An analysis of New York State teacher mentoring programs: Identifying components that meet teacher needs and change practice

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In February 2004, New York State began mandating formal teacher mentoring programs for all teachers in their first year in the classroom. However, the regulations allow for significant variation in programs at the local level. In an effort to help make programs more effective at improving teaching and learning, this study examined teacher participation in various mentoring program components and the extent to which each met teacher needs or changed practice.

For this study, two hundred twenty-seven (227) beginning teachers during the 2008-2009 school year completed an anonymous, on-line survey that included items related to their needs as beginning teachers, the program components in which they participated, and the extent to which their participation in those components met their needs, changed their practice and/or related to measures of job satisfaction.

The first set of key findings of this study revealed that teachers reported the greatest needs in learning to navigate their school systems and obtaining resources and the least needs for emotional supports. While teachers indicated some level of need in all of the areas identified in the research literature, their prioritization of those needs was not consistent with the rankings in the research literature. In addition, teachers varied in their needs based upon work characteristics such as teaching assignment, district type and district size. These findings suggest the utility of adopting a needs assessment questionnaire to gauge the specific needs of each cohort of beginning teachers as part of all formal teacher mentoring programs.

According to the second set of key study findings, New York State beginning teachers report that having a mentor at the same grade level or in the same subject area best met their needs in all areas and changed practice in most domains of teaching. Teachers reported participation in a wide variety of mentoring program components. When rating those program components that best met their needs, having a mentor at the same grade level and having a mentor in the same subject area were cited most often as the two most important components. Teachers were asked to report the degree to which their participation in each of the program components changed their practice in the four domains of teaching as defined by Charlotte Danielson: planning and preparation, classroom environment, instruction and professional responsibilities (2007). Teachers reported that having a mentor at the same grade level and having a mentor in the same subject area changed their practice in three out of the four domains.

The third key finding is that, although only one out of every four teachers in the study reported participating in team teaching, it was rated among the top three components for meeting instructional needs and changing practice in all four domains of teaching. In fact, it was rated as the highest component by teachers for changing their instruction. This suggests that teacher mentoring programs could be improved by including team teaching as a mentoring program component.