

# How do school districts mentor new teachers?



What's Happening

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This report provides a snapshot of school district policies for mentoring new teachers in five Regional Educational Laboratory Central states (Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota). State education agencies collected survey data from school districts on who provides mentoring, how time spent mentoring changes after the first year, whether mentors are required to observe mentees, whether mentors are required to receive training, whether districts provide stipends to mentors for their work, and what barriers districts identify to implementing mentoring programs. Respondents from nearly 1,000 school districts, including superintendents and other district administrative leaders, completed the survey during the 2013/14 school year.

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## Why this study?

Studies indicate that a large percentage (40–50 percent) of public school teachers in the United States leave teaching within five years of entering the profession (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Even in the aftermath of the 2008 economic recession, when job opportunities were limited, one study found that such turnover approached 20 percent (Gray, Sohela, & O’Rear, 2015). Turnover represents a tremendous cost to school districts. For instance, the Alliance for Excellent Education (2014) found that teacher attrition in the United States overall (including new and veteran teachers) costs more than \$2 billion a year, at a rate of nearly \$10,000 per teacher who leaves. Major costs associated with attrition include recruiting, hiring, inducting, training, and providing professional development to new teachers (see box 1 for definitions of key terms). High teacher turnover also increases the likelihood that students are taught by less experienced teachers. Research indicates that new teachers, especially in their first two years, are less effective than teachers who have more experience (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2006; Rice, 2010).

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## Box 1. Key terms

**Mentor.** A school district staff member tasked with supporting new teachers. Mentors are distinct from other personnel (such as instructional coaches) who provide support to a broader range of teachers (which might include new teachers).

**Mentoring program.** A program operated by a school district designed to provide support specifically for new teachers.

**New teacher.** A teacher in his or her first year of teaching in a school district.

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How can district and state education leaders improve the instructional practice of new teachers and reduce teacher turnover? National studies indicate that mentoring may be an effective intervention for improving teacher retention and performance (Gray et al., 2015; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Research also indicates that mentoring new teachers for at least two years can positively affect student academic gains (Glazerman et al., 2010; Strong, 2006).

But education and policy leaders often lack good information about the types of supports that school districts are providing to new teachers, particularly information on district mentoring programs and policies. Without a systematic way of understanding current district mentoring policy, these leaders cannot make informed decisions about state or district policy changes to explore. This report seeks to address this gap in understanding.

For instance, education leaders seeking to reduce attrition among new teachers across districts may wish to compare existing policies with promising practices identified in research, such as providing two years of mentoring or stipends and release time for mentors. Findings from this report can identify where gaps in current policy exist, which in turn can reveal high-priority areas to explore for policy change. Because this report features data for five states, the findings can also be used to identify topics for conversations across states on potential state-level policy changes and can help state leaders learn from each other about potential policy improvements.

Members of the Regional Educational Laboratory (REL) Central Teacher Mentoring Workgroup of the Educator Effectiveness Research Alliance identified the need for specific types of data on district mentoring programs. Leaders of five state education agencies—in Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota—partnered with REL Central to administer surveys to gather these data from district leaders to inform decisions in their jurisdictions.

State policies with regard to mentoring vary across these five REL Central states. For instance, Missouri is alone among them in requiring that school districts provide mentoring to new teachers for two years, that mentors have a minimum amount of experience as educators, that mentors receive training, that mentees are observed, and that mentors receive release time.<sup>1</sup> Kansas moved to require districts to have mentoring and induction plans in place for the start of the 2015/16 school year. Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota do not mandate that mentoring be provided but offer a variety of guidelines or supports that districts may use to support mentoring. Educator Effectiveness Research Alliance members indicate that across all five states specific funding either is not provided by states to support mentoring programs or has been substantially reduced or eliminated in recent years.

Regardless of each state's individual policy approach to mentoring, education leaders across the five states agree that they lack accurate data that describe current programs and policies in use across districts.

Instead, existing information is largely anecdotal and neither documents the policies, practices, resources, and costs associated with operating mentoring programs nor details key barriers to program implementation as perceived by district leaders. The district surveys that are the focus of this report were designed to gather data to close these information gaps.

