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Online Teacher Support Programs: Mentoring and Coaching Models



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NACOL
North American Council for Online Learning

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Introduction

You are a new virtual school teacher! How do you feel as you take this new step in your career? ...excited, apprehensive, uncertain, prepared...? If you are like most teachers who are new to teaching online, you have the following characteristics:

- Classroom teaching experience.
- Are knowledgeable about the content you are teaching.
- You have participated in a course or workshop about teaching online.
- You have strong technology skills and an interest in using new technology to teach and learn.
- You can benefit from a mentoring relationship from other virtual school teachers.

Clearly, you bring many strengths to your new role. As you begin to work with your students, their families, and site facilitators, in an online environment you will be using different teaching strategies, instructional materials, and communication techniques than you used in your regular (or traditional?) classroom. Where do you go when you have questions about your role, teaching online, helping students learn in an online environment, accessing information, providing feedback, or communicating with key audiences and would like advice? The resources provided by your school may include a mentor teacher as a guide.

This document describes the mentoring relationship from the perspectives of several virtual schools that have built mentoring programs to assist their new teachers. Each school's mentoring program is unique and has been designed specifically for the school's staff, size, and instructional approach. These schools have learned that a successful mentoring program is key in developing effective novice virtual school teachers and in supporting the continued growth of experienced virtual school teachers. Mentoring programs are still new to virtual schools, but they may also be a factor in teacher retention. In any case, an effective mentoring program will benefit the mentee through development of knowledge and skills, the mentor through development of leadership and communication capabilities, and the school through the sharing of ideas and expertise.

Definitions

In this guide, we use the terms teacher, mentor and facilitator to describe specific sets of responsibilities in a virtual school. The titles may vary in practice.

Virtual school teacher: the educator with primary responsibility for student instruction within an online course. Typically, the virtual school teacher interacts with students using Information Communication Technology (ICT), but in blended virtual schools there may be face to face interaction between teachers and students.

Virtual school facilitator: the person who supports students in a virtual school program. The facilitator may interact with students online or may facilitate at the physical site where students access their online course. This person may be another teacher/administrator/educational staff member.

Mentoring is a professional relationship between a mentor who has experience in the role being learned by the mentee. The relationship is characterized by guided support and teaching. It is a process in which the mentor serves as a role model, trusted counselor, or teacher who provides opportunities for development, growth, and support to less experienced individuals.

The following types and elements of mentoring are integrated into virtual school mentoring programs. The specific school models illustrate how a variety of mentoring types and elements can be combined to meet school needs.

Types of Mentoring

- **Task-based mentoring** focuses on an individual's short-term need to improve a skill or acquire knowledge in order to fulfill a new role.
- **Experience-based mentoring** pairs an individual, who is new to an organization or a role, with a mentor who has experience in that role.
- **Just-in-time mentoring** matches mentors with individuals who have an unanticipated need for assistance.
- **One-to-one mentoring** centers on a single mentor working with a single mentee
- **Team mentoring** joins groups of mentors with groups of mentees.
- **Formal mentoring** involves explicit expectations of the mentoring process and/or outcomes by specifying such characteristics as timelines, achievements, progress reporting, benchmarks, and communications formats.

Elements of Mentoring Programs

- Personal and professional reflection
- Sharing of expertise to others with common interests
- Portfolio development
- Learning communities
- Professional development planning for both mentor and mentee/protégé
- Short-term collaborations through co-teaching or team teaching

Roles of Mentors

In virtual schools, the role of the mentor is to support the instructors and facilitators in courses. Networks of mentors, instructors and facilitators take different forms to serve different school structures. The diagrams below show common structures and the roles within them.

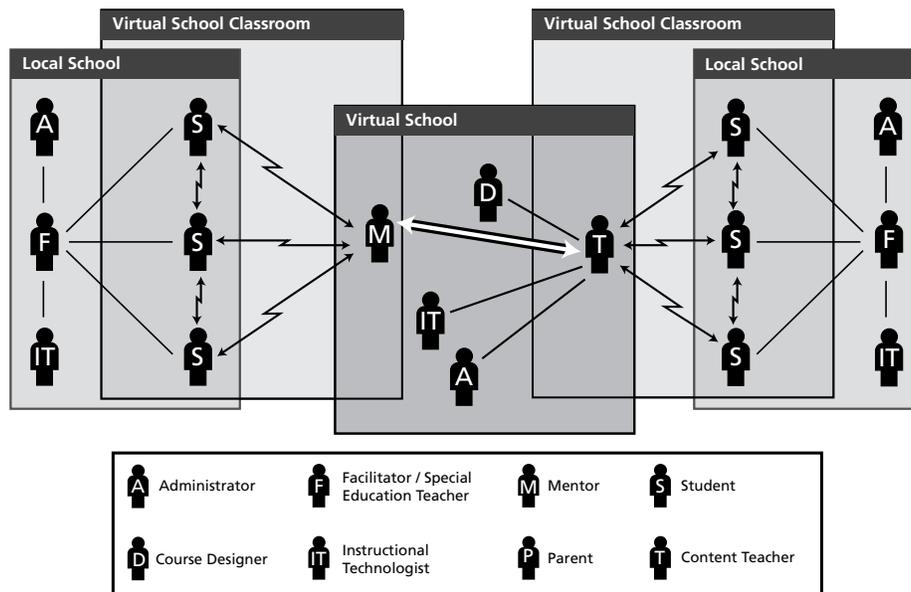
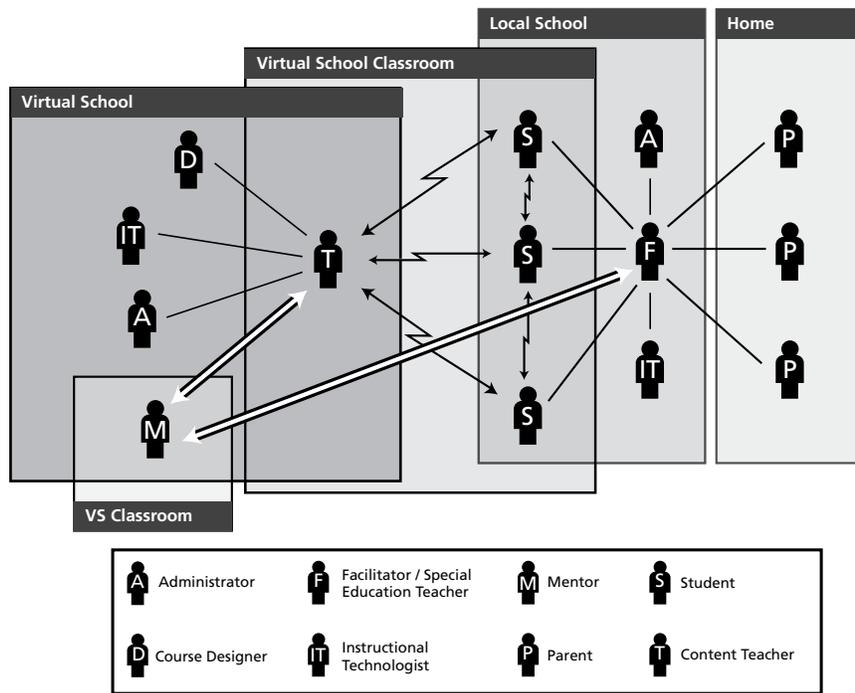


Figure 1 illustrates a virtual school structure designed to serve students who access their online courses from several local schools. The site facilitators in the schools interact with students at the local schools. An experienced teacher mentors the new virtual school teacher.



