

Evaluation of the Illinois Virtual Instructional Coach and Building Mentor Program

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Executive Summary

The Illinois Virtual Instructional Coach and Building Mentor Program launched in fall 2020 to provide much-needed support for new teachers during the challenging first two years of entering the profession. Funded by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) through the federal CARES Act, the Illinois Education Association (IEA) and Illinois Federation of Teachers (IFT) jointly lead the statewide effort, with the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) leading the program specifically in Chicago Public Schools.

Although acute short-term, pandemic-related needs precipitated the initiative, long-term teacher shortages in the state and union leadership in supporting its members' professional growth and wellbeing are the broader trends motivating the program design and implementation.

Digital Promise Global, a non-profit educational organization working at the intersection of practice, research, and innovation, serves as the independent research and evaluation partner.

This report presents our cumulative findings on implementation successes and challenges, factors shaping local implementation, and results for coach, mentor, and teacher outcomes. We also draw out implications and lessons learned to inform program implementation in 2021–22.

Program Description

The Illinois Virtual Instructional Coach and Building Mentor Program aims to:

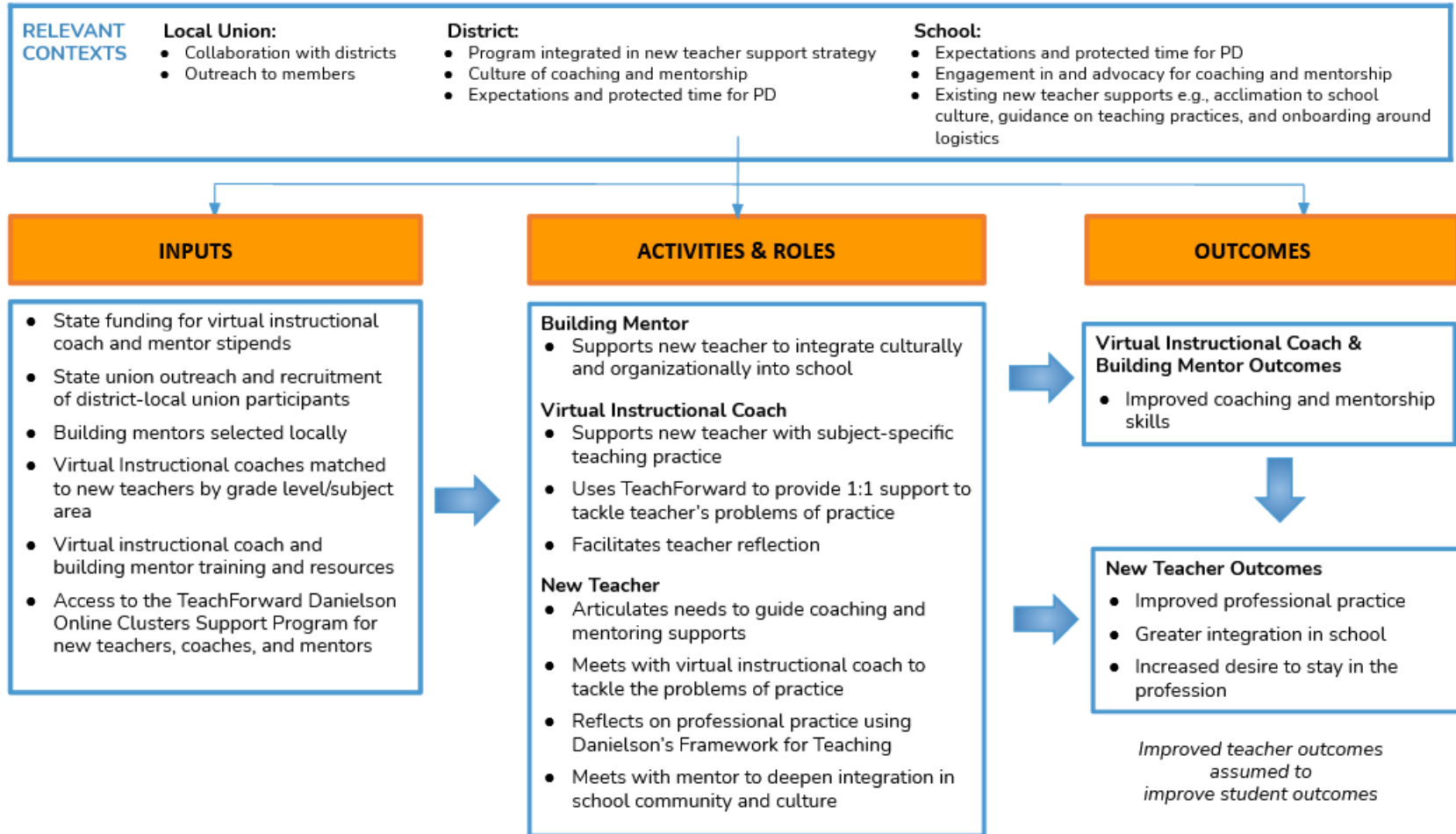
- Help first- and second-year teachers¹ strengthen their professional practices;
- Acculturate to their school community and become familiar with local policies and expectations; and
- Increase new teachers' desire to remain in the profession.

The program recruits and trains instructional coaches statewide and matches them to new teachers based on teaching assignment. The program leverages expertise statewide by having coaches support new teachers virtually. Participating districts select mentors in the same buildings as the new teachers. Mentors help teachers understand the ins and outs of their school and district processes and policies and to acculturate to their new work environment and school community. Thus, new teachers work with instructional coaches virtually on content-related matters and with building mentors locally on context-specific needs.

Coaches and mentors receive training focused on the Danielson Group's Framework for Teaching Clusters through online modules, and coaches have the opportunity to participate in live webinar trainings on those clusters. TeachForward provides an online platform for coaches to convene with new teachers and a library of resources and toolkits organized around the Framework for Teaching. Exhibit ES-1 provides a detailed logic model.

¹ New to the profession or new to the state of Illinois.

Exhibit ES-1. Illinois Virtual Instructional Coach and Building Mentor Program Logic Model



Evaluation Approach

The evaluation addresses key questions on whether the program was implemented as intended and factors that facilitated or constrained implementation; teacher, virtual instructional coach, and building mentor satisfaction with the training and supports they received; and teacher, coach, and mentor outcomes. We used both qualitative and quantitative methods, collecting data from participants in all stakeholder groups, including:

- Pre- and post-implementation surveys of participating new teachers, virtual instructional coaches, and building mentors
- Brief “snapshot” surveys of participating new teachers and virtual instructional coaches mid-implementation
- Post-implementation surveys of participating school principals
- Interviews with new teachers, virtual instructional coaches, building mentors, and district and local union leaders

We also met with the IEA, IFT, and CTU program team biweekly to learn about recruiting, training, and ongoing support; provide formative feedback with each round of data collection; and stay current with program development, especially in anticipation of the second implementation year.

Implementation

Program launch and recruitment. ISBE approved the program on September 30, 2020 and the program team recruited districts and virtual instructional coaches through the fall. Despite the challenges of the pandemic, IEA, IFT, and later CTU successfully recruited 14 different districts across the state (Exhibit ES-2). The majority of districts that participated tended to have little capacity to support new teachers on their own, had already deemed new teacher supports as a priority, and/or had many “singleton” positions (i.e., teachers with no peers with the same teaching assignment in the district). Looking ahead, at the time of writing, 33 districts signaled interest in participating beginning in fall 2021.

Exhibit ES-2. Recruited Participants

	Participants
Districts	14
Schools	66
New teachers	113
Mentors	75
Instructional coaches	128

Note: IEA and IFT recruited as of January 2021 plus CTU participants joining in March
Source: Illinois Virtual Instructional Coach and Building Mentor Program rosters, 2021.

Virtual instructional coach and building mentor backgrounds and training. A large majority of coaches and mentors are classroom teachers (80% and 74%, respectively) and cited enjoying working with new teachers as one of their main motivators for participating in the program (84% and 88%, respectively). Overall, instructional coaches (93%) and mentors (80%) rated the orientation and training that IEA, IFT, and CTU provided as moderately or very useful.

Coaching/Mentoring assignments and matching. Building mentors can support multiple new teachers in their respective schools. They were selected and assigned based on criteria that the district and local union set. By contrast, state unions matched the virtual instructional coaches they selected to new teachers based primarily on teaching assignment, region, and, where possible, racial/ethnic affinity. Most commonly, instructional coaches (70%) and mentors (67%) supported two teachers each. New teachers generally reported being well matched with their virtual instructional coaches on grade level and/or subject area (95%) and on serving similar student populations (89%).

Frequency of new teacher meetings with virtual instructional coaches. In spite of the extraordinary circumstances under the pandemic, nearly half of the teachers interacted with their virtual instructional coaches almost weekly in scheduled meetings (47%) or informally (48%). New teachers reported engaging more frequently with their building mentors, with approximately one-fifth interacting almost daily in unscheduled meetings (21%) or informal conversations (23%), and another 37 to 39 percent doing so almost weekly.

Nature of virtual instructional coaching and mentoring. Most coaches and teachers developed individual coaching plans to guide their collaboration. At the same time, new teachers turned to both instructional coaches and mentors for a wide range of instructional supports and for certain school-based supports. As intended, the building mentor role was more distinctive for aspects of school integration. Coaching and mentoring activities tended to happen through the videoconferencing tools teachers were accustomed to or through email, text, or phone. As a result, although virtual instructional coaches valued and shared the available resources on the TeachForward platform, they tended to use other platforms to facilitate coaching.

Key Factors Influencing Implementation

The midyear start had many implications for implementation. It dampened recruitment because districts didn't have the capacity to start a program on top of managing the many technological, safety, and instructional changes resulting from the pandemic. The depth of coaching and mentoring activity was also limited because new teachers were already overloaded, and coaches and mentors were very mindful about not burdening the teachers. For the second implementation year, an August/September 2021 start will ameliorate many of the concerns that arose this year. Beyond the midyear start during the pandemic, several other factors shaped implementation:

- Voluntary teacher participation helped generate more teacher buy-in
- Sufficient time and administrator support facilitated meaningful participation of teachers, virtual instructional coaches, and building mentors in the program

- Clear communication around virtual instructional coach and building mentor roles helped teachers receive better support
- Providing virtual instructional coaches and building mentors with latitude in their roles helped them support teachers in more personalized ways
- Providing guidance around coach-mentor collaboration ensured that everyone worked toward the same goal
- Having access to both virtual instructional coaches and building mentors provided new teachers with both insider and outsider perspectives and promoted the non-evaluative aspect of the program

Program Results

Even though the implementation period was relatively short—at most from February 2021 to the end of the school year—new teacher and instructional coach outcomes data demonstrate the promise of the Illinois Virtual Instructional Coach and Building Mentor Program.

New teacher efficacy increased through participating in coaching and mentoring. New teachers reported higher average efficacy ratings in meeting students’ needs (difference in pre- to post-implementation means on efficacy scale² = 0.476, $p < 0.0000$); engaging students (difference in pre- to post-implementation means on efficacy scale = 0.256, $p = 0.009$); and remote teaching (difference in pre- to post-implementation means on efficacy scale = 0.393, $p = 0.003$).

High percentages of new teachers reported their intention to remain in education. More than two-thirds (70%) of new teachers responding to the survey reported that they think they will “definitely” be classroom teachers in five years. A further 21 percent responded “probably” so.

Virtual Instructional coach efficacy ratings showed statistically significant improvement. Although starting with a relatively high sense of efficacy, coaches showed a statistically significant improvement in efficacy, on average, across the wide range of instructional coaching skills (difference in pre- to post-implementation means on efficacy scale³ = 0.167, $p = 0.014$) after participating in the program. Not surprisingly, 40 percent of coaches reported that they were not as effective as they anticipated being, due to pandemic circumstances, which should be better next year.

Building mentors reported consistently high efficacy ratings and their mean ratings were not statistically different after participating in the program.

² New teacher efficacy ratings on 5-point scale, where 1 = Not at all equipped, 2 = A little equipped, 3 = Quite equipped, 4 = Very equipped, 5 = Extremely equipped

³ Virtual Instructional Coach efficacy ratings on 5-point scale, where 1 = Not prepared, 2 = A little prepared, 3 = Quite prepared, 4 = Very prepared, 5 = Extremely prepared

Refining the Program

Several valuable lessons emerged during this year, which can help refine the Illinois Virtual Instructional Coach and Building Mentor Program and ready it for much larger-scale implementation statewide in 2021–22, including:

- Recruit and onboard districts during the summer
- Onboard and train virtual instructional coaches and building mentors before the school year begins
- Match new teachers to virtual instructional coaches before the school year begins
- Clarify virtual instructional coaches' and building mentors' respective roles for coaches, mentors, and new teachers
- Provide more specific expectations for coaching and mentoring activities
- Provide more opportunities for virtual instructional coaches and building mentors to meet in role-alike forums
- Examine ways to build authentic virtual instructional coach-new teacher interactions on TeachForward

Overall, stakeholders expressed widespread support for continuing the program in 2021–22. The value that stakeholders found in the program regardless of the difficulties associated with a midyear start indicates the need and demand for the program. More importantly, the increase in new teachers' sense of efficacy, as well as that of virtual instructional coaches, over such a short implementation period and the high proportion of new teachers reporting their intention to remain in the profession demonstrate the great promise of the program. The pilot experience and lessons learned position IEA, IFT, and CTU to offer a valuable service to individual new teachers, districts, and the teaching profession overall in the year to come, when the system will need to meet the challenge of supporting all students academically, emotionally, and equitably as we recover from the pandemic.

Introduction

The Illinois Virtual Instructional Coach and Building Mentor Program—launched in fall 2020 during the pandemic—supports new teachers during the challenging first two years of the profession. The Illinois Education Association (IEA) and Illinois Federation of Teachers (IFT) jointly lead the statewide effort, with the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) leading the program specifically in Chicago Public Schools. Although acute short-term, pandemic-related needs precipitated the initiative, long-term teacher shortages in the state and union leadership in supporting its members’ professional growth and wellbeing are the broader trends motivating the program design and implementation.

Digital Promise, a non-profit educational organization working at the intersection of practice, research, and innovation, serves as the independent research and evaluation partner. This report presents our cumulative findings on implementation successes and challenges, factors shaping local implementation, and results for coach, mentor, and teacher outcomes. We also draw out implications and lessons learned for the program to continue in 2021–22. We begin with a brief overview of state teacher supply and demand and induction policies as the context within which the Illinois Virtual Instructional Coach and Building Mentor Program sits.

State Teacher Shortages, Retention, and Induction

Long-standing teacher shortages. Illinois has grappled with a long-term teacher shortage since 2012, with the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) reporting 6,000 unfilled teaching and support vacancies in 2020 (ISBE, 2020a). Not surprisingly, climbing retirements peaking in 2017 (Fazio, 2020) was a significant contributor. Simultaneously, the numbers of teacher candidates enrolling and completing their credentials have steadily declined since the Great Recession, even though district demand has rebounded (Sutcher et al., 2016). In Illinois, teacher preparation program enrollment fell from 34,000 in 2009 to approximately 25,000 in 2012, and even further to 12,700 in 2017 (Fazio, 2020). Correspondingly, 15,300 certificates were issued to individuals completing an Illinois-approved teacher education program in 2011–12 and 4,400 licenses granted through Illinois University entitlement in 2018–19⁴ (ISBE, 2012; 2019). Accessibility to teacher preparation also declined as programs closed, thus reducing the teacher pipeline in rural areas in particular because teacher candidates tend to begin their careers close to where they went to school (Lichtenberger et al., 2015) and teach close to their certification programs: “In Illinois, nearly one in five districts is more than 30 miles from a teacher training program, hampering their ability to recruit student teachers and build pipelines to future educators” (Fazio, 2020).

⁴ 2011–12 data come from the Teacher Certification Report, which used the term “Certificates issued after completion of an Illinois-approved teacher education program.” The Teacher Licensure Report with 2018–19 data notes that the “table is formerly known as Teacher Certification Report, and uses the term “Licenses granted through Illinois University entitlement.”

The teacher shortage, moreover, disproportionately affects those most vulnerable. Analysis of 2017 state data showed that 74 percent of unfilled teaching positions were in districts serving a majority of students from minoritized populations and 81 percent were in districts where a majority of students were low income (ISBE, 2017). For bilingual and special education, the subject areas with the highest vacancies, vacancy rates increased from 1.7 percent and 1.9 percent, respectively, in 2018 to 2.1 percent (164.1 full-time equivalents [FTEs] statewide) and 2.5 percent (753.3 FTEs) in 2020 (ISBE, 2020a).

The shortage continues to persist through the pandemic. In fall 2020, 77 percent of districts responding to the Illinois Association of Regional Superintendents of Schools (IARSS) surveys reported a teacher shortage problem for their district. Although the percentage of teacher openings going unfilled decreased from 28 percent in 2017 to 17 percent in 2020, 65 percent of respondents perceived the shortage was getting worse (White & Withee, 2020). On top of instructional positions, paraprofessional and school support personnel vacancies sharply increased from 2014 to 2020 and is roughly 40 percent of all unfilled positions (ISBE, 2015; 2017; 2020b). The long-term teacher shortage puts pressure on the system to improve retention so as not to exacerbate the shortage already resulting from the reduced teacher pipeline.

Teacher retention. Among school-based factors, teachers are the greatest asset to student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Hanushek et al., 2005; Harris & Sass, 2007; Sanders & Rivers, 1996). Yet each year, around 16 percent of U.S. teachers either move schools or leave the profession entirely, creating constant demand for new teachers, with disproportionate impacts in schools serving students of color or students experiencing poverty (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Ingersoll et al., 2019). Rates of teacher turnover are even more pronounced among early-career teachers. Nearly half of new teachers leave the classroom in their first five years, with 9 percent leaving in the first year (Ingersoll et al., 2018).

In Illinois, the average statewide teacher retention rate of 86 percent is on par nationally and stable (ISBE, 2020a); however, district rates range significantly across the state (ISBE, 2020c). Consistent with established literature, retention rates in Illinois are lower during teachers' early career. In 2018, retention rates for teachers with less than one, two, and three years of experience were 70, 76, and 79 percent, respectively. The retention rate of teachers in their first year in particular has increased. In 2020, retention rates for those same levels of experience were 74, 76, and 80 percent (ISBE, 2020c). The system proportionally loses more Black teachers than white teachers—retention rates for Black teachers ranged from 77 to 81 percent from 2018 to 2020 and was 85 percent for white teachers for the same period (ISBE, 2020c). In the context of growing research on the importance of students having the opportunity to be taught and mentored by teachers of the same race and cultural understanding, equity in teacher retention starting in the early years is directly relevant to equity in student learning (Carver-Thomas, 2018; Gold, 2020).

