

Springfield Public Schools' Effective Educator Coach Program

This research brief examines Springfield Public Schools' Effective Educator Coach (EEC) program. The EEC program is a comprehensive mentoring program in which experienced teachers support new or struggling teachers. The EEC program was studied as part of a larger evaluation of a Massachusetts' Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) grant implemented in the Springfield Public Schools (SPS); SRI International and Abt Associates conducted the study on behalf of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

This brief first describes the local Springfield context, and next describes the EEC program and lessons from the first few years of implementation. It concludes with considerations for other districts that may be interested in implementing similar initiatives.¹

Springfield Public Schools Context

Springfield is the second largest school district in Massachusetts, and its nearly 60 schools serve a diverse population of approximately 27,000 students, including a large proportion of high-poverty, transient, English Language learners, and special needs students. Over the past several years, the district has invested in multiple efforts to improve outcomes for students as well as to address longstanding issues with teacher retention. One such effort was the 2010 federal TIF grant to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, in which SPS participated. In 2011–12, SPS began implementing its EEC program, using resources from the TIF initiative. The EEC program started in the district's 10 TIF schools (all of which were designated as Level 4 schools) before expanding to all schools districtwide in 2013–14.² The program was implemented within a complex constellation of state and district initiatives, including the Massachusetts' Educator Evaluation Framework, itself launched in 2011.³

EEC Program Description

Springfield established the EEC program to help inexperienced (non-Professional Teaching Status) teachers meet the state’s new Standards for Effective Teaching Practice, which were outlined in the state’s 2011 educator evaluation regulations.^{4,5} The EEC program provides experienced and highly qualified SPS teachers with stipends to coach less experienced colleagues, while simultaneously enhancing their own leadership and instructional skills.⁶ School administrators are typically not extensively involved in the district-led program, although they do identify potential EEC candidates. Key features of the EEC program include the following:

- *Coaching activities.* EECs’ core responsibilities are to meet regularly with mentees, observe mentees and provide feedback, share resources, organize professional development, and provide a model demonstration classroom for all teachers.
- *Structure.* Because EECs do not relinquish their full-time classroom teaching responsibilities, coaching activities are intended to occur before and after the regular school day.
- *Training.* Coaches receive mentorship training about how best to support mentees, and in particular, about how to work effectively with other adults.
- *Coach autonomy.* Individual EECs determine the specific content of the coaching (e.g., classroom management, lesson planning), target audience and structure (e.g., small group meetings, one-on-one sessions), and frequency (e.g., weekly, monthly) of the coaching sessions in collaboration with each of their mentees.
- *Connection with educator evaluation.* Although the program is intended to help teachers meet the performance expectations of the state’s evaluation system, EECs do not play an evaluative role nor do they share information from their coaching with mentees’ formal evaluators (typically the principal).

In 2013–14, the district expanded the EEC program beyond the 10 TIF schools to reach all schools districtwide, which led to some programmatic changes. First, the training provided to new coaches was streamlined, reduced from the original combination of 3 in-person days and 15 online modules (provided by the

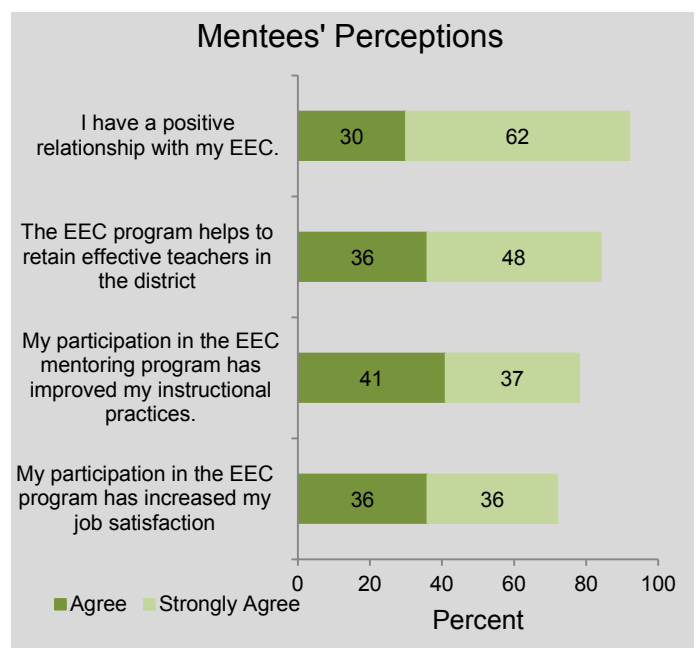
University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth) to five online modules and periodic in-person follow-up meetings. Second, in all SPS schools, the ratio of mentees to EECs increased to an average of 10 mentees per EEC, compared to the previous years’ average of 3 mentees. To help ensure that new EECs received sufficient support, the district also launched a train-the-trainer model, in which experienced EECs were trained to be “group leads,” responsible for supporting new EECs over the course of the school year.

