

Research Brief

Mentoring New Teachers to Increase Retention

A Look at the Research

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Overview of The Problem

In recent years the demand for new teachers across the nation has risen steeply. Demographic factors (such as the baby boom echo) and legislative policies (such as class size reduction) have resulted in the increased need for new teachers, while promising young graduates are often discouraged from entering the profession by low salaries and poor earnings opportunities. Many districts attempt to fill shortages by hiring non-credentialed teachers, who, if they are interns attending a credentialing program, are considered “highly qualified” under the terms of NCLB. Under-qualified and least-experienced teachers are often assigned the most difficult classes, and tend to be concentrated in special education, urban schools, and in schools serving students who are poor, minorities, and English learners. Factors such as these lead to high rates of attrition among practicing teachers, leading some educators to suggest we have a teacher retention problem rather than a teacher shortage problem.

High attrition rates have negative effects on student achievement. This is exacerbated by the fact that schools with large numbers of poor and minority pupils have more trouble retaining teachers and the most difficulty attracting new applicants for teaching positions. The continual flight of teachers from these schools creates burdensome extra costs to the district. Hiring and professional development are direct costs, increased instability in the school culture represents an indirect cost.

A Possible Solution

In addition to hiring new teachers, with or without credentials, districts often attempt to fill vacancies in such hard-to-staff schools by offering financial incentives or providing enhanced induction support. This last approach, usually in the form of some kind of mentoring program, has become increasingly popular over the past 20 years. Mentoring programs vary greatly from formal to informal, from the most comprehensive support of a full-time, highly trained mentor with a reasonable caseload who meets regularly with the new teachers, to an informal buddy system of support from an assigned fellow teacher who receives no release time, no compensation, and no training. Like mentoring, retention, and its antonym attrition, are not clearly-drawn concepts. First, we must be clear whether we are talking about retention in the teaching profession or retention within a particular school or district. Second, the time period should be defined: are we talking about retention after one year or after five? Third, we must know whether uncertified and part-time teachers as well as those with full-time positions and full certification are included in the statistics. Fourth, different writers use different terms: attrition has been variously referred to in the literature as migration, turnover, leaving, reassignment, wastage, mobility, or transition.

Teachers quit for many reasons that may be broadly divided into two categories: working conditions and personal factors. Working conditions include school demographics (percentages of poor and minority students), administration (lack of support from the principal), low salary, few resources, teacher’s level of control over decision making, and low

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student motivation. Personal reasons include starting a family, spouse's job relocation, and poor health. Some triggers of attrition or turnover (such as salary and family reasons) are probably immune to mentoring or other kinds of teacher support, some may be averted by support (such as student factors and school climate), and some (such as feelings of stress, lack of support systems, and poor communication with administration) are definite candidates for reversibility by mentoring.

A number of researchers have studied the effects of induction and mentoring on teacher retention. Richard Ingersoll analyzed data from the national Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) and found that as the number of reported components of induction increased, so teacher turnover was reduced during the first year of teaching (Figure 1).

The seven identified induction components consisted of a mentor, common planning time, new teacher seminars, communication with administration, a support network, reduced teaching load, and a teacher's aide. Less than one percent of the sample reported receiving all seven components, and three percent recorded having no induction support at all. Most, then, received some level of induction support, but there is no data examining which are the most critical components.

