

# Induction Insights



## Supporting Special Education Teachers—Administrators [AII-07]

### Policy Features that Make a Difference

#### Improving Mentor Programs for Novice Special Education Teachers

##### *Briefly...*

*Most states have policies for new teacher induction and mentoring programs that districts use as a foundation when designing and implementing local programs. Although most state policies do not differentiate programs for novice special education teachers, there are particular aspects of their experience—discussed in this Brief—that may affect mentoring effectiveness.*

State policies for new teacher induction and mentoring provide a foundation for district educators as they develop and implement programs. Districts implement state policy to meet the unique needs of their schools and teachers.

State policies rarely differentiate for special education teachers, in spite of meaningful differences. Special education presents a particular challenge to administrators who must implement mentoring policies. For example, some schools have only one special education teacher. Some have only one special education teacher working with students with a particular disability or degree of severity. Providing programs for special education teachers at the secondary level who teach more than one subject presents additional challenges.

Although federal and state governments can provide resources and shape local policies through guidelines and standards, local districts bear the responsibility for implementation. This Brief considers policy elements that promote high-quality mentoring. It offers an opportunity for building and district administrators to review the aspects of their state and district mentoring policies for which they have responsibility in the context of supporting novice special education teachers.

##### Teachers Served

State policies typically stipulate who receives mentoring and the program duration (e.g., 1 to 5 years). Eligibility for mentoring support may vary (e.g., beginning teachers, teachers who received certification through alternate routes, etc.).

When reviewing mentoring program policies, administrators might consider not just the duration of mentoring but also the type of mentoring support necessary and how it may change over time. For example, while a first year teacher may require frequent and intensive mentoring, a third year teacher might benefit more from participation with a collegial network of teachers.

##### Mentor Selection

Typically, state policies provide threshold criteria (e.g., successful teaching experience) and empower districts to establish a mentor selection process. Many states recommend that building administrators oversee mentor selection. Mentors should be chosen on the basis of a rigorous selection process conducted by veteran instructional leaders who know the characteristics—of knowledge, skills, and dispositions—of

high-quality mentors and the kinds of mentors needed for specialized contexts.

Administrators may find it challenging to meet mentor selection criteria if the number of high-potential mentors is limited—as tends to be the case in special education. This may occur in buildings as well as across the district. Administrators may find it necessary to look to alternative arrangements, such as multiple mentors for a novice special education teacher.

## Mentor Training

Not all accomplished teachers have the potential to become effective mentors. Even for individuals with high potential, training may be needed to help them develop appropriate mentor skills and knowledge. Although state policy may address mentor training, decisions regarding its content and delivery generally are left to the discretion of local districts. Care should be taken to ensure that training addresses the particular needs of special education mentors.

## Mentor Matching and Assignment

Building administrators often are responsible for mentor assignment. When novice teachers are matched with a mentor from the same field, mentor effectiveness and mentee retention tend to increase. Administrators should recognize and accommodate the various contexts in which special educators work. For example, policies may specify a lower mentor-to-new-special-education-teacher ratio to ensure that all specialized needs are met. In cases where special education mentors are not available in the novice's school, two mentors may

be necessary—one mentor who helps to socialize the new teacher at the building level, and another whose responsibility is instructional coaching.

## Delivery

Time is an essential element of high-quality mentoring, and it should be addressed in policy and practice. District administrators should include specific provisions for making contact time available for new special education teachers and mentors to collaborate and plan. Administrators may consider providing full-time mentors, common scheduling, and released time activities.

## Accountability

State policies often require that evaluation and accountability provisions be conducted as part of mentoring programs. Mentoring should focus more on assisting and supporting new teachers in the process of developing professionally than on evaluation. Many states also require evaluation of their induction and mentoring programs.

Administrators may want to review their policies regarding specific information such as who is responsible for evaluation, what evaluation criteria are to be used, how to conduct the evaluation process, and how to use the evaluation findings. They also may consider holding their district programs accountable for demonstrating that novice special educators are being served appropriately.

## Funding Resources

Generally, states provide some funding for mentoring programs, including program funding, professional development,

## ◎◎ Sightings

E-mentoring—the use of technology-based communication formats in which mentors and mentees interact—is a promising approach for supporting novice teachers, especially when they have limited access to in-building support. Check out whether your state mentoring policy references e-mentoring programs, especially in terms of how various elements (e.g., mentor selection, program delivery, etc.) may be affected. Find out more about e-mentoring in *E-Mentoring: Is this Promising Approach to Novice Special Education Teacher Induction Right for Your District?* The Brief is available on the NCIPP website at [www.ncipp.org](http://www.ncipp.org).

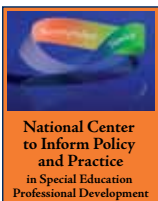


substitutes, released time, and incentives (e.g., additional pay, tuition waivers, etc.). However, the majority of costs usually are borne by the district. District administrators should ensure that adequate financial support and resources are available to ensure effective implementation.

**Learn More.** This Brief summarizes select findings from a comprehensive review of the literature:

Hirsch, E., Rorrer, A., Sindelar, P. T., Dawson, S. A., Heretick, J., & Jia, C. L. (2009). *State policies to improve the mentoring of beginning special education teachers*. (NCIPP Doc. No. PA-1). Gainesville, FL: University of Florida, National Center to Inform Policy and Practice in Special Education Professional Development (NCIPP).

It is available on the NCIPP website at [www.ncipp.org](http://www.ncipp.org).



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