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eye on research

Induction Makes a Difference

by Linda Molner Kelley

This research brief, excerpted from a recently published article (Molner Kelley, 2004), reports encouraging results in the long-term retention of novice teachers who participated in an induction partnership jointly administered by the University of Colorado at Boulder and six school districts. The study tracks 10 cohorts of inductees into their fifth year of teaching and researches components of the program that influence retention.

Recent studies suggest that school staffing needs may not be due to overall shortages of qualified teachers entering the profession, but rather by large numbers of teachers migrating to other schools or leaving the profession altogether. Over a third of beginning teachers leave the profession during the first three years, and almost half leave after five years.

Although other professions provide transitional assistance for new members (e.g., residents in medicine, interns in architecture, associates in law), historically the education profession has ignored the support needs of its recruits. When new teachers experience a lack of support and poor working conditions, their commitments to stay in the profession weaken.

This study tracked retention statistics of novice teachers who participated in the Partners in Education (PIE) Program, a comprehensive induction program jointly administered by CU-Boulder and six Colorado school districts. The research also analyzed induction activities that appear to have influenced these teachers' commitments to stay in the profession.

Program Description

Since 1987 the School of Education at CU-Boulder has been in a collaborative partnership with six local school districts that include the following three components:

1) An induction program for fully licensed novice teachers, called PIE teachers, tied to a Master's degree program at CU-Boulder;
2) Full time release of expert teachers, called Clinical Professors, from participating districts to (a) mentor novice teachers, (b) work on campus as methods instructors or supervisors of teacher candidates, and (c) serve as teacher leaders on school district curriculum and staff development projects; and
3) CU-Boulder faculty resources such as consulting, district and school program evaluations, workshops on curriculum and assessment, and collaborative research projects offered quid pro quo to school districts.

The first component, the PIE induction program, constitutes the focus of this research.

Teacher Retention Results

Ten cohorts of inductees were tracked to calculate four-year retention statistics (e.g., teachers who completed four years of teaching and began a fifth year). For the 144 teachers located and tracked, 23 were male and 121 were female. Of the males, 16 taught in elementary classrooms and seven taught in middle or high schools. Of the females, 105 taught elementary grades and 16 taught in middle or high schools. Nine of the participants were teachers of color.

PIE mentor Nancy Grindberg (left) and PIE teacher Melanie Funk (far right) provide reading instruction to two first grade students at Tennyson Knolls Elementary School.

Retention findings reveal that:

- 94 percent of PIE participants, or 136/144 teachers, were still teaching after four years, compared to national estimates of up to 40 percent of beginning teachers leaving within four years.
- 8 women and 0 males in this study left the profession within four years; larger studies report no significant differences between male and female attrition.
- 1 secondary Spanish teacher and 7 elementary teachers left the profession; recent national research shows little difference between secondary and elementary teacher attrition.
- No pattern of attrition related to school diversity or poverty appears among the teachers who left the profession within four years.

Could other factors besides induction support explain these high retention rates? PIE teachers start teaching at a reduced salary during their first year but subsequently make more rapid salary advances than most novice teachers by completing their master's degrees within two to three years. Because research suggests that higher paid teachers stay in the profession longer, the PIE teachers' higher salaries and increases could have influenced their decision to remain in their jobs. Arguments, however, that these teachers are special—for example, they meet academic standards for a master's degree program and choose to start graduate school early in the teaching career—don't explain the high retention rate. In fact, research suggests that more academically qualified teachers with high college entrance scores are less likely to remain in teaching, and earning a master's degree does not appear to predict retention.

What specific program features influenced novice teachers' desire to remain in teaching? And which induction program components did teachers and supervising administrators report as providing the greatest benefit to new teachers? The next section describes induction activities associated with retention followed by research findings tied to these activities.

Induction Activities Associated with Retention

The PIE induction program employs three approaches that have been identified by researchers as potential remedies for novice teacher attrition: intensive mentoring, cohort group networking, and ongoing inquiry into practice.

Intensive mentoring. PIE teachers receive classroom assistance from expert "clinical professor" mentors a minimum of one-half day each week for the full teaching year. Mentors are fully released from their own classrooms to concentrate on the needs of their inductees in addition to district and university duties. Mentors provide a variety of ongoing coaching options depending on each teacher's professional needs: observing lessons and providing feedback, modeling instruction, working with students, team teaching, examining student work, assisting with individual and group assessments, arranging observations of other classrooms, or whatever else might benefit the teacher.

