Peer Mentoring Best Practices

This brief summarizes key themes from the literature on effective mentoring practices and illustrates related findings from a study of the 2022-23 Peer Review and Mentoring Grant (PRMG) program. The study is part of a larger PRMG evaluation conducted by the Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative at the request of the Licensure, Educator Advancement and Development team at the Department of Public Instruction. The full report can be accessed [here](#).

Features of Effective Mentoring Practices

High-quality induction and mentoring programs matter. There are four predominant themes on effective practices derived from the literature on peer review and mentoring.

First, **rigorous mentor selection** should be utilized (beyond seniority-based measures).

Second, provide mentors and mentees with **adequate time** to engage in mentoring activities.

Third, make available ongoing **professional learning for mentors and initial educators**.

And fourth, **ongoing communication and support from school leaders** is a critical success factor in of mentor systems.

In addition to impacting mentoring programs, these approaches represent promising strategies for retaining teachers, improving teacher effectiveness, and improving student outcomes.

Rigorous Mentor Selection

High quality mentoring begins with a mentor selection process that attends to the professional, technical, and personal support of teachers. Effective mentors possess characteristics that support each of these intersecting identities. The WDPI defines a mentor as "a licensed educator who has successfully completed state-approved mentor training who demonstrates exemplary classroom practice and the effective collaborative qualities necessary to work with beginning educators" (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2019). As asserted by the Southern Regional Education Board (2018), "mentoring has distinct knowledge bases and skill sets." Effective mentors have strong people/communication skills, understand content and professional standards, and provide effective feedback. Mentors should maintain a focus on both instruction and professional standards, as these practices can positively affect gains in student achievement.

Rigorous Mentor Selection Example

The Oregon School District partners with Dane County New Teacher Project to train mentors using the research-based New Teacher Center Model. The training curriculum and ongoing seminars build mentor skills reflected in the literature, which include observation and feedback, analysis of student work, and optimal learning environments.

Dedicated Time for Quality Mentoring

Effective mentoring requires a multi-year, differentiated approach, which includes regular meetings between mentors and mentees. Teachers improve over time when supported with professional development, reflective practice, and collaboration with colleagues – all components of comprehensive induction and mentoring programs.

Dedicated time is crucial to successful mentoring efforts. The amount of time needed for effective mentoring is not consistently quantified in the literature; however, the New Teacher Center (2018c) identifies 60-90 minutes of protected, weekly time "to allow for the most rigorous mentoring/coaching activities." Districts use a variety of approaches to arrive at dedicated time, including substitute coverage, release model mentoring, and the utilization of retired teachers.

Dedicated Mentoring Time Example

The McFarland School District prioritizes dedicated time for mentoring by using release-model mentors "whose dedicated time allows for more than 1:1 model peers." This district's goal is to create a "mentoring program closer to New Teacher Center's (i3 research) model, which recommends 180 minutes of meeting time per month.
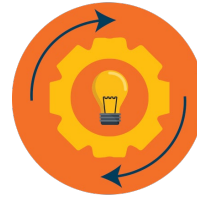
Ongoing Professional Learning

Professional learning in communities of peers affords both mentors and initial educators the opportunity to develop skills with and receive feedback from their peers. Beginning teachers benefit from collaborative learning. New teachers in rural schools feel "professionally isolated" (Hayes et al., 2019). This challenge can be addressed by establishing online communities and partnerships with local universities and education service centers.

Ongoing Professional Learning Example

Similar to many CESAs, CESA 12 offers quarterly mentor network meetings and beginning teacher professional development.

Several district applicants integrate training specific to their identified student academic goals. Examples include Cudahy, which adds social/emotional strategies, and Muskego-Norway, which includes training specific to best practices in ELA and Math and includes teachers in years 4 and 5 in their professional development.

School Leader Support

School leaders play a key role in the implementation of comprehensive induction programs. Leaders create working conditions necessary for beginning teacher professional growth. School leaders determine the allocation of resources (time, money, materials), provide schedules to allow for dedicated mentoring time, and determine conditions such as teacher caseload, schedule, room assignments and class sizes – all of which can impact a beginning teacher's experience. In addition, school leaders determine the degree to which the induction and mentoring program design and implementation are collaborative and involve multiple stakeholders. According to Elfers and colleagues (2022) "In order for induction work to be woven into the fabric of a district, it needs to be integrated and aligned with district priorities."

The involvement of key stakeholders in program design and communication builds program clarity and transparency. Mentors are one of many observers, and the role of each and purpose for the observations and resulting feedback must be clear to all stakeholders. For example, DPI (2019) clarifies the mentor's role as someone having "input into the formative and confidential (between mentor/beginning teacher) formative assessment of the educator, but…not considered a part of the formal evaluation process."

School Leader Support Example

Wisconsin Heights School District aligns mentors' work with the Educator Effectiveness process by scheduling monthly classroom visits with new teachers for observation and by "using the WI EE as a guide for feedback and strategies for best instructional practices." This alignment of induction and mentoring with other improvement initiatives is a practice suggested in New Teacher Center's Induction Program Standards as a goal: "Program leaders and key decision-makers create a program vision, mission, and program design focused on advancing student learning and accelerating beginning teacher effectiveness within a comprehensive system of development for all educators" (New Teacher Center, 2018a).

Considerations for Developing High Quality Mentoring Programs

The literature and our study suggest the following topics for considerations:

- Identify the number of mentors needed
- Develop a mentor selection process
- Determine mentor compensation
- Process for pairing mentors and initial educators
- Mentor training
- Dedicated time for mentoring activities
- Ongoing support for mentors
- Additional supports for initial educators
- Alignment with Educator Effectiveness
- Collecting feedback to inform program improvements

For additional information about the four essential mentoring practices described in this memo, please see the [reference list](#).