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Polly G. Haselden  
*University of North Carolina*

Pamela K, De Loach

Jennifer Miller

*See next page for additional authors*

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## **Systems of Support: The Educators with Disabilities Caucus and Its Mentoring Program**

### **Authors**

Polly G. Haselden; Pamela K. De Loach; Jennifer Miller; Monica Campbell; Lynn Boyer; and Nancy Anderson

# Systems of Support: The Educators with Disabilities Caucus and Its Mentoring Program

**Polly G. Haselden, Pamela K. De Loach,  
Jennifer Miller, Monica Campbell, Lynn Boyer,  
and Nancy Anderson**

In the field of education, critics have described the experiences of beginning teaching as “sink or swim, trial by fire, or boot camp experiences.”<sup>1</sup> Novice teachers face a critical transition period as they evolve from students who are solely responsible for themselves to teachers who are responsible for the learning of all of the students in their classrooms. During this transitional time, the outlook for the success rate of these teachers is disheartening. For instance, Ingersoll noted that 50% of novice teachers leave the field of education within their first five years of teaching.<sup>2</sup> Given these alarming statistics, it is clear that more interventions must be implemented to support and retain teaching professionals.

To understand what must be done to support novice teachers, the field must understand the challenges that teachers face during this critical period. These include: (a) identifying effective teaching methods; (b) developing appropriate classroom management strategies; (c) having appropriate materials and supplies for their classrooms; (d) satisfying the learning styles of different types of students; (e) effectively handling discipline issues; and (f) having enough time for appropriate instructional planning.<sup>3</sup> In addition, beginning teachers were concerned with paperwork, parental engagement, and the need for outside support;<sup>4</sup> while beginning special education teachers were concerned with policies, procedures, paperwork, and interactions with others.<sup>5</sup>

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**Polly Haselden is Assistant Professor in the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. Pamela K. De Loach is a special education teacher for students with severe and multiple handicaps with the Hillsborough County School District, Tampa, Florida. Jennifer Miller is a special educator for the Montgomery County Public Schools, Maryland. Monica Campbell is Assistant Professor in the Department of Early Childhood and Special Education at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. Lynn Boyer is Executive Director of the Office of Special Education, Extended and Early Learning in the West Virginia Department of Education. Nancy Anderson is Special Education Policies and Procedures Coordinator for the Virginia Department of Education’s Training/Technical Assistance Center at George Mason University.**

These findings provide professionals with a set of identified needs of beginning teachers. One common intervention has been the use of mentoring within school districts.<sup>6</sup> Mentoring programs have been well-publicized in the last decade as a means to support and retain beginning teachers.<sup>7</sup> Although mentoring programs have a common, defined purpose to provide support to beginning teachers, the types of mentoring programs vary greatly.<sup>8</sup> Mentoring programs also vary as a result of how structural or procedural factors are addressed. Characteristics related to time, for instance, the amount of time allowed or required for mentoring and the structured or ad hoc nature of how mentoring time occurs, create great differences across programs. How mentors are paired with mentees is another factor. Some programs have guidelines as to the types of mentors selected for new teachers, i.e., a beginning science teacher paired with a tenured science teacher, and others do not.<sup>9</sup> Although studies have been conducted to determine the effects of mentoring programs on teacher attrition, the type of mentoring program must be taken into account when evaluating their effectiveness.<sup>10</sup>

Results of research on the effectiveness of mentoring programs have been positive. It has been found over time that novice teachers who participate in mentoring programs use a variety of teaching practices, are better prepared for instruction, are more confident, and have better classroom management techniques.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, studies suggest that beginning teachers who are mentored have greater self-confidence, improved job satisfaction, a heightened rate of success and effectiveness, and an increased commitment to the school organization as a whole.<sup>12</sup>

Beginning educators who have disabilities may have additional challenges to face besides those commonly experienced by new teachers, challenges that are then extended to mentoring programs provided to support them. Are initial difficulties the result of their novice situation, their disabilities, or a combination of the two? What kinds of modifications, adaptations, accommodations, or resources can assist them in handling any difficulties their disabilities may present in an educational context? Mentors who are experienced educators, either with disabilities themselves or without disabilities but with extensive experience advocating for and supporting educators with disabilities, can be a strong resource to provide disability-related support to new teachers with disabilities. This is the premise of the national Educators with Disabilities Caucus Mentoring Program.

