



RESEARCH REVIEW

Elizabeth Foster

A recent close study of mentoring in a large urban district offers insights into what components of a mentoring program are related to educators' decisions to stay in teaching.

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STUDY EXPLORES MENTORING'S CONNECTION TO NEW TEACHER RETENTION

Throughout the summer, Learning Forward members have shared with us their stories of teacher vacancies in schools and districts, reminding us that the question of how to keep teachers in the classroom and support them through difficult times is pressing. Recruiting new teachers is a critical priority across the U.S., as it has been for decades.



Retaining teachers is an equally critical need, as teacher turnover or attrition is expensive, detrimental to the culture of schools, and negatively impacts outcomes for educators and students (Carroll, 2007). It is also an equity concern, given that teacher attrition is higher in schools already limited in resources and among teachers of color (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Pearson & Fuglei, 2019).

Many schools and districts have induction programs that support educators through their first, second, and sometimes third years in the profession or in a new school, with the goal of providing support to guide growth and retention. Often, those induction programs include a formal mentoring component. But induction and mentoring programs vary in their scope, quality, content, and intensity. More research is needed about what aspects of mentoring programs are most closely related to improved teacher outcomes.

A recent close study of mentoring in a large urban district offers insights into what components of a mentoring program are related to educators' decisions to stay in teaching. This study also points to some early indicators that leaders can look at to anticipate likelihood to persist in teaching.

► THE STUDY

Caven, M., Durodoye, R., Jr., Zhang, X., & Bock, G. (2021). *Variation in mentoring practices and retention across new teacher demographic characteristics under a large urban district's new teacher mentoring program* (REL 2021-10). U.S. Department of Education, Institutes for Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast & Islands.

METHODOLOGY

Grounded in the research about how mentoring and induction can lead to improved retention and student outcomes, and interested in testing a hypothesis that new teachers who have more intensive, higher-quality mentoring experiences and a closer demographic alignment with their mentor are more likely to stay, this study sought to develop a detailed understanding

of a large urban district's new teacher mentoring program.

The district requires new teachers to participate in the program, which provides 10 hours of mentorship a month. Teacher-mentor pairs determine the format and content of those mentoring conversations.

The researchers analyzed survey data from 192 pairs of new teachers and their mentors, as well as demographic data and one year retention data.

The study addressed three research questions:

1. How much time did the district's new teachers spend with their mentors, and what content did they focus on?
2. Did the race/ethnicity and gender of new teachers align with those of their mentors?
3. What is the relationship between new teachers' retention in the district the following year and the features of their mentoring relationship (amount of mentoring, mentoring content, and alignment between the race/ethnicity or gender of new teachers and their mentors)?

For each of these questions, the researchers examined differences across race, ethnicity, and gender. For example, they examined whether the content of mentoring conversations differed according to gender and race and according to whether the mentor's and mentee's gender and race aligned. They also examined whether mentees' perceptions of effectiveness varied according to those factors. (Note that the percentage of Hispanic teachers in this sample is relatively small, so most of the analyses and findings that talk about race and ethnicity compare white

new teachers and Black new teachers.)

This commitment to identifying and weighting the content of the mentoring conversations to examine whether there are significant differences by race is a practice highlighted in the **Equity Drivers** standard of the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2022). Understanding these patterns can be important in ensuring responsive resourcing, planning, and assignments of new teachers to mentors.

FINDINGS ABOUT MENTORING FREQUENCY AND CONTENT

The study found that more than 40% of new teachers reported frequent meetings with their mentor, defined as at least 10 hours a month. But more than a quarter (27%) reported meeting with their mentor fewer than four hours a month.

Most of mentors' and mentees' time together was spent on topics related to instruction. They were most likely to spend "substantial" time on instructional strategies (69%), differentiating instruction (60%), and supporting students with disabilities (59%). Thirty-nine percent of new teachers also reported spending substantial time in mentor meetings discussing family engagement, and almost 30% said the same about record keeping. The most common noninstructional support topic discussed was social-emotional support for the new teacher (54% reported this).

Mentoring frequency was not related to race/ethnicity or demographic alignment of mentor-mentee pairs. However, the content of those pairs' conversations did vary across race. White new teachers reported spending

more time than Black new teachers on classroom management. Black new teachers spent more time than their white peers on collecting and analyzing student data, differentiating instruction, teacher evaluation, and professional development (a broad category comprised of traditional workshops and topics not otherwise separated out in the analysis). The reason for these differences remained an open question.

There were also large differences in the frequency with which new teachers with a mentor of the *same* race/ethnicity and new teachers with a mentor of a *different* race/ethnicity spent on noninstructional topics. Pairs differing in race/ethnicity spent more time on family engagement, collecting and analyzing student information and data, teacher evaluations, and professional development.

In contrast, there were no differences in time spent on instructional topics based on alignment between mentors' and mentees' race/ethnicity. The study did not allow for investigation of the reasons behind these differences, but the researchers hypothesized that the increased time on these topics in different-race pairs might reflect mentees' or mentors' perceptions of their partner's strengths and needs based on culture, membership in a community, bias, or other factors.

FINDINGS ABOUT NEW TEACHER RETENTION

About 54% of all new teachers agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "The support I have received through the new teacher mentoring program has influenced whether or not I plan to stay at the district next year."

New teachers in the moderate and

A NATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON MENTORING PRACTICES

It is helpful to balance a look at a close study of one district mentoring program over a short period of time with a look at a large national longitudinal analysis. A recent analysis of several years of data from a national survey of new teachers in the United States examined new-teacher retention and how mentoring practices might predict it.