### **What the study examined**

This report provides a snapshot of school district programs and policies for mentoring new teachers in five REL Central states: Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota. Members of the Educator Effectiveness Research Alliance developed a survey in partnership with REL Central and encouraged all school districts in their jurisdictions to participate during 2013/14. The survey focused on districts only and did not collect data on state-run mentoring programs or policies, such as North Dakota's Teacher Support System Mentoring Program. A single survey was sent to each district to complete, for a total of 1,388 surveys. The survey was most often completed by either the superintendent or another district administrative leader. The overall district response rate was 70 percent (970 responses).<sup>2</sup>

The survey was designed to answer the following questions associated with K–12 district mentoring programs and policies in 2013/14 for new teachers:

- Who provides mentoring?
- How does time spent mentoring change after the first year?
- Are mentors required to observe mentees?
- Are mentors required to receive training?
- Do districts provide stipends to mentors for their work?
- What barriers to implementing mentoring programs do districts identify?

### **What the study found**

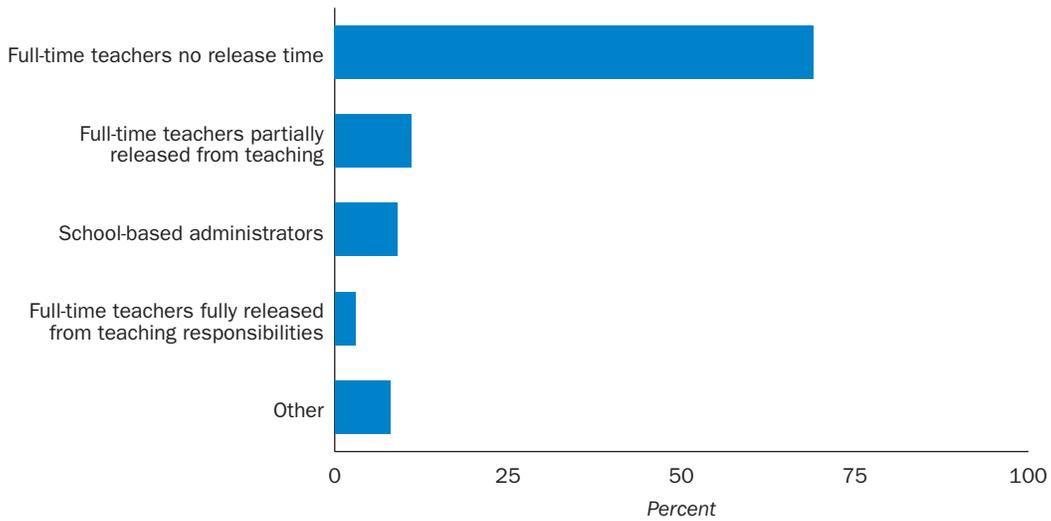
This section presents findings from the surveys administered to school districts in Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota.

#### **In most districts mentoring is provided primarily by full-time teachers without release time**

In 69 percent of districts across all five states mentoring is provided primarily by full-time teachers who receive no release time from teaching responsibilities (figure 1). Mentoring teachers are expected to teach their regular, full-time class load on top of their mentoring duties, which can reduce their capacity to provide mentoring support. In about 11 percent of districts full-time teachers receive partial release time to mentor, and in less than 3 percent of districts mentoring is provided primarily by full-time teachers who are given full release time.

The percentage of districts across states that indicate that mentoring is provided primarily by a teacher who receives full release time to mentor new teachers varies little, ranging from 0 percent to 3 percent. The percentage of districts across states that indicate that mentoring is provided by a teacher who receives partial release time ranges from less than 1 percent to 26 percent. In four of the five states more than 60 percent of districts indicate that mentoring is provided primarily by full-time teachers who do not receive release time for this activity (figure 2). State-by-state data are not shown for response categories with very small numbers of responding districts in some states.