## **The Educators with Disabilities Caucus**

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) has long had an interest in promoting the teaching profession to individuals with disabilities. In 1992, the CEC’s President, the late Ron Anderson, appointed a presidential commission on special educators with disabilities to examine the issues affecting special educators with disabilities and make recommendations to the organization to improve opportunities. At the 1996 annual convention, the representative assembly acted on the work of the commission by adopting a resolution that directed the association to take a leadership role on the issues facing educators with disabilities, as follows:

- Clearly and unambiguously present the message through its words and actions at all organizational levels that education professions are open to individuals with disabilities;
- Discuss the issues involved in the recruitment, preparation, employment, and retention of educators with disabilities more widely with other organizations and the general public along with recommended solutions to the issues;

- Build the coalition of organizations and agencies needed to improve opportunities for current and prospective educators with disabilities; and
- Use the size and strength of the Council for Exceptional Children to effect changes that will provide such opportunities.<sup>13</sup>

In 1996, the Educators with Disabilities Network was developed. The National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education, a federally funded project that was located at the CEC, assumed responsibility and management of the network. Through 2001, the clearinghouse published and distributed materials about the network, developed and hosted its website, created a listserve, and maintained the membership list. However, the network lacked status for advocacy within the CEC. Its placement within the clearinghouse also limited its capacity to establish a national voice and presence. In 2002, clearinghouse staff and some of the original organizers of the network discussed the philosophical and technical issues involved in moving it from a loose, somewhat hidden network to the status of a more high profile caucus within the CEC. During the convention that year, the network held a general meeting to consider the development of a caucus within the CEC, and the turnout was overwhelming. Educators, with and without disabilities, and preservice teachers with disabilities from various backgrounds across the country attended. With the momentum of that meeting, a board of directors for the newly formed Educators with Disabilities Caucus was established, and the clearinghouse began to make plans to transfer the responsibility and management of the group to its own members.

In February 2003, the clearinghouse used email and regular mail to inform all network members that the Educators with Disabilities Network was being dissolved, and they were encouraged to join the Educators with Disabilities Caucus. The membership list housed at the clearinghouse was removed in July 2003, and a caucus codirector developed a new caucus membership list. The network website was reconfigured to show the change in name and status of the group. The purpose of the caucus is to provide a formal means for members to suggest, advise, and advocate within the CEC and monitor the organization's policies and actions regarding educators with disabilities. The group also acts a resource and network for educators with disabilities as well as those who work with them.<sup>14</sup> One of the major means by which it does this is through its mentoring program.

### **The Educators with Disabilities Caucus Mentoring Program**

From the inception of the caucus, it was felt that a mentoring program for educators with disabilities should be a major component. As for all educators, collaboration is crucial for educators with disabilities. For some individuals with disabilities, however, positive collaborative experiences may be hindered by hidden or even overt disabilities. Providing individuals who are experiencing problems in this area with mentors who have encountered similar situations or are familiar with circumstances facing these individuals is an invaluable resource. Many caucus members themselves have disabilities and have overcome obstacles to become successful professors, educators, and administrators.

The primary focus of the mentoring services is to provide the support of experienced educators with disabilities to preservice educators with disabilities through a period of transition into their careers in education, support that can complement the kinds of assistance that university student support services provide to students with disabilities. Both potential mentors and mentees must submit an application

to the caucus.<sup>15</sup> The caucus mentoring program is designed to begin upon a student's admission to a teacher preparation program to assist students through coursework, internships, and student teaching, and then to continue as the educators with disabilities transition into their own classrooms. An important emphasis of the caucus mentoring services during this transition period is self-advocacy. The caucus established a list of guidelines and responsibilities for mentoring teams participating in the program and piloted the first mentoring partnerships during the 2002-2003 school year. To date, the numbers of individuals participating in the mentoring project has grown from three mentor pairs in the states of Florida and North Carolina to over 20 pairings throughout the nation. Information concerning the first three mentoring partnerships is presented below.

