

Mentoring Locally & Internationally - WestEd's Efforts to Combat the Teacher Shortage

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It has become common knowledge that there is a serious teacher shortage in the United States, with two to two and a half million positions to fill in each of the next ten years, as well as a 30-50% turnover of teachers. Surprisingly, according to a recent article in *Educational Leadership*, we have many more prepared and certified teachers than we have jobs for those teachers. How can it be that we simultaneously have a teacher shortage and a teacher oversupply?

One easy answer is that while there are sufficient job openings, many are in some of the most challenging school districts, with less than adequate working conditions and salaries far below the national average. The more difficult answer is that in the United States, there's an attitude of "sink or swim" for new teachers. "Here if a teacher fails, people say they weren't trained properly," says Ted Britton of the WestEd branch in Washington, D.C., "They blame the teacher, but in fact preparation is only one aspect of the problem."

Developing a comprehensive approach to teacher induction is the focus of several projects in the Learning Innovations at WestEd's offices, which utilize mentoring as part of a larger systematic program. With national statistics showing that mentoring can cut the dropout rate 50% or more in the first five years, there is powerful evidence that WestEd's various projects are long-term investments with real payoffs.

Karen Mikkelsen of the Northeast Regional Resource Center (a project of WestEd) is working with Susan Villani on the teacher retention issue from a comprehensive perspective. Their team is developing a product called *Keeping Quality Teachers – The Art of Retaining General and Special Education Teachers*. It's a user-friendly product designed to be used with a variety of audiences focusing on three strategies: administrative development and support, improving working conditions, and induction and mentoring programs that work. "What sense does it make to spend resources recruiting and training teachers if they leave within the first five years?," says Mikkelsen. "We are working with some wonderful people to design a practical, flexible, and inclusive approach that will result in keeping highly-qualified teachers in the workforce."

Using a more specific approach has also been effective on the local level with individual schools. Susan Villani of the Stoneham, Massachusetts office, and author of recently published *Mentoring New Teachers: Models of Induction And Support*, explains that the word mentoring can mean a lot of different things. "Some schools think a mentor is a friendly buddy, there to offer emotional support," says Villani. "Mentoring is much more than being a good neighbor. Mentoring involves promoting a colleague's reflection on her or his practice. This requires training, because being a good teacher doesn't guarantee that a person will be a good mentor. Mentors need to learn to ask good questions and combine questions with data that they collect, at the new teacher's request, when they do classroom observations and conferencing. That's why it's so hard to measure how many schools are truly using mentoring as effectively as possible." Yet there are a few detractors to the mentoring construct. "Unfortunately some schools see a mentoring program as a luxury, an add-on program that they cannot afford," adds Villani. "However, teachers are expected to be as competent in their first year as are experienced teachers. students need good teachers, and we simply cannot wait years for new teachers to become proficient. The costs of hiring, training, and eventually losing 30-50% of new teachers in their first five years make

mentoring the most cost-effective choice. So the question is not whether a school districts can afford a mentoring program. The real question is, "How can we afford NOT to have a mentoring program? "

Another project focused on mentoring is the partnership between the Maine Mathematics and Science Alliance, the Vermont Institute for Science Math and Technology, the New Hampshire Mathematics, Science, and Technology Coalition, and WestEd, called the Northern New England Co-Mentoring Network. This program provides mentor teachers with training and experience in mentoring, leadership, science and math standards, and research on learning. It prepares teacher leaders to mentor new teachers as well as veteran teachers who wish to enhance their background in science and/or mathematics. Susan Mundry, WestEd's Associate Director for Mathematics, Science and Technology Programs designs and provides professional development for the mentor teachers in this program. She says "the co-mentoring model builds communities of learners—mentor teachers learn from each other as well as from education specialists, and new teachers learn from experienced teachers. As mentors grow in their role they begin to work more broadly with many teachers in their buildings and districts to support everyone to provide quality instruction in science and math." She adds that, "we hope to create an ongoing source of support for new teachers that will help these states address the decreasing supply of well qualified mathematics and science teachers. Other WestEd staff working on this National Science Foundation-funded project include Kathy Dunne and Susan Villani, designing and providing professional development in mentoring, and Ann Brackett who conducts the formative, internal evaluation of the project.

