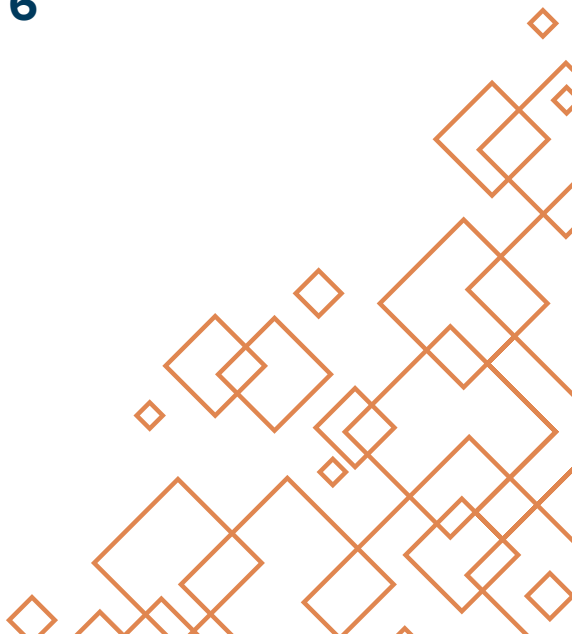
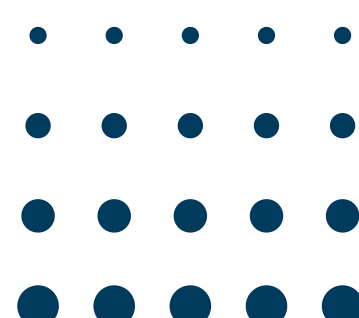


NATIONAL CENTER FOR
**TEACHER
RESIDENCIES**

MENTOR TEACHERS MATTER:

Strengthening Professional
Learning Improves
Teacher Quality and Retention

AUGUST 2026



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About NCTR



The National Center for Teacher Residencies (NCTR) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to developing, launching, supporting, and accelerating the impact of teacher residency programs. Headquartered in Chicago, NCTR's mission is to transform educator preparation by advancing the teacher residency movement to

prepare, support, and retain more effective educators who represent and value the communities they serve. For more information about NCTR, please visit nctrresidencies.org.

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Mentor Teachers Matter: Strengthening Professional Learning Improves Teacher Quality and Retention

Introduction

Retaining a strong educator workforce is a persistent national challenge that demands systemic, cost-effective solutions. Teacher shortages, particularly within special education, STEM fields, and rural and high-poverty schools, are exacerbated by high attrition rates, with a significant percentage of educators leaving the classroom within their first five years (Ingersoll, Merrill, Stuckey, & Collins, 2018). This continuous turnover places a severe financial and operational burden on school districts, draining substantial resources through constant recruitment, onboarding, and replacement costs (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Strategic investments in high-quality preparation, comprehensive induction, supportive working conditions, and effective mentoring are improving teacher retention and are fundamental to student learning and school improvement (Tan, Wei, Carver-Thomas, & García, 2026).

To address persistent challenges in teacher retention and effectiveness, federal departments of education and labor, state education agencies (SEAs), school districts, and educator preparation programs (EPPs) are designing and implementing teacher residencies and registered apprenticeship programs for teaching. Research consistently shows that teachers who complete teacher residency programs are more effective in the classroom and remain in the profession longer than those trained through traditional routes (Guha et al., 2017; Hascher & Kittinger, 2014; Temiz & Topcu, 2013; Ronfelt et al., 2014; NCTR, 2025). Although registered apprenticeships for teaching are relatively new, they are growing in popularity and share many of the key elements of what makes the teacher residency model impactful, but at this time, there is nascent data on retention and effectiveness. Both teacher residency and apprenticeship models include a paid, year-long classroom-based learning experience guided by a mentor teacher or journeyworker aligned to low- or no-cost coursework, culminating in teacher licensure (Palmero & Lara, 2025). [The National Center for Teacher Residencies](#) (NCTR) provides technical assistance to design, strengthen, and sustain high-quality teacher residency and teacher apprenticeship programs nationwide. Drawing on nearly 20 years of experience and evidence-based practice, NCTR understands that well-prepared mentor teachers are essential to developing effective educators. Our work has helped our partners build and implement mentoring systems through professional learning designed to strengthen instructional practice, improve teacher preparation, and increase educator

retention. Data from NCTR’s Network of teacher residency and registered apprenticeship programs from across 30 states and D.C. indicate that 81% of teacher residency graduates are retained in the profession into their fourth year as teachers of record, far exceeding national teacher retention rates (NCTR, 2025).

