

MENTORING NEW TEACHERS *A fresh look*

How can renewed approaches to mentoring help new teachers?

Sixteen new teachers attend an orientation. Their principal spends three or four hours describing the school's student learning goals, the district's evaluation rubric and options for professional learning activities. Down the hallway, four teacher mentors meet with their district coach. They are all first-time mentors and feel as apprehensive as the new teachers they are about to support. **How can districts and schools make mentors and new teachers good at what they do?**

Teaching is hard.

Teachers have limited time, resources and public support for ensuring that students with a wide variety of academic and behavioral needs meet increasingly rigorous learning expectations. *New teachers* do this work without the benefit of experience and while juggling unique challenges associated with beginning a new career.

These challenges contribute to turnover among early-career teachers.

Approximately 77 percent of [new teachers](#) stay in the profession for the duration of their first five years. Staff [attrition](#) costs districts billions of dollars, contributes to low teacher morale and disrupts student learning.

In response, many school districts use mentoring programs to support new teachers.

Teachers identify lack of administrative and instructional support as one cause of attrition. To address this, school districts across the country have designed induction programs for new teachers. A common element of these programs is assigned mentors, who guide new teachers' professional learning.

But not all mentoring programs effectively help new teachers.

The amount and types of support that new teachers currently receive from mentoring programs fall along a **Continuum of Support**. Many programs are *compliance-driven* or *problem-driven* systems of support. Where does your district or school fall on this continuum?

School districts can make mentoring programs better.

This edition of the [Fresh Look](#) series describes three areas that districts and schools should concentrate on when designing, implementing or improving mentoring programs for new teachers. Taking action in these three areas will ensure that both teachers and their mentors receive the type of support with the most impact, *people-driven support*.

Mentoring New Teachers: Action Areas

1. Rethink program elements that affect mentors.

2. Address challenges that new teachers *really* face.

3. Use a tiered process to respond to needs.

Continuum of Support



No Support

New teachers receive no formal help from designated mentors, or mentors receive no formal guidance from their district.



Compliance-Driven

As part of a required induction program, new teachers consult with mentors to complete projects, such as portfolios and professional growth plans.



Problem-Driven

Mentoring structures and activities are linked to specific challenges that early-career educators encounter in the classroom.



People-Driven

Mentors support teachers' entry into professional communities. The program emphasizes both teacher and mentor growth.

01

Rethink program elements that affect mentors.

How Do Mentors Become Good at What They Do?

The people who serve as mentors are the foundation of any mentoring program. The *quality* of this foundation is determined by the way a district or school approaches **three key program elements**:

Program Element #1: Mentor Selection Criteria

In [29 states](#), laws or administrative rules define criteria for selecting mentors. Most of these states require new mentors to have a minimum number of years of teaching experience and demonstrated instructional effectiveness, usually measured by past evaluation ratings.



But selecting mentors using criteria such as years of experience and past evaluation scores can be problematic because teaching and mentoring have distinct knowledge bases and skill sets. Although there is some overlap, there are significant differences. Effective mentors are not simply people who are good at providing instruction to students — they are people who are good at providing personal *and* instructional support to *adult* learners.

Program Element #2: Continuous Mentor Growth

In addition to thinking about mentor selection, districts need plans for continuous mentor *improvement*. After required initial training, mentors should engage in ongoing professional learning to boost their mentee teachers' job satisfaction and instruction.



Professional development for mentors should improve their communication and problem-solving skills to help them build the capacity of their mentees. Mentors should receive direct coaching and participate in professional learning communities, just as new teachers do. Professional growth opportunities and tools for mentors should be designed to target **three content categories**:

- **Interpersonal Relationships**
Mentors learn how to build trusting relationships with their mentees, and strategies for helping new teachers adjust to their profession, district and school.
- **Coaching Skills**
Mentors learn coaching techniques, including collecting evidence, guiding teacher self-reflection and providing actionable feedback.
- **Growth for Both**
Mentors engage in opportunities to deepen their knowledge of standards and content. Deconstructing teaching practices helps mentors improve their own instructional pedagogy.

South Carolina: Program Plans



In South Carolina, the Department of Education requires school districts to assign mentors to all novice teachers. Districts submit plans that describe how they will select mentors, provide at least three types of professional learning and assess the effectiveness of induction programs. These requirements do not necessarily guarantee effective mentor selection or growth, but they do set expectations for system monitoring and define roles for district and school leaders.

