

How residency programs are organizing mentor teacher professional learning during distance learning

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About the *Spotlights on Practice* series

Teacher residency programs provide intensive pathways into the teaching profession that focus on rigorous clinical preparation. These programs integrate credentialing coursework with a clinical placement in the public school classroom of an experienced mentor teacher for a full academic year. To help residencies recruit and train diverse, well-prepared educators in high-needs areas, the state of California dedicated \$75 million in 2018 to develop and expand teacher residency programs across the state through the California Teacher Residency Grant program.

WestEd provides formative evaluation for the grant program. To complement our reporting about the grantee partnerships' progress,¹ we are producing a series of case-study briefs called *Spotlights on Practice*. Each brief documents and shares residency program practices. By sharing these practical examples from the field, our aim is to support learning and improvement across the California Teacher Residency grantees and beyond.

About this brief

This installment of the *Spotlights on Practice* series focuses on how teacher residency programs are shaping their practices to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic. This brief is being released as teacher residency programs are shifting their in-person programs online and adapting to distance learning with incredible creativity and fortitude.

All residency programs in California (and nationally) have been affected by the shift to a virtual environment. This shift has impacted all aspects of program operation and implementation. Perhaps most centrally, it has impacted the mentor-resident relationship and collaborative experience, and the ways that programs organize programmatic support for mentors. In our evaluation of the 2019–20 residency year, spring survey data (gathered shortly after a majority of California's school districts suspended in-person learning to stem

¹ Eiler White, M., Hirschboeck, K., Takahashi, S., Reade, F., Perry, R., & Honigsberg, L. (2020). *Launching the California Teacher Residency Grant Program: Findings from Year 1 (2019/20)*. WestEd.

the spread of COVID-19) showed that 40 percent of mentors felt that the training they were receiving was “moderately,” “slightly,” or “not at all” useful. Given these results, we sought to find programs that had data indicating mentors were satisfied with their programs, and we investigated the professional learning that these programs provided to their mentor teachers during distance learning.

The three programs described in this brief represent a range of practices, big and small, that California Teacher Residency programs are putting in place. We feature the Fresno Teacher Residency Program, which has developed a set of supports for virtual co-teaching practices. We also highlight mentor support practices being implemented by the Sweetwater Union High School District Teacher Residency and the Salinas Union High School District Teacher Residency.

The aim of the brief is to provide examples from the field describing how some teacher residency programs are responding to real, commonly encountered challenges during distance and hybrid learning. This brief is not intended to offer a comprehensive list of all of the supports that these residency programs have designed, nor is it intended to evaluate the impact of these examples or label them as “best” practices to be emulated. Rather, we aim to succinctly document a limited selection of real-life practices and highlight topics for discussion among practitioners seeking to learn about other teacher residency programs and improve their own programs.

Spotlight on practice: Fresno Teacher Residency Program’s mentor supports for virtual co-teaching practices

The Fresno Teacher Residency Program offers resident credentials for dual multi-subject special education and bilingual education, and single-subject credentials in industrial technology and STEM. The two partners in the program, California State University, Fresno, and the Fresno Unified School District, have been working in partnership for over 12 years.

The 2020–21 residency cohort started in May 2020, well into California’s shelter-in-place order. Because

How the topic and example programs were identified

To select the topic for this first installment of *Spotlights on Practice*, we drew on spring 2020 survey results that showed that programs wanted more information about supports for mentors. We also interviewed stakeholders in spring 2020 to gather their feedback about the greatest implementation challenges facing teacher residency programs and areas where they most wanted to see examples of peer partnerships’ practices. Interviewees named supports and training for mentors, particularly during distance and hybrid learning, as one of the highest priority topics to explore.

To identify programs to highlight, we undertook a multi-step selection process that included:

- Reviewing program-specific data from the spring 2020 survey
- Interviewing expert partners in the field of teacher residencies for their recommendations of which programs to highlight
- Listening to program representatives talk about their practices during public webinars
- Conducting brief interviews with program staff after the start of the 2020–21 school year to understand the specific supports they provided to mentors following the state’s spring shelter-in-place guidance

After identifying promising mentor supports from three programs, we learned more by speaking again to staff from those programs, interviewing mentors, and gathering artifacts relating to their programs and mentor supports.

