

10 Mentoring and Induction Challenges in Rural Schools and How to Address Them

AUGUST 2019



Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank Kathy Dunne from the Northeast Comprehensive Center and Dan Frederking from the American Institutes for Research (AIR) for reviewing this brief and providing feedback.

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The Challenge

Beginning teachers need strong support systems. In addition to adjusting to the demands of the teaching profession, beginning teachers are often required to teach heavy classloads, manage the most challenging classrooms, and take on non-teaching responsibilities in addition to their regular teaching assignments.

Although beginning teachers face similar challenges in every type of school, these challenges are often amplified in rural schools (Showalter, Johnson, Klein, & Hartman, 2017), which frequently have a higher proportion of beginning teachers than their urban or suburban neighbors (Gagnon & Mattingly, 2015). For example, many beginning teachers in urban, suburban, and rural schools are assigned to teach multiple courses and grade levels, which requires additional planning and preparation time. However, this situation may be even more challenging for a beginning teacher in a rural school with few staff because no other teachers are teaching that course or subject.

Challenges for beginning teachers in rural schools are even further amplified by the fact that these teachers are more likely to have to juggle a greater number of responsibilities to meet the needs of their small school communities. Geographic isolation, poor teacher compensation, and dispersed leadership structures contribute further to the difficulties that rural schools face in attracting and retaining effective teachers, particularly the most talented beginning teachers. The good news is that a viable solution exists.

A Solution

Strong mentoring and induction supports have been linked with improvements in teacher retention, instructional practice, teacher working conditions, and even student achievement (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Schmidt, Young, Cassidy, Wang & Laguarda, 2017; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). However, in rural schools, mentoring and induction programs must be designed and implemented with the unique challenges of the local context in mind. Strong, locally designed mentoring and induction supports can help to address the unique challenges faced by rural schools related to beginning teacher development and retention. This brief outlines 10 common challenges encountered by rural schools when implementing mentoring and induction programs along with strategies to address the challenges and examples from the field.



1 The demand for qualified mentors is greater than the supply.

Rural areas often struggle to find qualified teachers to serve as mentors. Many districts specify a minimum number of years of teaching experience in their mentor qualification criteria, which may limit the pool of qualified applicants in particular schools. However, certain qualities of effective mentors do not necessarily correspond with years of experience, such as evidence of outstanding teaching practice; the ability to model effective, standards-based teaching; and strong intra- and interpersonal skills (Moir, Barlin, Gless, & Miles, 2009).

Strategies to Address the Challenge

- Reframe mentor qualification and selection criteria to prioritize evidence of effective teaching over years of experience. For example, the minimum qualification to become a mentor could change from 5 years of experience to 3 consecutive years of effective or highly effective teacher evaluation ratings.
- Create a pool of mentors at the district or regional level instead of the school level. Consider full or partial release time to allow for travel between schools.

- Offer stipends for local retired teachers to serve as mentors.
- Start a home-grown mentor pipeline by identifying early-career teachers who demonstrate potential to become teacher-leaders. Have one-on-one conversations with these teachers about their career goals, invest in their professional learning, and provide a vision for their growth within the school.



DISTRICT SPOTLIGHT

A rural district in eastern Oklahoma asked retired, highly effective teachers to serve as mentors to beginning teachers on a part-time basis. The district asked principals to identify recently retired teachers with a strong record of success in the classroom. The retired teachers were offered an honorarium to mentor beginning teachers. Mentors also received guidance and training on the mentoring process to ensure that they were supported in their part-time role.



2 Beginning teachers are not matched with a mentor in their subject area or teaching role.

Research suggests that matching beginning teachers with a mentor in the same field can lead to increased teacher retention and mentor effectiveness (Aguilar, 2013; Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). This is also true for beginning teachers and mentors who share similar teaching roles. For example, beginning special education teachers who are matched with special education mentors who have experience teaching similar students and grade levels are more likely to stay in the profession (Griffin, Winn, Otis-Wilborn, & Kilgore, 2003). However, matching beginning teachers with someone in their subject area or teaching role may not always be possible in rural schools with small staffs. In these situations, several creative solutions may help to ensure that beginning teachers are matched with appropriate supports.