Perceived Benefits of the EEC Program

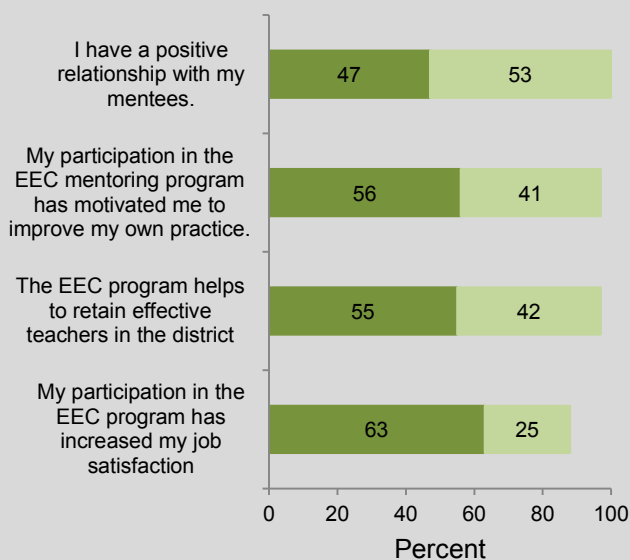
The research team conducted interviews and a survey of EECs and mentees to learn about their experiences with and perceptions of the program.⁷ Overall, participants reported positive assessments of the EEC program.

EECs and mentees agreed that the EEC program facilitated positive relationships among participants, increased their overall job satisfaction and morale, supported instructional improvement among mentees and EECs, and helped to retain effective educators in the district (Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1. Educators’ Perceptions of EEC Program Benefits



EECs' Perceptions



Notes:

Number of total mentee respondents: Ns range from 73 to 75.

Number of total EEC respondents: Ns range from 31 to 32.

Source: EEC and Mentee Surveys, Fall 2014

Survey Question: Please rate your agreement with the following statements. (Select one response)

The large majority of surveyed mentees reported that their participation in the EEC program had improved their instructional practice and helped to retain effective educators in the district. Interviewees corroborated survey findings; mentees described support from EECs as critical to surviving and excelling during their first few years of teaching. For example, one mentee observed, “If they [the EECs] weren’t here, I don’t know if I would be sitting here. They’ve pulled me through a couple of really, really rough days. This program has been my salvation as far as keeping me going. I think it’s wonderful.” Interviewed mentees described specific strategies EECs had shared for immediate use in their classrooms. For example, in a meeting focused on communication with parents, one mentee’s EEC brought letter templates for him to customize and send to parents. The EEC modeled what to write in one letter and the mentee then wrote individualized letters.

The EECs also reported overwhelmingly positive perceptions about the program’s effect on instruction and job satisfaction. For example, interviews indicated that the program also motivated EECs to improve their own practice. One EEC interviewee remarked that, “It [the

EEC program] helped me become a better teacher...this program helped me say, this is something I need to go back and do.” EECs linked their increased professional satisfaction to their additional responsibilities as mentors with purposeful and structured (rather than informal and ad hoc) opportunities to support less experienced colleagues.

Overall perceptions of the program were positive across the district, although EECs and mentees from the schools that had just began to implement the program in 2013–14 (non-TIF schools) were moderately less positive than those that had been implementing for 2 or 3 years (TIF schools).

Implementation Lessons

By studying EEC program implementation over several school years, the research team observed some potentially useful lessons about program implementation, including the following:

The autonomy to determine content, structure, and timing of coaching activities was important to both EECs and mentees. The purposefully broad EEC job description and responsibilities allowed EECs flexibility in how to focus coaching activities on mentees’ individual needs. This autonomy often resulted in EECs and mentees spending time on instructional strategies for particular content areas and on other skills identified as important for the mentees to succeed (e.g., classroom management).