Fresno Unified closed all schools and shifted away from in-person learning, the residency program was not able to offer in-person clinical experience, nor in-person mentor support meetings. In this time of uncertainty, and to better support their stakeholders, program staff felt it important to adapt various mentor-training support structures and resources that had originally been created for in-person learning in order to make them useful for a distance-learning environment for the 2020–21 cohort. To meet this need, they developed three interrelated supports, explored in the next section:

- A handbook describing five co-teaching strategies for mentors and residents to use during remote learning
- Regular mentor training meetings designed to iteratively introduce these five strategies to mentors and help them to try, debrief, and deepen their use of the strategies
- Regular video observations of teaching to help mentors understand how the strategies should and do look in practice

Three mentor supports for the distance learning environment

Handbook and “one-pager” describing co-teaching and engagement strategies for remote learning

The Fresno Teacher Residency Program has long invested in co-teaching as a key practice, and this is reflected in its mentor practices handbook. Its co-teaching framework is based on the St. Cloud University Model. In Fresno’s handbook for mentors, co-teaching is defined as “two teachers working together with groups of students and sharing the planning, organization, delivery and assessment of instruction and physical space.” The handbook also notes that co-teaching is an “attitude of sharing the classroom and students. Co-teachers must always be thinking, ‘We’re BOTH teaching!’” The program has a gradual-release-of-responsibility plan describing the aspects of instruction that residents are encouraged to take on as they transition from novice to more experienced teachers. While this plan guides mentors’ introduction of new co-teaching practices over time, mentors receive latitude and encouragement to consider whether their resident is ready to take on a particular co-teaching strategy.

In the Fresno Teacher Residency, in addition to mentor teachers co-teaching alongside residents in the classroom teaching placement, university faculty also co-teach the courses that residents take at California State University, Fresno. For example, a math professor and a special education professor might co-teach a math education course for residents in the special education concentration. Additionally, residency program staff often co-teach courses alongside a university professor in order to strengthen the alignment of district and university perspectives. Program staff also use co-teaching practices as they provide the district’s professional learning for residents. All these serve as models for co-teaching between residents and mentors.

To transition to the virtual learning environment, in spring 2020 (before the 2020–21 cohort’s May 2020 start date), Fresno program staff began researching best practices and co-teaching models for the distance-learning classroom. Their goal was to update their mentor practices handbook with written guidance about co-teaching that could support mentors and residents to work together in a year when “everybody was nervous” to take on the role of mentor teacher. Program staff described meeting in the spring and searching widely for any co-teaching resources that would help to describe how to translate the program’s established co-teaching practices to distance learning. “We got together and we did a lot of reading in the beginning,”

said Jeanna Perry, Teacher Development Manager at Fresno Unified. “It was: ‘Get out there and find anything you can [on virtual co-teaching]! Scatter!’”

After gathering ideas in the spring, program staff set about creating a new supplement to the program’s handbook to support the implementation of virtual co-teaching practices. The handbook went through multiple revisions within Fresno Unified and was shared with the district’s partners at California State University, Fresno, for further feedback. To guide the work, Perry describes wanting to relieve some of the “cognitive load” from mentor teachers who were in the thick of adapting to virtual learning. The handbook and the mentor training supports for the virtual co-teaching strategies had to clearly describe each strategy, show how each was an adaptation of something already familiar and valuable to mentor teachers, and offer examples of how each strategy could be enacted.

Ultimately, of the six prioritized co-teaching strategies in place prior to the pandemic, the Fresno team chose to prioritize the following five virtual co-teaching strategies:

- One Teaches, One Moderates
- Station Teaching
- Team Teaching
- Alternative Teaching
- Parallel Teaching

Program staff distilled their descriptions of these strategies into a “one-pager” (see Appendix A) that could serve as a quick reference for both mentors and residents. By continuing to emphasize these familiar co-teaching strategies in the new virtual environment, the program hopes to help mentors improve their ability to use the strategies flexibly in both face-to-face and virtual environments in collaboration with their residents. At the same time, mentors are encouraged to take on the co-teaching practices as part of an intentional release of responsibility over the year. For instance, at the beginning of the year, residents may greet students and lead a warm-up activity, then, later in the year, move on to using the “One Teaches, One Moderates” strategy.

