In battle against teacher turnover, MSU mentoring program proves effective

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Beginning teachers in urban school districts quit at an alarming rate - often from lack of support - and Michigan State University education experts are targeting the problem with an innovative mentoring program.

The research-based initiative already has proven successful in the Lansing School District, based on a new study, and now is being replicated at a much larger district in Atlanta. It could ultimately serve as a national model.

A major component involves freeing up veteran teachers to advise their beginning peers throughout the school year. It's a huge commitment - the Fulton County School System has released seven teachers from the classroom to act as full-time mentors - but holds promise for districts struggling to raise teacher quality and keep new teachers from becoming frustrated and leaving for another system.

Previous research has shown that nearly 50 percent of new teachers leave within five years and student achievement often suffers as a result.

"We call it the revolving door," said Randi Stanulis, MSU associate professor of education and director of the program.

A study by Stanulis and Robert Floden, University Distinguished Professor and associate dean for research in MSU's College of Education, found the mentoring program improved teacher effectiveness in the Lansing district when it was tested there during the 2005-06

school year. The findings are published in the March/April edition of the *Journal of Teacher Education*.

Stanulis said many school districts' mentoring, or induction, programs are ineffective because the mentors are poorly chosen and not trained properly. This is typical in states such as Michigan that have an unfunded mandate requiring each beginning teacher to have a mentor. Often, the mentor simply becomes a "buddy" - available for advice and explaining school procedures but rarely observing or providing feedback about teaching and learning.

Through the MSU program, which is funded by the Carnegie Foundation's Teachers for a New Era, veteran teachers are recruited and interviewed for mentor positions. They are matched with beginning teachers based on teaching responsibilities related to content and grade level. The mentors are continually trained throughout the school year.

Some mentors are then trained as coaches - meaning they can train mentors themselves and eventually make the program self-sufficient within the school system.

Stanulis said effective mentoring can create better novice teachers, improve student performance and potentially curb high teacher turnover.

"It's not that first-year teachers are unqualified," she said. "You wouldn't take a student who just graduated from medical school and have him perform surgery the next day. But that's what we do with teachers: They graduate in May and in August they're expected to do the same thing as someone who's been teaching 10 years."

In Fulton County, as in many large districts, teacher turnover remains a problem. The school system loses about 1,000 teachers a year - or about 10 percent of its instructional workforce, according to Tawana Miller,

the system's director of Title I and school improvement. Miller worked closely with the MSU team to implement the mentoring program in the Fulton County School System this year.

"Many new teachers are placed in an environment where it's a do-or-die, sink-or-swim situation," said Miller, who explains that she has "battle scars" from her first few years as a teacher in Fulton County. "It's almost an impossible task."

Source: Michigan State University