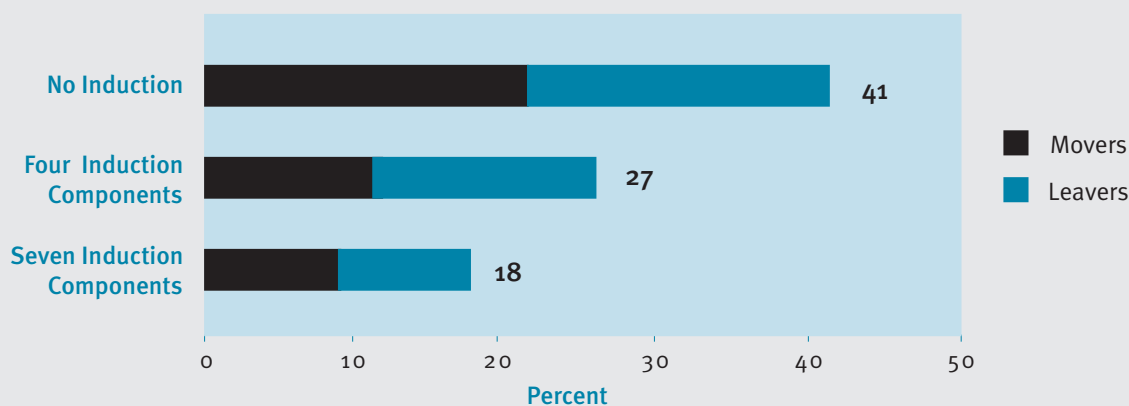
The California Council on Teacher Education (CCTE) published data collected from state participants in the

Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment (BTSA) program and compared state teacher retention rates with those of the nation (Figure 2). The data suggested that BTSA was having a positive effect on teacher retention.

As can be seen, after four years 84% of the 1995–96 new teachers were still in the system, compared to the national retention rate of 67%. Of course, using payroll data alone means that some of these individuals may not be in the classroom but employed elsewhere in the public school system. Similarly, those who left may have taken positions in private schools or out of state. Also, the full range of induction program support is represented by the California BTSA programs, so there is no estimate of the effects of a particular kind of support, such as mentoring, or how many received the most comprehensive support.

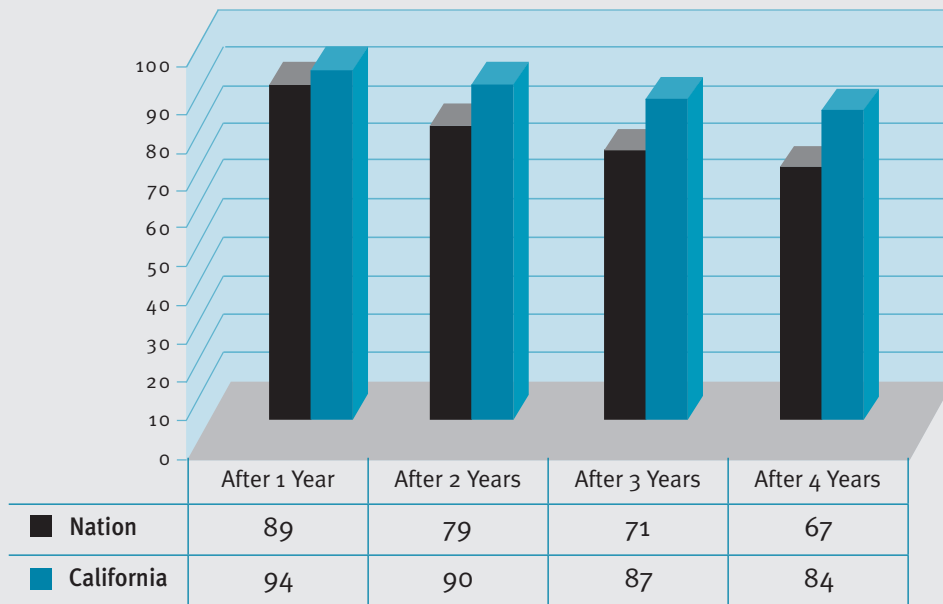
A study conducted by researchers at the New Teacher Center at the University of California Santa Cruz collected data from teachers who had been in their Santa Cruz New Teacher Project (SCNTP) mentoring program six years earlier. They found that, after six years, 94% were still in education and 88% were still classroom teachers. These data are superimposed on the chart in Figure 2 and all data are extrapolated to cover six years (Figure 3). It can be seen that those who received the comprehensive SCNTP support were less likely to drop out of teaching than those in the California and national samples.