Sweetwater Union High School District Teacher Residency

Facilitating mentors’ discussions of resident progress using virtual tools

In our spring 2020 surveys of California Teacher Residency Grant stakeholders, Sweetwater’s results showed strong overall ratings of program strength. Mentors’ survey responses suggested that they felt the program offered valuable professional learning supports and communicated clear expectations for mentors and residents. Residents’ survey responses provided strong ratings of their mentors’ modeling of high-quality teaching and feedback.

We spoke to Katrine Czajkowski, the Coordinator for Teacher Induction and Residency at Sweetwater Union High School District, who described the program’s unique approach to setting expectations, particularly around its gradual release of responsibility timeline for residents (which is called the Learning Trajectory). In Sweetwater’s program, they emphasize that mentor-resident relationships should be defined by setting high expectations. Sweetwater’s mentor supports encourage mentors to take the role of advocate for their resident, intervening with the partnering university or district as needed to make sure the resident is “challenging systemic oppression and implementing student-centered practices,” Czajkowski told us. While the Learning Trajectory describes a release

of responsibility over time, mentors and residents are encouraged to push themselves to experiment with taking on new practices as soon as they are ready. This means the program expects mentors to advocate for residents to “collaborate with others and act independently on behalf of equity for students” in the classroom as soon as they are ready.

During distance learning prompted by COVID-19, the program staff wanted to ensure there were opportunities for mentors to discuss strategies for “encouraging resident growth aligned with the Learning Trajectory.” The program’s Quarterly Resident Coach Network involves voluntary two-hour meetings that offer, among other experiences, opportunities to review residents’ current strengths and growth areas, and to discuss where each mentor-resident pair is along the Learning Trajectory. For example, the program recently offered a virtual activity at one of its Quarterly Resident Coach Network meetings that simulated the kinds of supportive mentoring discussions that previously occurred in person. Working synchronously, mentors used the Jamboard Google extension to simulate placing Post-It notes on a virtual Learning Trajectory. Once everyone had indicated where their resident currently was on the continuum, mentors had the opportunity to engage in productive conversation and get advice. Using Jamboard, mentors worked in small-group “breakout rooms” to explore and problem-solve shared problems of practice, discuss what steps mentors might take next, and talk through why different residents might be at different points in their learning trajectories.

Regular mentor support meetings to learn about and improve the use of co-teaching strategies

As in previous years, mentor support meetings in Fresno for the 2020-21 academic year began with a kickoff “Meet Your Mentor” event in July 2020, with this year’s event being held virtually. Mentor-resident pairs were introduced at the event, and they learned about their roles and the expectations for collaboration through the beginning of the year.

Before COVID-19, mentor meetings were held in person every nine weeks. In the 2020-21 academic year, the frequency of virtual meetings increased to every six weeks. Heather Horsley, the California State University, Fresno Residency Partnership Coordinator, says that the program plans to continue holding some meetings virtually even after it’s safe to gather in person, since it’s now clear that some content works virtually and that virtual meetings give mentors more flexibility in their time.

In addition to being designed to be responsive to mentors’ needs and interests, all of these mentor meetings highlight or reinforce some element of the five co-teaching strategies. After each meeting, program staff send out a feedback survey about needs to all mentors to guide the topic selections for the next meeting.

Program staff first shared the co-teaching handbook with mentors at the “Meet Your Mentor” event, presenting it as a basis for shared learning about virtual teaching, not as a set of top-down instructions. Describing the handbook’s launch, Perry said the communication to mentors was, “We are going to help you out and give you something to start with, but then we really want you to talk to each other about what that really looks like in your classrooms or virtual spaces.” At the meeting, mentors were also guided to “tab” pages in the handbook to indicate the strategies they planned to try out first, with the expectation that they would discuss how it went at the first regular mentor training meeting in September.

