Online Support for Teacher Induction

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By Judi Harris

Despite demonstrated benefits of mentoring programs for new teachers, nationally, more educators leave the profession each year than join it. Online support systems can help novice and experienced teachers overcome many of the limitations inherent in traditional mentoring programs. Used in combination with other online tools and resources, “e-mentoring” may help reduce the rate of teacher attrition while enhancing educators’ professional success.

Teacher Attrition and Its Causes

Nearly half of all new teachers leave the profession within their first 5 years of service. Despite significant efforts in recent years to increase the numbers of teachers entering the profession, teacher attrition outpaces retention, so shortages persist (National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future [NCTAF], 2003).

As NCTAF has asserted, “We have mistaken the symptom for the problem” (2003, p. 6). By focusing our efforts on producing, rather than producing and sustaining, teachers for our nation’s schools, we may have inadvertently exacerbated the “revolving door” problem (Ingersoll, 2002).

Why do so many new teachers leave so quickly? Reasons cited repeatedly in research about novice teacher attrition include overwhelming workloads, a pervasive sense of professional isolation, “reality shock”—the experience that full-time teaching is not what novices expected it to be, and lack of support (Abbott, 2003). Of all of these challenges, lack of sufficient professional and emotional support is believed to be primary (Chubbuck, Clift, Allard, & Quinlan, 2001). High-quality, easily accessible, customized support for new teachers is now known to be crucial to their retention and professional success.

Mentoring Improves Retention—But Faces Many Barriers

Formal mentoring programs can dramatically improve participants’ attitudes, feelings of efficacy and control, and variety of instructional strategies used in mentees’ classrooms (Huling-Austin, 1992). Moreover, meta-analyses of high-quality induction mentoring programs have shown 15% reductions in overall teacher attrition rates by the 3rd year of professional practice (NCTAF, 2003).

For this reason, most U.S. school districts now offer some mentoring for new teachers, requiring them to meet with more experienced educators working in their school buildings (Feiman-Nemser, 2001). Yet new research is showing that the success of such mentoring efforts is severely constrained by supply, scheduling, and school politics.

In many schools, there are simply not enough highly experienced and communicative mentors—especially in already underserved specializations such as mathematics, science, special, and bilingual education. In addition, mentors and mentees are often not released from any of their other duties to meet with each other, limiting the amount of assistance that the novices can receive.

To make matters worse, mentors usually serve, formally or informally, as evaluators of the new teachers. Novices report that they are hesitant to ask same-school or same-district mentors for assistance with their more daunting professional challenges when those mentors’ impressions could provide the basis for a report to the school principal (Abbott, 2003).

Addressing Attrition Online

The triple challenges of mentor scarcity, insufficient face-to-face meeting time, and new teachers’ disinclination to be fully forthcoming with assigned mentors can be addressed in a new way: by moving some of the support for teacher induction online, outside the realm of school- and district-based politics.

Mentoring online, also called e-mentoring and telementoring, can be structured to encourage more frequent and focused interactions than face-to-face mentoring. Mentors can be drawn from much larger pools of experienced teachers statewide and can communicate in both private and public discussion venues online, depending upon new teachers’ needs and preferences.

Online support for novice teachers is not a new idea. Merseth (1990) organized and researched a text-based electronic network for new teachers several years before the World Wide Web was available for public use. Today, many teacher preparation programs encourage informal group discussion and one-to-one communication online during teaching internships and after graduation.

Several larger scale school-university partnerships that support teacher induction with use of online tools and resources have emerged:

- http://ntsp.ed.uiuc.edu/
  University of Illinois’ Novice Teacher Support Project

- http://www.milwaukee.k12.wi.us/pages/MPS/Teachers_Staff/Tech_Tools/Portal
  Milwaukee Public Schools/Harvard University Professional Support Portal

- http://wings.utexas.org/
  University of Texas at Austin’s WINGS (Welcoming Interns and Novices with Guidance and Support) Online project

Programs such as these typically offer “just in time” online group discussion with both new and experienced teachers and Web-based, annotated professional information resources especially selected for use during induction years. Less frequently, online induction support pro-

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STEP coordinates its work with state leaders in teacher licensure and program approval to align campus changes with the state’s policies and expectations. Former CBE Vice President Diana Rigden has joined AACTE staff and will continue to codirect STEP with AACTE Vice President for Professional Issues Carol Smith. Current STEP work is funded by state grants (Mississippi and Virginia) and by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

The Mid-Atlantic Regional Teachers Project (MARTP) is a consortium of six states—Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Virginia—that works regionally on issues related to teacher quality, supply, and demand. Founded in 1998 by the Laboratory for Student Success, the Maryland State Department of Education, and CBE, MARTP offers state leaders the opportunity to address key issues collaboratively as a region.

The goals and priorities for MARTP (see www.martp.org/pubs/apublist.htm) include regional reciprocity, special recognition of highly accomplished new teachers, high standards for teacher preparation, tiered licensure systems, and coordinated data collection and evaluation.

MARTP is developing a designation known as the Meritorious New Teacher Candidate (MNTC) that will be awarded to exceptional new teachers in the region upon graduation. Piloted in spring 2004 in Maryland, Virginia, and Delaware, the designation has been conferred on more than 40 new teachers. In 2004-2005, MARTP intends to expand the designation to include all six states in the region. Criteria for candidates to receive the designation are outlined at www.martp.org.

MARTP is designing a longitudinal study of new teachers in the region, including those awarded the MNTC, to address questions related to the teachers’ education, training, hiring, and nurturing. MARTP states are providing funds for initial study design and are soliciting funding to carry out the research. Richard Ingersoll (University of Pennsylvania) will provide a background discussion paper establishing parameters for the research and guiding the study’s agenda.

MARTP is funded through the Laboratory for Student Success at Temple University (PA) under a federal grant. Maryland State Superintendent of Schools Nancy Grasmick chairs MARTP; Diana Rigden serves as project manager, and Susannah Patton (also formerly of CBE) is the project administrator.

For more information about STEP or MARTP, contact Diana Rigden at drigden@aacte.org or 202/293-2450.

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Programs also make one-to-one telementoring, electronic portfolio review, and question-and-answer or “information-on-demand” services available to novices.

Future Directions

Such combinations of services—a “cafeteria of [support] alternatives” (Joyce & Weil, 1972) for new teachers, rather than reliance on just face-to-face mentoring to address attrition—may comprise the most effective approach to induction support. As Schlager, Fusco, Koch, Crawford, and Phillips (2003) said, “New teachers’ needs are so variable and immediate that the appropriate combination of expertise, experience, and cultural background is unlikely to reside in one mentor who is available when needed” (p. 2).

Why not, then, offer a variety of support services in various configurations and venues—both in person and online, as needs, preferences, and logistics dictate—through school-university partnership work?

The responsibility for teacher retention does not belong to the school district alone. Schools, colleges, and departments of teacher education must work with their graduates’ employers to support new teachers in productive ways. As NCTAF recently asserted, “because we all have a stake in high-quality teaching, we are all, ourselves, accountable for bringing the best people we can to the teaching profession—and keeping them there” (2003, p. 33).

References


