

# **INTC Data Brief: 2011 Beginning Teacher Conference**

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This Data Brief reports on data collected at the 2011 Beginning Teacher Conference (BTC). INTC staff conducted two focus group discussions in which eight people participated. INTC also asked BTC participants to complete a survey about questions pertaining to their teacher preparation program and their experiences during their first year teaching. Seventy-seven participants completed the survey. This Data Brief includes implications of the data collected during the focus group discussion and the survey.

Tables and graphs of raw data appear in the Appendix, which is a separate document. References to individual tables are provided in parenthesis in the text below. A detailed methodology section can also be found in the Appendix.

## **OVERVIEW OF DATA AND ORGANIZATION OF DATA BRIEF**

This report is organized into the following sections:

- Section 1: Closed-Ended Survey Data
- Section 2: Open-Ended Survey Data
- Section 3: Focus Group Data
- Section 4: Discussion

The survey contained a combination of closed and open-ended questions, all geared towards explicating the first-year teachers' experiences. The first section of this brief addresses the data from the closed-ended questions and the second section focuses on the data from the open-ended questions.

## **SECTION 1: CLOSED-ENDED SURVEY DATA**

**Job Satisfaction.** Of the 77 survey respondents, 81% indicated that they were very satisfied with their decision to become a teacher, 18% responded they were satisfied, and 1% felt neutral or had no opinion. None of the participants indicated dissatisfaction with their career choice (Appendix Graph 2.1). When asked where they saw themselves in five years, 46% said they hoped to be still teaching in the same position, 42% saw themselves still teaching but in a new school or a different level/content area, 7% saw themselves still in education but in a different role (administrator, professor, counselor, etc.), 4% planned to stay home with family but with plans to return to education, and 3% felt that they would no longer be in education (Appendix Graph 2.2).

**Novice Teacher Supports.** Most participants reported having a formal or informal mentor in their first year. Five percent of the participants indicated that they had no mentor at all and were "on their own" (Appendix Graph 2.3).

The participants were asked to think about the mentoring or other coaching support that they received during the previous year. They were asked to indicate how often their mentor/coach engaged them in each activity and to rate the value of each activity. The mean value rating for those activities that occurred on a weekly or monthly basis consistently ranked between moderately and

extremely valuable, suggesting that the more often a teacher engaged in an activity, the more they perceived the activity as being highly valuable.

When asked about other services and supports received in their first year, only 25 of the 77 teachers reported being given release time to see other teachers teach a few times or more, but this was considered “extremely valuable” or “moderately valuable” by those who were able to do so. Participants also indicated benefiting from opportunities to network with teachers outside of their school and from new teacher meetings with their principal. The mean value rating for those services and supports those teachers reported taking place on a weekly basis was “extremely valuable” (Appendix Table 2.5).

**School Context.** In one survey question, teachers were asked to quantify their agreement (never, rarely, sometimes, often) with six statements regarding their school context. The statements addressed their colleagues (both teachers and administrators), available resources, parental support, and feelings of isolation. Nearly 98% of respondents felt that the teachers in their school were personally supportive and friendly “sometimes” or “often.” Eighty-six percent reported other teachers sharing resources and instructional strategies frequently; 86% reported feeling that their administrators were usually approachable and supportive; 87% felt they had adequate resources to do a good job; 94% found the parents with whom they interacted to be supportive; and 71% felt that they “rarely” or “never” felt isolated in their classroom (Appendix Table 2.7).

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
Teachers were personally supportive and friendly.	2 (3%)	0 (0%)	16 (21%)	59 (77%)
Teachers (besides my mentor) shared resources and instructional strategies.	2 (3%)	9 (12%)	19 (25%)	47 (61%)
Administrators (e.g. principal, dept. head) were approachable and supportive.	2 (3%)	9 (12%)	13 (17%)	53 (69%)
I had adequate resources (e.g. books, manipulatives, etc.) to do a really good job.	4 (5%)	6 (8%)	23 (30%)	44 (57%)
The parents with whom I interacted were supportive.	0 (0%)	5 (6%)	32 (42%)	40 (52%)
I felt isolated in my classroom.	34 (44%)	21 (27%)	15 (19%)	7 (9%)

**Improvement.** Respondents were asked to identify which three areas needed the most improvement during their first year teaching from a list of sixteen options. The top five responses were:

1. Using data to plan instruction (36%)
2. Creating a positive learning environment (incl. classroom management) (34%)
3. Working with students with Individualized Education Plans (31%)
4. Using differentiated instructional strategies (30%) and
5. Contributing to district or building-level decision-making (23%)

The least chosen areas were:

1. Making choices inside and outside of school that reflect positively on the teaching profession (1%)
2. Reflecting upon my own teaching practices (10%), Using strategies for interacting with administrators (10%)
3. Designing lessons that will meet the needs of students from diverse backgrounds (12%)
4. Working with English Language Learners (13%) and
5. Teaching subject matter (13%)

This could indicate that the teachers felt most confident in these areas, though it could also be that the teachers did not feel these applied to their particular context or that they were not as critical as the other areas (Appendix table 2.8).

