



INFORMATION BULLETIN

The Role of the Mentor in District-based Mentoring Programs

In September 2004, New York State school districts began implementing district-based mentoring programs for new teachers seeking their professional certificate. This Information Bulletin highlights several regulatory issues and cautions related to the role and responsibilities of the mentor as defined in the Commissioner's Regulations Part 100.2 (dd) and through guidance issued by the State Education Department. The information contained in this bulletin will be useful to persons involved in developing, implementing, negotiating, and participating in the mentoring program -- Labor Relations Specialists (LRS), local leaders, professional development committees, program coordinators, district administrators, mentors, and persons considering service as a mentor.

In New York State, the primary purpose of a district-based mentoring program is to provide support for new teachers in the classroom teaching service in order to ease the transition from preparation to practice, thereby increasing retention of teachers in the public schools, and to increase the skills of new teachers in order to improve student achievement in accordance with State learning standards. The district's Professional Development Plan (PDP) must describe how mentoring will be provided to all new initial certificate holders during their first year of employment. The mentoring plan, a component of the PDP, must describe the role of mentors, which shall include but not be limited to providing guidance and support to new teachers.

Typically, mentors are veteran or mid-career tenured teachers who are articulate and reflective about their own practice. A mentor's knowledge and skills have developed over time as a result of his or her professional experience. To be effective, a mentor needs a clear understanding of how the mentor's role has been defined in the district's mentoring plan, the program's philosophy, and what has been agreed to by the district and the local teachers' union. The mentor's role can be expanded to include responsibility for evaluation of the beginning teacher's performance only through the collective bargaining process.

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The Mentor's Work is Important to New Teacher Development

New York's teachers are being called to teach to higher standards and challenged to eliminate a persistent academic achievement gap for a very diverse group of students. Even with improved teacher preparation and teacher quality, we must understand that new teachers have two important jobs: teaching and learning to teach. By providing support during the critical early years, beginning teachers can focus their attention on students' learning needs earlier. According to Linda Darling-Hammond, "Beginning teachers who have access to intensive mentoring by expert colleagues are much less likely to leave teaching in the critical early years." (Good Mentoring, 2000, p.2) To be effective, mentors must understand the needs of new teachers and how those needs shift throughout the school year.

The mentor's primary role is to assist with new teacher development and help improve a beginning teacher's efficacy as problem solver and decision maker in the classroom by:

- guiding the beginning teacher's development into a skilled teaching professional
- providing planned and regular support
- critiquing his or her teaching practice, and
- encouraging self-reflection

The Qualities of Effective Mentors

The qualities of effective mentors can be organized into four skill sets:

- attitude and character
- professional competence and experience
- communications skills
- interpersonal skills

John Rowley, in his article, "The Good Mentor: Supporting Beginning Teachers," (May 1999), describes six essential qualities of effective mentors:

- Commitment to helping the new teacher
- Understanding that new teachers are at a beginning developmental phase in their careers
- Providing instructional support
- Building interpersonal connections with new teachers
- Learning from the experience
- Communicating hope and optimism for success

These six qualities are consistent with how the mentor's role has been defined in state regulation as one of "assistance through guidance and support."

The Mentor's Role: Assistance through Guidance and Support

According to state regulation, the "mentor's role is to assist with new teacher development through assisting, advising, coaching, and modeling, but not to supervise, assess, and evaluate the new teacher's performance." Responsibility for evaluating or assessing a teacher's performance is usually assigned to the building principal, administrator or designee. State regulation allows a mentor's role to be expanded to include an assessment or evaluative role only through a written agreement negotiated by the local teachers' union.

Mentor Training

While the success of a mentoring program depends greatly on selecting good mentors, the need for high quality and on-going mentor training and support cannot be overstated. To ensure the mentoring experience is a successful one, the mentor must be prepared for the mentoring role. How the mentor's role is defined will determine the training needs. Mentors should not begin their work with the new teacher prior to participation in some form of mentor training. Furthermore, while mentor training is necessary to ensure a quality mentoring experience, remember that not all good teachers are necessarily well suited to work in a collegial capacity or mentoring relationship with another adult.

Adequate Time to Mentor

Mentors need time to mentor. Collective research shows that the efficacy of mentoring is linked to time--reserving time, particularly during the instructional day, for mentoring to occur. But it is not just a matter of providing time, but rather

- how the time is used – low intensity activities such as brief conversations and chats or higher intensity activities such as team teaching and lesson planning
- the frequency of interaction between mentor and intern – weekly formal and informal meetings
- the type and quality of feedback provided to the intern - written comments on journal reflections

If the goal of the mentoring effort is to increase instructional capacity, mentors need time to plan, make classroom visits, and engage their interns in critical reflection on their teaching practice.

