

MASE 2026

# Mentoring as a Workforce Retention Strategy

*Framing retention as a systems design issue, not an individual teacher deficit*



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# Session Overview

- Opening + Framing the Problem
- Why Teachers Leave: A Systems View
- Reframing Mentoring: From Support to Strategy
- What Retention-Focused Mentoring Looks Like
- Conditions That Make Mentoring Work
- Application: System Reflection (Interactive)
- Synthesis + Practical Takeaways
- Closing

# Framing the Problem

*Establishing urgency and relevance*



# The Pattern We Cannot Ignore

## Minnesota administrators are navigating:

- Chronic unfilled positions
- Emergency hires as the norm
- Revolving roles in high-need settings
- Loss of institutional knowledge each year

We are not losing  
special educators  
randomly—  
we are losing them  
**predictably.**

**Thesis: Retention is a systems design issue, not an individual teacher deficit.**

**LDA MN context:** Field-based mentoring embedded since 2019 through the ABS pathway - insights grounded in ongoing, real-world work.

# Why Teachers Leave: A Systems View

*Reframing attrition away from individual blame*



# Three Drivers of Early Attrition

## Caseload & Compliance

Intensity of caseloads combined with paperwork burden leaves little time for actual teaching - or recovery.

## Professional Isolation

Early-career teachers in high-need placements often have no peer community or structured support nearby.

## Role Ambiguity & Strain

Unclear expectations, emotional labor, and overlapping responsibilities compound over time without intervention.

**REFRAME:** From "teachers aren't prepared" - to "systems are not structured for early-career sustainability."

# The Equity Dimension

## Attrition is not distributed evenly.

- Instability is concentrated in high-need, under-resourced settings
- Students with disabilities bear the compounding cost of repeated transitions
- The teachers most needed in complex environments are those most at risk of leaving

### QUICK ENGAGEMENT

*"Which of these pressures  
is most acute in your  
setting right now?"*

# Reframing Mentoring: From Support to Strategy

*Elevating mentoring to a system-level lever*



# Two Models of Mentoring

## Traditional

- Episodic - happens when there is time
- Evaluative or compliance-driven
- Mentor as expert assessing novice
- Ends at year one
- Peripheral to the system

VS

## Retention-Focused

- Structured and sustained
- Relational - not evaluative
- Developmental: novice is supported, not assessed
- Multi-year commitment
- Designed into the system as infrastructure

*Administrative lens: This is a system design question, not a question of individual mentor skill.*

# Three Principles of Retention-Focused Mentoring

## Relational

*not Supervisory*

Trust is the foundation.  
Mentors are not evaluators, and teachers need to know the difference.

## Developmental

*not Evaluative*

The goal is growth over time - not performance review. Early-career teachers must feel safe to struggle.

## Sustained

*not Short-Term*

One year is not enough. Retention gains compound with multi-year, structured support.

*Bottom line: This is about system design - what must be built in, not bolted on.*

# What Retention-Focused Mentoring Looks Like

*Making the model concrete and credible*



# Core Practices in Action

**01**

## Regular Reflective Conversations

Structured, scheduled time - not catch-as-catch-can.  
Consistency signals that the teacher matters.

**02**

## Normalizing Early-Career Challenges

Naming the difficulty without shame. Early-career struggle is predictable, not a character flaw.

**03**

## Joint Problem-Solving

Working through complex systems together - IEPs, behavioral supports, family dynamics - rather than the mentor directing.

**04**

## Bridging Preparation to Practice

Connecting what teachers learned in coursework to what they are experiencing in real time.

# A Story from the Field

## First-year ABS teacher. Large, high-needs elementary setting.

Within the first six weeks, she was responsible for a full caseload, managing multiple IEP timelines, and supporting several students with significant behavioral needs. She described feeling like she was "failing at everything" - instruction, compliance, and relationships with colleagues.

### The Mentor's Move:

Instead of offering solutions immediately, the mentor asked her to walk through a typical day. What surfaced was not a lack of skill - it was that she was trying to treat all tasks as equally urgent.

### Urgent

### Not Urgent

### Important

### Do

Tasks with clear deadlines and significant consequences if not completed in a timely fashion.

### Schedule

Tasks with no set deadline but that bring you closer to your long-term goals.

### Not Important

### Delegate

Tasks that need to get done, but don't need your expertise in order to be completed.

### Delete

Tasks that distract you from your preferred course, and don't add any measurable value.

# A Story from the Field - What Changed

They sorted her responsibilities into what was legally required, instructionally critical, and what could wait. Over the next few weeks, they revisited those priorities, practiced boundary-setting with colleagues, and connected coursework strategies to classroom realities.

*"Nothing about her caseload changed. But her interpretation of the work did. By mid-year, she was planning to stay."*

*"What's important here is not the individual mentor - it's the structure that allowed this kind of support to happen."*

*"The question becomes: what must be true in your system for this kind of conversation to occur consistently?"*

*Quick Show of Hands: "How many of you have had a first-year teacher in a situation like this?"*

# Conditions That Make Mentoring Work

*Translating practice into system design*



# Five Conditions for Effective Mentoring Systems

1

## **Separation from Evaluation:**

Mentors must not be evaluators. Without this boundary, trust cannot exist.

2

## **Manageable Mentor Caseloads:**

Effective mentors need time. Overburdening them replicates the problem we are trying to solve.

3

## **Scheduled, Protected Time:**

Mentoring must be built into schedules, not added on. If it is optional, it will not happen consistently.

4

## **Mentor Preparation & Ongoing Support:**

Mentors need training in reflective practice, coaching stances, and navigating ambiguity.

5

## **Commitment Beyond Year One:**

Retention benefits compound over time. One year is the floor, not the ceiling.

*Equity note: Uniform mentoring models fail diverse contexts. Systems must adapt to school culture, language, and community need.*

# Application: System Reflection

*Analyzing our own systems*



# Small Group Discussion

*Take 8 minutes. Find 2-3 people near you. Choose one or two of these prompts:*

**A** **Where does mentoring currently sit in your system?**

*Is it treated as support, compliance, or strategy?*

**B** **What is one structural barrier preventing effective mentoring in your context?**

*Think specifically - not just "time" but what kind of time, and whose.*

**C** **What is one condition you could realistically strengthen in the next year?**

*What would it take? What would have to change?*

# Synthesis + Practical Takeaways

*Consolidating learning into actionable insight*



# What We Know - Three Core Findings

## **Relationships are retention drivers**

Not "soft supports." Relational stability reduces the isolation that drives early attrition.

## **Structure determines effectiveness**

Without protected time, separation from evaluation, and trained mentors, even well-intentioned programs underperform.

## **Systems reduce isolation and ambiguity**

When teachers have clarity about expectations and someone to think through complexity with, they stay.

# Practical Entry Points

*What can you actually do when you go back?*

## **Audit mentoring vs. evaluation boundaries**

Are the roles currently blurred in your system? Name the boundary explicitly.

## **Build protected time into schedules**

Not aspirational time. Actual time. Start with one hour per month if needed.

## **Pilot a non-evaluative mentoring structure**

Even a small pilot creates evidence and builds the case for expansion.

## **Align with preparation partners strategically**

Districts and university preparation programs share the same goal. Formalize the connection.

The question is not whether mentoring matters.

The question is whether we design systems  
where it can *actually work*.

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