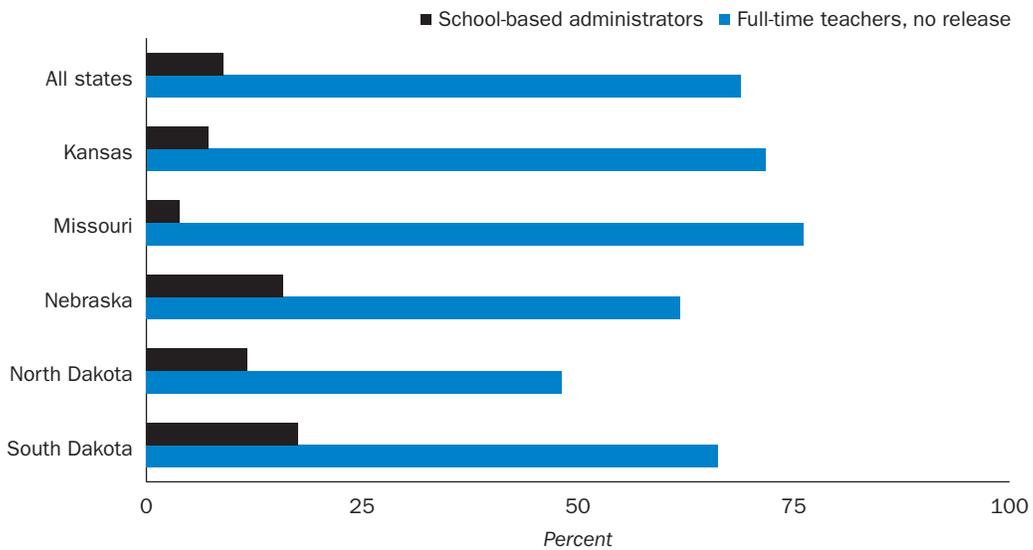
**Figure 1. Districts report that mentoring is provided primarily by full-time teachers with no release time, 2013/14**



**Note:** *n* = 874 respondents.

**Source:** Authors' analysis of data from the 2013/14 surveys.

**Figure 2. State-by-state results indicate that mentoring is provided primarily by full-time teachers with no release time, 2013/14**



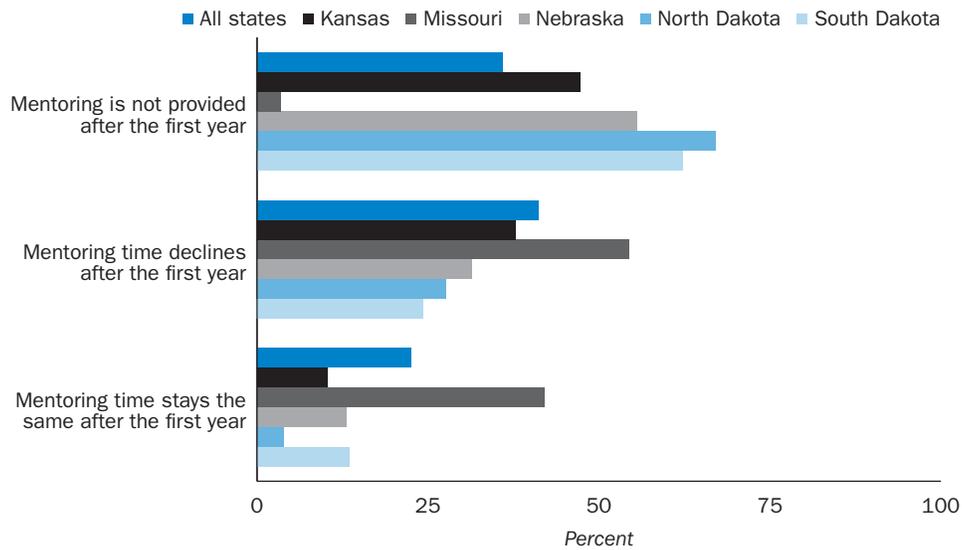
**Note:** *n* = 874 respondents.

**Source:** Authors' analysis of data from the 2013/14 surveys.

**In most districts mentoring ends or mentoring time declines after the first year**

Across all five states 77 percent of districts indicate that after the first year mentoring programs either end (36 percent) or taper off (41 percent; figure 3). In about 23 percent of districts mentoring stays the same after the first year. There is some variation across states. In Missouri, for example, where state policy

**Figure 3. In most districts mentoring either ends or tapers off after one year, 2013/14**



**Note:** n = 868 respondents. Percentages for some states may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

**Source:** Authors' analysis of data from the 2013/14 surveys.

requires that districts provide mentoring for longer than a single school year, 42 percent of districts indicate that mentoring programs stay the same after the first year.