Strategies to Address the Challenge:

- Recognize that beginning teachers need both content-specific support and basic orientation support and provide these supports through different methods.
- For content-specific support, explore options for technology-based distance mentoring or partnering with other rural districts in the region to create a bank of potential content-specific mentors.
- For orientation support, provide a mentor located in the same building who can answer just-in-time questions about school procedures and logistics.





PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT

The New Teacher Center's [Electronic Mentoring for Student Success](#) program matches beginning teachers in the critical shortage areas of math, science, and special education with mentors who have the same teaching experience. Beginning teachers have access to content facilitators and specialists including practicing scientists, mathematics educators, and special education faculty. Beginning teachers engage in interactive online learning communities with support from the content facilitators and specialists who answer just-in-time questions, curate online resources, and moderate discussion forums.



3

Beginning teachers may teach multiple courses, grade levels, and subjects.

Teachers in rural schools, especially those at the secondary level, routinely have to prepare for and teach multiple classes or courses every school day. Their classloads frequently span multiple grade levels and may even involve teaching multiple subjects. Learning to manage this workload can be daunting for beginning teachers. Mentors can help beginning teachers learn efficient planning strategies and give important instructional feedback that can be applicable across multiple contexts.

Strategies to Address the Challenge:

- Focus mentoring feedback on high-leverage practices that cut across content areas and grade levels. See [Module 6](#) of the Mentoring and Induction toolkit created by the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders (GTL Center) for information on how high-leverage practices for all learners can be integrated into instructional feedback from mentors.
- Leverage technology for subject-specific instructional feedback support.
- Pool regional planning and curricular supports focused specifically on managing multiple preps.



DISTRICT SPOTLIGHT

A Texas regional service center developed a series of one-page practice guides with suggestions on how to thrive in a rural school while teaching multiple subjects or grade levels. A service center specialist traveled to district schools once a month to provide mentoring support to beginning teachers. The specialist helped a first-year science teacher instructing six different grade levels arrange the course curriculum so that multiple grade levels were studying similar content and using similar lab materials at the same time. For example, while students in Grades 6–8 were learning about simple and complex machines, ninth-grade students were using physics formulas to calculate the forces generated by the machines. During this unit, each class was working to grade-level standards, but the teacher was able to streamline planning and preparation time due to the vertical alignment of the content and similar needs for lab materials. In addition, the service center provided ongoing mentoring support to the beginning teacher to address other challenges associated with teaching science.



4

Teachers of color may be less likely to receive sufficient mentoring and induction support.

Teachers of color frequently serve in economically disadvantaged, low-performing, and hard-to-staff schools, including schools in rural areas. These schools struggle to retain teachers of color for many reasons. For example, teachers of color are often relegated to roles as disciplinarians instead of instructional leaders. A lack of emphasis on culturally relevant pedagogical practices (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Ginsberg & Budd, 2017) can create a culture where teachers of color do not feel that they belong. Additionally, teachers of color may feel isolated or unwelcomed in small rural communities and may not have opportunities to form professional networks with other teachers of color (Jackson & Kohli, 2016). Culturally responsive mentoring and induction supports can help lessen the isolation experienced by beginning teachers of color and can help rural schools create environments to better support and retain a diverse teacher workforce.



Strategies to Address the Challenge:

- Consider the importance of mentor match for teachers of color. Implement strategies to match beginning teachers of color with experienced teachers of color, including using distance mentoring and pooling mentors at the district or regional level.
- Create mentoring programs focused on equity and social justice for rural communities.
- Help mentors identify and address issues that are driving teachers of color out of the profession. Train mentors to engage in conversations about race and educational equity with beginning teachers. Provide training for mentors to reflect on culturally relevant mentoring practices.
- Revise mentor selection criteria to prioritize culturally relevant teaching practices and a commitment to equity.
- Form partnerships with Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and other minority-serving institutions to strengthen professional networks for beginning teachers of color.
- Consider recruiting teachers of color in cohorts to reduce social and professional isolation.
- Identify the drivers of shortages of teachers of color in rural communities. Use [Insights on Diversifying the Educator Workforce: A Data Tool for Practitioners](#) as a resource to examine diversity gaps across the entire educator career continuum.



PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT

[Call Me MISTER®](#) (Mentors Instructing Students Toward Effective Role Models) was founded at Clemson University in 2000. The mission of the program is to increase the pool of available teachers in South Carolina's lowest-performing schools, many of which are rural. The program focuses on recruiting outstanding homegrown candidates, many of whom are candidates of color, from underserved, socioeconomically disadvantaged, and educationally at-risk communities. Candidates pursue approved programs of study in teacher education at participating colleges while receiving tuition assistance in the form of loan forgiveness. Candidates also receive structured mentoring supports, including academic counseling, cultural and social support from a cohort, and assistance with job placement. The program now operates in 24 colleges and universities across South Carolina as well as 9 partner universities across the country.



5 Beginning teachers feel professionally isolated.

Teaching at a school with few staff and few opportunities to connect with colleagues can sometimes translate to feelings of professional isolation for beginning teachers. Beginning teachers in rural schools may lack opportunities to collaborate with colleagues, especially other early-career teachers facing similar issues. Additionally, beginning teachers in rural schools with few staff often do not have the same level of access to experienced teachers with similar responsibilities who could be role models and assist them through the first years of becoming an effective teacher (Parsley, 2018).

Strategies to Address the Challenge:

- Design a strong orientation component for the induction program. Ensure that beginning teachers feel welcomed into their communities on a personal and professional level and connected to their colleagues.
- Invest in professional learning communities that allow beginning teachers to connect with teachers with similar teaching assignments. Consider creating online professional learning communities for beginning teachers to serve this purpose or leverage groups that are facilitated virtually with an educator preparation program or education service center.
- Connect beginning teachers with professional associations and organizations specific to their teaching assignments (e.g., National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, Council for Exceptional Children, National Association for the Education of Young Children, etc.). These organizations can provide access to professional development

opportunities, help beginning teachers expand their professional networks, and provide opportunities for formal and informal mentoring relationships.

- Consider ways to structure mentorship opportunities to promote collaboration across subjects. Because some rural schools may only have one teacher for a particular class or subject, it may be easier to connect with colleagues across subjects. For example, teachers could collaborate so that while the 10th-grade English teacher is teaching *The Grapes of Wrath*, the 10th-grade history teacher could be teaching about the Great Depression.



DISTRICT SPOTLIGHT

Mentors in Dime Box Independent School District (ISD) in east Texas are encouraged to help their beginning teachers identify professional organizations aligned to their teaching areas and attend those organizations' regional meetings. For example, a beginning math teacher and her mentor attended the Conference for the Advancement of Mathematics Teaching (CAMT) together to facilitate the expansion of the mentee's professional network beyond the school building. The district rewarded mentors with bonuses on the retention rate of their mentees when their mentees signed a contract for another year in the same district.

6 Beginning teachers feel personally isolated.

In addition to feelings of professional isolation, living in small, geographically remote communities can also lead to feelings of personal isolation. Beginning teachers who are new to the community have to adjust to the culture of their community while simultaneously adjusting to the demands of the teaching profession. Many rural areas have a strong sense of community rooted in a shared historical and cultural heritage, which can make it difficult for newcomers to find opportunities to socialize, make friends, and integrate into the community. Additionally, teachers in rural communities are often held in high regard or given special, elevated status in the community based on their profession and level of education. Beginning teachers may have trouble adjusting to being held up as a role model both in school and out in the broader community, which can lead to feelings of isolation.

Strategies to Address the Challenge:

- Include a strong community orientation component in the induction program to welcome beginning teachers into their communities. Provide adequate time to ensure that needs such as housing and financial arrangements are taken care of as well as professional orientation. Consider providing resources for spouses of teachers as well.
- Through orientation and ongoing mentoring, provide beginning teachers with an understanding of the culture of their school communities. Highlight community norms and expectations, such as stopping to chat with parents in the grocery store. Introduce beginning teachers to prominent community members, such as school board members or the mayor. Offer strategies to help beginning teachers build relationships with



community members, such as attending school sporting events, wearing school colors on Fridays, observing local holidays, and appreciating the cultural importance of special community events like the rodeo.

