

Retaining and Supporting First Year Teachers

Have You Considered the Elements of Successful Induction and Mentoring Programs?

IN THIS WATCH

Induction and mentoring programs may influence a special education teacher's decision to remain in teaching—Have you considered program elements that may increase success?

There is a critical shortage of special education teachers nationwide. By the year 2005, there will be more than 200,000 special education vacancies. Yet, recruitment strategies alone may not solve the problem. It is estimated that at least 40 percent of new special educators will leave the field before their fifth year of teaching.

Lack of professional support is often cited as the primary reason why teachers leave the field. In addition to improving working conditions, what can school districts do to support beginning teachers and encourage them to stay?

New teacher induction and mentoring programs can influence a first year teacher's decision to continue teaching. Such programs increase short-term retention rates—usually into the second year—by offering school districts a vehicle for helping first year teachers deal with the multitude of factors that contribute to the stressful and difficult nature of that first year.

Although definitions of induction programs vary, most provide systemic and sustained psychological and instructional assistance to beginning teachers. In general, induction programs have been found to increase first year retention by:

- Improving instructional effectiveness.
- Promoting satisfaction in teaching.
- Providing a way to orient new teachers to the district and the school culture.

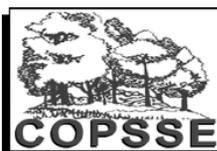
Certain features enhance the success of induction programs for beginning special education teachers. Read on to gain insights from the research.

Have You Considered the Elements of Successful Induction Programs for Special Education Teachers?

Having a mentor is the most frequently cited feature associated with new special education teacher satisfaction and success. Other notable program features include:

- Provide information and help with understanding special education policies and procedures, making instructional modifications, adapting curriculum, and managing student behavior.
- Direct new teachers to materials and resources within the school system.
- Assist new teachers in developing collaboration skills.
- Emphasize emotional support for the complex job requirements required of

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special educators (e.g., mentoring, consultation, use of reflection journals, stress management workshops).

Effective features in general education teacher induction programs also benefit new special education teachers. The following characteristics should be incorporated into special education induction programs:

- **Provide mentors.** Mentors who are teaching the same grade and/or subject area are perceived by new teachers as more effective.
- **Promote a culture of shared responsibility and support.** Veteran teachers are committed to helping beginning teachers improve.
- **Encourage frequent interactions between new and experienced teachers.** Regular interaction opportunities provide for both formal and informal exchanges.
- **Acknowledge a continuum of professional development.** Induction activities and expectations for new teachers take into account differences in skill levels between novice and veteran teachers.
- **De-emphasize evaluation.** The focus in induction programs is on assistance and support.
- **Communicate clear program goals and purposes.** New teachers understand that induction activities are designed to promote their personal and professional well being, improve student achievement by improving their instructional performance, orient them to the school culture, and encourage them to remain in teaching.

- **Address relevant issues.** In addition to emotional support, beginning teachers may benefit from assistance in such areas as classroom management, instruction, stress and workload issues, time management, and developing positive relationships.
- **Provide fiscal and political support to the program.** Provide compensation to mentor teachers in the form of financial compensation, increased status, release time, and/or load reduction.

Have You Considered Strategies to Enhance the Mentorship Component of Induction Programs for New Special Education Teachers?

Mentoring often is either the major activity or sole activity of formal special education teacher induction programs. This is for good reason—beginning special education teachers report that their mentor contributed significantly to their meeting expectations for themselves and their students, helped to build their sense of competence and confidence in teaching, and influenced their decision to stay in teaching.

Strategies that may be used to enhance the mentorship component of new special education induction programs include:

- **Assign mentors who are special educators.** New teachers tend to ask for more help and receive more quality assistance when the mentor has comparable job responsibilities. In fact, it's often more important to assign a mentor who has comparable special education responsibilities, even if it means going outside of the new teacher's building.

- **Provide opportunities for frequent contact.** New special education teachers report greater levels of satisfaction and success in teaching when they have frequent mentor contact.
- **Orient mentors and new special education teachers.** Prior to beginning the program, provide participants with an orientation.

WATCH THIS...

Induction and mentoring programs are only one strategy for reducing attrition. Challenging work conditions also must be addressed.

For More Information

Information reported in this brief was based on the COPSSE research synthesis, *New Teacher Induction in Special Education*, prepared by Cynthia C. Griffin, Judith A. Winn, Amy Otis-Wilborn, and Karen L. Kilgore. The document is available on the COPSSE web site at www.copsse.org.



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