to teach. As these more veteran teachers are retiring, I really want to make sure that the new teachers have developed a good community of support for each other.

[00:02:54.000] – Steve
So tell us about the program that you designed.

[00:02:57.720] – Amber
So, AFT, I got a grant from the American Federation of Teachers, and it was for new member engagement. These are my new members. I had pitched my proposal was to figure out a way to help connect the new teachers, basically, as a part of a Attracting teachers is that you have a good support system, but retaining teachers is making those connections. In general, I feel that adults have a difficult time creating community without some direction and some help around that, especially if you're a new teacher, you're busy, you are overwhelmed. And unless it's on your schedule, you probably won't do it. And so that was how it started. We set up some different social events It was mainly time to get people in the same room. And we get the new teachers together, and they

can ask questions. A lot of times, we played Trivia. We did a lot of things to make them feel comfortable in the community that they I have. My district heard that I was doing this. They knew that I was doing this. They have a traditional first-year mentoring program like most schools do. The HR director and I talked, and he wanted to combine forces.

[00:04:16.920] – Amber
That if the district was working on the first year, that I was working on the second, third, and fourth year, that could we… Last year was a little bit of a trial year where we were crossing over. Then this year, my program became a part of the district program.

[00:04:36.840] – Steve
How does your program connect with what the mentors are doing?

[00:04:41.740] – Amber
Mine actually is… Right now, it's pretty loose because this is the first year we're moving in that direction. The mentors, every new teacher, first year teacher will have a mentor. Years two through four will be… A lot of it is almost like coaching on my part. I'm going to do a lot of things to I'm getting ready to send out my beginning of year self-care message. I will be doing some things where I hold office hours so that they can stop in. New teachers are busy, so once a month, the last Tuesday, I'm going to have a coffee Google Meet hour where I'll be here having coffee and they can show up and ask questions. I'll have topics that I know from my own mentoring that are important. September, relationships with families, October, looking at progress reports. I know the rhythm of a school year. So that's how it's going to go. But what is really cool is that a lot of the mentors are signing on to keep going with the program, and they're jumping on their conversations. It's unpaid from that perspective after their first year, but they see the investment, and I think that they like to have those conversations with their teachers as well.

[00:05:57.400] – Steve
The word that's going through my mind I've been listening to you is belonging. That we're real powerful looking at the need for students to find belonging in the school. But I'm hearing that's a critical issue for us to be building with new teachers.

[00:06:21.140] – Amber
Absolutely. It's been a bit of my focus, I think, for the last couple of years, more so since COVID. But the idea that we need to be in the same spaces and have both formal conversations, but a lot of informal conversations, that we need to do things together. We're trying to bowl, we're trying to… we're going to book a boat, and we're going to go do some things together because it's in those activities, a lot of those third space activities, that that's where you can really build the community so that when a new teacher needs help, that they know that they can text me, or they know that they can text another mentor, and they know the teachers who are in leadership who want to help them. If you've played Trivia or sat around and had snacks and really talked informally, it takes down a barrier. What we really try to do is provide those opportunities to help bridge that. I don't think it's new teachers. I think everybody needs the bridge right now to help them reconnect and find that belonging and find that sense of space.

[00:07:27.580] – Steve
I do a lot of work built around the concept that teaching is a team sport and the increase in complexity of what educators are being asked to deal with, you can't tackle the building of kids social emotional skills as an isolated teacher in the classroom. You can't develop students' writing skills just in English class if it's not carried over into their science and social studies classrooms. It's really hard to build teams with people you don't know.

[00:08:02.780] – Amber

Absolutely. One of the things I think is interesting, too, is I think that there's a sense of community that develops where I had people who mentored me. I wasn't even in New York. I was in New Hampshire. They weren't formal, they weren't paid. But I still look at a few of the teachers who took me under their wing as lifelong mentors. They're people who have got me to where I am. I think it's a big honor to be a mentor, not necessarily the ones that's paired up by the district all the time, but to be a real mentor to someone and know that you're having an influence in good practices that are going to go forward even after you retire and after you've moved on.

[00:08:43.340] – Steve
I'm wondering what experiences you had that led to your writing the book, "Everything New Teachers Need to Know, but are Afraid to Ask?"

[00:08:55.360] – Amber
I've mentored, probably in this district, I've probably mentored 10, 12, maybe 15 people over the years. But a few years ago, I had a new teacher. She was not a brand new teacher. She was just new to our district. She was probably 25, 26. She was next door, my classroom. What caused me to write the book was actually her, her name is Nicole. She said to me one day, she's like, "You need to write all this down." I thought it was funny because it wasn't…these were not the professional conversations. These were the questions about health insurance. I always talk about, I just took whatever health insurance the person next to me took on that open path. You just don't know what you don't know. She would ask me questions about what clothes she should wear. She would ask me, I know one day on the way to school, she got sick. She caused me panic because she really didn't know what to do. She's like, "Well, I don't think I should come in." I'm like, "No, don't come in the building." But again, at that moment, she didn't know who to call, how to get a sub at the last minute, because those are the don't come up until they happen

to you.