COVID impact on teacher preparation and the governor's executive order. As the COVID-19 pandemic hit and U.S. schools closed in March 2020, teacher candidates lost the opportunity to meet several credentialing requirements they typically complete in the spring, a situation that threatened to exacerbate the teacher shortage in Illinois. To mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 on teacher candidates and on district hiring, the governor of Illinois signed Executive Order (EO) 2020-31, exempting teacher

candidates from the student teaching practicum, the teaching performance assessment (edTPA), and subject matter tests if they had not completed those requirements before March 2020. These exemptions allowed the teacher candidates to receive their professional educator license.

Anticipating the acute challenges facing novice teachers when school opened either fully remote or hybrid in fall 2020 and given that many would have been shortchanged in their student teaching experience, the Illinois State Board of Education authorized \$6.5 million for the Illinois Virtual Instructional Coach and Building Mentor Program, leveraging federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act (2020) dollars.

Investing in teacher induction. The Illinois Virtual Instructional Coach and Building Mentor Program represents the most significant investment in new teacher induction in Illinois in some time. A 2002 state law requires a mentor for every first- and second-year teacher. That requirement is contingent upon universal funding, however, which has never been the case. Rather, “ISBE partially funds induction programs via a competitive grant process” (New Teacher Center, 2016). At the peak, Illinois funded \$14 million per year for induction, but by 2015–16, it was down to \$1 million per year (College of Education, Illinois State University, n.d.).

With continued federal stimulus funds, the Illinois Senate passed [Senate Bill 814](#) in April 2021, earmarking \$6 million for new teacher mentoring for the 2021–22 school year and establishing a state grant program for district-level induction and mentoring programs aligned with the [Illinois Culturally Responsive Teaching and Leading Standards](#) that will be incorporated into state teacher preparation programs by 2025.

Instructional Coaching: A Critical Strategy for New Teacher Induction and Retention

A growing evidence base substantiates instructional coaching as an effective strategy for teacher learning and student achievement. A recent meta-analysis of 60 causal studies of teacher coaching programs shows a strong effect of coaching on teacher instruction and student achievement (Kraft et al., 2018), with effect sizes of 0.49 standard deviations (*SD*) on instruction and 0.18 *SD* on achievement. Randomized controlled trials of the New Teacher Center’s (NTC’s) new teacher coaching model found overall positive effects on student achievement in English language arts and mathematics (Schmidt et al., 2020; WWC, 2018; Young et al., 2017). Studies on a set of major initiatives show clear correlations between coaching and increased student outcomes, as measured through standardized testing (Mangin & Dunsmore, 2015).

Challenging working conditions (e.g., working in isolation and lacking opportunities to collaborate with colleagues), lack of on-the-job training and quality support, and lack of quality support from school administrators and leaders are leading reasons teachers, especially those early in their career, leave the profession (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Ingersoll, 2001; Podolsky et al., 2016).

Personalized instructional coaching and mentoring can help build skills that directly address the most challenging aspects of teaching that novices face, help them feel less isolated and more valued, and provide perspective that their steep learning curve is normal. Taken together, this attention can lift up

new teachers' sense of efficacy, shore up retention, and promote a more stable teaching workforce in schools serving students from historically marginalized communities.

The remainder of this report provides an overview of the Illinois Virtual Instructional Coach and Building Mentor Program and implementation context, how key program components were implemented on the ground, factors influencing implementation, resulting outcomes, and implications for program continuation in 2021–22.

Overview of the Illinois Virtual Instructional Coach and Building Mentor Program

The Illinois Virtual Instructional Coach and Building Mentor Program aims to:

- Help first- and second-year teachers⁵ strengthen their professional practices;
- Acculturate to their school community and become familiar with local policies and expectations; and
- Increase new teachers' desire to remain in the profession.

This IEA-, IFT-, and CTU-led program is designed by teachers for teachers, based on stakeholder input, and enhances service to the unions' members. Local unions and district administrators partner to enroll in and implement the program.

After ISBE approval on September 30, 2020, IEA and IFT began recruiting districts, mentors, and virtual instructional coaches. Onboarding for all parties as well as coach and mentor training for the first wave of participants occurred through January 2021. The earliest matched virtual instructional coaches and new teachers began meeting at the end of January, with more matches completed in February. The Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) worked with Chicago Public Schools to identify where the program could best support new teachers since the district has multiple induction programs already in place. CTU joined in March and coaches and teachers in Chicago began meeting at the beginning of April. While coaches and mentors met with their new teachers through to the end of the school year, the implementation period was at most slightly more than four months and in many cases, shorter.

⁵ New to the profession or new to the state of Illinois

Virtual Instructional Coaching and Mentoring is the Primary Strategy to Achieve Teacher Outcomes

Under the program, to achieve the teacher outcomes listed above, each participating new teacher has access to a mentor in the same building and an instructional coach from another Illinois district with whom they work virtually.

Based on participant-completed profiles, program leaders match virtual instructional coaches with new teachers based on their teaching assignment, primarily on subject matter, grade level, or special programs. Where possible, coaches and teachers are also matched on region and racial/ethnic affinity. Virtual instructional coaches work with their assigned new teachers individually to help them tackle problems of practice, with new teachers guiding where they would like coaching support. Program expectations stipulate that coaches and new teachers meet weekly. Instructional coaches who have multiple new teachers can also bring them together to create learning groups.

Building mentors help the teacher(s) in their school feel welcomed, supported, and connected to their new school climate. District and local union administrators leading the implementation on the ground select the building mentors following guidance from the program team and have latitude in identifying the experienced teachers best suited as building mentors. Building mentors provide new teachers with a knowledgeable point person who can give them the inside scoop on how things get done, clarifying unwritten norms and rules, as well as helping them understand the many school and district policies they need to adhere to.

Virtual instructional coaches and building mentors have flexibility in defining how best to connect with their new teachers and to conduct coaching and mentoring activities that appropriately meet their teachers' expressed needs.

Virtual instructional coaches are matched by grade level or subject area to new teachers in other districts. They regularly meet with each teacher to provide personalized support.

Building mentors support new teachers in their building to acclimate them to school norms and routines, and to ensure that they do not feel culturally "lost at sea."

Virtual instructional Coaches and Mentors Receive Training to Improve Skills and Support New Teachers

Virtual instructional coaches and building mentors received ongoing support from the program team through training webinars and supporting materials. During an onboarding webinar, the program team introduced coaches and mentors to their roles and responsibilities and offered various supports.

Instructional coaches and mentors completed online training modules aligned to the Danielson Group's Framework for Teaching Clusters:

- Safety and Belonging - Clusters: Developing positive relationships, routines, and procedures; coaching focus: building trust in coaching relationships.
- Cultural Competence and Anti-Racism - Clusters: Developing positive relationships, collective responsibility; coaching focus: constructivist coaching (active listening and leading asset-based coaching conversations).
- Engaging Families and Communities - Clusters: Learning outcomes and instructional decision making, collective impact; coaching focus: aligning growth plans with goals (for student, school, teacher, team).

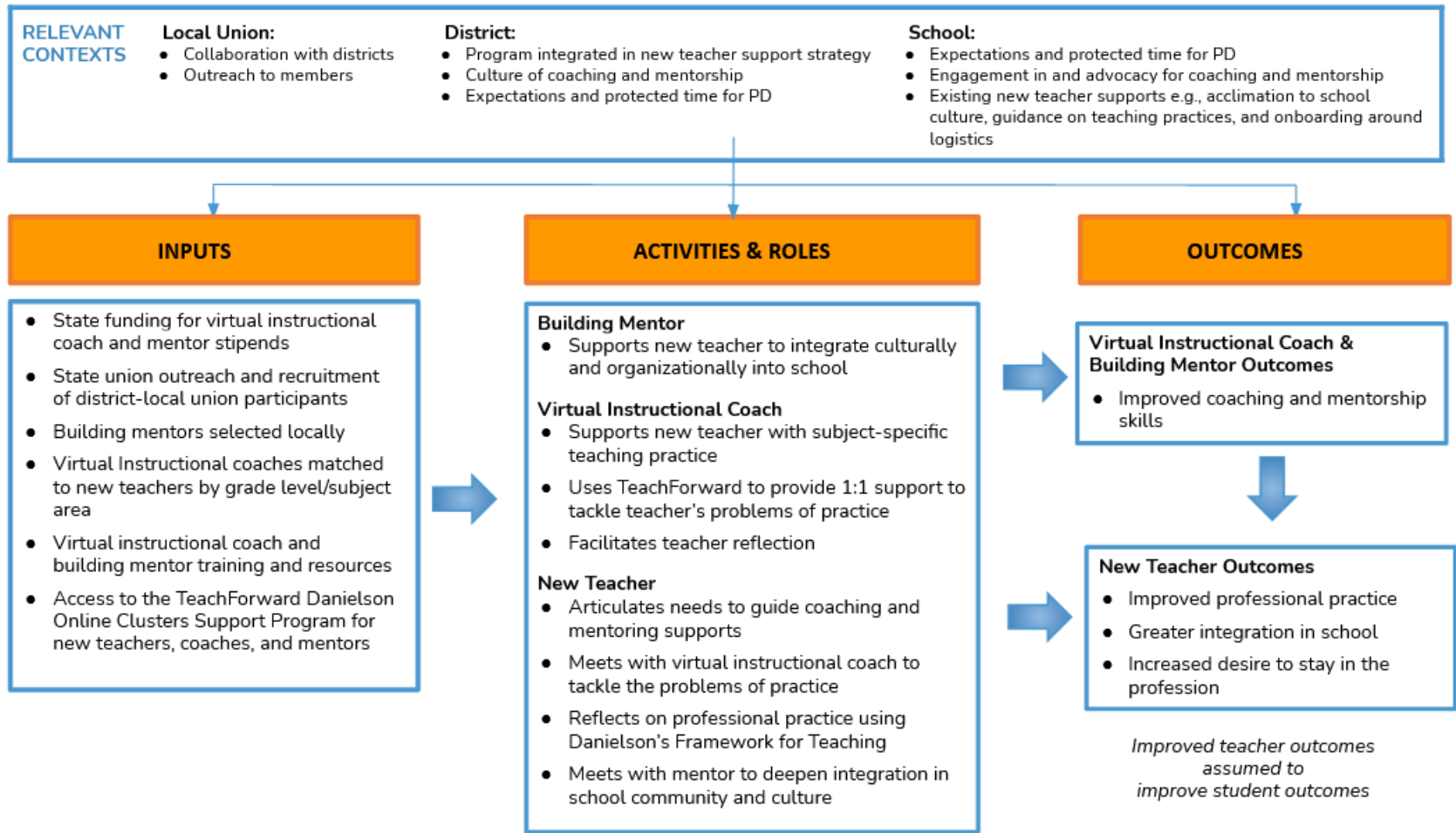
In addition, during the spring, virtual instructional coaches had the opportunity to participate in three optional live webinars on effective instructional coaching for novice teachers on the same topics.

As implementation progressed, the program team offered optional monthly forums for instructional coaches and mentors where they could ask questions and connect with other participating coaches and mentors.

An online platform, created and maintained by TeachForward, provided virtual instructional coaches, building mentors, and new teachers with access to the initial training modules (above) and a library of resources and toolkits organized around the Framework for Teaching that they could use for their conversations and activities. Instructional coaches also had access to monthly office hours with the Danielson Group to discuss their challenges, questions, and needs.

Exhibit 1 details the program logic model, including program inputs, expected roles and activities, targeted outcomes for coaches, mentors, and new teachers, and the major contextual factors influencing local implementation.

Exhibit 1. Illinois Virtual Instructional Coach and Building Mentor Program Logic Model



Evaluation Overview

Given the relatively short implementation period this year, the evaluation collected several key survey-based outcome measures and we more appropriately focused on learning about implementation factors to provide timely formative data and support continuous improvement.

Evaluation Questions

Following the logic model and reflecting the implementation context, we addressed the following key questions:

Implementation

1. To what extent was the program implemented as intended?
 - a. What factors affected program implementation and in what ways?

Satisfaction

2. To what extent do new teachers find the program valuable for their professional practice and workplace acculturation?
3. To what extent do virtual instructional coaches and building mentors find the program valuable in developing their coaching and mentoring skills?
4. What additional supports do new teachers, virtual instructional coaches, and building mentors need to benefit from the program?

Outcomes

5. To what extent does participation in the program help develop new teachers' professional practice? What role do virtual instructional coaches play?
6. To what extent does participating in the program help new teachers feel supported and oriented to the school culture and community? What role do building mentors play?
7. Do participating teachers intend to stay in the profession after the program?
8. To what extent do virtual instructional coaches' and building mentors' coaching skills improve as a result of participating in the program?

Data Sources

We used a range of qualitative and quantitative data to include diverse stakeholders' voices in addressing the evaluation questions (Exhibit 2).

We collected these data throughout the implementation period and provided formative feedback to IEA, IFT, and CTU after each data collection to inform their ongoing communication with and support for

coaches, mentors, and districts. We also drew out suggestions to facilitate IEA, IFT, and CTU’s refining the program and planning for a potential second implementation year.

See Appendix A for methods details, including sample sizes and response rates for data sources.

Exhibit 2. Data Sources, Samples, and Purposes

Data Source	Samples	Primary Purposes
Pre-implementation survey	All virtual instructional coaches, building mentors, and new teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reasons for participation ● Efficacy in skills and knowledge for respective roles
Post-implementation survey	All virtual instructional coaches, building mentors, new teachers, and school principals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Efficacy in skills and knowledge for respective roles ● Intention to remain in the profession (new teachers only) ● Implementation levels ● Value of key program components ● Facilitating factors and constraints in implementation
Mid-implementation snapshot survey	All virtual instructional coaches, building mentors, and new teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Temperature check on key component implementation for formative feedback
Interviews	Sample of district and union leaders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reasons for program participation ● Planning and implementation successes and challenges ● Feedback for program leaders ● Desire for program continuation next year
Interviews	Sample of virtual instructional coaches, building mentors, and new teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Nature of coaching and mentoring activities ● Challenges in participating in the program ● Program feedback ● Impact on skills and knowledge in respective role

Implementation

This section highlights the implementation of key components identified in the logic model (Exhibit 1), beginning with the program launch, district recruitment, new teacher participant characteristics, virtual instructional coach and building mentor background and training, and the frequency and nature of coaching activities.

Program Launch and Recruitment

As mentioned above, the Illinois Virtual Instructional Coach and Building Mentor Program was approved on September 30, 2020 and district recruitment began in the fall. This timing understandably resulted from the state approval process, but also missed a critical window for supporting new teachers when they encounter their first major challenges. The start of the school year is when new teachers dive into getting to know their students, establishing classroom routines, organizing their lessons, building relationships with new colleagues, and understanding the unwritten rules of the school. They face the exhaustion of planning and executing a particular lesson for the first time, worrying about engaging students, and understanding whether students have truly learned the material, to name but a few stressors virtually every novice teacher grapples with. Moreover, in 2020–21, new teachers faced the additional stress of teaching virtually and/or in-person during the pandemic.

With recruitment beginning after the school year started, program leaders found fewer districts able to commit to the program than initially anticipated. Even during the pandemic, some districts had in place the same supports that they typically provide to new teachers and therefore did not sense the need for another support program. Other districts decided not to add to new teachers' responsibilities under already extenuating circumstances. Some districts also reported that during the pandemic, they hired fewer new teachers than the state had projected. Within this context and while coaching and mentoring support may have been even more crucial for novices this year, the capacity at all levels of the district system to launch and implement a new program midyear was severely limited.

Despite these challenges, IEA, IFT, and later CTU successfully recruited 14 different districts across the state. Eleven districts were associated with IEA, two with IFT, and one district with CTU. These 14 participating districts, in collaboration with their local union, identified 75 building mentors for 113 novice teachers, spanning 66 different schools. Each mentor could support one to five teachers.

IEA, IFT, and CTU recruited and selected virtual instructional coaches in a separate process. With the exception of CPS and one other large district, instructional coaches served new teachers from districts other than their own. A total of 128 virtual instructional coaches were selected and onboarded.

Instructional coaches were assigned between one and three teachers each; however, with fewer districts than anticipated, some coaches did not have any new teacher matches. These coaches offer a potential pool for scaled-up implementation in 2021–22.

Exhibit 3 summarizes the number of participants IEA and IFT recruited by the end of January 2021, plus CTU and Chicago Public Schools, which joined in March. These participants were included in the evaluation. Although IEA and IFT continued discussions with districts that expressed interest through the end of the school year (and IFT onboarded two districts in April-May), we did not include participants that began later in the spring because the implementation period would have been too short to detect teacher outcomes.

Exhibit 3. Recruited Participants

	Participants
Districts	14
Schools	66
New teachers	113
Mentors	75
Instructional coaches	128

Note: IEA and IFT recruited as of January 2021 plus CTU participants joining in March
Source: Illinois Virtual Instructional Coach and Building Mentor Program rosters, 2021.

Reasons Behind District/Local Union Participation

Participating districts ranged from small (fewer than 100 students) to large (nearly 350,00 students), with most districts located in rural areas or large suburbs. The districts containing the most participating teachers were located in large suburbs (namely Plainfield and Indian Prairie) and, predictably, Chicago.

Boosting district capacity. The majority of districts that participated tended to have less capacity to support new teachers on their own, had already deemed new teacher supports as a priority, and/or had many “singleton” positions (i.e., teachers with no peers with the same teaching assignment in the district or school). The program gave those novices access to more experienced teachers from another district who could address questions about similar content and grade-level or subject-specific instructional strategies, and helped them feel less isolated as the only teacher with that teaching assignment in the district or school.

Local union leaders partnered with their district counterparts in launching the programs locally. Collaborative relationships between the local union and district leaders and common concern over new teachers’ professional learning and wellbeing catalyzed their willingness to implement a new program midyear.

Spotlight on a School with “Singleton” Positions

Greg (a pseudonym), the principal of a rural school with fewer than a dozen total staff members, shared the importance of access to virtual instructional coaching for schools like his with “singleton” teaching positions. *“Obviously, programs like this are very helpful. I have one English teacher, one science teacher, one math teacher, etc. They can’t meet [by subject area] and say, ‘hey, what are you doing’? There’s one of them, so I have to take advantage of this program.”*

This past school year, Greg hired a new teacher for the first time in six years. Without any existing strategies or support in place to onboard and consistently support the novice teacher, he jumped on the opportunity to connect his new hire with outside support through the union-led program. *“This situation, for curriculum and student management and so on, has been really helpful for [my new teacher].”*

Appeal of union-designed and -led teacher supports. Both district administrators and union leaders shared that a union-designed and -led program had the advantage of being seen by teachers as “by them, for them” in a way that district initiatives are not. This teacher ownership of the program has the potential to appeal to new teachers and support buy-in. As one union leader shared: *“the fact that I am able to put a stamp of approval on it, and that [teachers] were part and parcel of the development of it, spoke to a lot of teachers.... This [program] is going to be something that will be worthwhile.”* Another local union leader thought that the program *“shows that the union values their [new teachers’] time and craft, and wants to help them get better at it, and wants to give them that support in those first years.... We talked about how mentor programs are important, and here we are actually doing something about it to make sure that it is actually available....”*

District demand for 2021–22. IEA and IFT continued recruiting districts throughout the school year. The Chicago Teachers Union and Chicago Public Schools signed on by March 2021 and participating instructional coaches and teachers began meeting in April for the remainder of the school year. Participating districts advocated for the program to continue. As one district leader expressed: *“I think the state should find a way to keep this.... I have a decent-sized district, and I have some resources.... [But] there are many districts that don’t have the resources, [they] are too small, they just don’t have the ability to pull this off... I think the value is there.”* Through the spring, 33 districts signaled interest in participating beginning in fall 2021.

