Meeting the Needs of New Teachers Through Mentoring, Induction, and Teacher Support

Diana Brannon
Judy Fiene
Lisa Burke
Therese Wehman

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj

Part of the Educational Leadership Commons, Higher Education Commons, and the Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons

Recommended Citation
Brannon, Diana; Fiene, Judy; Burke, Lisa; and Wehman, Therese (2009) "Meeting the Needs of New Teachers Through Mentoring, Induction, and Teacher Support," Academic Leadership: The Online Journal: Vol. 7 : Iss. 4 , Article 22.
Available at: https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj/vol7/iss4/22

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by FHSU Scholars Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Academic Leadership: The Online Journal by an authorized editor of FHSU Scholars Repository.
Academic Leadership Journal

Providing new teacher induction is an important practice that is common in schools around the world (Wong, Britton, and Ganser 2005). Teacher induction and mentoring programs have been found to reduce the rate of new teacher attrition, increase job satisfaction, and efficacy (Ingersoll and Smith 2004). Mentoring has been the main form of teacher induction used in the United States since the early 1980’s (Fideler and Haselkorn 1999).

Many people think of teacher induction and mentoring as the same things. The terms are often used interchangeably. However, teacher induction is a comprehensive process that provides professional development that trains, supports, and helps retain new teachers. Mentoring is only a component of a full induction program. It focuses on one-on-one help between a veteran and new teacher often focusing more on new teacher’s “survival” than teacher development (Wong 2004).

Regardless of how it is defined, teacher induction means different things to different people. Some schools provide as little as a one day orientation, while others provide extensive new teacher orientation weeks and 1 or 2 year long weekly, structured mentoring programs (Wayne, Youngs, and Fleischman 2005). Because there is such diversity in the definition and implementation of new teacher programs, we decided to study the mentoring programs in our area. We contacted 35 school districts in Illinois to gather information about their mentoring programs. We also surveyed by e-mail first and second year teachers who graduated from Elmhurst College about their induction experiences. Finally, we conducted a focus group of new teachers including teachers from Early Childhood Education, Elementary Education, and Special Education to discuss their experiences with induction and mentoring.

We quickly learned that the vast majority of teacher induction programs in our area focus mainly on mentoring. Our findings for Illinois reflect teacher induction programs across the United States. When writing about teacher induction programs in the United States, Wong (2004) found that mentoring programs still predominate.

Our research found that most districts that offer a more formal mentoring program typically offer some sort of new teacher orientation followed by weekly or monthly meetings with an assigned mentor. In this article we will discuss what our research found about what schools are currently doing to mentor their new teachers, how effective new teachers feel their school’s mentoring programs are, and provide suggestions for what schools can do to meet the needs of first year teachers.

New Teacher Orientation

Many schools begin the year with a new teacher orientation. Although the concept of a new teacher orientation is commonplace, what schools are doing as an orientation varies greatly. Some districts offer a one day orientation that provides a brief overview of the district, staff, building, and general procedures. Other districts offer 5 day or more intensive orientations covering content from snow days to terrorist threats.
Common new teacher orientation topics include general procedures, technology, busing, the school’s medication policy, supply needs, school resources, emergency procedures, building tours, introduction of staff, schedules, rules and procedures, an introduction to the mentoring program, curriculum, and district goals. The new teachers that we spoke with found the orientations helpful. However, many who participated in programs that were 4 days, 5 days, or longer expressed some concern about the length taking time away from their ability to better learn the curriculum and prepare for their classes. As one teacher explained, “It was good because I felt more comfortable with the little things going in but it was like high school. I just got my curriculum before all of these meetings started. I was kind of like let me sit down and look at my stuff.”

Mentoring Programs

Mentoring programs were offered by many, but not all of the districts that we studied. The mentoring programs that we reviewed can be divided into categories. There are weekly or monthly programs, formal or informal, and also casual support programs.

Weekly Formal Meetings

Some districts offer weekly mentoring programs. These programs were considered helpful by most new teachers. However, the weekly meetings risk becoming a bit redundant and overwhelming for new teachers if not made truly purposeful. “I think for me, the weekly meetings are too much. Sometimes I don’t need to talk to the person every Friday from 8-9 or whatever, I needed them on Wednesday, not to say I couldn’t go, but by Friday I was ok, so I just felt like it was a little too structured in that regard.”

Monthly Meetings with Universal Topics

Other mentoring programs met monthly including a formal checklist or schedule of topics to be discussed. Having a formal list of topics by week or month is often helpful as one new teacher explained, “There were always things on that checklist that you never thought of but were really helpful.”