Kathy Dunne also served as project director on another National Science Foundation funded project entitled *Teachers as Learners: Professional Development in Science and Mathematics*. This project was a collaboration between WGBH Boston; Museum of Science, Boston; Education Development Center and WestEd, resulting in the development of 18 videos programs and accompanying print materials for professional developers. These video programs provide images of many professional development strategies in science and mathematics. Two of the videos, *Content-Based Coaching in Science, and Curriculum-Focused Coaching in Mathematics*, focus on the coaching aspect of the mentoring relationship. "One of the challenges for mentoring programs is to ensure that mentor teachers are provided with adequate training and support to effectively work with new teachers." Says Dunne. "We have been providing mentor training for the last 15 years and continually observe the importance of providing mentor teachers with images of what the coaching aspect of the mentor role looks like in-action. In the absence of providing a 'live demonstration' of the coaching process, video programs (like those developed through the Teachers as Learners project) can fill this gap." She adds that, "Not only can video tapes enhance a professional development session for a group of mentor teachers, they can also be used by individual mentors to deepen their learning and effective implementation of the coaching role."

Dunne describes the implications for mentoring programs in many large urban settings across the country such as Boston, Detroit, New York, Chicago and Los Angeles where hundreds of new teachers are hired each year. "When districts are in the position of needing to support large groups of new teachers of 500 or more, the one-on-one strategy of mentoring can become unwieldy and financially difficult, if not impossible, to support. Consequently, it's important for mentor program designs to include alternative strategies to promote teacher reflection where groups of new teachers work together with one mentor/coach or teacher leader versus relying solely on the one-on-one model." The *Teachers as Learners* series also provides examples of some of these alternative group learning strategies such as demonstration lessons, study groups, and case discussion.

Taking the next step from the state and national-level to the international level, WestEd's Ted Britton and Senta Raizon joined with researchers at Michigan State University, to examine teacher induction programs in Japan, Switzerland, France, New Zealand and Shanghai. After nine weeks in the field in

each country, Britton has a lot to say about the differences between these countries and the US in teacher induction. "In many overseas induction programs, the teachers receive a broad range of support services; it's far more than just mentoring. For example, in Switzerland and New Zealand there are Facilitated Peer Mentoring programs that allow new teachers to help each other solve problems with the assistance of a trained facilitator/mentor." In Switzerland, groups of four to six teachers meet with similar groups from other schools on a weekly basis, something which allows for the unique perspectives of solving their problems with real peers, as well as having less of a concern that people from their own school will hear about their failures. "It's unfortunate that here in the United States, 38 states insist on teacher induction programs, but only ten of those actually fund it".

As with all issues in education, there are a hundred ways to approach the challenge of the teacher shortage. For many of our WestEd colleagues, the various styles of mentoring provide the most effective way to affect this shortage in short order. "We've seen the positive results of mentoring programs nationwide," adds Villani, "For example, the teacher retention rate in Glendale Union Regional High Schools in Arizona increased from 47% to has high as 80%, and in a Columbus Ohio school, retention rates were over 80% ten years after the induction and support program was instituted. We need to move beyond quoting statistics, and ensure that new teachers in schools are supported by well-trained mentors, and provided opportunities to confer with their mentors during their first few years of teaching.

The need to decrease teacher attrition rates is one primary reason for WestEd's ongoing commitment to work with schools and districts across the country and abroad in the development of effective mentoring programs. However, improving teacher retention is not enough. The real goal of effective mentoring and teacher induction is to promote focused reflection and improvement of practice to enhance the quality of all teaching and achievement for all students.

REFERENCES

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