Throughout this paper, we will use *aspiring teachers* to refer to teacher residents and apprentices participating in a yearlong EPP aligned with the elements of the teacher residency and apprenticeship models. Maximizing the classroom-based learning experience fosters a strong sense of belonging, develops the teacher identity, and provides multiple opportunities for aspiring teachers to observe, enact, and get feedback on instructional practices that promote student learning.

It is also important to note that *mentor teachers* will be used throughout this paper to refer to mentor teachers and journeyworkers within the teacher residency and apprenticeship models. Mentor teachers are critical factors in the success of aspiring teachers. These experienced educators work alongside aspiring teachers in the classroom, supporting the aspiring teachers’ mastery of high-priority practices aligned with state professional teaching standards by co-planning, co-teaching, and coaching them, gradually increasing instructional responsibilities to the aspiring teachers throughout their yearlong experience. By the end of the year, aspiring teachers are well-prepared and confident to lead their own classrooms.

Research shows that mentor teachers—more than university instructors or field supervisors—most strongly influence how aspiring teachers develop their teaching practice (Zeichner et al., 2015; Clarke et al., 2014). Extensive research highlights the importance of mentoring programs for certified PK-12 teachers (Strong, 2009); however, the role of mentoring aspiring teachers remains less well understood (Ellis et al., 2020). We recognized the need for more research to better understand the specific needs of mentor teachers for aspiring teachers, and for a formalized professional learning program for mentors. To address this gap, we leveraged a Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) grant from the U.S. Department of Education awarded in 2022, to develop, pilot, and codify a mentor teacher professional learning program in collaboration with the Teacher Development Network LLC (TDN) and Dallas College (Davis, Hearn, & Hoskins, 2023).¹ Participants were practicing teachers employed across multiple school districts within the metropolitan area. This grant enabled us to collaborate with TDN and Dallas College to design a framework of skill dimensions and actions to

¹ Dallas College is a large, multi-campus public community college located in a major metropolitan area in the southern United States. The institution offers educator preparation and teacher certification programs designed to prepare individuals for careers in public education.

guide professional learning and develop, implement, and evaluate a professional learning curriculum for mentors serving aspiring teachers.

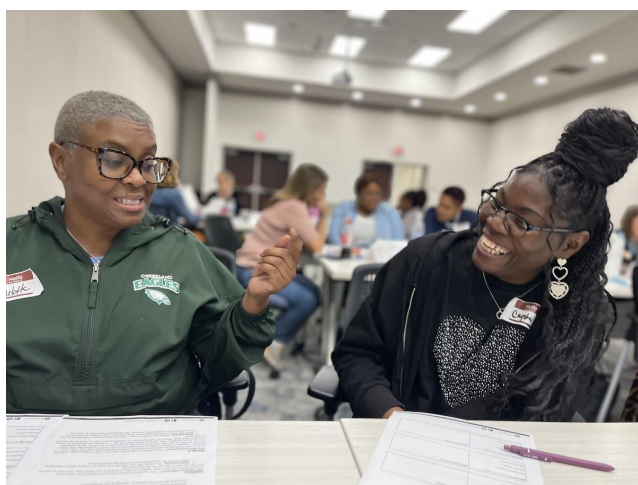
During the 2025-2026 academic year, NCTR engaged mentor teachers from Gwinnett County Public Schools (GCPS).² NCTR also engaged mentor teachers from Eagle Ridge Academy.³ Mentor teachers from GCPS and Eagle Ridge Academy participate in NCTR's [Mentor Teacher Professional Learning program](#).