In Figure 2, the students in the virtual school access their online courses from their local school. Parents and facilitators at their local school provide assistance to students. Experienced virtual school teachers mentor their new virtual school teachers.

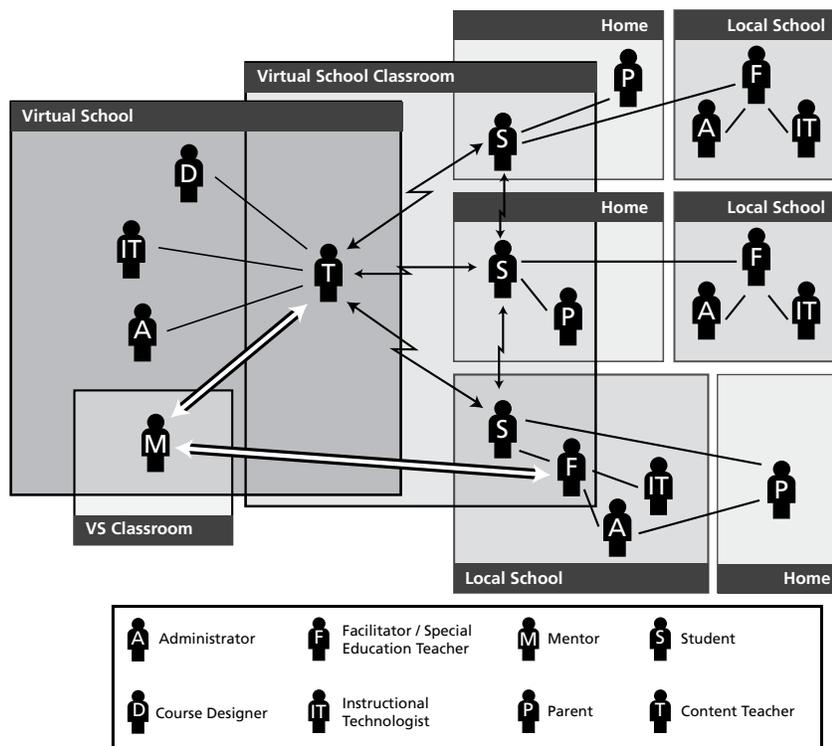


Figure 3 shows a virtual school in which students take their courses from home or from schools. In this structure, local school facilitators and parents assist the students. Experienced virtual school teachers mentor new virtual school teachers.

Models of virtual school educator mentoring

The mentoring programs described in this Issues Brief are unique because in each school, the profile of students, the design of courses, and therefore the responsibilities of teachers and facilitators vary. For example, schools with cohort-based programs that emphasize student interaction in courses will depend on mentors to help teachers develop their skills in managing group discussions. Alternately, a school based on individualization will organize mentoring programs to help teachers in motivating many students working at different points in a course.

In order to provide a comprehensive picture of mentoring programs in virtual school with various sizes and designs, the mentoring programs of the following schools are described:

- Alabama ACCESS Distance Learning
- Colorado Online Learning
- Florida Virtual School
- Idaho Digital Learning Academy
- Mississippi Virtual School
- Missouri Virtual Instructional Program
- Tennessee: e⁴TN
- Virtual High School

Alabama ACCESS Distance Learning

Key Features

- A formal mentoring program pairs new teachers with mentors during the teachers' first year teaching online.
- Mentors focus on collegiality, professionalism, communication, strategies, and the school's online systems.
- Teachers and mentors use an online professional development system.
- Mentors are trained for their roles.
- Informal mentoring is available by way of learning communities and expertise sharing.
- Regional support centers and the state department of education have actively supported new teachers and mentors with technical assistance, meetings, liaisons, and just-in-time services.

Alabama's ACCESS Distance Learning 'opened its doors' in January 2006 as a school-based program where classes are typically offered during the normal or extended school day. The courses are provided to students across the state in grades 9 through 12, free of charge, so the enrollment is large and expected to increase. The program has utilized two primary methods of delivery since its launch, web-based and interactive video conferencing (IVC). Alabama's ideal model of delivery is a blended model of delivery using these two mediums, and they are just beginning this blended version of delivery (IVC courses also have a web-based component to them, and vice-versa) this fall.

During the first two years of its existence, the ACCESS Distance Learning mentoring program was an informal one, with three regional support centers set up throughout the state, one in the northern, another in the central, and the last in the southern part of the state. Those support centers have hired and trained teachers and worked with the schools offering the classes to their students. These support centers have also employed technical advisors who provide help desk and technical support, and directors and assistant directors who provide answers to policy questions and other areas of teacher concern. The support centers have conducted faculty meetings that serve as training and mentoring sessions. Also during these first two years, the State Department of Education offered sessions called “Last Tuesday,” which provided teachers with ongoing professional development opportunities. The State Department also provided liaisons to the support centers; these liaisons assisted with school and teacher-related issues from the state level.

While keeping most of the ideas from its informal mentoring program, ACCESS Distance Learning has transitioned into a more formal model of mentoring as of fall 2008. Through this plan, protégé teachers (beginning teachers who enter ACCESS Distance Learning with no online teaching experience) receive mentors for two-block terms/semesters/one academic year. The mentors in this relationship work with the teachers to help them build a strong sense of collegiality, establish a lifeline of support systems, provide guidance regarding professionalism, give directions on locating and effectively using available resources, share instructional ideas, outline procedures specific to ACCESS Distance Learning, schedule and attend training sessions, orient them to the online environment, provide feedback and counseling, teach new instructional methodologies, and establish regular communication systems. All of these and more help the protégé work towards becoming a more effective teacher in the online environment.

In regard to professional development in its new mentoring program, ACCESS Distance Learning developed a web portal called CAST, Connecting ACCESS Staff and Teachers, an online professional development site where staff and teachers can go to access training modules and connect with other teachers across the state. CAST is located in the learning management system and consists of training modules, information, interactive learning communities (blogs, discussion boards, etc.), and live support for troubleshooting, where teachers can get quick feedback.

