TRAINING TOMORROW'S PRINCIPALS

Lev Pla
Regardless of how well we plan, we can always expect the unexpected and we need to be prepared to handle the situation appropriately. But while being able to put out fires should be part of a principal’s repertoire of skills, it should not be one’s *modus operandi*. The true strength of a principal is the ability to deal with all situations in a manner that enables the school to grow and prosper as a learning community. Unfortunately, while other professions provide an incubation period for newly minted professionals, with expectations commensurate with their knowledge and skill, new principals are expected to have the same—or more—skills as the principals they replace.

There is no foolproof way to prepare a new principal for all of the situations that might arise, but there are many ways that we can help them. School leaders all agree that prospective administrators can learn just so much in a classroom (Martin et al. 2003) and that internships provide the type of hands-on experiences they need for the position. Taking that a step further, we can also provide new principals with a support system of continual encouragement: peer mentoring.

A 2003 Public Agenda report showed that 52 percent of principals felt that the mentoring and guidance they received from colleagues was their most valuable preparation (Farkas et

In NAESP’s mentoring program, experienced and specially trained principals help new colleagues learn how to deal with the unexpected.

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al. 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 (NAESP et al. 1998).

According to Vincent Ferrandino, NAESP’s executive director and a former principal and superintendent, “There is an unquestionable connection between the principal’s ability to lead learning communities and the support they themselves receive for reflection, rigor, and ongoing learning in the context of their everyday work” (NAESP et al. 2003).

Educators know that while the world of the principalship may be exciting, challenging, and often personally rewarding, there is also a great deal of anxiety, frustration, self-doubt, and loneliness (Daresh and Playko 1993). Successful principals have a responsibility to reach out to newer colleagues and offer them the support and assistance needed to be successful as well.

**PALS Is for Principals**

NAESP, in partnership with Nova Southeastern University, developed a program in 2002 to train retired and experienced principals in ways to effectively mentor new principals during their difficult first years. The Principal Advisory Leadership Services (PALS) program addresses the crucial role of adult learning and how it differs from working with children and young adults. One example is that adult learning has to involve the experience and attitude of the learner to be meaningful (Knowles et al. 1998). The mentoring process should be a journey of discovery, in which veteran principals lead new principals to reflect before making decisions.

Of course, there will be times when a new principal needs to make a critical decision and there is no time for reflection. When time allows, however, the mentor and the new principal should review the circumstances surrounding the problem and determine alternative methods of resolution. This expands the knowledge base that new principals can use when faced with similar situations in the future. However, it is important for new principals to understand that they should adopt only those methods of dealing with issues that reflect their own personality and thinking.

Another advantage of peer mentoring is that the mentor experiences growth along with the new principal. For example, participants in NAESP’s National Principals Mentoring Certification Program (NPMCP) say that they have benefited as much or more than their protégés. New Jersey principal Linda Gross says, “Being a mentor has been a wonderful learning experience for me, too. I have learned to be a better listener and questioner.”

I often hear in discussions with principals throughout the country about colleagues who are choosing to leave the profession earlier than planned. The reasons are many, but what they often boil down to is that the job is just not fun anymore. What a tremendous win-win situation it would be for our profession if mentoring not only assisted novice principals in gaining the skills and experiences they need, but also encouraged and revitalized veteran principals.

As members of what I believe is the greatest profession on earth, let’s join together to address the shortage of qualified principals by leveling the playing field for our newest members.

**Help Is an E-mail Away**

Another way for experienced principals to offer support is through NAESP’s Principals Help Line, which allows new principals to e-mail questions about issues they are facing at their schools. A group of veteran principals will respond to these questions within 48 hours. NAESP members can access this service from the NAESP Web site, www.naesp.org, by clicking on Principals Help Line.

**WEB RESOURCES**

NAESP provides brief descriptions of the Principals Advisory Leadership Services (PALS) and National Principal Mentoring Certification Program (NPMCP). [www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentId=1104](http://www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentId=1104)

The ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management has made available for downloading its informative ERIC Digest, “Principal Mentoring.” [www.ericdigests.org/2002-2/mentoring.htm](http://www.ericdigests.org/2002-2/mentoring.htm)

New Visions for Public Schools describes its 20-week Principal Mentoring Program for new principals in New York City schools. [www.newvisions.org/pmp/](http://www.newvisions.org/pmp/)

The SERVE Center for Continuous Improvement presents its Beginning Principal Mentoring Program for new administrators. [www.serve.org/EdQuality/Educator/Principal_Mentor.php](http://www.serve.org/EdQuality/Educator/Principal_Mentor.php)

**References**


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