Purpose

This paper presents the empirical findings and systematic outcomes of the Mentor Teacher Professional Learning curriculum deployed across partner sites, including Dallas College, GCPS, and Eagle Ridge Academy. Specifically, this study explores:

- The unique clinical role of a mentor teacher for aspiring teachers;
- The design and structural elements of the evidence-based mentor curriculum;
- The key indicators of high-quality mentor professional learning; and
- The systemic outcomes that demonstrate improved mentor efficacy and advanced aspiring teacher readiness.

The Role of the Mentor Teacher for Preservice Teachers



NCTR facilitates a mentor teacher professional learning workshop with teachers from Gwinnett County Public Schools.

Being an excellent K-12 teacher does not automatically equate to being an effective mentor for adult learners (Moir, 2011). Just as teaching students requires specialized knowledge and skills, so too does supporting aspiring teachers. Although there is broad agreement that mentoring demands distinct competencies, educator preparation programs often lack consistent, structured approaches to developing these capabilities in mentor teachers

² Gwinnett County Public Schools is a large public school district located north of metro Atlanta in Georgia. The district serves approximately 175,000-185,000 students across more than 140 schools and employs over 14,000 teachers and instructional staff. The district serves students from kindergarten through grade 12 and partners with multiple educator preparation programs to support teacher recruitment and development.

³ Eagle Ridge Academy is an independent public charter school located in Twin Cities area in Minnesota. The school serves approximately 1,500-2,000 students across grades K-12 and employs more than 100 teachers and instructional staff.

(Zeichner, 2005). Even when professional learning structures are in place, they do not always address the full range of dimensions and skills needed to create the richest and most supportive environments for aspiring teachers (Gist & Bristol, 2022). The encouraging news is that research consistently affirms what we at NCTR observe across our teacher residencies and registered apprenticeship programs:

When aspiring teachers experience ***a strong sense of belonging***; engage in ***sustained and scaffolded classroom-based learning experiences, mentorship, and productive feedback*** connecting theory with instructional practice; are appropriately ***challenged***; and feel ***empowered to bring their full life experiences*** into the P-12 clinical experience, aspiring teachers report ***feeling more prepared to teach***, more ***hopeful about the profession***, and more ***inclined to seek and benefit from ongoing mentorship*** in the early stages of their careers (Boyd et al., 2006).

Grounded in an understanding of what aspiring teachers need to flourish—and informed by deep insights from 12 teacher residency leaders in our Network, along with a broad base of mentoring research—we developed the Portrait of a Mentor (The Portrait), a framework that defines the core characteristics and actions of effective mentors.

The Portrait is organized around three interrelated dimensions—***Grounding, Orienting, and Moving Together***—originally named by Mijung Kim (2023). These dimensions reflect the multifaceted role mentor teachers play in supporting aspiring teachers. When embraced fully, they help mentors nurture the professional growth, agency, and well-being of aspiring teachers within today’s complex educational environments.

Grounding centers on the relational and emotional foundation of mentoring. In this dimension, mentor teachers create a strong sense of belonging for the aspiring teacher, not only within the classroom but throughout the entire school community. This includes supporting the aspiring teacher in developing meaningful relationships with students, families, and colleagues. Effective mentor teachers demonstrate emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and healthy stress management. They reflect on their own values and model authentic, supportive interpersonal connections. By doing so, they help foster the aspiring teachers’ confidence, well-being, and capacity to thrive in the school environment.

Orienting is the dimension that focuses on guiding aspiring teachers as they grow their awareness of and learn to navigate through the professional, institutional, and sociopolitical landscape of education. Mentor teachers support aspiring teachers in understanding their roles, responsibilities, and the broader historical and systemic forces that shape teaching practice. This dimension includes helping aspiring teachers recognize and respond to expectations, constraints, and opportunities within schools—while fostering reflection on the norms and structures that may hinder or advance their practice and student learning. Effective mentoring in this area balances practical guidance with encouragement to question and reimagine the systems they work within. At its core, Orienting cultivates a sense of agency in aspiring teachers, empowering them to act with awareness and purpose within complex educational environments.

Moving Together is the practice-based dimension in which mentors and aspiring teachers engage collaboratively in the real-time work of teaching. Mentor teachers support aspiring teachers in applying pedagogical skills by balancing program-designed learning experiences with the dynamic realities of classroom life. This dimension emphasizes flexibility, responsiveness, and the co-construction of meaningful practice through iterative, data-informed learning cycles. In these spaces, mentor teachers help aspiring teachers reflect on successes and challenges, center student learning, deepen their metacognitive awareness, and strengthen engagement with families and communities.