- Develop a district- and campus-level plan to quickly involve the beginning teachers in community activities and to foster the development of relationships with the community.
- Ensure that mentors are giving beginning teachers feedback on their use of culturally relevant practices so that beginning teachers are better able to connect with their students and their communities. Ensure that beginning teachers are equipped to identify and address the specific needs of students in their schools, such as culturally relevant pedagogy, strategies for English language learners, and college and career counseling.

7 A lack of educator preparation options makes it difficult to create a smooth preservice to inservice transition for beginning teachers.

Rural schools are often far away from the nearest college, university, or traditional educator preparation program. Alternative preparation pathways for teachers may exist in rural areas, but they may be limited in scope and quality. Additionally, some models that are frequently used to bring groups of beginning teachers to rural areas, such as cohort models, may actually be counterproductive in the long run because they prioritize short-term relationships within the cohort at the expense of developing the long-term relationships with rural residents that are likely to keep teachers in the community (Rooks, 2018).

Strategies to Address the Challenge:

- Create strong partnerships between the district and educator preparation programs, even if those programs are at a distance. Developing these partnerships can help establish recruitment pipelines in areas with critical teacher shortages. The [CEEDAR Center](#) has resources to support local partnerships with educator preparation programs, such as this [guide](#) for developing quality fieldwork experiences for teacher candidates.
- Involve educator preparation program faculty in the design and implementation of mentoring programs. Use their expertise to ensure that throughlines exist in instructional expectations from preservice to inservice.

- Consider connecting with local community colleges to establish a recruitment pipeline.
- Establish rural residency programs, like the one highlighted below, to give preservice teachers the opportunity to experience teaching in a rural community.
- Leverage options for distance education including online or hybrid classes.



DISTRICT SPOTLIGHT

Teachers in Hawaii, particularly on the Big Island, experience feelings of personal isolation. In response, the Hawaii Department of Education, Kamehameha Schools, and several other community organizations collaboratively developed a pilot program called the [Kahua Induction Program](#). The program is designed to provide new teachers with a strong foundation for their first year in the teaching profession. The Kahua Program provides new teachers with a mentor as well as academic, social-emotional, and place-focused support. Kahua provides new teachers with an orientation to the Islands and specifically to the schools and communities where they teach. The program also features cultural and place-based sensitivity training to enhance curriculum development, instruction, and assessment and a community mentor to help navigate living in Hawaii.



PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT

The [Colorado Center for Rural Education](#) at the University of Northern Colorado supports the needs of rural educators in Colorado across the preservice to inservice continuum. With the assistance of the Center, preparation programs in Colorado have partnered with rural districts to set up transition programs to assist beginning teachers once they have been hired in a rural school. As part of the program, preservice students visit rural schools to observe how the schools operate and interview teachers and principals in those schools. The partnerships have also established residency programs in which inservice teachers work in rural schools for one semester. And finally, when a teacher is hired in a rural district, he or she continues to work with his or her preparation program for the first year after graduation.



8

Youth from rural areas frequently leave their communities in search of other career opportunities.

Teacher shortages are common in rural communities and are exacerbated by the fact that young people are far more likely to leave rural communities for jobs than come to rural communities for jobs (Kumar, 2018). Many rural communities find that their best bet to maintain a steady pipeline of teachers is to focus on mentoring and cultivating the interests of young people in the community rather than trying to recruit from outside the community. In fact, the majority of teachers in the United States work within 20 miles of the high school they attended (Reininger, 2012).

Strategies to Address the Challenge:

- Invest in Grow-Your-Own programs that include strong inservice supports, including mentoring and induction. Think about customizing mentoring supports for targeted audiences. For example, focus on motivated high school students who strongly identify with their rural communities and do not aspire to move away, or paraprofessionals who already live in and are invested in the community.
- Begin mentorship experiences in high school. Provide opportunities for high school students to participate in programs like [Educators Rising](#) or other experiences designed to spark interest in the teaching profession.
- Connect with school counselors to provide enrichment experiences related to career exploration in the teaching profession.



PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT

In 2017, the University of West Alabama launched the [Black Belt Teacher Corps](#). This program places home-grown teachers in the rural areas of Alabama's "black belt," which is named for the soil that supported 19th century cotton plantations. The cohort-based program provides teacher candidates with financial support and special training to design and implement place-based education projects that strengthen the bonds between schools and communities. Junior and senior candidates receive a \$5,000 scholarship per year plus a \$1,000 stipend for their projects. Many candidates are first-generation college graduates who intend to return to their home towns to teach.



9

Rural schools lack resources to provide consistent, coherent professional development experiences for beginning teachers.

High-quality professional development is important for beginning teachers. However, rural schools face several unique challenges related to professional development (Peltola, Haynes, Clymer, McMillan, & Williams, 2017). First, rural schools with few staff often face challenges scheduling professional development, so fewer opportunities exist for peer-to-peer learning. Additionally, rural districts may not have the capacity for a local professional development planning team or the resources to support dedicated professional development providers.

Strategies to Address the Challenge:

- Tap into locally operated regional cooperatives or partnerships to provide professional development opportunities for beginning teachers. Examples of existing cooperatives may include rural school associations, boards of cooperative educational services (BOCES), cooperative educational services agencies (CESAs), or other state-supported regional education offices.
- Use virtual supports like coaching and professional learning communities to deliver professional development.





PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT

Several districts belonging to the [Organization of Rural Oklahoma Schools](#) developed a cooperative to pool resources and staff to support beginning teachers. One common challenge across the cooperating districts was appropriately supporting beginning teachers with targeted professional learning to address their immediate needs, such as classroom management. The district cooperative contracted with a consultant to facilitate three in-person professional learning opportunities at a central location. The consultant also conducted virtual consultations with each beginning teacher to discuss and develop strategies for addressing their specific classroom challenges. The duration and frequency of the consultations was determined by the beginning teacher, consultant, and principal.



10 Teachers need pathways for leadership and professional growth.

In order to keep teachers invested in their careers in rural schools, opportunities for advancement and growth must be available. Teachers tend to stay in rural areas and remain in the profession when real prospects for increased job-related responsibilities in the teachers' areas of expertise and interest are available, and when appropriate compensation for these responsibilities is available (Lazarev, Toby, Zacamy, Lin, & Newman, 2017). Effective use of this strategy retains more teachers and also allows beginning teachers to become more engaged and involved with students and schools.

Strategies to Address the Challenge:

- Develop career ladders in rural communities that lead to teacher leadership opportunities. Focus on teacher leadership roles that allow experienced teachers to remain in teaching roles while supporting others, such as becoming a mentor.
- Ensure that mentors receive training and professional development supports to grow in their roles as teacher-leaders.

- Incentivize additional education-related advancement (micro-credentialing and other specializations needed in the district) for mentors and potential teacher-leaders.
- Offer a mix of responsibilities to potential teacher-leaders, such as teaching while being a part-time mentor or professional learning community facilitator.



DISTRICT SPOTLIGHT

A rural district in Washington state developed a teacher leadership program to encourage teachers to become leaders in their schools while remaining in the classroom. Teachers identified leadership roles matched to their school's needs and their personal strengths. Then teachers submitted proposals to the district with a rationale for how their leadership role would help increase capacity in their rural schools. Teachers whose proposals were selected were supported with additional planning time to carry out their new leadership roles. Some of the leadership roles created included technology support contact, resource specialist (provides access to a variety of classroom materials for lessons), content specialist, mentor, data coach and facilitator, and professional learning community facilitator.



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This work was originally produced in whole or in part by the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders with funds from the U.S. Department of Education under cooperative agreement number S283B120021. The content does not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the Department of Education, nor does mention or visual representation of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the federal government.

The Center on Great Teachers and Leaders is administered by American Institutes for Research and its partners: the Council of Chief State School Officers and Public Impact.