SREB

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Invest in Educators Series

Mentoring New Teachers

A guide to mentor support and teacher induction using the SREB Teacher Induction Framework

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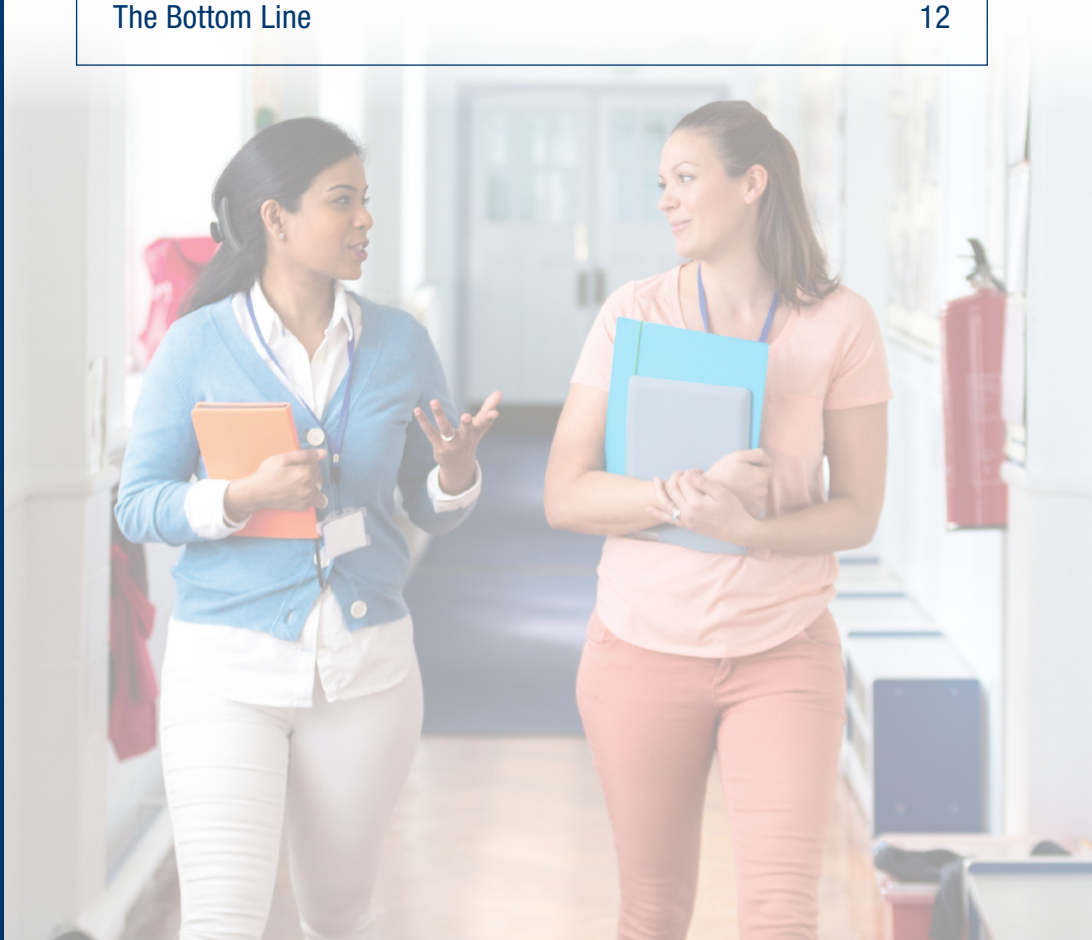

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A Renewed Approach to Mentoring New Teachers

Teaching is hard.

It is an art – a highly skilled profession. Teachers have limited time, resources and public support for ensuring that students with a wide variety of academic and behavioral needs meet increasingly rigorous learning expectations. New teachers do this work without the benefit of experience — and increasingly more new teachers begin without full preparatory training — all while juggling unique challenges associated with beginning a new career.

These challenges contribute to turnover among early-career teachers.

Approximately half of new teachers in the South leave the profession in their first five years. Staff attrition costs districts around the nation billions of dollars each year, contributes to low teacher morale and disrupts student learning. The top reasons for this high attrition rate, according to various studies and surveys, include 1) a lack of sufficient support from administrators and colleagues, including instructional, cultural and behavioral support, 2) a lack of resources, and 3) high stress, fatigue or burnout.

