



Novice special education teachers benefit from mentoring

BY DANA CURTON AND LAURA HESS

St. Vrain Valley Schools, in Colorado, serves over 33,000 students and has a diverse population, including 4,100 students with disabilities. As the district has grown in recent years, the number

of students with disabilities has been steadily increasing, resulting in a growing demand for special education teachers.

Simultaneously, and as in many districts, the pool of candidates for special education jobs in St. Vrain has

been decreasing. In fact, the Colorado Department of Education identified special education teachers as one of the top areas with unfilled positions in nonrural districts across the state.

In response to these challenges, the district established the Special

Education Alternative Licensure Cohort in 2019. It started with five teachers teaching elementary and high school special education and has grown to serve 55 teachers. To support these new special education teachers, the district developed an induction and mentorship program tailored specifically for alternative and temporary license special education teachers. Now in its fifth year, this program plays a pivotal role in the special education workforce.

For the past two years, the retention rate for cohort teachers has been 85%. That is higher than the average percentage (78.5%) of all Colorado teachers who return to the same school after their first year (Colorado Department of Education, 2023).

It is particularly notable because research shows that alternatively certified teachers tend to have double the attrition rates after their first year than traditionally certified teachers (Podolsky et al., 2016). Not only is this not the case in our district, but, most importantly, our alternatively certified teachers are thriving in their schools.

PROGRAM COMPONENTS

The induction and mentorship program arose from several key observations and challenges. We noticed that our district's most successful alternative licensure teachers had asked to attend our new teacher induction, even though, in Colorado, induction isn't required until after a candidate finishes their alternative licensure program.

We were happy to honor

this request. However, it became evident that the content designed for the entire group of new teachers did not address the specific needs of the alternatively certified and temporary licensed special education teachers. These teachers had not yet had the opportunity to practice writing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), analyzing assessments, or adjusting lessons within their university programs. They needed the opportunity to ask questions and see concrete examples without any apprehension in the presence of their more experienced peers.

We designed the program with the following components.

Cohort meetings for professional learning

New teachers participated in a two-year professional learning cohort. Using a cohort model allowed these early career teachers to be with other people at a similar place in their knowledge and experience, which created a safe and supportive atmosphere to ask questions and learn.

The classes focused on case management, including family involvement, instructional design, classroom management and behavioral support, as well as understanding disabilities. The discussions wove together content from each individual's university classes with district expectations and best practices for students with disabilities.

Consistent support from an instructional coach mentor

Each teacher engaged in 24 hours of supportive mentoring with an instructional coach

Alternative certification in St. Vrain Valley Schools

In Colorado, there are two types of temporary licenses that allow individuals to work as special education teachers while working toward their endorsement. Both of these licenses require prospective teachers to have already completed a bachelor's degree.

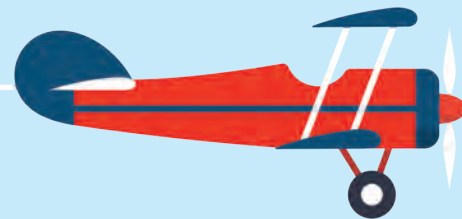
The first license is a Temporary Educator Endorsement for individuals who are currently enrolled in a traditional teacher preparation program for special education. The second type is an Alternative Teacher License, where individuals are hired for a teaching position and start an alternative teacher licensure program at the same time.

Our district began employing temporary licensed teachers from both of these categories who demonstrated a passion for teaching and learning, passed their prerequisite exams, and were already in or ready to start a licensure program. Fifty-eight percent of these teachers were in an alternative licensure program while teaching, and the remainder completed a traditional program with a Temporary Educator Endorsement.

Many of our teachers who are completing their alternative teacher license attend programs at University of Colorado Denver and Metropolitan State College of Denver. These programs include graduate-level coursework as well as a relationship with a university mentor.

While these programs provide theoretical frameworks and foundational principles of teaching and learning, our new special education teachers still had immediate needs regarding the support and instruction of students within their classrooms. Those needs gave rise to the Special Education Alternative Licensure Cohort, which now serves teachers in both the Temporary Educator Endorsement and alternative licensure pathways.

