

Education Week

Better Mentoring, Better Teachers

Three Factors That Help Ensure Successful Programs

By Dara Barlin

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For more than a decade, clear and consistent research has shown that the quality of teachers is the most powerful school-related determinant of student success.

Capitalizing on this now-large body of evidence, many education leaders have begun to invest in new-teacher mentoring. It's a smart bet.

When mentors are well-selected, well-trained, and given the time to work intensively with new teachers, they not only help average teachers become good, but good teachers become great. And because new teachers are most often assigned to the poorest schools and the most challenging classrooms, instructional-mentoring programs provide a powerful lever for closing the teacher-quality gap and ensuring that all students, regardless of their backgrounds, have a real opportunity to succeed.

In the more than two decades that my organization, the New Teacher Center has been helping districts and states develop comprehensive instructional-mentoring programs, we've seen some programs soar, some struggle, and many fall somewhere in between. We recently reviewed a number of these programs and identified three critical factors that seem to be making a positive difference:

Finding the right teachers to be mentors. This is the sine qua non of a high-quality instructional-mentoring program. The mentors' effectiveness ultimately determines to what extent programs will support new teachers in helping kids succeed. Successful mentors have many important aptitudes, but above all they are exceptional educators with a track record of fostering significant student learning gains in diverse settings. The path to finding the right mentors, however, is complex. Many districts don't have the structures in place to assess who their most skilled educators are, or which of their teachers are having a strong, positive impact on student outcomes. Even in districts that are able to identify their high-performing educators, there can be resistance to recruiting these master teachers away from their classrooms.

There are some programs, however, in which school and district leaders allocate the time needed to develop systems that identify top-performing educators. They also put a priority on communications about the longer term and stress the larger-scale gains that can be made through effective mentoring. These are the programs that are hiring the highest-caliber mentors—and realizing the greatest gains in student learning.

Aligning instructional-support efforts. Think of instructional support as a communal

tree that's supposed to be watered once a week. Although many well-intentioned people may want to water it in the hope of fostering growth, the tree is more likely to drown than to thrive if no one coordinates these individual efforts. The same holds true for instructional support.

One of a mentor's chief jobs is to help a new teacher close the "knowing-doing" gap by learning to apply knowledge of best practices to daily classroom routines. The rise of various instructional-support models in many school systems, however, often forces new teachers to navigate dozens of different perspectives, frameworks, and pieces of advice on teaching. A lack of coordination among these myriad advisers—literacy and math coaches, university supervisors, data specialists, special education counselors, technology coordinators, and many others—can result in conflicting messages that overwhelm beginning teachers and exacerbate attrition rates.

Programs seeking to address this issue have integrated mentoring into the district's larger learning goals and human-capital strategies. They try to ensure that all messages, tools, and strategies aimed at supporting teacher development are consistent and aligned. When this is done, new (and in fact all) teachers are better able to make sense of the various layers of information they receive, to understand clearly the expectations being placed on them, and to develop a personal road map for improvement consistent with a single, unified vision for quality teaching.

Partnering with principals. The job description of principals has been evolving away from operations and management and toward instructional leadership. Yet only a few emerging structures are in place to help them make this transition. Most principals still report that they don't know how to conduct an effective classroom observation, and many have never received information on how to transform school conditions in ways that allow new teachers to flourish. The education system at large has not yet stepped in to provide the tools, training, or guidance necessary to help fill these critical knowledge gaps.

When mentoring programs partner extensively with administrators, however, they provide an entry point for addressing these problems. While maintaining confidentiality with their new teachers (a key element in developing mutual trust), mentors can support the principal's understanding of effective observation and coaching strategies to use with new teachers, while they also learn about and create action plans for applying the principal's instructional vision and priorities in the classroom. The mentor and the principal, working together, can also discuss and implement other induction-related activities that help the school advance teacher growth.

The exciting news is that a number of districts have already identified and begun to build on these factors for success. The recent book *New Teacher Mentoring: Hopes and Promise for Improving Teacher Effectiveness*, which I co-authored, profiles four districts on the cutting edge of this new brand of thoughtful implementation of instructional-mentoring programs. What they're doing, detailed in the book, may provide ideas for others.

Boston, for example, has revamped its entire process for teacher recruitment and is

working to align a districtwide mentoring program with the Boston Teacher Residency program. The aim is to fill traditional gaps between teacher preparation, recruitment, and induction.

Chicago is seeking to overcome historical roadblocks to collaboration in large urban districts and make consistency of instructional support a reality. Its plan involves ensuring that mentors, principals, and content coaches all share the same instructional-support strategies.

Mentors in Durham, N.C., support only one or two schools at a time. This gives them heightened opportunities to help new teachers with instructional skills, while also working with principals to create school conditions that better enable new teachers to succeed.

The New York City Department of Education, which has integrated teaching standards into school accountability measures, has empowered former mentors to provide training in the standards' use. This has allowed principals and staff members to concentrate on helping all educators improve their effectiveness—rather than just assess progress periodically.

These are only a few examples of efforts being made in these and other school systems to implement instructional-mentoring programs and integrate them into districtwide visions for change. Reports from those involved indicate that not only are such activities beginning to gain traction, but they are also showing surprisingly strong results.

Districts that once had revolving-door relationships with their new teachers have cut attrition rates in half. Entire cohorts of beginning teachers have begun to foster student gains similar to or greater than their veteran peers' results. And mentors are reigniting their own passion for teaching.

When mentoring programs thrive, schools systems are also more likely to develop a comprehensive vision for assessing and supporting instructional excellence and to reconfigure their evaluation and tenure structures around that vision. More important, they have a much greater chance of transforming their schools into vibrant learning communities capable of helping all teachers, and all students, succeed.

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