



## 3 STRATEGIES

# to upgrade your mentoring program for new teachers

BY JOSHUA H. BARNETT

Investing in high-quality, effective mentoring programs is a key, research-based strategy to increase teacher retention and new teachers' effectiveness (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). But not all mentoring programs are created equal. In fact, too many of these programs operate

as little more than a buddy system in which mentors play informal, poorly defined roles and receive little training or supervision. Fortunately, this trend can change — and it must do so quickly, as districts hire a large number of new teachers to address staffing shortages, including many teachers who

are learning on the job in alternative certification programs.

A survey of new teachers in three states found that although 78% of new teachers were provided mentors, only a little over half of those teachers reported having at least three conversations with their mentor over the course of the

year. Only 41% were observed teaching at least once by their mentor during the year, and a majority of the new teachers were not provided a mentor who taught the same subject area or grade level. These patterns were most pronounced for new teachers working in high-poverty schools (Kardos & Johnson, 2010).

Given the widespread prevalence of these underdeveloped mentoring programs, perhaps it is not surprising that new teacher attrition remains high. Recent data indicate that more than 44% of teachers leave the profession within the first five years of teaching, often before they fully develop the skills to be effective in the classroom (Ingersoll et al., 2021).

The culprit to attrition is not mentoring per se, but ineffective mentoring. In fact, research shows that new teachers who have participated in high-quality mentoring programs score higher on measures of effective classroom practices, including student engagement and differentiating lessons to meet student needs, and new teacher mentoring is associated with increases in student achievement on reading and math assessments (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Further, mentorship from a highly effective teacher consistently ranks highest in surveys asking teachers which supports are most helpful (Behrstock-Sherratt et al., 2014).

High-quality mentoring programs also benefit the mentors, thereby making a positive impact on multiple generations in the teaching workforce. When experienced teachers are thoughtfully recruited and selected to become mentors and supported to fulfill their potential in the role, they advance their own expertise and career development without having to leave the

classroom. This offers a new career path that keeps highly effective teachers in the classroom and provides an alternative for the many teachers who do not want to become administrators but want to continue developing in the profession.

### A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH

Research highlights key elements of successful mentoring programs, including selecting mentors with proven know-how and similar grade and subject-area expertise, providing high-quality training and support for mentors to develop their knowledge and coaching skills, providing a sustained time frame for mentoring, and setting aside time for observation and collaborative learning. Yet these elements of a more comprehensive approach have been difficult for districts to put into practice.

The National Institute for Excellence in Teaching is working with districts across the U.S. to redesign their mentoring programs. In 2021, the institute released a report, *Why New Teacher Mentoring Falls Short, and How to Fix It* (National Institute for Excellence in Teaching, 2021), that outlines strategies that are leading to greater success in supporting new teachers. The report focuses on three key strategies that work, which we outline here.

We developed reflection questions to assist district and school leaders in assessing how well they are implementing these three strategies so they can consider how to strengthen new teacher mentoring. These questions can be used to identify areas where the mentoring program is already strong as well as areas for potential improvement.

If you have a mentoring program in place, we recommend you use these

questions to guide a review of your program and consider engaging district-level leaders, school leaders, mentors, and new teachers in the process. If you are developing a new mentoring program, these questions can facilitate a discussion as you design a program based on your specific needs and context.

## 1 Focus mentoring on instructional improvement.

High-quality mentoring focuses on teachers' pedagogy and practice and is therefore connected to systems for improving teaching and learning. Mentors should be excellent models of instructional practice and should serve mentees in an instructional coaching capacity. For many schools and systems, this is a shift, and it requires intentionality.

One important tool is the use of a research-based instructional framework or rubric that defines strong teaching practice across multiple domains and indicators of practice. The instructional rubric creates a common language for mentors and mentees to use to discuss teaching practices. Many districts already have such a framework in place, and it is a matter of making an explicit connection to the mentoring initiative.

Structural changes can also help strengthen the focus on instruction in mentoring, including allocating dedicated released time for mentors to meet with mentees. Building this time into the schedule sends a message about the importance of mentoring and it also creates the time and space for the mentors to be effective.

A key part of the shift to instructionally focused mentoring is intentional staffing. This includes creating a clear job description and

expectations for mentors that describe the instructional leadership role and establishing a process for recruiting and selecting master teachers who are skilled in coaching other adults. Districts should also provide sufficient compensation to attract effective teachers to the mentoring role.

**Reflection questions**

- To what extent do your mentoring efforts focus on instructional practice and improvement?
- How is the focus on instructional improvement communicated to mentors, mentees, and school leaders?
- How are you selecting mentors to ensure they are models of high-quality instructional practice?
- How are mentor teachers and new teachers paired? If a new teacher is not paired with an educator in their same grade or subject, how is the new teacher supported in the content and pedagogy of that grade or subject?
- How does mentorship support or supplement other instructional feedback and content-focused professional learning for new teachers?
- How much released time is allocated for mentors to observe and support new teachers in their classrooms? How do coverage and compensation for that released time work?
- What data or student work can be used to determine whether new teachers' instructional practices are improving and whether a mentor's support is having an impact?

**2 Support mentors to be more effective by providing training, tools, and protocols for the role.**

Mentors need to be equipped and empowered to serve as instructional leaders for their mentees. Even when mentors are selected with intentionality,

most need additional training and support in how to work with new teachers. Ongoing support will help them address questions and challenges that arise and provide opportunities for reflection and growth so that mentors become the best leaders they can be.