In addition to offering support to the teachers, the three support centers, mentioned above, are responsible for choosing the peer leaders/mentors who will assist the protégé teachers in getting acclimated to their new online teaching environment. The mentors are required to meet a certain set of criteria, as established by ACCESS Distance Learning, including extensive expertise in the learning management system, technical knowledge regarding operating the technology, and a sincere willingness to assist in getting the protégé teachers comfortable in their new roles.

The support center staff trains mentors before a mentor begins working with a protégé. At the support centers, mentors receive training through a one-day, on-site orientation. At that meeting, the support centers talk about the mentors’ roles and responsibilities as peer leaders, reviewing policies, discussing proper means of communication, grading, progress reporting, attendance policies, student enrollment and withdrawal, actions to be taken when a student is failing, teacher pay and expectations, technical equipment and resources, issues related to the learning management system, communication skills, dealing with plagiarism and cheating, designing and facilitating discussions, managing group work at a distance, and more. Once their training is complete, mentors are matched with protégés according to content areas.

Since the new formal mentoring program is just being implemented, measuring success is not yet possible. During the informal mentoring that occurred over the first two years of existence, positive feedback was received via phone calls, personal discussions, and emails from both peer leaders and protégés. Also, protégés' success was documented by their students' grades and informal comments from facilitators, students, state and support center staff, and also principals and other staff at the local school level. In addition, because the formal program is so new, the role of mentors in the protégés' courses has not been fully determined. Mentors will have access to these courses, however, so that feedback may be given to protégés as they actually teach courses.

The mentoring model at ACCESS Distance Learning is designed to provide ongoing as well as just-in-time mentoring. Martha Donaldson, Program Administrator for ACCESS, said, "Our goal is to provide mentoring for our teachers from the very beginning, and by having that we hope to provide assistance and guidance before there is an urgent need or a crisis situation. We will also be available for that just-in-time kind of assistance that is frequently needed." She added that there are many people at the state-level, support-center level, mentor-level, and CAST-site level that will assist protégés in their path to becoming an effective online teacher.

In addition to the new mentoring plan, opportunities for reflection are provided through the mentor-protégé relationships and through the CAST system. Although portfolios were not part of the original plan for the new mentoring model at ACCESS Distance Learning, Donaldson said portfolios may be an option they will look at in the future. All teachers have three full days of professional development before they first begin to teach for ACCESS, and then have ongoing opportunities for additional professional development throughout the year via the support centers and CAST. There is also a requirement for biweekly contact between new teachers and mentors. In regard to support, there are staff members who are available at night to help teachers with specific issues in the learning management system. In addition to the helpdesk support provided by the three regional support centers, the State Department of Alabama also has a helpline that teachers can call. Informal mentoring is available at ACCESS Distance Learning by way of learning communities and expertise sharing through the CAST system and the new mentoring program. Donaldson is excited to see what the new academic year holds in store for ACCESS, especially regarding the implementation of this new formal mentoring program.

Colorado Online Learning (COL)

Key Features

- The mentoring program focuses on personal relationships fostered through webinars and an annual whole-school gathering.
- Directors who offer just-in-time mentoring mentor new teachers.
- The school's Director of Curriculum and Instruction mentors all new teachers on the essential skills of teaching online.
- A social networking community supports ongoing peer mentoring.

COL consists of four administrators and 29 teachers. Twenty-four of these teachers have advanced degrees; all of the teachers are independent contractors who are geographically distributed, highly motivated, and offer, on average, 2.5 courses per year. The student population that they serve is

mostly rural students who are taking a total of one to three online courses throughout their high school careers. The COL model is very different from a full-time online school, as COL only receives a fraction of the funding per student that they serve.

The teacher mentoring program available at COL is also unique. Because of their unique staffing model, the school provides a mentoring model that suits their teachers' needs. In this model, the focus is on keeping their teachers engaged by building personal relationships with them. To foster these relationships, COL provides ongoing professional development for their teachers by way of webinars. They also host a yearly, face-to-face gathering. The last yearly gathering was sponsored in part by the Colorado Department of Education, and it included online teachers not only from COL but also from other online schools across the state of Colorado. Over 120 teachers came together to expand their horizons about online teaching and learning at the gathering.

In addition to the yearly gathering, there is training for new teachers when they are newly hired at COL. The COL administrators host a day-long, face-to-face mentor-type training, where new teachers sit down with different directors who are responsible for different components of COL, including curriculum and instruction, student services, technology services and overall management. These administrators are available to answer the new teachers' questions about being ready to teach their courses. The COL administrators also emphasize avenues teachers should use for support.

The new teachers are not assigned mentors. Instead, COL offers just-in-time mentoring, where any teacher can pick up the phone or email a COL administrator when they have a question. Executive Director Chris Rapp emphasizes that he and his administrative team are available at a moment's notice when the teachers need help. Rapp explains, "When a teacher calls us for help, at the moment they need it, 95% of the time we pick up the phone and help them right then."

And while the new teachers' courses do not have facilitators within them, Jodi Holzman, Director of Curriculum and Instruction, frequents the courses to see how teachers are doing. Holzman admits that most of the teachers being hired in recent years are already well versed in online teaching and learning, including their competencies in learning management systems. Most of the time spent in the mentoring process for these particular teachers is introducing them to the policies and procedures specific to COL. A few of the teachers that they hire have not done extensive amounts of online teaching, and their focus with those teachers is getting them comfortable within the new learning environment. Basically, the extent that they support teachers depends a great deal on what the teachers already know.

In the last year, COL has seen a shift in the number of applicants who have previous online teaching and/or learning experience. A new set of interviewing questions is used for teachers with online teaching experience as compared to teachers who apply with no prior online teaching and learning experience. COL teachers create their own courses, agendas and materials. In addition, COL expects teachers to be highly interactive with their students. COL feels that this expectation is important, especially considering their student-to-teacher ratio of 17-to-1. They also require their instructors to create an online learning environment that is conducive to student interaction and engagement.

In order to offer more opportunities for professional development and mentoring, the school recently started a social networking community (SNC) using Ning, where teachers can go to get

informational announcements, links to articles, websites, and blogs, share stories and reflect on their online teaching experiences. Through this SNC, they are trying to build a community of learners in an online environment. Holzman commented, "The focus is more on reflection and sharing; opportunities for teachers to get online and say, 'I am struggling with this, what are some ways that other teachers are handling a situation like this?'"

The yearly face-to-face professional development workshops focus on how to be a better online teacher. The curriculum for the trainings never focuses on the subject area in which the teacher instructs, although the time for content-based collaboration between teachers is built into the agenda. COL typically pays for the professional development opportunities. Occasionally, there are additional opportunities for COL teachers to help them stay up-to-date in online teaching and learning. Because of their unique service model, their ability to offer full-fledged professional development opportunities for their teachers is limited. Because of this, COL has to focus their professional development dollars on what will help their teachers the most. Although there is no formal team-teaching at the COL, teachers who teach the same course will sometimes collaborate and share their ideas. Overall, their measure of teacher success is how well their students' are achieving in the classes. Their student success rate is currently 88%, and Rapp emphasizes that this is a result of the quality teachers who work at COL.

