

**Evaluating the Impact of the BEST Program on Novice Teacher Support and Retention**

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### **Introduction and Need for Research**

Retention in school-based agricultural education (SBAE) continues to be an area of concern (Smith et al., 2024). James et al. (2024) reported that the retention rates of Kansas SBAE teachers were lowest in the first three years, aligning with the Ingersoll et al (2018) who found that most teachers leave the profession in the first five years. Mentoring programs can positively impact novice teachers, especially within their first three years (Rodgers & Skelton, 2014). These programs, when grounded in quality training and professional development, increase teacher effectiveness by addressing real-world challenges (Rodgers & Skelton, 2014). Dufour et al. (2006) and Stansberry and Zimmerman (2000) further suggest that incorporating experienced mentors into mentoring programs can provide guidance in classroom management and instructional strategies, improving teacher retention. In response to the need for increased teacher retention, the Kansas Team Ag Ed created the Beginning Educator's Success Team (BEST) program in 2020. At the request of the Kansas FFA Foundation, a program evaluation was conducted to assess the impact of the BEST program on retention and success of SBAE teachers. The research objectives were to identify teachers' overall perceptions of the BEST program and perceptions of the structure of the program with the central research question as "How does participation in BEST influence novice SBAE teachers' perceptions of professional support, program structure, and intentions to remain in the profession?" The findings from the program evaluation survey will be used to inform future program development and support strategies for novice teachers.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Ingersoll and Strong (2011) found that induction and mentoring programs significantly improve novice teacher outcomes like classroom management, teaching strategies, and maintaining positive classroom environments, contributing to improved teacher retention. Ingersoll and Strong's (2011) research on induction and mentoring programs referred to as the "Revolving Door" provided a framework for this study. Their findings highlight the importance of structured support systems for novice teachers in promoting teacher effectiveness and retention.

### **Methods**

Participants included teachers who entered Kansas agricultural education between the years of 2020 and 2024 as first year teachers of all certification types. A list of teachers organized by year of entering Kansas agricultural education was obtained from the BEST professional development coordinator. A survey was designed to measure constructs related to novice SBAE teachers' perceptions of the professional support and program design of the BEST program based on the existing literature that identifies skill development, a sense of belonging, and satisfaction as essential in novice teacher retention (Rodgers & Skelton, 2014; DuFour et al., 2006; Stansbury & Zimmerman, 2000). An email invitation to complete the survey was sent to 195 current and former beginning teachers through Qualtrics. Of those, 33 messages were reported as undeliverable, resulting in 162 recipients. Twenty-four former beginning teachers who did not have a current email address on file were contacted through Facebook Messenger. The total response rate of the survey was 28%. Nine teachers were unable to be contacted. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze all beginning SBAE teachers' levels of agreement with various statements regarding the value of the BEST program and its design and delivery. The constructs

used a Likert-type scale to assess levels of agreement (5 = *strongly agree*, 4 = *agree*, 3 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 1 = *strongly disagree*).

### **Results**

The first objective of this study assessed teachers' overall perceptions of the BEST program. Teachers agreed that their knowledge and skills as an agricultural educator increased because of the content shared through the BEST program ( $M = 4.00$ ,  $SD = .93$ ). The survey participants also expressed a strong agreement that their feelings of belonging and connection in the Kansas agricultural education profession have increased because of the program ( $M = 4.17$ ,  $SD = .97$ ). While still generally favorable, there was less agreement among teachers that their overall career satisfaction improved ( $M = 3.89$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ) and that they are more likely to continue teaching because of the BEST program ( $M = 3.67$ ,  $SD = 1.20$ ). The second objective evaluated beginning SBAE teachers' perceptions of the structure of the BEST program. Survey participants responded positively to the effectiveness of the bi-monthly fall Zoom meetings ( $M = 4.06$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ) and email communication ( $M = 4.39$ ,  $SD = .83$ ). Respondents were especially favorable to in-person professional development ( $M = 4.45$ ,  $SD = .79$ ) and found their locations suitable ( $M = 4.39$ ,  $SD = .86$ ). There was less agreement; however, in the helpfulness of Google Drive with BEST resources ( $M = 3.94$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ).

### **Conclusions**

The findings of this research provide evidence that targeted SBAE mentoring programs can positively influence teachers' skills, sense of belonging, and perceptions of support. It further identifies elements most valued by novice teachers. Participants agreed that the BEST program increased their teaching knowledge, skills, and sense of belonging in the profession. Their perceptions of career satisfaction and likelihood to remain in the profession were moderately positive, indicating room for improvement in the program for coordinators to offer more targeted career support, mentorship, and resources that directly address teachers' long-term professional needs. Additionally, participants highly rated the structure of the BEST program, especially in-person professional development, monthly Zoom meetings, and email communication. However, there was moderate agreement in the usefulness of resource sharing through a Google Drive.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

Well-structured mentoring programs are essential in supporting novice SBAE teachers, especially in their first three years (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011; Rodgers & Skelton, 2014). Participants' increased feelings of belonging and confidence in teaching may serve as a means of mitigating early career attrition. Components of the BEST program that participants most strongly perceived, like in-person professional development, should continue to be prioritized and maintained. Stakeholders should continue to invest in expanding and supporting mentoring programs like BEST to reduce early-career attrition in SBAE. Program coordinators should continue to enhance elements that directly contribute to career satisfaction and retention, such as in-person visits and targeted professional development. Survey feedback should guide ongoing improvements in content, delivery methods, and participant support. For example, maintaining timely and intentional meeting topics while exploring new approaches to resource sharing. Coordinators should also ensure that teachers who cannot attend every event still receive services and support. Finally, conducting qualitative research to capture participants' candid perceptions of the BEST program will provide valuable insights for enhancing programming and support.

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