

# Induction Insights



## Supporting Special Education Teachers—Teachers [TII-1]

### Induction

#### A Brief Introduction for Beginning Special Education Teachers

#### *Briefly...*

*Research suggests that strong induction and mentoring programs help novice special education teachers succeed during their first years of teaching. Many school districts have formal and informal induction programs. Learn more about the features of strong induction support in this Brief.*

Induction is a term that describes the support a new teacher receives. Teacher induction begins when a new teacher enters the workforce, and it may extend throughout the next several years of teaching. Induction represents a phase in development that focuses on new teachers' concerns and problems of practice. It also serves as a catalyst for new teacher integration in the school. In many districts, formal induction programs help new teachers become acclimated to the school and develop professionally.

Novice special education teachers who experience high levels of induction support tend to report greater job satisfaction and success in teaching challenging students. Positive mentoring and induction experiences also tend to influence teachers' determination to remain in teaching.

Although novice special education teachers can benefit from standard induction support, they also may require additional supports that address the realities they face—such as teaching students across disability groups and in different settings, often in isolation from their general education colleagues. Challenging work conditions—such as an uncertainty about roles and responsibilities, time pressures, scheduling difficulties, paperwork, and bureaucratic

requirements—also may result in the need for additional assistance to ensure a successful experience. However, in some cases, specialized induction support may not be readily available. In these cases especially, special education teachers may find it helpful to advocate for induction support that meets their needs.

What should novice special education teachers know about induction that will help them take advantage of opportunities and address challenges? Read on to learn about induction supports and how novice special education teachers may benefit from them.

#### Induction Program Elements

Induction programs vary from district to district and from state to state. There are a number of program features that novice special education teachers perceive to be particularly helpful. Examples follow.

##### **Mentors**

Mentoring is at the heart of both formal and informal induction support. Mentors provide instructional coaching, emotional support, and help navigating school policies and procedures.

Off-site personnel may provide mentoring for novice special education teachers,

◎◎ *Consider This...*

**Seek Out Opportunities to Collaborate**

Novice special education teachers report high satisfaction when they collaborate with veteran teachers. They benefit from working collaboratively with general education colleagues (e.g., co-teaching and team teaching, and in professional learning communities) and supporting one another in providing a high-quality education to all students. When novice special education teachers collaborate with their general education colleagues, they:

- Expand their circle of support to include general educators.
- Gain knowledge about the general education curriculum, which may widen their base of support and contribute to their socialization as members of the school community.



especially when there are no other special education teachers in the building. In such cases, it is imperative that novice teachers also have a school-based mentor who provides day-to-day socialization and support for immediate classroom concerns.

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, these teachers tend to request assistance often and rate the value of assistance high.

**Other Providers of Support**

Novice special education teachers should develop relationships with their professional colleagues, including other special education teachers, related service providers, general education teachers, and paraprofessionals. General education teachers can provide ongoing advice about supplies, schedules, routines, unwritten school rules, and content areas teaching strategies. When formal mentoring ends, these individuals may provide substantial support.

**Formal and Informal Sources of Support**

Formally scheduled meetings with mentors help to facilitate collaboration and communication between mentors and mentees. Informal supports—such as unscheduled meetings with mentors and colleagues, unannounced classroom visits, and hand-written notes—also are helpful. Novice special education teachers should request release time for routinely scheduled meetings and other professional development activities.

**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. Mentoring content that novice special education teachers find particularly helpful includes:

- Emotional support (e.g., listening, sharing experiences, providing encouragement, and solving problems).
- Materials and resources, including adapting and selecting functional materials for instruction.
- System information pertaining to the school and district.

- System information pertaining to special education paperwork and procedures (e.g., Individualized Education Programs, referrals, etc.).

Novice special education teachers should feel free to ask their mentors and other support personnel for the support and resources they need.

**Frequency and Proximity of Support**

Novice special education teachers benefit from frequent support for professional and emotional needs. Novice teachers who have contact with their mentor at least once a week for the first year tend to rate mentoring as effective.

Novice special education teachers should seek out multiple colleagues for support. They 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.

**Evaluation**

Novice special education teachers may 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, not as supervisors. In many cases, the mentor will not have an evaluative role; however, it is important for novice teachers to find out if they do and, if so, what the implications are.

**Induction Policies**

Many states have induction policies that help guide district program development. Although in most cases policies will not differentiate practices for special education teachers, it is helpful to know general requirements. Policies often include features of interest to novice teachers such as:

- **Eligibility.** Every state policy addresses the needs of beginning teachers. State policies typically vary from state to state.
- **Mentor selection, matching, and assignment.** Building administrators often

## ◎◎ Sightings

E-mentoring is the use of technology-based communication formats in which mentors and mentees interact. It is a promising approach for supporting novice special education teachers, especially when they may be the only special education teacher in the building. Novice special education teachers can watch for e-mentoring opportunities in the district. Also, novice teachers can check with their teacher education program.



are responsible for assigning mentors. When novice teachers are matched with a mentor from the same field, mentor effectiveness and mentee retention tend to increase. In cases where special education mentors are not available in the novice's school, two mentors may be necessary—one mentor who helps the new teacher become part of the school culture 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. Policies may include specific provisions for making contact time available for new special education teachers and mentors to collaborate and plan.