01

Rethink program elements that affect mentors.

Program Element #3: Human Capital Structure

In most cases, mentors are other teachers at a mentee's school. Although there are many advantages to this, it also results in **two crucial challenges** for districts to address:



- **Muddied Professional Roles**

When the people who mentor new teachers are full-time teachers themselves, confusion can arise about the distinctions among an assortment of school-based roles, including formal mentors, informal mentors, classroom teachers, teacher-leaders and instructional coaches.

- **The *How* and *When* of Mentoring**

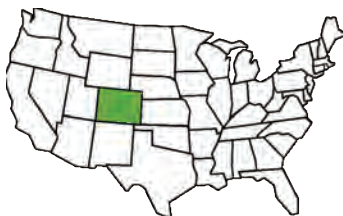
Mentors are already busy in their professional role as classroom teachers, providing *people-driven support* to the students in their classrooms. If mentoring duties are simply tacked on top of these teaching duties, it limits the time and energy available for quality mentoring — resulting in new teachers who receive inconsistent and *compliance-driven support*.

Mentors need [protected time](#) to engage in mentoring activities, such as attending training sessions, preparing mentoring materials, and observing and meeting with their mentees. Some districts attempt to address this by calling for release time for mentors. However, release time is often stipulated using vague language. This inadvertently sends a message that mentoring activities (and the [results](#) they produce) are not truly valued, because mentors' ability to routinely use their release time to help new teachers is not clearly defined or safeguarded.

Furthermore, release time typically results in a substitute taking over a mentor's teaching responsibilities so that they can fulfill their mentoring responsibilities. This merely shifts responsibilities around and requires mentors to spend additional time preparing for a substitute. So, throwing release time at the problem does not help mentors commit meaningful time or support to new teachers consistently, and in some cases, it can even make the problem worse.

Colorado: Retirees as Mentors

Although most mentors are school-based, in some cases, new teachers are matched with district-level staff or a mentor from an outside program.



In [Aurora Public Schools in Colorado](#), a group of teachers in their first three years of teaching in the district were paired with a retired mentor. Although the program did not significantly affect evaluation scores or retention rates, students taught by participating teachers had higher math and reading achievement than students of teachers with similar levels of experience who did not participate in the program.



Taking Action: Steps for District and School Leaders

01. Rethink program elements that affect mentors.

First Steps

✓ Reframe mentor selection criteria

Gather input from school administrators, current mentors and teachers to identify personality characteristics, work habits and skills that predict aptitude for good mentoring. Use this information to develop or adapt the process and criteria that are used to select mentors. Make sure selected mentors exhibit exemplary instructional practice that is cross-validated from a variety of sources, such as personal references, video clips, and both formal and informal evaluations.

✓ Rebrand the job of a mentor

First, clearly define the role and daily activities of a mentor. When people feel that their role and charge each day has a unique structure and defined purpose, it bolsters their commitment. *Then*, elevate the mentors' role by revising human capital specifications to communicate that mentors' actions, time and growth are valued. Create differentiated job descriptions for teachers, mentors, teacher-leaders and instructional coaches, including the daily work and performance expectations for each. Consider differentiating other elements of the human capital structure for each, such as the number of professional leave days provided. Design a user-friendly guide that describes the similarities and differences between roles. *Last*, provide new-teacher mentors with increased compensation. Make the difference in compensation between mentors and non-mentor classroom teachers significant enough to convey the importance of mentors' work, instead of coming across as an empty gesture.

Next Steps

✓ Develop clear-cut plans for mentor growth

Mentor development should include both initial and ongoing professional support. Align supports with the program's big goals and three key content categories — **interpersonal relationships, coaching skills** and **growth for both**.

✓ Get creative and precise about making school-based mentoring doable

Identify barriers to consistent, quality mentoring and use human capital structures to address the challenges. Doing this may entail altering components of mentors' work — such as their schedules and class compositions — by using innovative approaches and precise logistics.

Make Mentoring Doable: Structure the *How* and *When*

Before

- Mentoring duties are tacked on top of teaching.
- Mentoring activities are scheduled using vaguely-stipulated release time and often require substitute teachers.
- No structures are in place to encourage consistent, high-quality mentoring activities.

