

MENTORSHIP FOR SUCCESS:

Recommendations from Teach Plus
Colorado Policy Fellows



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INTRODUCTION

Throughout Colorado, the impact of the pandemic on the teaching workforce has been palpable. Teachers have experienced high levels of burnout and are sharing an unprecedented desire to leave the classroom. According to the [Colorado Education Association](#), in January 2022, 67% of teachers were considering leaving the field in the near future.¹ Retention of strong teachers is one of the most influential factors in student success; therefore, if teachers continuously leave the profession, students will be adversely affected.

We are a diverse group of educators and Teach Plus Colorado Policy Fellows who believe that one of the best ways to address the exodus of teachers is to provide greater support to them as they enter into the teaching profession. After surveying teachers across the state, as well as researching the largest factors leading to teacher retention and success, we found that one of the strongest influences on retention and success was the quality of teacher mentorship programs. Teachers who had consistent and strong mentors showed more resilience and navigated the challenges of teaching more effectively.

Colorado began improving mentorship programs in 2019 when it passed the "[Growing Great Teachers Act](#)."² The bill created a grant program for mentor teacher license endorsements for higher education institutions. After analyzing the new endorsement, we sought to gather perspectives from educators across the state to better understand the impact of mentoring on their teaching experience. We used this data and a review of existing research to identify best practices of mentor programs to build our recommendations on enhancing the impact of early career mentoring, and ultimately, improving teacher retention.

Our research was driven by two essential questions: What are the key behaviors and practices of effective mentor teachers, and to what degree are Colorado teachers receiving high quality mentoring support? And, how can we more fully leverage the capacity of mentor teachers to support new educators? By sharing our findings and recommendations, we hope to elevate the practices that lead to successful mentoring partnerships and to positively impact the state, districts, and schools, as well as the mentors, mentees, and, most importantly, our students.

Findings

1. **Designated meeting times** between mentors and mentees were not always consistent nor a priority.
2. **Mentor compensation and capacity** were not prioritized by administration with the result that mentor teachers often had too many responsibilities to effectively work with their mentees.
3. **Feedback and observations** were inconsistent and did not prepare new teachers to meet the needs of diverse learners and the demands of the profession.
4. **Mentor qualifications and development** varied between schools, and mentors were often underqualified and underprepared to serve the needs of new teachers.

Recommendations

1. **Designated Meeting Times and Consistency:** There must be designated, shared planning time between mentors and mentees to develop goals and participate in personal check-ins.
2. **Mentor Compensation and Workload:** Mentors should have sufficient capacity, through additional compensation and a reduction in instructional workload, to fulfill their responsibilities to mentees.
3. **Mentor Feedback and Mentee Observations:** Feedback and observations should be conducted on a weekly basis, or more, with a focus on classroom management and strategies for exceptional learners.
4. **Mentor Qualifications and Development:** Mentors need to be selected based on relevant content expertise and receive continuous professional development to sharpen their skills.
5. **Next steps for the Colorado Department of Education in implementing the 2019 Growing Great Teachers Act.**

METHODOLOGY

To better understand the needs and experiences of new educators who have gone through a plethora of preparation, induction, and mentorship programs, we conducted a survey on examining early-career teacher mentorship. This online survey was administered through the Teach Plus Colorado network and included both quantitative and qualitative data.

