

# *A* **For Developing Mentorship Program**

**for Beginning Special Education Teachers**

*Adopted By The CEC Professional Standards And Practice Standing Committee  
April 1997*

The CEC Professional Standards and Practice Standing Committee adopted these Guidelines in April, at the recent CEC convention. They were developed by the CEC Subcommittee on Certification chaired by Jane Erin. To develop the guidelines, the subcommittee reviewed the literature, particularly evaluation studies of mentoring programs, to determine those factors that have a positive impact on the mentoring process. Particular recognition is given to Lynn Boyer, a member of the subcommittee, for her work in developing these guidelines.

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## **Introduction**

Even with more extensive preservice teacher preparation, the beginning year of teaching presents new challenges and problems for all teachers that pose a steep learning curve. Like doctors in their medical residency, teachers who have the support of more senior colleagues and opportunities for continuing their learning become more skilled more quickly. Research shows that beginning teachers who have had the continuous support of a skilled mentor are much more likely to stay in the profession and much more likely to get beyond classroom management concerns to focus on student learning. All beginning teachers should be assigned a skilled mentor. Effective mentors should be selected for their outstanding teaching ability and be given the necessary training and released time to work productively with their new colleagues.

Ideally, the first year or two of teaching should be structured much like a residency in medicine, with teachers continually consulting a seasoned veteran in their teaching field about the decisions they are making and receiving ongoing advice and evaluation. In the quality control system we propose, teachers will have completed the first stage of licensing tests—examinations of subject matter and basic teaching knowledge—and will be ready to undertake the second stage—an examination of teaching skills conducted through a structured performance assessment that they work on in their first year (What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future, 1996).

In 1989 The Council for Exceptional Children's Delegate Assembly adopted standards for entry into professional practice. Standard IV states:

*Each new professional in special education should receive a minimum of a 1-year mentorship during the first year of his or her professional special education practice in a new role. The mentor should be an experienced professional in the same or a similar role, who can provide expertise and support on a continuing basis.*

The CEC Professional Standards and Practice Standing Committee charged its Subcommittee on Certification to review the literature on mentoring and to develop guidelines that would be useful to the field in implementing the standard.

The act of arranging for mentoring partners may not have positive benefits, but mentoring that has clarity of purpose and quality of delivery does. More specifically, the following conclusions can be drawn from the literature on mentorships:

- Mentorships provide emotional support to the new teacher.
- Mentorship programs must be well-planned with mentor training occurring prior to the opening of school and throughout the school year.
- Mentors must volunteer.
- Mentor relationships lessen the sense of isolation experienced by first-year teachers.

- Mentors facilitate the development of reflective practice in protégés.
- Mentorships convey the culture of the school and district.
- Purposes for mentorships are varied.
- Mentorship effect on teacher retention is undetermined.
- Mentorships encompass opportunities for direct experience, consultation with colleagues, and observation of other teachers, the three most effective sources of knowledge and skills as reported by teachers.

### **Guidelines for Establishing A Mentorship**

Quality special education professional preparation programs provide special educators with essential knowledge and skills. However, such programs are not capable of providing their graduates with all of the knowledge and skills and experiences that would be expected of a successful special educator. The same reality is found in other professions. These professions provide internships, induction programs, or other forms of mentoring that enable beginning professionals to learn how to apply the knowledge and skills they have acquired, learn more advanced knowledge and skills, and acculturate to their profession and work environment.

Recent studies of the retention and attrition of special educators provide clear evidence of the need for support for new special educators in their initial teaching experience. Teachers without such support from experienced professionals in similar roles have a higher rate of leaving the profession. Effective mentoring programs are an important strategy for reducing the shortage of qualified special educators.

