An Online Environment to Support
the Mentoring of Novice Teachers

This presentation describes a multi-level, multi-institutional collaborative peer mentoring project that uses the Nicenet Internet Classroom Assistant (ICA) to support and mentor first year teachers in Texas. The Novice Teacher Induction Program (NTIP) involves six higher education institutions within the Texas State University System. The presentation describes the way ICA is used to provide online expertise, mentoring, information resources and support to the first year teachers. It discusses the ways the online system is used to provide an environment for peer mentoring. The novice teachers build threaded conversations around their self-identified classroom challenges and describe the steps they are taking to address the challenges. Their fellow teachers read the entries and suggest strategies, provide fresh perspectives, and offer encouragement. The NTIP mentors also serve as peer mentors for each other to share challenges, successful strategies and for problem solving. Preliminary findings indicate that the online collaborative peer mentoring helps novice teachers by: reducing feelings of isolation and enhancing problem solving.

The presentation describes the online environment using Nicenet (www.Nicenet.org), a free web-based learning environment designed to support collaborative academic projects. The features of the system include full conferencing capabilities as well as scheduling, document sharing, personal message sharing and link sharing.

The presentation describes the strategies for online mentoring and the use of journaling for novice teachers and mentors to write about: 1) a current problem or issue they are facing; 2) the actions they are taking to address the problem; 3) reporting on how the action or strategy is working so far. In addition, they read the conference postings from their colleagues and respond to two that are of the highest relevance or interest to their situation.

The NTIP mentors are recently retired teachers who have a caseload of 10-12 mentors. They make site visits to the novice teacher campuses each week and assist with teaching the graduate seminar. They use Nicenet to mentor the novice teachers in their caseload and to share ideas and resources with other mentors across all participating institutions. All mentors meet every two weeks during a 3-hour Mentor Seminar conducted by the NTIP campus coordinator.

The presentation will present the preliminary findings from the ongoing research project. Among the findings are that:

- online conferencing structure requires novice teachers to respond
- online conferencing helps build and reinforce group cohesion and trust
- for many participants, online conferencing offers the best avenue for accessible and sustained support
- Well-timed instructor online interventions and support help the novice teachers in addressing critical problems and helping them to refocus their current instructional strategies