

Induction Insights



Supporting Special Education Teachers—Policymakers [PII-7]

Unique Challenges in Special Education Teacher Induction—Why a New Model is Needed

Briefly...

Many mentoring policies do not differentiate between novice special education teachers and their general education counterparts. Although novice special education teachers may benefit in part from general induction practices, their experience is limited when there is little attention given to their unique instructional needs. Policymakers can address this issue by embracing the new mentoring model described in this Brief.

Shortages of fully qualified special education teachers have led policymakers to promote policies and support programs 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.

Mentoring is at the heart of both formal and informal induction support. Mentors provide two types of support:

- **Socialization.** Mentors help the beginning teacher become acclimated to the school and district. They help new teachers understand policies and procedures. In the literature, this type of mentoring is often associated with teacher retention.
- **Instructional coaching.** Mentors observe the beginning teacher and offer constructive feedback. They make suggestions on how to improve practice. In the literature, this type of mentoring is often associated with improving novice teachers' instructional practice.

Strong mentoring programs influence novice special education teachers' determination to remain in teaching. Those who experience high levels of support tend to report greater job satisfaction and success in teaching challenging students.

State policies help to promote high-quality mentoring by shaping the design and delivery of mentoring programs and identifying the resources to support them. However, special education presents a particular challenge for policy implementation. Aspects of novice special education teachers' experience may necessitate a different approach to typical, general education mentoring programs. Policymakers who understand these differences are in a position to tailor mentoring policies and programs to the needs of these novices. Read on to learn more about an emerging mentoring model for novice special education teachers.

Challenges in Special Education Teacher Induction

Novice special education teachers face challenges such as teaching students whose needs vary greatly and across various service delivery models, often in isolation from their general education colleagues. Work conditions specific to special education—such as an uncertainty about roles and responsibilities, time pressures, scheduling difficulties, heavy caseloads, paperwork, and bureaucratic requirements—also can pose challenges.

Given this specialized context, it is not surprising that novice special education teachers prefer mentors who teach students who have similar characteristics and who are close in age to their own students. Well-matched mentors can provide new teachers with instructional support and professional development that is relevant to their needs. However, in many schools a mentor may not be available to meet the new teacher's specialized instructional needs.

An Emerging Mentoring Model for Special Education Teachers

When a school does not have a mentor who can serve as an instructional coach—a veteran proficient in mentoring skills who teaches students who are similar to those of the mentee—what can be done to ensure that the novice special education teacher receives the help he or she needs to thrive? The situation may be

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Placing novice special education teachers in formal mentoring programs with little emphasis on their specific needs may have negative effects. Participation may foster dissatisfaction with formal mentoring programs and consequently, have little effect on their decision to continue in teaching.



remedied by providing two mentors with differentiated roles.

The novice teacher is assigned a school-based mentor—who may be a general education teacher—who provides day-to-day socialization and support for immediate classroom concerns. These school-based mentors help the novice learn the school and district policies and procedures.

The novice teacher also is assigned an instructional coach who has expertise in the mentee's area of specialization. Typically, districts have approached providing an off-site mentor in the following ways:

- **Assign a mentor from a nearby school.** In such cases, administrators should ensure adequate supports, such as release time to meet, flexible scheduling, etc. These mentors often are compensated (e.g., reduced instructional duties, stipends, etc.).
- **Develop a centralized cadre of mentors.** In such cases, the district assigns mentors from a group of trained mentors who often serve in this role full-time.

E-Mentoring—A Promising Practice

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. Examples of e-mentoring attributes that may be attractive to special education mentor programs follow.

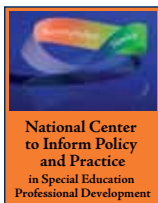
- **Mentor selection.** Mentors are not limited by school assignment, but instead can be selected based on their

expertise and matched to the novice teacher's needs.

- **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. In addition, the accessible nature of e-mail and discussion forum postings allows for easy access 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 have 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.

Because e-mentoring will affect various program elements (e.g., mentor selection, program delivery, etc.) policymakers may want to consider adding it to their mentoring policy.

Learn More. This Brief summarizes select findings from four comprehensive reviews of the literature conducted by the National Center to Inform Policy and Practice in Special Education Professional Development (NCIPP). These reviews and other *Induction Insight* briefs are available on the NCIPP website at www.ncipp.org.



This Brief is part of a series designed to help special education teachers during their initial years in the profession. The National Center to Inform Policy and Practice in Special Education Professional Development (NCIPP) is funded by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) of the U.S. Department of Education (cooperative agreement # H325Q070002). Bonnie Jones is the OSEP Project Officer. Opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Department of Education. NCIPP aims to inform special education policy and practice by examining and recommending those policies and practices that improve the retention and quality of beginning special education teachers. There are no copyright restrictions on this document; however, please use proper citation. The Briefs were produced by Warger, Eavy and Associates.

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