



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Published by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) • College of Education • The University of Texas at Austin

UNIVERSITY MENTORING PROGRAM RESPONDS TO NOVICE TEACHER SOS

One contract, one year as an educator, and a teaching career for Elise was a rap! As she reflected on her first assignment, she thought to herself, "I was the best in my class, but I felt like I was at my worst in my first classroom. My professors taught me to make learning engaging and fun, but my lessons just did not come together like they did during student teaching. The principal constantly told me to let someone know if I needed help, but I didn't know the questions to ask or to whom to direct them. I felt so alone, overwhelmed, and frustrated! Did anyone not notice I was losing the battle of becoming an effective classroom teacher?"

Novice and veteran teachers continue to leave the profession in high numbers. Success requires the knowledge, skills, and ability to incorporate state standards and performance objectives into lessons; manage the students and the classroom; meet the needs of diverse students; involve and communicate with parents; organize the classroom; assess and remediate; and effectively use teaching methods as students are engaged in learning. Managing this myriad of responsibilities can be a significant factor in a teacher's decision to quit! Conversely, research on teacher attrition reveals that contributing factors are low salaries, lack of support from school administration, unclear expectations, and inadequate preservice preparation. These challenges and concerns need to be addressed to help all teachers, especially novice teachers, provide quality learning experiences for the students they serve. *A teacher warranty program has become a popular solution.*

Although colleges of education may not be able to guarantee superior performance through a warranty program, they can guarantee that a struggling, beginning teacher will receive help in a programmatic way. The College of Education at Athens State University (ASU) has decided to follow a five-step plan to create a Teacher Warranty program. This program

will incorporate "best practices" to help novice teachers add to their existing body of knowledge and skills. ASU views weaknesses, identified by administrators during formal or informal evaluations, as opportunities to bridge gaps between theory and practice. The five-step plan includes:

- establishing a partnership between the University and the local school districts,
- determining resources and a budget to financially support the program,
- developing a mentorship agreement,
- preparing an annual report with feedback and the evaluative results of the program, and
- creating a sustainment plan for continuous support of novice teachers.

The university finds these steps essential to increasing teacher retention, promoting student achievement, and encouraging professional development (saving the school district money and strengthening teacher practice).

Step 1: Establish Partnerships. Athens State is instituting an avenue to provide support for novice teachers. School districts with which to develop partnerships have been identified. The Teacher Warranty program will focus primarily on mentoring relationships between ASU faculty and participating schools to warrant quality education for all students and equip beginning teachers with the abilities to implement best practices. University faculty will operate as the primary mentors. In addition to campus responsibilities, the Alabama State Board of Education requires professional education faculty to maintain a presence in P-12 public schools three days each academic year for the purpose of working directly with students.

As the need arises, stakeholders will enter into a partnership agreement to remediate the teacher in areas that administrators have identified as deficient. Committees will determine the overall objectives; financial obligations, roles, and responsibilities for each stakeholder; program design; and an evaluation and feedback process from the mentor, mentee, and the principal in order to establish a multi-dimensional system of accountability and assessment. In addition, an



Executive Committee will oversee the operation, policies, and procedures of the program.

Step 2: Budget and Resources. Effective classrooms need effective teachers, and the Teacher Warranty program is a remedy to attrition. To fund the initiative, the ASU Executive Committee will seek grants and some funding from the participating school districts to reduce university operating costs. The budget will include the cost for mentors to offer workshops during the academic school year, summer institutes, online sessions, resource materials, and technical and clerical support.

Step 3: Mentorship Agreement. The Executive Committee will determine the roles and responsibilities of all mentor program stakeholders. The goals and objectives will guide the terms of the agreement, including mentor training, beginning teacher handbook, orientation for all stakeholders, mentor and mentee selection criteria, training plan, program plan, professional development plan, network groups, evaluation and feedback plan, time allocation, record keeping requirements, demonstration classroom, and classroom observation.

Step 4: Evaluation of Program/Feedback Process. The ASU comprehensive evaluation plan will assess the program at identified benchmarks to measure program effectiveness. Indicators will provide the baseline to measure goals and objectives, and track the progress of the program. In addition, various data sources will be used to document evaluative feedback. The sources will include surveys; portfolios; selective journals; systematic observations; interviews; interest groups; tools to measure achievements of students, mentors, and mentees; and feedback from administrators. An annual report (with the results of each assessment) will be distributed to all stakeholders.

Step 5: Program Sustainment. Teacher mentorship program success has wooed school districts to invest in this type of support for beginning teachers. However, budget cuts have impacted the ability of school districts to fund a support program. Therefore, we are investigating grant opportunities that will supplement what school districts may be able to contribute. Foundation grants usually offer support for up to three years and do not cover ongoing operating costs.

It is imperative to share evaluative results and lessons learned with program stakeholders annually. A resilient mentoring program can yield astounding results in supporting beginning teachers. This information must be shared to attract non-participating school districts. Consequently, the report will contain a narrative that documents the commitment from the Executive Committee and every participant in the program. The success of the program will be determined by assessment

of goals and objectives, analysis of return on investment, and faculty support to make it a viable component of the Teacher Education Program.

Caveats to consider before issuing a teacher warranty include:

- There is no guarantee the novice teacher will remain in the teaching profession after the induction period. The research is replete with what the teacher preparation program can do for the beginning teacher, but there is a lack of empirical data that document a commitment from the mentee.
- The cost of implementing a teacher warranty program is expensive. In our already strained economy, a teacher induction program is a popular but costly approach to supporting new teachers. Consequently, strategies that may not produce results as effective as a comprehensive teacher warranty program may be used.
- Higher education faculty must be consulted and their opinions considered. The uncertainty of whether there will be course release, office hour flexibility, and travel reimbursement may threaten faculty acceptance.
- The criteria to determine who needs assistance and who does the assisting must be agreed upon by the school administrator and the teacher preparation program. Teacher education programs do not guarantee effective teaching behaviors, but teacher warranty programs can alleviate some of the ills that threaten successful teaching and learning.

Elise, like so many other novice teachers, ended her career in education before it really began. She completed her program of study but felt as though she was on an "island" after she walked into her classroom. She needed support beyond the conferring of her degree. A teacher warranty program could possibly have been the rescue ship in her sea of frustration.

Darlene Turner-White, *Assistant Professor, Early Childhood Education*

Wanda W. Hutchinson, *Associate Professor, Education*

For further information, contact the authors at Athens State University, 300 Beaty Street, Athens, AL 35611.

Email: wanda.hutchinson@athens.edu or darlene.turner-white@athens.edu