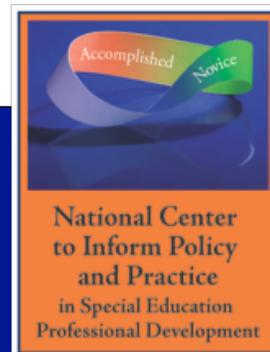


Special School District St. Louis County

Overview

The Special School District of St. Louis County (SSD) provides a comprehensive induction and mentoring program. The program includes two academies and a collaborative learning strand to address professional development needs throughout a teacher's career.



What makes SSD tick?

- Shared vision of special education induction support
- Multi-layered supports
 - ~ Includes district-level and school-based mentors
 - ~ Coordinates with professional development
- Sustained Involvement over 3 to 5 years
 - ~ Begins as individualized support, evolves to collegial collaboration
 - ~ Personalizes by level and rates of development
- Focus on student performance
 - ~ Involves analysis of student data to judge progress and goal attainment
 - ~ Provides mentors a focus for mentoring sessions
- Comprehensive program evaluation
 - ~ Involves multiple measures and continuous data collection
 - ~ Fosters continuous improvement

“We have a long history of great people here. We come across teachers who have left us and gone to work in other places, and they come back and say ‘I never realized the amount of resources and support that there are with SSD.’

We (SSD) believe it's a teacher's responsibility to be able to meet the needs of any child in the county, no matter what the incidence rate is, and we have the resources to support this goal.”

-SSD Program Director



“I see growth in new teachers as far as their instruction and being reflective about their practices. In their first year they are really confused about the whole process, by the second year they are able to begin to really think about their instruction, and then there is a big jump to the third year. By then they have enough resources, enough tools in their tool kit, and enough experiences that they can think about what they have done in the past and draw from those experiences to add to their ability as a teacher.”

-Instructional
Facilitator

District Context

SSD is a public school system in St. Louis County, Missouri that serves only students with disabilities. The district has five special education schools and provides special education services to 22 partner districts with 265 schools. In the 2009-2010 school year, SSD employed 2,750 special education teachers and 1,748 paraprofessionals to serve approximately 24,000 students with special needs. The partner districts consist of diverse student populations ranging from schools with high poverty, high minority populations to others with little racial or socioeconomic diversity. SSD provides services to all students in special education, across disability categories, and in a variety of contexts (i.e., self-contained, resource, co-teaching).

Program Rationale

The SSD induction program began in 1996 in response to the Missouri state mandate for two years of teacher mentoring. Using the mandate as an impetus for change, SSD formed an initial structure for the newly emerging induction program. At this same time, SSD began collaborating with the New Teacher Center. SSD modified the guidelines set forth by the New Teacher Center to meet the unique needs of beginning special

education teachers. Ultimately SSD created an extensive induction program aimed at ensuring a committed high quality special education teaching force.

Program Goals

Goal 1: Build instructional quality

Goal 2: Increase student achievement

Goal 3: Retain effective teachers



Components

For the past 10 years, SSD has maintained a rigorous program for its beginning teachers that far exceeds Missouri's minimum requirements. The current program incorporates a formalized professional development structure for all beginning teachers designed to support them through their tenure of employment. The overall program structure includes three strands: Academy I, Academy II, and Research and Collaborative Learning. Academy I focuses on induction, whereas the other components focus on professional development opportunities throughout a teacher's career.



Academy 1

The most intense learning strand for newly hired teachers, Academy 1 provides beginning teachers a solid foundation for a long and productive career with the district. Academy 1 welcomes new hires into the district by inducting them into SSD policies, procedures, and expectations, and by providing specific skill development as well as instructional and emotional support through coaching and mentoring.

Newly hired teachers' levels of previous experience and individual needs determine the length of time they spend in Academy 1. Beginning teachers who have no previous teaching experience participate in Academy 1 for three years. Teachers who have prior teaching experience yet are new to SSD participate in Academy 1 for two years. Each year of Academy 1 has a specific theme. The first year focuses on classroom supports for instruction, the second year on effective teaching, and the third year on thoughtful teaching.



