Chapter 13

Teacher Fellows: A School/University Partnership for Beginning Teachers

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes the Teacher Fellows Program. This program is a school/university partnership that has provided comprehensive mentoring and induction support to more than 400 teachers over the past 20 years. The program is grounded in social-constructivist, cognitive-developmental and teacher development theories. Both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods have been used to determine the program’s effectiveness over time. Results from analyses of the data indicate the program (a) improves teacher retention, (b) increases teacher effectiveness, (c) fosters collaboration between the university and public schools, and (d) impacts student learning.

INTRODUCTION

It [the Teacher Fellows Program] gave me a tremendous amount of resources to fall back on when I didn’t know what else to do. It never allowed me to settle for just making it through the year, but kept me striving for what I could do better in the future. (First-year teacher)

I know I have grown so much this year! I would not be where I am without having done the program. I feel confident in my abilities. (First-year teacher)

Each week I learned something new that kept me excited about teaching. It kept my fire burning. I don’t know what I would have done without this program. When the going gets tough, the Teacher Fellows keep on going. (First-year teacher)

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These quotes from first-year teachers emphasize the importance of providing mentoring and induction support for beginning teachers. Currently, most states require some form of mentoring. However, not all models of teacher mentoring are created equal. Ingersoll and Strong (2011) point out that while the overall objective of mentoring programs is to provide support for novice teachers, the components of these programs may vary widely. They explain:

> **Duration and intensity, for example, may be very different from program to program. Mentoring programs can vary from a single meeting between mentor and mentee at the beginning of a school year to a highly structured program involving frequent meetings over a couple of years between mentors and mentees who are both provided with release time from their normal teaching loads.** (p. 203)

Programs that include multiple supports for mentors and mentees represent what Smith and Ingersoll (2004) call “comprehensive” induction packages. Unlike the traditional “buddy system” where a mentor simply checks in on a mentee from time to time to see how things are going, comprehensive induction programs provide various supports such as release time, training seminars for mentors and mentees, common planning time, and participation in a network of teachers. Current literature related to teacher induction supports the positive impact of such programs (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004; Davis, 2011; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004; Strong, 2009).

In this chapter the authors will describe a public school/university partnership that has provided comprehensive induction to over 400 beginning teachers for the past 20 years. In addition, the authors will share results from research that demonstrates the partnership’s impact on teacher retention, classroom practices, and student learning.

**BACKGROUND**

The Texas State (TxState) Teacher Fellows is a comprehensive induction program that provides multiple layers of support to beginning teachers. This program represents a unique collaborative effort to address beginning teacher needs based on a no-additional-cost exchange of resources between the university and partner school districts. In this model, Teacher Fellows (TFs), fully certified teachers who are TxState graduate students, are contracted by the university to serve as first-year teachers in participating school districts. In exchange, experienced classroom teachers from participating districts are released from classroom assignments to serve as Faculty Exchange Teachers. Their role includes providing intensive on-site induction and mentoring support for the TFs in the graduate program, supervising and co-instructing in the undergraduate teacher education program at TxState, and/or supervising TxState student teachers in their district. The Exchange Teachers (ETs) are co-selected by the school districts and university through a collaborative interview process. For each ET the school district assigns to the program, the district selects three fulltime fully certified TFs who are assigned by the district to available elementary and middle school classrooms. Teacher Fellows earn a master’s degree, tuition free, within a specified fifteen-month program and are supported by an $18,000 fellowship in lieu of district salary. Since 1994, 21 cohorts consisting of 422 beginning teachers, 62 experienced teachers, and 12 school districts within the Central Texas area have participated in the program. The 2014-2015 academic year marked the twenty-first year of the program.
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