The greatest legacy veteran principals can leave is to share their wealth of knowledge with the next generation of school leaders.

Myra J. Bugbee
Mentorship

It has been said that experience is the best teacher. This is not a new concept; our forefathers lived it. The beginning of one’s education was “hands-on,” purposeful work with an expert who carefully watched over you and guided you to develop your skills to perfection. We now attend colleges and universities after having participated in more schooling than our ancestors would have ever dreamed possible. However, one fact has not changed. Apprenticeship—in modern terms, mentoring—is still one of the best methods of educating and preparing someone for a new career or occupation. Especially principals.

From A to Z, today’s principal has responsibilities that range from being an advocate for children and teachers to zooming in and out of classrooms. While constantly multitasking, principals must also make important decisions alone. It is here that a mentor can serve as a safe sounding board or provide experienced insight and guidance.

Yesterday and Today

When I became a principal about a dozen years ago, the responsibilities were much different. Site-based management was the buzzword and principals had more autonomy in their buildings than they do today. At that time, according to a study done at Johns Hopkins University in 1987, most of the principal’s time was spent on personnel management, student interaction, and observation and feedback.

Today, every principal feels pressures from a variety of outside influences. The role has become highly political and each principal must balance the demands of the community, state and federal governments, the superintendent, staff, and the teachers’ union.

Principals are expected to become involved in local activities and keep up-to-date about issues affecting schools. Ever-increasing parental concerns require a great deal more time than they did in the past.

Principals must also be involved in implementing decisions made by local, state, and federal legislators. Today, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act and high-stakes testing drive the curriculum. Instead of teaching children to learn for the joy of learning and for lifelong application, schools are forced to meet NCLB’s requirements for Adequate Yearly Progress.

In many schools today, high student growth creates overcrowded learning environments, and with growth has come diversity. A diverse environment often leads to a healthier one, in which the strengths of many can be shared and contribute to the good of the larger group. However, this requires many schools, accustomed to doing things a certain way, to make changes and develop practices that assimilate a diverse population into their school culture.

The explosion of technology has changed the landscape of communication for today’s principal. What used to be five or six telephone messages a day in the 1990s now can easily surpass 40 e-mails a day—all requiring responses. Just think, technology was supposed to make things easier! Two other new driving factors in schools are the increasing use of data and assessments to measure student achievement. Both create a tremendous amount of paperwork and the need to design relevant training so that the information can be used effectively for instruction. All of these changes can lead to a high level of stress, anxiety, loss of sleep, and a feeling of powerlessness for principals, especially new ones.

Mentoring Then and Now

How can we expect new principals to jump in and handle all these areas without support? It is up to veteran principals to provide that support, especially during new principals’ first year. Over the years, I have come to realize that being a principal is all about solving puzzles one piece or one decision at a time. I have come to realize that one of the most challenging aspects of being a principal is that every day is different. Although every principal’s experiences are unique and every school is different, we can help newcomers learn to make...
decisions courageously, based on their core values and the best data available.

When I first became a principal, the New Jersey Department of Education had a “mentoring” program for new principals. It invited interested tenured principals to attend an orientation meeting, where they could place their names on a list that would be used throughout the state. An experienced principal was then assigned to each new principal. There was little or no training for these prospective mentors. The year I became a principal, the list of approved mentors had run out, so I chose a mentor from my own district.

Our mentoring interactions consisted of several casual telephone conversations and occasional meetings at regularly scheduled district administrative functions. There were no formal mentoring sessions to address specific issues. If I encountered a challenging situation, I had to send out an SOS to my mentor, who would then share his thoughts.

Five Walkthrough Objectives

By sharing specific details in an organized fashion, I was able to help my protégé create a walkthrough framework that he can follow or adapt to his own style and needs. The five steps that I shared are as follows:

**Student Orientation to Work/Classroom Management.** If students are attending to their work, there is a higher likelihood they are learning.

**Curriculum Decisions.** I look for written objectives and whether the objectives are aligned to the standards and to our curricula.

**Instructional Decisions.** I look for sound instructional practices and a balance of strategies over time, including whole group, small-group cooperative learning, independent or paired students using self-stick notes to record something of interest, or asking questions.

**Walk the Walls.** I look for evidence of learning posted on the walls or listed on the board, such as writing samples and rubrics of learning objectives that show evidence of standards-based learning.

**Classroom Organization and Safety.** Are the desks grouped in clusters or rows? Are electrical cords strung across the floor? Are there places for students to organize their work in portfolios? I note and report to the custodian any safety issues I observe.

Mentoring the Mentors

Times have certainly changed for the better, based on my experience with the PALS (Principals Advisory Leadership Services) Institute, a mentoring program offered collaboratively by NAESP.
and NOVA Southeastern University. The program began with a three-day seminar, one of the most powerful professional development programs I have ever attended. The attendees were broken into small groups, with each assigned a coach. The group members interacted via monthly online chat sessions and wrote monthly reflection papers about our mentoring experiences. We were also required to read several books related to mentoring and to submit a final project summarizing what we had learned from our experiences with our protégés.

In one such experience, I was fortunate to mentor a protégé in my building. We met formally at least once a month, as well as almost daily by telephone, face-to-face interactions, or e-mail to discuss various topics I felt were important for his growth and development, such as vision, school culture and climate, school safety, facilities, hiring the right people, and observations and evaluations.

When my protégé asked for coaching about the evaluation process, I invited him to co-observe a teacher with me. Prior to the observation, I talked to the teacher and she was agreeable. We both took our own notes about the observation and we debriefed each other after the observation and before meeting with the teacher. While we found many similar observations and reflections, there were a couple of different items that each of us observed. It was an enlightening experience for both of us.

I shared with my protégé my belief that it is a dangerous practice to write an end-of-year evaluation based on only one observation of a teacher during the year. As a veteran principal, I routinely practice walkthroughs because I have found that I gain a great deal of information in these unplanned quick visits. I also try to visit classes at different times of the day. While I cannot get into every class every day, I try to do so at least three times each week. The format I use in my walkthroughs is a five-step process directly related to the four domains of teacher evaluation (Danielson and McGreal 2000). (See box.)

Finally, regarding the annual evaluation process, I shared templates that I use to help make writing the reports go a bit faster. There are some topics that I include in every written evaluation and to have them partly written, in an organized manner, has helped reduce my time in the writing process. I also guided him on the importance of wording recommendations for questionable teachers in a safe, legal, and direct manner.

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Leaving a Legacy

Being a principal is an amazing and fulfilling profession. It is challenging, dynamic, energizing, and draining. The joys far outweigh the frustrations and our impact extends far beyond anything we can imagine. After 25 years as an educator, my students are still the most rewarding part of my job. It has been a blessing and privilege to connect in such a profound way with so many children and to make a positive difference in their lives.

I think all principals at some time ask, “What is the legacy I want to leave?” According to Pete Hall (2006), 50 percent of the current principals will retire within the next five years, leaving a void in one of the most important leadership positions in American society. Our veteran principals can draw on a wealth of knowledge and experience to leave a legacy of leadership for the next generation of administrators by serving as mentors. This is a gift we can share because bringing out the best in others brings out the best in ourselves.

As a mentor, I found myself crossing back and forth from leader to learner and back again. I answered my protégé’s questions and asked him probing questions. I read more books about leadership, became more reflective, and challenged myself to emulate what great principals do.

In the end, being a mentor was truly a gift to me and I know that my protégé and I are both better leaders and better people because of our experiences together.

References


Myra J. Bugbee is principal of Toll Gate Grammar School in Pennington, New Jersey. Her e-mail address is mbugbee@hvrsd.k12.nj.us.
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