

Overcoming the Overwhelming

Mentoring programs help slash turnover and shield new administrators from stress

By Chris Record with Holly Couturier

When I was a new principal, I felt a gnawing in my stomach and tension in my neck. Why was I so on edge? What was causing my sleepless nights? Then it hit me: Three intersecting demands of the job were constantly pulling me in different directions.

First, a variety of stakeholders (staff, students, parents, district administrators, school committees, etc.) were bombarding me with requests—some polite and some not—to respond to something that had happened in the past. At the same time, I was learning on the fly how the school operates. For instance, how would we evacuate during a gas leak?

Finally, I had to figure out what the future vision for the school was and how to achieve it. How in the world would I guide this staff, student body,

and community to eventually bring that vision to fruition?

For years, these intersecting demands continued to stress me out. Was I the only one feeling this way? Was I doing something wrong? To whom could I turn for help?

Studying Stress

In my doctoral dissertation, I got the opportunity to examine the stressors principals face. Previous research revealed a gap in the literature about occupational stressors, principals' perceptions of the effects of stress on their professional and personal lives, and the coping skills they used to deal with that stress.

Multiple interviews with high school principals in their first or second year and more experienced principals with at least

seven years on the job furnished an understanding of the physical and psychological manifestations of principal stress. These included medical conditions, exhaustion, challenges with eating, anxiety, isolation, guilt, and anger.

The findings showed principals have high levels of occupational stress and are often ill-equipped to cope with stress or mediate stressors effectively. While principals enjoy many aspects of their work, they are often overwhelmed by the demands of their jobs and by the challenges of being supportive and loving spouses and parents.

Dissertation findings indicated that principals require more comprehensive training from university preparation programs, ongoing support from school districts and superintendents, and public policy



that supports proper recruitment, training, support, and mentoring.

Thwarting Turnover

According to researchers Gordon Donaldson and George Marnik, a significant concern is that about one-third of all principals change jobs every two years. As a result, many districts must go through the time-intensive process of hiring a new principal and habituating the person to the school district and community on an ongoing basis.

National research highlights the following detrimental impacts of principal turnover:

- Greater teacher turnover;
- Negative impact on student achievement;
- Increased fiscal costs; and
- Teachers resisting change efforts and simply “waiting principals out.”

With the adoption of Chapter 118, Maine joined 30 other states in establishing new teacher mentoring guidelines. With 23 states already mandating mentoring requirements for new principals, we believe that consistent, high-quality principal mentorship should be held in equal importance.

According to a report published by the Connecticut State Department of Education, several promising practices greatly increase the likelihood of administrator retention when implemented during the administrator’s first two years. These include:


- A support team to include a mentor, peer(s), and supervisor;
- An assigned mentor;
- Participation in a network of “new” administrators; and
- Attendance at conferences.

Recognizing principal recruitment and retention as a significant problem, the Maine Principals’ Association (MPA) created two induction programs to best support our newest administrators: Great Beginnings and the Mentor/Coach program.

The Great Beginnings program is a four-part, yearlong professional development program that tells new administrators what to expect in each upcoming quarter of the school year. It allows new administrators to meet with other new administrators from across the state to learn, share, and realize that they are not alone in their struggles. The Mentor/Coach program matches each new administrator with a trained mentor to serve as his or her mentor, guide, and confidant.

Although these two programs are not mandated by the state, the districts that invest in getting new administrators the support they need have increased the likelihood that the administrator is going to stay not only in the district, but also in the profession. Since 2005, more than 80 percent of the assistant principals, principals, and

career and technical education directors who participated in the MPA mentoring/coaching program are still in administration.

We are in a crisis-level educational administrator shortage, and if school districts do not invest in a mentor program for their newest administrators, they will soon have buildings with poor or insufficient leadership, which will ultimately trickle down to poor classroom instruction and poor student learning. Our kids deserve nothing but the best, so let’s start investing in our newest administrators. 

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