Why New Teacher Mentoring Falls Short, and How to Fix It

Findings from Louisiana and Texas Mentor Programs

Fall 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Districts have long struggled to figure out the best way to support educators in their first year at a school. This is the right place to focus – it is clear that the lack of an effective support system for new teachers is contributing to the higher turnover rate for new teachers. The retention problem is most acute at schools serving large concentrations of students of color, where teacher turnover is significantly higher than average.[1] One effective response is the creation of mentoring programs to support new teachers. While this response is a positive development, the quality and impact of these programs varies widely, with many programs operating as little more than a "buddy system."

High-quality mentoring programs have been shown to increase teacher retention and effectiveness, and new teacher surveys rank mentoring as the most helpful type of support. New teachers working with a mentor score higher on measures of effective practice, and their students increase their achievement on reading and math assessments.[2] As a result, states and districts should invest in high-quality mentoring for teacher improvement and retention, particularly in schools serving high-need students.

What makes for effective mentoring? The key elements of successful mentoring programs highlighted in the research include selecting mentors with proven know-how and similar grade and subject area expertise, providing high-quality training and support for mentors to develop their knowledge and coaching skills, providing a longer time frame for mentoring, and setting aside time for observation and collaborative learning. Yet these elements of a more comprehensive approach have been difficult for districts to put into practice. For example, one survey of new teachers found that while three out of four were assigned a mentor, only about half of those reported having at least three conversations with their mentor, and fewer than half reported that their mentor observed their teaching. This lack of investment in time, resources, and training makes mentoring much less effective.

Recognizing the vital role mentors can play, Louisiana and Texas are two states that have elevated mentoring in recent years. These states have approved policies and funding to address areas that districts need help to support. These include the need to increase compensation, time, training, and support for mentors; to focus the role on instructional improvement; and to align the work of mentors to the needs and goals of their individual school and district. Additionally, Louisiana and Texas vetted and approved organizations to ensure high-quality training and support for mentor teachers and administrators and, as part of those processes, the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching was named as an approved provider in both states.

Educators in districts that are working with NIET to redesign their mentoring programs are using the following strategies that are leading to greater success in supporting new teachers to be more effective:

Strategies and Action Steps to Support New Teachers

Strategy 1: Focus mentoring on instructional improvement.
- Establish a clear purpose for mentoring: improving teaching and learning
- Invest in mentoring through funding time, training, and the use of an evidence-based instructional rubric
- Create a clear job description, define compensation for mentors, and select the right people for the job

Strategy 2: Support mentors to be more effective by providing training, tools, and protocols for the role.
- Start by establishing trust and a growth mindset
- Ground mentoring in student outcomes and the needs of the mentee
- Use a cycle of coaching for continuous improvement
- Create opportunities for mentors to collaborate

Strategy 3: Align the mentoring program with district and school systems and goals.
- Support principals to integrate mentors in the school leadership structure
- Connect mentoring to district and school priorities or initiatives

As districts work to accelerate student learning and address achievement gaps, high-quality mentoring is an important strategy for increasing new teacher effectiveness and reducing high rates of turnover among new teachers. Focusing mentoring on instructional improvement, providing high-quality training and support along with compensation for mentors, and encouraging the integration of mentoring into school and district systems are essential components in attracting highly effective teachers to take on the role of mentor.

As growing numbers of new teachers step into classrooms, particularly in schools with large numbers of students of color and low-income students, it is absolutely critical that districts have in place tools and protocols for effective coaching and support that helps new teachers to be more successful earlier in their career.

INTRODUCTION

The Challenges and Potential of New Teacher Mentoring

Talk to any teacher, and they will likely tell you that the first year in the classroom was the most difficult of their career. Being a "rookie" is tough in any job, but it is especially tough for new teachers who are often left to navigate the challenges of their first year alone. Given the high numbers of baby boomers retiring from teaching, younger and less experienced teachers represent a larger percentage of the teacher workforce, with the typical teacher being in their first three years of teaching.[3] The urgency of providing better support for new teachers is increasing across the country.[4]

Educators and policymakers have recognized this challenge and responded with state policies and funding to encourage and support mentoring for new teachers. More than half of all states have guidelines for the selection of mentors, including years of experience and demonstrated effectiveness.[5] While this is a step in the right direction, too many of these programs operate as little more than a "buddy system" where mentors' roles are informal, with little training or compensation, minimal if any release time, and a lack of clear expectations or direction from school and district leaders. A 2010 survey of new teachers in three states found that although 78% of new teachers were assigned mentors, only a little over half of those teachers reported having at least three conversations with their mentor, only 41%

were observed teaching at least once by their mentor, and a majority of the new teachers were not assigned a mentor who taught the same subject area or grade level. These numbers were worse for new teachers working in high-poverty schools.[6]

We also know that each year about 7% of new teachers leave the profession, and 14% change schools.[7] Teacher turnover is higher in schools serving high concentrations of students of color and in schools with large numbers of low-income students, and this turnover takes a toll.[8] Students in schools with high teacher turnover score lower on both reading and math assessments.[9] Additionally, with the increase in teachers becoming certified through alternative certification programs, which often involves teaching full-time while becoming certified, the need for on-the-job support is even greater.

Research demonstrates that high-quality mentoring programs can directly address these concerns. New teachers who have worked with a mentor score higher on measures of effective classroom practices, including student engagement and differentiating lessons to meet student needs, and new teacher mentoring is associated with increases in student achievement on reading and math assessments.[10] In a study by the Institute for Educational Sciences and Mathematica, in new teachers' third year of teaching, the students of teachers who had received two years of comprehensive support scored higher in both reading and math.