Florida Virtual School (FLVS)

Key Features

- Formalized mentoring program
- New hires complete a training module prior to attending the initial face-to-face training
- New hires are supported by a formal mentor for up to one year
- Face-to-face and web-based follow up training sessions
- Mentors are experienced teachers who have a reduced student load
- Content buddies provide "just in time" content-related support
- Extensive network of support through both formal and informal mentoring
- On-going support from Instructional Leader
- On-going professional development
- Professional learning portfolio

The mentoring program at Florida Virtual School (FLVS), one of the largest virtual schools in the nation, has evolved over the years. It has been a natural and necessary process to meet the goals of the organization and for scalability purposes. The program originated with a handful of instructors who saw the need to support newcomers. Today, new online instructors at FLVS have a significantly stronger and more intricate support system comprised of six formal mentors and a myriad of individuals who collaborate to ensure the mentee's success.

FLVS started in 1997 under the name Florida High School. A joint grant-based pilot project between Orange and Alachua County Public Schools in Florida, the program started with approximately 77 students and 10 courses. FLVS currently offers over 90 online courses that range from core

graduation requirements to Advanced Placement courses. FLVS hires year round based on enrollment demands; this requires a flexible induction program that meets the needs of instructors new to K-12 online learning. As of this writing, FLVS has over 450 full time instructors, and serves well over 48,000 unique students.

The extensive support system for new online instructors at FLVS encompasses formal and informal methods of support, including mentoring, coaching and professional development (see diagram). The individuals who provide this network of support communicate frequently and modify the system as needed to meet the needs of the mentees and their students.

Formal mentors are assigned to new teachers on a rotating schedule. Mentor to mentee ratios vary between 20 and 80 mentees per mentor depending on the time of year. Summer enrollments typically require the hiring of additional instructors, thus mentors must adjust to the higher ratio.

When the new hire training roster is sent out, mentors know who they have been assigned and when their mentee will be at training. This is their cue to initiate contact. Subsequently, the inductees attend a required four-day face-to-face training presented by the training specialists. By that time, they have had time to acclimate to the learning management system and to complete preliminary tasks via a web-based training module.

At the face-to-face training, inductees meet representatives from various departments, including technology, along with human resources. They also meet an Instructional Leader and a mentor. In addition, they learn the name of their content buddy; content buddies are assigned by Instructional Leaders based on content knowledge and experience teaching in the online environment. The content buddy is a full-time teacher who teaches the same course the inductee will be teaching. As informal mentors, they become a valuable resource, providing “just in time” answers related to the course and content.

There is also a social component to the face-to-face new hire training. New hires have the opportunity to build relationships with their training co-hort, an Instructional Leader, a mentor and other staff by going out to dinner together, working in small groups, and practicing their new skills. For example, during one of the evenings, mentors help mentees make welcome calls to their newly assigned students. After calls are done, the mentors usually invite the new instructors to go out for dessert for more social time together. On a different evening, new hires join an Instructional Leader for dinner and an informal Q & A; the Instructional Leader is there to support the instructors as they embark on the journey together. Hence, the mentoring program goes beyond what might be considered mentoring to include coaching and on-going support from the Instructional Leader who reinforces what the mentee has learned through their experience.

During the last day of face-to-face training, mentors assist mentees with new job skills. They role play different scenarios and practice decision making, as well as go over other important pieces such as academic integrity. When new hires leave the four-day training session, they are prepared to serve students. It is understood, however, that this is just the beginning of their journey as online instructors. Throughout the following weeks they will participate in six mandatory synchronous follow-up sessions and complete specific milestones. These milestones are part of the instructor’s professional learning portfolio, which also includes their performance appraisal and professional learning goals for the year.

Formal mentoring extends well beyond the six follow-up sessions, into a full year from the date of hire. Face-to-face follow up sessions occur 30 and then 60 days after hire. This is a time to re-establish bonds, deepen knowledge, and reflect on the overall experience. Communication is always reciprocal; mentees may reach out to their mentors or anyone in their support system at any time. Mentors continue to check in every few weeks with new instructors and communicate regularly with the Instructional Leaders to provide support to mentees, therefore preventing or correcting potential concerns that would otherwise impede the instructor's success.

Role of Instructors

Instructors at FLVS are reflective practitioners and thought leaders as well as mentors to colleagues. The student is at the heart of every decision made by instructors at FLVS. Because of this student-centered approach, it is crucial that all instructors participate in an induction program that immerses them in the organization's core values and culture, not just the technology or the pedagogy of teaching online.

In essence, all FLVS instructors regardless of their experience level as online instructors are informal mentors. Even if they are not a content buddy, they collaborate and exchange knowledge frequently. This sharing of knowledge occurs via virtual as well as face-to-face team meetings and through the use of collaborative Web 2.0 tools. Sharing is also a natural byproduct of building relationships, since instructors communicate with each other via Instant Messenger, email, or phone.

One deliberate method is to hold virtual "Share Fairs" to highlight, celebrate and model best practices. Instructors take ownership of the presentation and share with colleagues the innovative practices they have implemented to help students succeed. Instructors also share information through Web 2.0 tools such as wikis or blogs. Teams may choose to use one of these tools to post resources, reflect on practices, or collaborate on projects. Team Spanish, for example, uses a blog to build community and reflect on teaching practices. Most recently the team used the Wetpaint® collaborative space to plan virtual fieldtrips, international pen-pals and other engaging learning opportunities.

