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Novice Principals Need Peer Mentoring

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In this era of accountability, principals are now responsible for student achievement on high-stakes state-mandated assessments and the No Child Left Behind Act. The novice principals who enter the profession today face a multitude of issues as they learn on the job. Skills necessary to lead highly complex schools are not learned in traditional principal preparation programs, therefore, it becomes essential to support and assist novice principals at the beginning of the principalship career with a peer mentor, a more experienced school leader. Peer mentoring allows the principals to be socialized into the profession they are about to embark on and it also allows them to have a smooth transition into the principalship. There are peer mentoring strategies discussed in this article considered highly effective throughout the United States.

Keywords: mentoring, novice principal, peer mentoring, mentors

Historically, principals have been rewarded for their work as managers, disciplinarians, and fiscal administrators (Flanary & Terehoff, 2001). However, the role of the principal has evolved over the past 30 years from manager to instructional leader in this era of accountability where high stakes testing and the No Child Left Behind Act have exacerbated the difficulty in sustaining effective performance by school leaders (Darsch, 2004; DiPaola & Hoy, 2008). As instructional leaders, principals are now responsible for student achievement on high-stakes state-mandated assessments. This development of increased standards for principals such as the heightened accountability by legislative and regulatory bodies, reform efforts and the complexity of changing demographics, places the principal in an isolated position where the expected role demands multiple definitions.

Highly trained and proficient principals are not born as leaders nor do they learn all the skills necessary to lead highly complex schools in traditional principal preparation programs (Southern Regional Education Board, 2007). Therefore, it becomes essential to support and assist novice principals at the beginning of the principalship career, with a peer mentor, a more experienced school leader, during their first few years in public school administration. Many novice principals are “tossed into the trenches” unprepared for what is to come and are left to survive alone. These newly appointed principals feel overwhelmed and isolated, yet they are expected to lead schools that have become very “...complex organizations with unpredictable demands” (Lovely, 2004, p. 10).

Today’s novice principals work long hours and are challenged to address and resolve a multitude of issues simultaneously. Not only must they be an expert in state and federal regulations, they must also be informed on local school board policies. Novice principals differ greatly from veteran principals with 20 or 25 years of administrative experience in multiple schools settings. The knowledge, skills, and values that new principals acquire will develop over time as they gain experience. Yet, there is little doubt that strong effective novice principals are prerequisites to school improvement and these principals are crucial to the development and preservation of effective schools (Bloom, Castagna & Warren, 2003). So, new principals are expected to hit the road running immediately.

As the many baby boomers leave the profession, new principals are entering the role of principalship with less experience. Unlike other jobs, principals have no “incubation period”; they are expected to perform all duties of the office and have the same if not more skills than the principals they are replacing (Bugbee, 2006). Malone (2001) supports the dilemma that not only is there a shortage of principals to fill current vacancies, but approximately 40% of the current principals are nearing retirement. Some of the factors include the increasing workload and stress that is often associated with the position (Hansford & Ehrich, 2006). During the past decade most of the principal’s time was spent on personnel management, student interaction, and observation and feedback (Bugbee, 2006). Today, the role of the principal has undergone dramatic changes. Most recently, a study conducted in Texas found that the most

serious concerns the principal faces today include role expectations, time commitment, lack of support, and community politics (Simieou, Deeman, Grigsby and Schumacher, 2010). Due to these demands, principal retention rates are heavily influenced by the level of student achievement and principals who leave as the leader of a school, leave the principalship profession altogether (Fuller & Young, 2009). Therefore, it is incumbent upon school districts to respond to the challenge of supporting principals and especially novice principals through a system of peer mentoring.

Elements of Peer Mentoring

New principals need guidance, support, and reassurance if they are to become effective leaders in today's multi-complex schools. Mentoring allows the principals to be socialized into the profession they are about to embark on and it also allows them to have a smooth transition into the principalship. One way to assure the success of new principals is through principal mentoring programs.

Many states require that new principals be mentored during the first two years of their careers. In fact, "Corporations have long used mentoring -- either formally or informally -- as a career-development strategy in which experienced executives offer developmental assistance to their less experienced protégés" (National Association of Elementary School Principals & Collaborative Communications, 2003, p. 9). Mentoring provides constant and current professional development for both novice and veteran principals. Some districts provide all principals with mentors, whereas other districts only allow novice principals to be mentored.

Strategies for Peer Mentoring

In a recent study, ten novice principals were mentored by two university faculty that had experience as public school administrators. The novice principals, from the same district, had two years or less experience as principals. The faculty acted as coaches and mentors to 10 novice principals. They organized structured bimonthly meetings for one year. The ten principals began to see that they had similar issues and concerns. The principals learned as much from their peers as they did from the coaches/mentors (Simieou, Decman, Grigsby, and Schumacher, 2010).

University faculty can assist school districts in providing successful induction and mentoring programs. Both of them have a vested interest in the success of the novice principals. Licata and Ellett (1988) discuss how university and school districts work together to provide novice principals with clinical induction programs.

Many states, professional associations, and public school districts, have created mentoring programs to certify and train mentors. In fact, by 2006 roughly half the nation's states enacted requirements that all new principals undergo mentoring (The Wallace Foundation, 2007). The Wallace Foundation published a report highlighting several mentoring programs considered highly effective throughout the United States. One of those is the New York City Leadership Academy where trained active and retired mentors provide professional support to both new and experienced school leaders, with particular emphasis on how they could enhance student achievement (Strong, Barrett & Bloom, 2003).

Another mentoring program was developed in 2002 by the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) in partnership with Nova Southern University whereby retired and experienced principals were trained to become mentors/coaches. The program was designed to create a cadre of mentors whose training and expertise was channeled to support both first-year or newly assigned principals. The training integrated mentoring best practices with participants' experiential knowledge (Brown, 2005). The mentoring program advocated that the mentor and the new principal review circumstances surrounding problems and determine methods of resolution (Brown). New principals understand the importance of reflecting on the methods of resolution (Brown).

Another model for peer mentoring was the San Diego Mentor Program. The San Diego City Unified School District approved a plan to provide administrators with "job-embedded training" to give them opportunities to build on existing strengths. Successful former administrators were selected to mentor principals. On-site mentors were responsible solely to mentor principals and assist in shaping them into strong instructional leaders. The development of this trusting and respectful relationship was the key to the success of the San Diego Mentor Program. Both the on-site mentor and the principal together made classroom walkthroughs and then analyzed how to best assist the

teachers. Developing a pool of on-site mentors who were exceptionally successful leaders were “key” to a successful mentoring program (Barry & Keneko, 2002).

Conclusion

A 2003 Public Agenda report showed that 52% of principals felt that the mentoring and guidance they received from colleagues was their most valuable preparation (Farkas, Johnson, & Duffett, 2003). Yet, compared to other education topics, there is very little written about principal mentoring. This relatively new approach to supporting our novice principals is an outgrowth of several stimuli, one of which is the impending shortage of qualified candidates for the principalship (Educational Research Services, 2000).

The mentoring of novice principals is an emerging national trend today. It is what the mentoring of teachers was years ago. If mentoring programs for principals can be as successful as structured mentoring programs for teachers, principals can become successful quickly to address today’s multi-complex schools.

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