► THE STUDY

Maready, B., Cheng, Q., & Bunch, D. (2021). Exploring mentoring practices contributing to new teacher retention: An analysis of the beginning teacher longitudinal study. *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring, 19*(2), 88-99.

Researchers conducted a secondary analysis of data from the Beginning Teacher Longitudinal Study conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau from the 2007-08 school year through the 2011-12 school year. This national survey was designed by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics to follow educators' career paths and gather data about the reasons they stay, change positions or schools, or leave the profession. (Note that the researchers used prepandemic data, and there is no discussion of the pandemic, school closures, virtual learning, or the impact of any of those factors on educator stress levels, wellness, or intent to stay in or leave the profession.)

Fourteen out of the 23 mentoring practices studied predicted new teachers' retention in the same teaching assignment for a second year. Nine of the practices predicted retention in the teaching profession into the fifth year. Seven practices predicted both.

Practices that were significant for both timeframes included having a mentor who taught the same subject as the new teacher and provided frequent support in selecting and adapting curriculum. In addition, retention was more likely when new teachers reported that the mentor's support improved a variety of instructional methods and classroom management.

Factors that predicted retention only into the first year included having a mentor whose main job was mentoring and who provided frequent supports in subject and grade-level instruction. Factors that predicted retention in the fifth year but not the second included frequent observations by the mentor and frequent support in reflecting on teaching practice.

These findings suggest that high-quality mentoring does make a difference for teacher retention, and they provide insight for making decisions about priorities in program design and resource allocation.

high-frequency groups were more likely than those in the low-frequency group to remain in the district the following year (97% and 94% versus 78%). The fact that retention was highest in the moderate frequency group raises a question about the ideal amount of time for encouraging retention. However, because this was not a randomized study, it is not possible

to infer causality of the mentoring program.

For example, teachers who were already likely to stay in the district may have sought more time with their mentor as a way to guide their own professional growth. On the other hand, it is possible that some teachers who met with their mentors frequently did so because they were struggling

or unsure about their future in the profession.

The one-year retention rate was lower for new teachers who reported spending substantial time with their mentor on classroom management than for those who did not spend much time on this topic (87% compared to 96%). That finding is reversed when the focus of time spent in mentoring conversations is on lesson and unit planning (94% retained compared to 86%).

Again, it is impossible to infer causality. More time spent on classroom management than lesson planning might indicate less readiness or confidence among those new teachers, or time spent on lesson and unit planning could help teachers feel successful enough to continue in the job.

New teachers were equally likely to remain in the district regardless of race/ethnicity or gender. New teachers with a mentor of the same race/ethnicity were retained at a higher rate than new teachers with a mentor of a different race/ethnicity but, surprisingly, the difference was driven by a high one-year retention rate among white new teachers with a white mentor.

White new teachers were more likely than Black new teachers to report that support through the program influenced their decision to stay in the district, but Black new teachers with a white mentor were more likely than Black new teachers with a Black mentor to report that support through the program influenced their decision. The reasons for these differences are not clear.

The researchers acknowledge that one year is a limited measure of retention and that three- and five-year retention data are needed to more clearly understand the relationship between mentoring and retention.

IMPLICATIONS

Research shows that teachers leave in the first three to five years of teaching in part because they feel unsupported

and disconnected. Mentoring programs attempt to connect and support their new teachers as part of the effort to retain them. This study speaks to the importance of looking carefully at those programs to understand what components and features are valuable, for whom, and why.

In addition to sharing data about factors that mattered in this program, the study can also guide other programs and districts in what to include and investigate in their own contexts. While the data collected on this program may not apply to all contexts, it provides a model of why and how to collect data. Leading indicators of new teacher attrition will serve any district well.

The attention to studying components of the program, content of the mentoring conversations, and the relationships between new teachers and their mentors offers valuable fodder for dialogues about how well the program is serving the needs of new educators and what adjustments and refinements might need to be made to the program in the future.

STANDARDS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Mentoring is critical to developing a system of high-quality, standards-aligned professional learning and laying the groundwork for improving

instructional practices, building trust and collaboration among educators as colleagues, and establishing relationships among educators, students, families, and communities.

It is also a promising strategy for improving new teacher retention. Stability of the teaching workforce, in turn, contributes to the conditions for success outlined in Standards for Professional Learning.

For example, the **Culture of Collaborative Inquiry** standard affirms the importance of educator collaboration, such as the relationships that develop in a mentoring pair and through a district's commitment to mentoring as a pillar of a learning culture. The **Equity Foundations** standard emphasizes the importance of establishing trust among staff, students, and community members and the need to determine what factors contribute to creating trust. This kind of trust is very hard to build over time if teacher turnover is high, meaning that focusing on determining which mentoring practices might best lead to retention and professional growth among new teachers is an especially good investment of time and resources.

Both reports highlighted here can contribute to the implementation of the **Evidence** standard, which notes that evidence is crucial at all stages of

planning, monitoring, and assessing professional learning. The standard calls for educators to use a variety of evidence to make decisions about professional learning policies, resources, plans, and goals.

These examples illustrate how Standards for Professional Learning can inform new teacher mentoring and how mentoring can, in turn, reinforce a culture of standards-aligned professional learning. Research can further illuminate the potential and value of mentoring by incorporating the standards intentionally and consistently.

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