Taken together, *Grounding*, *Orienting*, and *Moving Together* form a holistic framework for mentor practice—one that honors the complexity of teaching; promotes growth through care, challenge, and supportive practice; and prepares aspiring teachers to thrive in a range of educational contexts.

At the heart of this framework is the understanding that mastering pedagogy—the central goal of educator preparation—cannot occur if an aspiring teacher’s sense of efficacy, connection, or commitment to the profession is compromised (Klassen & Chiu, 2011; Ronfeldt & Reininger, 2012). These outcomes significantly increase the likelihood that

new teachers will stay and grow in the field (Ingersoll, 2011; Boyle et al., 2023)—which is exactly what the profession needs.

Core Mentor Teacher Professional Learning Curricular Content

Mentor teachers need the knowledge and skills to model, practice, and coach aspiring teachers using techniques that intentionally build affirming, collaborative relationships and ensure aspiring teachers have learning experiences that fully prepare them to thrive in their own classrooms and ignite student learning. Carefully designed professional learning for mentor teachers focuses on developing the skills to observe



NCTR, Dallas College, and TDN collaborate to develop effective mentor teachers.

and give meaningful and strategic feedback, engage aspiring teachers through increasingly complex instructional planning, lead reflective conversations, support classroom management, examine curriculum and student data, and guide aspiring teachers to navigate the complexities of working in a professional school setting. The content areas listed below provide opportunities for mentor teachers to make meaning of the knowledge and skills, practice applying the skills in increasingly complex situations, and be supported and coached as their understanding of the desired skills develops over time. Each professional learning session designed as part of the mentor teacher professional learning curriculum draws on multiple content areas, creating a spiraling curriculum.

Content Area 1: Orienting to the role and its responsibilities

- Understand the context-specific roles and requirements of mentors and aspiring teachers
- Develop an understanding of prioritized pedagogical practices for aspiring teachers
- Develop a systems-level understanding of the educator preparation program

Content Area 2: Relationship-building between mentor teacher and aspiring teachers

- Plan opening aspiring teacher experiences with empathic understanding
- Understand and practice building healthy, trusting partnerships
- Build skills to support active listening and identify its benefits within healthy professional partnerships
- Cultivate the emotional self-awareness and self-regulation that effective relationship-building requires

Content Area 3: Modeling, co-planning, co-teaching, and feedback on instruction

- Develop skills for making pedagogical practices transparent
- Plan lessons collaboratively
- Facilitate and model active learning and reflection on teaching
- Employ co-teaching strategies designed to meet the varying needs of the aspiring teacher
- Use different coaching approaches to develop the aspiring teacher's pedagogical knowledge and practice, and build comfort with making the practice of teaching public

Content Area 4: Adult learning theory

- Develop aspiring teacher agency, self-direction, motivation, emotional regulation, systems-level understandings, and skills for independent problem-solving
- Engage in difficult conversations
- Build mentor teacher and aspiring teacher navigational capital to understand who to call on for support with which challenges, and consider how decisions are made

Content Area 5: Systematic skill building and refinement

- Use observation cycles, including the collection of low-inference data, for active learning and reflection
- Design aspiring teacher learning experiences by bridging course curriculum and PK-12 clinical experiences
- Identify how each stakeholder from the educator preparation program and district will support aspiring teacher learning

Content Area 6: Preparing to become a professional educator

- Ensure aspiring teachers know and are engaging with building leadership
- Ensure aspiring teachers understand and are progressing toward the on-time and successful completion of all certification and academic requirements
- Guide aspiring teachers to understand the hiring process for future teaching positions