Role of Mentors

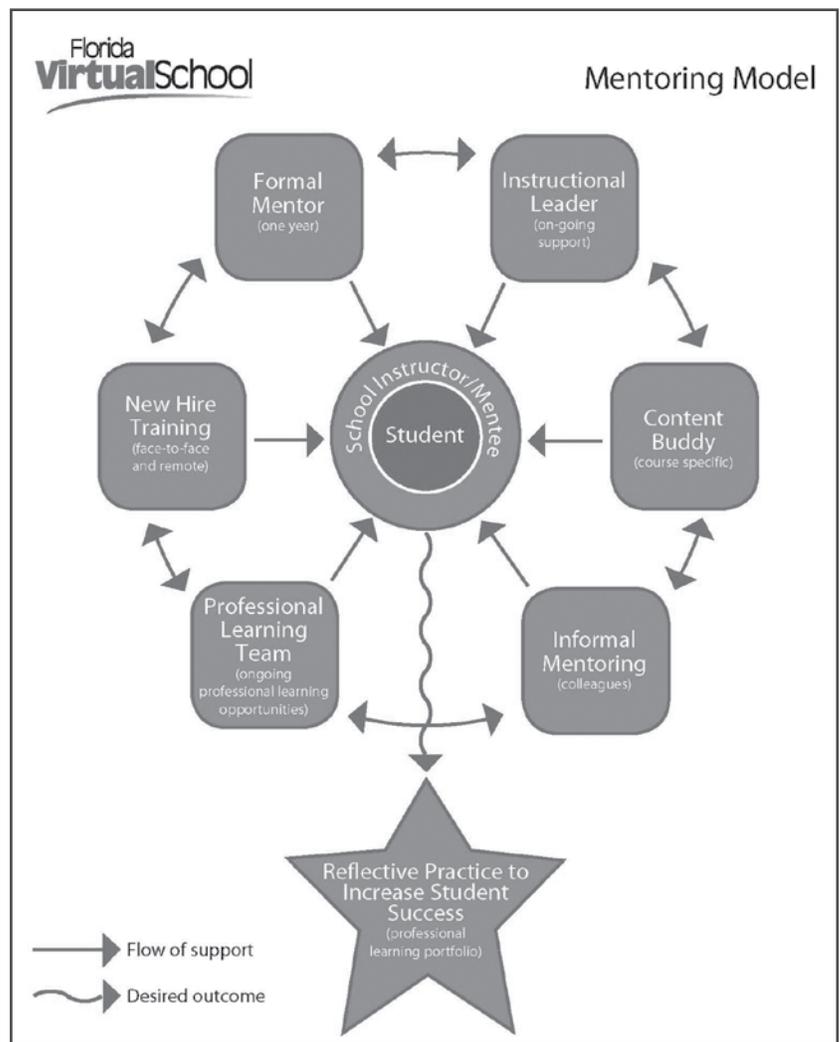
Mentors may be thought of as the "culture keepers" at FLVS, but they are also role models as well as expert online instructors. Their goal is to provide support, information, tips and resources that will help the mentee be a successful online instructor. Mentors also take on the role of cheerleader, go-to person, or simply trusted colleague. Although the formal mentorship is in place for one year after the new instructor is hired, the mentee-mentor relationship forms a bond that lasts well beyond that first year.

Culture-keeping is important in a growing organization, especially when individuals work at a distance. Because of the emphasis on student-centeredness, formal mentors are online instructors themselves who juggle the same responsibilities and face the same challenges as their mentees. Mentors have a reduced student load to allow them to balance their mentoring and teaching roles.

Nichole Taylor, who has been a formal mentor for one and a half years and has been with the organization for six years, finds that this dual role helps her build trusting relationships with her mentees because she can provide them with real life examples of best practices. This approach

allows the mentor to go beyond theory to practice, which is what new online instructors need in order to serve their students. At the end of the day, a mentor's number one priority according to Taylor is "making sure the new instructors know they are supported, even if they make a mistake or simply lack knowledge."

Adaptability and flexibility are also key components of mentorship at FLVS. The fluctuating mentor to mentee ratio requires that mentors collaborate with one another to group and manage their mentees according to mentee needs. Not only are mentees at different levels in their formal follow-up calls and sessions, depending on their date of hire, but they are also at different stages of developing as online instructors. The induction experience is therefore individualized, just as instructors would individualize for their students.



Role of Facilitators

As a leader in online K-12 education, FLVS offers several options to both students and school districts to work in an online educational environment: 1) The option used most by Florida students is to take online courses that are taught directly by FLVS instructors; 2) Students may take courses with local district franchise programs, where school districts use their own staff, but those staff members are mentored by FLVS mentors; 3) Students may take courses through an e-learning center at a local school. A site facilitator supports e-learning centers, but FLVS instructors teach the students.

Schools with e-learning centers can increase course offerings and add flexibility to the master schedule. The school enters into an agreement with FLVS to host an e-learning center. The school must provide an onsite facilitator. Hence, an e-learning center is a partnership between FLVS and the local school.

FLVS provides the instructor of record for the courses, along with all course materials, and the school provides the computer lab. Students are scheduled into the center by their school. When possible, students are assigned to the same online instructor, so both the students and facilitator can establish a working relationship with the full-time FLVS instructor.

A school-based facilitator as defined by FLVS does not have to be a certified instructor. It is up to each local school to decide on requirements for onsite facilitators. In some schools, facilitators are full-time teachers, and in others, they are paraprofessionals. All facilitators are given FLVS student management accounts so they can monitor their students' progress and communicate with the instructor for each course.

The site facilitator's role is, first, to provide a classroom environment where students can learn. The facilitator also monitors student progress and acts as liaison with the FLVS instructor. He or she also facilitates communication between the student, parent and FLVS instructor. Training for the facilitator is provided online and tech support is available via phone and email.

Idaho Digital Learning Academy (IDLA)

Key Features

- Informal mentoring follows an extensive and structured new teacher orientation program.
- Just-in-time learning opportunities are scheduled during the early months of a teacher's first year.
- Teachers are mentored by Curriculum and Instruction Specialists who are experienced teachers at IDLA.
- Online Principals recommend mentoring needs on the basis of evaluations of courses and teaching performance.
- Team teaching and curriculum collaboration are forms of short-term mentoring that are encouraged.
- Communities of learning and practice scaffold ongoing informal mentoring.

The IDLA has an informal teacher mentoring program. This mentoring program starts when teachers are hired at IDLA. All of the new teachers receive the same training when they are hired. This training consists of a three-week online orientation, a two-day, face-to-face faculty meeting, and an eight-week online orientation (facilitated by the Curriculum and Instruction Specialists).

As the new teachers begin using the online teaching environment, they receive weekly just-in-time training regarding what they need to know for that specific week. For example, during their first week, new teachers learn how to access their course and set up their rosters. At the same time, they have the benefit of working with their Curriculum and Instruction Specialist, who continues with the new teachers for the duration of their employment at IDLA.

In IDLA's model, the Curriculum and Instruction Specialist is the mentor. According to Janna Vega, Director of Curriculum and Instruction, and Michael Caldwell, Director of Supervision and Development, these Curriculum and Instruction Specialists, with their own backgrounds as online teachers, have taken the lead on mentoring the new teachers at IDLA. Although the structure of interaction between the Curriculum and Instruction Specialist and new teachers is not fully formalized, teachers are encouraged to consider the Curriculum Specialist heading their department as their primary resource when it comes to technological or pedagogical questions.

In addition to the Curriculum and Instruction Specialist, IDLA employs Online Principals who regularly provide feedback to teachers in the form of supervision and evaluation. The Curriculum and Instruction Specialists and Online Principals frequently access new teachers' courses and act as facilitators, helping these new teachers whenever questions or difficulties arise. While the Online Principal focuses more on the overall performance of the teacher as an online instructor (monitoring of discussion boards, feedback on assignments, communications between students/parents and teacher, protecting students with disabilities, matters of student discipline), the Curriculum and Instruction Specialists concentrate on the course-content and (drawing on their own depth of experience as online teachers) instructional techniques.