Sixteen new teachers attend an orientation. Their principal spends three or four hours describing the school's student learning goals, the district's evaluation rubric and options for professional learning activities.

Down the hallway, four teacher mentors meet with their district coach. They are all first-time mentors and feel as apprehensive as the new teachers they are about to support.

How can districts and schools make mentors and new teachers good at what they do?

In response, many school districts use mentoring to support new teachers.

School districts nationwide have designed induction programs for new teachers. A common element of these programs is assigned mentors, who guide new teachers' professional learning.

But not all mentoring programs effectively serve new teachers.

Induction should help novice teachers successfully adapt to the culture and context of the schools where they begin their teaching career so they have a positive impact on student learning. It should respond to novice teachers' pedagogical needs, bolster their confidence in their ability to teach their content, and help them grow their instructional expertise and professional identity.

This report was adapted from the Southern Regional Education Board's 2018 brief *A Fresh Look: Mentoring New Teachers*, by former SREB employee Torie Mekos. Additional contributors include SREB's Megan Boren, director for educator workforce, Amanda Merritt, division director for development and innovation, Debbie Barnett, leadership coach, Debbie Anderson, program director for Teaching to Lead, and Juliana Coleman, instructional coach. The report was produced with support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

For mentor teachers, support should expand their leadership skills, particularly in leading professional learning, providing effective instructional strategies and conducting observations with meaningful and actionable feedback.

Most school districts provide limited support for novice teachers. Effective induction programs provide individualized experiences for each teacher, with support specific to the person, the grade level and content area assigned for that school year and challenges encountered.

Where does your district or school fall on this continuum?

No Support

Educators receive no formal guidance or help from leaders, designated mentors, coaches or other professional support.

Compliance-Driven

As part of a required support program, educators complete growth plans and consult with mentors.

Problem-Driven

Mentoring structures and learning activities are linked to specific challenges encountered by educators.

People-Driven

Leaders, mentors, coaches, professional learning communities and other growth strategies collectively support educators' entry and progress in the profession.

School districts can make mentoring programs better.

This brief describes three areas that districts and schools should concentrate on when designing, implementing or improving mentoring programs for new teachers. Taking action in these three areas will ensure that both teachers and their mentors receive the type of support with the most impact— people-driven support.

1. Create a tiered system of support for educators.
2. Upgrade the support provided to mentor teachers.
3. Address challenges that new teachers *really* face.

Creating a Tiered System of Support for Educators

How can districts and schools help mentors support new teachers' needs?

All educators in any role need and deserve support. Just like new teachers need support, so do mentor teachers and even leaders.

New teachers' needs can be considered in three different levels. Mentors' roles and the guidance they need differ at each level, as should their strategies for novice teacher support.

Straightforward Needs

In current practice, districts, schools and mentors most often act as basic information providers to meet teachers' low-level needs. It's natural to do so because, at this level, support can be provided immediately and easily.

Examples of teachers' straightforward needs include:

- Logging in and using software to take attendance
- Knowing the procedure for requesting a substitute
- Using the copier

However, most of this information can be shared at orientation or by numerous colleagues in the first working days and weeks. Overall, concentrating the majority of mentoring efforts at this level is **not the most effective use** of valuable time, resources or human capital. Plus, if learning to communicate in concise and engaging ways is not included in their mentor selection or professional development, districts run the risk of inundating new teachers with information and procedures.

Moderately Complex Needs

Great mentors act as thought partners for new teachers. Teachers' days are filled with constant decision-making and new teachers who are not accustomed to this often experience decision-making fatigue.

Examples of teachers' moderately complex needs include:

- Talking through the physical layout and rules of their classroom
- Goal setting and lesson planning
- Determining the best ways to collect, grade and enter assignments
- Writing an informal script to prepare for parent conferences

This type of support is **what new teachers need the most** but are least likely to receive. Mid-level support helps new teachers make and manage key decisions in ways that create smoother personal and professional transitions. Mentors have the greatest impact on teachers when they act as thought partners who balance empathy and expertise. There is a pressing need for districts, schools and mentors to prioritize mid-level needs.

Highly Complex Needs

Mentors act as skill developers for new teachers. New teachers from all preparation pathways will need targeted, problem-driven skill development for common challenges and people-driven skill development for individual needs.