Key Practices in High-Quality Mentor Professional Learning

Effective mentor teachers are not simply experienced classroom practitioners—they are skilled teacher educators who cultivate the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and reflective habits that enable aspiring teachers to become effective educators. While *The Portrait* outlines what mentor teachers should know and do to effectively support aspiring teachers, developing these capabilities requires intentional professional learning that reflects what research tells us about how adults learn best: learning experiences must be relevant, collaborative, practice-based, and grounded in continuous reflection and improvement. Informed by the work of Linda Darling-Hammond (2017) and Zaretta Hammond (2020), both of whom offer research-based guidance on creating impactful learning environments for adults, this curriculum is organized around four foundational practices that create the conditions for mentor teachers to learn, practice, refine, and excel in their role. Together, these practices support mentor teachers in developing the expertise needed to foster high-quality learning experiences for aspiring teachers while strengthening their own instructional practice. While each practice is important, the first—building a culture of learning for mentors—serves as the foundation upon which the

others depend. Without a strong culture of trust, inquiry, and continuous growth, the remaining practices are unlikely to achieve their full impact.

➤ **Practice 1: Intentionally Shape a Culture of Learning**

The Portrait describes effective mentor teachers as educators who engage in ongoing self-reflection, navigate conflict and tension with skill and empathy, and work effectively within complex educational systems. Developing these competencies requires more than acquiring new knowledge; it requires mentors to examine deeply held beliefs, integrate new perspectives with prior experience, practice new approaches, and seek and apply feedback over time. Research on the science of learning demonstrates that adults develop expertise most effectively through learning experiences that connect to prior knowledge, engage them in authentic practice, provide opportunities for feedback and reflection, and occur within psychologically safe, collaborative environments (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Being a mentor teacher is both cognitively demanding and personally vulnerable; a professional learning experience must intentionally create a culture in which mentor teachers experience the same conditions they are expected to create for aspiring teachers. Central to this approach is establishing a *brave space* (Arao & Clemens, 2013)—a learning environment characterized by trust, mutual respect, shared responsibility, and psychological safety that encourages honest dialogue, productive struggle, reflection, and thoughtful risk-taking. When mentor teachers feel safe to question assumptions, acknowledge uncertainty, make mistakes, and learn from feedback, they are more likely to engage in the deep reflection and deliberate practice that lead to lasting changes in knowledge, skills, and professional identity. By designing professional learning that recognizes mentors' identities, experiences, and expertise while providing meaningful challenges, opportunities for practice, and ongoing feedback, programs cultivate a community of learners committed to continuous improvement and equitable teaching.

➤ **Practice 2: Center Active Learning and Reflection**

Effective professional learning is built around ongoing, iterative cycles of active engagement. As John Dewey famously observed, “We do not learn from experience. We learn from reflecting on experience” (1933). Developing the complex competencies outlined in The Portrait—such as engaging in deep reflection, sharing power with aspiring teachers, and navigating school

systems—requires more than practice alone. It also demands deliberate reflection on both learning and teaching experiences, as well as timely, constructive feedback (Kolb & Kolb, 2006).

When mentor teachers engage in structured cycles of action, feedback, and reflection, they are better able to internalize new mindsets and approaches, notice and name their growth areas, and make intentional, lasting shifts in their practice. Creating space for this kind of reflective learning not only deepens mentor teachers' understanding of their own teaching but also strengthens their ability to model critical reflection and continuous improvement for the aspiring teachers they support.

➤ **Practice 3: Utilize Models**

When mentor teachers are learning new skills, clear models can powerfully illustrate what effective mentoring looks and sounds like in practice. These might include videos of instruction or coaching, mentor reflections, protocol demonstrations, completed tools, or case studies highlighting real mentoring decisions.

To be most effective, models should be paired with sense-making structures—such as guided reflection, peer discussion, or observation tools—that help mentor teachers connect the model to their own practice. This work should happen within a supportive, reflective learning environment, as outlined in Practice 1, and drawing significantly on Practice 2.