On average, student scores were 4 percentage points higher in reading and 8 percentage points higher in math.[11] In addition, high-quality mentoring programs have been shown to increase new teacher retention.[12]

High-quality mentoring programs select experienced, effective mentors and match them with mentees in the same grade and subject where possible; focus on instructional improvement; provide training, support, and compensation for the role; ensure release time for mentors and mentees to work together; offer multiyear support that aligns to expectations for teaching and learning; and create opportunities for collaborative professional learning.[13]

In addition to improvements in classroom outcomes, mentorship from an experienced teacher consistently ranks highest in surveys asking teachers which supports are most helpful. In a survey of National Teachers of the Year, "receiving access to mentor" was the top-rated support that former teachers of the year said impacted their effectiveness at the beginning of their career.[14] Districts have found that the benefits of high-quality mentoring programs do not stop with new teachers. When experienced teachers become mentors, they are given a way to build their own instructional and leadership skills without having to leave the classroom, offering a career path that keeps more highly effective teachers in the classroom.[15]

Researchers also note that increased retention of new teachers contributes to the development of more stable collaborative learning teams in schools, offering greater consistency and coherence in professional learning over time.[16]

Efforts to Strengthen Mentoring Programs

While a majority of states require that mentors have a minimum number of years of experience and require training for mentors, only a few states have in place policies or funding to ensure the quality of training for mentors or support release time for collaboration and planning.[17] Researchers also point to a lack of screening for effectiveness of mentors and insufficient efforts to recruit effective teachers to serve as mentors.[18]

Louisiana and Texas are seeking to address these challenges through state-led efforts to improve district-based mentoring programs and funding tied to the new approach. (See Appendix A: State Policy Approaches to New Teacher Mentorship.) In addition to district size, Texas' program, for example, allocates funding based on factors such as the percentage of economically disadvantaged students and rural status of the district. What is different in these initiatives is a focus on providing time, resources, training, and ongoing support for mentors to engage in instructionally focused coaching, while at the same time aligning the work of mentors to school and district systems and leadership structures.

In Louisiana, state policy requires that yearlong undergraduate residents and post-baccalaureate or alternative certification candidates on a first-year practitioner license have a credentialed mentor and receive a minimum of five hours of mentoring per week. The redesign of Louisiana's mentoring program, approved by the State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education in 2018, creates training and certification requirements that ensure mentors are prepared to provide high-quality coaching and support.[19] Training providers must be approved by the state, and mentors must pass a certification test. To recognize the additional time and skills required by mentors, the state allocated funds for districts to pay $1,000 stipends to mentor teachers working with pre-service residents, as well as a $1,000 stipend to residents themselves.

Texas' Mentor Program Allotment (MPA), created in 2019, allows districts to apply for state funding for mentors of first- and second-year teachers.[20] In the first year, state funding for stipends was $1,800 and was expanded to include mentors for teachers in their first or second year teaching a new grade or subject. In the second year, funding ranged from $1,500 to $2,500 per mentor, based in part on the design of the district mentor program and use of an approved training provider. Districts must provide training for mentors on research-based teaching practices and ensure that mentors and mentees meet for a minimum of 12 hours each semester. Annual funding levels are determined by the state budget, and funds can be used for stipends, release time, training, and follow-up support.

As noted, Texas and Louisiana both approve training providers at the state level to ensure quality, and NIET has been approved to work with districts in both states to train mentors.[21] NIET's mentor training is based on over 20 years of experience training teacher leaders and principals to coach classroom teachers. Teacher leaders taking on these mentoring and coaching roles in NIET partner districts report they are more likely to remain in teaching, with nearly 90% agreeing that the opportunity for a leadership role increased their commitment to remain in teaching. In addition, teacher retention in NIET schools where trained teacher leaders are providing classroom teachers with coaching and mentoring is 10 percentage points higher than the average teacher retention rate nationwide.[22]

Based on this success in developing teacher leaders, NIET's mentor training builds skills and knowledge across a range of topics such as understanding and building trust with adult learners, using data to improve teaching, providing high-quality feedback, and creating continuous cycles of improvement. School and district leaders participate in training prior to the start of the school year in order to build a common understanding of the work of mentors and the goals of the program.

Follow-up support over the course of the year for mentors, as well as school and district leaders, ensures that mentoring is integrated into school schedules, budgets, and culture and aligned to systems for professional learning. Training and support are grounded in evidence-based practices and offered in-person or virtually, as requested by the district.

Findings from Louisiana and Texas Mentor Programs

Educators in districts that have redesigned their mentoring programs with support from NIET identified strategies and action steps that are leading to greater success in supporting new teachers to be more effective earlier in their careers.

These partnerships have used three strategies: 1. focusing the mentor program on instructional improvement; 2. making mentoring more effective through training, tools, and protocols; and 3. aligning the mentoring program with district and school systems and initiatives.

The findings in this report are based on interviews with practitioners in districts serving rural and mid-sized communities, and an urban charter network. Over 65% of students in these districts are economically disadvantaged, and four out of five districts serve a majority-minority student population. Each strategy and action step is discussed in the next section.

Strategies and Action Steps to Support New Teachers

Strategy 1: Focus mentoring on instructional improvement.
- Establish a clear purpose for mentoring: improving teaching and learning
- Invest in mentoring through funding time, training, and the use of an evidence-based instructional rubric
- Create a clear job description, define compensation for mentors, and select the right people for the job

Strategy 2: Support mentors to be more effective by providing training, tools, and protocols for the role.
- Start by establishing trust and a growth mindset
- Ground mentoring in student outcomes and the needs of the mentee
- Use a cycle of coaching for continuous improvement
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Strategy 3: Align the mentoring program with district and school systems and goals.
- Support principals to integrate mentors in the school leadership structure
- Connect mentoring to district and school priorities or initiatives

Strategy 1: Focus mentoring on instructional improvement.

Action Step: Establish a clear purpose for mentoring: Improving teaching and learning

To be successful, mentoring programs need to start with a clear, well communicated goal of improving teaching and learning. NIET works with district and school leaders to clearly establish and communicate the role of mentor teachers and put in place the systems and structures that support their success. Administrators and mentors in partner districts described the lack of goals or structure that characterized mentoring in the past. "Prior to this, our mentoring program was very loosely defined," said Anna Holmgreen, transformation and innovation administrator at Alice ISD in Texas. "For a long time, we had kind of a 'buddy system.' It was more, 'How are you doing? Do you have any questions? Can I help you set up technology in your classroom?'" While new teachers' social, emotional, and logistical needs remain an important priority, it is essential that mentoring be designed to support them to become strong teachers.

Programs with this focus on instruction begin by building relationships and trust as an essential foundation; however, they make clear to both mentors and mentees that the relationship is designed to support them to improve classroom instruction and student learning. Success with students is consistently rated by new teachers as the most important aspect of their job, and focusing mentoring on this priority ensures they feel supported to succeed.

In addition, mentors are trained to provide direct feedback on classroom practices and to support new teachers in developing and executing strong lessons using a cycle of coaching and support that extends over the course of the year. A research-based instructional rubric serves as an explicit guide for changing teacher practices and provides a framework for mentors and mentees to create a path toward growth.

