

# **Differentiated Models of Professional Learning for Educators**

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*The word pivot has become the mantra for many educators during the year 2020. With the dramatic shift in instructional practices during the COVID19 pandemic, leadership and professional learning have necessitated a consequential pivot to offer support to new and experienced teachers. The North Dakota Teacher Support System and Iridium Learning have collaborated to deliver professional learning to new and experienced educators to address many of the needs and challenges currently facing education in rural and urban areas alike. Navigating similar obstacles, such as isolation and technology-induced stress, has become second nature to the state mentoring program in North Dakota.*

*Keywords: mentoring beginning teachers, differentiated models of professional development, supporting first year teachers, changing learning structures in response to COVID 19*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In a year best described as tumultuous, educators were faced with and continue to navigate challenges that are unparalleled and unpredictable. Notions about classroom management, community building, assessment, differentiated and personalized instruction, and instructional practices were set aside, and innovation and creativity were warranted to instruct the simplest lessons. Teachers were disarmed of the tools and tricks that had proven effective year after year. The year of 2020 stood to be a year marked by change, adaptation, reluctant progression, and most importantly opportunity filled.

With challenges, opportunities for growth and refinement of practice are presented. While educators in 2020 were arguably faced with one of the most difficult years in teaching, many recognized the relentless hurdles as opportunities to build skills and practice new knowledge. Roche (2016) contended, “the essence of lifelong learning is the faculty... to treat every life event and situation as a learning opportunity” (p. 250). This growth mindset serves as a motivation for teachers, igniting a new purpose for learning and growing

professionally. Those who view the pandemic through the lens of opportunity capture the meaning of resiliency and becoming a lifelong learner.

Possessing a growth mindset may present a pathway of optimism and opportunity, but it does not diminish the challenges educators face in schools. The competence to execute flexibility and respond immediately to diverse situations is a requisite in teaching. Teachers must navigate the labyrinth of obstacles on a daily or even a minute-by-minute basis, making on-the-spot decisions with precision and discernment. Although it may feel like educators have been preparing for a pandemic-like event since the beginning of the profession, the roller coaster of emotions and constant turmoil could never have been anticipated to the degree it has been felt. Added to the normal stressors of teaching, secondary trauma has been felt by teachers who observed students and families traversing uncertain terrain, worked to implement unfamiliar technology practically overnight, watched a decline in classroom community, and missed daily communication with students and colleagues. This abbreviated list of stressors does not include primary stress stemming from health and safety concerns for self and loved ones. The long-term impact of these stressors is currently unknown, yet predictably will be felt for years to come.

As teachers work tirelessly to reflect and respond to the challenges produced by the COVID19 pandemic, the professional needs of educators have shifted tremendously (Rivero, 2020; Manning & Jeon, 2020). Stressors felt by teachers have necessitated an evaluation and consequential response from leadership teams within schools, districts, and states. Professional learning and support typically associated with a normal school year lack relevance and application. While classroom teachers and faculty have had their roles drastically change, educational leadership and school management must respond to the evolving needs of the school. It has never been so important as now for educators to lean on one another for support as well as seek opportunities to collaborate with colleagues and mentors.

For educators in North Dakota, the COVID19 pandemic has created new obstacles and magnified existing challenges. Times of challenge and transition require a call to action. This article delves into the hurdles that weather, demographic differences, population, and economic disparities present during typical school years and how these difficulties strengthen the use of creativity, innovation, flexibility, and adaptability during unprecedented times. With a continuous improvement approach, the North Dakota Teacher Support System relies on educational theories, stakeholder feedback, experience, and a reflective approach to address current needs of educators across the state.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Considered the Father of American andragogy, Malcolm Knowles (1972) asserted, “the heart of education is learning, not teaching” (p. 33). This statement serves as a reminder that the focus of instruction and teaching is the transformation of the learner. As education shifts and transforms with acquisition of new knowledge and innovation of ideas, circling back to the art of learning rather than the form of teaching is key to unlocking the pathway to learner achievement.

For educational professionals, expeditious and accurate responsiveness to learner needs has become crucial for student well-being and academic success. Although innovation has been a trending term in education, efficient development and implementation of innovation has been tested during the COVID19 pandemic. Unlike in previous years, innovation is not a dream for the future but a necessary and immediate action for the present.