Mentoring Focus

SSD employs a tiered mentoring system to meet the needs of beginning special education teachers. Beginning teachers receive support from school-based mentors, district-based instructional facilitators, and IEP partners. Each of the three mentors focus on providing specific support for beginning teachers.

School-based Mentor

School-based mentors help beginning special education teachers adjust to the school culture. Mentors provide services specific to each mentor/mentee pair; however, some general services are provided to all beginning special education teachers. These services include:

1. Assistance with school-level policies and procedures
2. Location of resources and materials
3. Emotional and social support
4. Management of required paperwork
5. Immediate attention to instructional concerns

School-based Mentor Selection

School-based mentors are selected and assigned to a beginning special education teacher at the discretion of the district-level area coordinator. Generally speaking, once a beginner is hired, the area coordinator solicits a veteran teacher in the same building to serve as the school-based mentor.

“I usually just check in with them once a day. ‘Hey, how’s it going?’ Kerry and I are sharing a math class, so I’ll see her at the end of every day. And then Nancy, I’ll catch her, just say hi, stop in at the end of the day or during my planning period just to go and see how things are going. Marleen, we have classrooms next door to each other, so needing the higher level support and understanding, she’ll just knock on the door or send a student over, just ask questions, or just need to process a situation that happened in class.”

-School-Based Mentor



The coordinator seeks a teacher with three or more years of successful teaching experience. Ideally, mentors have taught a similar content area and population of students as the beginner. Mentors must be willing to share time and materials with a new teacher. School-based mentors should also be organized, respectful, and responsible. A school-based mentor's duties are articulated by the instructional facilitator and by the area coordinator, who are the mentors' direct supervisors. School-based mentors are paid a stipend for mentoring responsibilities.

School-based Mentor Training

School-based mentors are required to attend a half-day training before school starts and two follow-up meetings during the school year. The half-day training focuses on adult learning principles, phases in beginning teacher development, observation and reflection strategies, and policies and procedures associated with the mentoring process. At the two follow-up meetings, in November and March, mentors discuss strategies and assist each other with challenges. School-based mentors also meet several times a year with the beginner's instructional facilitator for on-going support and development of coaching skills.

School-based Mentoring Sessions

During the first semester, school-

based mentors spend seven hours with each mentee. During the second half of the year, they spend three and a half hours. Each mentoring session is recorded in a *Mentor/Mentee Log* that serves as evidence of the mentor/mentee relationship. Mentoring sessions vary depending on the specific needs of each beginning teacher. Sessions may be planned and formally structured around a specific topic, such as IEP paperwork or collaborating with general educators. Sessions may also happen on an impromptu fashion, in response to unexpected or challenging situations the beginning teacher may encounter.



Instructional Facilitator

The instructional facilitator is primarily responsible for planning, implementing, and evaluating professional development for beginning teachers. These district-based mentors strive to ensure that beginners' professional development is based on effective, evidence-based instructional

practices. The instructional facilitator provides one-on-one instructional mentoring and develops and implements a series of professional development courses for a group of beginners. Instructional facilitator are paid teacher salary with an additional stipend

Instructional Facilitator Selection

Instructional facilitators apply for a full-time position with the Program Director. Instructional facilitators are required to have experience in professional development and coaching, as well as a history of successful classroom instruction.

“My conversations with beginners are data based, ‘So, let’s look at the data. Where do you see your students needing a different way of instructing or a different strategy?’ This puts instructional issues in the hands of student data.”

**-Instructional
Facilitator**



Instructional Facilitator Training

SSD instructional facilitators are sent to a one-week cognitive coaching seminar outside the district. Additional district-based training provides them information regarding district rules and procedures. During the school year, instructional facilitators meet bi-weekly to plan the professional development series, discuss successes, and assist each other with mentoring challenges.