Rhea Blanchard, an eighth grade English language arts teacher and mentor at Assumption Parish Schools in Louisiana, explained how the mentoring program in her district has changed. "We now have a clear vision of how to go about helping these new teachers," she said. "From the initial process of observing using the research-based rubric as a guide, to developing a coaching plan, meeting with the teachers, setting goals, working on what needs to be improved, and then starting over again with a new cycle, the goal is to help the new teacher to be successful, and ultimately, it needs to show up as student achievement."

School and district leaders play a critical role in communicating this new approach and ensuring that both mentors and mentees understand the expectations and priority placed on the work. "What I appreciate is we now have a structured program, and it is respected at a high enough level and prioritized. Not something that might happen, but something that does happen," said Krista Marx, human capital coordinator at Elgin ISD in Texas. "We have support coming from the assistant superintendent of academics, through me, through our campus-level mentor supervisors, to the mentors."

Action Step: Invest in mentoring through funding time, training, and the use of an evidence-based instructional rubric

The mentoring process – forming a relationship, understanding the new teachers' needs, establishing goals, observing classroom practices, and reflecting and planning together – takes time. Often, mentoring is added on top of a full teaching load, meaning mentoring takes place before or after school or even exclusively through phone calls and emails.

While these quick and less formal forms of communication are helpful, time should be built into the day for mentors and mentees to work together. "To mentor a person, you have to see them in the classroom, and you have to see them around kids," said Chris Mueller, a high school math teacher and mentor in Elgin ISD. "It's not something where you can say, let's meet at 4:30 when

school's out for 30 minutes and just talk. If you've never seen them in the classroom, then you can't have the conversations you need to have." District and school leaders must create and protect the time for mentoring, with close attention to scheduling decisions that allow mentors to observe mentees in the classroom.

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NIET's partner districts are using a variety of approaches to provide mentors more time with their new teachers. As noted, the Texas policy requires that mentors spend a minimum of 12 hours per semester with their new mentee, and many teachers use release time, late start times, or common planning periods to reach this goal. Louisiana has established expectations for mentor training and certification and requires a minimum of five hours of support for mentees each week. Many teachers identified time as an ongoing challenge and said the success of the program depends on districts and schools ensuring that mentors have designated time to observe and coach mentees.

Despite the challenges, many districts are successfully creating and protecting this time. Rhea Blanchard described how her district built her schedule for successful mentoring. "My schedule this year is perfect for me and my mentees. I have one extra planning period that I spend in my mentees' classrooms observing them and co-teaching. And then we all have 7th hour planning together, the three of us," she said. "It's really ideal. We can build relationships, we can problem-solve, and we can share ideas, since we are teaching the same subject. I learn as much from them as they do from me."

Another possible strategy to address the challenge of time became available to mentors through the move to virtual learning during the pandemic. Virtual learning created an unexpected benefit for mentors: They were able to observe their mentee more often since classes were recorded and available to be viewed on their own time. Mentors were able to recommend a strategy, receive a video of the mentee putting it into action, and provide feedback or have a conversation about it afterward. As teachers develop greater facility with technology, the ability to record and share practices or strategies expands opportunities for feedback.

In addition to time, mentors cited the specific mentoring process they learned through NIET's training as key to helping them better focus on supporting new teachers' instruction. They described the training as giving them a guide to how to work with their mentees. "With the new training and support this year, it has given guidance and a framework," Mueller said. "In years past, if you're thinking of it in a teacher sense, I have been going in blind with no lesson plans. I feel like now I have done a better job mentoring because I have guidance and criteria. I have set myself goals for where I want to be with my mentees at different points in the year and how to move on to the next phase. It gives us something to reach for."

The training offered by NIET helps mentors take the high-quality teaching practices they use in their own classrooms and coach using those practices with new teachers. Mentors are specifically trained in how to work with adult learners, how to give feedback that will be received and incorporated, and how to use data to guide continuous improvement. The training addresses how mentors can use a research-based instructional rubric, aligned to state teaching standards, as a tool for cycles of coaching that address the individual needs of teachers and their students. This creates consistency and coherence across mentors and reinforces the practices that all teachers are expected to master in teaching their standards and curriculum effectively.

The instructional rubric describes teaching practices across multiple domains and indicators of practice, at different levels of effectiveness, providing a common language for observing and coaching mentees.

"The rubric is a starting point and gives us something to reach for," Mueller said. "Once you start seeing progress on one part of the rubric, you can start moving on to another step. Let's just keep working through each dimension and getting better and better."

Using an instructional rubric to describe strong teaching practices offers an opportunity to make connections between the coaching by mentor teachers and expectations for new teachers in their evaluation system. "There were times in the old mentor program that the evaluation system was brought up, but it really didn't make any sense and felt like it was just something that we had to do," said Mari Hinojosa-Barrera, a first grade teacher and mentor in Alice ISD. "But now that we've been trained and are using the same rubric, it really is something that's relevant to me and that makes me a better teacher for my students. It holds me accountable. It holds my mentee accountable."

Action Step: Create a clear job description, define compensation for mentors, and select the right people for the job

In addition to investing in mentoring through time and training, districts and schools must also select the right people for the job. Mentors need to be selected through a rigorous process, rather than based on who is available during a certain time or because they are the type of teacher who is often given a leadership role. District or school leaders should develop a job description and

select mentors who are well qualified to support new teachers to improve their instruction. Identifying mentors with a strong level of knowledge, who bring a track record of effectiveness as a teacher in their own classroom, is vital. Effective teachers have the ability to provide useful and specific feedback for improvement drawn from their experiences. Training strengthens their skills as a coach, but they need a foundational level of expertise to build on.

Texas policy requires a minimum of 3 years of experience as a classroom teacher, and Louisiana's guidelines for selecting mentors include evidence of a consistent, positive impact on student learning, knowledge of curricular tools and resources, and an ability to communicate effective teaching techniques by generalizing beyond one's own classroom experience.

When we asked district leaders to describe the type of teacher who makes an effective mentor, two characteristics stood out:
1. **Experience and success in supporting student learning** in their own classroom.
2. **A desire to grow professionally** and work with other adults.

"We want experience. They don't have to be a 10-year veteran, but they need experience," said Cindy Blanchard, district pipeline specialist in Assumption Parish Schools in Louisiana. "We want them to be effective in the classroom, so we look at observation data and recommendations from principals. We also want someone who can work effectively with adults."

Another administrator, Jennifer Campbell of Algiers Charter Schools in New Orleans, described looking for teachers who are "thirsty for new learning and want to grow by deepening their expertise and knowledge of curriculum as well as leadership."