### **Shift in Professional Development Needs of Educators**

As P-12 teachers are exploring and applying fresh and inventive strategies to engage students in various learning spaces, particularly in response to challenges resulting from the COVID19 pandemic, educational leaders are faced with the paralleled responsibility to become more innovative in facilitating professional development with teachers (Rivero, 2020). Not only is content in need of reworking, but also delivery of instruction and accountability in application.

A study conducted by Student Achievement Partners in the spring of 2020 found that during the initial wave of the COVID19 pandemic, 80% of educators who reported to the survey expressed interest in

attending virtual professional learning. Of these respondents, 37% stipulated an increase in interest during the current year compared to a normal school year (Rivero, 2020). The challenges faced in schools during the pandemic-era have resulted in a hunger for learning centered on integrating appropriate and purposeful technology, building relationships with students in a variety of learning spaces, engaging online learners, and maintaining academic growth (Manning, & Jeon, 2020; Rivero 2020).

Besides recognizing challenges in classroom practices, school leaders must address additional stress teachers are encountering (Harmsen, Helms-Lorenz, Maulana, & van Veen, 2019; Helmke, 2020; Miller & Flint-Stipp, 2019). High levels of stress in P-12 teachers is a concern due to the impact of teacher wellness on student motivation, behavior, and learning (Lever, Mathis, & Mayword, 2017; Manning, & Jeon, 2020). Schools that focus on positive school culture and recognize the social and emotional needs of staff members are less likely to experience high rates of turnover (Manning & Jeon, 2020).

Teacher retention has a direct impact on the school community. Schools with high attrition rates often struggle with student achievement, positive school climate, parent involvement, and consistency in policies and procedures (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Glazer, 2018; Guha, Hyler, & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Holdheide & Lachlan-Hach, 2019; Lever, Mathis, & Mayworm, 2017; Sucher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). When schools work to keep effective teachers, they are investing in the long-term success and well-being of the students. Induction programs that place an importance on the mentoring relationship and empowering both new and seasoned teachers, have been praised for providing the support that is much needed by beginning teachers (Guha et al., 2017; Prilleltensky, Neff, & Bessel, 2016; Ronfeldt & McQueen, 2017; Schmidt, Young, Cassidy, Wang, & Laguarda, 2017).

While the COVID19 pandemic continues to generate complications for schools, it is necessary for educators to continue to reflect on current circumstances and respond accordingly. Historically, when crises arise, schools have responded with immediacy and careful consideration even in the midst of uncertainty (Manning & Jeon, 2020). As situations evolve, it is of greater importance to turn to the fundamental principles and theories in education.

### **Educational Theories & Implications**

When planning instruction for students, teachers must consider a plethora of factors including skill level, interest, content, engagement, and outcomes. Likewise, planning for adult professional learning requires similar considerations yet on a larger scale and through the lens of relevancy, appropriateness, and implementation. Factors, such as audience, engagement, content, implementation, and application, are all critical in delivering instruction that achieves intended learning objectives and outcomes. With adult learners, planning for diversity and learner variance is more intensive as a result of age range, background knowledge and experience, skill level, and mindset (Kelly, 2017; Knowles, 1974; Machynska & Boiko, 2020).

Although aspects of pedagogy can be applied to adult learning, andragogy takes a specific approach to catering instruction to learning styles, effective presentation, and relevant content associated with adult learning. Knowles (1972) defines the term pedagogy as “the art and science of teaching children” (p. 34); in contrast, andragogy refers to the teaching of adults and focuses on the “process of inquiry” rather than the transmission of knowledge from teacher to student (p. 36). Adult learning theories have concentrated on the following provisions: independence of the learner; experience and communication; willingness to learn; and orientation in learning and relevancy (Kelly, 2017; Knowles, 1974; Machynska & Boiko, 2020).

Just as mindset is important to the achievement of youth, mindset is a predictor of growth and improvement in adult learners as well. Carol Dweck clarifies the difference between two types of mindsets: the growth mindset and the fixed mindset (2019). According to Dweck (2019), the belief that intelligence is unchangeable is the definition of a fixed mindset. Conversely, a growth mindset is the idea that intelligence can be developed with experience, effort, and purposeful reflection (2019).

