Success for New Teachers

Five reasons your school board should support induction and mentoring programs—plus three decisive actions you can take

By Hal Portner

It's the same old story, year after year. Your district spends thousands of dollars to recruit, hire, and train new teachers. Then, after a year or two, the district has to repeat the process because those same teachers have left their jobs.

How much does this cost? It's been estimated that each teacher who is recruited, trained, and lost costs districts about $50,000. When you consider the problems that school systems have in retaining teachers, it is easy to see how the cost adds up—quickly.

One proven way to improve teacher retention is through induction and mentoring programs, a professional development process that supports new staff. These programs can save you

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thousands of dollars and improve the quality of teaching and learning in your schools.

Recruiting New Teachers, a national nonprofit organization based in Belmont, Mass., defines induction and mentoring as a period of "socialization to the teaching profession, adjustment to the procedures and mores of a school site and school system, and development of effective instructional and classroom management skills." A well-structured program trains new teachers on the district's academic standards and vision.

To be effective, education author and consultant Harry Wong says, an induction and mentoring program needs to be comprehensive, coherent, and sustained. It should be organized with many activities and many people involved. The activities and people should be logically connected and support each other. It should seamlessly send novice teachers into the district's ongoing professional development program.

Operationally, the focus of new teacher induction and mentoring concentrates on four key components: students and community; school and district policies and procedures; curriculum and instruction; and assessment.

How an induction and mentoring program is structured and carried out generally is left to administrators and teacher leaders. The school board bears the responsibility for providing support and resources to the program. Here are five reasons you should support them.

REASON 1: TEACHING AND LEARNING

A school board's prime directive is to provide for student learning, the cornerstone of which takes place between teacher and student in the classroom. Think about it this way: The higher the quality of teaching, the higher the quality of learning. As the quality of teaching improves, student learning improves.

In addition to providing new teachers with the tools they need in the classroom, a school board must also help them acquire the skills and resources to learn to teach better. And in many cases, effective induction and mentoring programs have helped teachers become better more quickly than they would have otherwise. Studies by Recruiting New Teachers have found that induction programs can make a tremendous difference both in a teacher's ability and in the learning experiences their students have.

More than 20 additional national, state, and local studies have produced similar findings. For example, at the start of the 2000-01 school year, New York's Islip Public Schools instituted a well-planned and fully supported induction and mentoring program that had a dramatic effect on student achievement. In the 1998-99 school year, 40 percent of Islip's high school graduates earned Regents diplomas, and 80 students were enrolled in Advanced Placement classes. In 2001-02, the year after the induction program started, 70 percent of graduates earned a Regents diploma and 120 students were enrolled in AP classes.

It is interesting to note that the students of these new teachers performed better than those of the novices before them. Even more interesting is that the students of the experienced teachers who served as mentors improved significantly as well. This is not unusual. Connecticut education officials report that participating veteran teachers find the induction and mentoring process promotes greater self-reflection on their own work; improves their teaching, professional knowledge, and interactions with colleagues; and ultimately results in higher student achievement.

REASON 2: TEACHER RETENTION

In 1997, President Clinton's *Call to Action for American Education in the 21st Century* informed us that 2 million teachers would be needed over the next decade to replace retirements and accommodate rapidly growing student enrollment. The education establishment geared up its teacher education and recruitment efforts, but the supply did not seem to catch up to the demand. The assumption was that there was a shortage of available teacher candidates.

However, a 2001 analysis of national data by Richard Ingersoll showed that widely publicized school staffing problems were not solely—or even primarily—the result of too few teachers being trained and recruited. Rather, the data indicated that school staffing problems were the result of a revolving door phenomenon in which large numbers of teachers were leaving the profession long before retirement.

About one-quarter of new teachers leave the profession within the first three years of teaching. Nationwide, about 30 percent leave within their first five years; in urban areas, about half do. Schools cannot afford to lose good teachers at any time, but especially now, when pressure to improve student achievement is increasing.

While teacher pay is always an issue, it doesn't top the list of reasons of those who leave. Indeed, according to a national study tracking 1992-93 college graduates' teaching careers through 1997, only 10 percent left because they were dissatisfied with salaries and benefits. Teachers who receive support from colleagues and administrators, experience fewer student discipline problems, and have higher levels of autonomy and influence over decision-making are more likely to stay regardless of personal characteristics or school demographics. A wealth of additional research and experience suggests that the key to retaining new teachers is providing them with effective support.

Case in point: In 1998-99, Islip retained only 29 of the 46 new teachers hired. Over the next three school years, after instituting its induction and mentoring program, the district retained 65 of 68 new hires.

Constantly replacing teachers is disruptive and demoralizing. It places burdens on the system that it can ill afford and destabilizes the instructional process. Equally devastating is the

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staggering financial burden high turnover places on a district by consuming resources that could be devoted to books, tutors, and other instructional resources.

That leads us to...

REASON 3: MONEY

Chances are, your district already has spent the money on teacher attrition that it might otherwise invest in retention. A June 2004 report by the Alliance for Excellent Education revealed that American schools spend more than $2.6 billion annually to replace teachers who have dropped out of the teaching profession. AAE and other organizations suggest that it is more cost-effective to provide teacher induction programs that reduce attrition instead.

A simple formula for estimating the cost of replacing an individual teacher is 25 to 35 percent of annual salary plus benefit costs. More sophisticated cost models of teacher turnover incorporate such factors as the costs of termination, vacancy, hiring, learning curves, and training. (See the sidebar.)