Research shows that mentorship is most successful when new teachers are paired with a mentor from their subject or grade level, and this was confirmed by mentors and mentees in our partner schools.[23] District and school leaders described the challenges in adjusting schedules to facilitate better matches between mentors and mentees and the importance of making this a priority. Many voiced the need for flexibility in smaller schools with fewer teachers in each subject area, or in circumstances when a new teacher needs support to strengthen specific instructional skills that might be more effectively provided by a teacher who happens to be outside their content area.

Deliberately matching new teachers with an experienced teacher in their content area or grade level creates the opportunity for deeper coaching that connects the content with teaching strategies or practices. "Being in their shoes and understanding their curriculum and standards gives me better insight into how to help them," said Rhea Blanchard, who mentors two ELA teachers. "I can try out a strategy before I support them to try it in their classroom." The other characteristic she highlighted was her position as a classroom teacher, even as she took on the role of mentor. "Being in the classroom gives me credibility with new

teachers," she said. "If I'm giving a suggestion, I can say, 'This is something I do and here are the results I got.'"

Raising expectations for mentors must be paired with making the role desirable and doable, with compensation, training, and release time. A 2016 study found that effective teachers were not as likely to serve as mentors. More than 40% of math teachers in the study who did not host a student-teacher were more effective than the average math teacher who did serve as a mentor.

Duplessis Primary School, Ascension Public Schools, Louisiana

Researchers also found that mentor teachers received "shockingly little compensation" with an average annual stipend of approximately $200.[24] Compensation is an essential tool for districts to use in recruiting and retaining effective teachers as mentors.

As a result of these and other related findings, increasing compensation for mentor teachers is a core element of the changes in state policy in both Texas and Louisiana. In Texas, districts can apply for a state allotment, which in the first cycle was $1,800 per mentee, and in the second cycle was between $1,500 and $2,500 per district, based in part on whether a district develops its own training program, or partners with an approved provider of training and support. Funds can be used for stipends, release time, or training, which is particularly important as districts build out more comprehensive, high-quality programs. Louisiana has provided state funding to increase mentor stipends, with districts eligible for $1,000 for mentors and mentees, including yearlong undergraduate residents and post-baccalaureate or alternative certification candidates.

After selecting and training mentors, retaining these strong teachers is critical. "When we invest in teachers through the mentor training, we want to make sure they stay with us long term," Campbell said. "We need to support them and make them feel valued in their work." Significantly increased stipends for mentor teachers are a key part of this strategy and signal the priority and importance of the mentor role.

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> —Jennifer Campbell, Administrator, Algiers Charter Schools, Louisiana

It also empowers mentors by providing them with a clear understanding of their role and the authority to carry it out. "Identifying strong teachers and building their leadership and coaching skills is only part of the solution," researcher Jonathan Supovitz writes. "Without empowering teacher leaders with more authority to exert influence on their colleagues to engage in instructional reform, efforts to leverage teacher leadership for school improvement will continue to fall short of their potential."[25]

By creating a clear job description, expectations, and compensation for the role of mentor, districts can help to provide mentors with the skills and authority to influence new teacher practice. This also positions mentors as part of the leadership pipeline and enables school systems to look for these experiences when hiring for administrative roles, including principal and assistant principal.

Summary of Action Steps for Strategy 1: Focus mentoring on instructional improvement.

Challenges	Action Steps
The goals of mentoring are unclear and not tied to instructional improvement.	*Establish a clear purpose for mentoring: improving teaching and learning.* Mentorship has a clear goal of improving instruction using a cycle of coaching and feedback.
Mentorship responsibilities are an add-on to other responsibilities without dedicated time for the role. There is minimal training or guidance on how to set or reach goals.	*Invest in mentoring through funding time, training, and the use of an evidence-based instructional rubric.* Mentors are given dedicated time within their day for observation and support with their mentee, along with training and support in using a research-based instructional rubric to guide their work.
Mentors are chosen based on who is available: instructional coaches, district employees, retired teachers, or a teacher with the same planning period.	*Create a clear job description, provide compensation for the role, and select the right people for the job.* Mentors are deliberately selected based on their effectiveness as a teacher and ability to work with adults, are compensated for the role, and are paired with a mentee from their field.

Strategy 2: Support mentors to be more effective by providing training, tools, and protocols for the role.

Action Step: Start by establishing trust and a growth mindset

While the ultimate goal is to improve instruction, this cannot be done without establishing a trusting relationship between mentors and the new teachers they work with. Mentors build this trust by showing new teachers that they care about them on a personal level and that they care about helping them grow in the profession. "It's personal," said mentor teacher Mari Hinojosa-Barrera. "You've got to make that connection with the person, really understand who they are, and get them to see that you are going through the same struggles." The stress of the first few years of teaching has been well documented, and mentoring can alleviate that anxiety.[26]

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> —Mari Hinojosa-Barrera, First Grade Teacher and Mentor, Alice ISD, Texas

Beyond personal and emotional support, mentors build trust with their mentees by offering useful, constructive feedback. New teachers are hungry for help improving their practice, and they welcome feedback when it comes from a trusted source.

When asked how her mentor built a trusting relationship with her, new teacher Hannah Smith in Assumption Parish described the quality of the feedback she received. "Her feedback was always so purposeful," she said. "It wasn't just, 'Oh you did a great job.' It was, 'You did a great job on this, and let's work on this for next time.' She would sit with me and explain, 'Here is where you can go about changing this,' and telling me exactly what I did well and exactly what I could do better. At that point, I really had that trust with her that I could go to her with any kind of problem because I knew that she was going to be honest with me and also uplifting."

When mentors build trust and focus on the new teachers' strengths when giving support, they can help new teachers feel comfortable asking for help. When feedback results in student success, it helps new teachers to develop a growth mindset that sticks with them throughout their career.

Action Step: Ground mentoring in student outcomes and the needs of the mentee

A key aspect of targeting support to the needs of the mentee is using student work and data. Mentors are trained to use a process of looking at student work, identifying areas where students struggled, discussing the teaching strategies that could be used to teach the standard, and planning ways to adjust or re-teach in order to guide the mentee to improve practice. "We work together with student data, looking at the numbers and saying, 'OK, let's go back and look at each question and break down the questions. How did we approach this and where could it have gone wrong and what are some ways we could go back and re-teach?' We also talk about how to anticipate those misunderstandings before teaching it next time," said Stacy Brammer, a middle school science teacher and mentor in Hearne ISD in Texas.