**Roughly half of districts require mentors to observe mentees teaching**

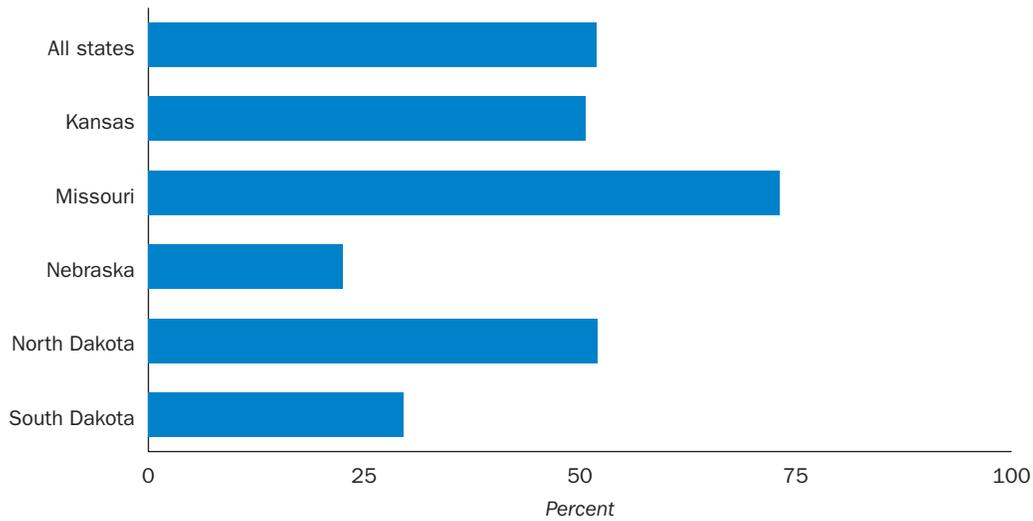
In 52 percent of districts mentors are required to observe mentees teaching (figure 4). There is some variation across states, from 22 percent of districts in Nebraska to more than 50 percent of districts in Kansas and North Dakota and 73 percent in Missouri. Missouri has state regulations that establish standards for district mentoring programs, including providing sufficient time for mentors to observe beginning educators.<sup>3</sup>

**A minority of districts require mentor training prior to starting mentoring**

In 32 percent of districts mentors are required to receive training before mentoring new teachers (figure 5). The share ranges from 11–12 percent in Nebraska and South Dakota to 37–43 percent in Kansas, Missouri, and North Dakota.

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**Figure 4. Across all five states about half of districts require mentors to observe mentees, 2013/14**

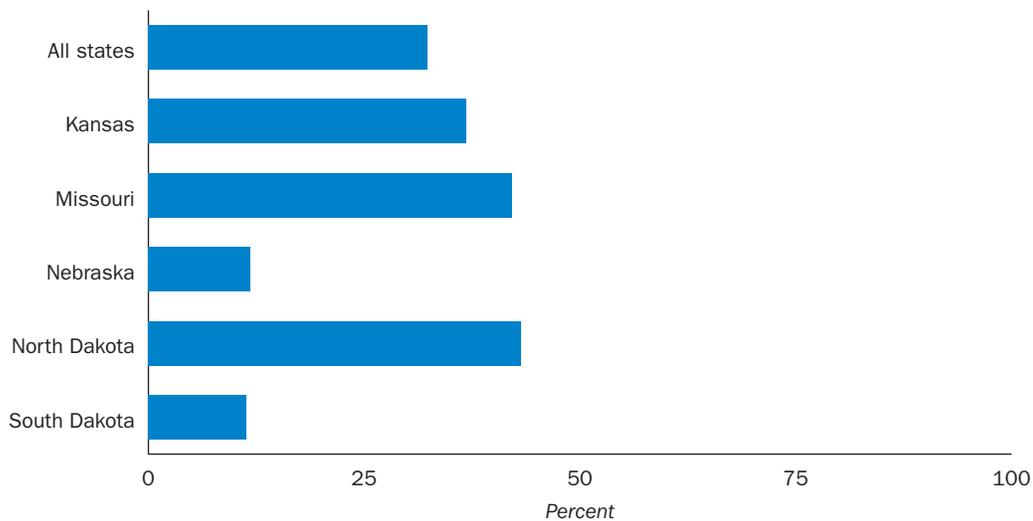


**Note:**  $n = 861$  respondents.

**Source:** Authors' analysis of data from the 2013/14 surveys.

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**Figure 5. Across all five states about one-third of districts require mentors to receive training, 2013/14**



