

State Policies to Improve the Mentoring of Beginning Special Education Teachers

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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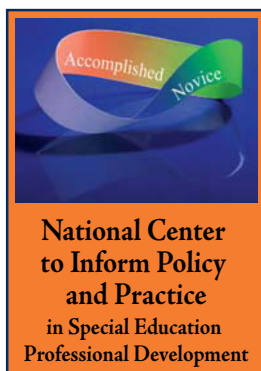
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INTRODUCTION

This paper identifies the components of policy that promote high-quality mentoring practice. We review and analyze state policy, rules, and regulations regarding beginning teacher mentoring with a focus on special education. Mentoring policies guide the selection, assignment, and training of mentors and the process with which novice teachers are matched with veteran mentors. Mentoring is a component of induction, but induction also includes a broader array of supports for new educators, including professional development, orientation, and reduced teaching load, among others.

Persistent and severe shortages of fully qualified special education teachers [SETs] have become a focal point in discussions of accountability and educational equity. Policymakers have set out both to increase the supply of new teachers and to promote their retention. To increase supply, federal legislation in particular has fostered the development of streamlined alternatives to traditional teacher preparation. To promote retention, policymakers have focused primarily on beginning teacher induction and mentoring.

Many have argued that effective induction would reduce attrition substantially and thereby alleviate teacher shortages. Others have posited that effective induction is an important complement to—but not a substitute for—increasing supply. Although research on the effectiveness of induction is meager, some studies have shown induction to be associated with increased retention. More evidence of the effectiveness of induction and mentoring is found in the program evaluation literature. Some induction programs, which are specified in this paper, significantly reduced teacher attrition rates. Induction and mentoring are also thought to promote beginning teachers' professional development, although there is less evidence to support this assertion.

State policy can help to shape the design and delivery of induction and affect the resources that are made available to support beginning teachers and their mentors. When induction policy is linked to state policy on teacher standards, preparation, certification, and licensure, a comprehensive framework for teacher professional development may be established, allowing districts flexibility in implementation.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Our conceptual framework includes policies at the federal, state, and local levels. Federal policies, such as NCLB, its Highly Qualified Teacher requirements, and IDEA, have helped shape local and state approaches by providing resources, guidelines, and standards, including for SETs. District policy may have the greatest impact on the nature and quality of mentoring. Local districts select, train, and provide professional development to mentors, design school schedules that can either facilitate or impede mentor interactions, and work with school leaders to create contexts in which mentoring is a high priority. State policy can significantly shape the form and quality of mentoring by setting program standards, providing resources, requiring and perhaps providing mentor training and professional development for all teachers, and mandating program evaluation.

Ultimately, many policies at all levels will have an impact on mentoring, and the needs of new teachers will be influenced by the quality of their preservice preparation, the availability of alternative routes, the rigor of licensure requirements, and the resources that an employing district invests in professional development. Ideally, federal, state, and local policies create a comprehensive and coherent policy infrastructure that provides schools with a clear understanding of what high-quality mentoring requires.

Assumptions

Special versus general education focus. Unlike much research on beginning teacher induction and mentoring, we consider factors that differentiate the work of beginning

SETs from GETs in other disciplines and assume these differences have implications for the development of effective state policy. Novice teachers need both expert instructional coaching from a mentor engaged in closely related work as well as a mentor who fosters socialization into the school culture. In general education, a single mentor typically performs both functions; however, for SETs, a single mentor is seldom available to fill both roles. Even if we accept the proposition that special educators require differentiated mentoring, it is not always possible for schools to provide it.

Local implementation. State policy should allow districts to adapt programs to meet local needs and to encourage innovation and commitment.

Good and bad attrition. Not all attrition is bad. Turnover may be positive when unqualified or poorly qualified teachers leave the field, when SETs switch to general education positions, or when teachers leave teaching to move to administrative positions or enter into other education professions outside of school.

Influences on the Presence of State Policies

Many factors influence whether mentoring policies are in place within a state, including the presence of key policy actors; knowledge of previous attempts and successes at authorizing, appropriating, and implementing teaching quality policies; and the severity of teacher recruitment and retention problems.

Governance. Due to constitutional language, political culture, and resources, states may develop policy or defer to local decision making. However, school equity and adequacy lawsuits have shifted spending and necessitated state-level policymaking to ensure minimal levels of support. Different states and regions have different legal and cultural traditions of local control. Some states promulgate statutes with very specific language about program requirements; others give agencies broad power to shape policies through state board rule or department regulations.

Decisions guided by teacher contracts. State law determines the scope of bargaining and whether specific issues that influence new teacher support can be addressed. These issues include evaluation, compensation, and specific aspects of the teacher workday, including class size and load, length of preparation periods, and extracurricular duties, among others. States with stronger, more expansive bargaining provisions may leave decisions about mentoring and induction to districts.