At that September meeting, Perry said, “We referenced back to those tabbed pages to see what had occurred in the virtual spaces and then what were next steps for them. What are the new co-teaching strategies you are going to try, and what is it going to look like? And then giving time to talk through and role-play them.”

When we spoke to Fresno program leads, they were planning their next mentor training meeting. The program leads were clear that implementing the five co-strategies would be a lot to ask of mentors at the beginning of any year, let alone one as challenging as this. They felt that, as is to be expected, mentors were starting with the strategies that they found most accessible during distance learning. The program’s general approach to supporting implementation of the co-teaching strategies throughout the rest of the year was to surface mentors’ use of the strategies, document patterns of how mentors were using the co-teaching strategies, encourage mentors to try out less commonly implemented strategies, and discuss implementation of the strategies with other mentors when they were together.

All of the program’s mentor support meetings became opportunities for the program staff to encourage and support mentors to experiment and learn together with their residents and each other about how to effectively use the co-teaching strategies, thus building their shared knowledge of instructional effectiveness. (For examples of how two other programs are organizing mentor supports to highlight and build shared knowledge and support residents during this pandemic year, see the text boxes **“Supporting shared focal mentor practices through training, meetings, and newsletters”** and **“Facilitating mentors’ discussions of resident progress using virtual tools.”**)

We spoke to two mentors about the co-teaching strategies and about general mentor supports in Fresno, and both reported regularly using two of the co-teaching practices with their residents. Both mentors use the One Teaches, One Moderates strategy frequently. Additionally, one mentor regularly uses Team Teaching and one regularly uses Parallel Teaching. They described deciding which strategies to start with based on the way instruction had been working virtually with their particular students and teaching styles.

Early results from the WestEd evaluation’s fall 2020 surveys suggest that Fresno mentor teachers feel supported in their role and find training useful. Both mentors we spoke with reported finding the opportunity to discuss strategies with other mentors to be the most valuable part of the training meetings. They said that these conversations spur them to take on new co-teaching practices. Having collaborative conversations with their colleagues “challenges us to try new co-teaching strategies and not get too comfortable” falling back on the same practices, one mentor said. At a programmatic level, program leads who participate in the conversations can use these opportunities to learn about and help deepen mentors’ expertise with these strategies.

Salinas Union High School District Teacher Residency

Supporting shared focal mentor practices through training, meetings, and newsletters

The Salinas Teacher Residency had high scores from mentors and residents on our spring 2020 survey. Although Salinas aims to continue its approach “the same as it was pre-COVID,” Danny Greene, Salinas’s New Teacher Support Specialist, told us, “our key pain point is one that is shared by all educators in the time of COVID and distance learning: How to find time in our busy, hectic schedules to have coaching conversations around planning, grading, interventions, and building relationships – just to name a few.”

Salinas’s mentor supports begin with an eight-hour training course provided by California State University, Monterey Bay. This course is drawn from the book *Mentoring Matters: A Practical Guide to Learning-Focused Relationships*, which is used as a shared resource for structuring mentor supports for the rest of the year.

One of these supports is a regular monthly newsletter, written by Greene, that highlights a particular mentoring conversation from *Mentoring Matters*. These highlights offer mentors accessible ideas for giving feedback in new ways, and help to reinforce expectations about mentor and resident roles. For example, a newsletter on the mentor’s role featured six “mentor moves” from the book, along with brief supports and conversation starters for enacting those moves. One move highlighted in the book was to “provide information.” To implement that mentoring move with a resident, mentors could have conversations beginning with particular starters, such as, “Given this issue, there are a few things you need to consider...,” “I’ve highlighted a few sections of the induction manual that you should pay particular attention to,” or “Let’s create a calendar of critical deadlines in the first semester and set up some prep time in advance of them.”

Mentors and residents meet for a monthly training meeting, and the book, newsletter, and gradual release calendar provide structure for the agenda. During these meetings, mentors are able to discuss with each other what aspects of teaching their residents are taking on in relation to the gradual release calendar and in the virtual instructional space. For example, when discussing how residents were taking on small group instruction, one mentor shared that, even though the teaching schedule allowed time for her to meet with her resident after each virtual classroom session to debrief, she felt she was unable to virtually observe how he worked with small groups in the same way she would be able to observe if they were working in a classroom together.