Depending on an educator’s mindset, novel ideas and unfamiliar skills may be welcomed or dismissed. Learners, adult and youth alike, who possess a growth mindset are more likely to be open to innovative, creative, and challenging ideas, particularly if the purpose of the strategies is clearly presented (Dweck, 2019). Learners with growth mindsets can be considered ambassadors of new ideas and innovation in

schools. Learners who possess fixed mindsets may be more reluctant to listen, learn, and apply new ideas without clear explanation of intent. In some cases, even clearly defined purposes of the skill or knowledge may not persuade the learner to stray from their comfort zone.

Although mindset is a critical factor in learning, Vygotsky's zone of proximal development also lends understanding to the process in which students learn (Eun, 2018). Simply stated, the theory of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) hinges on what the learner can do independently and what the learner can do with support (Eun, 2018; Murphy, Scantlebury, & Milne, 2015). Vygotsky's theory argues that "development occurs over time and the ZPD comprises the changes that need to occur for the learner to move along a learning trajectory" (Murphy, Scantlebury, & Milne, 2015, p. 285). Further, Murphy, Scantlebury, & Milne elaborate that ZPD offers a seamless connection between theory and practice when applied in co-teaching situations. Although ZPD is frequently discussed in terms of student to teacher relationship, it can arguably be applied in most learning environments, including educational professional development (2015).

Adults learning new skills or content must be challenged in a way that they see the new learning connected to their teaching practice in a novel manner. By providing choice and autonomy in the learning, this can support intrinsic motivation which is a key tenet of the ZPD. What becomes more critical for adult learners is the social co-construction of knowledge with peers. Allowing opportunities to discuss with colleagues provides that support to develop new skills and teaching practices.

Teachers have long worked toward differentiated instruction for their students. However, few professional learning opportunities for teachers have been modeled to differentiate between skills levels of experienced teachers. Similar principles found in P-12 differentiation of instruction can be applied in the adult classroom setting as well (Knowles, 1974; Roche, 2016; Thomlinson, 2017). Using an online platform offers a solution to providing adult learning that is meaningful, differentiated, and relevant to individual learners (Arifin et al., 2020; Henriksen et al., 2018; Kara, Erdogdu, Kokoc, & Cagiltay, 2019). Differentiation overlaps with personalized learning through offering choices to meet the needs of the learner while using technology solutions to mediate that differentiation (Bray & McClaskey, 2017).

In a year that has often felt chaotic, urgent, and frustrating, opportunities were presented to re-evaluate and identify the foundational needs of teachers and students alike. It was impossible to ignore the chaos and trudge through blindingly, and as a result, important dialogue was initiated to focus instruction based on the varying needs of learners. The intense focus on what is needed in education, rather than on what is expected, has been one silver lining of the COVID pandemic.

### **Evolution of Technology Integration**

Although technology has long been embedded in P-12 classroom practice, technology integrated instruction in adult professional development has evolved rapidly over the past decade and has transitioned from a good-to-know to need-to-know within the past year (Arifin, Nurtanto, Priatna, Kholifah, & Fawaid, 2020; Henriksen et al., 2018). The progression toward increased technology integration has likely been in response to keeping up with student interest, bolstering classroom engagement, and developing college and career-ready students. Educational leaders face unique challenges when providing technology support and education to faculty and staff with a wide range of experience and readiness level (Arifin et al., 2020; Kara, Erdogdu, Kokoc, & Cagiltay, 2019).

Technology integration has taken on many meanings. The most common interpretation is the integration of technology into classroom instruction to provide opportunities for learning, connecting, and extending content knowledge. Purposefully embedded technology supports differentiated instruction, creativity, personalized learning, and targeted interventions (Arifin et al., 2020; Henriksen et al., 2018; Kara, Erdogdu, Kokoc, & Cagiltay, 2019). During the pandemic era, most classrooms have shifted at some point to full virtual learning or a hybrid model. Both virtual and hybrid distant learning models rely almost completely on the effective use of technology. This shift has resulted in a greater need for teachers to become technology experts with little or no prior training.

From the leadership perspective, technology integration means transitioning professional learning, school meetings, and collaboration to a virtual format. One implication of this shift is that professional

development facilitators must be an expert in instructing using a virtual model and provide technical support for virtual learning teachers.

The pandemic created a scenario in which the traditional model of P-12 education and professional development has to quickly use technology in a transformational manner (Hughes, Thomas, & Scharber, 2006). During the abrupt movement to remote learning stemming from the onset of the COVID pandemic, most educators focused on the replacement aspect of the framework, trying to teach the same content, yet in front of a webcam to students in front of a computer. Teachers and students began to move toward amplification with an uptick in the use of apps, more sophistication in using learning management systems to distribute resources and assignments.

