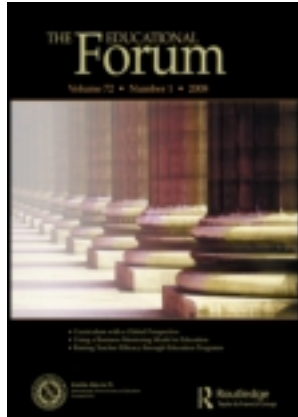


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A Comprehensive Induction System: A Key to the Retention of Highly Qualified Teachers

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Abstract

Studies have shown that teacher quality is the single greatest factor affecting student achievement. However, it is not simply enough to recruit highly qualified candidates and place them into the schools where they are needed the most; the United States needs a system to support and retain these teachers. This essay posits that school districts need to implement and sustain a comprehensive induction system, which fosters professional learning communities through a network of supports, to retain highly qualified teachers.

Key words: *teacher induction, teacher quality, teacher retention.*

More than ever before in the history of the United States, teaching is the profession that is shaping the nation's future, molding the skills of our future workforce, and laying the foundation for good citizenship and full participation in community and civic life (U.S. Department of Education 2004). Studies have shown that teacher quality is the single greatest factor impacting student achievement (Curran and Goldrick 2002; Huang, Yi, and Haycock 2002; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future [NCTAF] 2003; Berry 2004; U.S. Department of Education 2004). For this reason, America must remain steadfast in meeting the goal of ensuring that every classroom has a highly qualified teacher. However, it is not simply enough to recruit highly qualified candidates and place them into the schools and into the classrooms where they are needed the most; the United States needs a system to retain these highly qualified teachers. Teacher retention has become a national crisis. The nation needs strategies that will ensure not just greater rates of teacher retention, but also retention of great teachers (NCTAF 2005).

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Those limited states with current induction programs generally follow the *basic orientation model* (NEA Foundation 2002), which only helps new teachers learn school procedures and district policies, understand their responsibilities, and address basic classroom management issues. These programs are generally structured around a series of workshops. If a mentor is provided, it is usually in an informal capacity and is often selected for convenience, rather than for instructional coaching capabilities. This model generally focuses on the survival/discovery stage, seeking to provide initial support to new teachers by meeting their immediate needs and guiding their transition into the classroom, but not beyond (Curran and Goldrick 2002). It typically lasts for one year, at most. This basic model is not enough for teachers to feel supported, but only enough for teachers to survive that first year.

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One key to retaining the highly qualified teachers that districts have expended time, energy, and money recruiting could be a comprehensive induction system. This is not a stand-alone program. A comprehensive system of induction would be one stage in a continuum of teacher development in which new teachers would be acculturated to the profession. After all, graduation from a teacher education program cannot be considered the end of training for teachers, as it does not allow sufficient time for teacher candidates to develop the skills and experiences necessary for completely independent practice in their initial teaching assignments (AFT 2001). Some components of the comprehensive induction system would include an orientation program, quality and structured mentoring, common planning time for mentors and teachers, intensive and ongoing professional development, an external network of teachers, support from the school administration, and standards-based evaluation.

To make this comprehensive induction system effective, the program would last for a minimum of two years. Research has shown that when it comes to beginning teacher induction, longer is better than shorter (AFT 2001). This period of induction can make the difference between a teacher who succeeds early in his or her career and one who does not, and between a teacher who remains in the profession and one who does not. All beginning teachers would be required to participate, as they can benefit from induction whether they are licensed through traditional or alternative means. These early career teachers would be assigned a qualified mentor at their specific grade level. Mentoring is a crucial component of any induction program. Beginning teachers need the support, advice, and guidance that experienced teachers can provide. A formative assessment would complete the program in which the teacher would be assessed as to whether he or she met the standards set forth by the program.

The absence of support has been cited as the primary reason that teachers leave the profession, even over salary and job conditions (AFT 2001; Joftus and Maddox-Dolan 2002; Whisnant, Elliott, and Pynchon 2005). Research has shown that teachers who have no induction programs are twice as likely to leave within the first three years of teaching (Education Week 2000; NEA Foundation 2002). Those with well-designed induction systems not only are more likely to stay in the profession, but are also able to move more quickly beyond issues of classroom management to focus on instruction (NCTAF 1996).

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Beginning teacher attrition is a serious problem, especially in low-income areas and in subjects such as mathematics, science, special education, and foreign languages. It is estimated that almost one-third of America's teachers leave the field sometime during their first three years of teaching, and almost one-half leave after five years (Curran and Goldrick 2002; NCTAF 2002; Kuenzi 2004). These statistics are even higher for low-income and rural areas, and as high as 60 percent for teachers who have entered the profession through alternate pathways (NCTAF 2002). Furthermore, the teachers who leave appear to be disproportionately among the most academically gifted (NCTAF 1997; Schlechty and Vance 1981). The costs of replacing new teachers who leave are between \$8,000 and \$48,000 each, depending on whether student learning costs are considered (Benner 2000). Even the low-end estimate sums to billions of dollars nationally each year. However, teacher turnover is not just about numbers; the costs go far beyond the impact of lost dollars. The organizational and human toll, while harder to quantify, is devastating to struggling districts, schools, parents, and students. Districts lose the momentum of reform initiatives when teachers leave. Schools lose the continuity and consistency that are essential to the fabric of their communities. Students are forced to adapt to a passing parade of teachers, severing the emotional bonds formed with some of the most important adults in their daily lives (NCTAF 2002; 2005). In sum, high rates of teacher attrition can inhibit the development and maintenance of a learning community. In turn, a lack of community in schools may have a negative effect on teacher retention, therefore creating a vicious cycle (Ingersoll and Smith 2004). It is time to make a concerted effort to do more to break this cycle!