Full and Part-time Mentors

It is important to have a sufficient number of mentors whose primary task is to guide new teacher development. Full-time mentors are released from their instructional duties in order to focus their full attention on the demands of mentoring and responding to the developmental needs of their interns. Part-time mentors with release time from a portion of their instructional duties allows for a greater pool of mentors to make mentor/intern matches. The New York State Mentor-Teacher Internship Program (M-TIP) uses a ratio of 1-10 for full-time mentors and 1-4 for part-time mentors. Factors to consider in determining whether to have full or part-time mentors include:

- the program's goals and program philosophy
- the number of beginning teachers to be served
- the district's fiscal resources.

If the pool of available mentors is large enough, mentors should teach the same grade level and/or subject area as their intern. Although this is not essential, matches by grade and subject area allow pairs to work more closely on curricular issues specific to the intern's teaching assignment. Other factors to consider in making matches are proximity, gender, race and the generational needs of the mentoring pairs.

The Need for Confidentiality and Trust in the Mentoring Relationship

According to SED guidance, "If the mentor's role is solely that of guidance and support, information emerging from the mentoring activities and the mentoring relationship is confidential." In the Guidebook for Mentors, author Lee Shulman states:

Confidentiality prevents mentors from sharing the mentee's classroom difficulties with an administrator and/or supervisor and their colleagues. Confidentiality of the conversations and interactions of mentors and new teachers is necessary to gain trust. Mentors have access through observations and conversations to views and perspectives of the new teacher that no one else has. New teachers who do not trust their mentors will not listen to or share problems and issues with their mentor. The mentor's role is to guide the new teacher in best practices and professional growth. Interns need to be confident that the dialogue they have with their mentor is safe and secure and that they will get nurturing and supportive feedback from that mentor. The more closely mentoring is tied to evaluation, the less willing and open new teachers are to take risks and ask questions.

It is important that both administrators and colleagues respect confidentiality, and that the school community understands that the mentoring relationship is based on trust and confidentiality. Mentors must also ensure that their written notes and records are secure and remain confidential. Further, the topic of confidentiality should be addressed in mentor training.

Questions and Answers

1. What should a mentor do if the mentor believes the new teacher is not performing well?

By regulation, if the mentor is serving in a strictly guidance and support role, mentors must maintain the confidentiality of information obtained in their work with the new teacher. Even when mentors believe the new teacher is not performing well, mentors must remember what they have agreed to do and why - guide and assist the intern in their growth as a teacher, understanding that it takes time for new teachers to learn their craft. Additionally, mentors must remember that:

- they are not solely responsible for the new teacher's personal and professional development.
- their work is parallel to that of others - administrators and supervisors, staff developers, union leaders who have a role in supporting a new teacher's development, transition, and success into the teaching profession. While there is some similarity and overlap in roles, there are very real distinctions in responsibilities and core tasks for each one.

2. Should the mentor discuss Annual Performance Program Review (APPR) with the intern?

It is likely that the topic of teacher performance will come up in a conversation, and the intern will seek guidance and support from the mentor on this issue. In preparation for discussions and questions that arise, both mentor and intern should have a clear understanding about:

- Commissioner's Regulations governing APPR
- how the mentor's role has been defined with regard to assistance and evaluation in the district's mentoring plan;
- what has been agreed to in the local union's collective bargaining agreement;
- the different ways mentors provide assistance: assistance only; assistance integrated with formative assessment; and assistance integrated with both formative and summative assessment.
- what core tasks are the responsibility of administrators and supervisors, mentors, and union leaders

3. Who is responsible for evaluating the performance of new teachers?

In common practice and as defined by many union contracts, the Annual Performance Program Review (APPR), a teacher's formal evaluation, is conducted by an administrator (principal, assistant

principal, supervisor, department head, coordinator, unit head) and any other person serving more than 25 percent—10 periods of his assignment in any administrative and/or supervisory capacity except as defined in regulation, or a designee. Further, SED guidance states, "The presence of a mentoring program should never be construed as limiting or replacing the process of annual professional reviews conducted by the school administrators or others designated to supervise the beginning teacher."

4. Can a mentor be involved in the evaluation of teacher performance?

The answer is both yes and no depending on what is collectively bargained regarding mentor involvement in either formative or summative evaluation by the local teacher's union. First, let's define formative and summative evaluation.