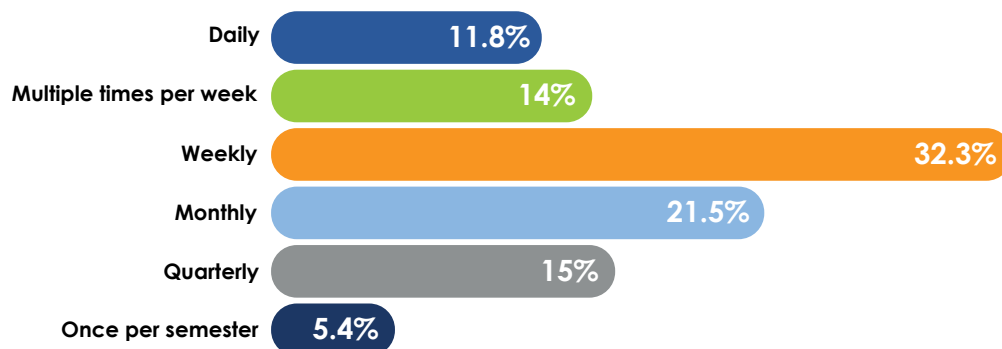
One hundred teachers with varying degrees of teaching experience, representing 19 districts across Colorado, responded to the survey. Thirty-three percent of respondents had less than 10 years of teaching experience, 27% had between 10 and 15 years of teaching experience, and 39% percent had more than 15 years of experience.³ The majority of participants currently teach in urban (36%) or suburban (58%) areas.⁴

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Designated Meeting Times and Consistency: There must be designated, shared planning time between mentors and mentees to develop goals and participate in personal check-ins.

For mentoring to be successful, it is important to establish consistency. Establishing routine meeting times demonstrates commitment, which builds trust between a mentor and a mentee. Further, it gives structure to the relationships, minimizes stress, and allows for adequate teacher and student development. While “consistency” is vague, research shows that mentors who meet with their mentees 60-90 minutes a month or more will be more effective in the classroom.⁵ Our research showed that over 40% of first-year teachers met with their mentor just once a month and some even more sporadically.⁶ This is drastically different from best practice and does not take into consideration teachers with a year or more experience, who meet with mentors even less frequently.

How frequently did you meet with your mentor in your first year of teaching?



Consistent meetings between mentors and mentees provide ample time to engage in mentoring activities that truly support the development of new teachers. These include personal check-ins to support emotional well-being and reduce burnout, the outlining of concrete skills and goals, and ways to continually review these goals with the mentee. One Colorado teacher shared the following about their mentor relationship, *“We met very infrequently. Most of the time it felt like boxes being checked with very little helpful work to create sustainable and life-balanced approaches to education ... most of the work was about classroom management and testing prep and very little of it was about the human beings ... including my own well-being.”*

An effective mentoring process must include forming relationships, understanding new teachers' needs, establishing goals, observing classroom practices, and reflecting and planning together—all of which take time. For true growth, mentors must see teachers interacting with students and delivering a lesson in order to provide targeted support.⁷ We urge district and school leaders to create and protect the time for mentoring, paying close attention to scheduling decisions that allow mentors to observe mentees in the classroom and with consistent time to develop and review improvement goals.

When asked to describe their mentor relationship, one Colorado teacher noted; *“He watched 1 or 2 classes per week and sat down and reflected with me on better ways to*

conduct the lesson. We weren't talking about hypothetical situations. I could implement those changes for the very next period I taught." Even if multiple observations are not possible because of scheduling, virtual classes and the ability to record lessons now allows for mentors to develop more impactful meetings to review actual classroom scenarios. Seeing practices in real time allows for more structured support to mentees and significantly increases the likelihood of skill development.

Along with needing consistent meeting times, mentors need to work in close proximity to their mentees. When researching the impact of who was a mentor, we found the alignment between mentor teachers and teacher candidates varying widely in the induction process across the state. Mentoring arrangements included fellow teachers in their department, instructional coaches, assistant principals, teacher representatives at other schools, and district instructional specialists. Candidates whose mentor was not in the same building reported that the lack of common instructional responsibilities made their mentoring relationships less impactful. One respondent shared: *"I had a mentor, though she was at the district level, not on site at my school. She met with me a few times during my first year. She was very nice, yet not very available or helpful when I had day-to-day questions."* For others, mentorship relationships with colleagues, even in an informal capacity, provided a positive influence: *"We had a strong Induction coordinator in our building who helped new teachers. I didn't have a formal mentor, but had several teachers take me under their wing if we taught the same courses or were in the dept offices together, or coached together, or otherwise."*

Districts often deprioritize instructional or school alignment when selecting mentor teachers. Early-career teachers experience frequent challenges in their day-to-day work, and the presence of mentor teachers who are both physically near and share similar instructional assignments (such as the same department or course) are likely to provide more support than those who do not work at the candidate's school or whose instructional responsibilities are not aligned.

