The coming wave of baby boomer teacher retirements, coupled with class size reduction initiatives and an average attrition rate of 46 percent among new teachers after six years (Ingersoll, 2001), have created the need to hire 2 million new teachers by 2010. For principals, especially those already smarting from failure to reach adequate yearly progress goals, this is not good news.

Seasoned principals know that when veteran teachers are replaced by large numbers of teachers new to the profession, even current student achievement levels are threatened. The influx of new teachers, coupled with the consistently high rate of teacher attrition, creates challenges for already overstretched principals who have the responsibility of bringing new teachers up the experience curve as efficiently as possible.

It can take two years of full-time mentoring to develop and retain effective teachers.
A Model Teacher Induction Program

Responding to the conviction that effective mentoring of new teachers will boost their performance and that of their students, 30 states now require some form of teacher mentoring. Unfortunately, few states clearly define the parameters of their mentoring programs. What is clear, however, is that not all mentoring programs have the same success in creating high-achieving teachers and students in a short time. Principals are well-advised to look under the hood of various mentoring programs for a history of proven results before they devote the time and effort required to implement a plan.

Luckily, there is a source of solid knowledge and research about the characteristics of teacher mentoring programs that consistently accomplish impressive instructional results. Nearly 20 years of experience and nine years of data analysis have led the New Teacher Center (NTC) at the University of California, Santa Cruz to formalize its highly regarded New Teacher Induction Model. Adopted by schools and districts from Alaska to Ohio, the model has significantly improved the effectiveness and productivity of second-year teachers.

Examining an Effective Mentoring Program

The NTC’s research shows that the most successful teacher-induction models, in terms of maximizing student achievement as well as increasing teacher retention, are highly structured. Unlike the more casual “buddy system” mentoring models, in which experienced teachers have periodic lunches or other casual supportive contact with novice teachers, the NTC model calls for two years of careful one-on-one mentoring by explicitly trained veteran teachers with strictly limited caseloads.

Not all highly effective teachers can or want to be mentors. Experience shows that some teachers are happiest in the classroom, running their own show. Others may unconsciously strive to create a model of themselves rather than of proven classroom practice. But those teachers who have been successfully trained to be mentors bring a wealth of guidance, experience, and support to a novice teacher.

The NTC induction model has 15 elements, including the following:

- The supportive engagement of the principal is a fundamental requirement to establishing the context for a successful program.
- Mentor selection is based on a formal application and review process, with an interview by a panel that includes administrators, veteran teachers, union leaders, and current and former mentors.
- Mentors are prepared for their roles through well-defined and continuous training.
- Mentors are released from full-time classroom duties for one to three years, after which they return to the classroom or take another educational role. A full-time released mentor’s caseload normally covers 12 to 15 new teachers.
- New teachers receive 1.5 to 2.5 hours of formally scheduled weekly mentoring support for two years.
- Professional standards provide a clear vision of best practice goals and provide a framework for the mentor’s work with the novice teacher. Standards language helps structure learning-focused conversations and teacher goals.
- Mentors employ a comprehensive formative assessment system to guide the evaluation of a new teacher’s work. The system is framed by professional standards and involves formal data collection and analysis of teacher practice, including examination of student work.
- A mentor’s grade-level and subject-area backgrounds are matched with those of new teachers. This allows mentoring to focus effectively on content, subject matter knowledge, and alignment of instruction with standards and curriculum initiatives.
- Mentors ensure that the teacher’s instructional priorities align with those of school administrators and the community by meeting separately with school principals on a regular basis.

From an academic performance viewpoint, research shows that some of the most critical elements of effective teaching practice can be conveyed by a mentor’s regular attention during the first two years of a teacher’s career. Teachers who have the most positive impact on student achievement focus on individual student learning and, in particular, the learning of low-performing students. Well-trained mentors can divert beginners’ tendency to focus on materials and management by redirecting their focus to individual student assessment and alignment of curriculum with standards.

Combating Attrition

An important benefit a good mentoring program can produce for your school is a measurable decrease in teacher attrition. Nationally, 14 percent of new teachers leave the profession after only one year (Ingersoll, 2001), and replacing departing teachers costs schools $2.6 billion a year, according to the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future. High-quality induction programs can save untold millions by keeping more new teachers in the classroom. In fact, school districts served by mentors using the skills and tools developed by NTC have had an attrition rate of 12 percent over six years, which means that 88 percent of those well-mentored new teachers were still in the classroom, compared with a national average of 54 percent retention after six years (Strong & St. John, 2001). The increased retention of mentored teachers represents a significant cost savings as well as an important foundation for ongoing student achievement.

Costs and Benefits

The costs of a high-quality mentoring program, including personnel, facilities, equipment, materials, professional development for mentors and new teachers, and administrators’ input time, will vary according to the system, with costs for a two-year mentoring program ranging from $6,000 to $12,000 per new teacher.
The most important benefit of such a program, of course, is the improvement in student achievement tied to the increased effectiveness of their teachers. Additional benefits include improved retention that will produce savings in the costs of additional recruitment, hiring, and induction. It is estimated that, depending on the calculation of initial costs, the returns on $1 invested in a comprehensive mentoring program based on the NTC model will range from $1.34 to $1.66 after five years (Villar & Strong, 2007).

“An important benefit a good mentoring program can produce for your school is a measurable decrease in teacher attrition.”

While the flood of teacher retirements is unstoppable, the turnover of newly hired teachers can be significantly diminished by effective induction programs like that developed by the New Teacher Center. Students will enjoy the biggest payoff—effective and committed teaching.

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References

WEB RESOURCES
The Fall 2006 issue of Research Roundup, titled “Effective Mentoring for New Teachers,” identifies several useful resources that will help principals ensure that mentoring relationships in their schools provide effective support for new teachers.

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WEB RESOURCES
The Fall 2006 issue of Research Roundup, titled “Effective Mentoring for New Teachers,” identifies several useful resources that will help principals ensure that mentoring relationships in their schools provide effective support for new teachers.

www.naesp.org

The New Teacher Center is a national resource focused on teacher and administrator induction. Its Web site contains articles about such topics as classroom visitations, principal coaching, and supporting new teachers.

www.newteachercenter.org/sld_articles.php
The National Elementary Honor Society is the new national student recognition program for grades 4, 5, and 6 promoting Academic Excellence, Responsibility, Service, and Leadership.

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