

Promoting Educational Equity with Teacher Mentor Programs

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Abstract

The United States is experiencing a critical teacher shortage impacting public schools in all regions. Unfortunately, high teacher attrition rates can contribute to educational inequity for students, creating situations in which some students receive a higher quality education than others. Unfortunately, teacher attrition tends to be most prevalent in low-income, high-minority schools and districts, exacerbating the issue of equity for these already marginalized communities. However, school administrators and teacher leaders may be able to increase teacher retention using research-based teacher mentor programs, which provide support for new teachers and empower veteran educators. When we develop and implement new teacher mentor programs that support veteran teachers as they seek to assist and empower our newest teachers, we may also help our veteran teachers feel their work and efforts make a positive difference. As a result, veteran teachers may feel energized to be positive forces in their schools. In the end, the design and implementation of such programs may increase job satisfaction and retention for all teachers who are involved. These ideas served as the motivation for a district administrator and me as we began our work to create, implement, assess, and refine a teacher mentor program in our district for the school year 2024-2025. In the summer of 2025, after several rounds of data collection, I will report on the effectiveness of the program results and make recommendations.

Keywords: educational equity, job satisfaction, teacher mentoring, teacher retention, teacher empowerment

Within the last decade, low teacher retention rates have contributed to what is now a critical national teacher shortage (Darling-Hammond, 2022). In 2017–2018, more than 100,000 teaching positions were left vacant and since then, more than 40 states have reported annual shortages in high-needs areas, such as math, science, and special education (Darling-Hammond, 2022). Between 2020 and 2022, the total number of educators working in public education decreased from 10.6 million to 10 million, a loss of 600,000 (Walker, 2022), and, as of December 2022, the teacher attrition rate was 16% (Nguyen & Kremer, 2022). More recently, in February 2023, more than three quarters of the country was in a teacher shortage (Jones, 2023). Sutchter et al. (2016) said it best when they wrote, “The teaching workforce continues to be a leaky bucket, losing hundreds of thousands of teachers each year—the majority of them before retirement age” (para. 7). As a nation, it is becoming more common for teachers to not only leave their positions, but the profession entirely (Jones, 2023).

When large numbers of teachers leave their positions, all students are negatively impacted (Kaufman & Diliberti, 2021). Some impacts include the loss of institutional knowledge, the hiring of underqualified teachers, bigger class sizes (Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020), and the undermining of student achievement (Guha et al., 2016). However, when teachers leave their positions, students who are “the most disadvantaged . . . often confront the highest rates of teacher turnover,” (Williams et al., 2022, p. 2) because turnover rates tend to be higher in rural and urban schools with low socioeconomic status and/or a high percentage of underrepresented populations (Ingersoll et al., 2018). Typically, schools in the poorest communities are the ones most hurt by teacher shortages (Ravitch, 2020). Although poor teacher retention rates negatively impact all students, those who are most significantly impacted are those who are members of marginalized communities. The educational inequity lies here.

The Need to Increase Teacher Job Satisfaction

There are many reasons teachers choose to leave their position or the profession entirely, but low job satisfaction may be a prevalent cause. It might be plausible to argue that if

school districts want to retain teachers, administrators, and other school personnel, district leadership must work to increase teacher job satisfaction. To do this, administrators can provide teachers with autonomy (Dilekci, 2022; Fradkin-Hayslip, 2021; Mangin, 2021; Rosenholtz & Simpson, 1990; Urick, 2020), support them with meaningful professional development and growth opportunities (Cirocki et al., 2023; Rajeswaran et al., 2023; Tan, 2018), provide opportunities for them to support one another (Ladd, 2011), and find ways to empower teachers (Moultroup, 2024). While there are many strategies for increasing each of these elements of job satisfaction, which in turn may increase teacher retention rates, there seems to be one that some states have used with success—research-based teacher mentor programs (Fischer et al., 2022).

State-Mandated Teacher Retention Programs

In December 2022, Fischer et al. created a database that displayed 40 individual state profiles with reports on teacher retention data (10 states were not able to successfully collect, analyze, and report data). The researchers included the number of teachers who stayed in their position or remained employed in their district in a different position, as well as reasons teachers provided for leaving their positions. They also provided detailed information regarding each state's mandated teacher retention programs.

In total, 49 states (all but New Hampshire) employ some sort of required teacher retention and/or recruitment program (Fischer et al., 2022). Some states use only one program, but many require school districts to use several strategies for recruiting and retaining teachers. Programs and mandates range drastically from state to state, and include elements such as incentives for high school students to enter the education field, teacher mentor programs, minimum requirements for teacher planning time, teacher evaluation protocols, advanced teacher licensure, minimum teacher pay, scholarships and grants to recruit and keep teachers in underserved schools and/or shortage areas, loan forgiveness, additional compensation for teachers in shortage areas and underserved schools, and financial incentives for teachers of

color (Fischer et al.). Although state policy makers mandate teacher recruitment and retention strategies, many states are still seeing a drop in teacher retention. In fact, national research has shown 23% of teachers left their role in the 2022–2023 school year, and 29% of teachers in high-poverty schools did the same (Education Resource Strategies, 2024). Regardless of the implementation of these programs, states are still losing teachers at alarming rates.