In this unique teacher mentoring program, collaboration in the form of team teaching takes place with the help and facilitation of Curriculum and Instruction Specialists. Collaboration also occurs between the teachers and Curriculum and Instruction Specialists when there is a change in curriculum. This collaborative situation not only gives the teachers a way to make a smooth transition to new content, but it also provides the teacher with an opportunity to enhance and contribute to the development of that new content. This model is one that emphasizes the importance of communities of learning and practice existing between the Curriculum and Instruction Specialists and the teachers within the various content area departments.

These communities of learning and practice go beyond what is mentioned above. They spill over into what Vega calls the "Faculty Lounge," which is an online space in the learning management system where teachers can discuss their stories and reflect on their own experiences. Within the Faculty Lounge, there are also opportunities for further professional development and additional resources that are specific to content areas. All of the teachers, not just the new ones, are required to take professional development courses online. IDLA is always looking at ways that they can address upcoming needs. Professional development opportunities target the most critical current need, whether that be addressing new technology, new processes and procedures, or enhancing online pedagogical practices. If a need arises for specific training, IDLA administration looks at ways they can efficiently and effectively deliver that needed training. IDLA is now looking at expanding to offer their teachers and other teachers around the state of Idaho a more formalized teacher mentoring program.

Mississippi Virtual School (MVS)

Key features

- Peer coaches mentor all teachers with a focus on student needs.
- Technical coaches offer mentoring related to the learning management system.
- Monitors help peer coaches in understanding specific teacher needs.
- Teachers, coaches, monitors and facilitators work in a network of sharing and development.
- Peer coaches have annual workshops for their own development, as well as monthly meetings, webinars, and discussion forums.

The Mississippi Virtual Public School is in its third year of offering courses. The School has a formal teacher mentoring program that includes ten peer coaches overseeing five full-time teachers and 106 contracted facilitators. The peer coach performs early intervention for new teachers and facilitators in regard to what they are responsible for within their course, the main goal being to meet the students' needs. These peer coaches keep in touch through virtual teacher's lounges, phone calls, email, instant messaging, and electronic whiteboards to coach, guide, and help mentees in any area they need help with. One master peer coach oversees the peer coaches in the same capacity to help them be the most efficient and beneficial link in facilitator growth and skills. A technical coach offers technical support regarding the learning management system, develops and delivers training, and provides a more one-on-one customized approach when it is needed. An additional support person in the mentoring process is a monitor, who goes into all facilitators' courses once a month to look at what peer coaches need to be concerned with when it comes to offering assistance to their new teachers.

According to Connie Ratcliffe, Director of Mississippi Virtual Public School, all Mississippi Virtual Public School teachers have mentors. She said, "Everybody has a mentor because even our experienced teachers out there don't need to feel isolated and on their own. They need to know that there is a warm body, somebody who is interested in what they're doing." The role of peer coaches is to discover and talk about what's working and not working. Then, they share this information with the facilitators who in turn will share that with one another. One of the top priorities of a peer coach is to glean resources that will best encourage, create idea exchange, and foster new learning strategies among their teams. Peer coaches can meet in virtual staff meetings once a month to interact on the successes of other team strategies and share out that information as well.

Peer coaches are assigned to teachers by their discipline with the exception of AP and Credit Recovery teachers who are assigned peer coaches to meet their unique needs. AP teachers are all under one peer coach and the credit recovery team is under another coach. The peer coaches are prepared via three top-level peer coaches. Those three are coached by the administration, and from there, those three coaches share the information with the peer coaches on the next tier, and so on. So the preparation is a top down approach. Each year, there is a three-day workshop for peer coaches. This training is done to introduce peer coaches to new ideas that are being implemented for that academic year. Peer coaches have a choice each year between continuing to peer coach or to continue on as facilitators. Therefore, it's not always the same coaches each year. Peer coaches are chosen for their exemplary performance as facilitators, implement innovative ideas, and show

a zeal for student centric teaching approaches. Their peers and MVPS administrative staff often nominate them. Facilitators are sent through a seven-week course to prepare them to do online course facilitation. Peer coaches are not sent through this training.

During the first year of Mississippi Virtual Public School, Connie Ratcliffe and another administrator were the center of all correspondence for teachers. As the school grew, the peer coach model was implemented to allow for quicker troubleshooting of teacher and facilitator issues. The support systems for the peer coaches will be new as of this academic year. These include monthly staff meetings to share resources, professional development webinars, and interactive discussion forums. This model also allows for the administration team to approach some of the peer coaches by consolidating concerns rather than at the individual level, allowing for a more open share of information. They are also looking at implementing a Book a Quarter program to provide peer coaches with resources that will help them in their roles as coaches.

Being a relatively young program, the peer coaches simply concentrate on helping the new teachers navigate the learning management system, keep the students engaged, and become more effective online teachers. The success of a mentoring relationship at the Mississippi Virtual Public School is documented through statistics being kept by a University of Florida initiative, the AT&T Virtual School Clearinghouse, and by way of feedback received through emails. Also, a doctoral dissertation research study on teacher efficacy of MVPS teachers conducted in the fall of 2007 supports the success and necessity of mentoring programs. Within the formal mentoring program, professional development is available for the teachers, at all levels, on an ongoing basis. In regard to informal mentoring, teachers are sharing their experiences daily through a variety of mediums. This system, according to Ratcliffe, is working very well.

Quotes from peer coaches at Mississippi Virtual Public School:

“Our teachers want to be successful and having a mentor (peer coach) to turn to for help provides them a sense of camaraderie. It is more like sharing than just instructing. I have decided to take that approach this year and learn as much as I can from each and every one of my teachers in order to better serve “all” the teachers within my department.” —Terry

“The peer coach model represents the human element in the virtual learning environment. The peer coach is that reassuring human voice that overrides and complements the impersonal, technological tools when necessary. The feedback the peer coach provides builds confidence, maintains morale, and provides valuable motivation to facilitators who may sometimes feel unsure or overwhelmed by the demands of the work they do.” —James

“We have an active ‘sharing lounge’ we call the teachers’ lounge that lets us find out a different way to do something or get help. Through peer coaching, we have been able to build a more active community and become better cyber-friends and cyber-colleagues!” —Joyce

Missouri Virtual Instructional Program (MoVIP)

Key Features

- All online teachers have mentors.
- All teachers take an online professional development course.
- Elementary teachers participate in daily mentoring Round-up meetings.
- Secondary teachers are mentored by department chairs using conference calls.
- Mentors support all aspects of online teaching with an emphasis on effective communication.
- The success of mentoring efforts is assessed using an online system.
- Teachers and mentors have access to an online platform for reflection and collaboration in a learning community.