[00:10:02.460] – Amber
She really encouraged me. She's actually there's a picture of us at the beginning of the book. She encouraged me to write down some of our conversations. In fact, I'm her work mom. She calls me her work mom. I am older than that. That was disturbing enough that I was old enough to be her work mom. [laughter] But it was true. But those relationships really led me to think about the things I didn't know about teaching weren't related to the teaching of English. They were related to, well, how do you with parents who are difficult. I know for me, at least, I was very young when I started teaching. And so at 22, I had 18-year-old AP Lit students. Their parents would send me a lesson. And so it was how do you navigate those situations? And I think that that's really what started the book idea. And then it was really my roles within that. What would I say to you as your work mom? And what would I say to you, again, as a union president? What would I say to you as your friend? Those are all roles that I would fill in a mentoring role.

[00:11:04.260] – Amber
I think a lot of people can feel that. It ended up being really fun because it was things that popped up during the course of a year. That's really how the book got written.

[00:11:14.680] – Steve
Very cool. With your experiences across those years, and now the Gen Z folks being the incoming teachers, I'm wondering what thoughts you've got about both people working as mentors and people supporting the Gen Z population moving into schools?

[00:11:38.680] – Amber
I think it's huge. I think that we cannot imagine me, I'm 51. I can't imagine a teaching world where so many eyes were on me all of the time. And that is what they're entering into. I

always tell them, I did not have a computer in my classroom. I didn't even have a phone in my classroom. I had a button that I called an office with a buzzer. And they always say to me, well, that must have been really hard. And my answer is always, no, it was much easier to have my classroom, and it was my classroom. And now with – I call them the students, the young people who are coming in, they have always lived in a very internet-connected world. The biggest thing I talk to mentors about is understanding that Gen Z has a few things figured out that I veteran teachers maybe could learn from, particularly they believe in a lot more in a work-life balance than we do. I know I grind. I'm like, I'm going to go, I'm going to do this, this, and this. That's my personality, I think, shaped by what I thought a good worker looked like.

[00:12:47.020] – Amber
They don't feel that way. They value their time. You hear the word boundaries a lot. They value those pieces that is, I think, probably really healthy. I just think we have to be careful how we presume them to be. I know that I've had conversations with more veteran teachers who are like, "Well, they just don't put in the time and the effort that we did. Well, I don't know how much our effort paid off of being free labor, which is what a lot of it was. Oh, well, you're on tenure, so of course, you're going to do this." They don't go that way. Then I think for the Gen Z teachers, I talk to them a lot about that it's intimidating when they know a lot more than veteran teachers do about some touchy subjects, like technology. No one wants to be the person who doesn't get it. When you have a new teacher with you and they can show you something, I always tell everybody, soak up everything you can get. I was actually just telling somebody the story today that I had a student teacher who taught me how to mirror and unmirror my screen on a smart board and then to my computer.

[00:13:54.000] – Amber
I remember thinking he was the most brilliant person I had

ever met. He knew how to do that. At the same time, I remember being intimidated. I was a grown up who had been teaching for quite a while, and this kid comes in and just… he can do things I can't do. So really, back and forth understanding that they're going to see the world differently, but we all have the same goal of teaching students and learning together. I think we just have to give each other some grace around the areas that maybe are surprising in some ways for us to handle. I know the one thing I talk to the mentors about, because the role that I became in our district is I'm the mentor coordinator of second through fourth year. I talk to them about, you have to have really candid conversations about things like communication. I text with everyone I mentor, and there's a number of people who don't really want to text with their mentors. They don't want to text or what time is the cut off at night? But you can have a conversation. Those are important things to talk about ahead of time, for sure.

[00:14:59.360] – Amber
My daughter – she's in college, she's a junior, she's going to be a teacher. I keep telling her, I'm like, you have to get me by 9:00. She's always telling me, "That's when my night's starting." I understand that, but mine is not. You need to get me earlier. I think those conversations just It has to be frank, candid conversations.

[00:15:17.940] – Steve
I'm sensing there's some great learning for both generations of teachers to do from each other.

[00:15:24.460] – Amber
Absolutely.

[00:15:25.560] – Steve
Insights on both ends that are valuable. How do you see mentor programs benefiting the experienced teachers who serve as mentors?

