

Cooperating Teachers' Best Practices for Mentoring #5: Implementation and Adoption of a Cooperating Teacher Preparation and Support Program¹

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Introduction

This publication series initially targeted secondary agriscience teachers in school-based agricultural education programs (SBAE) who served as cooperating or mentor teachers during the capstone student teaching experience, supporting student teachers' transition into full-time teaching. However, it can also guide program coordinators and others who support cooperating teachers in becoming effective mentors. This final article in the *Best Practices for Mentoring* series provides SBAE university faculty and others who serve as program coordinators of the student teaching internship experience with a step-by-step guideline on implementing a cooperating teacher preparation and support program. The program discussed in this article is similar to the one established within the UF/IFAS Department of Agricultural Education and Communication (Barry, 2019; Barry et al., 2021; Nesbitt et al., 2022). Previous publications in this series provide a real-world approach to mentoring techniques for cooperating teachers to use frequently and consistently during the capstone experience and a brief explanation of the importance of mentoring educators. This publication also provides an overview of the *Best Practices for Mentoring* series in Appendix A.

Benefits of Implementing and Adopting an Established Program

Based on a recent study, the cooperating teacher preparation and support program within the UF/IFAS Department of Agricultural Education and Communication provides a comprehensive model for institutions looking to establish a new support system for cooperating teachers as well as institutions interested in enhancing an existing one (Nesbitt, 2024).

Program coordinators, typically faculty or staff involved in managing teacher preparation initiatives, have implemented the cooperating teacher preparation and support program and emphasized that the program excels in its compatibility with their existing SBAE teacher-preparation programs. Coordinators felt that minimal disruptions occurred and that integrating additional components into their current structure helped them to maximize efficiency for training cooperating teachers in their program. The structured support in the program enables program coordinators to focus more on enhancing the quality of training, thus improving mentor capacity. Adopting this program removed time and most resource barriers involved in designing such a program, allowing program coordinators to focus on

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supporting mentor cooperating teachers before and during the student teaching internship experience (Nesbitt, 2024). This internship is a key phase of teacher preparation and allows student teachers to apply their classroom knowledge in real-world settings under the guidance of a cooperating teacher mentor.

Steps for Implementation

We recommend the steps below for implementing a cooperating teacher preparation and support program.

Step 1: Collect Resources

The 17 best practices for mentoring, discussed in previous articles in this series (Nesbitt & Barry, 2022a; Nesbitt & Barry, 2022b; Nesbitt & Barry, 2022c; Nesbitt & Barry, 2022d), should guide the resources needed to conduct a cooperating teacher preparation and support program. These best practices fall under three overarching themes: social support, professional support, and role modeling. Consider the following resources:

- Clear guide of the responsibilities expected of cooperating teachers with clear guidance on who to communicate with throughout the semester.
- Mentorship manual for cooperating teachers that includes guidance on:
 - What to look for during observation of the student teacher
 - How to give effective feedback
 - Language stems to use when providing feedback
- Reminders throughout the internship of important dates and activities related to supervising the student teacher (i.e., bi-weekly or monthly emails)
- Professional development content related to mentorship to be used in a workshop for preparing mentors and mentees, such as:
 - Opportunities to hear from past cooperating teachers about their internship experiences when serving as mentors
 - Effectively delivering and receiving feedback
 - Navigating conflict
- All forms that need to be completed throughout the internship, such as teaching evaluation or performance forms, to meet the state requirements for your teacher education program. Teachers appreciate it when example forms are given to guide their use of the forms.

Step 2: Create an Online Repository of Resources

We recommended that the cooperating teachers have access to information about their mentoring role in one convenient online repository. These can be housed through university websites, website builders (i.e., Weebly or Wix), or online store drives (i.e., Dropbox, Google Drive, or OneDrive). One example of this type of online repository, created by a university program coordinator, is <http://www.UFCooperatingTeachersSupport.com>.