Using various cost models, the Texas Center for Educational Research recently calculated the state's annual loss attributable to teacher turnover at between $329 million and $2.1 billion, based on the state's average teacher turnover rate of 15.5 percent. The center's research pegs a district's total turnover cost per teacher—for paperwork, temporary workers, productivity losses, and hiring and training a replacement—at about 150 percent of the departing employee's annual salary.

REASON 4: CLIMATE AND COMMUNITY

Induction and mentoring provides new teachers with confidence in the classroom. This makes the job more pleasant for the teachers, and learning more enjoyable for the students. Veteran teachers and administrators who participate in the induction and mentoring process experience the sense of pride and accomplishment that comes from helping others grow. The result is heightened morale and increased sense of community that comes from sharing in a successful effort.

A 1997 National Center for Education Statistics report identified support and leadership, good student behavior, and a positive school atmosphere as working conditions associated with higher teacher satisfaction and improved student learning. These workplace conditions were positively related to job satisfaction regardless of whether the teacher was employed by a public or private school or an elementary or secondary school, and regardless of teachers' background characteristics or school demographics.

Conversely, low levels of satisfaction and morale can lead to decreased productivity and burnout, greater use of sick leave, efforts to leave the profession, and a cynical and dehumanized perception of students. In short, teacher morale can have far-reaching implications for student learning as well as the health of the organization and the teacher.

It takes a community to induct and mentor a teacher. Collegial support of beginning teachers is a hallmark of a healthy education community. In a healthy community, people help each other grow.

REASON 5: IT'S THE LAW (IN SOME PLACES)

State regulations have given impetus to the widespread creation of induction and mentoring programs. In 2004, 33 states required mentoring programs for new teachers. Of these, 22 states provided funding. Nevertheless, the reason a growing number of schools and districts have embedded induction and mentoring into their cultures is not necessarily because of regulations. Words on paper don't define culture—people and their actions do.

Following are three decisive actions school boards can take to embed induction and mentoring into their schools.

■ **Action 1: Public affirmation.** One consistent theme associated with exemplary induction and mentoring programs is a clear and public message of commitment from the school board saying in effect: "We value the teachers new to our district and consider mentoring by their experienced colleagues to be fundamental to their professional growth." The following is an example of such a statement.

> The cornerstone of quality education is what happens between the educator and the student. Therefore, we expect our teachers to have and to continue to develop the skills, knowledge, and understanding needed to be highly effective.
>
> During the next several years, we expect to hire a number of new teachers. These new teachers will bring with them a strong knowledge base and an eagerness to teach. Research and experience suggests, however, that without the advantage of a program that provides for and supports the induction and mentoring of beginning teachers by their experienced colleagues, more than 30 percent of new teachers will leave the profession after their first year or second year. Those who do remain may take longer than otherwise to reach their full professional potential.
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> Because we value highly our new teachers and consider mentoring by their experienced colleagues to be fundamental to their professional growth and therefore their ability to better serve our children, it is essential that the district develop, support, and maintain an effective induction and mentoring program for new teachers.

■ **Action 2: Policies of support and accountability.** After the public affirmation comes the policy. Here's an example:

> The Board of Education will provide for a planned, ongoing

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induction and mentoring program for new teachers, including funds and time for planning and implementation. It also will direct the superintendent to establish a planning and implementation committee made up of representatives from the school board, administration, the teachers' local professional association, and other appropriate persons.

The committee shall be responsible to the superintendent for planning, developing, implementing, managing, and evaluating an induction and mentoring program for new teachers. It will direct the superintendent to report semi-annually to the school board on the induction and mentoring program and its effect, with recommendations for changes as needed.

■ **Action 3: Recognition.** In addition to providing adequate support to mentors, it is important to celebrate their successes and acknowledge their involvement. We all need to feel that our work is appreciated and not taken for granted, and mentors are no exception. Many districts with successful programs host end-of-year recognition dinners at which each mentor is individually acknowledged and given a token of appreciation.

Bringing induction and mentoring into a school's culture takes time, probably a minimum of two or three years beyond the program's implementation. With the school board's dedication and support, induction and mentoring will be embedded into a school's culture once people go through the program and experience its success, find that it resonates with their beliefs and values, and feel that they and their school have grown as a result. If taken seriously and implemented effectively, the investment in induction and mentoring will result in far-reaching dividends.

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THE COST OF TEACHER ATTRITION

Barry Sweeny, executive director of the International Mentoring Association, suggests the following process for determining the real cost of teacher attrition in your district:

1. Work with your personnel director to build a chart showing the actual number of teachers who left the school district over the last three to five years, categorized according to their reason for leaving: retirement, spouse got a different job requiring a move, better salary elsewhere, difficulty with supervisor, left teaching career, and so on.
2. Total up the people who left for reasons the district cannot control, such as retirement and spouse getting a new job.
3. Total up those who left for reasons the district might have been able to influence.
4. Estimate the percentage that each of these two groups represents of the total.
5. List all the costs to the district for recruiting, signing, orienting, and training new employees for their first year of employment.
6. Divide the costs to the district in step 5 by the number of people in step 3 to arrive at the cost per teacher of attrition after the first year.
7. Estimate the current cost per novice teacher for your mentoring and induction program. Then estimate and add the cost of the program if you were able to provide the time and other effectiveness elements you'd like to provide your new teachers.
8. Compare the costs of teacher attrition per person with the per-person cost of effective mentoring and induction support. You may be surprised. Usually the cost of adequately supporting people (doing it right) is far less than the cost of teacher attrition (doing it wrong).

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