

Induction Insights



Supporting Special Education Teachers—Policymakers [PII-5]

E-Mentoring

What Policymakers Should Know about this Promising New Approach for Novice Special Education Teacher Induction

Briefly...

E-mentoring—the use of technology-based communication formats in which mentors and mentees interact—is emerging as a solution for supporting novice teachers, especially when they have limited access to in-building support. This Brief describes the possibilities of using e-mentoring with novice special education teachers.

As the availability and use of technology continues to expand, e-mentoring—a practice in which mentors and mentees interact at a distance via telecommunications (e.g., e-mail, discussion board, chat room, etc.)—increasingly is finding its way into educational practice. E-mentoring offers a solution to some of the practical problems experienced by novice teachers, including:

- Having limited access to appropriate in-building mentors.
- Feeling vulnerable when asking for in-building support.
- Requiring specialized expertise that is available only at other sites.
- Finding it difficult to schedule adequate meeting time with mentors.

Although most research tends to focus on general education applications—particularly in the sciences and mathematics—there are promising possibilities for considering e-mentoring as a special education teacher induction practice. Indeed, many of the issues that e-mentoring addresses in general education are similar to those in special education.

E-mentoring can address the context of special education teacher induction. For example, novice special education teachers prefer mentors who also are special educators and teach similar types of students. They benefit from

having frequent contact, being in close proximity to the mentor, and receiving specialized content that supports their work with students with disabilities. However, many novice special education teachers find themselves in buildings without a special education colleague who meets these criteria.

What do we know from general education experience with e-mentoring that might be useful in special education? Read on to learn more about e-mentoring.

E-mentoring—A Viable Induction Practice

An e-mentoring program is not about the technology—it is about the quality of the induction experience. A well-designed e-mentoring program incorporates the essential attributes of traditional mentoring programs.

E-mentors provide the same support as face-to-face mentors (e.g., personal and emotional support, profession-related development assistance, etc.). Technology has not been shown to impede such interactions.

To date, only a few e-mentoring programs exist. However, most feature text-based communication in the form of e-mail and/or discussion board/forum entries. New teachers engage in typical

mentoring processes online, including asking questions, seeking advice from seasoned professionals, and generally looking for a shoulder to lean on.

Benefits of E-mentoring

An overall benefit of e-mentoring is its ability to offer differentiated experiences to novice teachers while addressing their immediate concerns. Examples of e-mentoring attributes that may be attractive to special education mentor programs follow.

- **Mentor selection.** Mentors are not limited by school assignment, but instead can be selected based on their expertise and matched to the novice teachers' needs.

🕒 Sightings

Policymakers can help create a context for e-mentoring by recognizing unique challenges and solutions of e-mentoring. Support strategies include:

- Creating a line item budget item for e-mentoring in the state budget.
- Identifying low-cost universally accessible technology-based solutions.
- Providing training on the technology-based tools and e-mentoring.
- Identifying key personnel and develop the technology infrastructure.



- **Scheduling time.** Unlike traditional programs, e-mentoring is not limited to a specific time period. The duration of the exchange is dependent upon the needs of the novice teacher.
- **Engagement flexibility.** By not requiring face-to-face engagement, teachers and mentors have flexibility in when they post questions, answers, or general comments. E-mails and discussion board entries can be archived for greater flexibility of use. Further, the accessible nature of e-mail and discussion forum postings allows for easy use at home, at school, and anywhere by cell phone.
- **Peer and mentor support:** Online communities can provide peer support that is lacking for many beginning teachers. Access to peers who are experiencing similar issues, challenges, and classrooms helps novice teachers address feelings of isolation.
- **Easy monitoring.** E-mail and discussion forum postings require individuals to sign in. This produces a permanent record that may simplify program evaluation.

Establishing E-mentoring Programs

Policymakers should be aware of some of the unique issues associated with e-mentoring programs. When establishing e-mentoring programs, the following issues should be addressed.

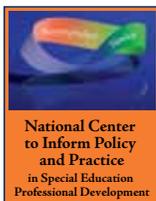
- **Source of support.** E-mentoring programs must be established, maintained, and sustained. This requires human and fiscal resources. To date, e-mentoring programs have been set up—either independently or as joint ventures—by institutions of higher education, districts, collaboratives, and state agencies.

- **Programmatic considerations.** The design should incorporate knowledge about effective mentoring and induction practices into online environments.
- **Technology considerations.** Attention must be given to which software operating platforms will be used and the online interactions within these platforms (e.g., whether to include online resources and curricula, whether there will be planned or on demand discussions, whether to include small-group mentoring relationships and/or large-group interactions among numerous mentees and mentors, etc.).
- **Role of facilitator.** Most e-mentoring programs promote the use of a facilitator who provides technical support and manages the site. Facilitators also may provide program support, including monitoring the interactions, answering questions, encouraging participation (e.g., assigning roles and interactions within discussion boards), and recruiting mentors. Some facilitators also provide relationship building activities and professional development for mentors and mentees.
- **Role of mentors.** In addition to having solid mentor skills, e-mentors must have the expertise to work in an online environment (e.g., navigating online platforms, having strategies for interacting with mentees, netiquette, etc.). Professional development may be required to help mentors feel comfortable working in online environments.

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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