[00:15:37.400] – Amber
I think it's rejuvenating to have conversations about different topics that you haven't thought about for years. I know one of mine that was really interesting was about grading. I had a newer teacher, and he came to me in a panic towards the end of the corner, and he said, "My grades aren't right." "What do you mean?" He's like, "They're not getting the grades they're supposed to." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Well, this person is really not a C plus. They're really a B." I said, "Well, what are you doing in your grading?" We ended up having this great conversation about how he had weighted certain things, and he didn't have enough class participation grades. I said, "Well, that's your prerogative how many you're going to have. But the way you've set it up now is it's weighted very little, and you want it to be weighted more, or you want something to be weighted less." That conversation got me thinking. It was just out of a moment of his curiosity of, how do you make this grading thing work out? That conversation, I think, is good for everybody.

[00:16:38.580] – Steve
A piece that I read years ago to reinforce what you just laid out there – back to the days of the blacksmith taking on an apprentice – they identified that the taking on of the apprentice lengthened the career of the master. It was bringing you back to a conscious love level around things that you weren't day to day handling consciously. You just gave a great example. I wouldn't have done that reflection on grading and the thoughts I'm making – because I'm engaged in that conversation, they've raised that conscious level.

[00:17:17.060] – Amber
Well, it's the automaticity. So many parts of school, it does become automatic. A lot of times we need to rethink what is automatic. Sometimes what is automatic is not good. It's the habits that you have or the world that you lived in. One of the big things I think about is communication with families.

How I used to communicate with families is very different than I do now. Interestingly, my communication, I communicated more earlier because they weren't so inundated with information. But now it doesn't do me any good to send two emails a week when they can go on to the parent portal. They see what I post on social media. They can see in Google Classroom. Making those adjustments so that you're not overcommunicating. That was a big one for me. Right after COVID, people were so tired of the millions of emails and the check-ins and all that, that I think that it's really shaped how people communicate now.

[00:18:12.540] – Steve
I'm wondering what suggestions you would have for instructional coaches and school administrators as to the roles that they should be playing in both the support of mentors, but then also in the support of the new teacher and the untenured teacher?

[00:18:32.700] – Amber
It's so specific to, not even your district, it's so specific to your building and what your building culture and climate is like, what role an administrator might have. Some buildings administrators are much more hands-on. They're going to give a lot of feedback. Other people leave that to their instructional coaches. What I find, I teach a class on Danielson, how we do our observations with the Danielson rubric. One of the things that we always talk about is that administrators who might be coming to watch you teach, didn't teach the grade level that you're teaching. They didn't necessarily teach the subject area. You might have a former fifth-grade teacher observing an AP lit class. One of the things I really talk about with instructional coaches and with administration is to make sure that everybody knows what we're measuring and what we're looking for. Instructional coaches and the administrators can go a long way towards helping shape the future of their district and certainly the future of their building about what we pay attention to. If you've been

teaching for a while, everybody knows there's always like, well, this initiative and then that initiative. But I think now the focus, at least for me, is really what vision of school and experience do you want for the people who are there?

[00:19:53.020] – Amber
Meaning both for your teachers and for your students in a building, what experience do you want? They shape that to a great degree. I think they can lean on their mentors to pass that knowledge down.

[00:20:05.760] – Steve
Important role for mentors to be playing in, I guess, personalizing for someone new the mission and the vision of what we want to have happen for learners.

[00:20:22.740] – Amber
Absolutely. I think that that's an evolving – very much an evolving topic. A lot of the research and conversations I've been is around what learning is going to look like within the next 5 to 10 years. This idea of personalization, it's almost like differentiation with every kid has an IEP thing in a positive way, that everybody has an individual education education plan that we're able to use technology and resources to foster that and really make that connection that learning is life and life is learning and those overlap instead of siloed school experiences.

[00:21:01.460] – Steve
Another word that's going through my mind as I'm listening to you, I'm real big on people seeing teaching as a profession. In my mind, I separate working in a profession from working in a trade, that if you work in a trade, you learn the right way to do something, and you're expected to do it the right way, and you probably get evaluated on whether or not you do it the right way. When you move into profession, you're working in a field where you learn a lot, study a lot, and then you're

conducting experiments. So a doctor is experimenting with a patient, and an attorney is experimenting with a case, and a teacher is experimenting with the learner. I can't write a script for…

[00:21:46.680] – Amber
It really is so exponential because if you just think about one student in one class, I think I just started today, I have 120 something students.

[00:21:57.160] – Amber
If I think about the ways that I to experiment with what ways can I reach this kid, well, then I have to think about their social emotional needs and their academic needs and then their family structures. If it's grandma, if it's Mom and Dad, it just exponentially grows around the need that students need adults who are really committed to the profession of teaching, because then you're working to improve something and make changes to it and not, like you said, static and say, okay, check the box.

