

From Novice to Expert in Three Years

New York district creates a mentorship program to get new principals up to speed faster

By Tamara Lipke and Bret Apthorpe

That sink-or-swim feeling is never more real than for new principals. And in New York state, they not only have to manage the incredibly complex challenges typical of the principalship, but they also must serve as change agents for new teacher evaluation systems.

According to interviews and classroom observations performed as part of a new superintendent's entry plan, Jamestown (New York) Public Schools lacked systems focused on improving student achievement. Compounding the problem for the suburban district was the fact that half of its six principals were new, nontenured principals with no prior principal experience.

The role of the principal in leading change is critical, so it was imperative for these novice principals to contradict Blair Mascall and Kenneth Leithwood's 2010 research suggesting that new principals need at least five years to have a lasting, positive impact. Our new principals wouldn't have five years, so we needed to find a way to give them the capacity to be successful within three.

Creating a Fast Track

The new superintendent and an experienced school leader reviewed the available research to identify the features of a professional development program that could meet its ambitious goals of principal success, address identified gaps, and provide a comprehensive platform of support to new principals. From this, we created "The Mentoring Guidebook for Principals and Mentors."



The three-year guide builds scaffolds around the skills and knowledge required of high-performing principals, including relationship-building, professional development, school visitation, and new-principal supports. The guide also focuses on the instructional leadership capacity-building necessary for success.

For our principals to hit the ground running, we intentionally put a culture of support in place that offered frequent, measurable connections with mentors. Vital to the success of this effort was to bridge the research-based best practices with real-world, day-to-day issues that principals—novice and mentor—face.

Recalling our own experiences from the first day as a principal, we outlined roles for the mentor principal and new principal. New principals must focus on leading their buildings while simultaneously honing and expanding leadership capacity. The mentor coaches, listens, and reflects to

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assist the new principal in implementing systems and in managing the instructional program within their building as it connects to the larger district system.

The mentors identified to work with novice principals hadn't served in this capacity previously. This program needed to support them, too, and it offered mentors a starting point from which to build a professional relationship with their assigned novice principal. Through breakfast and coffee meetings, shared school visitations, and discussion, they fostered relationships and co-constructed learning.

Steps Toward Success

The guidebook evolved into a step-by-step guide that outlines getting acclimated to a building, meeting with stakeholder groups, and gathering and analyzing data. It directs the principals to webinars and books about best practices implemented at high-performing schools, providing principals—novice and mentor—with help in formulating a vision.

We also offered a goal-setting process for mentors and new principals to use. The role of new principals was to set goals reflecting individual and building growth; the mentor's role was to support and coach the new principal to make progress toward those goals.

Challenges faced in developing mentor-mentee relationships included a lack of time for quality conversations, lack of financial resources, limited professional development opportunities in the district's focus areas, and the act of mentoring itself. But the guide helped build a framework to use in moving forward faster.

Creating Conditions for Success


We are now in the third year of using the guidebook, and all mentor-mentee pairs say that their continued use of it supports their work. Annual evaluations show tremendous progress toward their respective goals; new principals say the guidebook built a foundation for personal and professional connections, and mentor principals reported an unanticipated outcome: their own professional growth.

New principals say they wouldn't have otherwise considered some of the activities suggested to connect with stakeholder groups and district administrators; the guidebook also helped organize information- and data-gathering activities necessary for

the first months in the role. Ultimately, an esprit de corps developed between the new leaders and their mentor principals; by supporting each other, they strengthened the schools' curricular and instructional programs.

Will these new principals defy the research and show evidence of their efforts' impact? Early indications are that the systems implemented in the novices' buildings are improving student achievement and enhancing building cultures. Mentors suggest that an environment has been created for significant positive outcomes.

The approach appears to have influenced collaborative and

distributive leadership styles to build capacity among the leadership team, and the conditions now exist for new principals to realize their goals and positively effect change on behalf of students. We hope to break the five-years-to-success paradigm and create a new three-year pathway to success. 

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