Transformational examples have become more and more evident as the pandemic has continued (Hughes, Thomas, & Scharber, 2006). Band students each playing their part and other students becoming masterful video editors pulling in all together in a virtual symphony. Students using simulations of a chemical reaction and then working in small virtual groups to deconstruct the actual chemistry.

This progression of technology integration from replacement and amplification to transformation follows the RAT Model described by Dr. Joan Hughes (2006). Reports and studies have indicated for years that with all of the technology infused into schools, most was used at the replacement level. However, the RAT Model encourages teachers to reflect and assess their use of technology to enrich and amplify student learning, therefore, moving toward transforming and amplifying curriculum with technology. Complacency in technology integration in education is now a thing of the past. The pandemic has become the disruptor of P-12 education that has been needed for decades (Hughes, Thomas, & Scharber, 2006).

### **Strengths and Challenges of Online Learning Models for Adult Learners**

The flexibility and accessibility of online learning has piqued a curiosity in adults resulting in them turning to distance education to earn degrees and participate in continuing education. Online learning offers flexibility in physical space, scheduling, and engagement. However, online learning often comes with obstacles as well. Factors such as lack of technology self-efficacy, peer support, self-discipline, face-to-face instructor interaction, and motivation can all inhibit the success of learner's online education (Kara et al., 2019).

Although in-person learning can yield an optimal environment for building connections and creating meaningful collaborations, in many instances it presents a roadblock for learners. When access is limited, deficiencies can emerge and lead to inequities in student educational experiences. Since the inception of the North Dakota Teacher Support System, this inequity has been at the forefront of the planning for professional learning and support for teachers in the state. Innovative strategies have been necessary to extinguish the lack of access often observed in teachers employed in rural and small school districts.

A challenge that North Dakota teachers face almost year-round is inclement weather oftentimes causing poor driving conditions. The driving conditions make it difficult to bring groups of teachers together for professional development on a regular basis. In addition, lack of substitutes often prohibit attendance at in-person professional development. Time to participate with all of the other school and personal obligations whittles opportunities to meet in person. Schools and districts also vary across the state in their opportunities to engage in professional development. Professional learning opportunities readily available in some districts may be sparse or nonexistent in other districts due to varying leadership goals, overall culture and retention of staff in schools. All of these barriers became the impetus to shift to a different professional learning model.

### **EVOLUTION OF DIFFERENTIATED MODELS IN NORTH DAKOTA**

In the early planning stages of the North Dakota Teacher Support System (NDTSS), the primary considerations for the program focused on supporting new teachers and empowering experienced teachers to grow into educational leaders. In collaboration with Iridium Learning, the NDTSS worked to study and include theories, such as the zone of proximal development, differentiated instruction, growth mindset, community of practice, and andragogy. These theories have guided the mission and vision of the NDTSS.

Although the objectives and outcomes have not wavered, the process in which they are worked toward have evolved over time in response to feedback collected from program participants.

### Transforming Challenge Into Opportunity

North Dakota schools have a challenge that is evident across the nation, teacher retention resulting in teacher shortage. In 2009, the North Dakota legislature addressed this challenge by establishing a teacher support program. As stated in the North Dakota Century Code, the teacher support program will train experienced teachers who will serve as mentors for first-year teachers and assist the first-year teachers with instructional skills development (NDCC 15.1-18.2-05, 2019). The ND Century Code also states, the teacher support program will train experienced teachers who will work with school district administrators to identify the needs of the non-first-year teachers and help the non-first-year teachers address their particular needs through the use of research-validated interventions and proven instructional methods. The North Dakota Teacher Support System (NDTSS) was established as a result of this legislative recommendation.

Since 2009, the NDTSS has collaborated with experts in the field such as The New Teacher Center, Learning Forward, and Iridium Learning to develop and implement a mentoring and instructional coaching program that provides all public school districts an opportunity to engage in professional learning to level set their knowledge of a successful mentoring and coaching program.