Cohort group networking. To reduce isolation and foster collaboration, all PIE teachers attend seminars twice monthly. Again, seminar curricula address teachers' instructional needs. Mentors, occasional guest CU-Boulder professors and the director facilitate group work and model instructional strategies. Teachers share lesson and unit plans and use real classroom cases to engage in problem solving.

Ongoing inquiry into practice. PIE teachers enroll in three off-campus graduate courses during the induction year; this includes a five-month teacher-as-researcher project in their classrooms. Formative and summative aspects of the teachers' inquiry encourage reflection, flexible instructional adaptations, and assessment-driven decision-making.

Research Findings Tied to Induction Activities

Each year since 1988 program evaluations have been conducted and qualitatively analyzed. Data sources include surveys and interviews with PIE teachers and clinical professor mentors, interviews with PIE teachers' principals, assignments completed for graduate courses, classroom observations made by clinical professors, and other program artifacts. Analyses of two domains widely believed to influence retention—perceived teacher growth level and quality of mentoring—combined teacher and principal interview and survey responses for all 10 PIE teacher cohorts reported in the retention results. A third domain, satisfaction with inquiry-based graduate activities, was analyzed for eight of the 10 cohorts of teachers.

Analyses revealed consistent results across districts for all domains as well as agreement between teacher and principal responses. Findings from all three analyses follow with illustrative teacher and principal comments extracted from surveys and interviews:

Quality of Mentoring

- 146/147 teachers and 132/132 principals surveyed and interviewed over the 10-year study expressed satisfaction with mentor support.

These data consistently speak to the high levels of professional growth and efficacy PIE teachers attribute to mentor support, a finding that supports earlier research correlating mentoring and teacher efficacy with retention. A middle school math teacher illustrated a growing sense of professional efficacy due to mentor support in comments she made at the end of her induction year: "My educational philosophy for math ed is 'cementing.' I'm confident, in control, and able to adjust to varying abilities."

Levels of professional growth

- Over the 10-year study period, all 147 PIE teachers surveyed reported high levels of professional growth during the induction year. Of evaluating principals 130/132, or 98 percent, expressed satisfaction with teacher growth gains made during the induction year.

Many teachers, principals, and mentors independently identified similar areas of teacher growth such as assessment, classroom management, and differentiated instruction.

Inquiry-based graduate study

- Of the eight cohorts analyzed, 123/124 teachers expressed satisfaction with the graduate activities integrated with the induction experience.

A majority of teachers identified the teacher-as-researcher project as the highlight of these requirements. Analyses showed that the project created a sense of efficacy as teachers delved below the surface and pondered what really worked with their students. "I already had 'theories' I muddled through," one teacher commented. "Now, I got to test them out. The action research project taught me a lot about myself and the way I teach. Now I focus on the kids and realize the possibilities for their growth."

Principals echoed these claims: "They [PIE teachers] come out very insightful and open-reflective," one noted. Another principal reported, "She made huge growth this year in planning and management; she's very reflective, and she can critique herself and her lessons. She's now better at assessing needs and applying [this knowledge] appropriately to students."

Implications for District Leaders and Policy Makers

The current national and local remedies to teacher attrition seem paradoxically short sighted; they focus efforts on increasing the numbers of teachers in the hiring pipeline through alternative certification programs and other means while neglecting the professional needs of so many fully qualified novice teachers already staffing our schools.

Developing policies to retain effective novice teachers like the successful participants in the PIE Program can yield both financial and instructional benefits once districts calculate the real costs of replacing teachers. These investments include recruiting expenses, administrator time commitments, and costs associated with professional development and orientation programs for new staff members. Texas, for example, recently estimated that annual statewide turnover (reflecting a combination of teacher attrition and migration) costs could reach approximately $329 million.

From an organizational perspective, high levels of attrition also disrupt school programs and student learning goals. From an instructional point of view, school districts and their higher education partners should appreciate the intrinsic value of retaining teachers who make large gains in teaching effectiveness in the early years of teaching especially when, as this and other studies suggest, induction programs provide new teachers with comprehensive mentoring, networking, and classroom-based inquiry opportunities.

Reference

Molner Kelley (2004). Why induction matters. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 55 (5), 438-448.

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