

Community-based mentoring for preservice teachers

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Abstract

Purpose – Few would argue the importance of high-quality mentoring for preservice and beginning teachers; however, more attention is needed to the type of mentoring provided. This is especially true for new educators preparing to teach in new contexts. This article describes the implementation and perceived impact of a community-based mentoring program aimed at retaining teachers for high-need schools.

Design/methodology/approach – This article highlights aspects of the Family and Community Mentoring program, including its general purpose, mentor selection, activities and roles. Development of the model is framed by the need to include an asset-based approach to teaching in new contexts through community-based support for preservice educators. The article shares participant perspectives on initial program implementation and considerations related to including “community” as part of school-university partnership efforts.

Findings – Input from mentor and beginning teacher participants indicates that a mentoring program specifically focused on community acculturation resulted in perceived empowerment for beginning teachers; critical support beyond the classroom; and opportunities for building relationships between teachers and students/families and their communities. Mentors and beginning teachers were especially positive about their relationship in terms of the social and emotional support and unique opportunities beyond the classroom.

Originality/value – Retaining teachers is critical in providing students with a high-quality education regardless of where they live. This article contributes to broadening the scope of mentoring models and suggests that investing in a community mentoring program is a positive and worthwhile approach to school-university partnership efforts.

Keywords Teacher education, Community, Mentoring, Residency

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Teacher shortages attributed to recruitment challenges and high attrition levels are at a crisis point in high-need communities (Nguyen *et al.*, 2024; Guha *et al.*, 2016). This is especially true in the South, where more than 43% of all the nation’s children living in poverty reside (SREB, 2021). School districts in rural, high-need areas often face challenges in attracting new teachers due to contextual factors such as low economic stability and geography that often result in few housing options and lack of access to urban/suburban resources. However, research findings support the creation of strong support networks and mentorship programs for beginning teachers as promising strategies for keeping teachers in high-need schools (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Providing new teachers with supportive mentors and coaching opportunities through the critical first several years of practice can limit the exodus of the many highly motivated teachers who, when faced with the stressful demands of the work and climate, make the decision to leave the profession (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Mullen & Fallen, 2022). What is missing from many of these mentoring programs, however, goes beyond traditional forms of mentoring. Thus, we turn our focus to community and family mentoring support structures that acclimate new teachers to a community context outside of the classroom and promote culturally relevant teaching practices (Partnership for the Future of Learning, 2021).

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Intentional mentoring practices that ensure preservice teachers get to know the students and families in their school communities and are prepared to embrace such context when teaching are critical (Almy & Tooley, 2012; Guha *et al.*, 2016; Partnership for the Future of Learning, 2021). This is especially true when preparing teachers for practice in schools that are different from their own educational backgrounds (Podolsky *et al.*, 2016). Support and mentoring models that provide an avenue for new teachers to learn the context of the community in which they will practice can result in instruction that values, from an asset perspective, the lived experiences of students and their families. These models help teachers feel embedded in the community, which can ultimately influence student success by reducing attrition (Carroll, 2007). In this article, we explore the implementation of one such model and the impact on both preservice teachers and their community mentors.

Community-based and culturally responsive teaching practice

Developing culturally responsive teaching practices starts with cultivating a deep understanding of the local context and appreciation for the community's perspectives and practices. It is an asset-based pedagogical perspective that relies on the recognition that a strength and resilience mindset and affirming students' lived experiences are a requisite to their success as educators. Community-based and culturally responsive teaching and mentoring practices have been shown to increase student achievement (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011) and teacher retention rates (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). Honoring the lived experiences, culture, community and identity of children and families as part of one's teaching philosophy is a worthwhile goal to pursue in all educational settings, but more so in those that are defined as high-need. The unfortunate revolving door of teachers in high-need districts exists in large part because of the difficulty in recruiting, training and retaining professionals to work in and see the assets of these diverse locations (Garcia & Weiss, 2019). This is especially true for new teachers with little concrete experience, few connections with their students and families outside of the classroom and significant variation in personal histories (Elias *et al.*, 2022; Emdin, 2016).

Community-based mentoring models

Zygmunt *et al.* (2018) examined the role that a community-engaged, teacher preparation model played in shaping prospective teachers' orientation toward cultural responsiveness; specifically, how candidates "contextualized experience of culture, community and identity of children and families" (Abstract). Findings indicate positive connections between the work of the mentors and their impact on new teachers. The dynamics of how teachers were prepared to teach, and their use of culturally responsive teaching practice, created a shift away from deficit orientations. In addition, the caring relationship developed between the mentor and the teacher candidate was not only "pivotal," but fostered a "transformative space," giving the preservice teachers a "new lens through which to view the world" (p. 135).