From both the district and union perspectives, having the summer to plan, recruit building mentors, and set new teachers’ expectations for working with a virtual instructional coach is necessary for a successful program. And crucially, beginning the program before school starts means offering coaching and mentoring when new teachers face the realities of the classroom and teaching alone for the first time—navigating their new workplace and community cultures; understanding school and district operating procedures; establishing classroom routines, norms, and culture; learning the relevant content

standards and curriculum; lesson planning; and assessing students’ learning the standards. Reflecting on the program at the end of the school year, one teacher shared, *“This should have started at the beginning of the year—not in February. By the time it started, I had already figured out what I needed.”*

New Teacher Participation

Participating new teachers were fairly evenly distributed across grade levels, with slightly more teachers drawn from grades K through 2, and 9 through 12. Around one-fourth of participating teachers taught a self-contained class with all core subjects (27%), while the next-highest represented subjects were English language arts (ELA), special education, and math (24%, 22%, and 19%, respectively). While 27 percent of surveyed teachers had prior classroom experience as long-term substitute teachers, 60 percent were full-time teachers of record for the first time in 2020–21 (Exhibit 4).

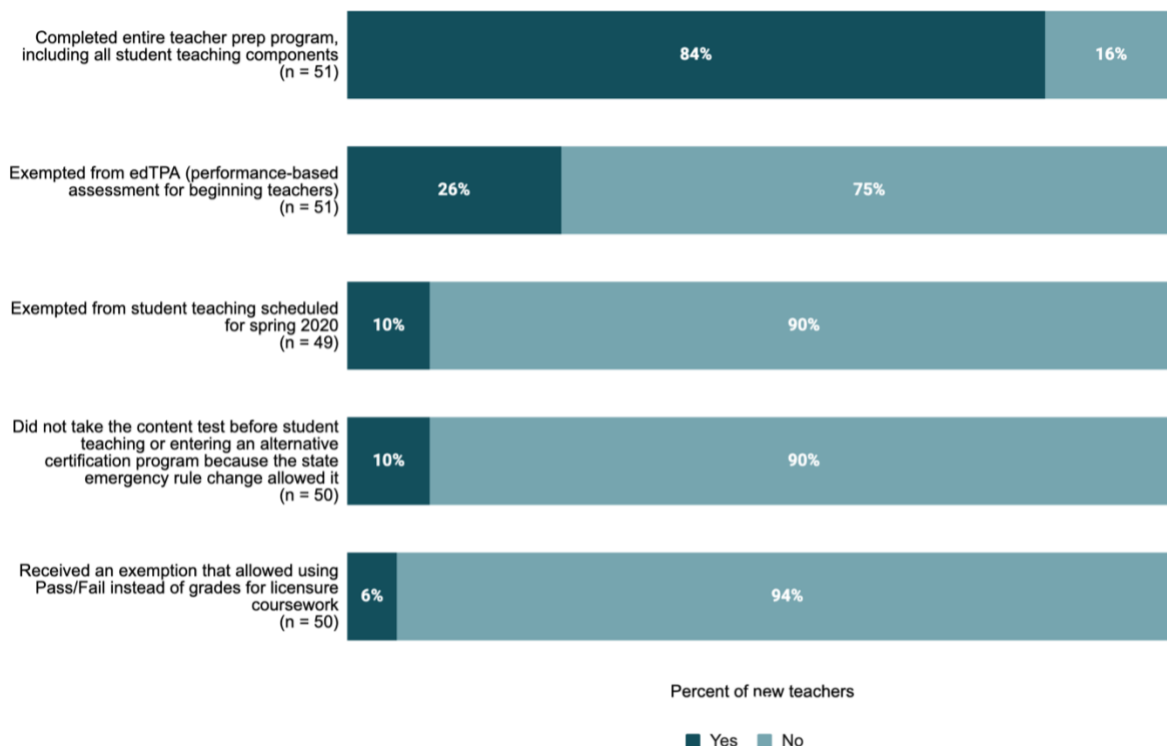
Exhibit 4. Participating New Teacher Characteristics

	New teachers (n = 54)
This is my first year as the full-time teacher of record	60%
I am currently enrolled in an alternative certification program	2%
I previously served as a long-term substitute teacher	27%
I had a previous career in another field and have recently switched to a teaching career	28%

Source: Teacher pre- and post-implementation surveys, November 2020 and May 2021.

A majority of new teachers (84%) enrolled in the Illinois Virtual Instructional Coach and Building Mentor Program were able to complete their licensure requirements before schools closed in March 2020 (Exhibit 5). As discussed above, the governor’s executive order exempted teaching candidates from certain requirements to receive their preliminary credential. A sizable percentage of participants received exemptions, notably from the edTPA (26%), student teaching (10%), and content tests (10%).

Exhibit 5. Teacher Preparation Completions and Exemptions



Note: Due to rounding, some totals may be over 100%.

Source: Teacher pre- and post-implementation surveys, November 2020 and May 2021.

Virtual Instructional Coach and Building Mentor Backgrounds

Virtual instructional coach background. Virtual instructional coaches' backgrounds, levels of experience, and motivations vary. More than 80 percent of recruited instructional coaches are classroom teachers, the majority of whom teach a self-contained class with all subjects represented, typical of elementary school. The most common single subject coaches teach is ELA.

A large majority of coaches described enjoyment in working with new teachers (84%) as well as a desire to give back to the teaching profession (74%) as primary reasons for participating. Coaches also sought leadership responsibilities outside of the classroom, improved coaching abilities, and extra pay (48%, 32%, and 29%, respectively). Notably, virtual instructional coaches came into the program with different levels of coaching experience. For 43 percent, this program was their first formal coaching experience, while 30 percent had previously accrued more than five years of coaching experience. This range in experience has implications for the types of differentiated supports that coaches might need.

Building mentor background. Like their instructional coach counterparts, building mentors primarily joined the program from the classroom. Nearly three-quarters of mentors were also classroom teachers (74%). Similar to virtual instructional coaches, mentors who were also classroom teachers primarily taught ELA and a self-contained class (30% each), and took their role because they enjoy working with

new teachers (88%) and want to give back to the teaching profession (62%). In the words of one building mentor: *“For me, one of the easiest ways to avoid becoming stagnant in my career and to keep the joy alive, is that enthusiasm [of new teachers].”*

More than a third of building mentors came into the program with at least one year of instructional coaching experience (36%), whether informally or through a formal coaching program. Almost two-thirds had no prior instructional coaching experience, and while mentoring is not the same as instructional coaching, these results indicate inexperienced building mentors may need specific supports from the program.

Virtual Instructional Coach and Building Mentor Training

A majority of surveyed virtual instructional coaches and building mentors found multiple support and training components of the program useful for their roles.

IEA, IFT, and CTU support. At the beginning of program implementation, IEA, IFT, and CTU provided an orientation and initial training, which 93% of instructional coaches and 80% of mentors found moderately or very useful (Exhibit 6). Throughout the program, IEA, IFT, and CTU hosted optional meetings or forums for each role type; 86% of coaches and 67% of mentors reported such meetings to be moderately or very useful (Exhibit 6).

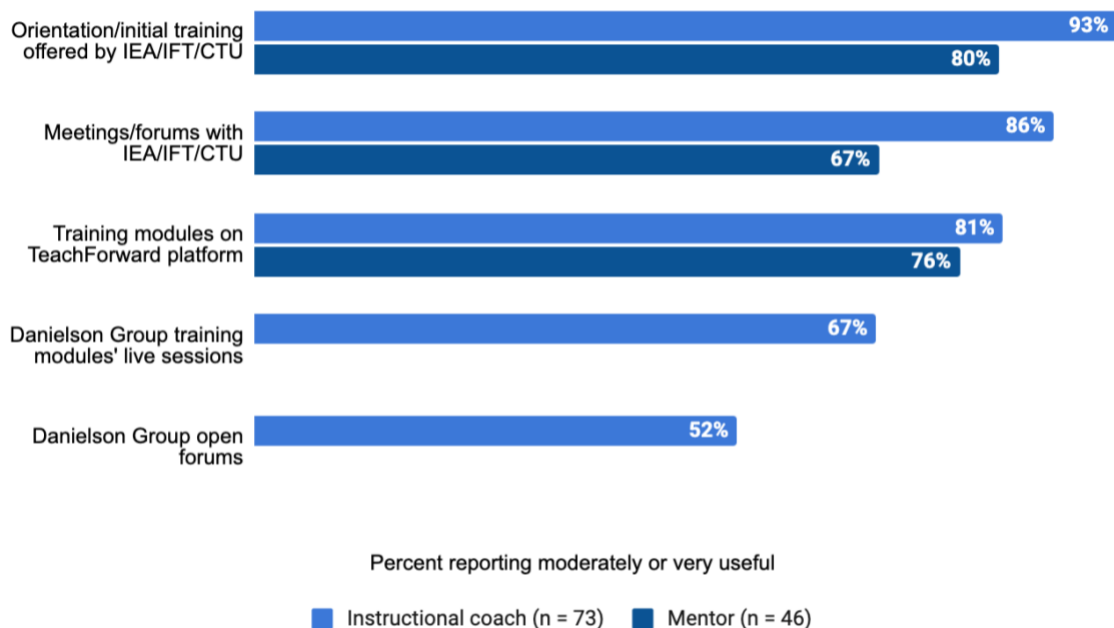
Training modules. Virtual instructional coaches and building mentors were expected to complete three modules (on building relationships, developing cultural competence, and engaging families) on the TeachForward platform as part of their professional learning. Each module includes numerous resources (e.g., videos, presentation slides, activities, strategies) about the topic. Most coaches (81%) and mentors (76%) found the modules to be moderately or very useful for their role (Exhibit 6).

Some virtual instructional coaches shared that the platform content could be more useful with focused guidance on how to apply the theories in practice, as this coach described:

“The modules are good for themes, like you have to have good relationships with your kids, you have to be culturally competent, but teachers also need help with ‘How do I do procedures? How do I do rules? How do I do reinforcement? How do I write a behavior plan? [to connect] the big themes and the day-to-day [to answer] ‘how do you get through this job?’”

Danielson Group live training sessions. The Danielson Group offered virtual instructional coaches optional live training sessions to accompany the TeachForward modules discussed above, which two-thirds rated moderately or very useful (Exhibit 6). Open forums offered by the Danielson Group were also useful to approximately half of the coaches (Exhibit 6).

Exhibit 6. Usefulness of program training for instructional coaches and mentors



Note: Virtual instructional coaches had access to live sessions of the Danielson Group training modules as well as the open forums.

Source: Virtual Instructional Coach and Building Mentor post-implementation surveys, May 2021.

Coaching/Mentoring Assignments and Matching

Building mentors can support multiple new teachers in their respective schools, up to six each. They are selected and assigned based on criteria that the district and local union set. By contrast, state unions matched the instructional coaches they selected to new participants based primarily on teaching assignment, region, and where possible racial/ethnic affinity. Approximately two-thirds of instructional coaches (70%) and mentors (67%) supported two teachers. A very small percentage (3–7%) of coaches and mentors served one teacher. The maximum number of teachers assigned to a mentor was six. (See Appendix B, Exhibits B-1 and B-2 for the full distribution of the number of new teachers that virtual instructional coaches and building mentors supported.)

Partly as a result of the high numbers of coaches IEA, IFT, and CTU recruited providing adequate flexibility in matching, new teachers generally reported being well matched with their virtual instructional coaches on grade level and/or subject area (95%) and on serving similar student populations (89%). As one teacher highlighted: *“The strength of the program is no doubt the proper pairing of [the mentor and the coach] with the new teachers, and I was so fortunate to be placed with these two rock stars.”*

However, because virtual instructional coaches need to be recruited and trained in time to start serving new teachers as soon as they come onboard, and because teacher assignments and courses of study as

well as other contextual factors can vary widely, exact matches all the time aren't realistic. A few teachers reported they were paired with coaches who did not share the same specialized teaching background. For example, one teacher shared: *"I wish I was paired with a virtual coach who knows a little bit more about what it means to be a bilingual teacher. [My instructional coach] is phenomenal, but some of the tips that [were] given to me cannot be applied to my group of students."* To supplement the support that she received from her coach, the teacher's building mentor connected her with another bilingual teacher within the school community who could provide guidance on instructional strategies unique to a bilingual classroom.

While teacher-virtual instructional coach matches were generally functional, some instructional coaches reported wanting more contextual information about the new teachers' districts or schools to align coaching supports and district/school goals. Many coaches began their collaboration with new teachers by asking questions to get to know them and their circumstances. However, in some cases, new teachers do not yet themselves have answers to contextual questions; in others, coaches might not feel comfortable asking certain questions before they have established a trusting relationship with the teacher. For example, one virtual instructional coach relayed:

"I don't know how much diversity [there is], what [the staff's] views are, how culturally responsive they are. Those kinds of things that are very sensitive to talk about. I have no starting point because I don't know about what they work on there. So, the way I tried to get around that was by trying to ask [the teacher] different questions, but certain things I feel are a little sensitive when I'm just starting with somebody."

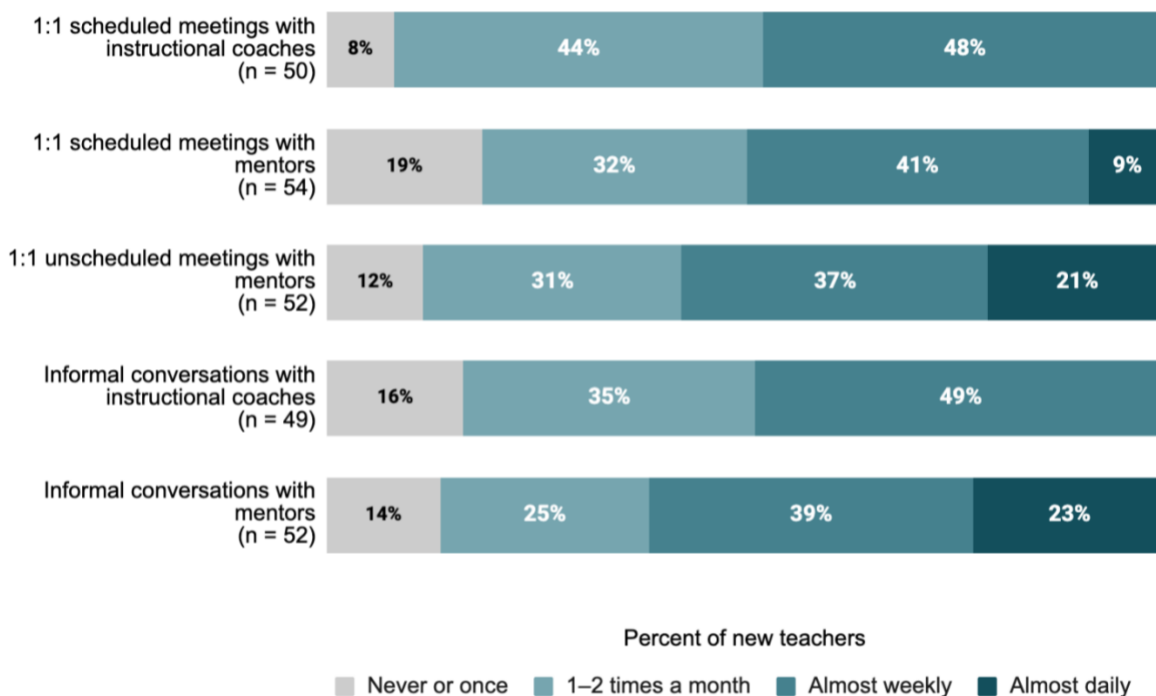
Instructionally, too, coaches wanted more assurance that their supports are aligned with the priorities in the new teachers' school and district to avoid confusing the teacher and generating conflicting or incoherent guidance. Strategies for the program team to share relevant contextual information gleaned from the district recruitment process, facilitating coach and mentor communication (discussed in more depth below), and protocols for coaches to establish rapport and elicit some contextual information may help virtual instructional coaches tighten the match to their teachers.

Frequency of New Teacher Meetings with Virtual Instructional Coaches and Building Mentors

In spite of the many different schedule configurations this year and in some districts, changes in the attendance model from remote to hybrid during the spring, participants reported that they had enough time to meet for coaching and mentoring activities. The majority of new teachers (80%) reported being able to find time to work with their virtual instructional coach. Nearly half of the teachers were able to interact with their instructional coaches almost weekly in scheduled one-on-one meetings (48%) or in informal communication (49%) (Exhibit 7). Only 8 percent of teachers reported interacting with their instructional coaches once or not at all in one-on-one scheduled meetings.

New teachers reported engaging more frequently with their building mentors, with approximately one-fifth interacting almost daily in unscheduled one-on-one meetings (21%) or informal conversations (23%), and another 37 to 39 percent doing so almost weekly (Exhibit 7). Additionally, 41 percent of new teachers reported engaging with their mentors in scheduled one-on-one meetings almost weekly. Nineteen percent of teachers had scheduled one-on-one meetings with their mentors only once or not at all.

Exhibit 7. Frequency of New Teachers’ Meetings with Their Instructional Coaches and Mentors



Source: Teacher post-implementation survey, May 2021.

Although new teachers did meet, coaches and mentors were aware of how overloaded and overwhelmed the new teachers were, and strove to reduce any burden associated with coaching and mentoring activities. The nature of instructional coaching and mentoring discussed next captures these nuances.