Interviewed EECs illustrated how they draw upon mentees’ requests for support and their own professional judgment to determine coaching topics. As one EEC summarized: “I looked at areas [where I thought they needed help] and asked them what areas they needed help with.” She explained that her two mentees requested feedback on interactions with students, so she conducted observations and provided feedback. The EEC then suggested to mentees that they survey their students to understand how they perceived their teachers. Mentees found the suggestion, and the resulting data, to be informative for their practice.

In addition, educators reported that the intentional separation of the EEC role from educator evaluation increased trust and comfort among EECs and mentees, which strengthened their relationships.

Expanding the program to serve all schools districtwide meant changes to the program's structure, which in turn led to challenges with coaches' capacity. Specifically, the streamlined training for EECs meant that the newest EECs received less intensive training. The increase in EECs' average number of mentees from 3 to 10 also introduced more demands on their time. These adaptations may have contributed to variation in experiences and perceptions across the schools with more experience with the program (TIF schools) and the district's other (non-TIF) schools.

Principal involvement in the program varied across schools, from schools whose principals' roles were primarily to identify potential EECs to schools whose principals were actively engaged in EEC-related activities and decisions throughout the school year. Although the district did not expect principals to participate in program operations, some principals made school-specific adaptations; one principal accommodated EECs' schedules so they could provide coaching during the day, for example. EECs and mentees in this school reported that they developed close working relationships with one another and described coaching that was targeted to teachers' individual needs in real time, since coaches were able to work with mentees in their own classrooms.

Several principals reported that they were interested in more formal involvement in EEC program implementation and training because they believed they could then better support their participating teachers and integrate the program activities into other school and district initiatives.

Notes

¹ The information presented in this brief is based on interviews with SPS district administrators, school leaders, and teachers, and a survey of EECs and the teachers for whom they provide coaching, called mentees. The findings from our study do not necessarily reflect the views of the district.

² Level 4 schools are designated as such by the state, based on an analysis of four-year trends in absolute achievement, student growth, and improvement trends as measured by MCAS. In January 2010, landmark education reform legislation was enacted to intervene in these schools. Level 4 schools are allowed flexibilities to accelerate student achievement and are given priority to receive ESE targeted assistance.

³ These initiatives included substantial School Redesign Grants in Massachusetts for Level 4 schools, which provided schools funds from Race to the Top and Turnaround Initiatives, other state supports and technical assistance from ESE's Center for Targeted Assistance. In 2012–13, all Massachusetts districts began implementation of new content standards (Common Core State Standards) and the state's Rethinking Equity and Teaching for English Language Learners (RETELL) initiative, which focused on improving the quality of instruction for English language learners.

⁴ Source: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/lawsregs/603cmr35.html?section=03>

⁵ Mentees are non-Professional Teaching Status (non-PTS) teachers, teachers who are new to the district or school, and/or teachers who need additional support.

⁶ Experienced educators are eligible to apply for EEC positions only if they meet multiple criteria, including having received an Exemplary or Proficient evaluation and strong interpersonal skills. Additional information about selection criteria is available from SPS upon request.

⁷ Findings in this brief are based on survey and interview data collected in October and November 2014. The research team administered a survey to 40 EECs and 103 mentees and interviewed 34 individuals, including district administrators, school administrators, and school staff.

Key Considerations

The insights gained about the EEC program may be useful for other districts interested in learning about a coaching program. The following may be important considerations for other districts during the development stage.

- *Determine a realistic caseload of mentees and supports for coaches.* The specific elements to consider include the number of mentees to which coaches are assigned, the amount and intensity of training, whether coaching will occur during the regular school day—and if so, how coaches who are also classroom teachers can manage both their teaching and coaching responsibilities.
- *Assess whether and how principals or other administrators should participate* in planning and implementing the coaching program. Requiring principal involvement as early as the program planning stage may help ensure that the program is adapted to each school's context, and is integrated with other building-level supports and resources.
- *Build potential expansion into resource allocations* to ensure that adequate resources will be available to support training and stipends for additional cohorts of coaches.

ESE developed resources based on district experiences, including a document with concrete suggestions for how to fund this type of program. See <http://www.doe.mass.edu/eval/leadership/CreateSustainRoles.pdf>

Suggested Citation: Checkoway, A., Comstock, M., Harless, E., Gallagher, H.A., and Gamse, B.C. (2015). Springfield Public Schools' Effective Educator Coach Program. Menlo Park: SRI International in partnership with Abt Associates.