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ABSTRACT

This guide describes a teacher mentor program for special education teachers in the Saint Tammany Parish Public School System, Louisiana. The Special Education Mentor Program provides peer support and professional development opportunities for new special education teachers. The program is intended to give immediate as well as long-term support to new teachers on technical and curriculum issues through peer support and professional development opportunities. The program has two components: a collegial coaching process and a seminar series. The coaching component is structured around a four-stage process: (1) planning conference, (2) observation of teaching performance, (3) reflection time, and (4) debriefing conference. In the seminar component, the new special education teacher and the mentor teacher attend a series of seminars on Individualized Education Program development, behavior management, time management, modification methods, alternative assessment techniques, and special education curriculum. The collegial coaching process is explained. Mentor teacher responsibilities and new special education teacher responsibilities are specified. Funding aspects of the program such as use of hourly stipends for extra time and use of substitutes are also discussed. (CR)

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Building Professional Partnerships: A Mentor Program for Special Education Teachers

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Building Professional Partnerships: A Mentor Program for Special Education Teachers

Abstract

The St. Tammany Parish Public School System has the most rapidly growing special education population in the state of Louisiana. Consequently, many new teachers are hired each year to provide special educational services to the disabled students. Because the lack of available certified special education teachers, the school district must hire non-certified teachers. Thus, to maintain the high quality of services that these students require, the new special education teachers need a structure that provides continuous support.

St. Tammany Parish Public School's Special Education Mentor Program for new special education teachers was an outgrowth of the special education staff's goal to successfully induct new special education teachers into the school system. The Mentor Program was created to give immediate as well as long term assistance to new special education teachers in technical and curriculum issues. The mentors also provided peer support to the new teacher to help alleviate feelings of frustration and isolation that are often prevalent in a teacher's first year of service.

The new special education teachers were paired with mentor teachers for the year. The Mentor Program defined a new special education teacher as any teacher who had never taught in special education in the St. Tammany Parish Public School System. Mentor teachers were identified as those who had successfully taught special education students in the St. Tammany Parish Public School System for at least one year. The mentors served as coaching partners as well as consultants to provide immediate assistance on technical and curriculum questions.

The Mentor Program was composed of two components: the collegial coaching process and the seminar series. To facilitate communication skills and professional growth, both the mentor teachers and the new special education teachers received training in the collegial coaching process. Working as coaching partners, both the mentors and the new special education teachers had opportunities to develop and enhance their instructional practices. The teachers coached each other at least once a month during the school year.

The Second component of the Mentor Program was the seminar series. Both the new special education teachers and the mentor teachers attended seminars lead by special education staff members. Some of the topics for the seminars behavior management, time management, IEPs, and effective teaching and assessment practices for disabled students. The seminar topics were selected by means of a needs assessment conducted at the first seminar. The Special Education Department provided funds for substitutes to allow the teachers to attend these meetings.

This program was evaluated through questionnaires, surveys, and interviews of principals, teachers, and staff. The results of the evaluation were extremely positive; consequently, the Mentor Program has become an integral facet of the Special Education Staff Development Plan.

The Mentor Program

Building Professional Partnerships



The Special Education Department of the St. Tammany Parish Public School System provides the Mentor Program for new special education teachers. This unique program is an outgrowth of a Special Education Department goal to successfully induct and maintain new special education teachers into the school system. The Mentor Program gives immediate as well as long term support to the new teachers on technical and curriculum issues through peer support and professional development opportunities.

Program Goals



The Special Education Mentor Program endeavors to provide peer support and professional development opportunities to fulfill the following goals:

- ▲ To develop each student to his or her maximum potential
- ▲ To insure program quality
- ▲ To improve legal compliance with local, state, and federal mandates
- ▲ To provide direct, on-going technical and peer support to new special education teachers
- ▲ To provide professional development opportunities with the classroom for new and mentor teachers
- ▲ To maintain teachers in the special education program



Mentoring is a complex, interactive process occurring between individuals of differing levels of expertise which incorporates interpersonal or psychosocial development, career and/or educational development, socialization functions into the relationship. This one-to-one relationship is itself developmental and proceeds through a series of stages which help to determine both the conditions affecting and the outcomes of the process. To the extent that the parameters of mutuality and compatibility exist in the relationship, the potential outcomes of respect, professionalism, collegiality, and role fulfillment will result.