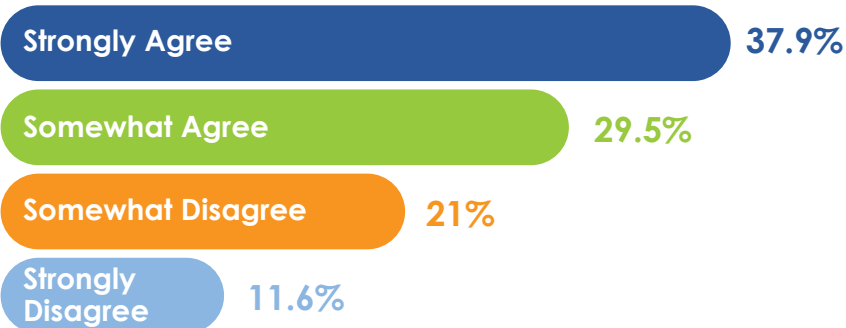
2. Mentor Compensation and Workload: Mentors should have sufficient capacity, through additional compensation and a reduction in instructional workload, to fulfill their responsibilities to mentees.

Along with the designated time to interact with their mentees, mentors need protected time to engage in mentoring activities, such as attending training sessions, preparing mentor materials, and observing and meeting with mentees. Research shows that more than 60% of full-time teachers are not provided with a reduction of workload or with the necessary time to adequately and effectively mentor new teachers.⁸ As the Southern Regional Education Board asserts, "Mentors are already busy in their professional role as classroom teachers ... If mentoring duties are simply tacked on top of these teaching duties, it limits the time and energy for quality mentoring."⁹

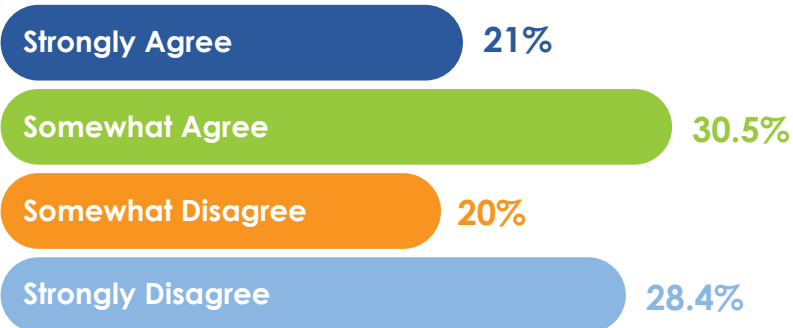
One out of four respondents in our survey stated that they wished they had met more frequently with their mentor teachers to discuss specific feedback and that simply scheduling common planning periods was not sufficient interaction time.¹⁰ One participant shared: *"My mentor was teaching on overload and had several other extracurricular obligations. She was great, but I feel like she could have used more time and/or support to provide more frequent observations and coaching."* This inadvertently sends a message that mentoring activities and the results they produce are not truly valued, because mentors' ability to use their time to help new teachers is not clearly defined or safeguarded.¹¹ While the experiences and skills of mentor teachers are important considerations in selecting high-quality mentors, it is equally essential that mentor teachers have the time and capacity to provide strong mentorship.

3. Mentor Feedback and Mentee Observations: Feedback and observations should be conducted on a weekly basis, or more, with a focus on classroom management and strategies for exceptional learners.

My mentor provided constructive and actionable feedback.



My mentor used observation data to drive instructional planning and practices.



Another notable theme from our research was the importance of, and lack of, authentic feedback and observations during teacher mentorship. Research from The [National Institute for Excellence in Teaching](#) found that only 41% of new teachers were observed teaching at least once by their mentor.¹² Simply having a mentor is not enough to guarantee new teachers get the feedback they need.