Instructional Facilitator Mentoring Sessions

Instructional facilitators are required to spend 25 hours a year with each beginner. They conduct classroom observations and face-to-face meetings, and use email and telephone contact to communicate with their beginning teachers. Instructional facilitators differentiate the content of these sessions based on whether the beginning teacher is a first, second, or third year teacher. SSD developed *Skill Sets* that align with the districts' Performance Based Teacher Evaluation and the themes

of each year in Academy I. Instructional facilitators evaluate beginning teachers' proficiency on the *Skill Sets*. Based on classroom observations, instructional facilitators determine beginning teachers' instructional needs. This is a collaborative process in which beginning teachers also identify what areas they would like to improve upon. Each mentoring session is recorded in the *collaborative log of coaching conversations* and provides evidence of instructional improvement. Sessions may focus on a classroom observation, content and application of the professional development series, or issues and concerns brought up by the beginner.



IEP Partner

Beginning teachers have identified paperwork management as a primary need. In an effort to alleviate this stress from their beginning teachers, SSD has developed an additional mentor support. The IEP partner is an individual who is assigned to a

newly hired teacher by the area coordinator to assist with the various procedural rules involved with special education paperwork (e.g. Individual Education Plans). The IEP partner can be another special educator in the building, or this responsibility can be added to the duties of the school-based mentor. IEP partners are paid a stipend for their mentoring responsibilities.

“The program continually evolves as we get new research and training. We also take information from our stakeholders. When something new comes along, it’s not like we jump into it, but we’ll analyze it and look at it to see if it fits the needs of our population, and then discuss how to implement it and phase it in.”

**-Instructional
Facilitator**



Professional Development

Beginning teachers attend a professional development series implemented by district-based instructional facilitators. In the first two months of the school year, instructional facilitators compile a list of their beginners' needs. Using this needs assessment, instructional facilitators work as a group to decide on the topics for the professional development series. Topics are then assigned to instructional facilitators based on expertise. Examples of topics from previous years include:

- Collaborative teaching
- Instructional strategies for secondary mathematics
- Self-advocacy
- Pre-emergent literacy
- Strategies for students with autism

Following professional development, beginning teachers meet with their instructional facilitator to discuss what was learned through their course and how the new skills can be implemented in the classroom.



Academy II

The primary focus of Academy II is to improve special education teachers' ability to use data to drive instruction and increase their students' achievement levels. Academy II is designed for teachers who are in their fourth and fifth year of teaching. The *Skill Sets* at this level focus on using evidence-based strategies to increase student achievement and on collecting and analyzing data to drive instruction. Whereas in Academy I, beginning teachers are expected to work closely with their mentors, in Academy II, teachers form collaborative groups with other teachers and work together with their colleagues to improve instruction and attain gains in student achievement.

Research and Collaborative Learning Strand

The primary focus of this strand is to provide sustained professional learning and growth opportunities to experienced teachers. During this time, teachers work closely and collaboratively with their colleagues, supervisors, and partner districts to examine student data and identify students' deficits and areas that need to be addressed through various evidence-based research strategies.

“We can't guarantee an environment that a teacher is going to walk into.

We ask ourselves, how do we ensure beginners have the strategies they need to teach in their specific context?”

**-SSD Program
Director**

Funding

Although a small portion of the funding for the SSD induction and mentoring program comes from state and federal sources, the majority of funding is from a local tax base. In 2007-2009, the Academy 1 budget for staff (Instructional Facilitators, Area Coordinators, and Director) salary and benefits (e.g. insurance, retirement) was approximately \$929, 233 or \$5,500 per beginner.



Measuring Effectiveness

SSD engages in routine data collection and every three years conducts an extensive program evaluation. The effectiveness of the program is determined through multiple data sources including:

- Teacher collected pre- and post- student achievement and progress monitoring data (routine)
- Collaborative Coaching Logs (routine)
- Continuum of Skill Sets Development (routine)
- Observations by Instructional Facilitators (routine)
- Retention Rates (annual)
- Instructional Mentoring Survey (three-year)
- Instructional Practices Survey (three-year)

Multiple stakeholders (e.g., local university professors, administrators, and mentors) analyze the program's progress and use the data gathered to make recommendations for the areas they identified as needing improvement. The completed evaluation report drives the development of future program goals.