**Note:**  $n = 853$  respondents.

**Source:** Authors' analysis of data from the 2013/14 surveys.

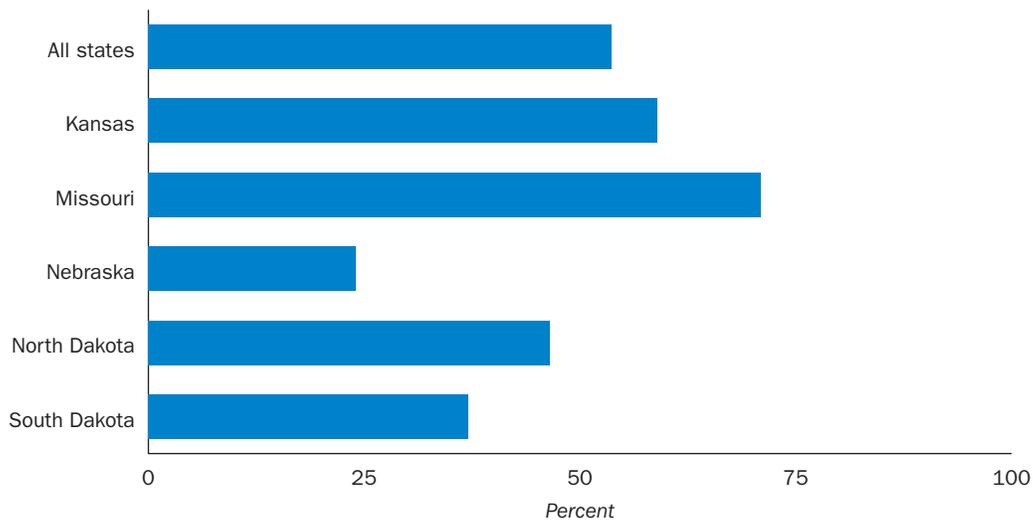
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### About half of districts provide stipends to mentors

Across the five states 54 percent of districts provide stipends to mentors (figure 6). The percentage of districts in each state indicating that stipends are paid to mentors ranged from 24 percent in Nebraska to 71 percent in Missouri. Among districts that provide stipends, the average stipend is \$476 per mentee.

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**Figure 6. Across all five states about half of districts provide stipends to mentors, 2013/14**