Elias *et al.* (2022) evaluated the effectiveness of community mentors in a health profession setting, showing positive outcomes for social services professionals. The researchers found that "community mentors can play a unique and critical role in developing and supporting graduate and health professional student learning in under-resourced community-based settings" and that community mentors "enhance student understanding about the broader context of life within communities with populations different from their own backgrounds" (p. 11). The findings speak in a broader sense to the value of community mentorship support in the preparation of people for service careers such as teaching. Research implications for practice in a larger context may suggest that when students are in community settings that are unfamiliar and potentially intimidating, specific mentor support can help forge relationships with community partners; develop asset-based dispositions that encourage an appreciation and

Emphasizing community in school-university partnerships

One strategy used to support the development of culturally relevant practices of teacher candidates is by leveraging the third leg of the triad of John Goodlad's school-university partnership model. Emphasizing the *community* in partnership endeavors demonstrated promise for increasing relevancy and transferring to a wide variety of settings (Goodlad, 1994; Goodlad *et al.*, 1990). This idea should apply to mentoring practices that extend beyond the classroom and include building community knowledge and understanding as the basis for the development of student-centered teaching. Envisioning this "third space" in which school, university and community intersect allows for authentic engagement of all stakeholders in the education of a community's youth (Sikma *et al.*, 2018). "Community" as part of the school-university partnership model is implied throughout the 2021 Nine Essentials with boundary-spanning structures, emphasis on context and culture and prominence of trusting relationships (NAPDS, 2021). This project promotes a more intentional, explicit integration of community into the school-university partnership work that has the potential to significantly impact preparation and retention, especially in areas that need it the most.

Program context

Implementation of a community-based mentoring model occurred within the context of a southeastern, state-supported higher education institution and its associated school partners (characterized by the US Department of Education as high-need). The institution established an educator preparation pathway that recruited teacher candidates from non-traditional backgrounds (career changers, non-education degree majors, etc.) to serve in the respective partner settings.

While the preparation program had a strong school-university partnership network with an established foundation of intentional mentoring and coaching structures, this project added a layer highlighting community connection and cultural awareness as critical to the experience.

The ten school partners engaged in this work were characterized by a high percentage of teachers on provisional license (average 26.8%) and high teacher turnover (average 14.2%) (SCDE, 2018; CERRA, 2019). Additionally, free/reduced-priced lunch rates were over 60% (elementary) and 45% (middle and high) (US Census Bureau, 2019). Schools fell within federally designated opportunity zones (economically distressed communities as defined by census data). The model described was implemented during the year-long residency, requiring teacher candidates to begin the school year in their assigned school placement and continue until the end of the university academic year. Teacher candidates were assigned a classroom mentor and a Family and Community mentor (FCM) prior to beginning the residency experience.

Family and Community Mentor (FCM) program overview

As an essential part of the program, FCMs prepare preservice teachers for the implementation of community-based teaching philosophies. They engage in building community knowledge and understanding as the basis for student-centered teaching practices and broader community engagement. FCMs provide direct support to teacher candidates to facilitate greater understanding of family dynamics, develop effective communication skills and use culturally responsive engagement strategies. They offer guidance and preparation support for teacher candidate attendance at school family literacy nights, cultural celebrations, math and science events and parent-teacher conferences.

In general, the FCM program model promotes an asset-based, culturally responsive teaching mindset for new teachers by exposing them to the wealth of resources and experiences of students, families and settings in all communities. The design of the FCM program is not complex. In essence, these mentors become “personal community guides” with the role of helping preservice teachers understand how the community works and what makes it special.

The program’s main goal is to acclimate new teachers to the communities in which they are placed as part of their preparation program. For example, the FCM might provide a guided tour of the town, landmarks and neighborhoods early in the school year, during which candidates learn community history, visit the areas where their students live and experience first-hand what the community has to offer. FCMs also work to ease anxiety for teachers who may be tentative to venture out on their own by planning outings in relaxed settings. This might include visiting a local lunch spot or ice cream eatery that provides an opportunity to meet town leaders, faith-based community members, parents and other citizens. Broader goals include increasing educator commitment to the communities in which they serve; reducing attrition rates and teacher “churn” that is destabilizing to learning; and promoting a teaching and learning mindset of asset rather than deficit framing (see [Supplementary Material Appendix A](#) for a full FCM description).