Missouri Virtual Instructional Program (MoVIP), funded by the state of Missouri, offers virtual education to both part-time and full-time private, public, and home-schooled K-12 students. In existence for a total of two years, MoVIP has an elementary school and a secondary school run by different vendors, Connections Academy and Northwest Missouri State University (subcontracts with NMSU are held by E-College and Kaplan), respectively. Because the MoVIP is a public school, it falls under the state's requirement that every new teacher be assigned a mentor. The virtual school environment offers both challenges and opportunities related to the formal mentoring experience.

Because of their two-vendor system, the Missouri program has two different mentoring models in practice. The elementary program has a model tailored to address the way the teachers work together. The teachers are all housed in one location, and they teach from the same location, which facilitates the mentoring process. The veteran teachers mentor the new teachers. They have regular meetings every morning called "Round-up," where they have time to share ideas and experiences before their day gets started.

The mentoring model for MoVIP secondary teachers partners teachers with department chairs for a curriculum focus. The teachers are not housed together as in the elementary mentoring program; instead, they hold collective conference calls.

Preparing mentors for their roles is done by way of Connections Academy (elementary program) and informal training (secondary program). The mentors in both the elementary and secondary programs help the new teachers for their first full academic year. According to Curt Fuchs, Director of MoVIP, the mentors are there to assist the new teachers in "learning the art of virtual education." He elaborates that the mentors assist the new teachers with motivation of and communication with the students, procedural issues, system issues (how does the information system/platform work), and pedagogical issues. The mentors are not facilitators in the new teachers' courses. However, Fuchs said that communication is a key concept for new teachers to learn. Some of the teachers on the staff copy their mentors on email correspondence they send to their students. By doing this, the mentors can see how the new teachers express themselves via email, and the mentors can suggest ways to better respond to a student's inquiry. Fuchs says it's important for the mentor to take that time to make sure that the new teacher's communication with the students is positive and educationally sound.

The MoVIP measures the success of its mentoring programs in two ways. First, the teachers, both mentors and new, keep track of their mentoring time in an online system. Second, success of their mentoring program is measured by the success of the teachers' students, e.g. measured via the students' grades.

New to MoVIP this year is an online professional development course, offered through E-Learning, which is required for all teachers. In this course, teachers learn how assessment, communication and other procedures work in the online learning environment. The course provides space for learning communities and a chance for reflection, where teachers can share their experiences and respond to others. Because the program is young, team teaching, portfolios and some other supportive, mentoring opportunities are not in use at this time. The future could provide a chance for MoVIP to integrate those types of opportunities and more for their newly hired teachers.

Tennessee: e⁴TN

Key Features

- Teachers' mentors, called lead teachers, are assigned by geographic regions.
- Lead teachers provide weekly checkpoint evaluations, based on best practice and standards, and offer as-needed assistance based on the checkpoint results.
- Lead teachers consult with Area Implementation Specialists.
- Mentoring relationships extend to summer retreats.
- e⁴TN uses reflection to facilitate one-on-one evaluative discussion between teachers and lead teachers.
- Informal mentoring occurs through team teaching and learning communities.

e⁴TN has a formal teacher mentoring program where they employ three Area Implementation Specialists and three lead teachers, each of whom serves one of the three grand divisions of the state of Tennessee. Because of the location assignments of the lead teachers, they are matched with their mentee teachers by geographic location.

These lead teachers work with all of the e⁴TN teachers, who are part-time adjunct instructors. The lead teachers perform weekly evaluations, called checkpoints, on the teachers and provide training informed by the quantitative feedback they receive in those checkpoints. The lead teachers then consult with Area Implementation Specialists who oversee them. In this system, all of the teachers receive mentoring; the weekly checkpoints are conducted with all of the teachers, and the checkpoints are based on best practices and the e⁴TN specific standards. For example, do the teachers communicate with students once a week, which is what they are required to do? Do they return communications from students and parents within 24 hours? Do they post regular announcements? Do they return work within three days? Do they complete progress reports when scheduled? Are they following all of the e⁴TN procedures? The same guidelines and additional ones are required of the lead teachers. For example, do they return communications with their mentee teachers within that 24-hour time period?

One of the three Area Implementation Specialists is the mentee for the lead teachers. She has been working with e⁴TN for some time since the inception of the program. She is responsible for working with the three lead teachers and mentors them as they work and mentor the other teachers. She reviews all of the checkpoints that the three lead teachers do. If she feels uncomfortable with a situation, she goes directly to the Coordinator and one of the Founders of e⁴TN, Wendy Oliver. All of the e⁴TN teachers are adjuncts with the virtual school and are full-time, face-to-face teachers at brick-and-mortar schools. An administrator in the teacher's building has to recommend a teacher to work as an adjunct at e⁴TN. There are site coordinators located at every school who provide support in certain situations. The lead teachers have access to the teachers' courses; however, they do not act as course facilitators in those courses. They are able to access the courses for quality checking. If the teachers take sick leave or personal leave, then the lead teacher can facilitate or monitor their courses.

The lead teachers focus on offering the other teachers insight into effective online pedagogies, uses of the learning management system, specific policies and procedures of e⁴TN, and directions on the use of the communication database. To measure success in a mentoring relationship at e⁴TN, the statistics from the weekly checkpoints are taken into account because those demonstrate what makes a teacher effective online. The communication database is an online database used to log all correspondence between teacher and students, e.g. progress reports, report cards, and any other correspondence. Each week, the teacher is given a score based on that week's correspondence. Although teachers sometimes dislike the scoring system, it's a constructive tool for the school to use to analyze the progress of teachers. At the end of the term, these scores are used as summative analyses that help e⁴TN determine teachers to invite back for the next academic semester.

The formal mentoring programs that are used in e⁴TN include professional development. One such example is the annual summer retreat attended by all lead teachers, site coordinators, and newly hired teachers, as well as experienced teachers. This particular retreat covers best practices, successful strategies within each district, and training for new teachers. e⁴TN uses reflection to facilitate one-on-one evaluative discussion between teachers and lead teachers. Just-in-time mentoring occurs continually. Team teaching and learning communities are forms of informal mentoring used in the school. The environment in which the learning communities exist is dependent on the teacher's comfort level. Some teachers physically meet together, while others meet online or collaborate via email. Overall, the program is effective and is providing hard data to make data-driven decisions on what works for teacher mentoring.

Virtual High School (VHS)

Key Features

- Successful completion of an online professional development course is required for all prospective VHS teachers.
- Two forms of the online course are offered; both forms include graduate credit.
- The VHS mentoring program for new teachers has two levels, followed by a third level for sustained professional development.
- All mentors are experienced teachers and trained curriculum coordinators.
- Mentors guide teachers in weekly evaluations of teaching performance.
- Mentors are supported with a formal school support system.
- Professional development opportunities extend to teachers outside of VHS.