### Purpose and Intention

Collaborating with experts in the field of education has allowed the NDTSS to broaden opportunities available to mentors and new teachers in North Dakota. Rather than professional learning being restricted by funding, travel, and schedules, NDTSS has designed a model to meet the needs of their participants by providing access to experts that may not be available by harnessing technology to mediate the opportunities. When referencing the RAT model, the NDTSS has transformed professional learning for mentors, instructional coaches, and new teachers (Hughes, Thomas, & Scharber, 2006). Table 1 offers an overview of the historical program model compared to the model implemented during the 2020-2021 school year, as well as benefits of the changes. The revised models are detailed in the following sections.

The purpose of the shift has been to better address the needs of teachers new to the profession. By offering a variety of professional learning opportunities focused on building the capacity of teachers, the NDTSS has created a system of support that begins with those who are on the front line.

**TABLE 1  
COMPARISON OF NDTSS PROGRAM - HISTORICALLY AND CURRENTLY**

	Historical Program	Current Program	Benefits of changes
Mentor teachers	Initial training - 16 hours face to face	Initial training - 16 hours of synchronous and asynchronous online learning	No travel costs Content grouped in smaller sections Self-paced
Beginning teachers	Online course focused on student problem solving	Online course focused on self-care, goal setting and well being	Teachers were given tools and time to practice
Instructional Coaches	Cohort of 40 coaches attend 5 6 days of face to face training	95 coaches attend twelve half day modules online with a cohort of 30 coaches	More participants More facilitators Better attendance

## **Induction Programs**

As professionals, when skills are learned and refined, self-efficacy develops, and effectiveness greatly increases. Along with heightened skill, the ability to observe, respond, and pivot at key moments is polished with experience. However, with teachers new to education, the ability to be flexible in teaching is a learned art and must be nurtured through purposeful support.

Skilled teaching requires experience, self-reflection, and effective mentoring. Factors including inexperience, perceived lack of support, low job satisfaction, compassion fatigue, and high levels of stress directly impact the health, well-being, and effectiveness of a teacher. Moreover, when teachers are not encouraged to work toward a work-life balance, the effects spill over into student well-being and achievement (Harmsen, Helms, Maulana, & Veen, 2019; Lever, Mathis, & Mayworm, 2017; Manning & Jeon, 2020; Miller, & Flint-Stipp, 2019). Districts and schools offering induction programming support new teachers and moderate the effects of new teacher stress; particularly in the pandemic era, induction support targeting self-care, personal and professional life balance, productive collaboration, self-reflection, and the practice of mindfulness are predicted to greatly improve outcomes of new teacher support programs (Harmsen et al., 2019, Manning & Jeon, 2020).

The first year in the classroom for new teachers is exhilarating, chaotic, exhausting, rewarding, and, hopefully, affirming. However, the fluctuating highs and lows of the first year have been widely documented. For instance, Ellen Moir's *Phases of a First-Year Teacher* presents a graphic explaining the different phases teachers encounter over the school year; the phases are anticipation, survival, disillusionment, rejuvenation, reflection, and anticipation (New Teacher Center, 2016). Referencing these phases throughout the school year helps mentors, administrators, and induction program facilitators to better address the specific needs of new teachers and anticipate upcoming hurdles. Although recognized as a tool for new teachers, the phases likewise represent most teachers during the normal school year as they embark on new responsibilities.

The NDTSS relies on theory, research, feedback, and experience to design and implement an induction program targeting current needs of teachers, reinforcing continuous improvement practices through conferencing, building capacity, and empowering teachers to be self-reflective and inquiry driven. Although priority is placed on the mentoring relationship, the NDTSS offers additional and supplemental support for new teachers.

In North Dakota, the number of first-year teachers is estimated to be 519 with an average of 264 new teachers enrolled in the state mentoring program during each school year (NDTSS, 2020). Lack of comprehensive funding has limited the number of teachers who the program can service each year, resulting in reaching program capacity often by early August. In addition, some new teachers are not enrolled in the program due to mentor teacher shortage in the area of their school or other perceived roadblocks such as misunderstanding of the opportunities with NDTSS.

To explore program outcomes and progress toward achievement, the NDTSS annually conducts a teacher retention study. The study population includes teachers new to the classroom and completes a comparative analysis among teachers who participate in the NDTSS mentoring program during the first year of teaching to teachers who do not. Over a five-year study, teachers who were mentored in the Teacher Support System were retained at approximately 11% higher rate than teachers who were not enrolled in the support system (NDTSS, 2020). The difference in retention rate between NDTSS participants and non-participants reveals the importance of mentoring and support for new teachers to remain in the field of education over a length of time.