Examples of teachers' highly complex needs include:

- Developing critical thinking questions to gauge student learning
- Differentiating assignments for a variety of student needs and abilities
- Creating quality literacy learning practices that hold students accountable
- Analyzing student data and using that data to adjust instruction

A systemic focus on teacher effectiveness has caused many districts, schools and mentors to prioritize skill development to meet new teachers' high-level needs. But these efforts are often mismatched with what new teachers prioritize at first.

Before new teachers are available to engage in professional goal setting, instructional-performance coaching and self-reflection, they need to feel **comfortable and confident** in their roles and environments.

Just as new teachers have varying needs, so do mentor teachers.

Mentor teachers should be highly skilled and effective teachers but are also embarking on new roles of supporting their colleagues themselves — a totally different job using a different set of skills. Providing mentors with tiered support can help model and prepare them to provide tiered support to their mentees. Multiple mechanisms of support, such as coaching, collaborative groups, training access and manuals or guidebooks are essential to providing mentor teachers with the help they need to be good at their additional responsibilities of supporting new colleagues as well as students.

Useful Tools for Mentors

Harrisonburg City Public Schools in Virginia created a useful mentor handbook. Harrisonburg's mentor handbook is a strong example of mentor supports throughout the school year that prioritize mid-level needs and transmit the culture of teaching to novices.

Instead of simply providing an overview of the role and purpose of a mentor, the handbook includes examples of questions mentors should ask and a comprehensive month-by-month list of specific actions to support their mentees.

View the mentor handbook online

SREB partnered with the Georgia Department of Education to create an on-demand, interactive course that prepares teacher mentors statewide. Based on SREB's existing induction trainings, the modules help mentors build supportive relationships and develop key mentoring skills. Each module includes practical exercises and resources — such as checklists, sample conversations, and activity calendars — to strengthen mentor effectiveness and enrich the new teacher experience.

Upgrading Support for Mentor Teachers

How can districts rethink elements of induction to help mentors become good at what they do?

Mentors are the foundation of any new teacher support system or induction program. The quality of this foundation is determined by the way a district or school approaches three key elements of mentoring policy and structure.

Mentor Selection Criteria

In a majority of states, policy defines criteria for selecting mentors. Most of these states require new mentors to have a minimum number of years of teaching experience and demonstrated instructional effectiveness, usually measured by past evaluation ratings and other metrics.

But selecting mentors using criteria such as years of experience and past evaluation scores can be problematic because teaching and mentoring have distinct knowledge bases and skill sets. Although there is some overlap, there are significant differences. Effective mentors are not simply people who are good at providing instruction to *students* — they are good at providing personal and instructional support to *adult learners*.

Continuous Mentor Growth

In addition to thinking about mentor selection, districts need plans for continuous mentor improvement. After required initial training, mentors should engage in ongoing professional learning to boost their mentee teachers' job satisfaction and instruction.

Professional development for mentors should improve their communication and problem-solving skills to help them build the capacity of their mentees. Mentors should receive direct coaching and participate in professional learning communities, just as new teachers do. Professional growth opportunities and tools for mentors should be designed to target three content categories.

South Carolina: Program Plans

In South Carolina, the Department of Education requires school districts to assign mentors to all novice teachers. Districts submit plans that describe how they will select mentors, provide at least three type of professional learning and assess the effectiveness of induction programs. These requirements do not necessarily guarantee effective mentor selection or growth, but they do set expectations for system monitoring and define roles for district and school leaders.

- **Interpersonal Relationships**
  Mentors learn how to build trusting relationships with their mentees, and strategies for helping new teachers adjust to their profession, district and school.
- **Coaching Skills**
  Mentors learn coaching techniques, including collecting evidence, guiding teacher self-reflection and providing actionable yet non-evaluative feedback.
- **Growth for Both**
  Mentors engage in opportunities to deepen their knowledge of standards and content. Deconstructing teaching practices helps mentors improve their own instructional pedagogy.

Human Capital Structures

In most cases, mentors are other teachers at a mentee's school. And in fact, some research argues that mentoring is more effective this way. Although there are many advantages to this, it also results in two crucial challenges for districts to address:

- **Muddied Professional Roles**
  When the people who mentor new teachers are full-time teachers themselves, confusion can arise about the distinctions among an assortment of school-based roles, including formal mentors, informal mentors, classroom teachers, teacher-leaders and instructional coaches.
- **The Unfunded Mandate**
  Mentors are already busy with their role as classroom teachers, providing people-driven support to their students. If mentoring duties are simply tacked on top of teaching duties, it limits the time and energy available for quality mentoring — resulting in new teachers receiving inconsistent, compliance-driven support.