Step 3: Pair Cooperating Teachers and Student Teachers

Research has acknowledged cooperating teachers who hold the role of mentors during student teaching internships serve in one of the most influential roles in the degree program and are integral to the quality of the student teaching experience (Norris et al., 1990; Roberts, 2006). Mentorship strongly impacts teacher effectiveness, motivation, engagement, satisfaction, and persistence. Studies indicate that mentorship during the early years of teaching plays a crucial role in increasing new teacher retention by addressing teachers' challenges and enhancing their self-efficacy (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

Knowing this, it is important to consider how cooperating teachers and student teachers are paired for this mentorship relationship. From the student teacher's point of view, the cooperating teacher must exhibit qualities of professionalism, effective teaching and instruction in and outside the classroom, and personal characteristics that are nurturing and trustworthy. Cooperating teachers must also want to create a strong working relationship with their student teacher (Roberts, 2006). In a study conducted by Wold et al. (2022), location, similar content, and personality preference were the top three factors for a successful mentorship relationship, as indicated by new teachers and their mentors. Due to the nature of the internship experience, location and similar content are generally the same, leaving personality preference as the top consideration when pairing cooperating teachers and student teachers (Johnson, 2002; Wold et al., 2022). We recommend providing student teachers with ample opportunities to meet potential cooperating teachers before allowing them to submit their preferences. Program coordinators should reflect upon these preferences in the pairing process.

Step 4: Onboarding

Onboarding sessions before professional development provide cooperating teachers and student teachers with an earlier opportunity to establish their mentoring relationship. Additionally, these onboarding sessions give cooperating teachers the ability to view their handbooks and responsibilities to process and generate any questions they may have by the workshop.

Step 5: Mentoring Professional Development Workshop

During the pre-internship professional development, cooperating teachers should receive training on best practices of mentoring, focusing on supporting their student teachers. The cooperating teachers should be introduced to tools such as the cooperating teacher mentorship manual and online repository for support, and they should receive training on how to be effective mentors and how to navigate conflict if it arises. Additionally, we recommend that experienced cooperating teacher/student teacher pairs who successfully navigated internships through regular feedback and reflection be asked to share their experiences. Finally, cooperating teachers should be given one-on-one time to plan with their student teachers, providing guidance on unit plans, lesson planning, and sharing important school/program dates and activities.

Step 6: Frequent Communication and Ongoing Support

Once the internship has begun, support for the cooperating teachers should be continued through frequent communication. This communication should include reminders related to implementing the best practices for mentoring and any upcoming dates and activities that are part of the internship experience. This communication and support can come via email or virtual check-ins. Additionally, virtual group check-ins can be utilized to foster community amongst cooperating teachers, allowing them to support each other based on their experiences and create a sense of connectedness (Nesbitt, 2024).

Implementing a cooperating teacher preparation and support program provides a structured, research-based framework to enhance mentorship in school-based agricultural education. Following the step-by-step guide outlined here, institutions can establish or refine their support systems, ensuring cooperating teachers are well-prepared to guide student teachers through their critical internship experience. This model offers a clear pathway for effective mentoring and addresses common challenges by providing

essential resources, structured onboarding, and continuous support. With these practices in place, cooperating teachers can more effectively foster professional growth, motivation, and retention of future educators, ultimately strengthening agricultural education.

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Appendix A: Best Practices for Mentoring: Cooperating Teacher Series

Cooperating Teachers' Best Practices for Mentoring #1: Supporting Cooperating Teachers

Overview of the role of cooperating teachers as mentors for student teachers during their capstone experience. This publication is intended for SBAE cooperating teachers and those who support cooperating teachers in their role as mentors.

Cooperating Teachers' Best Practices for Mentoring #2: Social Support

An overview of the best practices for mentoring with a focus on social support is provided utilizing specific practices for school-based agricultural education programs.

Cooperating Teachers' Best Practices for Mentoring #3: Professional Support

An overview of the best practices for mentoring with a focus on professional support is provided utilizing specific practices for school-based agricultural education programs.

Cooperating Teachers' Best Practices for Mentoring #4: Role Modeling

An overview of the best practices for mentoring with a focus on role modeling is provided utilizing specific practices for school-based agricultural education programs.

Cooperating Teachers' Best Practices for Mentoring #5: Implementation and Adoption of a Cooperating Teacher Preparation and Support Program

An overview of how to implement and adopt a cooperating teacher support program in a university teacher preparation program.