Data systems and oversight capacity. State and local data systems generally are not designed to provide policymakers with the information they need to estimate the cost of teacher turnover and the potential savings of investing in new teacher support; thus, it may be difficult for them to understand the need for mentoring. These influences all contribute to the likelihood of finding robust mentoring policies at the state level. Of course, the absence of statute, rule, and regulation does not preclude district implementation of high-quality mentoring. After all, resources and requirements could be determined locally. State policy does enhance the likelihood that all new teachers receive at least a minimal level of support regardless of the district in which they work.

METHODOLOGY

Although interest in improving teacher retention through mentoring has increased dramatically, there is still a dearth of research related to the components of state policy necessary to facilitate high-quality support. To identify state policies that may lead to high-quality mentoring, we searched 10 databases for policy research related to mentoring, hand searched tables of contents for two journals following ancestral references, and identified relevant papers from the abstract and introduction.

After this initial review, to guide our analysis, we posed seven questions regarding mentoring program components. These included:

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1. Who is served?
 2. How are mentors selected?
 3. How are mentors and novices matched and assigned?
 4. What training is required?
 5. How is mentoring support delivered?
 6. What accountability and evaluation provisions are required?
 7. What resources are provided for mentoring initiatives?

Between May and September, 2008, data on state policies were obtained through a systematic search of multiple online sources. For this analysis, current state laws, rules, and programs on beginning and new teachers, induction, and mentoring were collected and analyzed. Data were categorized as:

- State Law [SL] if the information was obtained from a state statute or legislative code
- Administrative Rules [AR] if the information came from the state annotated codes or state board of education rules
- State-sponsored Programs [P] whether established by state law or administrative code or as stand-alone programs.

For states with no current state laws, policies, or programs found in the initial search, state departments of education were contacted to verify that the absence of information reflected an absence of policy.

Data from states' mentoring and induction laws, policies, administrative rules, and programs were collected, compiled, and sorted into the seven categories. The paper presents a detailed description of how states address the seven policy components.

STATE MENTORING PROVISIONS

States have given varied attention to the structure, requirements, and expectations for new teacher mentoring and induction. With few exceptions, most states have at least some provisions. Our analysis showed that of the 48 states with policies, rules, or programs:

- 48 address who will be served in their mentoring programs
- 38 have provisions that describe how mentors are selected
- 32 address how mentors will be matched and assigned
- 35 include provisions for mentor training
- 28 describe how mentoring is to be delivered
- 29 require some form of accountability or evaluation
- 34 have policies to address funding.

Fourteen states address all seven policy components. Only four states have provisions that address SETs, but none do so in any substantive fashion. Where policies were created (SL, AR, P) can affect the quality of mentoring programs, but districts often view these collectively without regard to origins.

Educators Served

Induction experience in the initial years of teaching can improve teaching competence and increase the likelihood that participants remain in the field. Authorities recommend that teachers participate in high-quality induction programs for at least the first 2 years of their careers. Generally, the beginning new or provisional teacher distinction is the threshold for inclusion in mentoring programs. Some also pertain to teachers who are new to a field, a district, or state; enter the profession through alternative routes; or need more initial support. Because most states do not require summative evaluation of their induction programs, the overall number of teachers served is unknown.

Mentorship Program Considerations

Selection. 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 of high-quality mentors and the kinds of mentors needed for specific schools. Effective mentors are outstanding teaching practitioners who have strong interpersonal skills, experience with adult learners, and current knowledge of effective classroom practice. Research in special education has focused on attributes that novices value most in their mentors (e.g., articulate, supportive, patient, available, personable, caring, open, friendly, comfortable around others, trustworthy, unobtrusive, non-threatening, and flexible). Not all accomplished teachers have the potential to become effective mentors, and some schools may have limited pools of high-potential mentor trainees. Some states stipulate that mentors have proven records of classroom effectiveness, are prepared to work with adults, and have content and pedagogical expertise. This component of state policy may be of particular importance in our analysis given special education's specialized knowledge base and specific planning and teaching requirements.

Training. Of the states that require mentor training, few specify the content, amount, or timing of training that mentors must receive or when the training should occur. Although some degree of autonomy is necessary for programs to address local needs, local district discretion regarding content and delivery yields variability in the quality with which policy is implemented. By assisting in the area of mentor training, states can mitigate the potential for inequities among districts (e.g., by developing and making available mentor training materials).