Novice special education teachers should obtain a copy of the district policy and the state policy and check to make sure that they are receiving all of the support and resources to which they are entitled.

## Support from the Principal

Novice special education teachers perceive principal support to be very important to their success. Principal support

strongly influences job satisfaction and their decision to remain in teaching.

Novice special education teachers are encouraged to talk with their administrators about their concerns and needs. These teachers have found that principals can be helpful in addressing the following topics.

- Help with time management skills, including developing schedules and organizing multiple responsibilities.
- Support in the form of sheltered status, which may include reduced caseloads and fewer administrative duties.
- Assistance with required paperwork and tasks.
- Help understanding roles and responsibilities.
- Support in negotiating their roles and coordinating complex responsibilities for inclusion and collaboration.

- Information about constructive avenues through which to seek help and to receive assistance.
- Protection from difficult situations (e.g., large numbers of challenging students, extensive nonteaching duties, etc.).
- Support with supervision, management, and coordination of paraprofessionals (e.g., how to set expectations, determine a structure and schedule for paraprofessionals, deal with paraprofessionals who interact inappropriately with students, and find time to work with paraprofessionals).
- Guidance regarding interaction with parents (e.g., addressing low parent involvement, conducting different types of meetings).
- Strategies for dealing with challenging behavior (e.g., how to avoid power struggles or responding to behavioral triggers) and for providing positive behavioral support.

## ◎◎ Consider This...

Some districts and universities have formed partnerships that focus on supporting novice teachers. Two of the most common partnerships are:

- **Alternate route certification.** The number of individuals seeking special education certification through alternative routes is increasing nationwide. Alternative route certification (ARC) programs provide access to a teaching credential by circumventing traditional preservice preparation. Partnerships between higher education teacher educators and school faculty can enhance the efficacy of ARC programs. ARC candidates who participate in programs characterized by strong partnerships tend to remain in special education positions in greater number than do those candidates who participate in stand-alone district-sponsored programs.
- **Professional Development Schools.** The Professional Development School is a well-established type of partnership in which university and school faculty provide school-based preparation experiences for preservice teachers while at the same time providing ongoing professional development to improve school practice. Preservice special education teachers who participate in Professional Development Schools—especially those who have had capable mentors and concrete field experiences and coursework—report feeling well prepared. Participating students also appear to maintain or make greater gains in achievement, have higher degrees of motivation, and have better attendance records. In addition, partnership schools and districts tend to hire these preservice teachers upon graduation.



- Support in developing content expertise in different general education subject areas.

Novice teachers should feel free to ask their administrators for these and other types of supports that are needed.

**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):

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.

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.

Pugach, M. C., Blanton, L. P., Correa, V. I., McLeskey, J., & Langley, L. K. (2009). *The role of collaboration in supporting the induction and retention of new special education teachers.* (NCIPP Doc. No. RS-2). Gainesville, FL: University of Florida, National Center to Inform Policy and Practice in Special Education Professional Development.

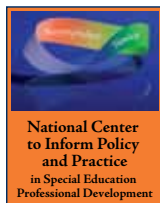
Rosenberg, M. S., Brownell, M., McCray, E. D., deBettencourt, L. U., Leko, M., & Long, S. (2009). *Development and sustainability of school-university partnerships in special education teacher preparation: A critical review of the literature.* (NCIPP Doc. No. RS-3). Gainesville, FL: University of Florida, National Center to Inform Policy and Practice in Special Education Professional Development.

These reviews and other *Induction Insight* briefs are available on the NCIPP website at [www.ncipp.org](http://www.ncipp.org).

## ◎◎ Consider This...

### Questions to Ask

- Are orientation sessions available that explain the school's policies and procedures?
- How often will I be observed and receive constructive feedback?
- Will I be given time to plan with colleagues, observe other classrooms, and meet with other new teachers for peer support?
- Will I be provided with resources (e.g., curriculum materials, professional development, and suitable classroom space)?
- Will I have opportunities to interact with other teachers in the school (e.g., serving on teaching teams with general educators, having my classroom near general education classrooms, being included in all facets of school-based decision making, etc.)?
- How many content areas will I be assigned to teach?
- Will I receive training in how to use assistive technology?
- Does the school have a shared vision and belief that supports the inclusion of students with disabilities?



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