

EXPERIENCED PRINCIPALS

Need Mentors, Too

Mentoring programs for new principals often ignore the needs of veteran principals.

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Think back to your first principalship. Were you simply given a map, keys to the building, and a wish of good luck? Or did you feel you had a safety net of support? The principalship is a highly complex, demanding position. According to Leithwood *et al.* (2004), “leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school.” That is why it is so important to support newcomers to the field.

IN BRIEF

Although typical mentor programs target first-year principals, the authors contend that experienced principals moving to a new district or grade level would also benefit from a mentor's support. The article notes the differences and similarities in the needs of new and veteran principals and describes a mentor certification program designed to provide support for both.



The National Mentor Certification Program

A flexible program that meets the needs of any new principal exists with the National Principal Mentor Certification Program (NPMCP), developed by the National Association of Elementary Principals and Nova Southeastern University. The NPMCP is designed to create a cadre of mentors whose training and expertise is channeled to support both first-year or newly assigned principals. The training integrates mentoring best practices with participants' experiential knowledge.

The program's two major elements—the three-day Leadership Immersion Institute followed by a nine-month internship—offer participants the theory and methodology of mentoring, as well as the application of learning and experience under the watchful eyes of trained coaches. During their internship, each of the new mentors interacts electronically with his or her coach while fulfilling a program requirement to log a total of 72 hours with a protégé and nine reflections of the mentor's practices, in addition to a final presentation.

The NPMCP is ideally suited to meet the needs of new principals, regardless of their previous positions or experience. As the principal's position becomes increasingly difficult and complicated, having the support of a mentor adds to the likelihood that both first-year and veteran principals will stay and be effective in their new positions.

of the principal (*i.e.*, their professional socialization is sound). However, they must focus on organizational socialization in the new district. Similarly, an experienced principal moving to a new grade level within a district may understand organization well, but may need assistance in learning new professional socialization skills.

Although many mentor programs work to support new or first-year principals, veteran principals often are not considered. We believe experienced principals changing grade levels or districts need this support. Unfortunately, they may be reluctant to seek that support because they are veterans and “should know everything,” or they may not be aware of what they do not know. Although their needs may be different, they would greatly benefit from a mentoring experience that takes into account both aspects of socialization.

Differences and Similarities in Needs

The similarities and differences of mentoring a first-year principal and a veteran principal can be compared with new and used automobiles. Both provide safe transportation but have specific needs. The new car comes with an owner's manual, just as a policy manual provides needed support for the first-year principal. The veteran principal, like the used car owner, may not enjoy such support. But just as reading the manual is only one aspect of owning a car, simply having technical skills falls short of preparing new or experienced principals for their new positions.

We believe that both first-year and experienced principals in new positions should have mentors because this type of support will increase their effectiveness in their new settings. The most important common attribute in mentoring these principals is the social aspect. This is where a mentor can be someone to turn to when new or veteran principals are confronted with sensitive problems or tasks, or to consult with when testing new ideas. Both need to learn the local culture in order to most effectively apply their technical knowledge.

But although typical mentor programs target the first-year principal, we contend that many *experienced* principals who change positions to rejuvenate their practice, or perhaps to accept a new challenge, would also benefit from a mentor's support. These principals have different support or mentor needs that are often overlooked.

The Socialization Process

Socialization refers to how people learn their social roles, and for principals it typically starts in their first years of teaching. Teacher leadership experiences contribute as much to the prospective principal's socialization as does taking master's-level classes for initial administrator certification. For first-year principals, mentoring is another vehicle for principals to be socialized into their complex roles. Leithwood, Steinbach, and Begley (1992) further define socialization as “those processes by which an individual selectively acquires the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to adequately perform a social role, in this case the school principalship.”

The socialization process is further broken down to *professional* socialization and *organizational* socialization (Hart 1993). Professional socialization for principals encompasses knowledge of core responsibilities, laws, procedures, and processes, as well as the technical

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skills common to all principals. In contrast, organizational socialization refers to the processes through which new principals learn how to be a principal in a specific district or school.

This learning process may be complicated because aspects of the professional and organizational socialization a principal encounters in one setting may or may not transfer to a new setting. Policy implementation and decision-making can vary tremendously across schools and districts.

For a first-year principal working in a new district, the socialization process is complicated by the layered nature of the organization. Davis (1998) found that most principals lose their jobs because of their inability to get along with people, not because of a lack of technical skills or because students are not achieving. Principals in this situation most likely have not been successfully socialized to the organization.

Successful veteran principals who transfer to different districts usually have a good understanding of the role

They also need to learn specific tasks unique to a particular district.

While the first-year principal may need assistance with technical skills, such as creating a budget, the experienced principal new to a district or grade level has a general understanding of budgeting but will need to learn the peculiarities of his or her new setting.

A long history of evidence shows that principals can benefit from a mentoring system in which an experienced principal helps a protégé combine theory and practice with experience (Daresh 1995). However, the mentor programs currently in place are designed for first-year principals and may not be offered to experienced principals who are new to a position. The ideal mentor program is one that meets the needs of both. 

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WEB RESOURCES

The International Mentoring Association is an excellent source of general information on mentoring. www.mentoring-association.org

The Coaching and Mentoring Network provides a resource center for mentoring news, books, articles, training, and accreditation. www.coachingnetwork.org.uk/ResourceCentre.htm

The Education Alliance at Brown University has made available a free download of *Making the Case for Principal Mentoring*, developed in conjunction with NAESP. www.alliance.brown.edu/db/ea_catalog.php?search_calc=d10389

NAESP describes the PALS Program Toolkit used for mentoring certification. www.naesp.org/ContentLoad.do?contentId=1886

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