NEW TEACHER SUCCESS STORY



Ali Thomas is a third-year teacher at a high-needs K-8 school with 57% of students on free and reduced lunch and 65% minority students. Before Thomas started, the middle school special education teacher position had turned over four times in five years. She came to the school through the Special Education Alternative Licensure program and has brought some much-needed stability. Thomas describes the impact of this increased consistency for students: “They know what to expect and know that I am here to help them and not just here to get my hours and then leave [which would have been the case with student teaching].”

Thomas has been able to shift the instructional model supporting many of the 6th graders and 8th graders in English language arts class, where she is co-planning and co-teaching with the general education English teachers. This co-teaching model has increased students with disabilities’ time in general education classes and provided more authentic access to grade-level curriculum. And Thomas’ knowledge of differentiation and her presence in the class benefits all students, not just those with IEPs.

Thomas has now finished her master’s in education along with her special education endorsement. Her advice to new teachers is: “Lean into your people and your building. If you don’t ask the questions, you will never get the answers.”

within their first year of teaching. The support was designed to emulate the support a cooperating teacher would provide during student teaching in a traditional teacher education program and build the new teachers’ toolboxes.

The coach and new teacher worked together co-planning, co-developing IEPs, and co-designing progress monitoring. Our new temporary endorsement teachers continue with coaching for a flexible amount of time in their second year to have the same opportunities to reflect and grow as our new traditional teacher candidates, who work with coaches to examine and reflect on their own thinking and practices.

Gradual release of case management and IEP development

Through a model of gradual release, the new teacher gains confidence and mastery of skills. Our new teachers complete their first several IEPs and evaluations with the support of the instructional coach mentor until they feel confident with all aspects of the

IEP. This allowed the new teachers to develop exemplar IEPs that they could use as models when they moved into developing the IEPs on their own. While the mentoring spans the entire two-year duration, its emphasis transitions from co-development to providing valuable feedback and fostering opportunities for reflective practice.

Relationship with peer support mentor in their building

We have structured the peer support mentors’ roles in a variety of ways. These peers can be other special education teachers or general education teachers. Since the instructional coach mentor is already involved, the peer support mentor does not have to have an in-depth knowledge of special education or the content that the new teacher is teaching. Instead, the peer mentor focuses on sharing their knowledge of the school and can provide support and encouragement while sharing their passion for teaching.

SUPPORT FOR TEACHER CANDIDATES

The program has helped us recruit special education teacher candidates who might not otherwise pursue their credential because it gives candidates a point person to ask questions, a clear understanding of the support provided, and the reassurance that they would be part of a cohort of teachers. This has encouraged more people to become special education teachers, including many who already worked in our district. Over 75% of the early career teachers who have obtained their alternative licensure were working for the district already as para educators, substitute teachers, or office staff.

New high school teacher Lisa Kelty said, “I think what helped me make the decision to pursue my teaching degree through alternative licensure was having someone show me there is a clear and accessible path to my license with a lot of support. Each time I have had questions, concerns, or doubts about my next steps, I

have been able to reach out for help, support, and encouragement.”

The two-year cohort model also contributed to principals’ confidence in hiring alternative pathway candidates, assuring that these candidates would have the support needed for a successful start in their first couple of years.

The previous candidates now have successful teaching careers and many have obtained master’s degrees. They have become integral parts of their school communities from serving as department chair, volunteering to pilot curriculum, participating in committees, coaching sports, and leading clubs.

ADVICE FOR ADMINISTRATORS

To make this program successful, the support of district-level administration and school principals

is key. Once we implemented the coaching model in 2019, we worked with principals to show them how they could hire a teacher with an alternative license and how the district would support that teacher.

To implement a program such as this, district-level administrators must be open to the possibilities of shifting current resources to be able to meet the needs of teachers entering into the field of this type of licensure. Also, there must be a partnership between various departments such as human resources and professional development.

St. Vrain Valley Schools has found a way to change the outlook for hiring special education teachers and has created a model of success to impact the workforce with qualified professionals that are passionate about serving students with disabilities. We work across departments and buildings

to support this particular group of educators who have chosen teaching special education as a second career.

REFERENCES

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