After

- A mentor's teaching duties are altered. For example, a high school teacher may have a reduced course load and additional prep period to use for mentoring activities; an elementary school teacher may fill an interventionist position.
- Defined logistics about mentors' time and activities each week encourage mentoring that is well-planned and occurs regularly.

02

Address challenges that new teachers *really* face.

Why is Being a New Teacher Difficult?

Teachers [report](#) high levels of occupational stress — more than people who work in medicine, sales, executive management, the service industry, business, construction, transportation or farming. Being *new* magnifies many of the stressors that teachers face.

Navigating a New Normal

There's a saying: "Teaching isn't a job; it's a lifestyle." There is a lot of truth in this statement because the teaching profession has a unique culture and set of demands. Being a new teacher means orienting oneself to the culture of the profession and the day-to-day realities within a district and school.

Inefficient Routines

New teachers are starting from scratch. They often find themselves teaching unfamiliar content to unfamiliar students in an unfamiliar grade level using unfamiliar materials. As teachers gain experience, they become more fluent with these elements and develop personal routines and systems. But in the beginning of their careers, teachers aren't as efficient with allocating their time and energy.

Stress and Fatigue

Adjusting to new realities and starting from scratch can be physically and mentally taxing. Planning and preparing lessons often spills over into personal time. New teachers expend a lot of energy and effort learning to balance the management of their classroom and professional role with their personal life.

Lots of Demands

Even with conventional knowledge, skills and support, new teachers need help meeting the specific needs of their specific students within their specific classroom. These needs are diverse, and managing all of them cohesively can be overwhelming.



More Than Skills: Why *Personal* Support Matters

The act of teaching is hard — that's why most mentoring programs for new teachers focus on skill-related goals, such as improving instructional delivery and applying feedback. But the ins and outs of being a teacher are hard too. Becoming a teacher can come with emotional challenges. New teachers want assurance that the professional *and* personal challenges they are experiencing are normal. Supporting new teachers needs to be more than just sharing information, providing instructional coaching and designing professional development. It also needs to come in the forms of empathy, perspective and advice. When mentors work on professional growth goals without probing a teacher's mindset or emotional health, skill development can become distracting, stressful and even counterproductive.



The Tale of the Spoon

Closing the Achievement Gap One Utensil at a Time

As told by Torrie Mekos, communications specialist for educator effectiveness

My first year of teaching, I met my friend Emily. We were both fresh out of college and had just moved 800 miles from our respective homes to begin our teaching careers. Together, we went through typical first-year teacher experiences: We mourned the loss of our personal lives. We called our dads to express disbelief when we received our first paychecks, convinced there must have been some sort of accounting error. We commiserated about day-to-day stressors in our classrooms, schools and profession.

Early in the school year, Emily was meeting with our mentor. Emily and I both worked at low-income schools, where closing the achievement gap was issue No. 1. We were surrounded by a sense of urgency to learn "best practices" for everything from assessing students' reading levels to casually preventing anarchy in the boys' bathroom.

Our mentor was giving Emily feedback about behavior management and sharing ideas for an upcoming vocabulary lesson when Emily interrupted with spontaneous sobbing. She hadn't been focusing on any of the well-meaning feedback that our mentor was providing. In the rush of graduating, moving and starting new jobs, Emily and her roommate hadn't really had time to make their apartment a home. They hadn't even had a chance to buy essentials like beds or silverware.

Then Emily confessed something. For every single meal they had consumed since earning the title "teacher," Emily and her roommate had been sharing a **single, disposable plastic spoon**. *Cue stock 1950s horror movie screaming*. They simply washed it between meals and passed it back and forth.

Our mentor immediately ended the session, drove Emily to her house and gave her some of her own silverware.

Now that Emily and I are older, wiser and (maybe) more well-adjusted, we look back on this and laugh. Despite how ridiculous it seems now, it illustrates how there truly is a Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs for teachers. Sure, teachers don't enter the profession seeking money and fame — but they aren't martyrs either. New teachers need to hear that striving for a work-life balance (or simply a spoon) doesn't make them unprofessional or uncommitted to their students' success. Making sure that new teachers have spoons may not directly improve instruction, but personal and professional well-being are closely linked. If districts, schools and mentors aren't intentional about recognizing this connection, their efforts to help new teachers deliver good instruction will be futile.