- Formative evaluation is designed to help teachers develop professionally and improve their teaching practice; and
- Summative evaluation is designed to rate teacher performance and to make decisions about their employment.

The Commissioner's Regulations, Section 100.2. (dd) (iv) (d), indicates that if the mentor's role is one of guidance and support, then "Information obtained by a mentor through interaction with the new teacher while engaged in the mentoring activities of the program shall not be used for evaluating or disciplining the new teacher; unless the school district or BOCES has entered into an agreement, negotiated pursuant to Article 14 of Civil Service Law whose terms are in effect, that provides that the information obtained by the mentor through interaction with the new teacher while engaged in the mentoring activities of the program may be used for evaluating or disciplining the new teacher.;" Therefore, according to the regulations, the mentor cannot be involved in any of the activities or methods employed by the school district or BOCES to evaluate and assess a teacher's performance as outlined in the Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR). The district's APPR plan describes the criteria for and methods the school district or BOCES employs to assess teachers' performance, which may include but is not limited to the following:

- Content Knowledge
- Student Development
- Instructional Delivery
- Collaboration
- Preparation
- Student Assessment
- Classroom Management
- Reflective and Responsive Practice

The plan also describes the methods used to evaluate teachers' performance, which include, but are not limited to the following:

- Classroom observation
- Peer review
- Videotape assessment
- Portfolio
- Self review

For teachers possessing a transitional or initial certificate, the plan shall require the teacher to be evaluated based on portfolio review, which may include, but is not limited to:

- A sample of student work
- Student assessment instrument
- Teacher's reflection on his or her classroom performance

Mentors must take steps to ensure that information obtained through their conversations, interactions, and mentoring activities with the new teacher is not used for purposes of evaluating or disciplining the new teacher by:

- ensuring that record-keeping and routine documents and forms such as their mentor log, notes and narrative comments about their perceptions, observations, and conclusions, either positive or negative are kept in a secure place;
- not providing any information, either verbally or written, to persons and groups responsible for making employment decisions;
- not participating in pre-and-post-observation conferences and sharing comments, either positive or negative about the intern's performance;
- not completing or signing any document that requires the mentor to identify the topics and provide comments about what was discussed in mentor meetings.

Both the mentor and intern should be clear about the type of information required for the district's recordkeeping purposes. According to the regulations, "The district shall maintain documentation of the implementation of the mentoring program for at least seven years. The documentation shall include for each individual receiving mentoring should include their name, his or her teacher certificate identification number, the type of mentoring activity, the number of clock hours successfully completed in the mentoring activity, and the name and the teacher certificate identification number of the individual who provided the mentoring."

If, through a collective bargaining agreement, the mentor's role is expanded to include responsibility for assessment or evaluation of teacher's performance, the mentor should

- receive training on how to conduct performance evaluations. According to regulation, the district's APPR plan shall describe how it will provide "training in good practice for the conducting of performance evaluations to staff who perform such evaluations, or alternatively, shall state the fact that the school district or BOCES permits such personnel to participate in training to this subject offered by the department;"
- make sure that the formative assessment serve the needs of the teacher and not the administration and is therefore confidential.

5. What is NYSUT's position regarding involving the mentor in evaluation activities?

NYSUT understands that no one single mentoring model will fit the needs of every district. The regulations allow for local discretion and collective bargaining on a variety of issues, including the role of the mentor. NYSUT urges locals to consider the implications of expanding the mentor's role from an assistance only role to one that combines assistance with summative assessment. Any decisions regarding the mentor's role should be reflected in clearly and carefully crafted contract language and collective bargaining agreements. For information on peer review/peer assistance, obtain a copy of "Peer Review and Peer Assistance: An AFT/NEA Handbook", on the AFT website at www.aft.org/pubs-reports/reportlist.

Advice to Local Leaders

- Educate the school community on the importance of mentoring, the mentor's role and the confidential nature of the mentoring relationship.
- Ensure that the procedure for selecting mentors is published and made available to all staff.
- Adopt clear, carefully crafted policies and agreements about the confidentiality of mentoring and consider having mentors sign a confidentiality agreement.
- Ensure that mentor training takes place prior to mentors' initiating contact with their interns.
- Make beginning teachers aware that the union is available to attend their pre-and post observations and conferences with the principal.
- Engage your local members in a discussion about the pros and cons of involving mentors in evaluation of beginning teachers.
- Consider that persons qualified to serve as mentors in an assistance role may not be well-suited to assume an assessment or evaluative role.
- Establish a procedure to reconfigure mentor/intern pairings if the need arises.