Nature of Virtual Instructional Coaching and Mentoring

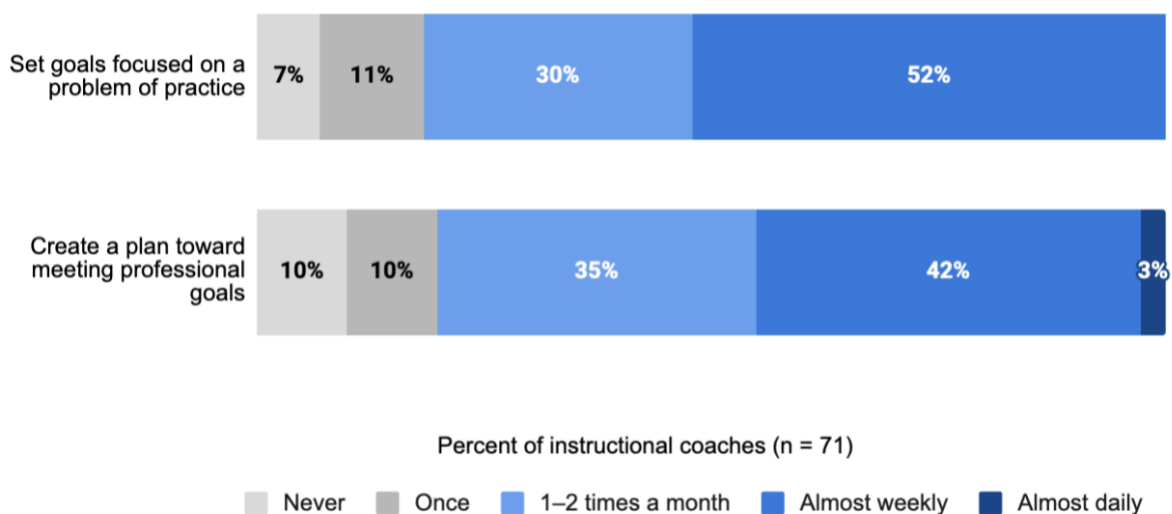
Most coaches and teachers developed individual coaching plans to guide their collaboration. Program expectations included having new teachers and virtual instructional coaches develop goals and a personalized coaching plan to reach those goals. Half (52%) of coaches surveyed reported setting goals focused on a problem of practice with new teachers almost weekly, with another 30 percent doing so 1–2 times per month (Exhibit 8). Mirroring these results, almost half (45%) of coaches reported that they were able to create a plan with new teachers toward meeting professional goals almost weekly or more

often, with one-third (35%) also doing so 1–2 times a month. A large majority (86–88%) of coaches reported that these activities were moderately or very important in supporting teachers.

A notable percentage (17%), however, reported that developing individual coaching plans to address the specific needs of teachers was moderately or very challenging. When the coaching began in late winter/early spring, teachers already had processes for classroom management, student engagement, lesson planning, and other instructional aspects. Undoubtedly, they could improve, but coaches were also mindful about not being overly disruptive and the need to establish relationships and buy-in to understand how to offer support to new teachers. A formal coaching plan sometimes worked against gaining teacher buy-in, as this coach explained:

“I had to figure out a more comfortable approach in terms of strategies for coaching.... I was realizing that sometimes coaching feels like it’s too formal right now, so I was trying a more organic approach and conversation.... A formal meeting feels like a homework assignment rather than catered help, compulsory rather than something that will help [the teacher]. [A conversational] approach is easier for that relationship.”

Exhibit 8. Frequency of Setting Coaching Goals and Plans



Source: Virtual Instructional Coach post-implementation survey, May 2021.

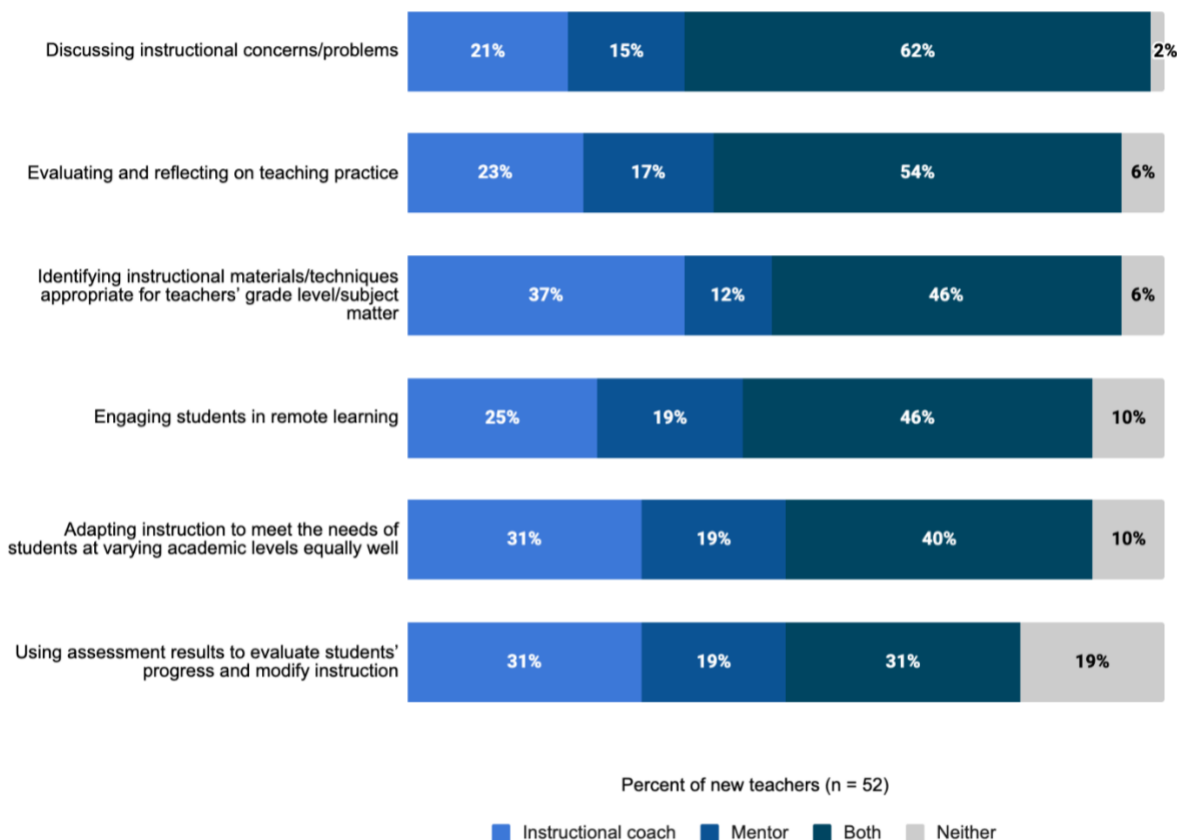
New teachers turned to both virtual instructional coaches and building mentors for a wide range of instructional supports. The program distinguished virtual instructional coach roles from that of building mentors by designating subject-specific concerns for coaches and school and district policy and culture to mentors from the new teachers’ respective buildings. The act of teaching, though, necessarily integrates knowledge about content, pedagogy, and student learning and development; is situated within student-teacher relationships, classroom culture, school culture; and is governed by school,

district, and state policy. Grasping these dynamics is understandably a steep learning curve for many new teachers.

Thus, it is notable the extent to which new teachers went to both their virtual instructional coaches and mentors across the wide range of supports we surveyed them on (Exhibits 9 and 10). On instructional supports, a larger percentage of new teachers discussed their questions with both coaches and mentors compared to teachers who chose to do so with either their coach or mentor. From 40 to 62 percent of new teachers reported discussing instructional concerns, evaluating and reflecting on their teaching practice, identifying grade- or subject-appropriate instructional materials and techniques, engaging students in remote learning, and adapting instruction to meet the students' different academic levels with both coaches and mentors (Exhibit 9). Twenty-one to 37 percent did so with only virtual instructional coaches and even fewer with building mentors. These instructional aspects are ones for which the virtual instructional coaches are intended to be new teachers' primary supports. New teachers likely go to both coaches and mentors on these topics because their questions are pressing, they are looking for as much help as possible, and they therefore seek input from many quarters.

The proximity of building mentors, their pre-existing relationships in some cases, and continued relationship-building means that in all likelihood, new teachers will continue to call on building mentors for instructional concerns—regardless of whether they have the same teaching assignment—as well as for the nuts and bolts of the local school community. Addressing this likely overlap will help coaches and mentors clarify their roles and see the need to communicate periodically when they are supporting their new teachers.

Exhibit 9. Instructional Supports New Teachers Received from Instructional Coach and/or Mentor

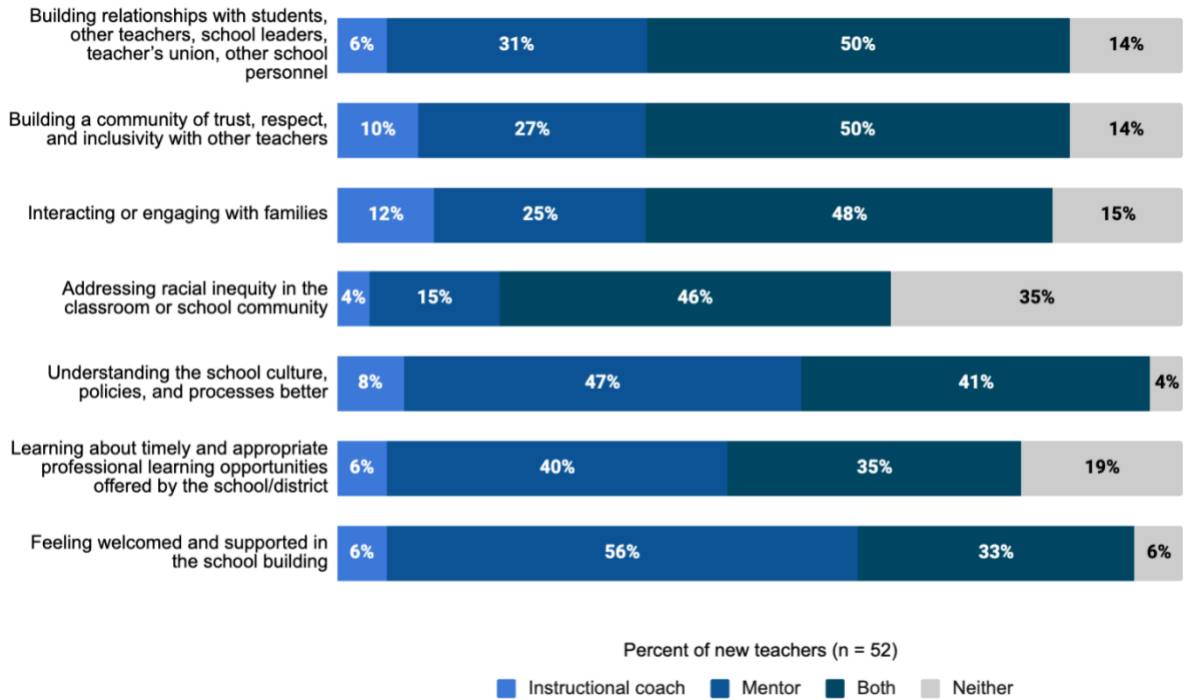


Source: Teacher post-implementation survey, May 2021.

As with instructional supports, new teachers turned to both coaches and mentors for certain school-based supports. Building mentors have the contextual knowledge of local policies, community, and norms and therefore, not surprisingly, very few teachers went to their virtual instructional coaches only for school-related supports (Exhibit 10). Interestingly, approximately half of new teachers did turn to both mentors and coaches for supports around establishing relationships with students, colleagues, and other school staff (50%); building a trusting, respectful, and inclusive community with other teachers (50%); engaging with families (48%); and addressing racial inequity in the classroom or school community (46%).

The building mentor role was more distinctive for aspects of school integration. As designed, new teachers seem to recognize the specific role building mentors can play in helping them acculturate to their new workplace. Specifically, teachers reported that their mentor primarily helped them feel welcomed and supported in the school building (56%, plus 33% who went to both mentors and coaches); better understand their school's culture, policies, and practices (47%, plus 41%); and learn about school or district professional development opportunities (40%, plus 35%) (Exhibit 10).

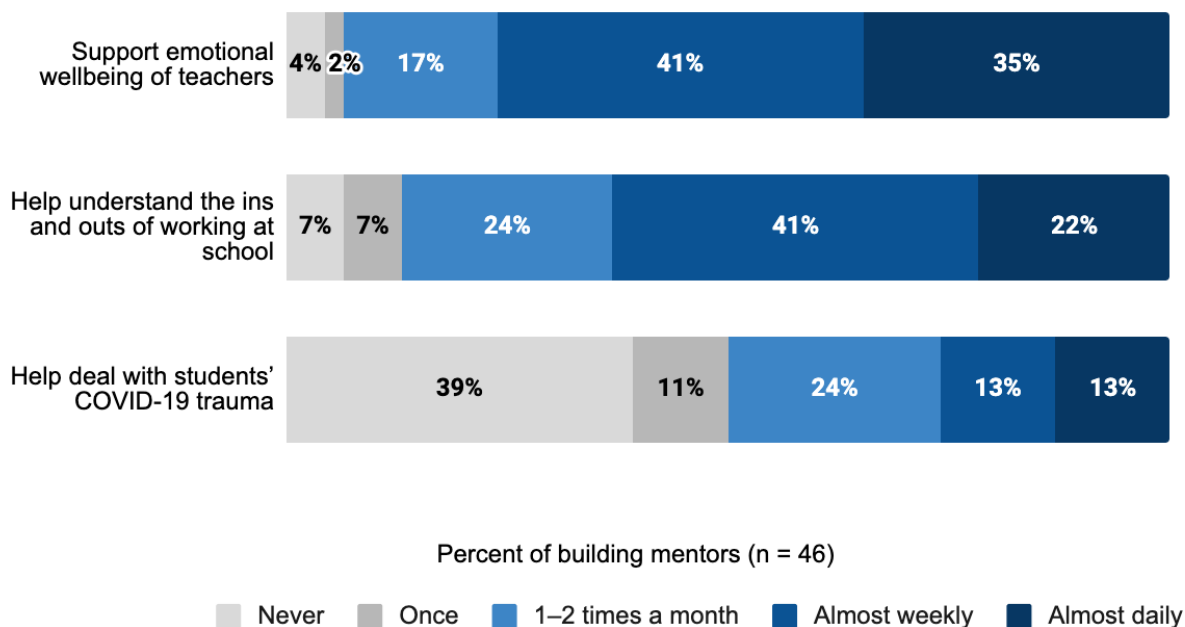
Exhibit 10. School Community and Culture Supports New Teachers Received from Instructional Coach and/or Mentor



Source: Teacher post-implementation survey, May 2021.

Building mentors also reported great emphasis on supporting teachers’ emotional wellbeing (76% doing so almost weekly or more often) and helping them understand the ins and outs of working at their school (63%), indicating the holistic nature of supports mentors provide new teachers (Exhibit 11). Building mentors less frequently supported new teachers with dealing with COVID-related trauma, likely reflecting their relative lack of preparedness to address it and new teachers’ identifying more typical first-year concerns. However, as students return in the fall, many teachers may need better understanding of and skills in trauma-informed approaches to best serve their students.

Exhibit 11. Frequency of Select Building Mentor Supports for Teachers



Source: Building Mentor post-implementation survey, May 2021.

Virtual instructional coaches valued the resources available on TeachForward, but used other platforms to facilitate coaching. Three-quarters (78%) of virtual instructional coaches agreed or strongly agreed that the content included in the TeachForward platform was helpful overall. Nonetheless, instructional coaches underutilized the platform for multiple reasons, including usability, overload with many new technology platforms this year, and a perception that the platform is transaction- rather than relationship-based. A small majority (61%) of coaches reported that using the TeachForward platform was easy, while a sizable 39 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Most instructional coaches interviewed found navigation on the platform challenging and wanted the resources organized so that they can easily understand what is available. They shared that it was easier to find something of similar quality and relevance for their grade level and content area through a simple online search. As one coach explained:

“It would have been helpful if there were kind of a more clear outline or flow. There was just like a whole bunch of stuff in the module that we needed to do.... I was like trying to go down the [list of] things, but then the folder has a folder which has a folder. And so just making sure that I previewed and looked at all the information I needed to look at was sometimes a little bit overwhelming.”

In part, as mentioned above, coaches and new teachers alike faced demands to adopt a plethora of technology tools for distance learning. The TeachForward platform unfortunately fell on top of these

ongoing technology-based pressures and adopting a new platform midyear and learning to navigate yet another platform frustrated both instructional coaches and new teachers.

Beyond pandemic-related circumstances, however, virtual instructional coaches raised questions about the platform as a vehicle for conducting coaching. For almost half of the coaches, using the platform to facilitate coaching (e.g., assign activities to teachers and provide feedback) was moderately or very challenging. They did not turn to the platform for video conferencing, and the platform at the time didn't lend itself to ad hoc communications, which are more likely via text or phone calls. (Current plans include developing an asynchronous chat function.) More substantively, the platform is primarily designed to allow coaches to build out coaching activities based on teachers' needs and using resources in the library. Coaches then "assign" learning activities for the new teachers. For virtual instructional coaches struggling to establish a connection and trust with their new teachers, assigning tasks too soon seemed to undermine their relationship-building efforts. As one coach explained: The platform is *"very distinctively different. If I'm coaching, I would do it over [video].... The platform is more task-based rather than experiential.... We have more of an interpersonal structure."*

Thus, most participants seldom used the platform outside of completing modules, attending webinars, and completing surveys for this evaluation. Most virtual instructional coaches didn't assign activities or tasks to teachers to avoid giving overwhelmed teachers more "homework." Rather than using the platform as a one-stop shop to manage all their coaching activities, virtual instructional coaches turned to tools like Google Docs to take meeting notes and keep track of next steps, and used common video conferencing tools with teachers outside of the platform. Additional platform functionality planned for fall 2021, combined with more time for relationship-building in a yearlong implementation, may allow coaches and new teachers to consolidate their coaching work in TeachForward.

Key Factors Influencing Implementation

In the abbreviated implementation period, putting in place the many program elements—district and instructional coach recruitment, coach and mentor training, coach-teacher matching, TeachForward platform and resources—and getting coaching and mentoring activities underway was a significant accomplishment for the program team and all involved. Participants expressed gratitude that teachers could begin benefitting from the program during the 2020–21 school year. As one district administrator put it: *"I was blown away that this was a possibility, particularly this year [since] the lion's share of my new teachers hadn't gone through teacher preparation. It was imperative. This year is a doozy to start your career in education, when you don't have models to base it off of."*

As we have already referenced, the midyear start had many implications for the program. An August/September start for 2021–22 will ameliorate many of the concerns that arose this year. Further learning about the factors, beyond the midyear start, that most influenced implementation will help refine the program and set the stage for a smoother implementation in 2021–22. We describe these key factors in this section.

Voluntary teacher participation helps generate more teacher buy-in. In some cases, the local coaching program did not garner sufficient new teacher support. As explained previously, in some cases, coaching supports coming midyear were difficult for new teachers to fit in, especially if they had already identified other supports. In other cases, teachers had little say in their participation, did not receive clear expectations, or were told by their district or building administrators that their participation was mandatory. For example, one coach explained that the new teacher *“got the email to join [and] it felt like it was another thing [she] had to do. [I told her] ‘I get it.’”* Overall, only one-third (31%) of teachers cited gaining guidance from an instructional coach as their primary motivator for participating. By contrast, slightly more than half (55%) of surveyed teachers reported that they were required to participate in the program as new teachers and 14 percent were encouraged by their principal or union representative to participate.