#### *Mentoring Teams*

All of the pilot mentees were in graduate programs and were given the opportunity to help select their own mentors. As a result, two teams were composed of individuals both of whom had documented disabilities, and one team was composed of a mentee with a disability and a mentor without a disability. One team's mentor was a tenured educator with a learning disability. This individual had over twelve years of experience as an educator and was paired with an educator with cerebral palsy who had just returned to graduate school. The mentee had been released from his previous job as an educator and was returning to school to pursue his Master's degree in another area of education. The mentor of the second team was a tenured educator without a disability. This individual was selected by the mentee who had requested the mentor when she was approached about participating in the pilot study. The mentee was an educator with three years of experience pursuing a Master's degree in special education. She was diagnosed with learning disabilities in reading and written expression as well as attention deficit hyperactive disorder and used a wheelchair. In the third team, the mentor was an individual with cerebral palsy who had 25 years of experience teaching special education. The mentee, a graduate school student pursuing her Master's degree and teaching certification, had several issues with severe gait ataxia and tremors, seizures, polyarthralgias, severe arthritis, asthma, and dupuytren contractures. Additionally, her fibromyalgia caused her to experience short-term memory loss.

#### *Collecting Information About the Mentoring Partnerships*

Data were collected throughout the implementation of the mentoring program to guide the efforts of the caucus; address what needs to be continued; what needs to be changed within the program; and provide groundwork for the future. Members of all teams were encouraged to establish consistent, scheduled contact with each other and to use telephone calls and email for situations that arose outside of the planned contacts. Time logs of each contact and field notes were the primary sources of data obtained during this phase of the program. All data were obtained over the course of two semesters, a span of six months. At the completion of the pilot year, the chairs of the mentoring program analyzed the information to identify common issues across the teams and make suggestions for improvements to the program.

#### *Information from the Mentoring Partnerships*

All three mentoring teams addressed two issues from the mentees' perspectives. First, mentees felt that the accommodations that they used to participate in classes in graduate school were affecting the learning of others. For instance, the noises made by their Alpha

Smart communication devices, the keyboarding required for note-taking, and repeated clarifications and questions could be distracting to others in their classes. Second, accessibility was a concern across the teams. The physical characteristics of the buildings in which they were educated, e.g., the locations of ramps, automatic doors, and sheltered walkways, could, at times, be inconvenient. The two mentees who used wheelchairs also reported that their physical disabilities hindered their participation in group activities and affected their stamina during classes.

Distance was an issue noted by mentors when the members of a partnership were not geographically close. In one situation, distance was the variable that determined the difference between immediate and delayed support. This, in turn, caused the mentor to become frustrated with the amount of time it took to provide support as well as the communications methods, telephone calls and email messages. Although the time-consuming nature of providing services was felt to be distance-related by one mentor, the other two mentors noted that providing support for mentees simply took a lot of time. For instance, helping a mentee establish and use a support system within the framework of his or her educational environment is a challenging task regardless of the distance.

All of the participants in the piloting, though, were thankful for the availability of email and telephone calls for timely contact as problems did occur between the mentors' and mentees' scheduled contacts. All of the mentees were grateful for outside support. Two explained that it was much easier to deal with the stresses of school knowing that there was a person to help them process problems and, even more importantly, work on processes to prevent issues related to their disabilities from occurring. Moreover, mentees who were working in educational settings were thankful for having someone outside of their educational environment for mentoring purposes. Both mentees and mentors in the situation in which distance was a factor felt that support, regardless of the location, was better than having no outside support at all. Finally, and importantly, all of the mentees in the pilot effort of the caucus mentoring program are still in their current positions in school or work.