In other words, if you don't pay attention to it and give it some TLC, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is capable of eating Bloom's Taxonomy for lunch!





Taking Action: Steps for District and School Leaders

02. Address challenges that new teachers *really* face.

First Steps

✓ **Use a personal lens to improve the criteria used to select mentors**

Check that selection criteria communicate mentors' crucial role in helping new teachers acclimate to their school community and the culture of teaching. Mentors need to be empathetic and understanding about the concerns and challenges new teachers have.

✓ **Talk to teachers about their experiences**

Conduct surveys and focus groups with teachers about what they experienced during their first year to learn more about the ebb and flow of personal and professional transitions. Ask them about specific ways mentors can make both transitions easier. Have these conversations with teachers who have a few years of experience under their belts. Those in the midst of first-year stressors and those who are too far removed from early challenges may not have as many key insights to offer.

✓ **Review district and school induction activities for added stressors**

Inspect existing induction activities for unintentional stressors. New teacher induction programs often include orientation sessions to attend early in the year and portfolios to assemble throughout the year. These activities can compound the stress new teachers feel and detract from the intended purpose. Prioritize the availability of mentors to help new teachers get physically and mentally prepared for the school year. Seemingly mundane practices, such as setting up their classrooms and making copies, will allow new teachers to begin the school year feeling positive, calm and focused.

Next Steps

✓ **Share real ways for mentors to provide *people-driven support***

Mentors help mentees navigate and prioritize competing elements of their new professional lives, such as lesson planning, grading papers and communicating with parents. Train mentors to identify new teachers' inefficient habits and provide coaching, without compromising quality. Unlike *compliance-driven* or *problem-driven supports*, *people-driven support* can be challenging to structure and define benchmarks for. Create checklists and pacing calendars for mentors to give them concrete guidance and ways to self-monitor. Align these tools with [common stages](#) that teachers experience during their first year.

The First Year: Staged Support

Excitement

New teachers are anticipating entering the world of teaching.
Suggested mentor actions: Establish regular meeting times. Help make the school building familiar.

Survival

New teachers feel frustrated and exhausted.
Suggested mentor actions: Focus on one thing at a time. Give encouraging notes and care packages.

Disenchantment

New teachers may disengage from day-to-day practices.
Suggested mentor actions: Provide time for venting. Introduce formal instructional coaching. Recognize classroom successes.

Introspection

New teachers feel relieved and ready to self-reflect.
Suggested mentor actions: Recommend new techniques to improve teaching. Visit other classrooms together for inspiration.

Revitalization

New teachers begin to use their reflections to plan for next year.
Suggested mentor actions: Guide adjustments to teaching and management. Share development opportunities. Celebrate!

03

Use a tiered process to respond to needs.

How Can Districts and Schools Help Mentors Support New Teachers' Needs?

New teachers' needs can be thought about on three different levels. Mentors' roles and actions differ at each.

Low-Level Needs

Mentors act as **information providers** for new teachers. Examples of teachers' needs include:

- Logging in and using software to take attendance
- Knowing the procedure for requesting a substitute
- Using the copy machine



In current practice, districts, schools and mentors most often act as *information providers* to meet teachers' *low-level needs*. It's natural to do so because, at this level, support can be provided immediately and definitively. However, if the ability of mentors to communicate in concise and engaging ways is not included in mentor selection or professional development, districts run the risk of inundating new teachers with information and procedures. Overall, concentrating the majority of mentoring efforts at this level is not the most effective use of valuable time, resources or human capital.

★ Mid-Level Needs

Mentors act as **thought partners** for new teachers. Examples of teachers' needs include:

- Talking through the physical layout of their classroom
- Determining the best ways to collect, grade and enter assignments
- Writing an informal script to prepare for parent conferences



Mid-level supports are what new teachers need the most but are least likely to receive. Teachers' days are filled with constant decision-making. New teachers who are not accustomed to this often experience decision-making fatigue. Mid-level supports help new teachers make and manage these decisions in ways that create smoother personal and professional transitions. Mentors have the greatest impact on teachers when they act as *thought partners* who balance empathy and expertise. There is an urgent need for districts, schools and mentors to prioritize mid-level needs.