When new teachers volunteer to participate in the program with a clear understanding of what it involves and how it is aligned with instructional and curricular goals, they are more likely to build relationships with coaches and actively collaborate with them. *“She [new teacher] was really bombarded with work and had other supports within her building, so meeting with me was not a priority. I don’t think that she volunteered to participate,”* explained a virtual instructional coach.

Sufficient time and administrator support facilitates meaningful participation of teachers, coaches, and mentors in the program. As already discussed, an overwhelming majority of virtual instructional coaches, building mentors, and new teachers reported being able to find time to work with one another despite the challenges of this past school year. More than 90 percent of teachers reported that the amount of time spent with their virtual instructional coaches and building mentors was worthwhile and sufficient to meet their teaching needs and learn about school culture and processes.

Nonetheless, time is arguably the most precious resource educators have. New teachers typically have the same full load as veteran teachers while being expected to learn the job. Generally, they do not have reduced duties that give them time to improve their craft. Among new teachers surveyed, about half (53%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that their school administrators reduced their duties to create time for them to meet with their mentor. The other half seemed to report some accommodations.

From the perspective of instructional coaches and mentors, nearly half (46%) of instructional coaches said they needed more time to support teachers effectively. Mentors being in the same schools as new teachers, however, allowed for informal interactions that provided some time to connect. Shared one mentor: *“The challenges I encountered were in regards to time outside of the school day.... Getting our schedules to mesh was extremely difficult for an hour at a time, but we met on the fly daily.”*

The program team might be able to alleviate some time pressure by convening district and local union leaders and school administrators to share how some are making time for teachers to receive the instructional coaching and mentoring supports they need.

Clear communication around virtual instructional coach and mentor roles helps teachers receive better support. Guidance and communication for all participants around the latitude and flexibility of roles and responsibilities of virtual instructional coaches and building mentors is another factor that can influence the implementation of the program. Clearly communicating coaches’ and mentors’ roles and

responsibilities would help teachers understand what coaching and mentoring is and is not, and how they can find the best support. Although it is likely new teachers would continue to go to both coaches and mentors for the wide range of supports they need, as discussed above, greater understanding of how their coaches and mentors can distinctively help them might streamline and deepen their collaboration with each. This issue is more salient for the virtual instructional coach role as 21 percent of instructional coaches disagreed (versus only 7% of mentors) that their teachers knew what their respective role was.

While the vast majority of building mentors (98%) and virtual instructional coaches (88%) agreed or strongly agreed that they knew what was expected of them in their respective roles, a targeted opportunity exists to help the minority of virtual instructional coaches better understand the expectations. When instructional coaches and mentors receive clear information about the program (e.g., number of times per week to meet with a teacher, how to start connecting with teachers), they feel more confident to start their collaboration with new teachers, particularly those who don't have previous coaching or mentoring experience.

Going more beyond general descriptions of roles and responsibilities, approximately one-fifth of virtual instructional coaches and building mentors indicated that knowing how to determine the coaching or mentoring activities to work on with their new teachers was moderately or very challenging for them. For example, although coaches appreciated the breadth of resources provided on the TeachForward platform, they were unclear about how the platform related to their day-to-day work with teachers and how to narrow down the resources to a manageable amount to work from.

In seeking guidance, less experienced instructional coaches found insights from more seasoned coaches valuable. These collaborations could happen as breakout sessions during training webinars or in virtual meetings that some coaches proactively organized. *"This is a new teacher in this crazy year. She probably feels she is keeping her head out of water anyway. And this [program] is another thing that she has to do. So, how am I go[ing to] do something that is worth her time? My conversation with more seasoned coaches yesterday helped me figure out how I should do that,"* explained an instructional coach.

Looking ahead, receiving guidance around the coach and mentor roles and responsibilities can be especially helpful at the beginning of the school year when coaches and mentors start connecting with teachers. It can help virtual instructional coaches and building mentors know where to focus their efforts or how to guide new teachers in tackling their challenges and achieving their goals, in addition to helping new teachers understand what the program is and is not.

Providing virtual instructional coaches and building mentors with latitude in their roles helps them support teachers in more personalized ways. Although a general need for guidance around roles and responsibilities is present, many virtual instructional coaches and building mentors appreciated the opportunity to exercise their professional judgment and a certain level of autonomy. The latitude enabled instructional coaches to personalize support to new teachers based on their needs, goals, and challenges. *"It's kind of been a little bit open-ended to where it depends on your teachers' needs. I appreciate that because everybody needs a lot of different things,"* explained one virtual instructional coach.

Providing guidance around coach-mentor collaboration ensures that everyone works toward the same goal. Ensuring that virtual instructional coaches and building mentors play complementary roles likely requires some communication and collaboration between them. It wasn't always clear to instructional coaches and mentors if or how they should interact and collaborate with one another. About half of instructional coaches and mentors (44% and 51% respectively) reported interacting with one another, and around one-fifth of instructional coaches (19%) and mentors (22%) reported it was quite or very important to do so. Communication between the coach and mentor helped them coordinate their support, understand the division of labor, and "ensure that everyone is working toward the same goal."

However, about one-third of virtual instructional coaches (38%) and building mentors (33%) stated that their collaboration to coordinate support for new teachers was moderately or very challenging. Instructional coaches and mentors asked for direction on who should initiate communication and what types of coordination are expected throughout the implementation period.

Having access to both virtual instructional coaches and building mentors provides new teachers with both insider and outsider perspectives and promotes the non-evaluative aspect of the program.

"I think that the biggest benefit of this [program is having] someone to talk to that's not in the building.... If I go to [my virtual instructional coach] and say I got this kid, she doesn't already have any preconceived notions about who he is, what he does, so it's nice to have somebody that I can talk to about those things. It's been a super benefit if I want to talk about what's going on in the school." – New Teacher

Many interviewed participants shared that it was beneficial to have the building mentor role carved out as separate from, yet complementary to, the virtual instructional coach position. New teachers need support from a coach who has experience teaching the same subject area and grade level—experience and expertise that may not always be available within the school building. At the same time, an outside coach cannot provide support about the specific school culture, thus underscoring the crucial role of the building mentor. Even when one teacher in a school is qualified for both coaching and mentoring roles, they might not always be able to make time for both instructional support and cultural integration. Splitting the role between two people means that neither the coach nor the mentor has too much on their plate to handle while teaching full-time. "Since I did not have to mentor instructionally, I was more effective in my focus on building, administration, staff issues, and other pertinent information, such as evaluations, professional teaching standards and responsibilities," explained a building mentor.

Additionally, having two seasoned teachers to turn to can provide the new teacher with both "insider" and "outsider" perspectives: "This is a great resource for new teachers. It allows them to work closely with a building mentor, but also pairs them up with someone outside of the district. This allows the new teacher to see different perspectives," shared a principal. Since the instructional coach is removed from district and school politics and does not have established relationships with staff at the new teacher's building, they are able to provide an outside perspective without bringing in biases or preconceptions about building staff, students, or history. For new teachers who are often overwhelmed, this distance provides a safe, non-evaluative space to share grievances and gain perspective. As such, all new

teachers (100%) agreed or strongly agreed that the program provided a safe, non-evaluative environment where they could discuss their instructional challenges.

Prioritizing relationship building during initial meetings with teachers allows coaches to build teacher buy-in and better personalize their support. Teachers are more likely to invest time and energy in coaching when they feel comfortable and have rapport with their coach. A vast majority of virtual instructional coaches (92%) reported that establishing rapport with their teachers was only slightly or not at all challenging, but almost one in ten could use more support in developing their relationships with the new teachers. About a quarter (24%) of virtual instructional coaches (compared with 11% of building mentors) also reported that encouraging teachers to actively work with them was moderately or very challenging.

To build trust and teacher buy-in as outsiders, successful virtual instructional coaches needed to think carefully about how to approach their initial interactions with new teachers. For example, one coach invited both of her assigned new teachers to jointly attend the initial onboarding meeting, and only then transitioned to one-on-one meetings. For the teachers involved, having another new teacher in the same virtual meeting felt less intimidating. A number of coaches described how they took time during the first meetings to learn more about their teachers' needs rather than jumping straight into a set agenda of specifying goals. This approach allowed coaches to gain more information about their teachers' values, approach, motivation, and challenges and allowed teachers to become comfortable before sharing problems of practice. During these initial conversations, successful coaches also asked questions and took notes around school and district contexts (e.g., length of class periods, student demographics).

However, some instructional coaches were at a loss when it came to fostering a new relationship virtually. An instructional coach explained: *"It was hard to build a relationship over Zoom. It really is. I feel like we didn't become more than superficial and polite. [I wanted the teacher to] come to me with some issue that she's had, which I think is the whole point of [coaching], but I didn't know how to foster that over Zoom."* If a coach was working with a new teacher within their building, they might drop by their classroom for a quick chat, offer to run an errand for them, or invite them to get a cup of coffee. By design, the Illinois Virtual Instructional Coach and Building Mentor Program matches coaches virtually to take advantage of expertise across the state. Coaches who struggled to build rapport in a virtual environment would have liked additional training on strategies they could use when teachers seemed reluctant to open up or participate in coaching.

Program Results

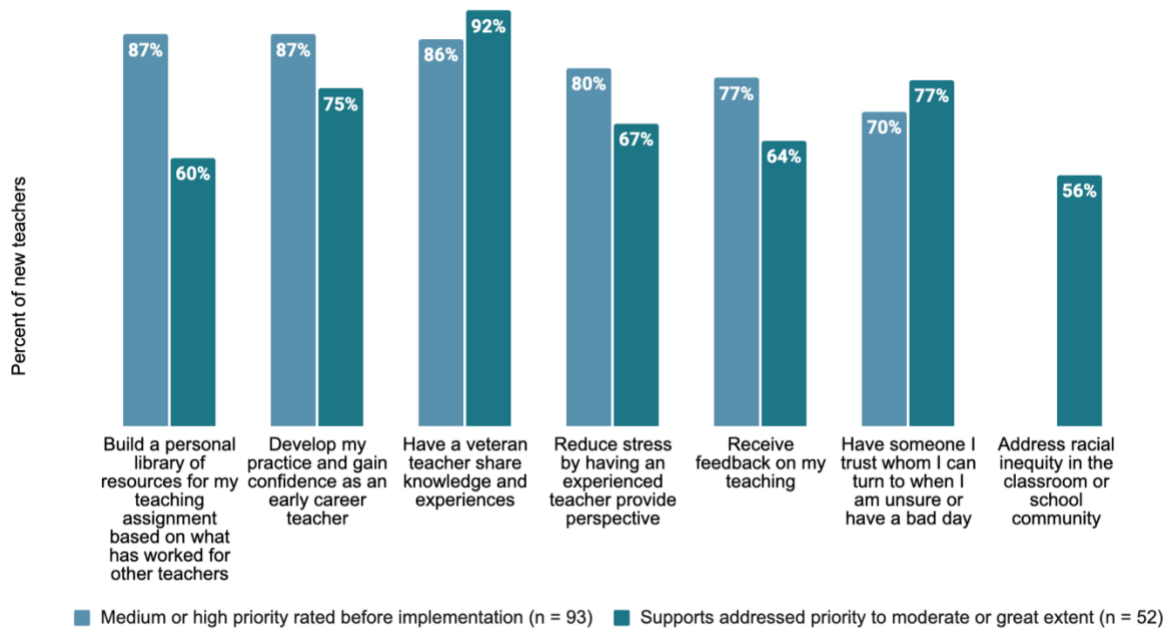
The Illinois Virtual Instructional Coach and Building Mentor Program aims at the primary outcomes of improving new teachers' professional practice, their sense of belonging and integration into their school community, and desire to remain in the profession. We discuss these teacher outcomes next, then we briefly summarize improvement in coach and mentor skills as the key strategies to achieving teacher outcomes.

Developing New Teachers' Professional Practice

Coaching and mentoring activities addressed new teachers' priorities. At the beginning of implementation, new teachers specified priority goals that they hoped to address through the program. A considerable percentage of teachers prioritized learning from their experienced colleagues and growing their instructional resources and practice. These teachers rated the following areas as medium to high priorities: Building a personal library of resources for their teaching assignment (87%), developing their practice and confidence as early career teachers (87%), having a veteran teacher share knowledge and experiences (86%), reducing stress by having an experienced teacher provide their perspective (80%), receiving feedback on their teaching (77%), and having someone whom they can turn to on a bad day (70%) (Exhibit 12).

At the end of the program, surveyed teachers reported that program supports addressed those priorities to a moderate or great extent (Exhibit 12). Notably, about 9 in 10 teachers reported having access to a veteran teacher who shared their knowledge and experiences. Approximately three-quarters of teachers had access to someone whom they could turn to for answers or comfort (77%) and were able to develop their practice and gain confidence as early career teachers (75%).

Exhibit 12. Priorities New Teachers Hoped to Address and Extent to which Program Supports Addressed Them

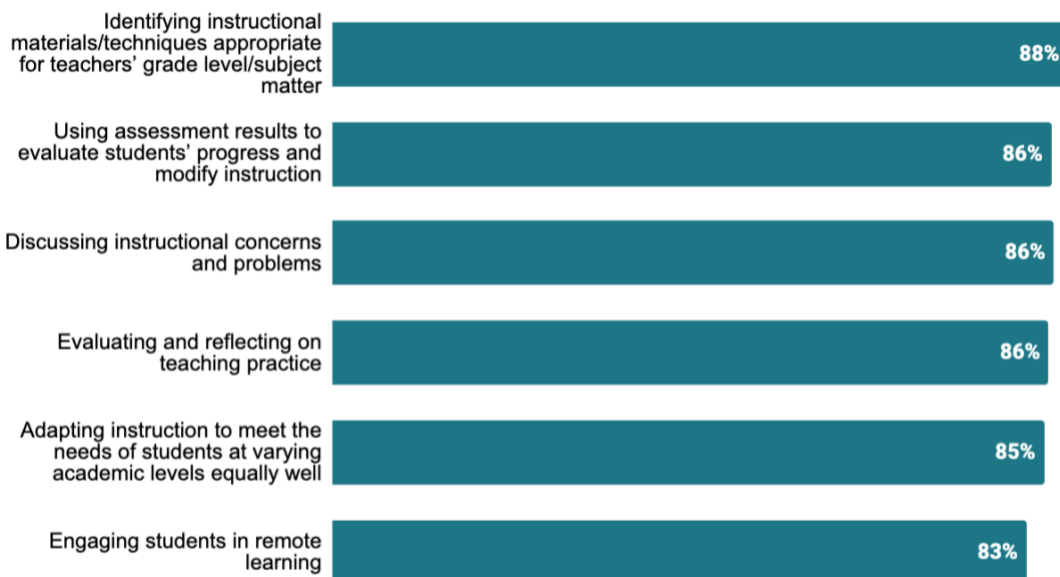


Note: We asked the question about addressing racial inequity in the classroom or school community only in the post-implementation survey.

Source: Teacher pre- and post-implementation surveys, May 2021.

Furthermore, a majority of surveyed teachers reported that supports received from their instructional coach and/or mentor were helpful for their professional practice. Overall, more than 80 percent of teachers indicated that program supports were quite or very helpful in: discussing instructional concerns, identifying instructional materials and/or techniques, using assessment results to gauge student learning and modify instruction, adapting instruction to meet students’ differing academic needs, engaging students online, and evaluating and reflecting on their teaching practice (Exhibit 13). These key areas reflect novice teachers’ typical needs in the early years of their career, and the results suggest the promise of the program in addressing those needs.

Exhibit 13. Extent to Which Teachers Reported Supports Were Helpful to Their Professional Practice



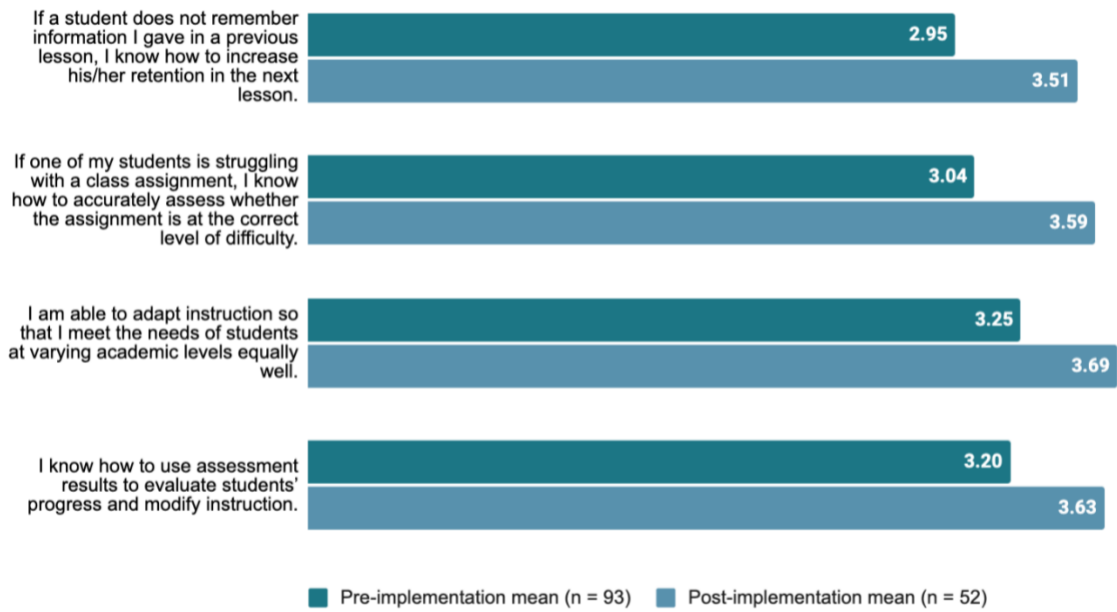
Percent of new teachers receiving support reporting it was quite or very helpful (n = 51)

Source: Teacher post-implementation survey, May 2021.

New teachers' efficacy ratings showed statistically significant increases. Teachers reported highly statistically significant improvements in key aspects of their practice, all the more remarkable for the short period they participated in the coaching program. New teachers reported higher average efficacy ratings in meeting students' needs (difference in pre- to post-implementation means on efficacy scale⁶ = 0.476, $p < 0.0000$); engaging students (difference in pre- to post-implementation means on efficacy scale = 0.256, $p = 0.009$); and remote teaching (difference in pre- to post-implementation means on efficacy scale = 0.393, $p = 0.003$). Exhibits 14 to 16 show new teachers' ratings along each dimension, pre- and post-implementation.