  Mentors need designated, protected time to engage in mentoring activities, such as attending training sessions, preparing mentoring materials, observing and meeting with their mentees. Some districts attempt to address this by calling for release time for mentors. However, release time is often stipulated using vague language. This inadvertently sends a message that mentoring activities (and the results they produce) are not truly valued, because mentors' ability to routinely use their release time to help new teachers is not clearly defined or safeguarded.

  Furthermore, early release time typically results in a substitute taking over a mentor's teaching responsibilities so they can fulfill their mentoring duties. This merely shifts responsibilities around and requires mentors to spend additional time preparing for a substitute. Adjusting schedules and staffing creatively can prevent these issues.

A move toward strategic staffing, which is having notable positive effects on staff morale, teacher retention and student learning across the nation, can help district leaders with a new human capital structure that allows for mentor teachers to be part-time teachers and part-time mentors — allowing the time to do both jobs well.

Make Mentoring Doable: Structure the How and When

Before

- Mentoring duties are tacked on top of teaching a full student caseload.
- Mentoring activities are scheduled using vaguely stipulated release time and often require substitute teachers.
- No structures are in place to encourage consistent, high-quality mentoring activities.
- Mentors are not paid or given a small stipend for their extra duties.

After

- A mentor's teaching duties are altered. For example, a high school mentor teacher may have a reduced course load and additional planning period(s) to use for mentoring activities; an elementary school teacher may have a year-long resident or apprentice to help cover their class during collaborative mentoring duties.
- Defined logistics about mentors' time and activities each week encourage mentoring that is well-planned and occurs regularly and in a timely manner.
- An increased salary for mentor teachers, compensating them for their additional training, impact and duties as a leader in the school building.

Addressing Challenges New Teachers Really Face

Why is being a new teacher difficult?

Teachers report high levels of occupational stress — more than people who work in medicine, sales, executive management, the service industry, business, construction, transportation or farming. Being new to the career magnifies many of the stressors that teachers face.

Navigating a New Normal

There's a saying: "Teaching isn't a job; it's a lifestyle." There is a lot of truth in this statement because the teaching profession has a unique culture and set of demands. Being a new teacher means orienting oneself to the culture of the profession and the day-to-day realities within a district and school.

Inefficient Routines

New teachers are starting from scratch. They often find themselves teaching unfamiliar content to unfamiliar students at an unfamiliar grade level using unfamiliar materials. As teachers gain experience, they become more fluent with these elements and develop personal routines and systems. But at the beginning of their careers, teachers aren't as efficient at allocating their time and energy.

Stress and Fatigue

Adjusting to new realities and starting from scratch can be physically and mentally taxing. Planning and preparing lessons often spill over into personal time. New teachers expend a lot of energy and effort learning to balance the management of their classroom and professional role with their personal life.

The First Year: Staged Support

Excitement
New teachers are anticipating entering the world of teaching. *Suggested mentor actions*: Establish a rapport and regular meeting times. Help make the school building familiar.

Survival
New teachers feel frustrated and exhausted. *Suggested mentor actions*: Focus on one thing at a time. Give encouraging notes and care packages.

Disenchantment
New teachers may disengage from day-to-day practices. *Suggested mentor actions*: Provide time for venting. Introduce formal instructional coaching. Recognize classroom successes.

Introspection
New teachers feel relieved and ready to self-reflect. *Suggested mentor actions*: Recommend new techniques to improve teaching. Visit other classrooms together for inspiration.

Revitalization
New teachers begin to use their reflections to plan for next year. *Suggested mentor actions*: Guide adjustments to teaching and management. Share development opportunities. Celebrate!

Adapted from The New Teacher's Survival Guide

Lots of Demands

Even with conventional knowledge, skills and support, new teachers need help meeting the specific needs of their specific students within their specific classroom. These needs are diverse, and managing all of them cohesively can be overwhelming.

More Than Skills: Why Personal Support Matters

The act of teaching is hard — that's why many mentoring programs for new teachers focus on skill-related goals, such as improving instructional delivery and applying feedback. But the ins and outs of being a teacher are hard, too. Becoming a teacher can come with emotional challenges.