One teacher expressed, *"My district provided a peer observer who showed up unannounced having never met me, gave me harsh evaluations and provided very little coaching to improve. None of the people coaching, observing and mentoring me ever communicated with each other."* This lack of collaboration and communication is discouraging and confusing to educators who are constantly trying to refine their practice.

More than a third of our survey respondents did not reap the benefits of receiving specific and actionable feedback. When we posed the statement "My mentor provided constructive and actionable feedback," 33% of participants disagreed with it.¹³ Additionally, 48% disagreed that "My mentor used observation data to drive instructional planning and practices."¹⁴

Similarly, when asked "What aspects of a mentor relationship do you think are the most important for your success as a teacher?" 52% of our survey participants said classroom management strategy co-creation and 41% said peer observations.¹⁵ These were the two highest scoring aspects, right behind consistent social-emotional check-ins. As one educator stated, *"Teachers want nothing more than to be as effective as possible ... Feedback needs to be followed by coaching, modeling, and co-planning."*

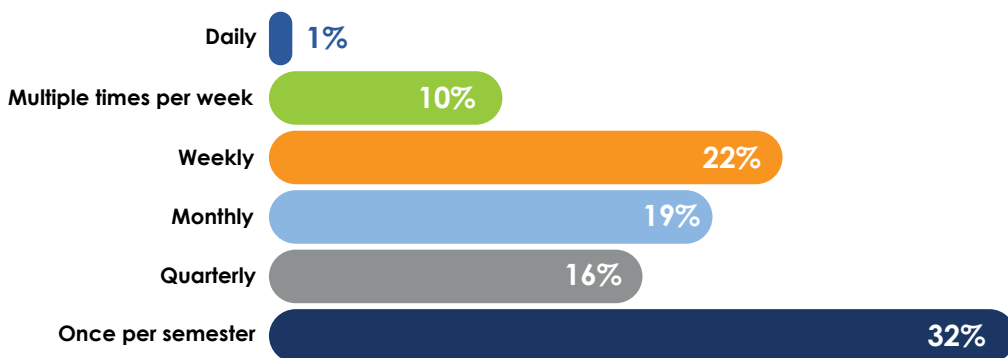
The co-creation of classroom management strategies is an often-overlooked aspect of mentorship. Research from the [National Education Association \(NEA\)](#) on classroom management describes a necessary shift "from maintaining behavioral control to fostering student engagement and self-regulation as well as community responsibility."¹⁶ Effective classroom management is a skill that takes years to develop. If more experienced educators do not intentionally offer support in this area, then asking new teachers to figure out how to balance self-regulation and community responsibility is not feasible. This growth can only be made if new teachers are given feedback on classroom management through frequent, low-stakes observations.

Similarly, mentors must collaborate and guide new teachers in best-practice instruction for exceptional learners—those receiving pull-out services like special education, multilingual education, gifted and talented enrichment, etc. Our survey showed that almost 50% of teachers did not discuss the needs of exceptional learners on at least a weekly basis.¹⁷ To best prepare educators to work with students with diverse learning needs, these conversations must be prioritized during mentorship to ensure the success of all students.

4. Mentor Qualifications and Development: Mentors need to be selected based on relevant content expertise and receive continuous professional development to sharpen their skills.

Finally, we must ensure that mentor teachers are highly qualified and receive professional development to develop their knowledge and skills. [A study in Washington state](#) found that the average educator who is mentored by a highly effective teacher begins their career with the same effectiveness as an average third-year teacher.¹⁸ Districts and schools must invest the time, money, and resources to build mentorship programs that select, develop, and retain highly qualified mentor teachers.

