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Department of Education

Fall 2023 Mentor Grant Check-In

Semi-Structured Interviews on Best Practices in Mentor Grant Implementation

The mentor grant exists to deepen mentoring programs at the local level, providing funding for mentoring programs that support teachers in years 1-3 and their mentors. In the fall of 2023, the Educator Development office at CDE conducted structured interviews with mentor grant recipients beginning their second year of mentor grant implementation. The goal was to uncover themes in the impact of the grant program and to surface best practices in current grant implementations. This report is a summary of the findings.

Identified Themes

Nine key themes emerged from the interviews. The themes represent common findings across the interviews:

- Mentor impact on new teacher and mentor retention
- Mentor training and support
- Utilizing full-time employees for new teacher support and program coordination
- Power of reflection for both mentors and new teachers
- Web of support for new teachers, beyond just the mentor
- Support for teachers from varying backgrounds
- Subject-specific mentoring needs
- Compensation key for the success of mentoring programs
- Program sustainability

Each theme will be explored below, including details from the participants.

Participants and Method

Fourteen grant program leaders participated in semi-structured interviews between August and November of 2023 via Microsoft Teams or phone call. All program participants were entering the second year of a two-year mentor grant. Two-year awards for programs ranged from $34,000 to $900,000 per program, typically evenly split between grant years. Each interview lasted no more than 30 minutes and proceeded through the questions below with the interviewer deciding what questions to ask based on timing and themes:

1. As you reflect back on year 1 of the grant, what activities do you feel have had the greatest impact on your mentors and new teachers?
2. As you think about the ways you've spent the mentor grant funds in year 1, which expenses have been the most impactful and which have had less impact?

Deepen Mentoring, Retain Teachers

3. What impact have you seen on teacher retention for those who've participated in the grant program?
   a. What about impact on efficacy or effectiveness?
4. What is your biggest learning from year 1 of the grant program?
5. If you were designing an ongoing grant program to impact new teachers and mentors, how would you set it up? Where should limited funds be allocated?
6. If you had 5 minutes with the board of ed/legislature/governor's office, what would you want to share with them about the mentor grant?

The interviewer took notes during each interview, highlighting key answers and writing down exact quotes from participants. Interviews were not recorded. After the completion of all 14 interviews, the interviewer identified key themes. The themes were compared against the original notes to ensure accuracy and to identify specific quotations in the reporting below. Themes and quotations were also cross-referenced with participants to ensure accuracy.

Mentor Impact on New Teacher and Mentor Retention

Program leaders identified retention as a key issue for their programs. They indicated that retention has been particularly tough in a post-pandemic world. Most said that their retention has improved since implementing the mentor grant with one participant reporting that they had 120 new teachers in year 1 of the grant and just 72 new teachers in year 2. The program leader felt they were retaining more new teachers because of the supports of the mentor grant and thus had fewer new teachers beginning positions in year 2. Another program leader in a small program reported 100% retention after year 1 of the grant with no teachers leaving the district after participating in the grant program, even though 60% of the staff was new that year, directly out of college or in alternative licensure programs. Two of the program leaders said that retention has not improved during the grant program. However, both program leaders also had declining enrollments within their districts, leading to increased teacher turnover as teachers seek permanent positions or are non-renewed due to enrollment.

Program leaders also mentioned that the mentor grant is improving retention of their mentor teachers. One program leader called the mentor grant a way to "keep our irreplaceables" by giving mentor teachers a leadership pathway and a way to support the profession. Another program leader said that she consistently hears from mentor teachers that the training they received as a mentor has led to a new sense of energy and focus within their instruction, leading to increased retention and job satisfaction. One program leader mentioned that she was having trouble retaining mentor teachers but due to promotions, with mentors moving into instructional coach or administrative roles after their success in the mentor program. The program leader viewed this as a success, creating a pipeline of education leaders through experience as a mentor.

Mentor Training and Support

Participants consistently identified the need for robust mentor support to have a healthy mentoring program. All program leaders described new mentor training programs that were created using grant funding. These training programs included an emphasis on coaching skills for mentors and regular meetings throughout the year to learn new mentoring skills and to support each other in the mentoring process. One program leader mentioned that having two years of mentor support was crucial. In year one, their mentor training focused on how to break down teacher skills and teach them to new teachers. In year two, their mentor training focused more on coaching and providing feedback. The program leader felt that both tasks were crucial for successful mentoring relationships. Another program leader identified support of mentors as a key task, either from building administration or from program leaders. Without proactive support, mentors will fall back into a buddy system focused on helping teachers navigate building systems such as copiers or substitute placement without getting into the deeper work of mentoring for instructional quality. This kind of mentoring, focused on deeper practices, can only happen with strong support and a deep understanding from building principals about the needs of new teachers and mentors, including the time required for that relationship.

