Ambiguities and Possibilities in California's Mentor Teacher Program

Over 5,000 California teachers have been given stipends and released time to provide staff development and consultation to other teachers—but the future of the program remains unclear.
ated in 740 of the state's districts and county offices of education.

The enabling legislation authorizes stipends for up to 5 percent of the state's 180,000 teachers, but actual appropriations for the current school year ($44.7 million) will be sufficient to support about 3.75 percent of the population. Districts that have thus far chosen not to participate (representing less than 10 percent of the state's teachers and students) are for the most part very small (fewer than 30 teachers), have had difficulties in coming to agreement with local teacher unions, or have already implemented master teacher programs they consider incompatible with the mentor program.

Mentors are appointed for one-, two-, or three-year terms to work in a staff development capacity with new teachers, other career teachers, and "teacher trainees" (persons entering the profession either right out of undergraduate schools or mid-career without formal teacher training experience).

Mentors must be permanent teachers with recent classroom experience. They are nominated by teacher-dominated selection committees, appointed by local governing boards, and must continue to teach at least 60 percent of the time. All aspects of the mentor program are included within the scope of collective bargaining, except the district's decision to participate and the actual designation of mentors by the board, which is based on committee recommendations.

Both district officials and representatives of teacher organizations were called upon to make speedy decisions when the program began in 1983-84. Reaching agreement was particularly difficult because of the permissive nature of the law and the lack of specific criteria for identifying and evaluating candidates. The legislation delegates tremendous discretion to local boards, requiring only that mentors must:

1. be credentialed classroom teachers with permanent status in their district;
2. have substantial recent experience in classroom instruction; and
3. have demonstrated exemplary teaching ability as indicated by effective communication skills, subject-matter knowledge, and mastery of a range
of teaching strategies necessary to meet the needs of pupils in different contexts.¹

**Implementing Local Mentor Programs**

Local selection and implementation procedures vary widely. Some candidates wishing to assume the mentor role are virtually self-selected, while others are given an extraordinarily careful and time-consuming evaluation. In one district, there was little teacher involvement in the program design, few teachers applied, and selection criteria were avoided because all who applied were accepted. At the other end of the spectrum are districts that have collaboratively developed program guidelines with parents, teachers, and administrators; screened, selected, and trained committee members; and selected mentor teachers through written applications, interviews, and classroom observations of instruction.

Initial indications are that the complexity and sophistication of a mentor evaluation/selection process is positively related to the importance that district teachers and administrators give to the program. A second, even stronger, relationship seems to exist between the selection process and the perceived status of mentors in a district. Where the selection process has been collaboratively developed and well articulated, mentors do in fact seem to enjoy some status differentiation. This increased stature reportedly gives the mentors increased credibility and easier access to other teachers.²

Interestingly, although the teaching of adults is central to the legislated description of the mentoring role, neither knowledge of adult learning theory nor possession of adult training and coaching skills is included anywhere in the criteria for selection of mentor teachers. The authors of the legislation seem to have made a very tenuous assumption that the ability to work well with children implies an ability to work successfully with adults.

Mentors work at great risk. They have been selected for their expertise, but public recognition of their differential worth and contribution challenges the time-honored egalitarian relationship among teachers. To be accepted, mentors find they must minimize differences in status and salary.

In practice, mentors typically wear many hats for their districts. Few do only peer coaching, staff development, or curriculum development. A broadly representative sample of 367 districts surveyed by the Far West Laboratory in the summer of 1984 (Little and others, 1984) revealed that the five most commonly assigned mentor responsibilities were: (1) staff development or consultation with individual teachers on a request basis (53 percent of current mentors), (2) conducting or facilitating school- or district-level staff development (50 percent), (3) assisting teachers in locating and organizing curriculum materials (42 percent), (4) curriculum development in high priority areas (42 percent), and (5) classroom or other assistance to beginning teachers (41 percent).³

Not all mentor programs are successful, and several are still bogged down in negotiation issues. However, the emerging key to gaining acceptance is mutual exchange, sensitivity, and responsiveness among teachers and administrators to teacher needs. A collaborative planning process is essential to establish a constituency for the program.

**Successful Mentor Programs**

ABC Unified, a large urban district, is a case in point. Nestled in the greater Los Angeles basin, ABC has 23,000 students and 900 teachers, 95 percent of whom have voluntarily participated in some form of clinical teaching or instructional skills training. For the past ten years, the district has funded a $200,000 staff development program, which supports instructional resource teachers (IRTs) who function as peer coaches at school sites. When the mentor program became available in 1984, the district dealt directly with the local bargaining unit to define a “fair program” for mentors, IRTs, and other classroom teachers. To distinguish between mentors and instructional resource teachers, it was decided that IRT functions should be performed solely at the school site, while mentors also would be a district resource.