The United States' inability to support high-quality teaching in many of its schools is driven not by too few teachers entering the profession, which is a common misconception, but by too many teachers leaving it for other jobs (NCTAF 2003; 2005). Spending money to recruit new teachers to meet staffing shortages is a lot like putting water into a leaky bucket if these teachers leave in a few short years (Ingersoll and Smith 2003). The key to addressing shortages lies not in attractive recruitment policies, but in support and training for new teachers at the school site (Curran and Goldrick 2002). When we ask, "How can we find and prepare more teachers?," we are focusing on the symptom instead of the problem. Instead, we need to ask, "How do we get the good teachers we have recruited, trained, and hired to stay in their jobs?" (NCTAF 2002, 3).

As someone who has spent two decades in the education profession, I have seen a revolving door of teachers and the devastating effects it leaves on student achievement and school stability. To retain highly qualified teachers, this country needs to implement and sustain a *comprehensive induction system*, which fosters professional learning communities through a network of supports.

The State of Induction in the United States

Currently in the United States, 33 states have induction policies; however, only 22 mandate and fund these varied induction programs (NEA [National Education Association] Foundation 2002; Hall 2005). In the remaining one-third of the states with induction policies, these policies function only as good intentions, neither mandated nor financially supported. Seventeen states are silent on induction, offering neither policy guidance nor funding (American Federation of Teachers [AFT] 2001).

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These programs connect new teachers to a network of colleagues and resources. They relieve the isolation that too often characterizes teachers' early professional experiences. Comprehensive induction provides the essential bridge for a beginning teacher between being a student learning about teaching and becoming a professional teacher (Feiman-Nemser 2001).

This comprehensive induction model would benefit both early career teachers and those with more experience. Since another frequently cited reason teachers leave is lack of professional growth (NCTAF 2005), another professional track could be created for mentors in this comprehensive induction system. Trained, qualified mentors are essential to the success of the program. By seeing that mentors are central to any school system, teachers might feel that they can aspire to this advanced position on a professional track and assume a leadership role, or a position of empowerment. This, in turn, could lead to their retention. State and federal funding would be needed for training and compensating the mentors for their time, effort, expertise, and professionalism. Too often induction is seen as an expensive "extra"—an additional cost for already overburdened school districts (NCTAF 2005). However, the costs of not giving teachers a strong start are substantial, as student achievement can suffer with a constant barrage of inexperienced teachers. It has been reported that students who have inexperienced teachers for three years in a row never catch up academically (Sanders and Rivers 1996). These funds would pay dividends in the end as long-term benefits would outweigh the initial startup costs.

The Payoffs From Induction Programs

Well-designed induction programs have proven their value by (1) reducing attrition rates among new teachers and (2) being more cost effective than constantly recruiting new teachers to replace those who leave. Teachers with comprehensive induction packages are half as likely to leave at the end of their first year of teaching when compared with new teachers who do not participate in any induction activities (Smith and Ingersoll 2004; NCTAF 2005). Over a five-year period, for example, California's Beginning Teachers Support and Assessment Program successfully reduced teacher attrition rates among participants by two-thirds (NCTAF 2002). This program involves a mandatory two-year induction program in which a mentor teacher is partnered with a new teacher. The program is centered around the development of an individualized induction plan that includes the beginning teacher's growth goals, specific strategies for achieving those goals, and documentation of progress (Kuenzi 2004). First- and second-year teachers participate in intensive learning activities that build on their preservice preparation and lead to life-long learning.

The NCTAF (2005) has estimated that every year, the United States loses approximately \$2.6 billion to teacher attrition. Models suggest that it is more cost effective to provide teacher induction programs that reduce attrition than continue to fund recruitment and hiring initiatives to replace large numbers of departing teachers. For example, using evidence from a medium-sized California school district, Villar and Strong (2007) found that every \$1.00 invested in comprehensive induction programs produces a return of \$1.66 after five years.

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In looking holistically at comprehensive induction systems, the long-term benefits will outweigh the initial startup costs. From a capacity-building standpoint, this system has been shown to reduce attrition rates and, therefore, lead to greater retention rates. From an economic standpoint, both the states and federal government can use the billions of dollars that are currently spent on recruitment (and wasted on attrition) and invest a portion of that money in comprehensive induction systems, research and development of these systems, and human capital. This will not only create additional funds in the future to sustain this system of induction (such as the money necessary to pay mentors), but long-term professional stability.

Conclusion

Overall, well-designed and sustained induction programs can be viewed as part of a life-long professional development design. Teachers who are better prepared for their jobs and more confident in their professional skills are more likely to remain teaching. Since teachers generally do not hit their teaching strides for a few years into their careers, those teachers who remain in the profession will have greater time to refine their crafts to develop into highly qualified professionals who help students meet their full academic potentials. Comprehensive induction systems just may be the key to the retention of highly qualified teachers and increased student achievement in the United States.

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