Chapter 19
Enhancing a Rural School–University Teacher Education Partnership through an E-Mentoring Program for Beginning Teachers

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ABSTRACT
This case study describes an innovative and effective e-mentoring program for beginning teachers that has enhanced Western Carolina University’s (WCU) school-university teacher education partnership. With national data indicating that nearly one-half of beginning teachers leave the classroom within five years, schools and universities are faced with the challenges of providing the support needed to keep new teachers in the classroom and developing them into effective professionals. Like those nationally, the schools in the university’s rural service region were facing new teacher retention issues. The authors of this chapter and their school partners believed that technology-mediated mentoring had the potential to extend the benefits of face-to-face mentoring by providing professional development that engaged new teachers in an external community of learners, was connected to and driven by teachers’ work, and was sustained, intensive, and respectful of teachers’ demanding schedules. The School University Teacher Education Partnership (SUTEP) then developed and implemented this technology-based project.

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**HISTORY OF THE PROJECT**

School-university partnerships have become an important educational phenomenon in recent years, especially as they relate to school reform and teacher quality. School-university partnerships attempt to achieve beneficial change in the partner organizations through constructive initiatives (Calabrese, 2006). Although such partnerships have existed since the late 1800s (Clark, 1988), they started receiving significant attention in the early 1980s (Goodlad, 1988). These partnerships take on a variety of forms but typically have as their goal the improvement in the quality of some aspect of P-16 education (Handler & Ravid, 2001a). Our partnership, formally known as the School University Teacher Education Partnership (SUTEP), was created in 1997. SUTEP is housed in the College of Education and Allied Professions (CEAP) at WCU. SUTEP provides an umbrella for the majority of initiatives between the university and the public schools. The central mission of SUTEP is to support a seamless continuum for the ongoing development of professional educators. This mission is met through the work of four standing committees, one each dealing with recruitment, preparation, induction, and professional development. In order to provide maximum impact, all academic departments and centers in the College of Education and Allied Professions collaborate with SUTEP and have in their mission provision of services related to these initiatives. The university has signed partnerships with 108 schools in its region.

One goal of SUTEP is to assist school systems in meeting the North Carolina State Board of Education requirement to develop and provide a Beginning Teacher Support Program Plan (N.C. BOE, 2003). Implementing this plan can be a challenge to rural schools, like those in our region, where resources are limited. The SUTEP Induction Committee provides support by collaborating with beginning teacher coordinators to design comprehensive services for teachers during their first three years of service.

Conversations within our partnership focusing on technology began in 2005. SUTEP and five partner school systems received grant funding in 2006 from the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation to develop and pilot an online support program to enhance beginning teacher support. The pilot, Project START (Supporting, Training, And Retaining Teachers) Phase I, demonstrated that many benefits to first-year teachers are related to their opportunity to share new ideas and similar experiences. Technology was recognized as a viable format for this exchange. With the online support program housed on WCU’s server, beginning teachers were able to talk with colleagues who were struggling with similar problems. Career master teachers and university faculty from CEAP and the College of Arts and Sciences (otherwise known as e-mentors) facilitated discussions and answered questions, providing the knowledge and skills that come from the wisdom of experience.

The first phase of this project was successful, as documented in the educational impact section of this chapter and led to Project START Phase II. This phase resulted in an expanded partnership between WCU and eleven WNC school systems in 2008. The purpose of this project was to increase the current support for first-year teachers established through the initial program to include teachers in years two and three of their careers. Building on the e-mentoring model, the program expanded to include synchronous online chats and the option of sharing classroom video clips. These new features better met the needs of technologically savvy teachers, providing opportunities for them to seek support through the virtual world in addition to the face-to-face school-based mentoring available in their schools. Technology was also used to differentiate professional learning among new teachers by providing a variety of support opportunities. For example, a primary concern for many new teachers is getting ready...