## **Differentiated Models for Professional Learning**

### *First-Year Teacher Model*

The NDTSS collaborates with school districts, administrators, instructional coaches, mentor teachers, and regional education associations (REA) to provide new teachers with comprehensive induction programming. Induction programs include teacher networks, professional development opportunities, observation rounds, video clubs, and mentorship. The NDTSS offers multiple strategies to equip teachers to face the challenges of being new to the classroom.

As previously explained, a structured induction program is crucial in providing support for new teachers and studies suggest comprehensive programs assist in retaining teachers. The bedrock of an induction program is the mentoring relationship. The first-year teacher spends a minimum of 30 hours during their initial year of teaching conferencing with their mentor teacher using a continuous improvement framework. In addition to conferencing, new teachers are required to be observed and observe other teachers throughout the year. The mentoring experience is documented to demonstrate growth and progress toward short- and long-term goals.

Along with mentorship, the NDTSS offers an online first-year teacher course focusing on topics applicable to new teachers. Historically, the course followed a traditional model and emphasized purposeful reflection on experience and individual students. Over the past years, the course has become more responsive and fluid to the changing needs of teachers. In fall 2020, in response to the turmoil resulting from the COVID pandemic, the course was redesigned to support the social and emotional health and well-being of new teachers. The NDTSS collaborated with a local health and wellness expert to develop online modules and live webinar sessions to target the needs of new teachers. Self-care, maintaining healthy eating habits, mindfulness, meditation, stress management, and physical activity were all topics discussed during live meeting sessions and online activities.

The pilot course has provided new teachers with a safe place to ask questions, practice mindfulness techniques, and be reminded of the impact of teacher wellness on student achievement. Feedback from participants in the course suggested that they are utilizing calming strategies into their daily routine, practicing mindfulness when faced with stress, incorporating breathing techniques into classroom transitions, learning to embed physical movement into instruction, and working on improving good eating habits. One teacher wrote, “I have been using 5 minutes mindfulness check-ins with my students... 98% of them said they appreciated the daily check-ins!”. Others mentioned, “the busyness of the day makes it difficult to sit down and relax” and “I think I need to get over the mindset that it isn't selfish to focus on self-care but needed so I can help others”. The feedback has affirmed that the focus on teacher health and wellness has been much needed and appreciated.

Additionally, and in response to feedback from new teachers in the program, the NDTSS recognized the need for more opportunities to explore other topics of interest. “Genius Hour” sessions were created to address these specific topics and provide a place for teachers to problem-solve challenges. Session themes include technology tips and tricks, mindfulness in teaching, classroom management, educational ethics, and a conversation with administrators.

### **Beginning Teacher Networks**

As a local support for new teachers, the NDTSS offers Beginning Teacher Network (BTN) Grants to school districts and REAs. Grant candidates submit proposals with ideas for BTNs and are reviewed by the NDTSS team. Proposals are accepted based on number of participants, strategies being utilized, and degree at which support is needed in the region. Book studies, observation rounds, area networking, coaching, regular meetings, and guest speakers can all be included in the funding for the BTN grant.

The NDTSS strives to offer relevant and meaningful support to all new teachers in the state through a structured mentoring program, new teacher course, and BTNs. However, there are opportunities to grow in support and improve outreach of the program. Growth goals for supporting new teachers are noted in the implications for the future section of this article.

### *Mentor Teacher Model*

Key players in the support of new teachers include mentor teachers and instructional coaches. Mentor teachers are chosen by the building administrator. The NDTSS supports this decision with resources for administrators to reflect upon, including guidelines for selection of mentors, qualities that lead to successful mentoring and a job description of a mentor teacher. Selection of a mentor teacher is an essential part of the process and requires careful consideration on the part of the administrator.

Once a mentor is chosen, the mentor and first year teacher are enrolled into the program. The enrollment signals the type of training required by the NDTSS. New mentors are required to complete the equivalent



of fifteen hours of training. This training has taken place face to face across the state over the course of two days. However, COVID 19 made this type of training impossible and the training model pivoted from face to face to online with a combination of both synchronous and asynchronous learning offered in four modules and three online meetings to practice and learn the requirements and skills necessary to mentor. Mentors who have mentored before are considered Repeat Mentors, their training consists of four webinars offered over the course of the year. Repeat mentors and new mentors choose a webinar series that fits their specific professional learning needs. The topics discussed in these webinars includes, but is not limited to feedback, observation, building relationships, trust, Universal Design for Learning and coaching for diverse learners.