Matching and assignment. Research has suggested that when teachers are matched with a mentor from the same field, mentor effectiveness and mentee retention increase. SETs' ratings of positive mentoring relationships and likelihood of remaining in the field increased when their mentors were special educators who had experience with similar students and at the same school and grade level as their mentees. Indeed, many current state policies specify criteria for matching (e.g., mentors and new teachers may be required to teach at the same grade level, in the same content area, or in the same building). In this regard, special education presents a particular challenge to policymakers and administrators. Because some schools have only one SET or only one SET working with students with a particular disability, degree of severity, or age level, matching can be difficult; thus, policymakers and administrators must recognize and accommodate the various contexts in which special educators work.

Delivery

Policymakers and school administrators must ensure that teachers have adequate planning time and opportunities for collaboration with colleagues. Peer collaboration may engage special educators with other SETs, with general education colleagues, or both. Incorporating peer collaboration training into induction can enhance professional development for all teachers and can provide what beginning special educators need most: emotional support.

The costs of staffing and release time for mentoring typically are borne at the local level. Few states have attended to time in policy. There are many ways mentoring programs can address time constraints through design—e.g., full-time mentors, common scheduling, release time—but most states do little more than require that local districts find time.

Accountability

Some evaluation and accountability provisions associated with their mentoring programs are contact, document, monitoring, assessment, reporting, and feedback requirements. There is little specific information in policy regarding who is responsible for evaluation, what criteria are to be used, how the process should be conducted, or how the findings should be used.

Formative and summative new teacher evaluation. Individual accountability remains an important component of mentoring. Formative assessments can document teachers' growth and inform conversations about professional strengths and weaknesses. Some states require summative evaluation of individuals served or the development of portfolios as part of the evaluation process. State policies have generally kept the evaluation and support of new teachers separate. In most cases, mentors do not evaluate new teacher performance.

Program accreditation and evaluation. Many states require evaluation of their induction and mentoring programs. Program evaluations are typically focused on program improvement but specify few details.

Funding and Resources

Policymakers must ensure that adequate financial support and resources are available for implementation and distribute funds to guarantee equitable opportunity for all new teachers. A majority of states provide at least some support for their mentoring programs in different forms, including program funding, training and professional development, substitutes, release time, incentives, additional pay or stipends, and tuition waivers. States differ greatly in levels of funding, how resources are secured and allocated, and how expenditures are monitored. State policymakers know that costs will vary with the number of new teachers and with district demographics, only two of the variables to consider when assessing the adequacy of resources vis-à-vis program-mandated requirements. The impact of investments in mentoring has not been assessed.

Putting it Together: Comprehensive Approaches to Mentoring

It seems clear that rigorous policy includes clear standards and sets threshold expectations for new teachers, mentors, and those designing and delivering mentoring programs locally. Rigorous policy requires evaluations that incorporate data on retention and professional development to guide districts in designing programs and meeting state standards. In addition, ongoing, dedicated funding and policies that establish spending priorities are essential. This paper mentions commendable programs in several states.

Many of the 14 states whose policies address all seven components provide examples of strong policy infrastructure that support comprehensive systems of mentoring and induction. These frameworks provide standards and funding, guide implementation, and call for accountability, evaluation, mechanisms for program improvement, and ongoing capacity building at the state, regional, and local levels.

DISCUSSION

Good policy does not guarantee faithful program implementation, better retention, or improved teacher quality, and the absence of good policy does not preclude effective mentoring. A better question to pose is how essential is good policy to uniform state-wide implementation? (California is an example of what good policy can accomplish.) Although policy that includes all seven components may not guarantee effective programming, good policy does increase the likelihood that programming will be implemented widely and well. We may know little about which elements are most important or how best to fit these together into a coherent program, but states that put all seven in place are off to a good start.

Among other summary points we make in the paper:

- The specifics of program implementation are left to districts to decide.
- State policy must work in concert with federal and local policy if new teachers' needs are to be met.
- New teachers, whether GETs or SETs, are considered an undifferentiated group with common needs in state policy; creating the capacity to serve all beginning teachers well and establishing good policy and practice can make a difference.

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- Mentoring policy cannot be expected to overcome poor school practice.
 - A coherent and comprehensive policy framework for teacher development will have substantial impact on the retention of SETs and their development as professionals.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Few states can reliably track teacher turnover at the school level, and few can reliably assess teacher quality by linking teachers to student outcomes. Until better data systems are in place, many states will be unable to answer such fundamental questions about the efficacy of their mentoring and induction programs. Even when evaluation is required by policy, decisions regarding methods and measures are most commonly left to districts. Furthermore, measures specified in state policy tend to focus on variables other than effectiveness. Although induction should also be evaluated in terms of the return it yields on investment, cost-benefit analysis requires more careful and systematic data collection. We have much to learn about the essential elements of effective induction and mentoring, and more research clearly is warranted. Good policy helps to define who receives and who provides induction support, but what happens during interactions between mentors and novice teachers ultimately determines whether beginners get what they need to succeed. Studies of effective mentors may also be instructive.