Monthly Meetings with Topics Focusing on the New Teachers’ Specific Needs

One of the most popular types of mentoring with the new teachers was monthly meetings that were based around their needs. “The mentoring program that I went through was one that took place once a month, usually after school but sometimes during our planning period. Topics varied depending on issues that arose and for the most part, she created the agenda of relevant information but at times, there were issues/topics/concerns that I needed addressed. That was really helpful.”

Informal Meetings

Some districts have very informal meeting schedules and programs. They assign a mentor and let the new teacher and mentor work out the details on their own about what they will do and how they will do it. One teacher explained that “My mentor and I decide what we need to discuss, instead of being given topics.” Another teacher shared that her mentor program was only “as needed”. “My school set up mentors this year for new teachers, but there were not any special meetings between them, they just knew of a teacher they could go to if they needed something.”
No Mentoring Program

Many of the districts that we surveyed do not offer any mentoring programs. Although this is unfortunate, new teachers are often able to overcome this by finding a mentor on their own. “We don’t really have a mentoring program in my district. When I started two years ago I was lucky enough to get a job where I student taught, so I looked to my student teaching mentor for guidance when needed. My school is also quite small and all the teachers are great, so I felt comfortable going to anyone for ideas/help.”

Additional Support

A couple of the districts we studied offer additional support to new teachers through half day monthly meetings or workshops. “Each month, first year teachers meet with their mentors for half the day to touch base on the topics of brain based learning (differentiation), assessment, lesson design, and rubrics.” “We had new teacher meetings that were twice a month at the beginning of the year just covering topics that were coming up like conferences and how things are run. Then we had one at the end of the year about how to close up and what we need to do. I felt they were very beneficial because they were talking about things that were really necessary that I would have had questions about and needed to go to someone else to ask. So, those meetings were great. That was an opportunity basically to meet up with other new teachers.”

Observations

More and more districts are including some sort of observation and evaluation as part of their mentoring programs. Most new teachers appreciated having this opportunity. “We did that in the first and the second semesters. We had to watch a veteran teacher teach a lesson and we also had our mentor come and watch. That was very helpful because I saw from another teacher something they did that I didn’t do.”

New Teachers’ Feelings about Mentoring

Most new teachers participate in some form of new teacher induction. As we have discussed, there is great variance in the types of programs available and their success. Therefore, we asked our alumni new teachers to share what they felt made a good mentoring program to learn more about the mentoring experience directly from those being served.

Support for Organization

New teachers who had guidelines and structure built into their induction program found it to be very valuable. For some, structured meetings were provided toward the beginning of the school year and then tapered off as the school year continued. A binder that included topics to be covered throughout the school year helped them to prepare for each meeting with their mentor (e.g. report cards, parent/teacher conferences, closing out the year, etc.). Additionally, the teachers found it helpful to have information given to them upfront as opposed to gradually throughout the school year. “My mentor gave me a calendar at the beginning of the year, pretty much telling me everything that she was going to do the entire school year... She gave me a blank calendar and... we tried to match as much as we could. So it was nice to have that.”

This illustrates how a mentor can help with long-term planning. By the mentor stating that she would like
to “match as much as we could,” shows how this mentor is providing additional support. This added help takes this teacher’s first year mentoring experience to a deeper and more personal level. Having a mentor who not only provides essential information, but is also there to show the novice teacher how it is to be used is an example of how a positive mentoring relationship can be effectively formed.

Support by Caring

Teachers also expressed appreciation when their mentor teacher genuinely cares about their progress. It is important to these teachers to know that their mentor is helping them not because they are “assigned”, but because they truly want to see the teacher succeed. “She was willing to do it and she cared about what she was doing. So, anytime [I] needed to drop her an e-mail or ask her a question about something we were teaching . . . it was easy to just run up there and talk to her.”

Another teacher explained the importance of having a mentor who wants to be involved by sharing her experience. “I would have been more content to go across town to another teacher who would volunteer to do it.” These types of exchanges show the importance of the mentoring process being an authentic relationship rather than just a responsibility that needs to be fulfilled.

Support for Collaboration and Collegiality

New teachers strongly believe in mentors being connected with their teaching responsibility. Teachers who had mentors that were also a member of their grade level team felt much more supported. One middle school teacher shared, “We had a team meeting every single day so my team was my support system. We were all very comfortable with each other because my [mentor] teacher was also my team leader.” This situation is ideal. The collegiality found in this type of environment affords the teacher the opportunity to use other members of the team for additional support and friendship.