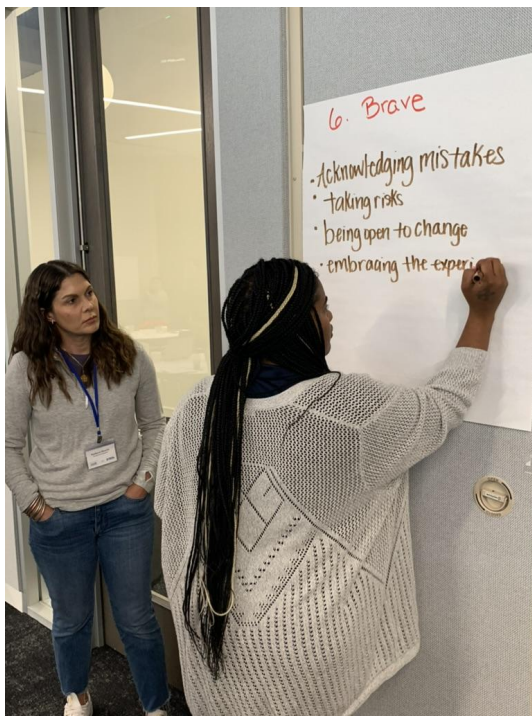
Using models supports key competencies from The Portrait, including *adaptive expertise*, and *willingness to examine their own pedagogical practice*. By seeing high-leverage practices (Ball & Forzani, 2011) in action and unpacking their implications, mentor teachers are better equipped to enact those same moves with their aspiring teachers.

➤ **Practice 4: Provide In-Field Coaching**

Because mentoring happens in real-time, in real classrooms, mentor teachers need support *in situ*—while they are actively working with aspiring teachers and students. In-field coaching, where program leaders provide real-time support and feedback, is a powerful tool for accelerating mentor teacher growth.

When done well, in-field coaching builds trust between mentors and program leaders (New Teacher Center, 2021), creates space for risk-taking, and encourages mentor teachers to adopt practices more closely aligned with their vision for mentoring. This real-time support helps bridge the gap between theory and practice, ensuring coherence across the EPP—especially within the clinical experience. Ultimately, it reinforces alignment between mentor teacher development, program learning goals for aspiring teachers, and the competencies outlined in The Portrait.

Outcomes from Mentor Teacher Professional Learning



Mentor teachers from across the Dallas region collaborate to strengthen their mentor practice.

Between June 2024 and February 2025, NCTR partnered with TDN, Dallas College, and regional school districts to pilot Mentor Teacher Professional Learning. Engaging 148 mentors, the series combined 32 hours of in-person training with 16 hours of online modules. Survey data reveals high satisfaction, with 97% of mentor teachers reporting improved abilities and preparedness. This engagement demonstrates how NCTR works with school districts, EPPs, and state education and labor agencies to strengthen the teacher workforce through high-quality preparation, comprehensive induction, supportive working conditions, and effective mentoring thereby improving teacher retention. NCTR's Teacher Residency Model and, now, its Mentor Teacher Professional Learning are two evidence-based approaches to improving teacher quality and retention.

Data collected from district leaders, principals, mentor teachers, and aspiring teachers in the Dallas College Mentor Teacher Professional Learning program demonstrate that mentor teachers are improving their ability to mentor aspiring teachers, impacting aspiring teachers' instructional practices, and feeling a greater sense of belonging. The goal was to support mentor teachers to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions outlined in The Portrait. Participating mentors (n=148) engaged in four, 8-hour days of in-person structured learning experiences that emphasized reflection, collaboration,

modeling, and in-field coaching, complemented by four modules of online learning, each module averaged four hours of work time. We collected data from the mentor teachers to understand the impact of the Mentor Teacher Professional Learning sessions on both the individual mentor teacher and the program as a whole. We also evaluated data collected from NCTR's Residency Year Survey. These data helped us understand the impact of the Mentor Teacher Professional Learning from the perspectives of the mentor teacher and the principal.

Responses from the end-of-the-year Mentor Teacher Professional Learning Survey (n = 106 mentors) indicate that participation in the Mentor Teacher Professional Learning program improved mentor teachers' practice and resulted in mentor teachers feeling efficacious and supported.



Mentor teachers are clinical educators, guiding aspiring teachers to observe, co-plan, co-teach, and reflect on instructional practice and student learning. Mentor teachers and principals completed surveys to indicate the preparedness of the aspiring teachers. Data from this pilot indicate that mentor teachers and principals had a high rate of confidence in the aspiring teachers' preparedness to teach.