Carrin, 1988



Program Framework



The Special Education Mentor Program pairs a mentor teacher with a new to special education teacher for one year. This program is composed of two components: **the seminar series** and the **collegial coaching process**. The mentor teachers attend seminars four times a year and the new to special education teachers attend seminars seven times a year. Both groups participate in two days of collegial coaching training that prepares them to coach each other once a month.

The Mentor Program defines a **new special education teacher** as any teacher who has never taught special education in the St. Tammany Parish Public School System. Thus, this group has a very diverse background. Some of the new teachers are certified in special education while some of the teachers are not. Also this group includes teachers who have prior experience with special education students as well as those who have no prior teaching experience.

Mentor teachers are defined as teachers who have had a least one successful year teaching special education students in the St. Tammany Parish Public School System. It is recommended that these teachers have the ability to work collaboratively and model desired teaching strategies as well as possess good communication skills,

The Seminar Series

To develop and enhance the teachers' knowledge of compliance issues and instructional practices, both the mentor teachers and the new to special education teachers participate in a series of seminars. The seminar topics are selected on the basis of a needs assessment conducted early in the school year. Special Education staff members as well as regular education curriculum specialists facilitate these seminars. Topics for the seminars include IEPs, behavior management, time management, modification methods, alternative assessment techniques, and special education curriculum. Mentor teachers also attend seminars on collaboration and leadership skills.

The Collegial Coaching Process

To facilitate communication between the teachers and to encourage professional growth, both the mentor teacher and the new to special education teacher receive training in the collegial coaching process. As coaching partners, the teachers have opportunities to develop and enhance their instructional practices. The teachers coach each other once a month on a topic of their choice.

The collegial coaching process emphasizes teachers working together to develop a professional partnership while focusing on technical and instructional issues. Within the collegial coaching process the teachers examine the teaching strategies they currently use in their classrooms, integrate new techniques into their teaching practices, and reflect upon the effects of the strategies on student learning and achievement. There are four stages of the collegial coaching process. These stages are (1) the planning conference, (2) the observation/teaching performance, (3) the reflection time, and (4) the debriefing conference.



Professional learning about teaching is not simply a matter of propositional knowledge or knowing about a range of teaching strategies. . . . for the information to become understanding requires that we construct and reconstruct the information in our minds, connecting and interpreting the new ideas in terms of what is already known. Interaction with others--conversation, dialogue, argument, debate--provides an essential ingredient to this process of construction. Because knowledge is personal, dynamic and never complete, it is unlikely that we will ever arrive at the truth, at the final best way to teach; hence there is a responsibility to continue the conversation throughout our professional lives.

McCann and Radford, 1993



Teacher Responsibilities



The Mentor Program is built upon a reciprocal relationship between the mentor and the new special education teacher. Thus, both the new special education teacher and the mentor teacher have responsibilities while participating in the Mentor Program.

Mentor Teacher Responsibilities

The mentor teacher will:

- ▲ provide technical assistance in the areas of special education regulations, school system procedures and policies, and curriculum, as needed,
- ▲ provide peer support as new teacher requests,
- ▲ coach the new teacher through a coaching cycle each month,
- ▲ attend bi-monthly Mentor Program seminars,
- ▲ co-create a coaching plan for mentor and new special education teacher, and
- ▲ send time sheets to Mentor Program coordinator each month as needed.

New Special Education Teacher

The new special education teacher will:

- ▲ request technical assistance in the areas of special education regulations, school system procedures and policies, and curriculum, as needed,
- ▲ provide peer support as mentor teacher requests,
- ▲ coach the mentor teacher through a coaching cycle each month,
- ▲ attend monthly Mentor Program seminars,
- ▲ co-create a coaching plan for mentor and new special education teacher, and
- ▲ send time sheets an/or copies of the substitute request form to Mentor Program coordinator each month as needed.

Funding



In order to implement this program, monies are allocated from the PL 101-476 IDEA budget. Budget funds are used to pay for substitutes to allow the teachers to attend the seminars. Time for the coaching process is also funded by this budget. Teachers may elect to have a substitute teach their class while they conduct the planning, observation/teaching performance, and debriefing conferences with their partner. If they do not want a substitute in their class, they may conduct the planning and debriefing conferences before or after school and receive a stipend.

Stipends

Stipends of \$12.50 per hour are paid for before and after school coaching time. For reimbursement for before or after school coaching, a teacher must complete a time sheet at the end of each month, have the principal sign the form, and send it to the Coordinator of the Mentor Program.

Substitutes

If the coaching partners elect to have a substitute teach their classes while they coach, they must notify the Coordinator of the Mentor Program. The notification of the Coordinator will be done through the teachers' plan of implementation.

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