Respondents were also asked to identify which three areas they most wanted to improve as teachers during their second year of teaching from a list of sixteen options. The top five responses were:

1. Using differentiated instructional strategies (43%)
2. Creating a positive learning environment (incl. classroom management) (39%)
3. Using data to plan instruction (36%)
4. Using various instructional techniques (27%) and
5. Working with students with Individualized Education Plans (22%)

The least chosen areas were:

1. Making choices inside and outside of school that reflect positively on the teaching profession (3%)
2. Working with English Language Learners (7%)
3. Reflecting upon my own teaching practice (9%)
4. Using textbooks or other curricular materials (10%) and
5. Using strategies for interacting with colleagues and staff (10%) (Appendix table 2.8).

## **SECTION 2: OPEN-ENDED SURVEY DATA**

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Open-ended survey questions asked teachers to explain the positive elements of their first year experience, the limitations or weaknesses of their first year experience, and what they felt they needed the most in order to be successful in year two.

**Support Needs in Year Two.** Participants were asked, “What do you feel you need the most in order to be successful in year two?” Many responses were consistent with areas in which they felt they needed the most improvement: help with learning and implementing differentiation strategies, more training on optimizing learning experiences for special education students, training on how to use data to better differentiate instruction, and improved classroom management skills. Others were consistent with addressing challenges they experienced in year one: more planning time/time to reflect on practice, additional resources (classroom-based, like textbooks, as well as curriculum-based) and help finding them, improved time management and organizational strategies, improved communication and collaboration between staff members, and a supportive school environment. Most responses also included a general need to improve their instructional practices and gain more confidence in their professional abilities.

**Positive Elements of Year One.** Participants were asked to describe the positive elements of their first year experiences. The response themes most related to: feeling support from staff and/or parents, seeing student progress, relationships built with students and other staff members, professional learning and growth, general comments related to students, and the teachers’ mentoring program. The element most cited by respondents (71%) was support received from colleagues, including mentors, administrators, and other teachers.

**Limitations or Weaknesses of Year One.** Participants were asked to describe the limitations or weaknesses of their first year experiences. The response themes most related to: limited time/resources, lack of support, bureaucracy/politics, lack of/inaccessibility of mentor, classroom management, grading, diversity of student needs, poor staff communication, special education, dealing with difficult students, and issues related to school climate. For this question, there was no individual theme that emerged over and above the rest; responses varied but generally fell into the themes listed above.

### **SECTION 3: FOCUS GROUP DATA**

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There were two focus groups, each consisting of four participants. The purpose of the focus groups was to find out more about the experiences of the first-year teachers and to see how their experiences confirmed or contradicted the survey data. A list of the focus group questions can be found in the methodology section of the Appendix.

**Anticipation.** Focus group participants were asked to think back to before the school year started and identify what they were feeling, fearing, and/or experiencing excitement about. Both groups spoke about a general anxiety not knowing fully what to expect in their first year, and more specifically described anxiety over feeling like they needed to know what they were doing before the school year started. One group elaborated on this for most of their discussion, talking about being fearful of “teaching the curriculum correctly,” not fitting in with the staff, and having a “baptism by fire” in trying to figure out everyday things like the bell schedule. This group also noted that they were generally excited to be finally teaching. Individuals in the other group were focused on fears related to setting up the school year (i.e. lesson planning, setting up their classrooms, etc.), and one teacher noted being surprised to find that she had no classroom.

**Change.** In the focus groups, teachers were also asked about changes that have occurred since the start of school and who, if anyone, influenced that change. One group did not specify particular changes but reported a general improvement in practice. The entire group credited this improvement to their co-teachers and/or mentor teachers. The other group had more individualized responses; half the group noted that they “learned how to teach,” a change they credited to their students. In fact, this group credited their students as being the main agent for all of their changes. These changes included an increase in time spent advocating for students, notice of the importance of teaching social skills, and recognizing how students develop compensatory skills for their lack of achievement.

**Surprising Experiences.** Participants were asked what surprised them the most about their first year teaching. Nearly all of the participants in one group remarked on the following: the lack of a set curriculum (or availability of one), the low expectations held for students by school staff, and the lack of consequences for student behavior/lax detention policies. In the other group, the conversation was less cohesive, with comments idiosyncratic to individual districts (i.e. one teacher spoke of their district undergoing a lawsuit) or individual teachers. However, there was general agreement regarding feeling pressure to improve students’ test performance and the amount of bureaucracy encountered with the system. Teachers in both groups spoke about how empowered they felt as teachers, noted that the first year was easier than they expected and were pleasantly surprised by the fact that they did not feel looked down on for being a first-year teacher.

