

Induction Insights



Supporting Special Education Teachers—Policymakers [PII-2]

Reshaping Induction Policies and Programs

Using Novice Special Education Teachers' Perceptions

Briefly...

Policymakers who understand the demands placed on novice special education teachers are in a better position to provide relevant induction policies and support to districts. Find out which features of induction programs novice special education teachers perceive to be effective.

Mentoring and induction support influence novice special education teachers' determination to remain in teaching. Those with high levels of support tend to report greater job manageability and success in teaching challenging students. They also tend to feel better about their preparedness to teach, knowledge of pedagogical content, and ability to manage classrooms.

However, placing special education teachers in formal mentoring programs designed primarily for general education teachers with little emphasis on their specific needs may not have positive results. In fact, participation in general programs may foster these teachers' dissatisfaction with formal mentoring programs and consequently have little effect on their decision to continue teaching.

Novice special education teachers can tell us much about the types of induction support that they perceive to be effective. An understanding of key program components may be helpful as policymakers revise programs and provide support to districts that are carrying them out.

Read on to learn about seven types of induction support that novice special education teachers find helpful.

Characteristics of Mentors

Mentors who provide instructional coaching should be matched carefully to mentees. Novice special education teachers prefer mentors who teach students with similar disabilities and who teach in the same grade level. When paired with like teachers, novice special education teachers tend to request assistance often and rate assistance high. Further, these teachers tend not to request instructional assistance if their mentor does not teach students with the same disability or does not teach in the same grade level.

Other Providers of Support

Novice special education teachers also develop relationships with their professional colleagues, including other special education teachers, related service providers, and paraprofessionals. General education teachers often provide ongoing advice about supplies, schedules, routines, unwritten school rules, and effective teaching strategies. Over time, these individuals may provide more substantial support than do formal mentors.

Principals should encourage all staff members to participate in new teacher induction programs. Strong administra-

tor support, including regular communication, can help novice special education teachers feel well prepared.

Formal and Informal Sources of Support

Formally scheduled meetings with mentors appeal to novice special education teachers. Such meetings help to facilitate collaboration and communication between mentors and mentees. Novice special education teachers also perceive informal supports—such as unscheduled meetings with mentors and colleagues, unannounced classroom visits, and handwritten notes—to be helpful.

◎◎ Sightings

Consider the special education context when setting policies and providing support for induction. Novice special education teachers benefit from school-based socialization and instructional coaching. However, as is typically the case in special education, there may not be one person in the novice teacher's school who can fill both mentor roles. This situation may arise when available special education teachers in the building do not teach the same type of students as the novice and/or do not have adequate qualifications to serve in a mentor role. Learn more about solutions to this challenge—such as assigning multiple mentors and e-mentoring—in other NCIPP *Induction Insights* Briefs.



Novice special education teachers require release time for routinely scheduled meetings and other professional development activities. They also benefit from professional development that is focused on addressing special education issues—a particular concern of these teachers.

Frequency of Support

Frequency of support influences new teacher perceptions of its effectiveness or helpfulness. Novice special educator teachers who have contact with their mentor at least once a week for the first year tend to rate mentoring as effective. However, these teachers also perceive this amount of assistance to be inadequate for addressing all of their professional and emotional needs.

Proximity of Support

Novice special education teachers tend to access colleagues who are in close proximity for assistance more than their assigned mentor—especially if the mentor is not in the same building. However, they have a preference for mentors who are special educators over those who are in the same school.

Content of Support

Novice special education teachers find professional development most effective when the content addresses their special education classroom assignments (e.g., strategies to teach and motivate challenging students), rather than generic new teacher content. They also report needing more information than usually is provided.

Although novice special education teachers typically have many instructional

needs, they find the following mentoring content to be particularly helpful:

- Emotional support (e.g., listening, sharing experiences, providing encouragement, and solving problems).
- Materials and resources, including adapting and selecting functional materials for instruction.
- Information pertaining to the school and district policies.
- Information pertaining to special education paperwork and procedures (e.g., Individualized Education Programs, referrals, etc.).

Evaluation

Novice special education teachers feel more comfortable interacting with mentors who do not have evaluative roles. While new teachers benefit from constructive criticism and feedback from mentors, they prefer mentors to share information as guides or advisors and not as supervisors.

Novice special education teachers also feel uncomfortable working with mentors who have evaluative roles that require them to make decisions about the new teacher's certification and re-employment. In these relationships, novice teachers may not want to reveal their problems and concerns to their mentors for fear of losing their jobs.

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

Billingsley, B. S., Griffin, C. C., Smith, S. J., Kamman, M., & Israel, M. (2009). *A review of teacher induction in special education: Research, practice, and technology solutions* (NCIPP Doc. No. RS-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.

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