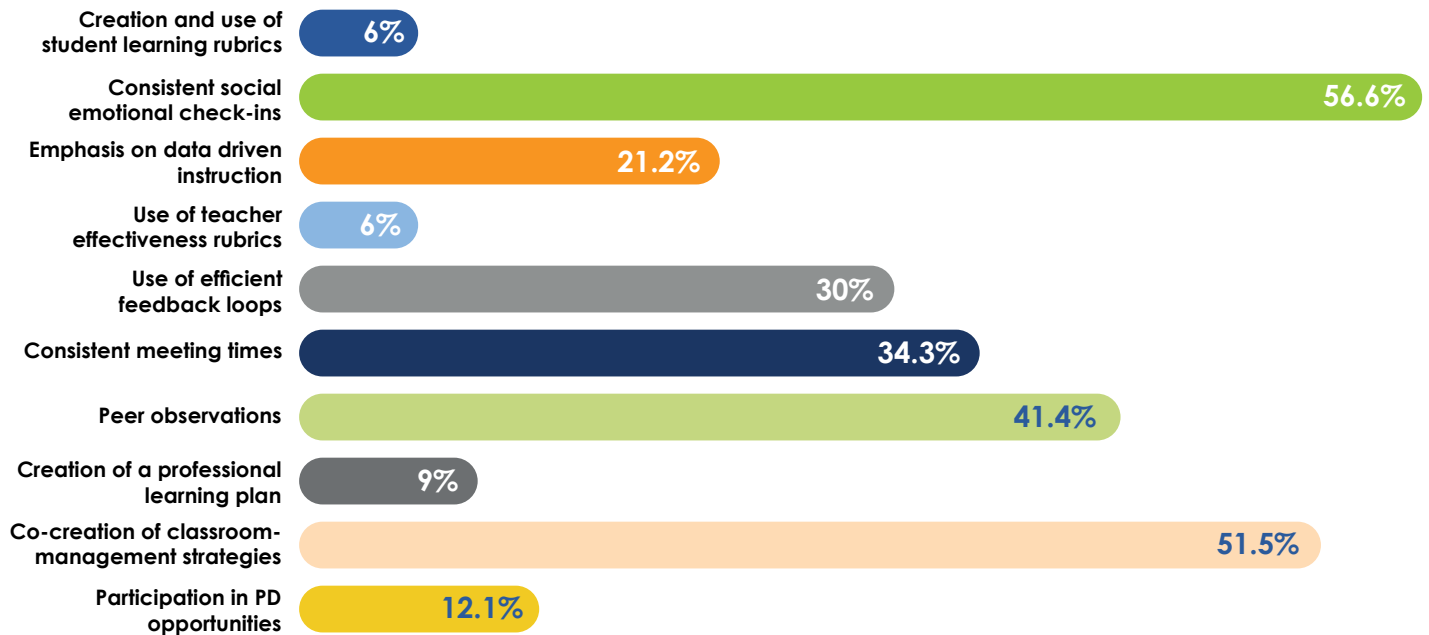
How frequently did you meet with your mentor to discuss your instructional practices as it relates to exceptional learners?



Research suggests that teachers need at least three to seven years of experience in order to be considered highly qualified; however, not all mid-career teachers should serve in mentorship roles.¹⁹ As one Colorado teacher expressed, *“Not all veteran teachers should be mentors; it is a different skill.”* Although mentors should have at least three years of teaching experience, they should also be selected based on their ability to demonstrate success in supporting student learning and a desire to grow professionally through collaboration with other adults.²⁰ Thus, schools should use clear and consistent mentor selection criteria to help identify and select highly qualified mentors.

These mentors should have the content expertise and relevant experience to best support new teachers. They also need to provide social-emotional support to new educators to help them remain in the profession. In order to best support mentor teachers, schools and districts must offer continuous opportunities to build the emotional and pedagogical support new teachers need.

What aspects of a mentor relationship do you think are the most important for your success as a teacher?



Our survey respondents reported consistent social emotional check-ins and co-creating classroom management strategies as two of the most important aspects of the mentor relationship.²¹ To meet the needs of early-career teachers, mentors have to participate in more than an initial training class. They must revisit and refine their skills in providing feedback, supporting the development and execution of lesson plans, and developing social-emotional support. Teachers reported that *“mentoring teachers takes time, preparation, and emotional resources.”* One teacher also stated that *“providing training for mentors to be effective and thoughtful with new teachers”* is necessary, and mentoring is *“more than just knowing curricula; it’s about understanding relationships and knowing what type of support is needed.”*

District- and state-wide systems are responsible for supplying necessary mentor training. A research-based instructional rubric to evaluate mentors provides a framework to ensure growth, collaboration, and development of effective coaching practices. When mentor teachers are given training, guidance, and specific criteria, they have clear expectations of their roles and responsibilities and, therefore, know what action steps they must take with their mentees.