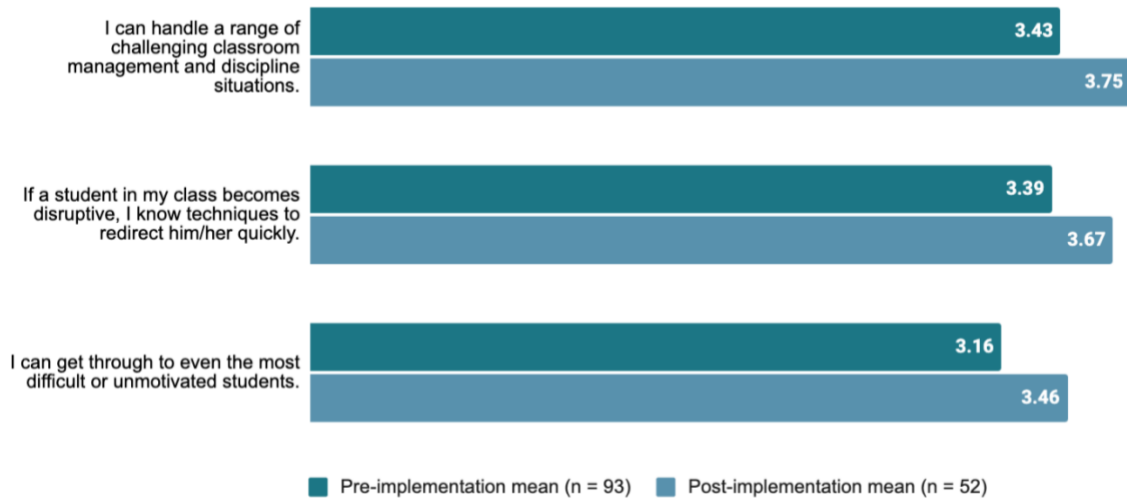
⁶ New teacher efficacy ratings on 5-point scale, where 1 = Not at all equipped, 2 = A little equipped, 3 = Quite equipped, 4 = Very equipped, 5 = Extremely equipped

Exhibit 14. New Teachers' Mean Efficacy Ratings for Meeting Student Needs, Pre- and Post-implementation



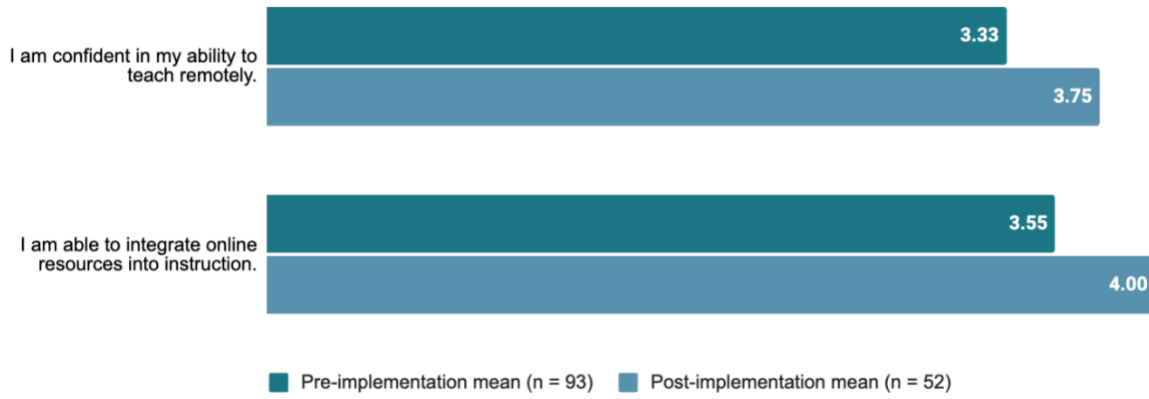
Source: Teacher pre- and post-implementation survey, January and May 2021.

Exhibit 15. New Teachers' Mean Efficacy Ratings for Engaging Students, Pre- and Post-Implementation



Source: Teacher pre- and post-implementation survey, January and May 2021.

Exhibit 16. New Teachers' Mean Efficacy Ratings for Remote Teaching, Pre- and Post-Implementation



Source: Teacher pre- and post-implementation survey, January and May 2021.

Spotlight on A New Teacher's Growth

Ashley (a pseudonym) is a music teacher who participated in the Illinois Virtual Instructional Coach and Building Mentor Program in 2021. Although she completed her teacher preparation coursework, the abrupt shift to virtual learning in 2020 cut her student teaching short. Consequently, she felt underprepared for the challenges she faced during the year. Like many teachers in this unusual school year, Ashley grappled with frequently changing schedules and shifts between remote, in-person, and hybrid instruction. To complicate things further, Ashley rotated between two buildings in her district every two weeks and coordinated her lessons with dozens of teachers.

Luckily, she was matched with a virtual instructional coach with expertise in both music instruction and trauma-informed instruction and with a building mentor with deep knowledge of the district climate. Thanks to her coach and mentor, Ashley has access to consistent, rich support in the areas she needed. Ashley shared: *"I had two great people that I just automatically felt comfortable sharing with."*

The availability of Ashley's mentor on campus meant that she had easy access to help with "day-to-day things," such as navigating scheduling, during their weekly meetings and frequent informal interactions. "[Whether it's] a building principal question or chat with the secretaries, I always just lead [Ashley] to the right person," said Ashley's mentor. On the other hand, when Ashley needed support related to music instruction, she turned to her instructional coach during the biweekly virtual meetings. Ashley and her coach scheduled these meetings to correspond with the end of a two-week rotation at one of Ashley's schools. In this way, they could reflect together on the experience in one school, while planning ahead for the next two weeks in her other school.

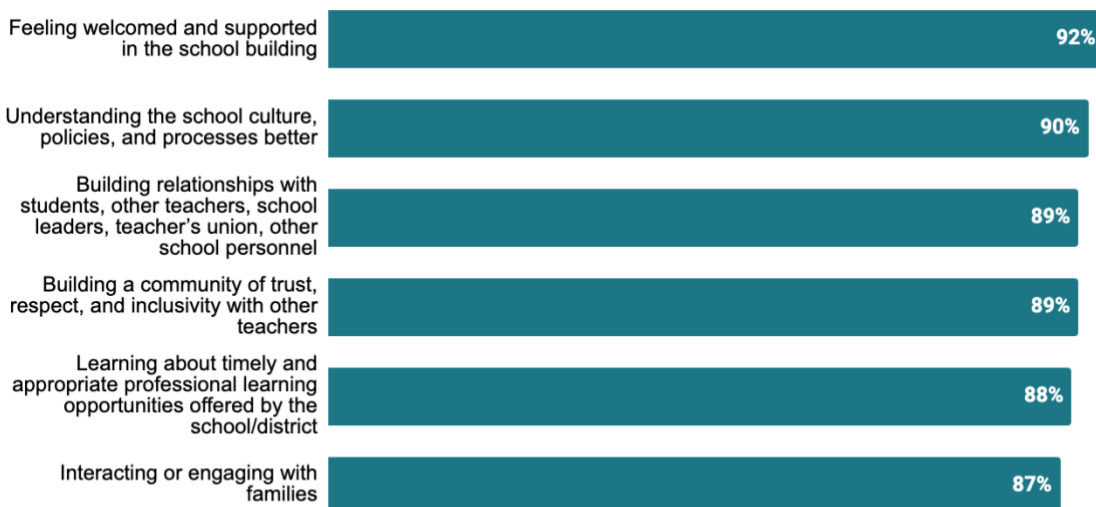
In some cases, Ashley turned to both her building mentor and virtual instructional coach for support. *"At the beginning of the year, you just want the kids to like you and want to be their friend, so it gets really hard to find that line between being a jerk and being stern. I really worked on classroom management with both of them, getting resources from the two of them,"* Ashley said. From her mentor, Ashley received immediate, direct feedback through informal classroom observations. Meanwhile, her coach provided her with strategies specific to music classrooms and teachers who move between buildings. Ashley shared: *"That was my biggest goal and I definitely think, looking back at the beginning of the year, there's been immense growth in that area. I feel confident next year, I can start*

Supporting New Teachers' Orientation to School Culture and Community

Program supports helped new teachers integrate into their schools. The pandemic exacerbated many challenges new teachers typically contend with, especially with integrating into the school culture and community as schools navigated between remote and in-person instruction. For a vast majority of surveyed teachers, coaching and/or mentoring supports were quite or very helpful in facilitating their integration into the school culture and community (Exhibit 17). About 90 percent of new teachers reported that program supports helped them feel accepted in their school; better understand the school culture, policies, and processes; establish relationships with colleagues and students; build a professional community; learn about professional learning opportunities; and engage with families.

Teachers explained that the building mentor is able to use their knowledge of the district and school culture, policies, processes, and hierarchies to help them navigate day-to-day interactions and work. For example, a mentor can provide tips about the personalities in the school and ideas for how to approach colleagues. In some cases, mentors were also familiar with specific students in the new teacher's classroom and therefore better positioned to help differentiate instruction to meet their specific needs. As mentioned earlier, mentors also noted that having a virtual instructional coach who supported their teacher(s) in curricular and instructional matters facilitated their role in orienting teachers to the school culture and community.

Exhibit 17. Extent to which Teachers Reported Supports Were Helpful in Orienting Them to Their School Culture and Community



Percent of new teachers reporting quite or very helpful (n = 50)

Source: Teacher post-implementation survey, May 2021.

Intention to Remain in the Profession

“My coach and mentor were both amazing and I was so happy to learn and grow with their guidance.” - Teacher

High percentages of new teachers reported their intention to remain in education. In spite of the extraordinary challenges of beginning a teaching career during the pandemic, new teachers’ reported intention to remain in the profession is promising. More than two-thirds (70%) of new teachers responding to the post-implementation survey reported that they think they will “definitely” be classroom teachers in five years. A further 21 percent responded “probably” so. This combined 91 percent figure is higher than the year-to-year retention rate in Illinois for the past three years (86%) as well as the national retention rate (84%) (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hamond, 2019; ISBE, 2020). Among the one-third (30%) who did not respond that they definitely will be classroom teachers in five years, 38 percent thought they would probably be in education in another capacity. Although these data reflect intention only, they are substantially higher than traditional estimates that almost half of teachers leave the profession within the first five years (Ingersoll et al., 2018).

Coaching and mentoring during the difficult first years as a novice teacher can help teachers believe they will make it through by putting the challenges of the school year in perspective and providing models of veteran teachers who had remained in the profession. As one teacher put it:

“[This program] can help a lot with making what is a big and daunting and scary job, especially in your first year, seem less so. It can really help teachers take a step back, take a breath, and know that there are ways to figure it out. You have these teachers that have been doing it for years, and they’re still in it. They still love it, and they want to be able to help teachers like you. It can help a lot, just [hearing from your coach and mentor] that ‘yes, this year is scary, but look at where you could end up. I’m here to help you get where I am.’”

Improving Virtual Instructional Coaches’ Coaching Skills

“This is an invaluable experience in my teaching career. One that I am most proud to be a part of. Because I am training someone to affect the lives of many young people in a positive and effective manner.” – Virtual instructional coach

As the primary channel by which the program realizes its new teacher outcomes, virtual instructional coaches’ sense of efficacy and feeling supported in their role are important precursors to program success.

The vast majority of virtual instructional coaches (93%) reported that they had adequate resources to coach effectively and almost as many (89%) reported being moderately or very effective overall in supporting new teachers during the program period. The coaches appreciated that the program

encouraged them to get out of their comfort zone by coaching someone in another school and district, and helped them grow in their own teaching practice as a result of the collaboration with new teachers.

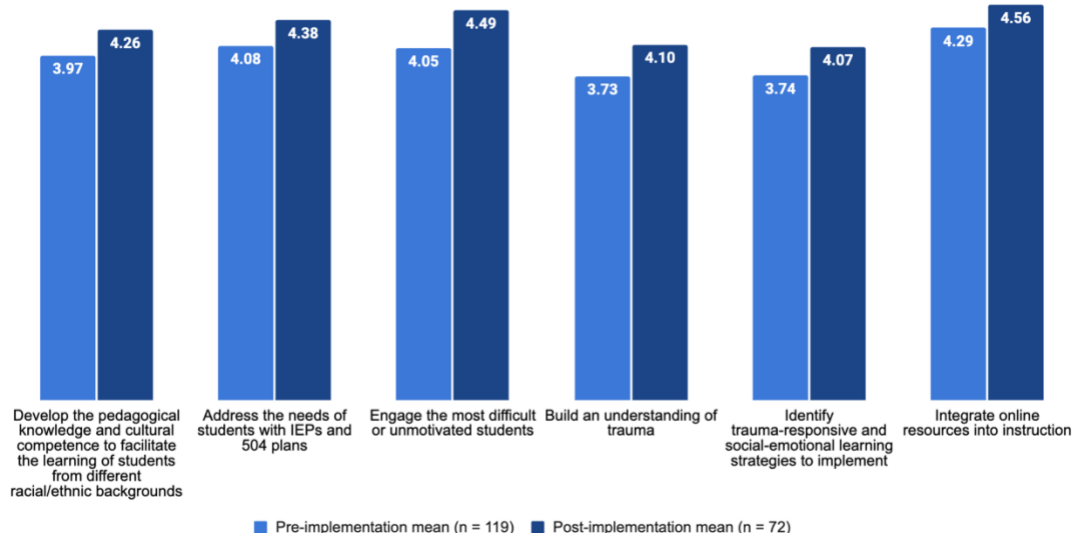
Virtual instructional coach efficacy ratings showed statistically significant improvement. Instructional coaches reported a relatively high sense of efficacy from the start of the program (61% to 92% reporting very or extremely prepared across a wide range of instructional coaching knowledge, skills, and dispositions). With the training and coaching practice, even during the abbreviated implementation period, coaches showed a statistically significant improvement in efficacy (difference in pre- to post-implementation means on efficacy scale⁷ = 0.167, $p = 0.014$).

Even with these results, not surprisingly, 40 percent of coaches reported that they were not as effective as they anticipated being, due to pandemic circumstances, and one quarter (24%) reported needing additional training to coach teachers more effectively.

The increase in virtual instructional coaches' efficacy is driven by coaches' reported improved preparation in: Building an understanding of trauma (from 61% to 76% reporting very or extremely prepared); identifying trauma-responsive and social-emotional learning strategies to implement (from 63% to 76%); developing the pedagogical knowledge and cultural competence to facilitate the learning of students from different racial/ethnic backgrounds (from 68% to 81%); and integrating online resources into instruction (from 86% to 96%) (Exhibit 18). These improvements reflect some of the topics the program training addressed, as well as the priorities that arose in supporting new teachers. (See Appendix B, Exhibit B-3 for full set of items comprising the coaching efficacy scale for virtual instructional coaches.)

⁷ Virtual Instructional Coach efficacy ratings on 5-point scale, where 1 = Not prepared, 2 = A little prepared, 3 = Quite prepared, 4 = Very prepared, 5 = Extremely prepared

Exhibit 18. Differences in Virtual Instructional Coach Efficacy, Pre- to Post-Implementation



Source: Virtual Instructional Coach post-implementation survey, May 2021.

Virtual instructional coaches also reported high levels of preparedness in the interpersonal skills needed in coaching (82% to 97% reporting very or extremely comfortable on the pre-implementation survey), although as discussed above, doing so virtually could be challenging. With such high preparedness levels at pre-implementation, the slightly higher proportions of coaches reporting being more comfortable on these interpersonal skills after implementation were not statistically significant. (Exhibit B-4 in Appendix B illustrates coaches’ preparedness ratings on interpersonal skills, pre- and post-implementation.)

Improving Building Mentors’ Mentoring Skills

District or school leaders selected specific mentors in many cases because they were already supporting the new teachers in their buildings. Because of their proximity to each other and an already-established relationship, we anticipated that new teachers would approach their building mentors with a wide variety of questions, not only about school culture as intended, but also pedagogy and even subject matter, as illustrated in Exhibit 10 above. We therefore asked building mentors about their efficacy in supporting new teachers across a range of instructional, organizational, and cultural aspects of teaching.

Not surprisingly, building mentors’ ratings of their efficacy in online teaching increased marginally significantly (difference in pre- to post-implementation means on efficacy scale⁸ = 0.244, $p = 0.053$). Building mentors’ initial efficacy ratings on instruction-related skills and interpersonal skills were high and did not differ from pre- to post-implementation. (See Appendix B, Exhibits B-5 to B-7 for details of building mentor efficacy ratings along key dimensions.)

⁸ Building Mentor efficacy ratings on 5-point scale, where 1 = Not prepared, 2 = A little prepared, 3 = Quite prepared, 4 = Very prepared, 5 = Extremely prepared

Implications and Conclusions

The Illinois Virtual Coach and Building Mentor Program is an ambitious statewide initiative to invest in and commit to the teaching profession. While the pandemic exacerbated the need for novice teacher supports, the limited local uptake of the program in 2020–21 reflects teacher, school, and district burdens as well as the midyear program launch.

Implementation during the second semester of 2020–21 represents a limited pilot of the state program and is an inadequate basis on which to judge its success. Related to the implementation levels, lower response rates than we ideally would have liked mean that the findings have limited generalizability and we should all be cautious in interpreting them (see Appendix A, Exhibit A-2). We analyzed potential missing data bias for new teacher respondents in particular and found that those who responded to both the pre- and post-implementation surveys did not differ from those who responded only to the pre-implementation survey on the pre-implementation efficacy measures (see Appendix A, Exhibit A-5).

We can have some confidence therefore that the statistically significant findings that the new teachers reported about being more prepared are representative of new teacher participants on average. We cannot generalize beyond the program participants, however, because districts who signed up for this first year reported having little capacity to support new teachers whereas those with more in-house capacity did not feel an immediate need to join.

Even so, the promising results from this limited pilot argue for continuing the program in 2021–22 for a more robust implementation across the state.

Support for Program Continuation

Diverse stakeholders support continuing the program in 2021–22. School opening in fall 2021 represents a crucial opportunity to reset for schools, teachers, students, and families—one that the coaching and mentoring can play a crucial role in for novice teachers. The opportunity for a full year of support will leverage the fixed costs that have already been incurred in developing the program and training coaches and mentors.

New teachers, virtual instructional coaches, building mentors, and district and union representatives expressed interest for the program to continue. Among 39 interview respondents across those stakeholder groups, all but one interviewee said that the program should continue if funding permits. One principal summarized the value in this way: *“I believe this program has great potential to develop both the art and science of teaching for new teachers. The blend of instructional coaches and mentoring in the school is something we need as it provides a non-threatening way for teachers to self-reflect and improve.”*

Experienced educators, moreover, recognize the importance of supporting teachers during their second year, which—in one coach’s words—is their “make or break year.” For many who began teaching in 2020, the reality is that 2021–22 will be their first year with full classrooms, full in-person instructional days, and curriculum and assessment expectations that were relaxed or waived during the pandemic.

Coaching and mentoring during this second year can bridge the experiences teachers didn't have in their first year.

