

Chapter 24

Developing an Online Mentoring Program for Beginning Teachers

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ABSTRACT

If schools are to retain well-qualified and much needed new teachers, it is important that teachers are provided a variety of resources for helping them through the transition from pre-service education to the classroom. An electronic mentoring program that provides school administrators and teachers a connection to a wide spectrum of professional contacts without the constraints of time and distance can be a valuable tool for the retention and professional development of this precious human resource. The leadership role for an electronic mentoring program calls for a unique combination of in-depth knowledge of the developmental needs of beginning teachers, a plan for development of an online program based on knowledge of the necessary program components, an understanding of professional development and adult learning, skills to effectively communicate online, and the ability to work in a collaborative, facilitative, and ever-changing environment.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on the program development of an innovative approach to mentoring, known as online or electronic mentoring, to assist beginning teachers during the transition into the classroom. Online mentoring is a fairly new concept, particularly as a support for beginning

teachers, and little research that has been done in this area, especially in regard to program administration and leadership issues. It is also a concept that meets resistance among many educators, who believe that mentoring requires a more personal, face-to-face approach to be effective. This chapter will discuss the findings of a study entitled *The Leadership Role in Online Support Programs for Beginning Teachers* (Clouse, 2008). This study examined both the program development and

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leadership strategies involved in the administration of online mentoring programs for beginning teachers. The methodology used a qualitative research design employing an inductive process to develop a grounded theory. Data, gathered via telephone interviews with administrators of past and present electronic support programs for new teachers, were coded to identify, organize, and relate categories and themes. From the emerging themes, propositions were formulated to support a grounded theory of leadership for the administration of electronic support programs for new teachers.

The objectives of the chapter are to present the issues related to the development of these types of mentoring programs, the leadership strategies involved, as well as challenges, successes and advice of program administrators who developed and implemented online mentoring programs. This information can be helpful to educational leaders involved with mentoring and the professional development of both beginning and veteran teachers, by providing insight into an alternative approach to support such efforts.

BACKGROUND

Since the early 1990s, the annual number of teachers leaving the profession has surpassed the number of those entering by an increasing amount (Darling-Hammond, 2003). Teacher attrition, which is particularly high among teachers in their first few years of service, is the primary problem. Data suggest that 40 to 50% of all beginning teachers exit the profession within the first five years. Not only are there high costs associated with teacher exits, high turnover of teachers causes staffing problems due to the lack of commitment, continuity, and cohesion among employees. Consequently, this can adversely affect school environment and student performance (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003).

There is an emerging consensus among educators and policymakers that the retention of new teachers is dependent on effective mentoring and induction programs (Feiman-Nemser, 2003). However, not all school districts have the resources to establish formal mentoring programs, particularly smaller districts in rural areas. This calls for alternative forms of induction and mentoring support. An alternative kind of mentoring, called electronic mentoring, could help school districts provide their teachers the benefits of mentoring despite their lack of resources. Electronic mentoring or e-mentoring uses electronic communications, such as e-mail and online discussion groups, to connect mentors with protégées without constraints of time or place (Single & Muller, 2003). A well-structured electronic mentoring program could serve a relatively large number of teachers and sites and provide needed support to beginning teachers in districts that are unable to provide adequate on-site mentoring.

The research study entitled *The Leadership Role in Online Support Programs for Beginning Teachers* (Clouse, 2008) explored this innovative approach of electronic or online mentoring to help beginning teachers with the transition into the classroom. Many of these programs have shown encouraging reports of satisfaction by program participants and possible support in retention efforts (Merseth, 1990; Redmond, 2002; Johnson, Clift, & Klecka, 2002; Abbott, 2003). However, e-mentoring is not quite as simple to implement as it may seem (Harris, O'Bryan, & Rotenberg, 1996; Johnson et al., 2002). E-mentoring is a fairly new concept, particularly as a support for beginning teachers; and there is limited research in this area, especially in regard to program administration and leadership issues. Clouse's (2008) study examined how organizations developed and administered these kinds of online support programs for new teachers and explored the leadership traits of administrators of these programs. This study investigated these programs from the perspective of the program administrators to uncover

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