Program implementation

Family and Community Mentors (FCMs) are personal community guides for preservice teachers. They share knowledge about the community, school and district that may include an introduction to local traditions, community activities, favorite restaurants and community leaders. FCMs possess skills that ensure preservice teachers have a successful transition as new community members and can feel “at home” in the district, school and community culture.

FCM role. Where FCMs ease the transition of preservice teachers into their community role and assist in providing support for their full integration into community life, they are *not* directly involved with coaching and evaluating the educator’s instructional duties. Example FCM activities are listed as follows.

- (1) Providing community orientation, support and a voice of encouragement for preservice teachers placed in the district during their yearlong internship period.
- (2) Acting as a link to the larger school and local community by identifying and locating community resources and experiences to share.
- (3) Aiding preservice teachers in their completion of a *Community Asset Mapping Project* (see [Supplementary Material Appendix B](#)).
- (4) Celebrating the preservice teacher’s achievements and providing encouragement during challenges.
- (5) Introducing preservice teachers to community leaders and community activities (e.g. accompanying teachers to local churches, festivals and restaurants).

FCM selection. The responsibility for selecting FCMs is shared between the educator preparation program and partner districts. FCM candidates are chosen for their combination of experience and knowledge of community structures and dynamics, families and mentoring disposition. The individuals chosen to work with teacher candidates in this project have come from varied pathways, including business, education, and service professions. In this project with a focus on rural community schools, all FCMs had deep ties and family history directly connecting them to the community, as well as personal knowledge of most of the families served by the school. Districts take the lead on the identification and recommendation of potential FCMs, relying on knowledge of individuals in the community who are best qualified

to serve in the unique role. Criteria for selection include having extensive knowledge of the community and an ability to share characteristics from an asset-based mindset. It is highly recommended that FCMs have a strong internal drive to support others and that they display a positive and enthusiastic demeanor. Finally, FCMs can, but do not have to, be directly connected to the school district. They can be current or retired district employees or general community members. For this project, participating FCMs included:

- (1) *FCM 1* is a native of the county and a graduate of the district high school. She had a career in healthcare until accepting employment as a district Parent Liaison in 2012.
- (2) *FCM 2* spent 32 years as an educator in her community district. She was a mentor of preservice and initially licensed teachers, and upon retirement, now works closely with international teachers as well as children in aftercare and tutoring programs.
- (3) *FCM 3* was a former Teacher of the Year, is a current educator (in a school not hosting teacher candidates during this time) and a lifelong community resident. She is the product of the district in which she teaches and holds deep connections to the community.

Each district uses its own recruitment, interview and screening process and makes recommendations to the institution for FCMs, with the institution assuming ownership of the hiring and training. In future program iterations, many FCMs continued serving, thus reducing the need for extensive training. This stability, coupled with positive program outcomes and high teacher candidate satisfaction levels, makes the program relatively easy to maintain.

Expectations and accountability. FCMs must be willing to serve at least one full semester (fall or spring) with the expectation that they will spend time outside of school hours providing preservice teachers with opportunities to experience the cultural and leisure life of the community. Weekly meetings or activities are required and typically last at least two hours. FCM activity logs provide a description, date and time spent submitted to the institution at the end of the semester (see [Supplementary Material Appendix C](#)). For their service, FCMs receive \$500 per semester. This is currently covered by a federal grant award; however, it will become part of program fees once the grant period is over. FCMs sign a contract setting forth the role expectations. To ensure that the expectations are understood and accepted, the university program office conducts an onboarding orientation at the start of each school year with new FCMs.

Sample activities. Since the program in which the preservice teachers are enrolled is a year-long internship model, candidates begin the school year when school begins for the district (late July or early August). The beginning of the school year is the most critical time for FCMs to interact with preservice teachers since most are new to the community and school. FCMs make initial contact with the preservice teachers within the first week of teachers reporting back to work and continue to provide significant support, typically through early October. The FCM's role is to initiate experiences that will draw preservice teachers into direct contact with school, district and community stakeholders. Trust is the foundation for a successful FCM and preservice teacher relationship; thus, their first responsibility is to welcome them into the school and greater community. Personal introductions within the first two weeks of school, welcome treat bags and care packages with school supplies and willingness to share personal email and phone contact information with preservice teachers help establish communication. One activity that was highly praised by new residents as being effective was the FCM arranging guided tours of the town, landmarks and neighborhoods early in the school year. As the semester continues, FCMs provide encouragement and focus on increasing knowledge of students and caregivers. This helps preservice teachers understand certain family dynamics and facilitates closer relationships and stronger bonds. Since the FCM was selected because of their deep knowledge of the community and the families served by the district, they use the