**Note:**  $n = 844$  respondents.

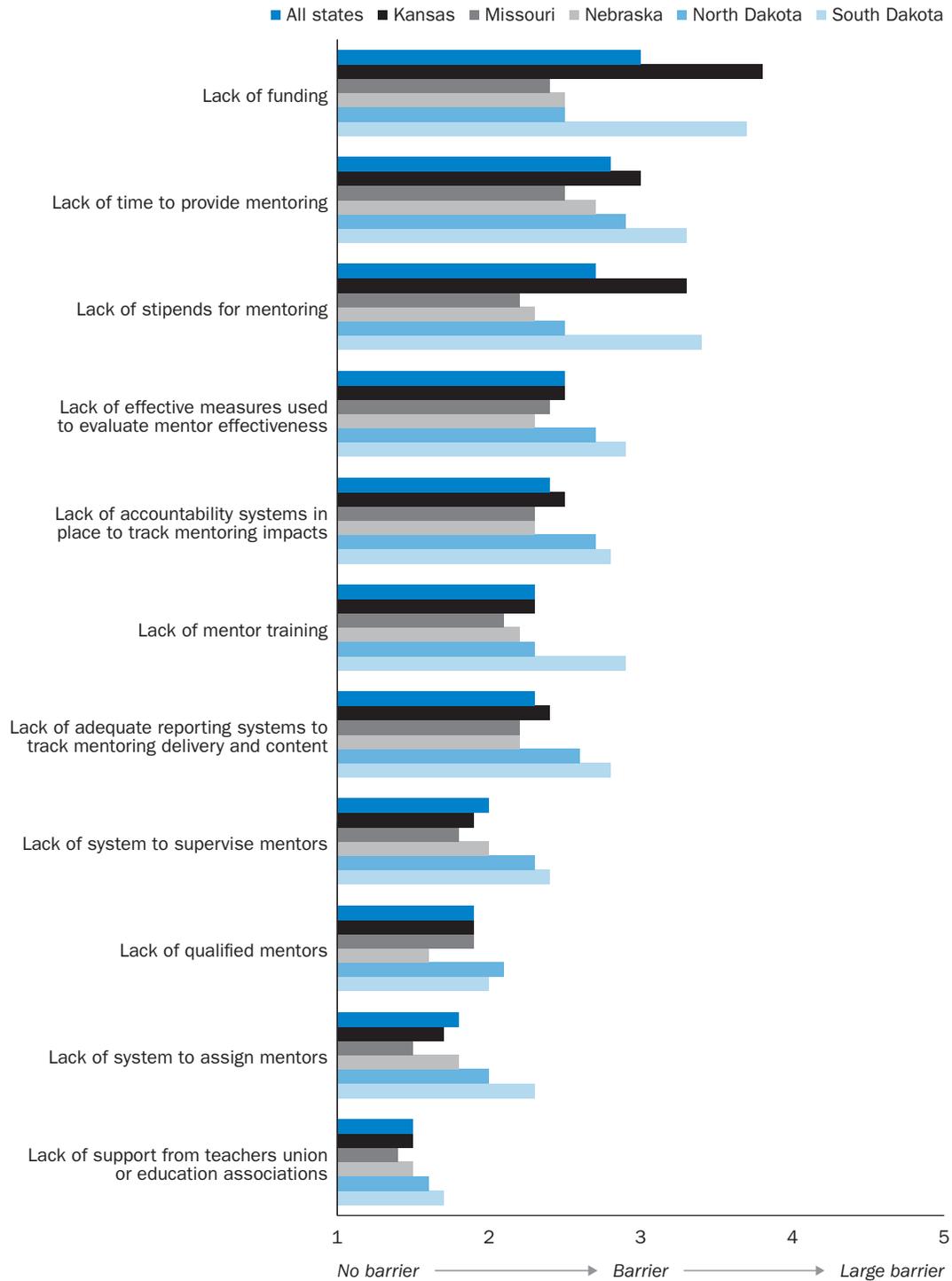
**Source:** Authors' analysis of data from the 2013/14 surveys.

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**Across all districts lack of funding, lack of time, and lack of stipends were most commonly identified as a barrier to implementing adequate mentoring programs**

Respondents were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 5 the degree to which 11 listed factors presented barriers to their district's ability to provide an adequate mentoring program for new teachers. A rating of 3 or higher was identified on the survey as indicating a barrier, with a rating of 5 indicating a large barrier. In certain states, such as Kansas and South Dakota, several factors, including lack of funding, lack of time for mentoring, and lack of stipends for mentoring, were identified as barriers to implementing adequate mentoring programs. However, of the factors listed in the survey, only lack of funding had an average score of 3 or higher across all districts (figure 7). The next two highest-rated factors were also resource-related: lack of time for mentoring and lack of stipends for mentoring.

**Figure 7. Across all districts lack of funding, lack of time, and lack of stipends were most commonly identified as a barrier to mentoring, 2013/14**



**Note:** *n* = 887 respondents. The figure reports mean ratings for each factor.

**Source:** Authors' analysis of data from the 2013/14 surveys.

## Next steps

The data gathered through the multistate survey of district officials can help policymakers and state and local education leaders understand how new teachers are mentored across districts. While data are limited to 70 percent of the districts in five REL Central Region states, they shed light on several key questions, including who provides mentoring, how time spent mentoring changes after the first year, whether mentors are required to observe mentees, whether mentors are required to receive training, whether districts provide stipends to mentors for their work, and what barriers districts identify to implementing mentoring programs.

Table 1 summarizes the key findings for each research question and presents some potential next steps for state and local policymakers and education leaders to consider.

The district data provided in this report could be supplemented by additional data from the teacher- or school-level perspective on current mentoring programs and practices. Such data would allow state leaders to compare what district leaders reported is happening with what teachers and school leaders are experiencing. In addition to providing data on how district policies work in practice, these added perspectives could also provide insights into the strengths and weaknesses of existing mentoring programs, as perceived by practitioners.

District leaders could draw on the research reported here to enhance and improve their mentoring programs. To facilitate such changes, state and district leaders could work together to identify districts with particular mentoring program components (such as stipends or training for mentors) and share best practices and lessons learned. Such information sharing could help build a stronger understanding across districts of the specific types of programs and policy options that are currently implemented.