- Principals (n=35) rated teacher residents and apprentices (aspiring teachers) preparedness to utilize high-priority practices increased from 3.06 in 2024 to 3.38 in 2025 on a 4-point scale
- Dallas College mentor teachers rated their teacher residents (aspiring teachers) higher than the average across all other programs in NCTR's Network on the following indicators:
 - The teacher resident's (aspiring teacher's) preparedness to teach as the teacher of record

- The teacher resident's (aspiring teacher's) ability to plan and teach a curriculum that explores opportunities beyond students' school community
 - The teacher resident's (aspiring teacher's) use of student data in planning & instruction
- Dallas College also saw notable gains between 2024 and 2025 in both the mentors' and residents' (aspiring teachers') evaluations of their preparedness to teach as teachers of record the following year.

These results suggest a strong sense of skill development and future readiness among participants, with collaborative, practice-based learning emerging as a key contributor. Included below are Dallas College mentor teacher reflections about their experience in the Mentor Teacher Professional Learning program, demonstrating how mentor teachers strengthened their practice and developed a strong sense of community.

“
"Seeing the other mentors and knowing that I'm not alone... I may not have all the answers, but I know I can always ask questions."
– Dallas College Mentor Teacher, 2025

“
"The content was engaging—both the self-reflection and practicing skills and strategies."
– Dallas College Mentor Teacher, 2025

“
"Watching videos and learning how to give feedback using just the facts was the most effective."
– Dallas College Mentor Teacher, 2025

Mentor teachers emphasized the value of peer connections, opportunities for reflection, and exposure to actionable tools—affirming the importance of designing learning experiences that are collaborative, practical, and grounded in real work. The data show strong overall alignment between mentor experiences in the pilot and the competencies outlined in The Portrait. In particular, mentor teachers demonstrated growth in areas such

as reflective practice, public use of mentoring tools, and collaborative sense-making—laying a strong foundation for deeper, ongoing development.



NCTR engages Gwinnett County Public School teachers in Mentor Teacher Professional Learning.

In partnership with GCPS, we engaged more than 20 mentor teachers over a four-month period through five virtual synchronous sessions and a one-day in-person session. The goal was to support mentor teachers in developing the knowledge, skills, and dispositions outlined in The Portrait and aligned with GCPS' established coaching approaches. We collected survey data from the mentor teachers to understand the impact of NCTR's Mentor Teacher Professional Learning sessions individually and disseminated the surveys after each session. We also collected data at the conclusion of our Mentor Teacher Professional Learning session. The data we collected and included below helped us to evaluate our session content and the impact of the sessions on the GCPS mentor teachers' practice.

94%

of GCPS mentor teachers reported that they were a better mentor because of participating in the series

100%

of GCPS mentor teachers agreed or strongly agreed that implementing Facilitative and Directive Coaching improved their teacher residents' (aspiring teachers') practice

100%

of GCPS mentor teachers agreed or strongly agreed that every mentor teacher professional learning session facilitated by NCTR was relevant to their role as a mentor

Responses from GCPS mentor teachers indicate that participation in NCTR's Mentor Teacher Professional Learning was relevant to their role and their needs. Not only did GCPS mentor teachers improve their ability to mentor their aspiring teachers, but mentor teachers saw the impact of their coaching approach on their aspiring teachers' instructional practice. Below we've included reflections from GCPS mentor teachers about their participation in NCTR's Mentor Teacher Professional Learning.

“

“I am a better mentor because I have participated in the Mentor Teacher Professional Learning with NCTR.”

– GCPS Mentor Teacher, 2025

”

“

“As a brand new mentor, I had no idea what direction to take except by instinct and now I have a clear vision!”

– GCPS Mentor Teacher, 2025

”

“

“I have started moving away from a ‘fix-it’ mentality toward a coaching approach. Rather than providing immediate solutions, I’ve learned to ask reflective questions that encourage new teachers to analyze their own practice and generate their own insights.”

– GCPS Mentor Teacher, 2025

”

“

“I am learning how best to transfer control in the classroom, which I’ve essentially controlled for years by myself. This is helping me better collaborate with my mentee.”

– GCPS Mentor Teacher, 2025

”

NCTR works collaboratively with district or EPPs to align the mentor teacher professional learning with district frameworks and initiatives. Dr. Na'Shea D. English is a coordinator in GCPS's Office of Employee Experience. We worked collaboratively with Dr. English to tailor the mentor teacher professional learning to align with district goals and efforts.