New teachers want assurance that the professional and personal challenges they are experiencing are normal. Supporting new teachers needs to be more than just sharing information, providing instructional coaching and designing professional development. It also needs to come in the forms of empathy, perspective and advice. When mentors work on professional growth goals without probing a teacher's mindset or emotional health, skill development can become distracting, stressful and even counterproductive.

The Tale of the Spoon: *Closing the Achievement Gap One Utensil at a Time*

As told by Torrie Mekos, former teacher and former SREB staff member

My first year of teaching, I met my friend Emily. We were both fresh out of college and had just moved 800 miles from our respective homes to begin our teaching careers. Together, we went through typical first-year teacher experiences: We mourned the loss of our personal lives. We called our dads to express disbelief when we received our first paychecks, convinced there must have been some sort of accounting error. We commiserated about day-to-day stressors in our classrooms, schools and profession.

Early in the school year, Emily met with our mentor. Emily and I both worked at low-income schools, where closing the achievement gap was issue No. 1. We were surrounded by a sense of urgency to learn "best practices" for everything from assessing students' reading levels to casually preventing anarchy in the boys' bathroom.

Our mentor was giving Emily feedback about behavior management and sharing ideas for an upcoming vocabulary lesson when Emily interrupted with spontaneous sobbing. She hadn't been focusing on any of the well-meaning feedback that our mentor was providing. In the rush of graduating, moving and starting new jobs, Emily and her roommate hadn't really had time to make their apartment a home. They hadn't even had a chance to buy essentials like beds or silverware.

Then Emily confessed something. For every single meal they had consumed since earning the title "teacher," Emily and her roommate had been sharing a single, disposable plastic spoon. Cue stock 1950s horror movie screaming. They simply washed it between meals and passed it back and forth.

Our mentor immediately ended the session, drove Emily to her house and gave her some of her own silverware.

Now that Emily and I are older, wiser and (maybe) more well-adjusted, we look back on this and laugh. Despite how ridiculous it seems now, it illustrates how there truly is a Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs for teachers. Sure, teachers don't enter the profession seeking money and fame — but they aren't martyrs either. New teachers need to hear that striving for a work-life balance (or simply a spoon) doesn't make them unprofessional or uncommitted to their students' success. Making sure that new teachers have spoons may not directly improve instruction, but personal and professional well-being are closely linked. If districts, schools and mentors aren't intentional about recognizing this connection, their efforts to help new teachers deliver good instruction will be futile.

In other words, if you don't pay attention to it and give it some TLC, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is capable of eating Bloom's Taxonomy for lunch!

Action Steps for District and School Leaders

To provide quality, tiered support for aspiring and current mentor teachers, leaders can prioritize the following action steps.

✓ Restructure and elevate the job of a mentor.

First, clearly define the role and daily activities of a mentor. When people feel that their role and charge each day has a unique structure and defined purpose, it bolsters their commitment. Then, elevate the mentors' role by revising human capital specifications to communicate that mentors' actions, time and growth are valued.

Create differentiated job descriptions for teachers, mentors, teacher-leaders and instructional coaches, including the daily work and performance expectations for each. Design a user-friendly guide that describes the similarities and differences between roles and responsibilities.

Identify barriers to consistent, quality mentoring and use team-based staffing structures to address the challenges. Doing this may entail altering components of mentors' work — such as their schedules and class compositions — by using innovative approaches and precise logistics.

Consider differentiating other elements of the human capital structure for each teacher type, such as the number of professional leave days provided, student class loads, schedules and collaborative planning time. This moves toward transitioning to a strategic school staffing model, which requires a shift in how teachers view their roles and responsibilities. This includes support for incoming and current teachers in adopting a growth mindset to embrace adaptability, collaboration and professional growth. This could be done in a model beyond the traditional one-teacher, one-classroom paradigm and toward a team-based culture that prioritizes teacher and student success.

When people feel that their role and charge each day has a unique structure and defined purpose, it bolsters their commitment.

Last, provide new-teacher mentors with increased compensation. Make the difference in compensation between mentors and non-mentor classroom teachers significant enough to convey the importance and increase of a mentor's work, instead of coming across as an empty gesture.

✓ Reframe mentor selection criteria.