**External Challenges.** During the focus groups, participants were asked to identify challenges teachers face due to external pressures (schools in general, society, and the public). Many participants reported feeling that teachers are depicted in society as lazy, and that there is an overarching lack of respect for them as professionals. As a result, they feel increased pressure to

“prove themselves” to parents who do not have a realistic view of what their job entails. Relatedly, many cited society’s lack of understanding of the additional non-teaching demands of the profession as a challenge. Some reported feeling like they were “asked to be a mom more than a teacher,” and most spoke of feeling pressure to provide for their students financially (supplies, rewards, classroom resources, etc.).

## **SECTION 4: DISCUSSION**

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The data above allow us to make some summary statements about the experiences of first-year teachers and, consequently, possible needs and supports for beginning teachers.

**Support and School Climate are Pivotal.** With the exception of a few survey questions, participants were not directly asked about the climate of their building. However, in the open-ended survey questions asking them to identify challenges and positive experiences and in the focus group conversations, school climate was a consistent theme that was discussed by the research participants. For some, it was a hindrance to their development as teachers: “The other teachers were brutally mean, often,” “The staff was very hard to work with and unapproachable,” while for others, it was pivotal to their growth: “The other teachers were always very kind to me and always treated me like I was part of the family, which I think is why I like my school so much, because I felt like I had joined a little family,” “I felt supported, encouraged, and cared for the whole year and grew tremendously as a professional.” Regardless of whether it hurt or helped them, school climate was clearly a pivotal factor in their experience as a first-year teacher.

During both focus groups, the teachers highlighted the importance of support in their first-year experiences. The teachers all entered the school year with fears and anxieties related to their performance. They worried they would be expected to be “experts” from day one and be expected to have a firm grasp on everything from classroom management to their curricula prior to the students’ arrival. Though they learned as time progressed that this was not the expectation, they still felt pressures related to testing, school morale, parents, procuring resources, classroom management, etc., all the while trying to *learn* their job. They spoke about how pivotal mentors and other staff members are in helping them in navigating it all. These feelings were consistent with what was revealed in the open-ended survey responses; the teachers stressed the need for an ongoing support system in getting through their first and second years in the profession.

**Mentors Can Help.** Teachers reported relying on their mentors for a variety of supports from morale (i.e. “a safe person to vent to”) to instructional (i.e. providing classroom resources). Comments related to mentors were often non-specific but overwhelmingly positive, with comments like, “The new teacher mentor program was extremely helpful,” and “I received a ton of support from my mentor!” More specific comments by teachers included crediting their mentors with ensuring their classroom success via positive criticism and direct assistance in the classroom: “My mentor and principal gave me positive criticism and feedback to help me become a stronger teacher.” Others touted the affective benefits of their mentoring experience, including offering emotional support and encouragement: “My mentor helped me tremendously and her and I [sic] worked very closely to ensure success.” The teachers with mentors felt included in a support community where they felt safe asking for help. Teachers without mentors or with mentors in other departments reported feeling especially overwhelmed during the first weeks of school.

### **Beginning Teachers Need Support Related to Classroom and Time Management.**

Throughout focus group and survey responses, teachers mentioned struggling with both time and classroom management. Many complained about losing prep time during the day, resulting in the

need to stay after school to complete their tasks. They conveyed frustration with the amount of time spent working outside of school, feeling “exhausted” and “no time for life outside of school.” Participants also consistently mentioned classroom management as an area for needed improvement in year two. More specific responses regarding classroom management needs included behavior management strategies, classroom procedures, and instructional student-level concerns varying from how to differentiate instruction to feeling the need for more training on special education and Response to Intervention approaches.

**Suggestions and Further Research.** The data from this brief emphasizes the importance of mentors on the experiences of new teachers as well as the importance of a positive school culture. Many beginning teachers felt their coworkers were supportive and friendly, yet several still reported feeling isolated in their classrooms. This may suggest that teachers need deeper staff interactions than exchange of materials. New teachers who had the opportunity to spend time with their mentors addressing their instructional practices (i.e. analyzing student data, lesson planning, lesson observation, etc.) found it to be extremely valuable, but many reported never experiencing these activities. Such activities may improve beginning teachers’ feelings of isolation by providing a collaborative atmosphere in which they feel that their classroom activities are not solely based on their own knowledge, training, and experience. This can be particularly helpful at the start of the school year, when many beginning teachers reported feeling the most pressure and stress. Induction programs should keep this in mind when planning new teacher experiences and set aside time for new teachers to collaborate with their mentor in specific and meaningful ways. Additionally, when possible, release time should be given so that beginning teachers can observe their mentors teach and vice-versa.

More research should be done linking these ideas: How can/do mentors help new teachers navigate the culture of the school? How does a new teacher’s interaction with his or her mentor affect how he or she views the climate of the school? How does the climate of the school affect a new teacher’s job satisfaction and self-efficacy? Is there a difference in how new teachers experience culture in different types of schools/districts (i.e. small vs large, rural vs. suburban, etc.)? The data also highlight the need for more research on school culture impacting new teacher experience and how it can be improved.