“Working with NCTR and participating in the Mentor Teacher Professional Learning sessions has strengthened our work with our teacher residency program here in GCPS. It's given our mentor teachers a safe space to learn, reflect, and actually practice coaching — not just talk about it.”

– Dr. Na'Shea English, GCPS Coordinator, 2025

In the winter and spring of 2026, NCTR worked with Eagle Ridge Academy school leadership, aspiring mentor teachers and current mentor teachers to improve their ability to observe and give meaningful and strategic feedback, engage aspiring teachers through increasingly complex instructional planning, and lead reflective conversations. NCTR's Mentor Teacher Professional Learning series engaged approximately 15 mentor teachers over four months with six synchronous virtual sessions. We evaluated responses from the mentor teachers from Eagle Ridge Academy who were coaching aspiring teachers during the engagement and the most commonly cited shifts in their mentoring practice were:

- Asking more questions rather than giving direct advice
- Being more explicit about affirming the aspiring teacher's strengths
- Giving the aspiring teacher more space to lead in conversations
- Suggesting/holding time for observations of teaching with reflective conversations
- Prioritizing my well-being

Conclusion

Given the complexity of mentoring an aspiring teacher—and the many skills required to open one’s classroom, model effective instruction, and provide sustained, developmental support—mentor teacher professional learning is not optional; it is essential. When this learning is thoughtfully designed to align with the dimensions and competencies outlined in The Portrait and when professional learning employs the key practices and is facilitated in an inclusive, supportive community where mentors feel empowered to take risks, the outcomes are powerful: **mentor practice improves, and the clinical experience for aspiring teachers is significantly enriched.**

A full year of high-quality, on-the-job clinical learning alongside an experienced mentor teacher remains one of the most effective ways to prepare new teachers. Investing in mentor teacher development through targeted professional learning ensures that aspiring teachers graduate from their EPPs confident, competent, and ready to lead classrooms effectively. Prioritizing this work not only improves teaching effectiveness and retention—for both mentors and aspiring teachers—but also leads to stronger student outcomes across the district.

While this work is informed by national research and best practices from EPPs across the country, effective mentor teacher learning must also be responsive to the local context. Mentor teacher professional learning needs to be context-specific and should reflect the unique needs, values, and systems of each school, district, and state. NCTR works collaboratively to design and implement mentor teacher professional learning in deep collaboration between partner organizations—EPPs, school districts, nonprofits, state education and labor agencies, and unions—to build a shared vision for what new teachers need to know and be able to do, and what mentor teachers must do to support that development. When this collaborative vision is clearly communicated and consistently supported, the field sees real results: **aligned systems, empowered educators, and better outcomes for all learners.**

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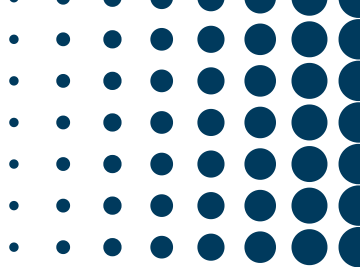
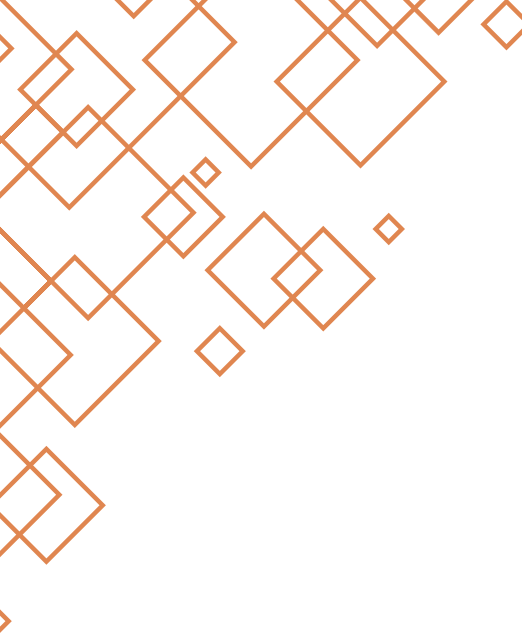
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