Gather input from school administrators, current mentors and teachers to identify personality characteristics, work habits and skills that predict aptitude for good mentoring. Use this information to develop or adapt the process and criteria used to select mentors. Make sure selected mentors exhibit exemplary instructional practice that is cross validated from a variety of sources, such as personal references, video clips, and both formal and informal evaluations.

✓ Use a personal lens to improve the criteria used to select mentors.

Check that selection criteria communicate mentors' crucial role in helping new teachers acclimate to their school community and the culture of teaching. Mentors need to be empathetic and understanding about the concerns and challenges new teachers have.

✓ Provide mentors with training, coaching and collaboration opportunities.

Mentor teachers must be properly trained, as well as supported by coaches and each other. Provide a repository of quality resources for mentor development and access to a district or regional coach who specializes in mentoring skills. Create a professional or networking community for mentor teachers across the district to interact and collaborate with each other to help with their own mid- and high-level needs as mentors.

✓ Develop clear-cut plans for mentor growth.

Mentor development should include both initial and ongoing professional support. Align support with the program's big goals and three key content categories — interpersonal relationships, coaching skills and growth for both.

✓ Encourage mentors to help new teachers proactively more often than reactively.

Training sessions and tools should provide mentors with examples of new teachers' needs at each level. Guide them to anticipate other needs that new teachers might have at different stages throughout the school year — creating a targeted mentoring plan for first-, second- and third-year teachers. Give specific suggestions for the times and areas that mentors should act as a thought partner. Allow mentors time and space during training to proactively plan their just-in-time mentoring support based on the needs they anticipate their mentees having.

✓ Share real ways for mentors to provide people-driven support.

Mentors help mentees navigate and prioritize competing elements of their new professional lives, such as lesson planning, grading papers and communicating with parents. Train mentors to identify new teachers' inefficient habits and provide coaching, without compromising quality. Unlike compliance-driven or problem-driven support, people-driven support can be challenging to structure and define benchmarks for. Create checklists and pacing calendars for mentors to give them concrete guidance and ways to self-monitor. Align these tools with common stages that teachers experience during their first year.

✓ Remind mentors to delegate.

It is important for mentors to have strong pedagogical and content knowledge — but keep in mind that mentors are learners themselves. Urge them to plan for how they will meet teachers' low-level and high-level needs. Have mentors reflect on which needs can be targeted by other colleagues and which needs they can support themselves. For certain high-level needs, skill development from a colleague with specialized knowledge or authority, such as an instructional coach or administrator, may be necessary.

✓ Design reference materials for mentors.

The first year of teaching can be a roller coaster. Work with teachers and mentors to develop staged lists of areas for mentors to check in with their mentees about, as well as a timeline of activities that align with the needs of new teachers and the procedures of a specific district or school. This helps districts and schools use mentors efficiently and effectively by reinforcing mid-level supports. Include mentors and teachers in developing both the content and format of these materials. Use their opinions and insights to plan a strategy for getting teachers and mentors to actively consult their reference materials throughout the school year.

✓ **Talk to teachers about their experiences.**

Conduct focus groups and surveys with teachers about what they experienced during their first year to learn more about the ebb and flow of personal and professional transitions. Ask them about specific ways mentors can make both transitions easier. Have these conversations with teachers who have a few years of experience under their belts. Those in the midst of first-year stressors and those who are too far removed from early challenges may not have as many key insights to offer.

✓ **Review district and school induction activities for added stressors.**

Inspect existing induction activities for unintentional stressors. New teacher induction programs often include orientation sessions to attend early in the year and portfolios to assemble throughout the year. These activities can compound the stress new teachers feel and detract from the intended purpose. Prioritize the availability of mentors to help new teachers get physically and mentally prepared for the school year. Seemingly mundane practices, such as setting up their classrooms and making copies, will allow new teachers to begin the school year feeling positive, calm and focused.

The Bottom Line

All of this is hard work. But the best path to success for teachers and mentors is a people-driven support system that thinks strategically about people's actions and needs, tackles the personal challenges of new teachers and supports the people doing the mentoring.

When you invest in supporting people in these ways, both individuals and systems get better — resulting in impactful mentoring, happier teachers who stay longer, effective instruction, and, most important, students who learn more in their classrooms each day.

Explore More

SREB Teacher Induction Framework

Teacher Induction Policies

Teacher Career Pathways and Advancement Options

SREB

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