Mentors in the NDTSS are required to engage in professional learning of their choice throughout the year. The intent of these opportunities includes a chance to learn new tools and techniques to support their ability to mentor effectively as well as allow mentors an opportunity to network with mentors from across the state to practice and problem solve. The topics explored in the webinars build upon themselves over the course of the year. The progression allows mentors to become more comfortable with the format, content, and group members. This level of comfort creates a learning environment where mentors can be vulnerable when discussing challenges while benefiting from the collective experience of the larger group.

Over the course of the past twelve years, it has been critical to shift the professional learning offered to mentor teachers. Each year, mentor teachers gain insight and perspective which leads to deeper questions and increased curiosity. A growing group of mentors who have mentored three or more first year teachers, are considered Advanced Mentors. This group provides an additional challenge in how to support and push their learning. What is focused on is what grows, and it is through this understanding the NDTSS works to offer relevant and requested training on topics based on mentor feedback.

#### *Coaches Academy Model*

Instructional Coaches also play a vital role in the support of teachers. In an effort to create a foundational understanding of instructional coaching amongst districts across the state, the NDTSS offers a Coaches Academy for newly hired coaches. The Coaches Academy offers 48 hours of training and networking for coaches through Learning Forward. This training has historically taken place face to face over six days. The COVID 19 pandemic allowed the NDTSS an opportunity to host the Coaches Academy online through 12 four-hour sessions (see Table 1).

Although the learning model changed significantly, the needs of beginning coaches remained familiar. Coaches benefit greatly from an opportunity to understand their roles as change agents in their schools and practice the skills that will ensure their work directly impacts teachers and students. The transition to an online Coaches Academy allowed NDTSS twice as many coaches as the face to face model. Instead of being out of their buildings and traveling to the training, they were able to join groups more easily via zoom video conferencing. Cost that had been used to reimburse mileage and meals was shifted into allowing more applicants of the Coaches Academy to receive the training.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE**

The blended learning framework implemented by the NDTSS is continually evaluated, assessed for effectiveness, revised for relevancy, and improved through a feedback cycle. For each professional learning opportunity offered by the NDTSS, qualitative and quantitative data are collected, analyzed, and utilized to inform future projects. The goal is for the learning experiences to address current needs and relevant topics for the educators in the state. By seeking feedback from program constituents, the NDTSS continues to revise and respond to the needs of program participants in real-time. These principles as well as andragogical theories and principles inform future program revisions and implementation.

#### **A Balance for Beginning Teachers**

An area of growth emerged over the course of the pandemic-era concerning the needs of beginning teachers. In past years, the support for these teachers has been focused on specific classroom and instructional needs. Albeit critical in developing effective teachers, fostering a culture of care, safety, and

positivity directly impacts teacher satisfaction. Consequently, teacher satisfaction and professional enjoyment leads to increased commitment with purpose, better health and wellness (of the teacher and the classroom community), and feelings of success.

As previously noted, the focus on the social emotional wellness of new teachers within the course has elicited positive feedback and fostered positive connections throughout the state's cohort of new teachers. In future years, balancing the social emotional aspect of new teacher mentorship and support will be on the forefront of planning and implementation. However, more importantly will be to assess the needs of the new teachers and respond accordingly through the school year. Although a framework for the course will be presented early in the year, revisions will be made as necessary.

### **The Future of the Mentoring Program**

As the Mentoring Program continues to address the changing needs of educators, it will be important to continue differentiating the professional learning needs of mentors. There are a few key areas warranting prioritized attention: special education, school counseling, and alternative licensure. These three groups of beginning teachers are faced with unique challenges which are therefore in need of a customized approach. These changes are in their beginning phases as the NDTSS works to collaborate with experts in these fields to more fully understand the needs and how to best address these needs. The NDTSS Mentoring Program is also considering what a second year of mentoring would entail. Currently, the NDTSS is able to offer mentoring to teachers in their first year as a teacher; however, building a relationship is key to mentoring, and relationships typically take six or more months to build. Once a relationship is built, the mentoring can begin to go more deeply into challenges experienced by the beginning teacher. This type of program is people-driven as it emphasizes both teacher and mentor growth (Southern Regional Education Board, 2018).