Data-driven feedback and support is a key component of NIET's mentor training. Mentors are taught how to track and monitor student work and student data, use the instructional rubric as a means of guiding improvement based on what they see happening in their classroom observations, and center their feedback on student outcomes. Mentors learn to help new teachers develop a student-centered approach to instruction. They break down student learning targets or standards, anticipate student needs, plan instructional strategies to meet those needs, and reflect and adjust based on student work.

"The mentor training helped mentors focus on what students need to learn. Before you even start planning, you have to know what you are looking for in terms of student work," said Campbell. "In terms of support, it starts becoming an informal coach where they are meeting with the new teacher and talking to them to see how well they understand and internalize what they want the students to do. And it helps the new teacher to start thinking about things differently – their approach to the lesson, their approach to strategies – because they are focused on what they want their students to be able to do at the end of the lesson. It's a different mindset when you start thinking that way."

As mentors get to know their mentees, they use that knowledge to plan and structure their support. The mentors in this report discussed several strategies they used to understand a mentee's needs, including reviewing and discussing lesson plans, observing mentees teaching in-person or virtually, examining student work and data together, watching a video of an expert teacher and discussing it together, and using guided questions to help mentees reflect on their own practices. In 2020-21, mentors found that viewing recordings of a mentee's lesson was a useful new tool in understanding their needs and one they would like to continue to use in the future.

These techniques are skills mentors learn through training. "In training, we were given a way of questioning that doesn't make the mentees feel like they are being criticized, but makes clear that the goal is to help them find more effective ways of supporting students to succeed," Mueller said. "Once you get to know them and have enough conversations with them, you can say, 'I notice that you don't seem to be getting the result you are hoping for. Let's see if we can make a change that leads to a different result.'"

Through this targeted support, the mentors and mentees work together on a wide variety of complex components of teaching. Among these are:

- **Analyzing student data** and using it to drive instruction;
- **Increasing student engagement** and ownership of their learning;
- **Anticipating student questions** during independent activities or when creating lessons; and
- **Grouping students** based on student strengths and needs.

Denise Garcia, a middle school science teacher and mentor in Alice ISD in Texas, gave this example of tailoring her support toward the needs of her mentee: "One of my mentee's goals was related to increasing student achievement on the state test. I supported him to break down his goal to manageable, concrete steps and provide different resources and strategies he can use with his students. With virtual learning, we had issues with students showing up to class,

and that's added a real struggle for him. We worked together, and he changed his goal to getting more student engagement in a virtual setting. Now his initial and revised goals ultimately align because student engagement impacts student success on test scores."

Garcia's example illustrates the targeted, flexible support that is possible through high-quality mentoring. Mentors are able to provide specific instructional practices aimed at helping the mentee achieve a specific goal and adjust those strategies in response to changing classroom context, all while keeping student learning as the central focus.

Action Step: Use a cycle of coaching for continuous improvement

To impact teaching and learning, mentoring cannot be a string of one-off meetings or observations. The mentoring process must be cyclical and focused on continuous improvement. One big mistake mentors make is trying to fix everything at once through their feedback for a new teacher who is then overwhelmed. The coaching cycle helps ensure that there is focus on one particular area and allows the mentee and mentor to work on that before addressing the next one.
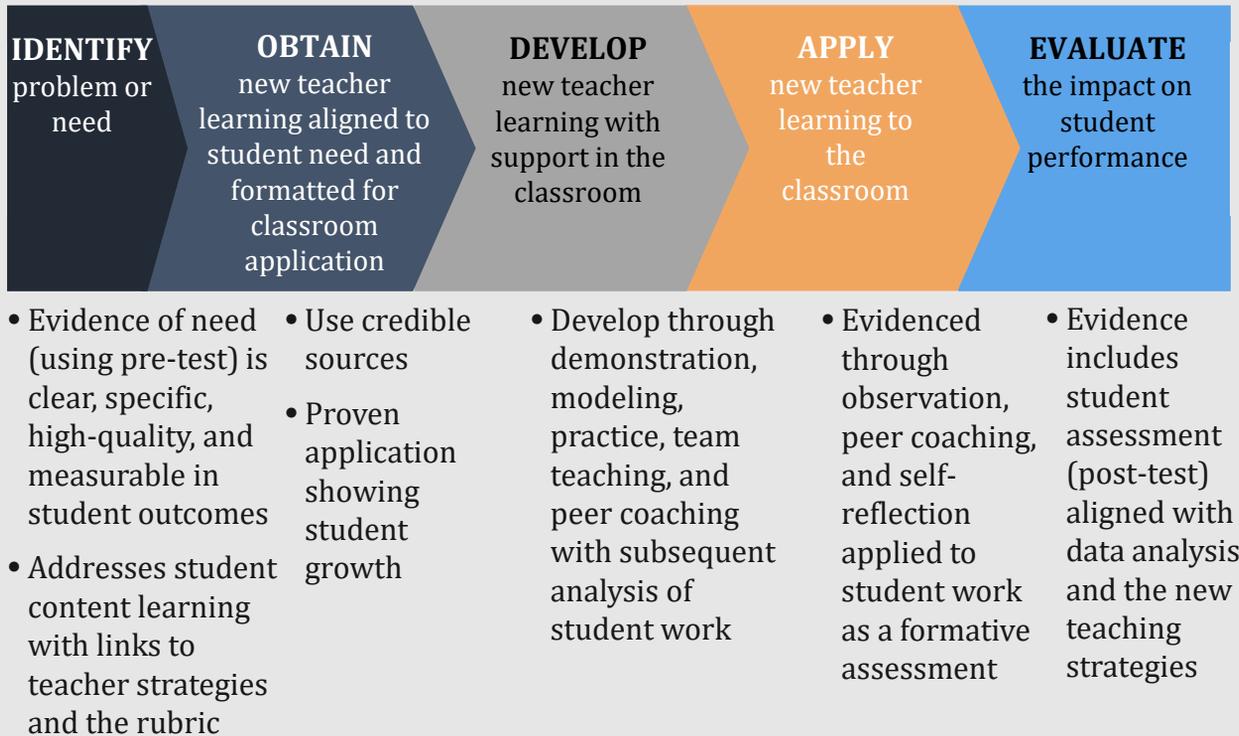
The coaching cycle starts with the mentor and mentee discussing a problem of practice, setting a goal, and planning how to approach the problem.

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For example, Hinojosa-Barrera worked with her mentee on lesson planning based on the district curriculum. "We're sitting down, dissecting a standard, and looking at the complexity and the specificity of it to see what we could do better."

