

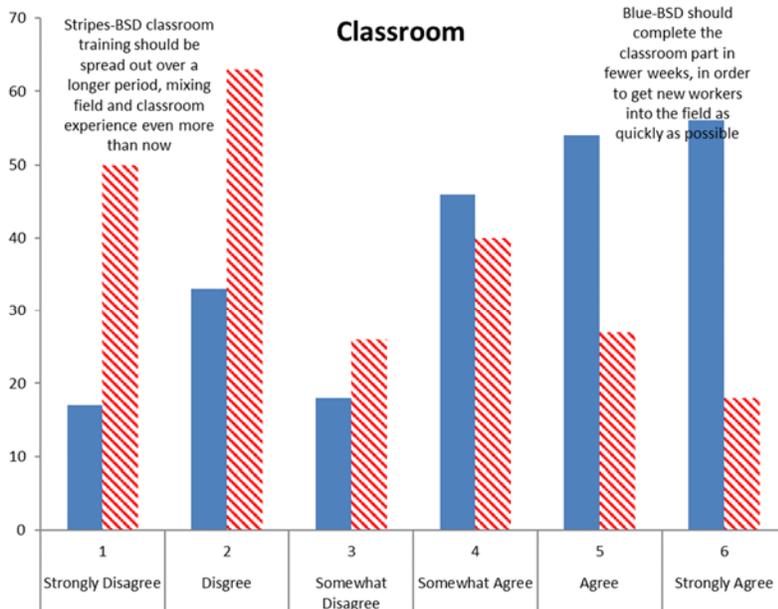
Training new Caseworkers

Texas' Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) was experiencing high turnover among Child Protective Service (CPS) case workers. Among entry-level case workers, 26% left within 12 months, before they had taken on a full case load. Worse, 43% left before 24 months, the time generally recognized as when case workers were fully productive.

Though pay, case load and work-related stress all contributed, a key root cause of high turnover was improper training and mentoring. Case workers and their supervisors widely reported that training was not

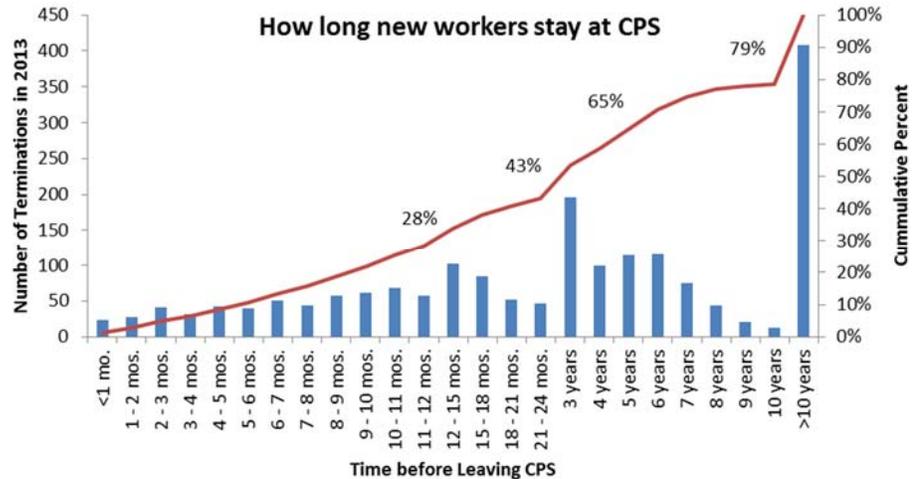
appropriate—that they started in the field without the knowledge or skills to make crucial decisions about the safety and wellbeing of some of Texas' highest risk households.

The historic training program consisted of 13 weeks, conducted before the case worker was assigned to a case. This included 7 weeks of core training and 6 weeks specially designed for the needs of caseworkers in the three CPS programs. Of those weeks, 10 were in a classroom and 3 involved sending the new hire out on a sort of scavenger hunt to find opportunities to experience certain types of case-related work. This is directly at odds with what the education field knows about adult learning. Adults



learn by doing. They learn best when they are challenged to solve a problem with little direction...then introduced to more formal knowledge about how they could have addressed the problem. Adults learn best in teams. Instead, new caseworker training involved hours of sitting in a classroom, watching PowerPoint slides.

When surveyed, case workers and their supervisors agreed that training should be in the field, tied specifically to local practice and involve mentors. A pair of telling questions used as part of a larger survey asked case workers and



supervisors if classroom training should be expanded (blue in chart), or should classroom training be shortened in order to get workers into the field more quickly (red in chart). The DFPS commissioner heard the message loud and clear—training needs to be longer and field-based. He launched a task force to change training.

Texas is a very large state, including 13 regions that range from remotest West Texas to the highly populated big cities. Designing a new training program required: committed leadership, a core team of experts committed to change, collaboration with the existing training team, focus groups including new and experienced workers in every region, and hard data—both performance data and survey input. Transforming training also required a hard-and-fast timeline. The transformation team committed to an aggressive timeline in which new parts of the program were piloted, then rolled out on a monthly basis.

The solution involved several new training approaches:

- Mentors. CPS had used mentors sporadically in the past. Going forward every new hire was joined with a mentor that had only 2-3 years of experience. Thus, the mentor was close in age to the new worker, and better able to relate to the challenge of starting out
- Field trainers. Field training is a fundamentally different skill set from classroom training. It requires different teaching materials, and less driven more by the actual events in the field than a pre-planned training agenda
- Competence models. Previously, training was capped by a test. As scary as this was, it bore little resemblance to real field work. Instead of testing, CPS moved to attestation of competence levels, assessed through collaboration of the field trainer, mentor and supervisor. The switch meant that new workers could remain in training until they had exhibited the required competencies—not merely passed a test on the appointed day
- Regional adaptations. Statewide, classroom training was built around case methods officially documented in the common training material. Supervisors were famously advising new caseworkers to “forget all that” and learn how case work is uniquely performed in the local office. Field training was shifted—focusing on the optimum blend of formal method and field adaptation
- Team case work. In the past, the objective of training was to prepare a case worker to conduct every aspect of a case on the first day after graduation. Under the new model, new workers were assigned to an experienced case worker with a full case load. The new worker took on aspects of the cases as soon as that skill was developed. Thus, a new caseworker began doing parts of actual case work after only a few weeks, as part of a team. Thus, the new worker had much experience with every aspect of a case before taking full responsibility for one.

A year after the “Continuous Learning” task force began its redesign of training, a subsequent survey bore out the widely-held belief that things were changing for the better. Case workers entered field work feeling more confident in their capabilities; they felt better prepared to be responsible for the lives of young Texans and their families. Equally important, the turnover rate was falling off.