Utilizing Full-time Employees for New Teacher Support and Program Coordination

When asked about the most impactful use of grant funds, program leaders consistently identified full-time employees as crucial for program success. Several leaders mentioned that new teacher support can get lost in the shuffle of a school system. They emphasized that it was crucial to program success that they have a full-time program leader who can focus on the needs of new teachers exclusively. Otherwise, those teachers will not get the support they need to be successful and stay in the profession. The role of the full-time employees funded by the grant varied significantly. In larger programs, that person was primarily a program coordinator and mentor supporter: identifying participating teachers, assigning mentors, training mentors, supporting instructional coaches, training new teachers, coordinating paperwork and stipends. In small to medium programs, that full-time employee was often a direct supporter of new teachers, visiting classrooms and coaching new teachers directly, sometimes in combination with a mentor teacher and other times serving as the mentor directly. One program specifically highlighted the work of their district-level new teacher coaches. The program leader was able to specifically name multiple teachers who were retained in the district due to the proactive support of their new teacher coach. They identified their alternatively licensed teachers as needing even more proactive support than what a new teacher from a traditional background may need.

Power of Reflection for Both Mentors and New Teachers

Program leaders identified time to reflect as critical for both new teachers and their mentors. In the rush of the school year, it can be difficult to find time to reflect on what's working and how to grow. A mentor program allows for that necessary reflection in three ways: 1) In conversations between mentors and new teachers; 2) In new teacher meetings to share challenges and troubleshoot; 3) In mentor meetings to share the challenges of mentoring and reflect on best practice. All the program leaders mentioned the need for these proactive times of sharing among and within like-groups (mentors and new teachers). One program leader specifically mentioned that experienced teachers reported that they were more reflective in their own classrooms after learning how to support new teachers in growing their practice.

Web of Support for New Teachers, Beyond Just the Mentor

Though program leaders emphasized the critical importance of mentors in a new teacher's development, they also highlighted that new teachers require a web of support. This can include instructional coaches, department chairs, team leaders, and administrators. Program leaders explained that only through a coordinated approach can a new teacher thrive. New teacher coaches and mentors need to be on the same page as administrators, providing coordinated feedback and support. If new teacher supporters do not coordinate, they risk providing conflicting guidance or overwhelming the new teacher. Two program leaders specifically said that one of their biggest learnings from year one of the grant was the importance of coordinating support with building principals. Administrators need a deep understanding of the mentoring program, including the time required for mentoring and attributes of a great mentor. Most building leaders are very willing to support a mentoring program, but that support requires deep communication and coordination.

Support for teachers from varying backgrounds

Program leaders expressed appreciation that the mentor grant provides funding to support any teacher in years 1-3 from any background, including educators working under initial, alternative, and emergency licensure. Program leaders emphasized that, due to the teacher shortage, educators are coming from more varied backgrounds than they have in the past. For teachers working under an alternative or emergency license, they may have no classroom experience. Program leaders emphasized that these teachers require intensive support and that the mentor grant allowed them to provide that support in expanded ways, including direct coaching

and mentoring. One program leader reported that, because they had a grant-funded coach specifically focused on alternatively licensed teachers, they were able to retain 97% of those teachers after year one of the grant. It was a remarkable change from previous years, which saw a much greater turnover in alternatively licensed educators.

Subject-Specific Mentoring Needs

Several program leaders mentioned that they designed new mentoring structures because of the grant that included subject-specific support. Most commonly, they were providing additional mentor and coaching support to new teachers in special education, math, and science subject areas. One program reported that they utilized a science-specific new teacher coach with great success. In the 21-22 school year (before the mentor grant), the district was able to retain only 4 of 16 new hires in science. In the 22-23 school year (year 1 of the mentor grant), the district was able to retain 11 of 12 new hires in science. Every new hire mentioned their new teacher science coach as a key reason they were staying in the classroom. Another program leader, after implementing new teacher math coaches in year 1 of the grant, had identified special education as a focus area for year two, acknowledging a challenging shortage in this area and seeing mentoring as a key strategy to retain these special education teachers.

Compensation Key for the Success of Mentoring Programs

Program leaders consistently mentioned stipends as a key use of funds for their mentoring programs. Mentoring takes time from both new teachers and their mentors. In addition to time to meet together, both parties participate in training outside of the school day. That time to focus on mentoring can be difficult to find. Compensation has two key impacts. 1) Compensating the mentor pair ensures that they prioritize the mentoring relationship, finding time to meet outside the busy school day; 2) Compensation communicates to the mentor that their support is valued. Mentor teachers are often asked to volunteer for committees and other non-funded additional work. Providing a stipend for their mentoring activities places value on mentoring and encourages mentor teachers to invest the time required. One program leader mentioned that recruiting mentors has been challenging post-pandemic. Teachers are more focused on setting boundaries and finding life-work balance, sometimes meaning that they turn down unpaid opportunities to support new teachers. The program leader said that providing a fair, attractive stipend has helped to overcome that shortage and encouraged more mentor teachers to participate. Another program leader indicated that they were able to double their mentor stipend this year, providing compensation that was more in line with other opportunities such as coaching and in line with what nearby districts offer mentors.

Program Sustainability

Finally, program leaders consistently expressed concerns about sustainability. They were very proud of the work they have been able to accomplish through the mentor grant—citing growing programs, increased retention, and better support for teachers. However, they recognized that their current program structures may not be sustainable without continued funding. All were eager for additional funding for ongoing mentor grants and were simultaneously advocating for additional funds to support mentoring through their district budgets. They believe in the power of mentoring and recognize that high-quality mentoring requires financial support.