Three states, however, according to Fischer et al. (2022), are finding success with maintaining high percentages of teacher retention and/or improving their teacher retention rates—Georgia, Kansas, and Maryland. When examining what these states have in common, it is clear they each have a two- or three-year required teacher mentor program (Fischer et al., 2022) that includes rigorous standards each district must meet and maintain. Perhaps, based on this observation, teacher job satisfaction and retention rates could be increased through the design and implementation of robust teacher mentor programs.

While each of the three states' program is different in its design and implementation, there are clear expectations and accountability for district leaders, school administrators, and teacher mentors. More specifically, in Georgia, some requirements include the establishment of a vision, mission, and goal for the teacher mentor program; setting specific criteria for recruitment and selection of mentors; and mentor participation in ongoing training. In addition, administrators and mentors are held accountable through regular data collection and analysis regarding the effectiveness of the program; communication of the established goals, vision, and mission; and adherence to a set of guidelines for mentor selection (Georgia Department of Education, 2024). Based on Georgia's teacher retention rate, it may be necessary for state governments to adopt some of these teacher mentor program requirements and accountability measures, especially if we want to increase the rate at which teachers remain in their positions and/or districts nation-wide.

Using Teacher Mentor Programs to Increase Teacher Job Satisfaction

The establishment or revision of a teacher mentor program may positively impact all teachers, not just those who are new to the profession. For new teachers, it is critical to have “robust mentoring and support programs” (Williams et. al. 2022, p. 91) that help to provide them with systematic support (Radford, 2017). These types of mentor programs, when proven to be helpful, can positively impact teacher self-efficacy, which may then increase the likelihood that newly hired teachers will stay in the profession longer (Han, 2023; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

As an additional benefit, mentor programs may also increase job satisfaction for veteran teachers who serve as mentors (McGee et al., 2023), likely because their participation in such programs strengthens their sense of empowerment and helps them improve their own practice (Guha et al., 2016). Also, if mentor teachers are given decision-making power when designing and implementing their mentor programs, this shared leadership approach may make it more likely for them to stay in their positions (Urlick, 2020). Through intentional collaboration, administrators and teacher leaders may find themselves in a situation in which retention rates increase for veteran staff as well as their newest teachers,

Teacher Mentor Program Design and Implementation

At the start of the 2024–2025 school year, one district administrator redesigned and began to implement a new teacher mentor program in our rural school district in New Hampshire. First, school administrators selected competent teacher mentors from the pool of candidates in each school building. They searched for and hired outstanding professionals who are in good standing, have demonstrated effectiveness as a teacher, and have either attended or will attend a district-approved mentor training program. Once mentors were hired, the district’s curriculum coordinator and I developed and began to provide initial and ongoing training for mentors and administrators regarding the topics of adult learning theory and peer coaching models. Using this knowledge, teacher mentors and administrators began to collaborate to create and implement a teacher mentor program that includes a vision, mission

statement, and goals; the process for pairing mentors and mentees; agendas for monthly mentor/mentee meetings; mentor/mentee classroom observations; mentor accountability procedures; the role of administrators in teacher mentoring; support for mentors; design of data collection tools; data collection, analysis, and reporting; and any other program features decided upon by the group. As part of the process, and to assess the effectiveness of the program for mentors and mentees, teacher leaders and district administrators will collect and analyze data throughout this school year, using the mentor-designed data collection tools, which include input from both mentors and mentees. At this point in time, it is difficult to know what the data collection tool and process will look like because we are in the process of finalizing the tools. However, the data will be used to inform revisions to the teacher mentor program during the school year and for the following year, with the idea that some changes may need to be made to mentor training and any other ongoing systems within the program.

Future Reflections

It is the hope of this teacher leader that the mentor program design will have positive impacts on all those involved. First, ideally, teacher mentors will be empowered by being a part of the decision-making process. It is possible that this level of involvement for mentors may help them feel committed to the program and ensuring its success, resulting in consistent and meaningful revisions of the program to meet the needs of all educators involved. In addition, mentees should feel valued since the data collection tool will ask for their input regarding the program's effectiveness and changes that need to be made for future mentees. Lastly, and maybe most importantly, mentees might feel supported throughout their transition to a new teaching position. Ideally, the implementation of our program may boost teacher retention rates for those at all experience levels and, as a result, increase educational equity for students. My goal is to write a follow-up article regarding the data, the mentor program's level of effectiveness, any other pertinent knowledge that was gained as part of this process, and recommendations for implementing successful teacher mentor programs.

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