These examples show that the things that really make a difference in new teachers’ success from their viewpoint are often more affective in nature. New teachers want mentors who go beyond the outlined program to truly walk side by side with them. They also want mentors who care about them and make them feel part of the team. This makes sense considering that in their study of first year special education teachers, Schlichte, Yssel, and Merbler (2005) found that “. . . strongly forged relationships and the accompanying feelings of emotional well-being are protective factors and critical to retention” (p. 29). Or, as one of alumni who did not have a mentor put it, “It does get lonely. If you have someone assigned as a mentor you always have a friend to go to.” It seems that this is a key factor to the success and satisfaction of many new teachers.

What Schools Can Do

Many induction programs assign mentors whose main job is to help acclimate new teachers to the culture of the school. Although this is helpful, it does not result in a sustained positive impact on teaching behaviors. Simply assigning a mentor alone does little to remedy the situation of new teachers becoming discouraged and leaving the profession (Wong 2004). Districts need to provide new teachers with a focused and structured induction program that includes the opportunity for them to observe other teachers teaching, collaborate and share ideas, gain support from the administration, and be part of a learning community.
New teachers have a lot of tasks they are expected to have mastered on the first day of school. Not only are they responsible for their students' learning, they also have to plan and map out the curriculum for the year, manage classroom behavior, work and collaborate with their colleagues, and build relationships with the families of their students. These skills are studied and discussed in teacher education programs. However, they are developed on the job. For many new teachers, implementing all that they have learned about expert teaching can be overwhelming. Therefore, districts need to provide extensive support for new teachers to help them make the transition from student to teacher.

Multiple Supports

New teachers need to be able to look to multiple people for support throughout their building and district. This includes teachers, administrators, and support staff. Everyone has different strengths, knowledge, and experiences to offer. As one new teacher explained, “I know I am going to go to this person if I have a question as to how to solve this problem where I am going to go to her if I have more of an organizational problem.” The more that new teachers are part of an entire community of induction, rather than limited to rely on only one person, the better.

Moving from Survival to Effective

New teachers need “survival skills” such as school procedures, behavior management, parent communication, and basic curriculum to be covered at the beginning of the year. When these types of issues are addressed early on, new teachers feel more confident to focus on pedagogy and best practice, rather than just survival as the year continues. Therefore, school districts need to add elements of comprehensive induction to their mentoring programs to help promote learning and professional development.

Constructive Feedback

New teachers need supportive and consistent feedback regarding their teaching. As one new teacher explained, “I had a lot of teaching assistants and a support teacher in and out of my room all the time for the special education students that I had. I kind of used them as a guide. Sometimes some of them would see me more than once a day so first period and eighth period I could try things a little bit differently if I realized something wasn’t right. I kind of asked them for feedback and that seemed to go over well... that was my kind of my way of figuring things out.”

Many new teachers try to gain feedback about their teaching from students, aides, or other specialists who consistently see them teach. This can be helpful. However, it is much easier and effective for new teachers to “figure things out” from the feedback of colleagues who are trained to observe and provide insights, suggestions, and encouragement on a consistent and scheduled basis. This takes away the fear many teachers have of being observed. It turns observation into a positive, meaningful, learning experience.

Continued Support

A final consideration when developing or implementing any induction program is the duration of the program. Most programs last for one year. Although this is helpful, many new teachers express concern about what they will do when they need support after their first year. As one teacher put it, “I think you
really need to have a formal first year mentor program but then maybe a second year informal type program. Next year will be my second year and I'm just left. I can talk to people, but I'm just left in the open.”

This serious and practical concern is why many districts are beginning to offer two year mentoring programs. The first year often focusing more on “survival strategies”, while the second focusing more on the pedagogy of teaching and best practice.

Our study found that many districts are only just beginning to address the issue of new teacher induction. However, more and more programs are designing detailed and extensive new teacher orientation and mentoring programs. Although we have seen a lot of improvement in teacher mentoring programs over the last decade, our findings support those of Wayne, Youngs, and Fleishman (2005), “Fewer than 1 percent of teachers get what the Alliance for Excellent Education (2004) calls a ‘comprehensive’ induction package: a reduced number of course preparations, a helpful mentor in the same field, a seminar tailored to the needs of beginning teachers, strong communication with administrators, and time for planning and collaboration with other teachers” (p. 76). Therefore, more work needs to be done to address the needs of new teachers, even though many districts are off to a good start.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


VN:R_U [1.9.11_1134]