ABC district currently supports 29 mentors and 53 IRTs who work together to support school and district staff development goals. The success of the program is based on hard work, not magic, and can be attributed to broad involvement in program design,
sound evaluation of mentor candidates, and continuing revision of program practices.

Beginning in January 1984, the district involved classroom teachers, department chairpersons, and site and district administrators in the design and development of the local mentor program. Selection, duties, and role expectations were consensually defined. Based on committee guidelines, the district sought mentors who would coach other teachers in curriculum, instructional methods, or learning theories. Each site had one representative on the appropriate selection committee. Criteria for committee membership included exemplary communication and teaching skills, generally the same skills expected of mentors. All district teachers were invited to apply, and one of three selection committees (elementary, junior high, or secondary) reviewed the applications. Criteria used to assess applications included evidence of the ability to:

- Communicate well in writing,
- Model exemplary teaching,
- Prepare and deliver workshops for adults,
- Lead others,
- Build trusting relationships, and
- Complete mentor tasks.

Candidates were asked to submit four recommendations, one from their site principal and three from peers, two of whom had to be from their own school.

Prior staff development experience was clearly an advantage in the application process. To offset this advantage, special efforts were made to attract teachers with little staff development experience, but a strong interest in mentoring. Teachers without staff development leadership experience were given credit for their willingness to develop adult training and coaching skills.

Candidates successfully evaluated in the paper screening process were then interviewed by an appropriate grade-level selection committee, using an interview guide developed by the committee. Ability to communicate effectively and work well with others, commitment to professional growth, and potential success in peer coaching were assessed in the structured interview.

The candidates were also asked to submit a 20-minute videotape of their classroom instruction. Directions for the videotape allowed for any type of content, but required full class instruction through a logical learning sequence. Committee members received four hours of training in rating instruction before analyzing the videotapes, which were rated for lesson clarity, appropriate teaching methods, student participation, effective lesson monitoring, consistent standards, and student progress toward meeting educational objectives.

ABC divided its allocation of mentor slots among the various selection committees based on the number of teachers at each grade level in the district. Initially, mentors were given general responsibilities based on their area of focus. More specific assignments were formulated with mentors during two weeks of training conducted by the district office, which included adult learning theory, curriculum implementation, instructional methodology, peer observation, and coaching. Designated mentors were then directed to develop district interest in their area of focus and support the use of peer coaching. Additionally, they were encouraged to collaborate with existing instructional resource teachers to form Mentor-Instructional-Resource Teams (MIRTS) at school sites. At the site level, the teams provide curricular, instructional, and management assistance and coaching on request. At the district level, mentors provide model lessons, training, or classroom observation and coaching.

Program implementation is developmental, and the ABC mentor program is being revised. Initial ambigu-
ity about the distinction between mentor and instructional resource teacher roles was clarified through a consensual process involving each of these groups, as well as building and district administrators. At the site level, both mentors and resource teachers report to two district staff developers. Mentors are formally supervised by district directors of elementary and secondary education.

A district need not be large or have a long staff development history to have a successful mentor program. Wheatland, a small elementary district in the Central Valley, has only 1,600 students, 83 certificated staff members, and three mentor teachers, but the district superintendent views the mentor program as a way to rejuvenate staff and provide opportunities for teachers seeking leadership roles. The Wheatland program was cooperatively developed by teachers, administrators, and board members to improve writing across the curriculum and use of computer technology in the academic curriculum. During the first two years of the program, all teachers in the district received 16 hours of training from mentors on instructional use of the computer, with an emphasis on teaching writing. Mentors are also implementing a summer school program.

The Wheatland District has limited staff development resources to support the effort, but has received valuable assistance and training for mentors from the Regional Teacher Education and Computer Center (TECC). Teachers in Wheatland attribute the positive climate and success of the mentor program to: (1) effective communication with everyone involved—board, administration, teachers, parents, and students; and (2) recognition of the "creative genius" within the district—using local teacher expertise rather than hiring external "specialists" for staff development.

Documenting and Evaluating Mentor Programs

Minimal requirements and guidelines have permitted a wide range of locally developed program documentation and evaluation processes. Most districts have some form of time accountability for their mentors, requiring evidence of hours spent on mentoring activities that are over and above normal teaching responsibilities. However, systematic evaluations of local programs have not as yet been conducted.

