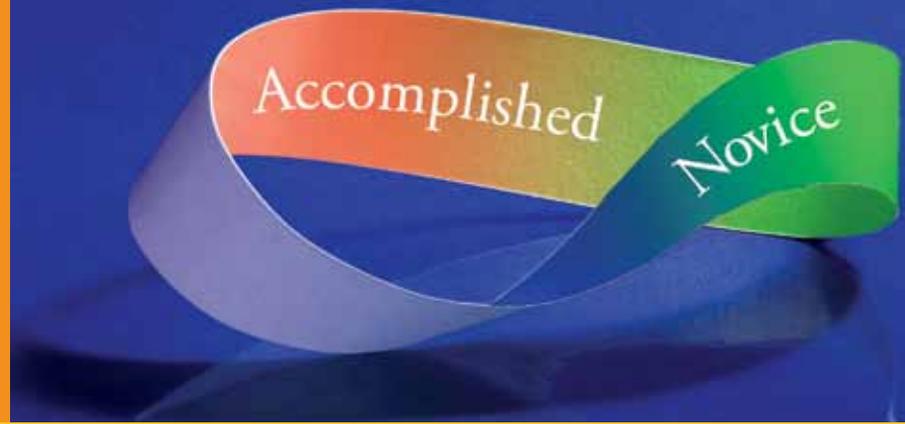


Induction Insights



Supporting Special Education Teachers—Policymakers [PII-4]

State Policies to Improve Mentoring of Novice Special Education Teachers

Briefly...

Effective state policy for new teacher mentoring stipulates program elements that increase the likelihood that district programming will be implemented and, thus, defines for districts what is important about mentoring support. 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 quality.

Shortages of fully qualified special education teachers have led policymakers to promote policies that increase the supply of new teachers and that help to ensure their retention. To promote retention, policymakers have focused primarily on beginning teacher induction and mentoring.

State policies help to promote high-quality mentoring by shaping its design and delivery and by identifying the resources to support novice teachers and their mentors. Policy provides a foundation for how districts develop induction programs. Good policy allows for variation in district implementation so that programs fit comfortably within local contexts and support structures and are feasible given existing resources.

Special education presents a challenge for policy implementation. For example, some schools have only one special education teacher. Some may have only one special education teacher working with students with a particular disability. Providing programs for special education teachers at the secondary level who teach more than one subject presents additional challenges. Yet, state policies rarely differentiate for special education teachers, in spite of meaningful differences.

This Brief considers policy elements that promote high-quality mentoring. It

offers an opportunity for policymakers to review their state mentoring policies in the context of supporting novice special education teachers.

Teachers Served

Forty-eight states address who is served by their mentoring policies. Although states stipulate that novice teachers receive mentoring, there is variation in program duration (e.g., 1 to 5 years). State policymakers should consider not just the duration, but also the type of mentoring support necessary during the beginning years and how it may change over time. They also should differentiate the type of support needed by veteran teachers (e.g., transferring from another state) from that of novices.

Mentor Selection

Thirty-eight states address mentor selection criteria in their policies. Typically, threshold criteria tend to focus on successful teaching experience, with the establishment of a selection process left to district discretion. Authorities recommend that mentors be chosen on the basis of a rigorous, high-quality selection process conducted by veteran instructional leaders who know the characteristics—knowledge, skills, and dispositions—of high-quality mentors

and the kinds of mentors needed for particular schools and specialized contexts. Schools may have limited numbers of high-potential mentors to select from.

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 mentor skills and knowledge.

Although 35 states address mentor training, decisions regarding its content and delivery generally are left to the discretion of local districts. While such flexibility seems advisable, it may result in a varied quality of training at the local level. Policymakers can provide resources (e.g., make training and materials available) to mitigate the potential for inequities.

Mentor Matching and Assignment

There is some evidence that teacher retention improves when novice teachers are matched with mentors from the same field. Thirty-two states address mentor matching and assignment, usually by setting criteria for matching or establishing mentor-mentee ratios.

Policymakers 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 new teachers 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. Policymakers should be aware that too often the costs of staffing and released time are borne by districts.

Twenty-eight states address contact time for mentors and new teachers; however, most do not include specific provisions for making it available. Policymakers can facilitate quality mentoring by encouraging features such as common scheduling and released time activities. State policy also can ensure that program standards for mentoring are specific about meeting the needs of novice special education teachers.

Accountability

Twenty-nine states have evaluation and accountability provisions associated with their 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.

Policymakers may want to review their policies regarding information such as who is responsible for program 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 district programs accountable for demonstrating that novice special educators are being served appropriately.

Funding Resources

Thirty-four states provide some support for their mentoring programs, including

◎◎ 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. To date only one state references e-mentoring in its policy; however, because e-mentoring will affect various elements (e.g., mentor selection, program delivery, etc.) you may want to consider adding it to your mentoring policy. Find out more about e-mentoring in *E-Mentoring: What Policymakers Should Know about this Promising New Approach for Novice Special Education Teacher Induction*. The Brief is available on the NCIPP website at www.ncipp.org.

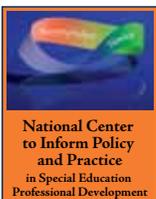


program funding, professional development, substitutes, released time, and incentives (e.g., additional pay, tuition waivers, etc.). Policymakers should ensure that adequate financial support and resources are available to ensure effective implementation.

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.



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