"I only see this program improving over time as the teachers have an entire year to work together versus only the second semester. I would have loved to have a program like this in place when I was a new teacher. Someone I could comfortably seek advice and ideas from without feeling judged or that I am bothering or wasting a co-workers' time." – Virtual instructional coach

Refining the Program

Several valuable lessons emerged during this year, which can help refine the Illinois Virtual Instructional Coach and Building Mentor Program and ready it for much larger-scale implementation statewide.

- *Recruit and onboard districts during the summer.* After districts and local unions sign on to the program, they identify eligible new teachers and appropriate building mentors and need important details to plan and set expectations for their participants. Earlier onboarding will provide the needed time for local district and union leaders to clarify program components and help districts gain participant buy-in.
- *Onboard and train virtual instructional coaches and building mentors before the school year begins.* Although coaches and mentors found the training modules valuable, some found them time-consuming and making the training available before school begins may provide coaches and mentors with more time and flexibility to complete the training before they begin working with their new teachers.
- *Match new teachers to virtual instructional coaches before the school year begins.* As already discussed, the beginning of the school year is a crucial time for novice teachers, when coaching support can provide substantial value. Matching coaches and teachers in time to allow coaches to work with new teachers through the many decisions and answer key questions associated with learning the curriculum and lesson planning from the start can make a big difference in setting up the teacher for a successful year.
- *Clarify virtual instructional coaches' and building mentors' respective roles for coaches, mentors, and new teachers.* Although program literature describes how virtual instructional coach and building mentor roles differ, new teachers bombarded by information don't necessarily internalize the differences. In addition to clarifying roles and expectations during onboarding for all stakeholders, state program leaders can help facilitate an initial meeting among matched coaches, teachers, and mentors for them to talk specifically about how they will work together, coordinate, and delineate supports for the teacher.
- *Provide more specific expectations for coaching and mentoring activities.* Virtual instructional coaches and building mentors alike requested clearer expectations for specific activities they should engage in with new teachers, including "real-life examples of supports." Coaches and

mentors with little coaching experience in particular would like more strategies for building teacher buy-in and engagement and potentially a sequence of activities they could follow to launch the relationship. As a coach requested: *“I would like more guidance on the flow of what I should present to the mentee. Although I loved the freedom of meeting my mentee where they were at and what they needed, a full year program would need more direction and more professional collaboration between virtual coaches.”*

- *Provide more opportunities for virtual instructional coaches and building mentors to meet in role-alike forums.* Coaches and mentors had a few opportunities to talk informally with others in the same role and wanted more such opportunities. Inexperienced coaches found those exchanges particularly valuable: *“The most meaningful thing was meeting together as coaches,”* gathering strategies and tips from more experienced peers. All coaches and mentors valued the connection to others facing similar dilemmas and the time to problem-solve together, such as how to develop rapport with their new teachers at a distance or how to gain teachers’ trust to open up and share their concerns.
- *Examine ways to build authentic virtual instructional coach-new teacher interactions on TeachForward.* TeachForward offers a rich library of multimedia resources on a wide range of instructional topics. The current expectations for use are more “task-oriented” rather than relational, and in prioritizing the relationship, coaches did not use the platform for coaching or creating assignments for teachers, preferring to pull any relevant resources and sending them to teachers via email and communicating through videoconferencing, phone, text, or email. Helping coaches situate the activities they can assign on TeachForward within a broader relationship-building effort with their new teachers may them take advantage of the many TeachForward supports for coaching.

Developing and launching the Illinois Virtual Instructional Coach and Building Mentor Program during the pandemic was a tremendous undertaking by IEA and IFT. The value that stakeholders found in the program regardless of the difficulties associated with a midyear start indicates the need and demand for the program. More importantly, the increase in new teachers’ sense of efficacy, as well as that of instructional coaches, over such a short implementation period and the high proportion of new teachers reporting their intention to remain in the profession demonstrate the great promise of the program. The pilot experience and lessons learned position IEA, IFT, and CTU to offer a valuable service to individual new teachers, districts, and the teaching profession overall in the year to come, when the system will need to meet the challenge of supporting all students academically, emotionally, and equitably as we recover from the pandemic.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Methods

To investigate our evaluation questions, we used a mixed methods design. We collected qualitative and quantitative data throughout the implementation period, analyzed each data source separately, and then compared the results to substantiate the reliability of the study. The quantitative data, primarily through surveys, provided a program-wide overview of implementation and key outcome measures. The qualitative data collection brought complementary, deeper insights to the quantitative data, addressing how and why implementation occurred as it did within specific local contexts.

The quantitative data sources included pre- and post-implementation surveys of virtual instructional coaches, building mentors, and new teachers; a post-implementation survey of principals, as well as a brief snapshot mid-implementation with new teachers and instructional coaches. The qualitative data collection included interviews with district and union leaders, virtual instructional coaches, building mentors, and new teachers. We also included open-ended questions in the pre- and post-implementation surveys and snapshots. Exhibit A-1 details the data collection activities by evaluation question.

Exhibit A-1. Evaluation Questions, Data Sources, and Respondents

	Pre-implementation survey	Post-implementation survey	Snapshot	Interviews
Respondents	Virtual instructional coach, building mentor, teacher	Virtual instructional coach, building mentor, teacher, principal	Virtual instructional coach, teacher	District, local union, virtual instructional coach, building mentor, teacher
Implementation				
1. To what extent was the program implemented as intended?		X	X	X
1.a. What factors affected program implementation and why?		X		X
Satisfaction				
2. To what extent do new teachers find the program valuable for their professional practice?				
3. To what extent do virtual instructional coaches and building mentors find the program valuable for coaching?		X		X
4. What additional supports do teachers, virtual instructional coaches, and building mentors need to benefit from the program?				

	Pre-implementation survey	Post-implementation survey	Snapshot	Interviews
Outcomes				
5. To what extent does participation in the coaching program help develop new teachers' professional practice? What role do virtual instructional coaches play?	X	X		X
6. To what extent does participating in the program help new teachers feel supported and oriented to the school culture and community? What role do building mentors play?		X		X
7. Do participating teachers intend to stay in the profession after the program?		X		
8. To what extent do virtual instructional coaches' and building mentors' coaching skills improve as a result of participating in the coaching program?	X	X		X

Surveys and Snapshots

Data collection. Beginning in mid-November 2020, we administered the pre-implementation survey, which was programmed in Qualtrics and then assigned as an activity on the TeachForward platform, to all IEA- and IFT-affiliated instructional coaches, mentors, and new teachers recruited into in the program. The pre-implementation survey aimed to gauge educators' efficacy in specific skills and knowledge, as well as identify their reasons for participating in the program. Because of the rolling start of the program, we kept the pre-implementation survey open through mid-January 2021.

In early March, we administered a brief survey to the IEA- and IFT-affiliated instructional coaches and new teachers to take a “snapshot” of the frequency of and their satisfaction with coaching activities to provide formative feedback to the program team.

We administered the post-implementation surveys in May 2021. They measured coach, mentor, and teacher efficacy in the skills and knowledge associated with their respective roles; new teachers' intention to stay in the profession; the value of key program components; and facilitating factors and constraints in program implementation. We also administered a survey to school principals to better understand their engagement in and perspectives on the value of the program. Exhibit A-2 shows the number of respondents and response rate for each survey by stakeholder group.

CTU came on board after the initial wave of IEA and IFT recruitment. To accommodate the CTU implementation period, we administered the pre-implementation survey to CTU coaches, mentors, and teachers from late February 2021 through early April. CTU-affiliated participants received the post-implementation survey in May, at the same time as the IEA- and other IFT-affiliated participants due to the firm reporting deadlines for the evaluation.

Exhibit A-2. Survey Samples and Response Rates

Survey	New teacher	Virtual instructional coach	Building mentor
Pre-implementation	93 (100%)	119 (93%)	80 (100%)
Post-implementation	54 (48%)	73 (62%)	46 (64%)
Pre- and post-implementation	45 (45%)	68 (53%)	42 (57%)
Snapshot	40 (48%)	52 (44%)	N/A

Data analysis. Using the R statistical software package, we conducted descriptive analyses (i.e., frequencies and means as relevant) for each survey item. As a method of data reduction, we used factor analysis to create relevant efficacy scales. For the teacher pre- and post-implementation surveys, we created three teacher efficacy scales: (1) meeting student needs, (2) engaging students, and (3) teaching remotely. We conducted factor analysis to examine the properties of 13 survey items on efficacy to

ensure that combining the survey items results in conceptually relevant scales that are reliable for analysis. Based on the factor analysis, we created three variables using a weighted average approach, keeping the variables in the same response scale as the original survey items to ease interpretation. All three scale variables were highly reliable with alphas of at least 0.86 (Exhibit A-3).

We employed this same process for the instructional coach and building mentor surveys (Exhibit A-3). From the instructional coach surveys, we created two scales, capturing efficacy and interpersonal skills comfort. For their mentor surveys, we created three scales, which capture instructional support efficacy, supporting remote teaching efficacy, and interpersonal skills comfort.

To understand the changes from pre- to post-implementation, we conducted paired t-tests to compare the efficacy and/or interpersonal skills comfort scales for each stakeholder group (Exhibit A-4).

Furthermore, because of the short implementation program period and lower response rates that we had hoped on the surveys, we analyzed potential missing data bias for new teacher, instructional coach, and mentor respondents. For each role, we compared participants who responded to both the pre- and post-implementation surveys with those who responded only to the pre-implementation survey on the pre-implementation efficacy and/or interpersonal skills measures (Exhibit A-5). Our findings indicate that those who responded to both the pre- and post-implementation surveys did not differ from those who responded only to the pre-implementation survey on the pre-implementation measures.

Exhibit A-3. Survey Scales

Scales	Items	Reliability (Cronbach's α)
Teacher efficacy in meeting student needs	<p>To what extent do you feel equipped in the following aspects of teaching? <i>[1 = Not equipped at all, 2 = A little equipped, 3 = Quite equipped, 4 = Very equipped, 5 = Extremely equipped]</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. If a student does not remember information I gave in a previous lesson, I know how to increase his/her retention in the next lesson. b. If one of my students is struggling with a class assignment, I know how to accurately assess whether the assignment is at the correct level of difficulty. c. I am able to adapt instruction so that I meet the needs of students at varying academic levels equally well. d. I know how to use assessment results to evaluate students' progress and modify instruction. 	0.96
Teacher efficacy in engaging students	<p>To what extent do you feel equipped in the following aspects of teaching? <i>[1 = Not equipped at all, 2 = A little equipped, 3 = Quite equipped, 4 = Very equipped, 5 = Extremely equipped]</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. I can handle a range of challenging classroom management and discipline situations. b. If a student in my class becomes disruptive, I know techniques to redirect him/her quickly. c. I can get through to even the most difficult or unmotivated students. 	0.86
Teacher efficacy in remote teaching	<p>To what extent do you feel equipped in the following aspects of teaching? <i>[1 = Not equipped at all, 2 = A little equipped, 3 = Quite equipped, 4 = Very equipped, 5 = Extremely equipped]</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. I am confident in my ability to teach remotely. b. I am able to integrate online resources into instruction. 	0.89

Scales	Items	Reliability (Cronbach's α)
Virtual instructional coach efficacy	<p>How prepared are you to support new teachers in developing each of the following skills? <i>[1 = Not prepared; 2 = A little prepared; 3 = Quite prepared; 4 = Very prepared; 5 = Extremely prepared]</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Teach effectively b. Handle a range of challenging classroom management and discipline situations c. Redirect students quickly if they become disruptive in class d. Develop the pedagogical knowledge and cultural competence to facilitate the learning of students from different racial/ethnic backgrounds e. Address the needs of students with IEPs and 504 plans f. Engage the most difficult or unmotivated students g. Accurately assess whether an assignment is at the correct level of difficulty h. Adapt instruction so that they can meet the needs of students at varying academic levels equally well i. Build an understanding of trauma j. Identify trauma-responsive and social-emotional learning strategies to implement k. Build and maintain a positive, inclusive, anti-racist learning environment, built on trusting relationships, that engages all students l. Teach remotely m. Integrate online resources into instruction n. Use assessment results to evaluate students' progress and modify instruction 	0.95
Virtual instructional coach interpersonal skills comfort	<p>How comfortable do you feel... <i>[1 = Not comfortable, 2 = A little comfortable, 3 = Quite comfortable, 4 = Very comfortable, 5 = Extremely comfortable]</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Building rapport online with someone I don't know b. Identifying useful problems of practice that I can collaborate on with new teachers c. Providing feedback to teachers about equitable practices in the classroom d. Observing teachers teaching and providing meaningful formative feedback e. Encouraging others when they are discouraged f. Providing constructive feedback to a colleague 	0.92

Scales	Items	Reliability (Cronbach's α)
	g. Identifying differentiated supports to meet the needs of a coached teacher	
Building mentor instructional support efficacy	<p>How prepared are you to support new teachers in developing each of the following skills? <i>[1 = Not prepared; 2 = A little prepared; 3 = Quite prepared; 4 = Very prepared; 5 = Extremely prepared]</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Teach effectively b. Handle a range of challenging classroom management and discipline situations c. Redirect students quickly if they become disruptive in class d. Develop the pedagogical knowledge and cultural competence to facilitate the learning of students from different racial/ethnic backgrounds e. Address the needs of students with IEPs and 504 plans f. Engage the most difficult or unmotivated students g. Accurately assess whether an assignment is at the correct level of difficulty h. Adapt instruction so that they can meet the needs of students at varying academic levels equally well i. Build an understanding of trauma j. Identify trauma-responsive and social-emotional learning strategies to implement k. Build and maintain a positive, inclusive, anti-racist learning environment, built on trusting relationships, that engages all students l. Use assessment results to evaluate students' progress and modify instruction 	0.95
Building mentor supporting remote teaching efficacy	<p>How prepared are you to support new teachers in developing each of the following skills? <i>[1 = Not prepared; 2 = A little prepared; 3 = Quite prepared; 4 = Very prepared; 5 = Extremely prepared]</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Teach remotely b. Integrate online resources into instruction 	0.92

Scales	Items	Reliability (Cronbach's α)
Building mentor interpersonal skills comfort	<p>How comfortable do you feel...</p> <p><i>[1 = Not comfortable, 2 = A little comfortable, 3 = Quite comfortable, 4 = Very comfortable, 5 = Extremely comfortable]</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Building rapport online with someone I don't know b. Identifying useful problems of practice that I can collaborate on with new teachers c. Providing feedback to teachers about equitable practices in the classroom d. Encouraging others when they are discouraged e. Providing constructive feedback to a colleague f. Identifying differentiated supports to meet the needs of a mentee g. Explaining how things "really work" at my school to a new staff member h. Supporting a new staff member understand how to communicate with parents i. Explaining school policy to new staff members 	0.94

Exhibit A-4. Mean Differences in Efficacy and Interpersonal Skills Comfort Ratings from Pre- to Post-implementation

Scales	Pre-implementation			Post-implementation					
	<i>n</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Mean difference	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Virtual instructional coach efficacy	66	4.21	0.51	66	4.40	0.57	0.167	2.530	0.014
Virtual instructional coach interpersonal skills comfort	68	4.38	0.55	67	4.42	0.59	0.036	0.511	0.611
Building mentor instructional support efficacy	42	4.03	0.64	40	4.09	0.69	0.077	0.881	0.384
Building mentor supporting remote teaching efficacy	42	3.92	0.86	41	4.15	1.00	0.244	1.993	0.053
Building mentor interpersonal skills comfort	41	4.28	0.60	41	4.26	0.67	-0.022	-0.250	0.804
Teacher efficacy in meeting student needs	45	3.11	0.90	42	3.60	0.86	0.476	4.536	<0.000
Teacher efficacy in engaging students	45	3.32	0.79	43	3.63	0.76	0.256	2.721	0.009
Teacher efficacy in remote teaching	45	3.50	0.90	42	3.85	0.82	0.393	3.181	0.003

Exhibit A-5. Missing Data Bias Analysis

Pre-implementation efficacy	Respondents with pre-implementation survey response only			Respondents with pre- and post-implementation survey response					
	<i>n</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Mean difference	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Virtual instructional coach efficacy	51	4.10	0.49	68	4.21	0.51	0.113	-1.209	0.229
Virtual instructional coach interpersonal skills comfort	51	4.30	0.49	68	4.37	0.55	0.081	-0.851	0.397
Building mentor instructional support efficacy	38	4.00	0.64	42	4.03	0.64	0.025	-0.178	0.859
Building mentor supporting remote teaching efficacy	38	3.92	0.92	42	3.92	0.86	0.004	0.022	0.983
Building mentor interpersonal skills comfort	38	4.16	0.55	42	4.28	0.60	0.121	-0.934	0.353
Teacher efficacy in meeting student needs	48	3.11	0.72	45	3.11	0.90	0.002	-0.014	0.989
Teacher efficacy in engaging students	48	3.33	0.65	45	3.32	0.79	-0.008	0.051	0.959
Teacher efficacy in remote teaching	48	3.38	1.00	45	3.50	0.90	0.120	-0.598	0.551

Interviews and Open-ended Survey Questions

Data collection. We conducted three rounds of interviews. First, in February 2021, we interviewed with a purposive sample of instructional coaches. Because of the midyear start of the program, we targeted instructional coaches who were most active in the program (i.e., had completed at least a module on the TeachForward website, completed the pre-implementation survey, and met with their new teacher at least once). Second, we invited all district administrators and local union representatives of the participating districts to participate in interviews in late February/early March.

The third round of interviews occurred in late March/April 2021 with a sample of new teachers, instructional coaches, and mentors. We again sampled coaches deemed active, as well as the new teacher(s) matched to those coaches and their respective mentor(s). Our intention was to recruit as many matched pairs and/or triads as possible (i.e., a new teacher, their matched coach, and their matched mentor) to gain a better understanding not only of individual experiences, but also of the coach-teacher-mentor social unit.

At the time we were recruiting interview respondents, participating districts were returning from spring break and some of the districts were changing attendance models (e.g., opening up hybrid instruction or increasing the amount of in-person instruction). Given the demands on educators across the board this year, we oversampled respondents and were able to recruit and conduct 28 total individual interviews (16 coaches, 6 mentors, and 6 new teachers). With our sampling strategy, our interviews provided deeper insights into four coach-teacher relationships, two coach-mentor relationships, one teacher-mentor relationship, and one coach-teacher-mentor triad. Exhibit A-6 shows the number of interview respondents by stakeholder groups.

Exhibit A-6. Interview Respondents

Stakeholder Group	Sampled	Participated
Virtual instructional coaches	19 (winter) 25 (spring)	6 (winter) 16 (spring)
Building mentors	30	6
New teachers	56	6
District leaders	10	8
Union leaders	10	7

The interviewed instructional coaches, mentors, and teachers ranged in subjects taught and grade levels. Instructional coaches and mentors differed in years of coaching experience, some being novice and some more experienced in coaching and mentoring.