In many districts, mentors are required by contract to work a specified number of days, or overtime, or summer hours. In other districts, mentors have individual agreements for the

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performance of specific tasks or services. Both approaches are congruent with the general strategy that the mentor role has been defined as one that provides extra pay for extra work. The very mention of merit pay, any kind of formal status differentiation, or rewards for excellent teaching are untenable in most districts. It is quite clear that, despite the existence of any legislative intent to take the first steps toward developing a statewide professional career ladder for teachers, teachers themselves—or at least their bargaining representatives—steadfastly resist any initiatives that attempt to go against traditional egalitarian conceptions of teaching as a profession.

The California Mentor Teacher Program raises a number of significant evaluation issues. At the most global level, the legislature is interested in evidence on which to base policy decisions. Indicators of the program’s success as well as its cost-effectiveness will be required. From the standpoint of a state education agency, this is a difficult challenge: legislated program goals frequently are broadly written, largely intangible, and difficult to operationalize. For instance, the goal of the Mentor Program is:

... to encourage teachers currently employed in the public school system to continue to pursue excellence within their profession, to provide incentives to teachers of demonstrated ability and expertise to remain in the public school system, and to restore the teaching profession to its position of primary importance within the structure of the state educational system.

Past experience has taught us that those teachers willing to assume additional responsibilities are also those most likely to leave the teaching profession. A paradox may well exist here in that legislation designed to reward good teaching and encourage good teachers to remain in public education has resulted in singling out those teachers most likely to leave, but not necessarily encouraging them to stay. Other dimensions of teaching as a profession will need to be examined. For example, what are the relative benefits of improved working conditions, revised salary structures, and alternative role definitions of professional responsibilities?

Further ambiguity is created by the lack of legislative definition of the stipend. Mentors are to receive an "additional annual stipend over and above the regular salary," but this amount is not to be counted as salary or wages. Thus, while mentors must implicitly "earn" the stipend, it is by definition an award or citation and not "extra pay for extra work." Nevertheless, most districts have chosen to tie the stipend to specific staff development duties, a task reflective of "earning" the extra money.
"How ability and expertise in teaching can be recognized, encouraged, and rewarded are often asked but seldom satisfactorily answered questions."

Despite all of the evaluation problems, documenting and evaluating are essential if mentor programs are to be improved and continued. At the mentor level, most districts are just beginning a formal evaluation process. Mentors maintain activity records, participate in student mentor workshops, and mentors are working with district staff members to develop instruments for teacher feedback on mentor coaching and consultation activities. Some districts have also initiated formative program evaluation efforts. However, at the local level, evaluation issues have centered more closely around mentor candidate assessment than around program improvement. The probability is high that this will continue to be the case in all but the most sophisticated, and usually the largest, districts unless evaluation requirements and budget appropriates are built into statute.

Although conceived as an attempt to encourage outstanding teachers and exemplary teaching, the Mentor Teacher Program has been almost universally rejected as a way to pay selected teachers additional money in exchange for performing additional tasks. Defining the program in such terms has allowed many of the most difficult issues in both teacher and program evaluation to be substantially ignored at present. In districts where the program has been labeled as particularly successful—that is, where local teachers and administrators agree that it has contributed to the improvement of instruction—issues of teacher evaluation and program definition have typically been resolved through the collective bargaining process. In these districts, program evaluation tends to center around either the amount (but not the quality) of curriculum materials that have been produced by mentors, or subjective (and predominantly oral rather than written) expressions of satisfaction from teachers who have had individual contacts with mentors.

At the same time, the Mentor Teacher Program has given many districts the opportunity to have teachers, administrators, and board members discuss their conceptions of good teaching, and in a few notable cases, build those conceptions into formal mentor selection, implementation, and evaluation processes.

**An Uncertain Future**

The future of the California Mentor Teacher Program is substantially unknown, although given its centrality in the omnibus educational reform package (SB 813, 1983) and its potential to help in the implementation of other parts of that package, the program is likely to persist for at least a few more years. It is an ambitious, if somewhat equivocal, attempt to encourage and reward outstanding teachers and support staff development for other professionals. Over the next five years, as many as 9,000 mentor teachers may be identified in California to work with new and career teachers. If careful program development and an extended support system are provided, mentors can have a powerful effect on curricular and instructional improvement.

But we must be cautious. As the mentor role becomes elaborated, there will be a tendency to expect mentors to do everything. Just as good teaching can’t solve all the problems facing schools today, mentor teachers cannot solve all the problems of teaching. Better salaries and working conditions for all teachers must be provided. The mentor program is just one piece of the larger reform that needs to take place, and it is crucial that the program be integrated with other school improvement efforts.

**References**


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