The Council for Exceptional Children's Standards for Entry into Special Education Practice contained in *What Every Special Educator Must Know: The International Standards for the Preparation and Certification of Special Education Teachers* acknowledges the challenges for the special educator new to the field in the critical transition year from preservice preparation to assumption of responsibility for special education students receiving services along the continuum of services. As such, Standard IV of the Standards for Entry into Special Education Practice provides for the following:

*Each new professional in special education should receive a minimum of a 1 year mentorship during the first year of his or her professional special education practice in*

*a new role. The mentor should be an experienced professional in the same or a similar role, who can provide expertise and support on a continuing basis.*

In discussing the intent of the Standards for Entry, *What Every Special Educator Must Know* states that this mentorship experience is not part of initial certification but an aspect of continuing education that aids the new teacher in further developing knowledge and skills in the area of certification and provides the support required to sustain the new teacher in practice. The mentorship experience is expected to provide a satisfying personal and professional experience for the special educator new to the field and to the experienced educator serving as the mentor, thereby producing significant outcomes associated with growth, recognition, and collegiality for both.

### **Purposes of a Mentorship Program**

Although the overall goals of a mentorship are to improve the quality of instruction for students with exceptionalities and to retain special educators in the field of special education, they may be accomplished by addressing the following purposes in the development of the mentorship:

- **Facilitate application of knowledge and skills.**

New special educators find themselves in their initial years of teaching having to apply what they have learned in their professional preparation programs. They are expected to be able to select and adapt curriculum, individualize instruction, develop individualized education programs, work effectively with parents and other professionals, and practice consistent with legal and ethical requirements. An effective mentoring program is designed to assist new teachers take what they know and are able to do and apply their knowledge and skills to the diverse situations the teachers face within their practice.

- **Convey advanced knowledge and skills.**

Mentoring programs should be a part of professional development, whereby the new special educator learns from the mentor more advanced knowledge and skills necessary for successful practice. Often these competencies can only be learned from experience. For example, a college or university can prepare their future special educators with basic competencies for supervising paraeducators; however, learning the additional knowledge and skills necessary for effective supervision needs to be provided

through on-the-job training. Thus an effective mentoring program is designed to teach new special educators the additional knowledge and skills they require.

- **Assist timely acculturation to the school climate.**

Schools, like any other work environment, have a culture made up of both explicit and implicit rules. New teachers often find themselves operating in a cultural context that is foreign. Often schools have a dominant culture that guides the overall operation of the school and subcultures composed of groups of professionals within the school, or even the cultural context of an individual teacher and his or her classroom. The modern special educator, perhaps more than any other teacher in the school, has to function effectively within the variety of cultural contexts in the school. Helping the new special educator learn the cultures and how to work effectively within them is a purpose essential to an effective mentoring program.

- **Reduce stress.**

Stress is a part of being a special educator. What distinguishes those who practice effectively and retain in the profession and those who do not is the level of stress and the ability to cope with stress. Beginning special educators face a particularly high degree of stress and generally have not been prepared to cope with that stress. Mentoring programs provide special educators counseling, support, and instruction for managing stress.

- **Improve job satisfaction.**

People who get great satisfaction from their work are more likely to stay in their profession. Similarly people who are satisfied perform at a better rate. Thus high job satisfaction by special educators is of great benefit to all parties involved with special education. Job satisfaction is affected by two perceptions: how persons perceive their own performance, and how they perceive how others evaluate their performance. For new special educators, who often have unrealistically high expectations of themselves and everyone around them, the first years of teaching can be very frustrating. As schools become more inclusive with a smaller concentration of special educators, new special educators have fewer colleagues with the experience to help them develop appropriate measures for gauging their performance and job satisfaction. Mentoring programs can provide that guidance.

- **Support professional induction.**

Successful special educators contribute to and derive benefit from their school but also from their community and profession. Helping new special education professionals become benefiting and contributing members of the larger

special education profession is an important purpose of mentoring programs. Local chapters of The Council for Exceptional Children, and state or provincial organizations such as CEC, provide opportunities for new special educators to see themselves as part of a larger community of special educators and to gain support and new knowledge and skills from their professional colleagues.

### **Features of a Successful Mentorship**

- **Purposes are clearly stated and assessable.**

Successful mentorships are designed, implemented, and assessed consistent with clearly stated purposes. Mentoring is not an end in itself, but rather a means to achieve mutually agreed upon outcomes. It is important that the purposes of the mentorship program be developed by persons representative of the parties that will be involved in its implementation. After the purposes and the implementing program are developed, it is equally important that all participants clearly understand and subscribe to the purposes.