Table 1. Key Findings from the Evaluation Data

Year	06-07	07-08	08-09
Number of New Hires	255	349	305
Number of New Hires Who Resigned	32	18	18
New Hire Retention Rate	88%	95%	94%

Table 2. Teacher and Administrator Survey Response

Teacher Survey Item 08-09	Agreed
Participating in staff development improved my instructional performance.	91%
Job-embedded support positively impacted my professional growth.	89%
Job-embedded support positively impacted student learning.	90%
Administrator Survey Item 08-09	Agreed
Teacher participation in the induction program improved their performance.	98%
Teacher participation in the induction program improved student learning.	91%
Overall satisfaction with Academy 1.	87%

Overcoming Challenges

SSD program staff have a strong commitment to supporting beginning teachers that manifests in their desire to tackle challenges as they arise.

Reflecting and Responding

SSD reflects on the evaluation data collected and decides how best to respond to problems described in the data. One difficulty noted during the first three-year evaluation was beginning teachers' ability to collect progress-monitoring data on students and to inform specific student-based goals. When data showed teachers were struggling with this skill, SSD instructional facilitators supported skill development by focusing mentoring sessions on data-driven goals, and by modeling process of collecting students data and instructional decision making.

Change

With a focus on continuous improvement, the SSD often finds itself revising its practices. Significant changes in structure based on the evaluation feedback affect everyone, and additional training must be conducted for all staff. For example, simply adding an additional beginning teacher support, the special education IEP partner, changed the focus of mentoring sessions for instructional facilitators and school-based mentors. In this case, both the district and school-based mentors adjusted their roles, responsibilities, and skill sets.

Ongoing Challenges

What is certain about SSD is the commitment to excellence in support of teacher learning across the career continuum. The district believes there is always room for improvement. The following topics are the current challenges SSD is tackling.





“I see growth in new teachers in their instruction, their reflections about their practices, and their confidence. In their first year they are really confused about the whole process. By the second year they are able to begin to really think about their instruction. Then there is a big jump to the third year. By then, beginners have enough resources, enough tools and strategies in their tool kit, and enough experiences that they can think about what they have done, draw from past experiences, and add to their ability as a teacher.”

-Instructional
Facilitator

A Standard Needs Assessment/ Observation Tool

Currently, SSD instructional facilitators rely on the district *Skills Sets* to determine the needs of beginning teachers. Although the *Skill Sets* are aligned with the district’s Performance Based Evaluation Tool, instructional facilitators agree a formative evaluation would be helpful in informing their mentoring sessions to improve beginning teacher classroom practice. Beginners enter the district with varying degrees of knowledge and expertise in the classroom; some need more support than others. Having a system that lets instructional facilitators assess the strengths and weaknesses of each beginner would allow for more individualization. Strong beginners could demonstrate competence on *Classroom Supports for Instruction* and move quickly to *Effective Teaching*, while others might need more time.

University Collaboration

SSD would like to establish a close and collaborative relationship with a neighboring university. Although there is university representation for the three-year evaluation, SSD hopes to align the induction program expectations with the teacher preparation curriculum of local universities.

Closing

At \$ 5,500 per beginner, the SSD program lies beyond the reach of most districts’ induction budgets. What’s more, the unusual administrative infrastructure—a multi-district special education unit—complicates adoption by more traditionally organized districts. Despite their unique structure, we all can learn from SSD. Implementing the elements of the SSD program can strengthen districts existing programs and help to differentiate them for novice special educators. We believe the SSD program is exemplary in both design and delivery. It attends to both school level socialization and instructional coaching; it is sustained over a period of years and aligned with an on going and evolving professional development agenda. Observations of novices are keyed to a standard assessment model, which provides a framework for meaningful mentor-mentee discussion. The program is evaluated systematically with an eye to improvement; as good as it is, it is never considered complete. In our judgment, these elements represent what we believe to be best practice in special education induction and mentoring. Adopting any of them is likely to strengthen many induction programs, and the more a budget will allow, the stronger a program is likely to become.