High-Level Needs

Mentors act as **skill developers** for new teachers. Examples of teachers' needs include:

- Developing critical thinking questions to gauge student learning
- Differentiating assignments for a variety of student needs and abilities
- Creating high-quality literacy centers that hold students accountable



A systemic focus on teacher effectiveness has caused many districts, schools and mentors to prioritize acting as *skill developers* to meet new teachers' *high-level needs*. But these efforts are often mismatched with what new teachers prioritize. Before new teachers are available to engage in professional goal-setting, instructional-performance coaching and self-reflection, they need to feel comfortable and confident in their roles and environments.



Taking Action: Steps for District and School Leaders

03. Use a tiered process to respond to needs.

First Steps

✓ **Encourage mentors to help new teachers proactively more often than reactively**

Training sessions and tools should provide mentors with examples of new teachers' needs at each level. Guide them to anticipate other needs that new teachers might have at different stages throughout the school year. Give specific suggestions for the times and areas that mentors should act as a thought partner. Allow mentors time and space during training to proactively plan their supporting actions based on the needs they anticipate their mentees having.

✓ **Remind mentors to delegate**

It is important for mentors to have strong pedagogical and content knowledge — but keep in mind that mentors are learners themselves. Urge them to plan for how they will meet teachers' high-level needs. Have them reflect on which needs they are capable of supporting themselves and which may call for including a colleague with specialized knowledge or authority, such as an instructional coach or administrator.

Next Steps

✓ **Design reference materials for mentors**

The first year of teaching can be a roller coaster. Work with teachers and mentors to develop staged lists of areas for mentors to check in with their mentees about, as well as a timeline of activities that align with the needs of new teachers and the procedures of a specific district or school. This helps districts and schools use mentors efficiently and effectively by reinforcing mid-level supports. Include mentors and teachers in developing both the content and format of these materials. Use their opinions and insights to plan a strategy for getting teachers and mentors to actively consult their reference materials throughout the school year.

Virginia: Useful Tools for Mentors



In Virginia, Harrisonburg City Public Schools created a useful mentor handbook. Instead of simply providing an overview of the role and purpose of a mentor, the handbook includes examples of questions mentors should ask and a comprehensive month-by-month list of specific actions to support their mentees.

Harrisonburg's mentor handbook is a strong example of staged mentor supports throughout the school year that prioritize mid-level needs and transmit the culture of teaching to novices.

[See the mentor handbook](#)



Mentoring New Teachers: The Bottom Line

Being a new teacher is hard. Mentoring new teachers is hard. And improving the implementation of mentorship programs is hard.

But the best way to work toward success for teachers, mentors and systems is using supports that are **people-driven**: growing the *people* doing the mentoring, tackling the *personal* aspects of being a new teacher, and thinking strategically about *people's* actions and needs.


When you invest in supporting people in these ways, both individuals and systems get better — resulting in impactful mentoring, happier teachers, effective instruction, and, most important, students who learn more in their classrooms each day.

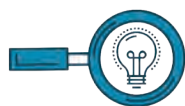
You Can Do It. We Can Help.

SREB's educator effectiveness team is available for strategy advice, technical assistance, focus groups and on-demand analysis.

To request assistance or information related to this report, email Torrie Mekos (Torrie.Mekos@SREB.org) and Matthew Smith (Matthew.Smith@SREB.org).



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Explore More

Topic: Mentoring Policy

[Support From The Start](#) from the New Teacher Center reviews policies related to new teacher induction and mentoring across all 50 states.

Topic: The First Year of Teaching

["The First Year of Teaching Can Feel Like a Fraternity Hazing"](#) from the *Atlantic* illustrates personal and systemic challenges for new teachers by following a teacher throughout his first year in the classroom.

Topic: Teacher Stress

[Teacher Stress and Health](#) from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation identifies four main sources of teacher stress and explores the consequences for teachers, students and school systems. The report also examines workplace wellness programs that promote teachers' mental health.

Topic: Being an Effective Mentor

[Secrets for Mentoring Novice Teachers](#) from the University of Florida's Lastinger Center highlights key areas for mentorship activities and outlines the role of school leaders.

Topic: Practical Implementation Ideas

["Supporting New Teachers in Managing the Classroom"](#) from the New York Association of School Psychologists' annual conference offers practical advice and strategies for assigning mentors, giving new teachers feedback, and helping them manage their professional workload while remaining sensitive to their personal needs.