If you’ve ever been asked to formally work with an aspiring principal completing his or her practicum, it’s not an easy decision to make. Prior to making a decision about serving in that role, it is important to consider the commitment required to provide a high-quality candidate experience. Your work with the candidate makes a significant contribution to the future of K-12 educational leadership and to the profession. Are you ready to make the commitment?

Following a 33-year career as a teacher and principal in a diverse, urban school district, I have spent the past nine years as a full-time college instructor in an educational leadership program. In that role, I have worked with many principals and students engaged in educational leadership practicums and internships. As a principal, I worked with five practicum students, serving as a cooperating administrator. Here’s my advice for those debating whether to serve in this capacity.

Considerations
When making a commitment to be a cooperating administrator, consider the following.

Understand the time commitment. Determine if you can allocate the time required to make the experience a quality one for the candidate. The student’s higher education institution outlines a set of requirements that the candidate needs to experience and document during the practicum. This can serve as a guide as you engage in the decision-making process about serving as a cooperating administrator.

Hold an initial formal meeting with the candidate and college supervisor. In this meeting, it is important to discuss the following: articulation of clear mutual expectations; establishment of formal meeting times during which specific topics will be discussed; an outline of projected student experiences during the course of the semester or school year; commitment to confidentiality; and establishment of practicum evaluation criteria. This formal meeting provides a clear framework that will guide the work of all participants in the practicum.

Hold scheduled meetings during the practicum. Set a schedule of times and dates of 45-60 minutes (after school/weekends) in which a specific topic will be covered. Topics might include hiring/interviewing; scheduling; parent-community relations; staff supervision; data use; budgeting; meeting planning and leadership; special education programming; staff assignments and allocations; school safety plans; curriculum and instruction initiatives; and professional development activities.

Engage in a metacognition activity. As you interact with your practicum student, it is important to explicitly share your thinking. Sharing the considerations that go into your decision-making and actions can serve as a guide for the practicum student when he or she assumes a school administrative position.

Articulate your values and ethics. The leadership decisions you make shape the school experience of school community members. Conversations about student class placement criteria, special education programming, philosophy, shaping school culture, and teacher-student interaction expectations can help practicum students examine their value framework that will guide their school leadership.

Share mutual learning and feedback. The practicum experience provides an opportunity for the cooperating administrator to reflect and engage in conversations about his or her own practice. With the establishment of a trusting and comfortable relationship, you and the practicum student can discuss issues and concerns in a forum that many principals who are the only administrator in a school seldom experience. As the practicum student shadows you during the course of a school day, the person often develops questions related to your actions. Follow-up conversations can cause fruitful reflection and examination of administrative practices.

Help the practicum student see the big picture—bridging theory and practice. Leading a school involves multiple skills and thoughtful application of the knowledge gained both through formal academic study and the wisdom gained through school-based leadership. Sharing the wisdom gained through site-based leadership can give the practicum student a template to consider in his or her future leadership role. Conversations might involve you discussing the practical challenges present in creating a safe and orderly school environment; creating a personal work-life balance; responding to the central office’s multiple initiative demands; and implementing school accountability measures driven by student test scores.

Serve as a reference, advocate, and mentor. Serving as a cooperating administrator includes a commitment to assist the candidate as he or she seeks an administrative position. This could include the prompt follow-up for reference requests, networking with other principals to promote the practicum student’s job candidacy, and writing reference letters outlining the candidate’s job qualifications. Once the candidate secures an administrative position, many former practicum students seek a continuing relationship. This may evolve into a mentoring role or that of a friendly listener or advice giver—a relationship I continue to have with my practicum students from my principalship days.

Being a cooperating administrator can be a rewarding experience and a growth opportunity. Knowing that you helped shape the careers of future educational leaders is a wonderful legacy.

Patrick Delmore is an assistant professor in the Edgewood College School of Education.