



Building

With careful investment, an **assistant principal** will become a valuable partner in the school leadership team.

By Sandra A. Trach

Schools are symbiotic organizations that are stimulated by the push and pull of change. This exciting yet creative tension can be complicated to navigate. High-performing principals know that shared leadership with their assistant principal is absolutely essential for success.

An effective assistant principal is a potential future principal. Therefore, principals must make a deep commitment to nurture the novice leaders with dedicated time, training, and support. Developing an assistant principal is a time-intensive but worthy commitment for not only the principal and assistant

principal, but also the entire school community.

According to Christopher Colwell in *Impact: How Assistant Principals Can Be High Performing Leaders* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), assistant principals “lead from the middle” of the school, which allows them to work at a meaningful intersection of administration and leadership, and among faculty, staff, students, and parents. Assistant principals are key relationship-builders, becoming a bridge between the principal and faculty and staff, and aiding in the trust and transparency necessary for a successful school culture.

Experienced principals often say they owe much of their success to their assistant principals—that



Leaders

they are the ones who lead, facilitate, communicate, collaborate, design, implement, problem-solve, and so much more. The assistant principal is a vital shared leadership partner with the principal in every endeavor.

Principals must resist using assistant principal talent solely for managerial needs. Instead, principals should empower assistant principals as aspiring school leaders, ones who are ready to assume the helm at a moment's notice. This can only happen with deliberate coaching and mentoring through authentic reflection, meaningful tasks, and continuous feedback.

The Right Strategy

Principals must help assistant principals move from theory to application. While management tasks such as bus duty, schedules, and student discipline are necessary in a school, it is important to move beyond

these types of tasks in order for assistant principals to learn and grow.

Colwell advises “the 50 percent rule,” contending that at least 50 percent of the assistant principal’s workday must be dedicated to the lives of students and teachers and the mission of the school. This is an easy metric by which to gauge the assistant principal’s schedule and assess the impact on teaching and learning.

Principals must prepare their assistant principals strategically while staying realistic. New assistant principals cannot grasp the flood of leadership and administrative tasks required at the outset. Initially, assign a few projects that allow depth, then slowly expand responsibilities. Principals should not only be ready to assign tasks to their assistant principals, but also to give up some tasks and prioritize new ones. Part of empowering assistant principals is allowing them to shoulder some of the workload so the assistant principal can grow.

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Tools for Growth

The principal and assistant principal must be fully united in their understanding of high-quality instruction and how to provide purposeful feedback. This effort takes focused time and energy and must be deliberately planned into the week.

Here are other ways principals can build leadership capacity:


- Start the morning with brief meetings to organize the day, and hold one-on-one closure opportunities for reflection. Balance these with quick check-ins throughout the day to communicate needs and decisions.
- Conduct walkthroughs together to connect the instructional vision to visible learning. Develop and employ a common instructional vocabulary.
- Extend authentic forms of leadership, authority, and responsibilities.
- Provide opportunities to observe you in action, then debrief together. Conduct arranged observations of the assistant principal that include pre-conference and post-reflection tools.
- Encourage assistant principals to unearth problems within the school and design improvement efforts. Do not insulate the assistant principal from challenges. Guide from the side as much as possible, and intervene only when necessary.
- Teach the assistant principal how to work through a personnel dilemma by modeling how to navigate supervision and evaluation procedures, balanced with improvement processes.
- Create ways for your assistant principal to visit other schools to learn from peers in focused visits. Develop ways for the assistant principal to participate in small-group meetings with other assistant principals in the district through an aspiring principal network, or consider a partner organization such as NAESP, which trains principal mentors to provide such learning.
- Support the assistant principal on finding ways to uphold and support the principal's vision while also maintaining his or her unique professional identity.
- Colwell suggests encouraging your assistant principals to "lead up" by developing new projects, expanding on assigned projects, and creating project proposals as they feel more comfortable in the role.
- Make time for reflection and dialogue by holding routine conversations, providing coaching and counsel, and making your decisions transparent.
- Offer a continuous loop of timely feedback, including a balanced approach of encouragement and constructive growth suggestions.

Here are five practical suggestions for helping assistant principals grow:

- 1** Conduct classroom walkthroughs together and model what to look for in highly effective instruction.
- 2** Support the assistant principal with data analysis. Look at student work and data together. The principal should model inquiry practices, and in turn, the assistant principal will develop data literacy.
- 3** Teach your assistant principal how to engage with challenges and untangle conflict. Listen to, guide, and support the critical thinking necessary to maneuver through issues.
- 4** Empower your assistant principal to offer his or her own professional opinions and rationale, not just emulate your voice.
- 5** Model ways to reflect. Teach your assistant principal how to gain perspective on needs and issues, and ways to solve dilemmas. Reflection is not only necessary for analysis, but also for growth.

A Worthy Investment

Principals must dedicate time and energy to listen, guide, and support assistant principals. This is a time-intensive commitment that will pay dividends not only for the assistant principal, but also the principal and school. With careful investment, an assistant principal will become a partner in the school's work.

It can be a challenge to determine how districts can sustain this level of training and support, especially when cost is an issue and time is a challenge. However, districts must consider this a wise investment. Assistant principals who develop with a high-performing principal contribute to stable school leadership. Above all, empowering assistant principals is professionally gratifying for the assistant principal and principal alike. The assistant principal's newfound capacity will not only help the school flourish, but also expand to a new principalship in the future. 

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