### **The New Coaches Academy**

As a result of the feedback received from the Coaches Academy, NDTSS is exploring ideas to include a session for administrators to attend with their coach to prepare for the beginning of the school year. It was also clear from the feedback that coaches were interested in additional opportunities to continue their learning. A coaching laboratory may be offered in the future to allow coaches a chance to practice the art and science of coaching through a lab environment. Creating this type of environment for coaches will allow them to self-assess their strengths and areas for growth, refine their coaching skills and focus on a particular area in which they need or want feedback.

Early decision-making about how the professional development would be offered helped alleviate stress for mentors, coaches, and program staff. Even when things were uncertain, participants knew what to expect from the NDTSS trainings. There was no need to cancel face to face meetings and all sessions were recorded for those who had personal roadblocks hindering their ability to engage. The big pivot that was made early in the program year, made it easier to make smaller pivots down the road. If decisions were not made early or changed back and forth, a sense of chaos would have been felt making it much more difficult to be motivated, focused, and invested.

## **SUMMARY**

Although the pandemic presented an abundance of obstacles for teachers, it also united a community of educators who are better-focused and determined to grow educational practices that have long been in need of revision. In North Dakota, the effects of the pandemic have been felt widespread. Rural schools have struggled with keeping up with technology demands and engaging students who are learning from a distance. Other communities have been devastated by health concerns and grief. Larger school districts have worked tirelessly to keep students in schools and learning maintained. Each community has persevered through the unique hardships caused by the pandemic.

When health concerns arose worldwide in March 2020, the NDTSS recognized that teachers would need a different support system for the following school year. Leaning on the established blended learning

model, the NDTSS and Iridium Learning worked together to develop a plan for training, facilitating, and supporting teachers across the state. The goal was to build on what had been implemented in the past while introducing new skills like attending virtual trainings, engaging online asynchronous coursework, and experimenting with new technological strategies. Further, incorporating choice, differentiated models, and offering a range of relevant and current topics for professional learning promoted interest and engagement in program participants. Adhering to a structured framework with the allowance of flexibility in skill levels and interest provided educators in the program a perfect blend of meaningful professional development. All these changes were applied with the intent to continue the spirit, connectedness, and professionalism of the program.

Bearing the responsibility for supporting new teachers in North Dakota, the Teacher Support System has worked to respond in real-time to feedback from educators, be proactive in planning for unforeseen challenges, provide learning experiences to new and seasoned educators, and support teachers who are navigating the intricacies of education. Creating an extensive teacher support system requires the investment of mentors, instructional coaches, administrators, and state educational systems to ensure new teachers are equipped with the knowledge and support needed to be successful from the start.

## **CONCLUSION**

The intricacies of teaching span beyond the four walls of the classroom. What happens in the classroom depends wholly on the support and guidance from entrusted educators who work to empower teachers new to the profession. It requires dedication, passion, and thoughtful reflection to turn learned-knowledge into a skilled-practice. However, the hard work sustained during the initial stages of teaching transforms into an indispensable foundation when challenging times arise. The hurdles COVID19 has created will have long term implications; fortunately, many schools and districts have worked tirelessly to pivot and develop scaffolds for teachers, so obstacles have been transformed into opportunities for growth and learning. The skills acquired out of pandemic-necessity will extend and improve the educational systems of the future.

No other tool has contributed more to keeping up the momentum in education as technology, particularly during 2020. Long past are the days when an overhead projector, video recorder, and cassette player suffice the technological needs of the classroom. Expedient demand leads to innovative responsiveness and creativity. Evidence of this has been witnessed in education throughout the pandemic. The responsibility of teachers to continue to meet the needs of students as well as care for loved ones and self has created a burden with the potential to rock the world of education.

Challenging times require educators to nurture and rebuild the structures in education systems that have long withstood the test of time, but this is not a solitary undertaking. Experienced teachers and educational leaders must reflect on current practices to ensure the tasks expected of new teachers are achievable and contribute to the allure of the profession. Educators must work together to make this a reality. The act of pivoting will no longer be a necessity in an extraordinary year, but it will be a constant in the practice of teaching. It is with this promise that educators will relentlessly strive to meet the ever-changing needs of their students and thrive when faced with adversity.

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