One teacher noted, *“Mentors are particularly important to the retention of BIPOC educators and educators in under-resourced districts, where educators can feel isolated and risk early burn-out.”* Selecting outstanding mentors and giving them the necessary resources to be successful is essential in the development and retention of the outstanding teachers our students need.

5. Next steps for the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) in implementing the 2019 Growing Great Teachers Act

After the Growing Great Teachers Act passed in 2019, education preparation programs could apply for CDE grant money to start their own mentor teacher endorsements. Currently, there are seven organizations offering this endorsement in Colorado, but few of them provide any clear descriptions of what their program entails. After reaching out directly to each program, only one responded with a comprehensive plan and syllabus for how their certification program is structured. Our work must continue to emphasize accountability if we are to make any tangible improvements in the teacher mentorship arena.

1. CDE should continue to work with advocacy and research groups that collaborate with teachers, such as Teach Plus, to create a teacher mentorship pilot program modeled after [Administrator Mentoring Cohorts and Induction Programs](#) and to increase accountability after receiving grants from the “Growing Great Teachers Act.”
2. CDE should update and revise its mentor website to include state-wide mentorship rubrics and mentorship PD resources to ensure schools have the necessary resources to clearly define their mentorship program.
3. CDE should develop and aggregate mentorship program materials and support to allow networks with fewer resources to actively engage in mentor programs without significant strain on district resources.

CONCLUSION

Consistency, collaboration, and conversation are the key components of a helpful and authentic teacher mentorship model. In order to successfully implement these models, we must first provide Colorado’s mentors and mentees with protected and consistent meeting times outside of planning periods. Secondly, mentors must be adequately compensated for their time and/or have a reduction in their teaching load. To succeed, mentors must consistently observe and provide real-time feedback to mentees focused on instruction, classroom management strategies, and best practices for exceptional learners. Lastly, qualified mentors must undergo continuous training and professional development, shaping their practice to meet the unique needs of their mentee. With improved mentorship programs across the state, Colorado can retain the diverse and effective teaching force its students need and deserve.

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ABOUT TEACH PLUS

The mission of Teach Plus is to empower excellent, experienced, and diverse teachers to take leadership over key policy and practice issues that affect their students’ success. Since 2009, Teach Plus has developed thousands of teacher leaders across the country to exercise their leadership in shaping education policy and improving teaching and learning, to create an education system driven by access and excellence for all.