The interviews were semi-structured, individual, and virtual around the following main thematic areas: The value of coaching for new teachers, the local contexts surrounding new teacher supports and learning, facilitating and constraining factors in coaching, ongoing needs, and suggestions for program improvement.

Open-ended survey questions also provided qualitative data. In addition to asking respondents if there was anything else they wanted to share about their experience with the program, we asked principals whether they thought the program should continue in the 2021–22 school year and whether they had any suggestions for improving the program. We asked mentors and coaches open-ended questions on: challenges they encountered; additional supports they or teachers could use; and importance of mentor-coach interaction and separating the roles.

Data analysis. We captured audio recordings and notes for each interview, and conducted thematic analysis using a structured debriefing form for each role after data collection. Our team read and re-read interview transcripts; summarized key points as codes that describe the content; systematically clustered codes into themes in an iterative process that tied back to the evaluation questions. We triangulated the interview data across stakeholder groups to further confirm or disconfirm emergent themes across the pairs/triads. The multiple stakeholder perspectives provided a rich understanding of implementation successes and challenges, and allowed us to validate the strength of the themes across the groups.

For survey open-ended questions, after familiarizing ourselves with the data, we conducted iterative thematic analysis of responses to each question, similar to the process described for interviews.

Appendix B. Additional Program Implementation Data

Virtual instructional coaches and building mentors were able to meet with and support the vast majority of new teachers they were assigned (Exhibits B-1 and B-2).

Exhibit B-1. Number of Teachers Assigned to and Supported by Virtual Instructional Coaches

Number of teachers	Assigned to instructional coach		Supported by instructional coach	
	Number of coaches	%	Number of coaches	%
1	0	0%	2	3%
2	51	70%	51	70%
3	17	23%	16	22%
4	5	7%	4	5%

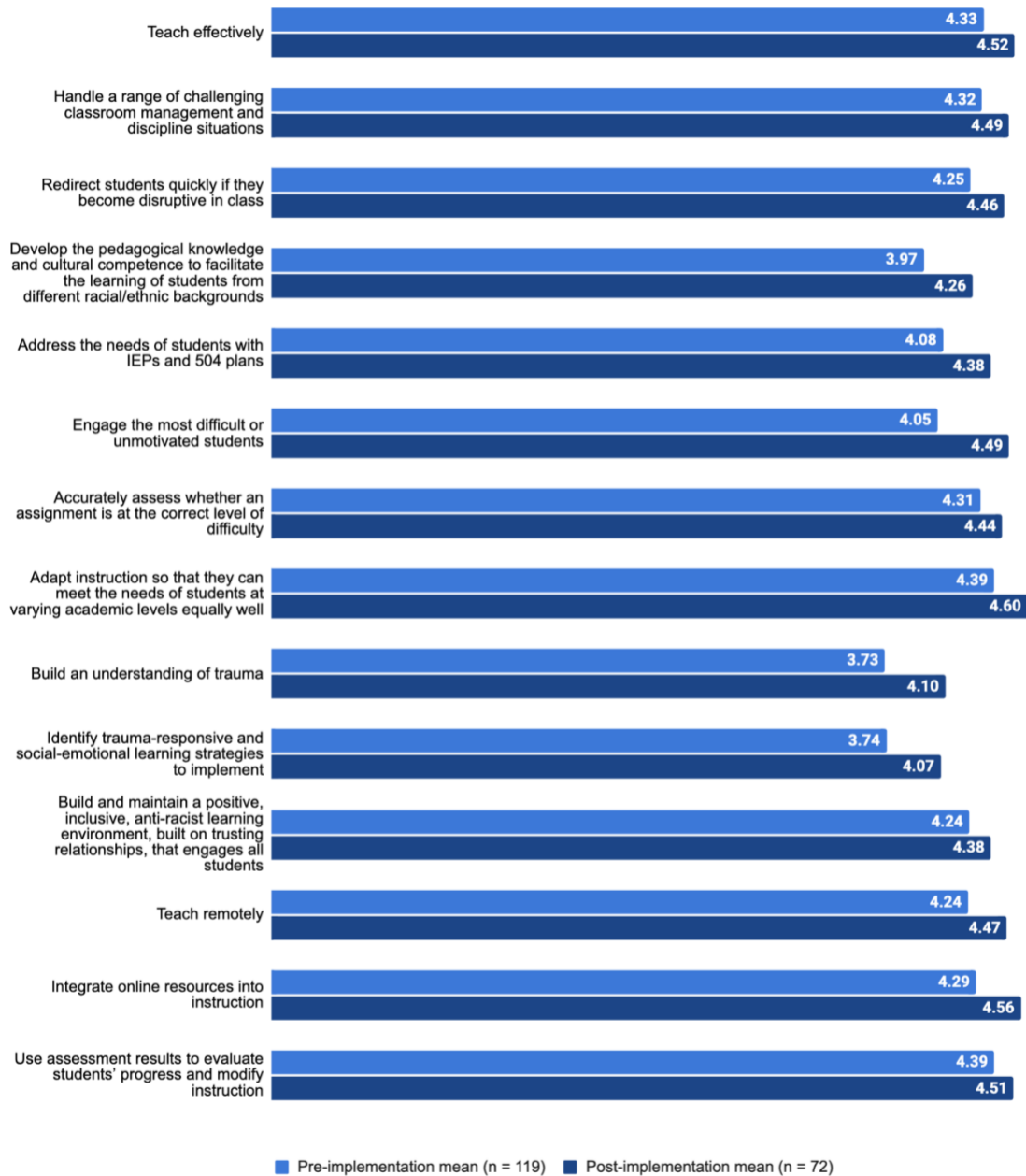
Source: Virtual Instructional Coach post-implementation survey, May 2021.

Exhibit B-2. Number of Teachers Assigned to and Supported by Building Mentors

Number of teachers	Assigned to mentor		Supported by mentor	
	Number of mentors	%	Number of mentors	%
1	0	0%	3	7%
2	32	70%	31	67%
3	7	15%	8	17%
4	6	13%	4	9%
5	0	0%	0	0%
6	1	2%	0	0%

Source: Building Mentor post-implementation survey, May 2021.

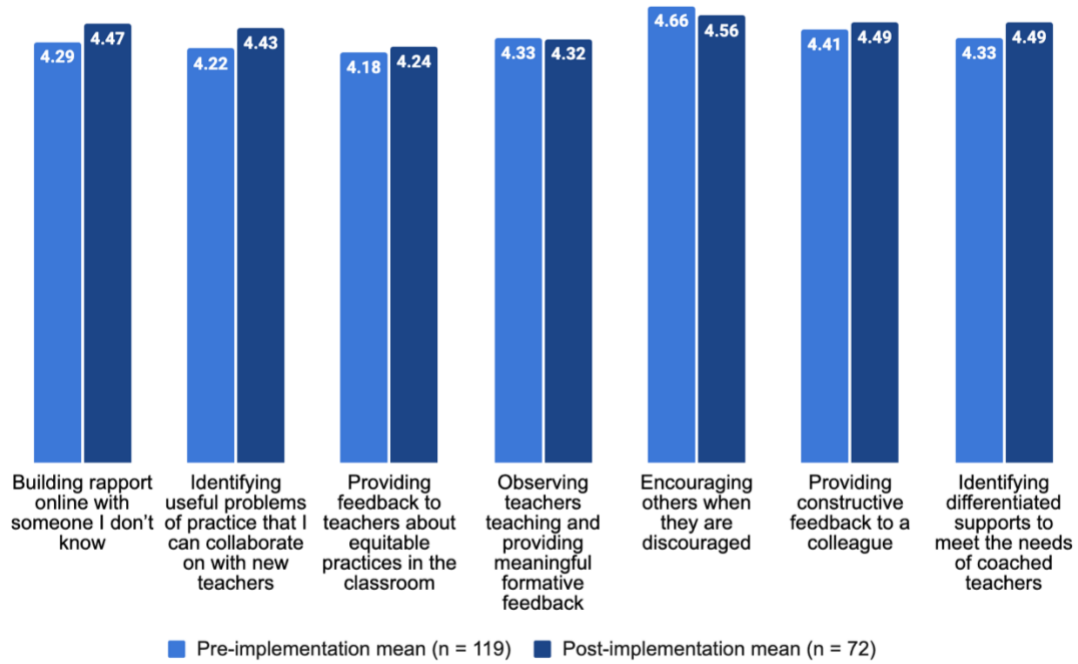
Exhibit B-3. Coaching Efficacy, Virtual Instructional Coaches, Pre- and Post-Implementation Means



Note: Efficacy items on 5-point scale, where 1 = Not prepared; 2 = A little prepared; 3 = Quite prepared; 4 = Very prepared; 5 = Extremely prepared

Source: Virtual Instructional Coach pre- and post-implementation surveys, January and May 2021.

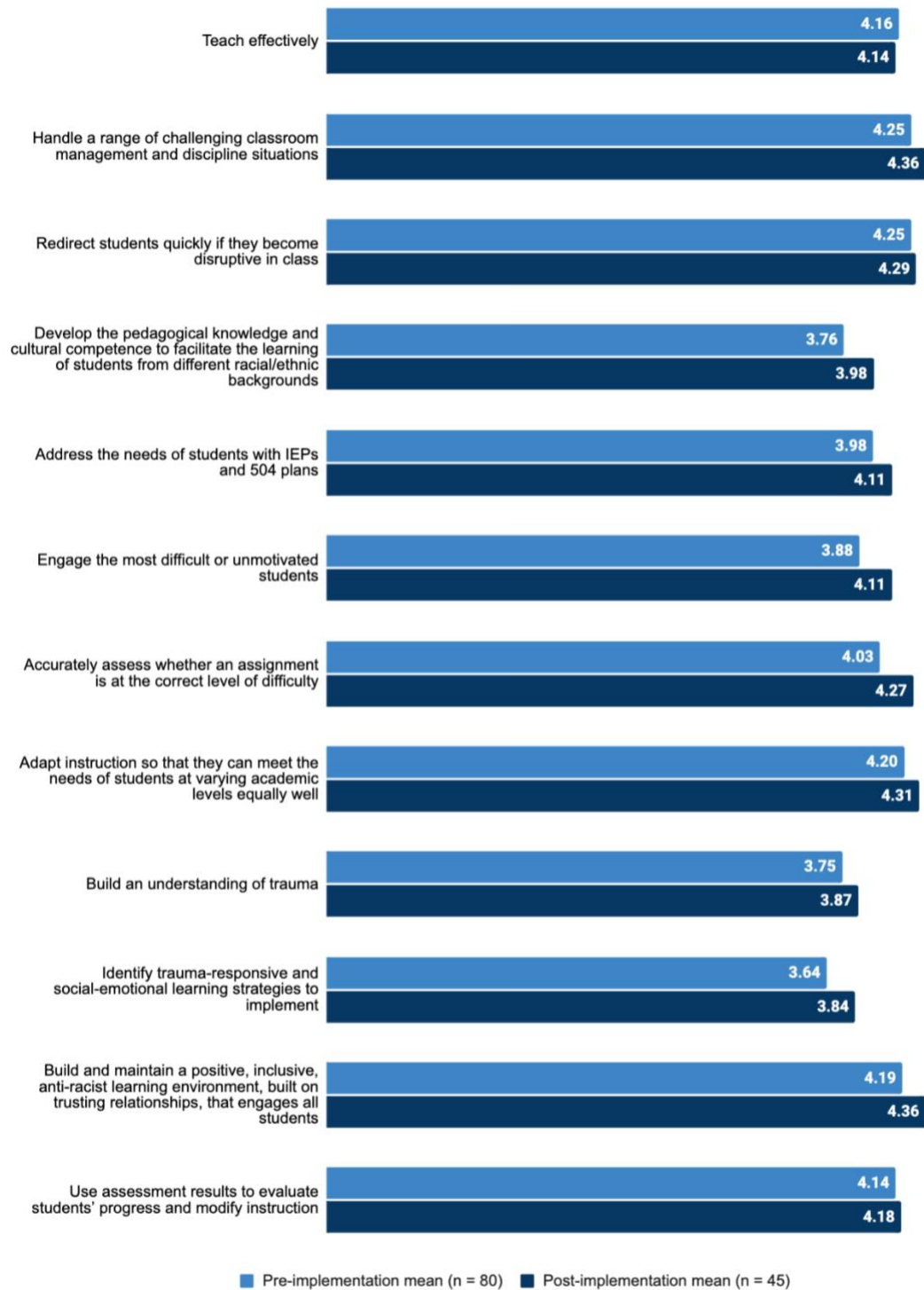
Exhibit B-4. Interpersonal Skills Comfort, Virtual Instructional Coaches, Pre- and Post-Implementation Means



Note: Efficacy items on 5-point scale, where 1 = Not comfortable, 2 = A little comfortable, 3 = Quite comfortable, 4 = Very comfortable, 5 = Extremely comfortable

Source: Virtual Instructional Coach pre- and post-implementation surveys, January and May 2021.

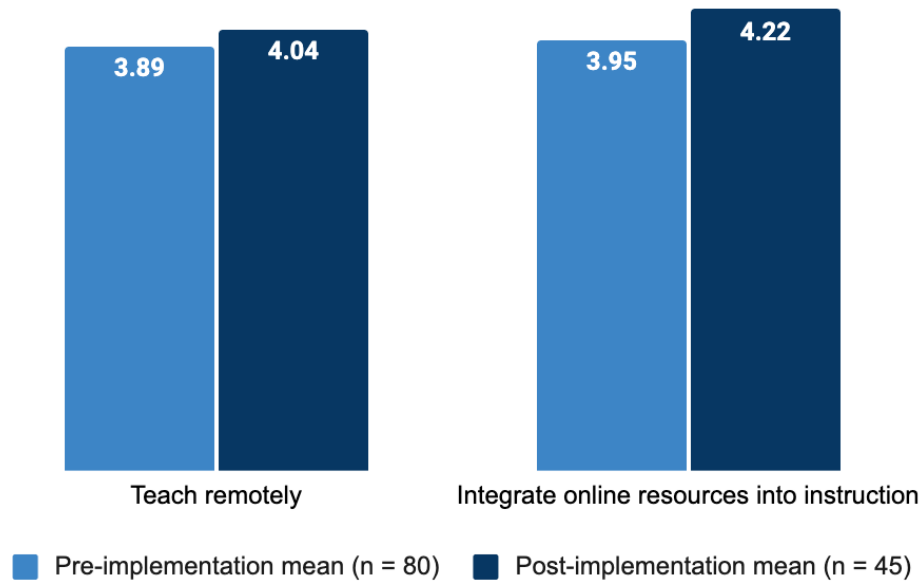
Exhibit B-5. Instructional Support Efficacy, Building Mentors, Pre- and Post-Implementation Means



Note: Efficacy items on 5-point scale, where 1 = Not prepared; 2 = A little prepared; 3 = Quite prepared; 4 = Very prepared; 5 = Extremely prepared

Source: Building Mentor pre- and post-implementation surveys, January and May 2021.

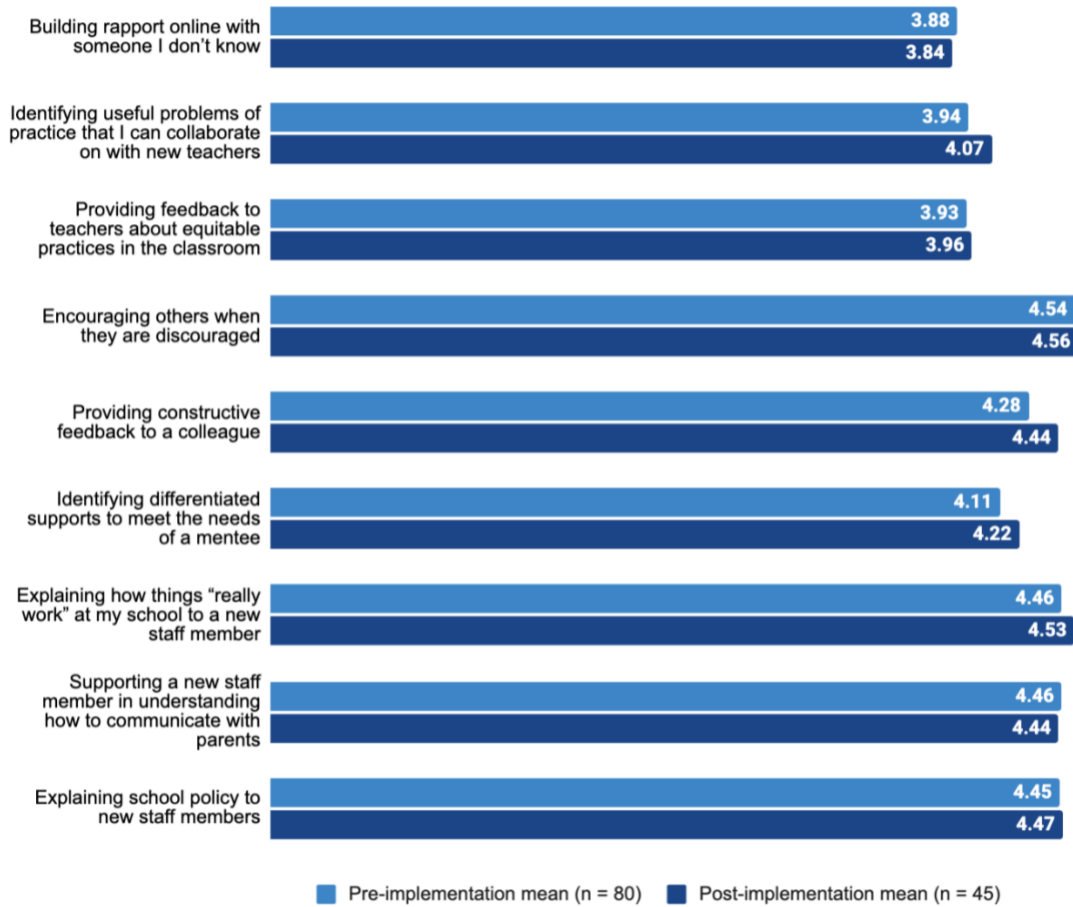
Exhibit B-6. Supporting Remote Teaching Efficacy, Building Mentors, Pre- and Post-Implementation Means



Note: Efficacy items on 5-point scale, where 1 = Not prepared; 2 = A little prepared; 3 = Quite prepared; 4 = Very prepared; 5 = Extremely prepared

Source: Building Mentor pre- and post-implementation surveys, January and May 2021.

Exhibit B-7. Interpersonal Skills Comfort, Building Mentors, Pre- and Post-Implementation Means



Note: Efficacy items on 5-point scale, where 1 = Not comfortable, 2 = A little comfortable, 3 = Quite comfortable, 4 = Very comfortable, 5 = Extremely comfortable

Source: Building Mentor pre- and post-implementation surveys, January and May 2021.