Figure 1:
Percent Turnover of Beginning Teachers After One Year,
According to Amount of Induction Support They Received



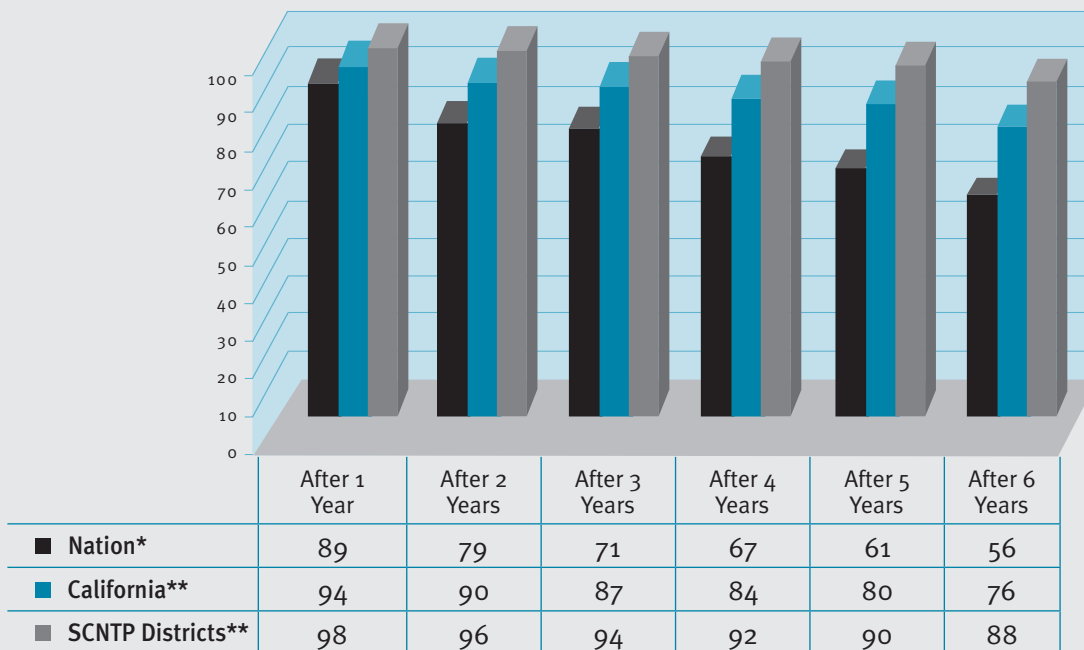
Source: Smith, T. & Ingersoll, R. 2004 "What are the Effects of Induction and Mentoring on Beginning Teacher Turnover?" *American Educational Research Journal*. 41: 3: 681–714

Figure 2
Teacher Retention Rates: Comparing California to the Nation



Source: CCTC, Sept. 17, 2002

Figure 3
Percent of Teacher Retention Over Six Years:
Comparing Rates of SCNTP Teachers to the State and Nation Statistics



* Extrapolated Years 5-6

** Extrapolated Years 1-5

Sources: Ingersoll (2002); CCTC (2002); Strong & St. John (2001)

A second study conducted four years later replicated these findings with a larger group of teachers. These two studies are the only examination of retention among beginning teachers that follows them for that length of time.

Summary and Recommendations

These studies together with other research, both quantitative and qualitative, suggest that mentoring may be correlated with the retention of new teachers in the profession, and may also be related to decreased turnover from district to district and school to school. While none of the studies proves a causal connection, the accumulated evidence is compelling. Reduced attrition and turnover have the potential for saving schools and districts funds that are sorely needed for student resources, teacher aides, professional development, and other support to improve the working conditions of teachers.

The concept of mentoring and new teacher support is now widely accepted as desirable, but the features that distinguish a highly effective program from one that provides only nominal support have not been clearly defined. It is recommended that funding be authorized to study not whether mentoring and induction are worthwhile, but what features of mentoring and induction programs are the most effective.

Of course, retention is only one of the desired outcomes of mentoring and induction, especially in an era when long-term retention in any profession may no longer be the goal of the new generation. Other outcomes of interest are student achievement and the development of teaching practice, outcomes that are notoriously difficult to measure. Studies that look at these outcomes are now beginning to appear and will be discussed in separate research briefs. Also, we should estimate and compare the costs and benefits of expensive comprehensive mentoring programs in order to assist school administrators in determining whether there are sufficient long term returns to warrant the initial expenditure.

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