

## An Introduction to Virtual Mentoring

### *How to Support New Teachers with an Online Mentoring Program*

*Research shows 40-50% of teachers leave the profession within five years*

Every year in North Carolina, thousands of college graduates enter the teaching profession eager to help children learn. Some thrive but many quickly decide they need a new line of work. According to the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, one-third of all new teachers leave the profession after three years, and 46 percent are gone within five years. New teachers are 2.5 times more likely to leave teaching than experienced instructors (Croasmun, Hampton and Herrmann, 1997).

Teachers stop teaching for a number of reasons, including salary, workplace environment, and job satisfaction. A critical reason they remain in the profession, however, is success in the classroom. A 2008 study found, "the key [to teacher retention] seems to lie in the level of success teachers encounter in raising their students' academic performances" (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008).



The core question with regard to teacher retention then becomes how do we help teachers succeed?

Research suggests the answer lies in teacher mentoring. According to a recent study by The Education Commission of the States, “While the impact of induction and mentoring differed significantly...*collectively the studies do provide empirical support for the claim that assistance for new teachers and, in particular, mentoring programs have a positive impact on teachers and their retention*” (Ingersoll and Kralik, 2004, emphasis authors’).

*There is empirical evidence that mentoring programs have a positive impact on teacher retention*

In typical mentoring programs, a new teacher is paired with a more experienced instructor at that school to whom he or she can ask questions or solicit advice. In some cases, a mentor is assigned to several new teachers at once. Each method can help teachers overcome obstacles in classroom management and content knowledge, but they also have potential problems.

## **BARRIERS**

The most surprising obstacle to a successful mentoring program: not all teachers make good mentors. It’s counterintuitive—they’re teachers, after all, and what is being a mentor if not teaching?

Many administrators and would-be mentors fail to consider the adult-to-child or adult-to-adolescent dynamic many teachers are used to, and even depend upon, to teach effectively. Some teachers struggle when tasked with mentoring someone from their peer group.

Also, it’s hard to find experienced mentors in schools plagued by attrition. If only half of incoming teachers last five years, schools don’t have a large pool of quality mentors to choose from. This is especially true in low-income and turnaround schools, which often have even higher turnover rates. The mentors they do have may find

themselves rendered ineffective by being spread too thin, thereby leading to more teachers leaving the school, or leaving teaching altogether.

*If half of all new teachers quit within five years, how many go on to become mentors?*

## VIRTUAL MENTORING

Given that effective mentoring can have a positive effect on teacher success and retention, can schools also overcome the problems inherent in conventional mentoring practices?

Thanks to an increase in the power and availability of technology to schools across the state, schools find more resources available to them than ever before. Over the past two decades, North Carolina has invested substantially not only in computing capacity—hardware, software, infrastructure, and connectivity—but also human resources, such as technology personnel and media specialists, to support that capacity.



The proliferation of online courses and the founding of the North Carolina Virtual High School are examples of how Internet technology can expand a school's educational capacity. Students in small rural schools can enroll in Advanced Placement courses they otherwise couldn't access. Learners too shy to raise their hand in class may blossom into regular contributors in online discussions. Teachers and students can interact and collaborate over a distance of hundreds of miles. With all this computing power only a click away, why not harness this power for teacher mentoring?

Virtual Mentoring can help schools supplement their mentoring efforts. Online, schools can connect experienced mentors with new teachers to guide them through the difficulties of their first years on the job. While a face-to-face mentor relationship is ideal, that isn't always possible due to factors like budget cuts and indifference toward mentoring in general. Virtual Mentoring can fill in the gaps caused by overtaxed or ineffective mentors.

*Schools can increase their mentoring capacity with a Virtual Mentoring program*

A Virtual Mentoring program brings new teachers together with an experienced mentor to collaborate on activities that correspond to specific issues within the subject matter. Online mentors can guide teachers through the curriculum, plus tricky areas for new teachers such as classroom management and parent conferences. They can also assist small groups of teachers from different geographic areas to form a network of peers with whom they can share successes and solve problems.