Support for mentors should address some or all of the following topics: grounding coaching in student work and student data to be responsive to the needs of teachers and their students; how to get to mentees' needs through reviewing and discussing lesson plans, observing teaching, watching and discussing a video of an expert teacher, and other strategies; and engaging in guided reflection to help mentees develop awareness of their practices and improve them.

**Reflection questions**

- How do you develop a shared understanding of and language for instructionally focused mentoring practices among mentors and mentees?
- How often do school leaders or coaches observe mentors and provide feedback on their own instruction and their support to mentees?
- What opportunities do mentors have to collaborate and grow their capacity and skills as instructional leaders?
- What resources need to be in place to enable all of the above, and to what extent are they currently in place? Consider funding, time, tools, handbooks, trainings, and other types of resources or supports.

**3 Align the mentoring program with district and school initiatives.**

Mentors can also have a larger impact on schoolwide improvement efforts if empowered to do so. One way is through helping mentors understand and connect their work to district systems and priorities, such as new curriculum implementation. Seeing

their role as advancing these initiatives provides mentors with a greater sense of involvement and impact at the school and district levels. District leaders and principals can facilitate such alignment and collaboration by holding districtwide mentor meetings and other opportunities for mentors to collaborate and form professional connections, as well as by inviting mentors to learn about and collaborate on districtwide or schoolwide improvement initiatives.

In addition, including mentors on a school or district leadership team elevates their role. It brings their experiences working with new teachers into the school and district's decision-making process while also empowering the mentors to be part of decision-making and take their learning about district or schoolwide priorities into their mentoring work.

**Reflection questions**

- In what ways is the work of mentors designed to advance district and school priorities or initiatives such as the introduction of a new curriculum?
- How do mentors learn from school or district leaders about those key goals and priorities and how they connect to the mentoring program?
- In what ways is the work of mentor teachers integrated with school leadership structures and school systems such as professional learning or leadership teams?
- What opportunities do mentors have to develop leadership and be involved in school or district decision-making processes?
- In your school or district, how could the work of mentors strengthen a current priority or initiative?

**SHIFTS TOWARD SUCCESS**

By shifting the purpose of mentoring to focus on teaching and learning, providing high-quality

### 3 strategies to upgrade your mentoring program for new teachers

training and support for mentors, and integrating mentoring into existing school and district initiatives, districts can better support new teachers to be successful earlier in their career. That success can include increased effectiveness and retention of new teachers, increased effectiveness of the mentor teachers, and improved student achievement. Given the growing number of new teachers in the profession and the challenge of staffing classrooms with effective educators, improvements in new teacher mentoring are long overdue. Fortunately, we have increasing amounts of evidence showing improved approaches are possible.

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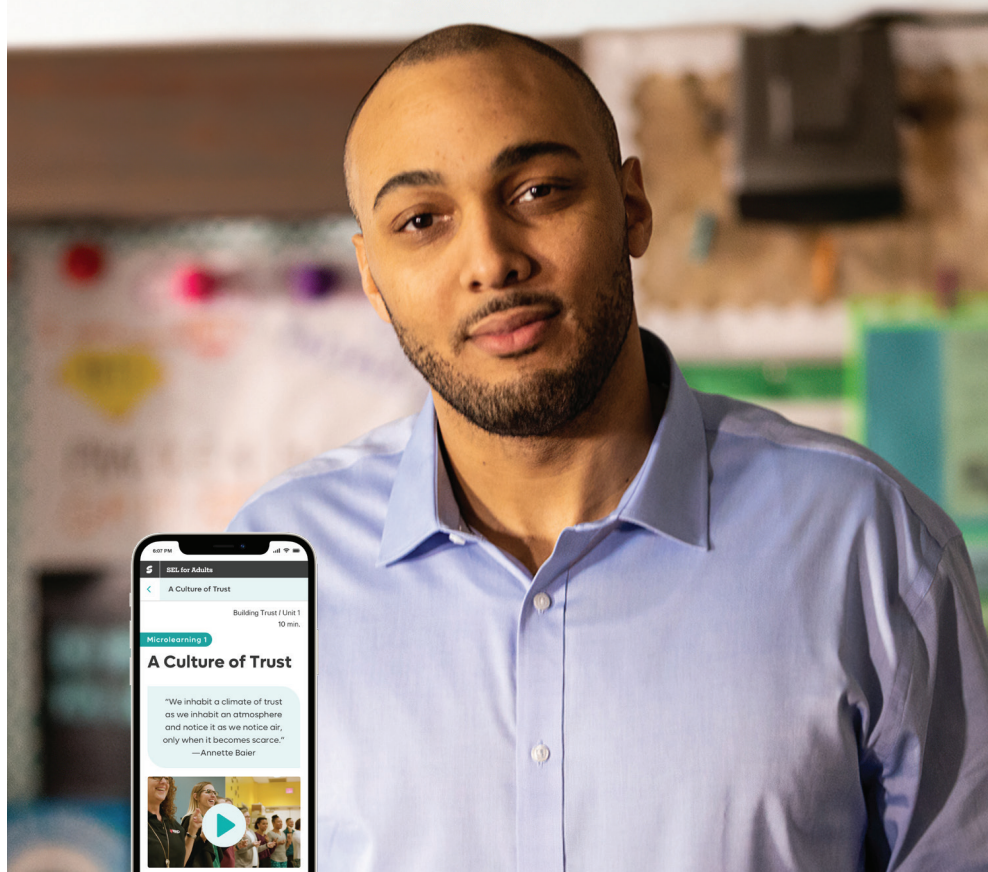
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