The director of the school administration program is calling because he would like you to be a mentor to one of the students who is studying to be a principal. You were recommended by other university faculty and chosen by the student. What a compliment to you to be considered for such an awesome responsibility! It’s worth considering, isn’t it? Most of us believe that we owe it to the profession to assist those educators who will come after us. Also, many mentors find that the experience is a professional learning opportunity for them as well.

So You Want to Be a Mentor?

The difference between effective and ineffective mentors is the time devoted to the candidate’s progress, the sharing of enthusiasm, and the amount of encouraging and supportive behavior. Perhaps the most important of these is taking the time to plan and engage the prospective administrator in growth-filled activities that foster his or her progress.

The following suggestions are based on experiences of working with cooperating personnel from public, private, and parochial schools and agencies for more than 25 years. This is what I have found in observing the interactions of mentors and mentees.

Making the Best of It

Excellent mentors set the expectation that the candidate will spend a great deal of time before school, during planning periods, and after school in the office observing and assisting in the routines of the school day and observing the many roles the administrator must play as an instructional leader.

To get started, show an interest in the work that is being done by the candidate in his or her college/university preparation program. Review the major assignments required in classes to gain an idea of the depth of training being received and the corresponding practical experiences that could be supplied by the district. Most programs will have a list of activities that are to be accomplished during the internship. Make sure to cover these topics. Also, knowing the preparation program requirements and the quality of the candidate’s

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assignments gives you an idea of the seriousness and commitment of the candidate as well as strengths and opportunities for improvement.

Arrange for the candidate to spend time with other personnel in the school and district to see what they do, the legalities that govern their work, problems they typically encounter, how they solve those problems, and how administrators have facilitated their work. Remember to inform all professional personnel and staff that the candidate is fulfilling an internship required in his or her training for principalship.

There are always things going on in the district or in neighboring districts that only happen occasionally or even rarely. Such things may be participation in an accreditation self-study, construction or renovation of a building, a curriculum audit, or the piloting of an innovative program. Mentors can intercede with the leaders of such activities to have their interns included in such learning opportunities.

Since administrators spend so much time communicating with people—both internal to the school and school district, and external to the community—opportunities to involve the intern are abundant. The goal here is to provide some everyday experiences involving human relations, integrity, and ethical behavior. Clearing the way for interns to sit in on instructional support team meetings or special education meetings with parents or guardians provides them with real-life examples of advocacy for children.

Supervision of teachers is another important area where your experience and judgment are helpful to your junior colleague. An internship might be the only time that the mentee and the mentor get to observe a class together. What strengths and opportunities for improvement did the experienced principal note and what was observed by the mentee? How would you service that teacher in the discussion and reflection afterward?

Networking with other administrators and community leaders is a valued way to get fresh ideas, talk through common problems, and seek workable solutions. Have the candidate accompany you to a meeting held by an association of local administrators or by local education agencies or community groups.

Good mentors share time with the candidate. Dedicate a particular time, maybe an hour or so each week, to share experiences.

At this point you may think that this is a lot of unrewarded work, but nothing could be further from the truth. You are revealing your philosophy of education, the wisdom behind your daily decisions, hard-earned wisdom, a marriage of your education and experience. The reward comes when another school boasts of an exceptional leader you have mentored. Think of the countless school personnel, students, parents, and community members who have benefited from your involvement in assisting in the education of a new principal. Try it!

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