- **Mentor criteria are clear.**

The development of a satisfying and successful mentor relationship rests primarily upon the quality and commitment of the mentor. Effective mentors bring to the relationship a desire to be a mentor, a history of successful teaching, a willingness to be open-minded, flexibility in scheduling, knowledge of the school culture, the capacity to develop a trusting and confidential relationship, a nonjudgmental perspective, and effective communication skills.

- **The mentor has volunteered.**

Mentorships require a commitment of time and an earnest desire to advance the professional development of a new special educator. Mentors who volunteer or participate in a selection process demonstrate their interest and determination to create a mentorship that is satisfying to both the mentor and the mentee.

- **Mentor training occurs prior to opening of school and through the year.**

Successful teachers bring valuable instructional experience to the mentee. Systematic mentor training should develop in mentors other skills, however, that are important to a successful mentorship. Mentors should receive training in communication strategies that encourage sharing, clarify information and problems, facilitate problem-solving, and support the mentee in an active and empathetic manner. Mentors should also be knowledgeable in characteristics of adult learners, the provision of direct instruction consistent with the developmental level of the

mentee, and responsibilities within a leadership role.

This comprehensive training should begin prior to the arrival of new teachers, continue at regular and planned intervals throughout the year and include the opportunity for mentors to discuss concerns and issues with supportive colleagues.

- **There is a high level of interaction between the mentor and mentee.**

A well-planned mentorship includes regular opportunities for the mentor and mentee to discuss and plan. This often includes an agreed upon time each week as well as a willingness and flexibility on the part of the mentor to be available, apart from the planned time, when the new teacher's need for support is particularly urgent.

- **The mentor has knowledge of and experience at the same level and with the same specialization as the mentee.**

It is essential that the mentor have the knowledge, skills, and experiences that are necessary to meet the purposes of the mentorship. A mentor is a professional role model for the mentee and thus must represent to the mentee the professional they would like to become. It is also important that the mentor has experienced the current teaching situation the mentee is experiencing so that the mentor can give appropriate guidance. A mentor who can assist a mentee from personal experience is at once more credible and valuable to the mentee.

- **The mentee and mentor have dependable and ready access to each other.**

While easy access to the mentor is an expressed desire of new teachers, this is not always possible due to variations in student population and dispersion of services. All mentorships should include, however, means of communication that allow the mentee to have questions and concerns addressed in a timely manner. These might include expedited telephone access, e-mail, planned coverage for classroom observations within the school, and additional substitute allowances for observations in schools other than the mentee's.

- **The mentorship relationship is guided by mutual respect for professional views.**

A new special educator brings to a first or new teaching assignment experiences, knowledge, and beliefs that will drive the mentee's practice in the early years. The mentor's role is to advance the professional development of the mentee. Pairing the new teacher with a mentor who shares or can be respectful of their knowledge, experience, and beliefs is important for instilling self-confidence and professional validation in the mentee.

- **Time for interaction is supported and provided.**

Effective mentorships occur when there is a high level of interaction between the mentor and mentee. Time for this to occur must be supported by the building administrator and colleagues who are invested in the successful transition of a new teacher into the classroom. This support may include staff volunteering to cover classes of the mentor and mentee so that planned time together can occur and substitute coverage or reduction in schoolwide assignments that are time-consuming, such as bus or lunch duties.

- **Mentoring is a highly personal and sustained relationship.**

Mentorship programs for special educators must be developed with an awareness of the individual, dynamic, and interactive nature of successful mentorships and a commitment to support both the mentor and the protégé through the duration of the relationship. While guidelines and best practices provide signposts for development of programs, the highly individualized nature of each mentorship must be respected and allowed to define the benefits that it brings to both educators as they move from teacher and student to trusted colleagues.

### **What Every Special Educator Must Know**

**The International Standards for the Preparation and Certification of Special Education Teachers, Second Edition**  
*The Council for Exceptional Children*

Use these professional standards for state certification and accreditation of professional preparation programs. Includes common core standards for knowledge and skills for all beginning special education teachers as well as expanded sets of standards in the areas of deaf or hard of hearing, early childhood, emotional/behavioral disorders, gifted, learning disabilities, mental retardation/developmental disabilities, physical and health disabilities, and visual impairments. Contains technical and clarifying amendments adopted in May 1996.

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