Then, the mentee tries the strategy in their classroom, and the mentor observes the lesson or reviews lesson videos, looks at resulting student work, and discusses the results with the mentee. They work together to plan next steps based on student learning. "If kids aren't getting it, we'll come back,

adjust, and do what we need to do to hit that standard," said Hinojosa-Barrera. "If they are getting it, we know we can move on to the next thing." NIET uses the *Five Steps for Effective Learning* to guide mentors in creating a clear process for helping new teachers to identify a student need, obtain new learning to address that need, develop and then apply that learning in the classroom, and evaluate the impact on students. Using a protocol such as the *Five Steps for Effective Learning* helps new teachers continuously improve their classroom practices.

Five Steps for Effective Learning

IDENTIFY problem or need	OBTAIN new teacher learning aligned to student need and formatted for classroom application	DEVELOP new teacher learning with support in the classroom	APPLY new teacher learning to the classroom	EVALUATE the impact on student performance
• Evidence of need (using pre-test) is clear, specific, high-quality, and measurable in student outcomes • Addresses student content learning with links to teacher strategies and the rubric	• Use credible sources • Proven application showing student growth	• Develop through demonstration, modeling, practice, team teaching, and peer coaching with subsequent analysis of student work	• Evidenced through observation, peer coaching, and self-reflection applied to student work as a formative assessment	• Evidence includes student assessment (post-test) aligned with data analysis and the new teaching strategies

Research by Guskey (2000) identifies four principles common to professional development practices and strategies used in successful initiatives that have produced demonstrable evidence of improvements in student learning. These have been adapted by NIET to create the Five Steps for Effective Learning protocol.

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Knowing where new teachers are in their knowledge of instructional materials and teaching strategies through the cycles of coaching helps school and district leaders to better support new teachers.

Coaching Strategies

Mentor teachers learn to employ a range of coaching techniques that can be adapted to suit teachers' individual needs. Some teachers might benefit most from "lighter" coaching in which the mentor teacher observes the teacher applying a new strategy during a lesson and then follows up with reflective questions and feedback.

Other teachers might benefit most from observing the mentor teacher stepping in to model a strategy with students. Still other teachers might need more intensive coaching where they co-teach a lesson to a classroom of students right alongside the mentor teacher. These more interactive forms of coaching require trust and a strong working relationship between new teachers and mentors.

NIET's mentor training on the coaching cycle also works to address another common gap in instructional coaching: following up with teachers after the initial coaching session to be sure they have sufficiently understood everything. In some cases, mentor teachers might need to provide several sequential coaching sessions to support a teacher who is struggling. The mentor teacher might observe a lesson, follow up to debrief about it, and then go back to the classroom to co-teach a lesson with the teacher. Finally, mentor teachers can provide additional one-on-one assistance. For example, a mentor teacher might help their mentee plan a lesson or how to formatively assess students at the end of a unit or lesson.

Action Step: Create opportunities for mentors to collaborate

Although the work of mentoring is individualized, it should not be done in isolation. Marx, the human capital coordinator at Elgin ISD, shared the benefits of intentionally fostering collaboration between mentors and continuing to grow their skills. "It helps them to be able to team up and share ideas," she said. "If the mentors are able to come together and they know that their mentee is having a difficult time with lesson pacing, for example, and one person knows someone who is really great at lesson pacing, you could do a shared viewing of that person's lesson. 'Stronger together' is real, and when mentors are able to collaborate instead of having seven different mentors trying to find seven different examples of one thing, they are able to pool their resources and find the one best example and share among the group."

Training mentors using an evidence-based instructional rubric helps to build a common language and establish the foundation for future collaboration. By working to build a common language and understanding of strong classroom teaching using an evidence-based instructional rubric, mentors have an opportunity to get to know each other during training. District administrators and building leaders can facilitate ongoing collaboration by holding districtwide mentor meetings, creating opportunities for mentors to collaborate and form professional connections. Mentors visit classrooms together and receive follow-up support as they work collaboratively to strengthen their skills. Ongoing supports over the course of the year are critical, since mentors run into numerous challenges and need the ability to get help in thinking through these challenges and possible solutions. Another successful support strategy used by several districts is to establish district-level positions to support mentors across multiple schools and facilitate collaborative learning opportunities for mentors and mentees.

The mentor trainings, especially when they are part of a statewide policy as in Texas and Louisiana, can be a chance for mentors to collaborate across district lines. Louisiana specifically promotes this by training district-level administrators through regional collaborations and a state teacher leader summit. In addition, the state added a domain in the teacher evaluation rubric to create a tool for providing feedback to mentors on their mentoring role.

Somerset High School, Somerset ISD, Texas

Summary of Action Steps for Strategy 2: Support mentors to be more effective by providing training, tools and protocols for the role.

Challenges	Action Steps
Relationship building is left to chance. Feedback doesn't provide detailed or actionable feedback and is not connected to a path toward growth and improvement.	***Start by establishing trust and a growth mindset.*** The relationship is established as a partnership, and deliberate work is done to establish a mentoring process focused on growth and actionable feedback. Trust and relationship building are built into the training.
Student work is not systematically used by mentors in their coaching. Support is one-size-fits-all or driven by the experience and teaching style of the mentor.	***Ground mentoring in student outcomes and the needs of the mentee.*** Feedback is grounded in student work and data. Classroom observations using a research-based framework support mentors to understand the mentee's strengths and respond to their specific needs.
Support is given through a few isolated observations that do not build off one another.	***Use a cycle of coaching.*** Utilize an explicit coaching cycle where the new teacher is regularly observed and receives feedback.
Mentors work independently with little interaction or collaboration.	***Create opportunities for mentors to collaborate.*** Collaboration at the school and district levels strengthens practice and builds a community of teacher leaders.

Strategy 3: Align the mentoring program with district and school systems and goals.

Action Step: Support principals to integrate mentors in the school leadership structure

The impact of mentoring has the potential to extend beyond the individual work mentors do with new teachers, especially when they are supported by building leaders and seen as valuable members of the school leadership team. Mentor programs can create connections between the support of mentors and the ongoing professional learning structures and systems in the school, creating continuity in feedback, support, and expectations over time.

In addition, mentors help to create a collaborative culture and strengthen the focus on instructional improvement. Rhea Blanchard described how her position as a classroom teacher, a mentor for new teachers, and a member of the leadership team allows her to see where issues arise in the implementation of school and district programs or initiatives. "As I see something in my work with new teachers," she said, "I bring up those issues to my leadership team so that we can problem-solve how to make it work better for everybody." Mentor teachers in these districts are increasingly participating as members of their school leadership team.