Such additional data gathering and analysis could also spur further dialogue on important questions around these topics and could inform potential changes in local, state, and national mentoring policies. These changes are particularly important to consider as states and districts grapple with new teacher turnover, the need to improve instruction quality, and the need to prioritize investment of limited resources to support teachers as they enter the profession.

**Table 1. Selected survey questions and results: Relevance to research and policy and next steps**

Question	State survey results	Potential next steps
Who provides mentoring?	A majority of responding districts (69 percent) indicated that mentoring is provided by full-time teachers who receive no release time from teaching responsibilities.	Research suggests that students of teachers served by full-time mentors showed greater performance gains than their peers, a finding that holds even for higher need students (Fletcher & Strong, 2009). Leaders could identify districts that already implement release time for mentors, work with these districts to gather data on associated costs, and explore ways to measure return on investment of mentoring programs. Such data may be particularly important, as districts in the survey identified the top barriers to their ability to provide adequate mentoring as resource-related (lack of funding, lack of time, and lack of stipends).
How does time spent mentoring change after the first year?	A majority of responding districts (77 percent) indicated that mentoring of new teachers either ends or tapers off after the first year.	State and district leaders could initiate conversations about providing mentoring support to new teachers for two full school years, because research suggests that at least two years are needed to affect student performance (Glazerman et al., 2010; Strong, 2006). Policymakers and education leaders could disseminate information to districts through conferences and webinars to share research that discusses effects associated with the length of mentoring programs. Education leaders could also identify districts (or states, such as Missouri) that currently require two years of mentoring and use these as case studies to inform other districts and states about how to use existing resources to provide expanded mentoring support.

*(continued)*

**Table 1. Selected survey questions and results: Relevance to research and policy and next steps**  
(continued)

Question	State survey results	Potential next steps
Are mentors required to observe mentees?	About half (52 percent) of responding districts indicated that they require mentors to observe their mentees' teaching.	Some research finds that observation is critical to a mentor's ability to diagnose and address issues involving new teachers' instructional practice (Rowley, 1999). Districts could convene school and teacher leaders to identify and address barriers in policy or practice that may prevent mentors from spending time observing their mentees' instruction. In particular, leaders could explore the links between providing release time for mentors with the mentor's ability to observe mentees' teaching. These areas may be linked, as mentor and mentee schedules may conflict during the school day.
Are mentors required to receive training?	About a third (32 percent) of responding districts reported requiring mentors to receive any training.	While the survey found that few districts require mentors to receive training, state and district leaders could engage in further study to determine whether mentors do in practice receive training, even if it is not required. Research suggests that teachers assigned to mentors who had training or experience in supporting beginning teachers could more effectively manage and organize instruction than teachers whose mentor had no such training (Evertson & Smithey, 2000). National policy organizations also identify a need to ensure that mentors meet rigorous requirements, including evidence of at least three years of effective instructional practice (National Association of State Boards of Education, 2012).
Do districts provide stipends to mentors for their work?	A little more than half (54 percent) of responding districts reported that they provide stipends for mentors.	State and district leaders could work to develop a clearer understanding of why nearly half (46 percent) of districts do not provide stipends to mentors. Some research on the impact of stipends on mentoring programs has shown that a lack of financial support for mentors had adverse effects on perceived teacher longevity and teacher effectiveness (Freemyer, Townsend, Freemyer, & Baldwin, 2010). Leaders could identify districts that do offer stipends and work with them to gather data on the costs of stipends and how this expense is covered.
What barriers to implementing mentoring programs do districts identify?	Across all five states, just 1 of the 11 factors listed in the survey rose to the level of a barrier as defined by the survey: lack of funding.	As state and district leaders explore next steps in developing teacher mentoring programs, it is important to consider the funding required to provide the key components of a robust mentoring program. Providing at least two years of mentoring support and offering stipends and release time for mentors are three key components that require adequate funding. Leaders could explore ways to measure return on investment of mentoring programs to justify the required investments.

**Source:** Author's analysis.

## **Notes**

1. Mo. Rev. Stat. § 161.375.1
2. Response rates for individual states were: 81 percent in Kansas, 65 percent in Missouri, 72 percent in Nebraska, 77 percent in North Dakota, and 68 percent in South Dakota.
3. See Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2008) for more information.

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