time they have with teacher candidates to discuss, explain and interpret the cultural norms, values and communication styles of the school family. Candidates consistently shared appreciation for the FCM's efforts to ease transitions for them and welcomed the FCM's support when attending local celebrations and festivals (i.e. Watermelon Festival, 50 Mile Yard Sale, Homecoming parade and school sports events), giving candidates a low-stress opportunity to ease into the cultural life of their students and community. FCM responsibilities conclude in April when the preservice teacher has completed the internship; however, given the established FCM/preservice teacher relationship, personalized community-based mentoring often continues. See [Supplementary Material Appendix D](#) for additional FCM activities.

Implementation results

First-hand experiences from two teachers (former teacher candidates) currently teaching in a partner district school and three Family and Community Mentors (FCMs) provided information regarding how participants engaged in the program and the perceived impact.

Participants were contacted by email and asked to contribute to the information gathering process. After agreeing, they attended a video conference call to discuss the purpose of the data gathering, review the question prompt template and consider the process and timeline for completion. Data were collected using a question prompt format. Each participant individually prepared responses to three question prompts, including quotes and anecdotal information to support their reflections. FCMs were asked to share information and insights about their experiences as an FCM, specifically addressing the experience in terms of its impact on teacher residents, the greater school community and themselves. The teacher candidates were asked to describe the types of support that were provided and share how the experience shaped their development as a teacher and impacted their transition into the community. Responses to these questions were detailed and personal, contextualized to each participant's specific situation.

Family and Community Mentors

Family and Community Mentors continuously highlighted the positive nature of their relationships with the preservice teachers and the impact of their interactions. Engaging in activities such as talking through a community's history or attending events involving K-12 students, the FCMs saw significant growth in the confidence and ease with which preservice teachers interacted with families. They emphasized strong partnerships between school and community as a cornerstone to student success. However, they also suggested that just providing a "word of encouragement" was a significant part of their role in that it led to program completion, full-time employment and teacher retention. One FCM recalled classroom visits in which the teacher candidate "not only seemed to have adapted well to the environment and school setting but saw [me] not as a stranger but as part of their 'family' with whom they were comfortable sharing work and personal experience." FCMs described their role as developing empowerment, agency and growth. "It's about building trust, offering support and celebrating every step of the journey toward stronger families and communities."

Beyond impact on teachers, FCMs experienced personal growth. "As a Family and Community Mentor, my role has had a profound impact on [me] and has allowed me to deepen my understanding of the complexities and importance of family and community engagement in education." This self-improvement is an unexpected benefit of the program. Overall, FCMs saw themselves as contributing to district success by providing a service that enables high-quality new teachers to choose the community as their professional home. Reflecting on this experience, one FCM noted, "By empowering others, I have helped them realize their potential and become more self-confident and self-reliant." Another FCM described how being intentional in discussing the cultural backgrounds, diverse experiences, cultural norms and

Former teacher candidates (now beginning teachers)

Preservice teachers experience a great deal of stress and overwhelming emotion during the year-long residency. Having the FCM as someone not associated with their classroom or evaluating their performance provided a source of support and reflection. They looked to their FCM “to offer perspective on the importance of good balance between classroom responsibilities and being involved with students after school.” The preservice teacher described how the FCM “helped me make it through the tough days” and “open [ed] the door to trust and comfort” helping develop professional attributes that were not necessarily part of a traditional program.

Even when teachers were from the community where they were completing their residency, they saw benefit in having the Family and Community Mentor. As one teacher noted, his “confusion” over how an FCM could help him, since he was from the community, dissolved into an “eye-opener” as he noticed that having someone in his corner that was outside his teaching role gave him a different outlook on the community he thought he knew. “I’m more aware of the things that are going on around me. The program, with the built-in mentor for the community, has been a piece that I didn’t know that I needed.” FCMs have deep connections in the community, prompting “better understandings of students’ backgrounds leading to deeper connections and increased relatability in the classroom.”

Teachers stressed that the FCMs possess “a great wealth of socio-cultural knowledge and firsthand experience” that could be used to strengthen instructional practice. One participant shared that she was confident in her ability to make a smooth transfer from internship into her first year of teaching due to the intentional cultural acclimation. She shared, “without this help, it would have been a struggle to learn (the) in-depth details about my new community. . . to be fully immersed within it.” Teachers described the feeling of being “shaped” into “proactive leaders who engage with the community.” This feeling showcases one of the program goals for FCMs to position preservice teachers to trust the value of collaborative community partnerships and to employ culturally responsive practices as part of their teaching practice.