Administrators noticed shifts in the school and district culture around instruction after redesigning their mentor program to include more training and support. "Conversations are changing," Campbell said. "I'm hearing more critical conversations schoolwide around the instructional materials and around the standards."

While mentors can enhance the culture and leadership capacity in a school, mentors need the support of school leadership to do this. Mentors are more effective when their principal understands and prioritizes the work they do, providing release time or coordinating schedules to facilitate time for mentoring and time for mentors themselves to collaborate. "Principals who have been trained can see the connections between mentoring and the rest of the professional development system, and they are more aware of what their new teachers and mentors are going through," said Holmgreen, who supervises the mentoring program at Alice ISD. "It makes it a more systemic approach."

In Texas, in order to access state mentoring program funds, building-level administrators and other staff who support new teachers commit to attending mentor program training. This level of engagement enhances the support they are able to provide. In Louisiana, administrators are encouraged to participate in training to strengthen their understanding, support, and oversight of mentors and to connect the mentor program to school systems and goals.

District and school leaders are less likely to bypass or marginalize mentors when they have participated in mentor training and have a clear sense of the role and responsibilities. Mentors can be used more strategically when their role is understood in the context of school staffing structures and job-embedded support systems.

Action Step: Connect mentoring to district and school priorities or initiatives

Mentoring has the potential to increase district capacity and cohesion when integrated into the priorities and initiatives of the district as well as the school. For example, mentors can be used to help new teachers, along with other teachers in the building, learn about and implement district initiatives in their classrooms. In Louisiana, mentors have played an important role in the implementation of new, high-quality instructional materials.
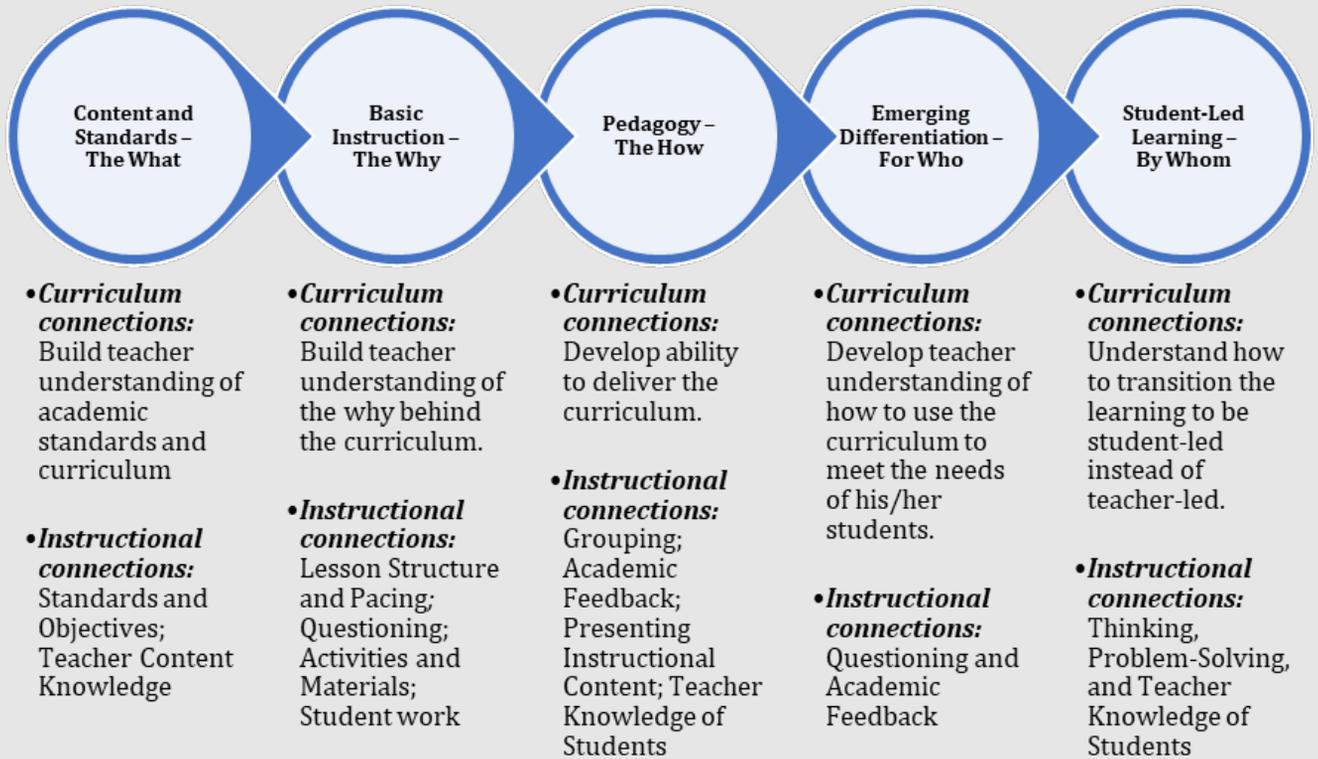
"Before, our new teachers were thinking that they could not ask additional questions or plan something that is not written in the curriculum. Now through the support of their mentor, they are more confident in looking at the standard, their student needs, and how to use high-quality instructional materials and resources to support every student to succeed," Campbell said. "Mentors are getting the teachers to look at the standard and then think about where that standard is addressed in the curriculum, where they can anticipate student difficulty, what additional questions they can ask, and

whether students are meeting the standard." NIET is working with leaders in Jefferson Parish Schools in Louisiana to help teachers make connections between high-quality instructional materials and the instructional strategies needed to help students reach mastery. The *Teacher Learning Progression on Curriculum* outlines connections between curriculum and instructional skills at various levels of expertise, helping mentors to pinpoint specific areas for improvement and target their support based on their mentee's needs.

The progression illustrates how new teachers can continue to deepen their knowledge of the curriculum and how to use it to increase student success. Starting with a basic knowledge of academic standards and curriculum, teachers build their understanding of the "why" behind the curriculum and how it can be used to meet individual student needs. As they build their instructional skills, they are able to support students to take ownership of their own learning and engage in thinking and problem-solving with peers, described in the curriculum progression as "student-led learning."

