

Beginning Teacher Induction and Support in AZ

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The elementary and secondary teaching force is one of the largest occupational groups in the nation and is becoming even larger. Over the past three decades, the elementary and secondary teaching force has grown dramatically in the U.S. – at double the rate of students. This growth raises a number of questions regarding its causes and consequences. But one implication has been an upsurge in teacher hiring, which has resulted in another dramatic trend — a “greening” of the teaching force. For example, in the late 1980s, the most common teacher was a veteran with 15 years of teaching experience. By 2018, the most common teacher was not a gray-haired veteran; but a beginner in the first year of teaching.

Beginning teachers also stand out for their attrition — teachers leaving teaching — which is especially high among beginners. Between 40 percent and 50 percent of new teachers leave within the first five years of entry into teaching. In short, beginners are now the largest group within one of the largest occupations in the nation, and these beginners are more prone to leave teaching quickly. All of this suggests a strong increase in the need for support programs for beginners.

As a result, over the past couple of decades, there has been growing interest in schools and school districts providing orientation, mentoring and support programs – widely known as induction – for beginning teachers. The percentage of beginning teachers who report participating in some kind of induction program in their first year of teaching has steadily increased in recent decades — from about 50 percent in 1990 to 95 percent by 2018.

The situation has been similar in Arizona. There has been an increase in the number of teachers and also in the number of beginning teachers in the state. In 2021 the most common teacher in Arizona was a beginner in their second or third year of teaching. Strikingly, Arizona also has had above-average rates of overall teacher attrition, and very high rates among beginning teachers. Over 22 percent of beginning teachers annually quit teaching in the state. Moreover, in a 2016 Arizona Department of Education survey, the most common reason Arizona teachers gave for their departures was not low salaries or retirement, but dissatisfaction with school working conditions and school administration.

As a result, as in the nation, there has been a growth in induction programs for beginning teachers in Arizona. The Arizona Beginning Teacher Support Survey conducted by the state's Department of Education in the spring of 2021 showed that over 90 percent of school districts offered some kind of systematic induction support to beginning teachers in their first years of teaching. However, while most beginning teachers in Arizona participate in some kind of formal induction program, the support school districts provide varies, as does the number of years of induction support. The survey revealed that over a third of districts offered one year of support, while over half offered two or more years of induction support. The survey also revealed that the most common induction supports that districts provided to beginners were a district or school orientation and also regular supportive communication with their principal or other site administrators. Ninety-two percent of districts offered each of these. In addition, 85 percent of districts indicated that beginning teachers participated in common collaboration and planning time with other teachers in their subject area or grade level. About 45 percent of districts reported providing seminars/classes for beginning teachers. On the other hand, only 5 percent of districts offered beginning teachers a reduced teaching load to ease their transition – a support that is probably more common for beginning professors in higher education.

One of the most important components of support programs is mentoring of beginners by veteran teachers. Seventy-four percent of districts in Arizona report that beginning teachers received support from an instructional coach or trained mentor teacher. However, districts greatly vary in the details of such programs. The number of beginners that mentors work with and how often they meet with their mentees greatly varies. Moreover, there are large differences in how much training and development mentors receive before and during their mentoring work. Finally, whether mentor teachers are given any release time from their normal instructional responsibilities also varies across the state.

These differences in the quality and system of induction and mentoring are consequential. We now have strong data documenting that induction for beginning teachers matters. A number of studies indicate that induction helps improve beginning teachers' instructional performance, their retention, and their students' achievement. However, the data also tell us that the kinds and amounts of support teachers receive greatly vary. The research shows that the positive impact of induction depends heavily on the quality of that support, the length of time they receive it, and the broader system of support provided. In sum, the data suggest that to increase teacher retention and quality, as well as positive outcomes for students, Arizona districts should review whether their induction programs include a full package of effective support.