## ADVANTAGES

One notable advantage Virtual Mentoring has over a face-to-face relationship is that it allows teachers to form a Professional Learning Community (PLC) with fellow teachers in their subject area. For example, imagine if a biology teacher is having trouble teaching the Krebs cycle. He or she might not be able to find much peer advice if his or her school only had two other science teachers, neither of whom taught biology.

In an online PLC, a teacher could interact with as many as ten to fifteen biology teachers, each offering his or her unique perspective on how to overcome the obstacle. Because enrollment in an online Professional Learning Community is not restricted to a local school system, the

PLC creates a network of instructors focused on a specific content area. This leads to collaboration and the sharing of strategies and best practices. Most importantly, teachers have formed a supportive group of colleagues who finally realize they're not the only ones struggling to adapt to the classroom.

## WHAT TO LOOK FOR

A successful online mentoring program meets these important criteria:

*Online professional learning communities promote collaboration and sharing among teachers*

- **Mentorship experience:** Look for a program that has had several successful mentoring relationships both online and face-to-face.
- **Wide reach:** Find a mentoring program that attracts teachers from a wide geographic and demographic base. Diversifying the cohort will lead to a larger spectrum of ideas and strategies. An effective mentoring program should draw from a large network of educators from a variety of backgrounds.
- **Develop understanding:** Seek a mentoring relationship that offers opportunities to develop understanding of the content—an understanding teachers can then pass on to their students.
- **Course curriculum:** In addition to advice and support, a quality Virtual Mentoring program should provide lesson plans and assignments aligned to the state



course of study. For teachers scrambling to get through the day, having course materials at their disposal can significantly reduce their stress level.

*Seek a Virtual Mentoring program that has successfully mentored teachers both online and face-to-face*

- **In-time professional development:** Teachers should be able to discuss relevant issues with their cohort and their mentors as they occur. If a teacher accesses Virtual Mentoring materials during his or her planning period, it will be much easier to make an adjustment on the same day that the teacher first encountered problems, making frustration less likely to snowball.

- **Reach a new generation of teachers:** A Virtual Mentoring program should treat technology not as extraneous gadgetry, but as a useful tool with which to enhance the learning experience. Many teachers entering the profession come from a college or corporate experience which heavily relied on electronic communications. However, they end up in schools where the technology infrastructure or culture does not afford them opportunities to use the tools they are most comfortable with—essentially, they enter schools that don't communicate the way they do.
- **Privacy and safety:** If a teacher vents her frustrations with her principal, she needs to know her words won't somehow reached the principal's ears. Any online Virtual Mentoring course or Professional Learning Community must have a clear privacy policy.



## TRUST LEARN NC

LEARN NC's Virtual Mentoring Program is uniquely positioned to meet North Carolina's teacher mentoring needs—particularly those of rural and low-income schools. LEARN NC has a cadre of mentors who are experts in their content area and have effectively mentored teachers in their own school systems, both online and face-to-face.

*LEARN NC mentors will guide teachers through everything from understanding content to dealing with parents*

Participants in LEARN NC Virtual Mentoring will have access to a fully-developed, year-long online course aligned to the North Carolina Standard Course of Study. Teachers can use it as their curriculum for the entire year, or just to grab a lesson for class tomorrow. LEARN NC courses give educators the versatility and availability to access valuable content whenever they need it.

In the 2007-2008 school year, LEARN NC conducted pilot Virtual Mentoring courses in Biology, Civics and Economics, English I, United States History, and e-Commerce I and II. In the future, LEARN NC hopes to expand its reach to all core subject areas.

Before the creation of the North Carolina Virtual High School, LEARN NC served as the primary provider of online courses to North Carolina schools, serving more than 2,000 students per year since 2001. In addition, LEARN NC has assembled a network of coordinators in all 115 North Carolina school systems. LEARN NC has the experience, the reach, and the infrastructure to administer a viable Virtual Mentoring program to teachers and schools in North Carolina. Whatever the challenge, LEARN NC will be there from the first day of class through the final bell of the year.

**To find out how LEARN NC can help mentor your teachers, contact Ross White at [ross@learnnc.org](mailto:ross@learnnc.org) or go to [learnnc.org](http://learnnc.org).**

## WORKS CITED

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