VHS's virtual classroom model of instruction is cohort-based, so students are not self-pacing through the courses. Instead, they are on a calendar schedule, so a semester's worth of material is covered within a semester. There is a certain level of independence within one- to two-week time windows. This cohort design requires a very different skill set for the online teacher than teaching an online course with less degrees of student-to-student interaction. In the virtual classroom space, teachers need to know how to support online discussions, design activities that foster high levels of student-to-student interaction, and to facilitate group activities online with no face-to-face contact.

Virtual High School has a formal mentoring program for new teachers, which begins once a "newbie" teacher has graduated from the school's online professional development course. There are two options for prospective teachers regarding this professional development course.

1. A ten-week online course offering six graduate credits. "Netcourse Instructional Methodologies (NIM)" teaches the standards of effective online teachers, including the skills they need to teach effectively in an online virtual classroom. Teachers in NIM will teach a course section of an existing VHS course.
2. A twenty-two-week intensive course offering 12 graduate credits. The Teachers' Learning Conference (TLC), offered once a year, teaches the standards of effective online teaching, as well as teaching how to develop a VHS online course, which is designed to VHS's online course design standards. At the end of the course, teachers have fully developed a VHS online course, which they will then deliver the following semester.

After graduation from one of these professional development courses, teachers begin teaching for VHS. Their required mentoring program begins at Level 1: the Faculty Advisor Mentoring Program. In Level 1, the teacher is paired with an experienced VHS teacher who is also a VHS Curriculum Coordinator, a mentor, a faculty advisor. The mentor is from the same content discipline area as the "newbie" teacher and is typically a full-time employee of VHS. Occasionally, to accommodate a very large group of first-semester online teachers VHS may contract with experienced VHS teachers who are not full-time employees. All mentors have successfully completed the VHS training for curriculum coordinators, which includes the mentoring, faculty advising, and mastery stages of training.

At Level 1, the mentor works with the “newbie” teacher one-on-one as she is delivering her course. The mentor evaluates the “newbie” teacher on a weekly basis using an evaluation system based on the National Education Association’s Guide to Teaching Online, which were originally based on VHS standards. The mentor works behind the scenes, helping the “newbie” teacher with individual needs, but does not act as a facilitator in the “newbie” teacher’s course. For example, if a “newbie” math teacher is having trouble with students who are falling behind, the mentor steps in and says, “Okay, how can we present this material in a different way? Are there any additional resources that we can point the student to that will help them to better understand this concept? Can we design the assessment in a different way?” (Liz Pape, CEO of VHS)

The mentor assists his teacher to improve any online teaching skills during course delivery based upon the results of the weekly evaluation rubric. Because VHS teachers have the flexibility to modify courses as they see fit for their students rather than using a canned curriculum, “newbie” teachers can make changes to a course via their Level 1 mentoring relationships. Since the mentors are also curriculum coordinators, they assess the situation to see if a suggested curriculum change should be made.

VHS maintains a formal support system for all stakeholders, including mentors, which includes the Service Tickets System, faculty website documents, and ongoing professional development program. The Service Tickets System provides just-in-time help-desk support. A mentor with a need submits a service ticket, which is triaged within eight hours. VHS’s goal is for all service tickets to receive a response within 24 hours.

After a teacher’s successful graduation from Level 1 mentoring, she enters Level 2 mentoring. This level is called ProGrEss, PROfessional GRowth ESSentials, and it includes just-in-time mentoring, ongoing professional development modules that are not fully-formalized courses, opportunities for reflection and peer-review of courses, and a setting conducive to deepening online teaching skills. Level 2 is less focused on the demonstration of the mastery of online teaching skills as it is on the professional growth of each teacher in online teaching. VHS hopes that teachers with more than one year of online teaching experience have reached Level 2.

VHS is now developing a program for VHS Master Teachers. This program is for VHS teachers who have shown deep mastery based on VHS standards and who are also willing to mentor student teachers. A VHS Master Teacher will mentor someone who is interested in becoming an online teacher and who is on the track for attaining a Certificate of Online Teaching and Learning (VHS-developed) through the Best Practices courses. These prospective online teachers enroll in a course called “Becoming an Online Teacher” and are paired with a VHS Master Teacher.

VHS’s informal mentoring activities include short-term collaboration, co-teaching/team-teaching, learning communities, and sharing of expertise with others with common interests. VHS puts no more than 25 students in a virtual classroom space, but there may be more students interested in taking a class. So VHS creates multiple sections of that course that are taught by different teachers who have been trained in NIM. No VHS teacher is a full-time online teacher. Instead, VHS has a unique partnership model with member schools. Teachers at member schools are willing to teach an online class through VHS and are given an area on the VHS learning management website where they can come to meet with one another. This opportunity is offered through the ProGrEss program, where lessons are shared and discussions take place regarding the curriculum in shared classes.

In order to share resources with the larger community, VHS is developing a public arena. Where ProGrEss is private for VHS teachers only, the general community will be able to benefit from what VHS has to offer through COVE®, a Community Of Virtual Educators. By enrolling in any of a series of five Best Practices courses, which are geared to K-12 teachers who want to use Web 2.0 tools in their classroom teaching, teachers can learn from anywhere at anytime. COVE is a space where the teachers can communicate and share with one another as they are practicing their newly attained skills beyond the six-week course.

Overall, VHS's mentoring program has been highly successful. Liz Pape, CEO of Virtual High School Global Consortium, highlights the importance of virtual schools considering whether the measures they use to determine the effectiveness of their mentoring programs are, of themselves, effective. Liz encourages virtual school leaders to look at hard data measures rather than anecdotal indicators. For example, the percentage of newbie teachers who completed the VHS professional development course is an indicator of how engaging that online training program is. That number is typically in the high 90s, around 95%, indicating that the training is engaging and that VHS provides teachers with the right support for learning new skills in a new professional development environment, an online environment to which many of them are not accustomed.

Another mark of the effectiveness of VHS's professional development and mentoring program is the percentage of the teachers new to the virtual school who demonstrate mastery of target online teaching skills as measured by mentors on a weekly basis. VHS gives a "stamp of approval" to those teachers who have both understood the training and who have gone on to demonstrate that mastery in practice. Liz says, "That gives the administration a level of confidence that we don't have to assign a one-on-one mentor anymore because they have successfully taught a course while demonstrating mastery of the online teaching skills as set by the VHS standards for online teaching. That percentage is around 87 to 88%. For VHS, it always starts with the standards because if you have standards then you automatically develop the criteria for the evaluation as well as the hard measures of success."

Summary

This Mentoring Brief was intended to inform the reader of the importance of mentoring programs for online teachers and provide the reader with a variety of models of newly and well established mentoring programs for online teachers. There is insufficient research on the effects of mentoring on online teacher performance, student performance, student satisfaction, and other factors. Similarly, state policy for online teacher mentoring programs is absent in many of the key states with online course programs for K-12 students. We recommend that additional research be conducted in order to support state policy development and funding initiatives for online teacher mentoring programs.

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