### Consider the Caucus Mentoring Program

Teaching one's own classroom in a school creates many challenges for new educators; doing so with a disability can add yet another set of tests. What if the educator needs help with the physical act of writing? How could she ask for help without other staff members feeling uncomfortable or sorry for her? How could she establish her own support system in her school? She may be spending hours on paperwork because she feels she has to physically do it by herself. With the assistance of a program like the caucus mentoring project for educators with disabilities and the support of her school administrator, she may be able to think of possible accommodations, advocate for her needs, and act upon a solution.

The insights gained from similar experiences are a critical first step in helping new educators with disabilities become successful, insights that are not always present in other school, district, or state mentoring programs. One of the codirectors of the piloting effort stated it this way:

One member of a mentoring team was already involved in another mentoring program. However, she felt more comfortable participating in the caucus mentoring program. I feel that it was simply because the mentor understood the additional

issues that face the educator with a disability in the classroom as well as in the continuing studies at the university level that were occurring at that time... One important support that the caucus mentoring program offers beginning educators with disabilities is the option of choosing to not disclose a specific disability, but at the same time, having appropriate supports in place. Because of this, beginning educators with disabilities have two support systems through their individual schools and the caucus. One support system, the school system, is to help with district procedures. And the caucus provides another avenue to help manage the personal issues that come up with having a disability in the classroom.

School and district leaders provide the next step that helps educators with disabilities. The knowledge that educators with disabilities and their advocacy efforts are supported by administrators empowers them in their careers, for their own good and the good of all of their students.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Richard Ingersoll and Thomas Smith, "Do Teacher Induction and Mentoring Matter?," *NASSP Bulletin* 88 (March 2004): 28.
- <sup>2</sup> Richard Ingersoll and Thomas Smith, "The Wrong Solution to the Teacher Shortage," *Educational Leadership* 60 (May 2003): 30-33.
- <sup>3</sup> Robert Dollase, *Voices of Beginning Teachers: Visions and Realities* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992); Scott Veenman, "Perceived Problems of Beginning Teachers," *Review of Educational Research* 54 (1984): 143-178; Lou Hulling-Austin, "Teacher Induction Programs and Internships," in *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education*, ed. W. R. Houston, (Reston, VA: Association of Teacher Educators, 1990), 535-548; John Sears, James Marshall, and Ann Otis-Wilborn, *The Exceptional Teacher's Handbook: The First-Year Special Education Teacher's Guide for Success* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 1994); Susan Whitaker, "What Do First-Year Special Education Teachers Need?," *Teaching Exceptional Children* 33 (Sept.-Oct. 2000): 28-36.
- <sup>4</sup> Sears et al., *The Exceptional Teacher's Handbook*; Whitaker, "What Do First-Year Special Education Teachers Need?"
- <sup>5</sup> Whitaker, "What Do First-Year Special Education Teachers Need?"
- <sup>6</sup> Ingersoll and Smith, "The Wrong Solution to the Teacher Shortage."
- <sup>7</sup> Susan Odell, "Induction Support of New Teachers: A Functional Approach," *Journal of Teacher Education* 37, no. 1 (1986): 26-29.
- <sup>8</sup> Ingersoll and Smith, "Do Teacher Induction and Mentoring Matter?" The first type would be structured to be developmental and foster growth for beginning teachers while the other would serve as an assessment tool for determining if new professionals are adequately prepared for a career in teaching.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> Richard Ingersoll and John Kralik, *A Review of Empirical Research on the Effects of Teacher Mentoring Programs in Elementary and Secondary Schools* (Denver, CO: The Education Commission of the States, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> Whitaker, "What Do First-Year Special Education Teachers Need?"

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Clayton E. Keller, Christine C. Givner, and Dianne Raeke Ferrell, "Policies and Practices Within Professional Organizations," in *Enhancing Diversity: Educators with Disabilities*, ed. Ronald J. Anderson, Clayton E. Keller, and Joan M. Karp, (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 1998), 260.

<sup>14</sup> See <http://www.cec.sped.org/diversity/edc.html> for more information about the EDC.

<sup>15</sup> See <http://www.cec.sped.org/diversity/edc.html#3> for an application.