Teacher Learning Progression on Curriculum

Content and Standards – The What	Basic Instruction – The Why	Pedagogy – The How	Emerging Differentiation – For Who	Student-Led Learning – By Whom
• *Curriculum connections:* Build teacher understanding of academic standards and curriculum • *Instructional connections:* Standards and Objectives; Teacher Content Knowledge	• *Curriculum connections:* Build teacher understanding of the why behind the curriculum. • *Instructional connections:* Lesson Structure and Pacing; Questioning; Activities and Materials; Student work	• *Curriculum connections:* Develop ability to deliver the curriculum. • *Instructional connections:* Grouping; Academic Feedback; Presenting Instructional Content; Teacher Knowledge of Students	• *Curriculum connections:* Develop teacher understanding of how to use the curriculum to meet the needs of his/her students. • *Instructional connections:* Questioning and Academic Feedback	• *Curriculum connections:* Understand how to transition the learning to be student-led instead of teacher-led. • *Instructional connections:* Thinking, Problem-Solving, and Teacher Knowledge of Students

From: High-Quality Curriculum Implementation: Connecting What to Teach with How to Teach It, NIET, 2020

Using a tool like the *Teacher Learning Progression on Curriculum* helps new teachers to understand how instructional decisions, such as how they use grouping or activities and materials, support the engagement and learning of each student. Mentors can help new teachers identify strategies that create equity and inclusion, such as providing lower-performing students with scaffolded supports to accelerate learning and engage with grade-level material. As a result, new teachers see the connections between improvements in their teaching and improvements in student learning.

A robust mentoring program that helps new teachers to improve their practice and better support student growth is highly valuable and motivating. When this system is prioritized and connected to other systems and initiatives in the school and district, it has the potential to attract and better support new teachers and contribute to the continuous growth of all educators.

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Summary of Action Steps for Strategy 3: Align the mentoring program with district and school systems and goals.

Challenges	Action Steps
Principals and district leaders are not substantively involved in the mentoring program. Mentors work independently and their work is not integrated with school-level leadership and instructional efforts.	***Support principals to integrate mentors in the school leadership structure.*** Building and district-level leadership are trained in mentoring best practices and support mentors in their work. The work of mentors is a key part of the school's instructional plan, and mentors are seen as a valuable member of the school leadership team.
The work of mentoring is isolated from other school or district initiatives, such as curriculum or the evaluation system.	***Connect mentoring to district and school priorities or initiatives.*** Mentorship is integrated with school and district priorities and initiatives and aligned to ongoing professional learning systems.

CONCLUSION

Evidence demonstrates that high-quality mentoring increases the retention of new teachers, while making them better classroom instructors. At the same time, evidence – and the experiences of teachers – also demonstrates that too many districts fail to provide new teachers with effective support. Making mentoring more consistent, high-quality, and connected to systems for improving teaching and learning offers a high-impact strategy for new teacher success.

Changes in state policy can support these improvements by providing funding for districts to extend mentoring over multiple years, offer high-quality training opportunities, and provide significantly higher compensation for the role. Building on these state improvements, districts can then establish expectations, ensure release time, and create accountability for the work of mentors and mentees.

Shifting the purpose of mentoring to focus on instructional coaching requires districts and schools to provide additional time, training, support, and resources for mentors.

One important tool is the use of a research-based instructional framework or rubric that defines strong teaching practice across multiple domains and indicators of practice. The instructional rubric creates a common language for mentors and mentees to use to discuss teaching practices. Other important ways to strengthen mentoring include creating a clear job description and expectations for mentors, sufficient compensation to attract effective teachers to the role, and a process for recruiting and selecting teachers with a growth mindset along with the skills and dispositions to be effective.

As with any instructional coaching, effective mentoring must be grounded in student work and student data and be responsive to the needs of teachers and their students. Mentors get to know their mentee's needs in a variety of ways, such as reviewing and discussing lesson plans, observing mentees teaching in-person or virtually, examining student work and data together, watching and discussing a video of an expert teacher, and using guided questions to help mentees reflect on their practices. Using student work, the coaching cycle creates an opportunity to set and achieve measurable goals based on the individual needs of teachers and their students. These skills require training and support for mentors as they in turn support new teachers.

Mentors can also have a larger impact on schoolwide improvement efforts if empowered to do so, such as by integrating them into school leadership teams and aligning their work to school and district initiatives. District leaders and principals can facilitate ongoing collaboration by holding districtwide mentor meetings and creating opportunities for mentors to collaborate and form professional connections. These interactions support mentors in understanding and connecting their work to district systems and priorities, such as new curriculum implementation. Seeing their role as advancing these initiatives provides mentors with a greater sense of involvement and impact at the school and district levels. In their own school, including mentors on the school leadership team elevates their role and brings their experiences working with new teachers into the decision-making process.

By shifting the purpose of mentoring to focus on teaching and learning, providing high-quality training and support for mentors, and integrating mentoring into school and district systems, districts can better support new teachers to be successful earlier in their career. States can play a role in elevating the importance and effectiveness of new teacher mentoring, concentrating resources on schools serving higher numbers of poor and minority students, and targeting mentoring on instructional improvement. Given the growing number of new teachers in the profession, and the challenge of staffing classrooms with effective educators, improvements in new teacher mentoring are long overdue.

Appendix A: State Policy Approaches to New Teacher Mentorship

LOUISIANA	TEXAS
• Louisiana piloted in 2018, and established in 2019, a state Mentor Teacher Certification. • Mentors who support pre-service teachers during their one-year teaching residency or teachers earning an alternative job-embedded teaching certificate are required to be certified as a mentor teacher. • To earn the certification, mentor teachers must pass the Louisiana Mentor Teacher Assessment Series or other state-approved assessment. • Certified mentor teachers can also work with new teachers or other teachers in need of support. • There are currently 29 state-approved training providers. • The state allocated funds for districts to pay $1,000 stipends to mentor teachers. Source: Louisiana Department of Education	• Texas established the Mentor Program Allotment as part of House Bill 3, a comprehensive education bill, in 2019. • Districts can apply to receive the allotment by developing a mentoring program that meets state requirements. • The plans must include dedicated time for mentors to meet with new teachers for at least 12 hours per semester. • Districts may develop their own training or use one of the state-approved training providers. • Mentor teachers work with teachers within their first two years of teaching. Depending on funding levels, mentoring can expand to support teachers who are teaching in a new grade or subject area. • Eligible districts receive an allotment per mentee teacher. Funding is based on factors such as district size, rural status, and the percentage of economically disadvantaged students, and has ranged from $1,500 to $2,500 in recent years. • Funds can be used for mentor stipends, release time, and training. Source: Texas Education Agency

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