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ENDNOTES

- 1 Breunlin, E. (2022, January 3). "I can't do this to myself anymore": Pandemic stress has driven some Colorado teachers to leave the classroom. The Colorado Sun. <https://coloradosun.com/2022/01/03/colorado-education-schools-teachers-mental-health-pandemic-covid/>
- 2 S.B.19-190, 2019 Reg. Sess. (Col. 2019). <https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/sb19-190>
- 3 Question: "Including the 2021-2022 school year, how many years of teaching experience do you have?" Response (n=99) Less than four years (13.13%) 4-9 years (20.20%) 10-15 years (27.27%) More than 15 years (39.39%)
- 4 "Which of the following best describes the setting you teach in?" Response (n=99) Resort rural district (2.02%) Rural district (4.04%) Suburban district (57.58%) Urban district (36.26%)
- 5 Victoria Department of Education. (2016). A Reflective Guide to Mentoring and being a Teacher Mentor. Victoria Department of Education. <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/school/teachers/profdev/Reflectiveguidetomentoringschools.pdf>
- 6 Graph: "How frequently did you meet with your mentor in your first year of teaching?." Response (n=95) Daily (12) Multiple times per Week (14) Monthly (33) Quarterly (22) Once per semester(19)
- 7 National Institute for Excellence in Teaching. (2021). Why New Teacher Mentoring Falls Short, and How to Fix It. <https://www.niet.org/assets/ResearchAndPolicyResources/strengthening-new-teacher-mentoring.pdf>
- 8 DeCesare, D., Workman, S., & McClelland, A. (2016). How do school districts mentor new teachers? https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/central/pdf/REL_2016125.pdf
- 9 Southern Regional Education Board. Mentoring New Teachers: A Fresh Look. (2018). Southern Regional Education Board. https://www.sreb.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/mentoring_new_teachers_2.pdf
- 10 Question: "How frequently did you meet with your mentor in your first year of teaching?." Response (n=95) Daily (12) Multiple times per Week (14) Monthly (33) Quarterly (22) Once per semester(19)
- 11 Gray, L., Brauen, M., Cross, F. (2013). Strategies for Longitudinal Analysis of the Career Paths of Beginning Teachers: Results From the First Through Fourth Waves of the 2007–08 Beginning Teacher Longitudinal Study. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED544179.pdf>
- 12 National Institute for Excellence in Teaching. Three Critical Steps for Strengthening New Teacher Mentoring. (2021). National Institute for Excellence in Teaching. <https://www.niet.org/newsroom/show/feature/three-critical-steps-strengthening-new-mentoring>
- 13 Graph: "My mentor provided constructive and actionable feedback." Response (n=95) Strongly Agree (36) Somewhat Agree (28) Somewhat Disagree (20) Strongly Disagree (11)
- 14 Graph: "My mentor used observation data to drive instructional planning and practices." Response (n=95) Strongly Agree (20) Somewhat Agree (29) Somewhat Disagree (19) Strongly Disagree (27)
- 15 Question: What aspects of a mentor relationship do you think are the most important for your success as a teacher? (select up to 3)" Response (n=99) Creation and use of student learning rubrics (6.06%) Consistent social emotional check-ins (56.57%) Emphasis on data driven instruction (21.21%) Use of teacher effectiveness rubrics (6.06%) Use of efficient feedback loops (30.30%) Consistent meeting times (34.34%) Peer observations (41.41%) Creation of a professional learning plan (9.09%) Co-creation of classroom-management strategies (51.52%) Participation in PD opportunities (12.12%)

16 National Education Association. (2006). Classroom Management. National Education Association. <https://www.isbe.net/Documents/clsrm-mgmt-brief.pdf>

17 Graph: "How frequently did you meet with your mentor to discuss your instructional practices as it relates to exceptional learners?" Response (n=91) Daily (1) Monthly (17) Multiple times per week (9) Once per semester (29) Quarterly (15) Weekly (20)

18 Will, M. (2019). How Can We Get More Highly Effective Teachers to Serve as Mentors? EdWeek. <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/how-can-we-get-more-highly-effective-teachers-to-serve-as-mentors/2019/05>

19 Schwan, A., Wold, C., Moon, A., Neville, A., & Outka, J. (2020). Mentor and New Teacher Self-Perceptions Regarding the Effectiveness of a Statewide Mentoring Program. *Critical Questions in Education*, 11(3). <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1287181.pdf>

20 National Institute for Excellence in Teaching. Three Critical Steps for Strengthening New Teacher Mentoring. (2021). National Institute for Excellence in Teaching. <https://www.niet.org/newsroom/show/feature/three-critical-steps-strengthening-new-mentoring>

21 Graph and Question: What aspects of a mentor relationship do you think are the most important for your success as a teacher? (select up to 3)" Response (n=99) Creation and use of student learning rubrics (6.06%) Consistent social emotional check-ins (56.57%) Emphasis on data driven instruction (21.21%) Use of teacher effectiveness rubrics (6.06%) Use of efficient feedback loops (30.30%) Consistent meeting times (34.34%) Peer observations (41.41%) Creation of a professional learning plan (9.09%) Co-creation of classroom-management strategies (51.52%) Participation in PD opportunities (12.12%)