Through regular surveys, informal conversations, and what he characterizes as “a culture of trust,” Greene gathers feedback throughout the year from mentors. He reports that they find the newsletter and meetings valuable. Mentors noted that this year, they are juggling how to balance making time for improving these mentoring moves and addressing practical challenges of mentoring during the pandemic, such as making sure their residents can get access to district technology.

Video examples and observations of teaching to help mentors understand how the co-teaching strategies should look in practice

Program staff are of the shared belief that seeing what the co-teaching strategies are supposed to look like will help mentors and residents implement them well. As they started the school year, the residency program had video examples of what the co-teaching strategies would look like in a face-to-face classroom environment. They had also identified a YouTube video of what virtual co-planning could look like. However, they wanted to expand their video library to include more examples of remote co-teaching strategies within their own district that they could use to support their mentor teachers.

One of the factors that made this video library expansion possible is that observations of clinical practice, conducted both by district and partner university staff, have long been a part of the program. These observations have continued in the virtual space – sometimes through real-time observations and sometimes via video submitted by residents. Perry says that observers take care to note the co-teaching strategies they see, and to incorporate reflections on the strategies into the post-observation feedback. She says this labeling allows program staff to “keep track of who is doing what, where, and looking for patterns and trends” they can use to support mentor training. For example, Perry says that if observers encounter a pair who is using a strategy that not many others use, they can ask that mentor to present on it at a meeting: “Talk to us about how you are doing that work. How are you implementing it? What is the resident doing? What are you doing?” Perry described how having this information may help them identify pairs who could provide video examples of the co-teaching strategies in action.

Horsley described the university securing an addendum to its memorandum of understanding with the district to allow for video recording, subject to parental opt-out, during distance learning. “The research is there about using video to strengthen your practice,” Horsley said. “COVID gave us a path to put it in place.” She added that she hopes to continue video permissions after in-person learning resumes, because data that the program is gathering (including feedback from participants and growth on rubrics) shows that video is a productive improvement tool for both mentors and residents.

Horsley tells us that they plan to continue video observations after in-person learning resumes, in addition to the walk-throughs they had traditionally conducted. Video recordings are valuable, she said, because they “allow for repeated viewing, deeper discussion, and flexibility of schedule.”

Conclusion

Teacher residency partnerships have always been built on educators’ and administrators’ willingness to roll up their sleeves and solve problems. COVID-19 has introduced steep new challenges, but those engaged in teacher residency work were already primed to respond with creativity and humility. We look forward in our next briefs to exploring more program responses to the pandemic, and to learning how programs’ changes this year will strengthen their work to build a diverse and well-prepared teacher workforce pipeline long after COVID-19 has passed.

Appendix A: Fresno Teacher Residency Program co-teaching and engagement strategies for remote learning

A standalone “one-pager” within the Fresno Teacher Residency Program handbook described the program’s five focal co-teaching practices for the virtual classroom. The descriptions featured on this one-pager are below.

One Teaches, One Moderates: One teacher instructs the whole class in the video lesson while the other teacher responds to text comments from students. One teacher instructs the whole class in the video lesson while the other “presents” material on their own screen and changes documents needed or writes visual notes for students.

Station Teaching: Teachers create various leveled assignments in Microsoft Teams assigned to specific students at their instructional level. Teachers may develop various video lessons or find resources at various levels to assign students. Teachers meet with small groups (guided reading groups or other stations) at designated times and then students do independent work when not with the teacher.

Team Teaching: Both teachers interact in video lessons or on chat, taking turns and building off of one another to model discussion or think aloud.

Alternative Teaching: Teachers address similar objectives with differing methods/resources. One teacher does a whole group lesson on video or live chat. Other teacher does a similar lesson with modifications/differentiation of pacing, materials, or expectations with increased support for students who need that.

Parallel Teaching: Each teacher does the same lesson at the same time for two smaller groups to heighten engagement, participation, and understanding; materials, resources, and format can be identical.

We are grateful to all the teacher residency program staff, university partners, and mentor teachers for sharing their time and thoughts with us during these challenging and busy times.