[00:22:32.600] – Steve
If you think of that, carrying it over to other professions, nobody would expect new people coming into the field in those professions to be on their own. That we have this history of expecting that first-year, non-tenured person to go off to this room with 25 kids and carry on the way a 25-year veteran with all that experience and background behind them does.

[00:23:08.040] – Amber
Well, and there's history, too. I mean, it's how long you've been in the profession, but just what is going on in the world. I mean, some of the new teachers I'm talking to, graduated high school with COVID. I know last year I had new teachers who had done their student teaching on Zoom, which is just crazy.

[00:23:30.000] – Steve

That’s right.

[00:23:30.630] – Amber
How is that even a reality of a situation? We do throw teachers into the deep end and see what happens. But I really think that with the right mentoring structure and just the right attitude about the responsibility that we all have for the next generation of teachers, that makes a huge difference. You can see, I think you can meet a more veteran teacher and know immediately whether they are interested in that next generation or if they’re stuck in their ways. To me, it’s just very refreshing to work with new teachers to find out what’s going on with their lives, what they like, what they’re interested in. As long as you’re an active participant learning things, they’re not intimidated to learn from you. I think that’s part of what I’ve been doing successful is I’m very curious about their lives and them. I think in turn, they know I’m not trying to be the boss. I’m not trying to tell them everything. I just want to know what they can teach me and what I can teach them.

[00:24:30.640] – Steve
In my work with coaching, I label the curiosity of the coach as one of the key factors. Curious about the person you’re working with, curious about their situation, curious about their students. It walks right into it. Well, Amber, any closing thoughts you might want to toss out there, both to the new folks entering the field and the experienced folks looking to support them?

[00:25:00.000] – Amber
Yeah, I think I’ve been thinking a lot about… I actually was just working on a new book, and I’ve been thinking a lot about this need for reconnection. I think it’s no more… I mean, it’s very obvious to me in schools that the face-to-face interactions, but also the community interactions of talking in the faculty room, giving these spaces where you can bond with each other in a formalized way. A lot of the newer

teachers don’t necessarily have all of the social acumen to be able to walk in and just acclimate so well to everything. One of the things that I’m thinking about in society, even, is how do we provide people with opportunities to bowl together, to have a meal together, to have a potluck, how to reconnect in a way that a lot of people who are in their 50s know how to do. But I think a lot of the younger teachers don’t have that. A lot of people after COVID lost that. That’s been one of my concerns lately is really how do we bring that community back with those connections.

[00:26:13.460] – Steve
I’ll give you a quick reinforcement from a person who was on this podcast with me who is teaching master’s degree classes and told about walking down the hall, running a little bit late for her class, and hearing the silence, thought nobody was there, only to walk in the room and find 20 people sitting on their phones. She has to purposely plan an activity to get them up and moving around the room and talking to other people before she starts the class. So that just re-requests exactly what you’ve laid out there.

[00:26:54.580] – Amber
Yeah. A lot of the research I did in the past summer has been a lot about what has that society has stopped…people aren’t in…people don’t bowl every Thursday night. People don’t even…they go to their certain church staying, or they’re dropped out of that. I think that that’s leading to a lot of the loneliness and the isolation and the anxiety that a lot of people are having. I think teachers are just uniquely situated to help students learn how to reenter society that way. But also, I think there’s an obligation that we help families do that as well. So providing things like having a family game night at school, having those types of activities where you have safe spaces, but someone else is leading it. I think that people really need that right now. That’s on my mind about as we’re looking at the next wave of new teachers, is how can we

make sure that they are able to be in community with the people that they teach with and their families and their students? But also, how do we pass that on to the next generation? Because I think that that is the breakdown.

[00:28:02.660] – Amber
Right now, I think that a lot of people are feeling that it's very isolated.

[00:28:07.040] – Steve
Well, Amber, thank you so much. I greatly enjoyed the conversation. I will put a link to the Education Week article and a link to your book in the lead-in to the podcast. Is there a way that listeners might be able to contact you directly if they want to find out more about your program there, or come to you with some questions?

[00:28:30.300] – Amber
My website, it's called flexibleclass.com. That's easy if you know me right away. Flexibleclass makes sense. Flexibleclass.com is one way. My email is very simple. It's amberchandler@gmail.com. So any of those ways. But my website is probably a good way.

[00:28:50.580] – Steve
We'll put the website in there for folks to find you as well.

[00:28:54.000] – Amber
Awesome.

[00:28:54.470] – Amber
This was great. Thank you. Awesome. Take care.

[00:29:00.060] – Steve [Outro]
Thanks for listening, folks. I'd love to hear what you're pondering. You can find me on Twitter or LinkedIn at Steve Barkley, or send me your questions and find my videos and blogs at barkleypd.com.