Challenges and recommendations

FCM identification and selection

Identification and selection of individuals to serve as an FCM requires the cooperation of the partner district and an agreement on the qualities and experience required for this form of mentorship. This project was fortunate to be working with districts that had formally identified or hired people in their locations to take on roles coordinating and fostering parent/community relationships. These candidates possessed established credentials and successful track records of working as parent/community liaisons, thus providing a starting point for selection of FCMs. The program relied on the district’s knowledge of its own stakeholders to guide and formalize placements. In situations where there may not be candidates already identified in a similar manner, FCM selection may require more open dialogue and considered discussion of the necessary FCM disposition, role and responsibilities. Of primary importance in the process of selection and placement is the assurance that the FCM selected is a person who has the full confidence of the district and partner school(s), as well as the university partner. Consideration also must be given to the size and distribution of placement schools to ensure all preservice teachers have direct and easy access to the FCM. Finally, partners must explore compensation models such as shared cost between district and institution, integration into existing structures, or adding a fee.

Training and consistency

FCM chosen for this experience were already experienced in mentoring, thus additional training was not needed at the time of this article. Through annual orientation sessions and regular interactions with the university director, the program maintains a level of consistency in activities and approaches and fosters dialogue with the FCMs that helped them develop relationships with each other. Formal training for the FCM can support program validity and reliability and is recommended for replication and future program iterations.

Preservice teacher feedback

Preservice teachers openly voiced appreciation for the FCMs, especially their help in completing the Community Asset Mapping activity. However, no formal process beyond this investigation was established to routinely provide feedback from either the preservice teachers or FCMs on the benefits or areas for improvement. FCM semester logs of activities provided some data, as did informal conversations with FCM and teacher candidates; however, to more reliably capture feedback for FCM program enhancement, a formal process should be considered.

Specific practices and activities could then be evaluated more objectively and measured against the outcome goals for continuous improvement.

Concluding thoughts

An integral part of school-university partnerships is engagement in innovative practice that meets the unique needs of districts and their communities. As stated in NAPDS Essential 4, partnerships “recognize the influence of context and culture” (NAPDS, 2021, p. 15). Family and Community Mentors (FCMs) provide a bridge that fills the gap between the formal schooling of educators and their “informal” education of specific contextual learning. They provide an asset-based lens with which to view local communities and the lives of students and families beyond the school building.

Many teacher preparation programs seek to attract and retain teachers to work in high-need school districts. However, the process of moving into a new community and adjusting to a setting that may be very different from one’s own experience has the potential to create disconnects that can impact new teachers’ self-efficacy and increase the likelihood of their leaving the profession (Langley *et al.*, 2014). An environment that is perceived as confusing creates a sense of imbalance or dissonance, a phenomenon called “cultural disequilibrium” (Bergeron, 2008). The Family and Community Mentor model attempts to address the issue by providing a support structure to bridge the gap between cultural distance, social connectedness and general self-efficacy. Actively fostering empowerment and agency is foundational and supports the development of meaningful connections to work and “place” for both the FCMs and teacher candidates.

Efforts to help preservice teachers transition to their role of full-time educators in diverse communities through community-based mentoring are seeing positive traction. The Family and Community Mentor model shared in this article encourages enculturation through an asset-minded perspective, shown to be a promising practice for preservice teachers as they transition into professional educators. Mentoring efforts and observed results reported by Family Community Mentors highlighted positive impacts on the beginning teachers and on the mentors themselves. These outcomes provide evidence that developing a community-grounded relationship with the teacher candidates helped them feel comfortable with students as well as a part of the greater community that they serve. For instance, when Family Community Mentors were asked about the impacts of their work with teacher candidates in practice, they reported positive interactions and provided examples of the impacts of community connection on teaching attitudes and practices. These included increasing confidence, skills and attitudes of teacher candidates towards family and community

engagement; recognizing the importance of collaboration with the community in advancing educational goals; and overall feelings of belonging to a new personal and professional setting.

The Family and Community Mentor model is straightforward, financially sustainable and can be implemented in a variety of settings. It aligns with several school-university partnership essentials, but more importantly, provides a missing link to supporting preservice teacher development that extends beyond the classroom. As programs seek to find new and innovative means of recruiting and retaining high-quality, well-prepared educators, they must recognize the importance of embracing the community as the third partner in school-university endeavors.

Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found online.

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