



What's My Role?

Part 2

To get the most out of the position and move up, APs should be prepared for substantial on-the-job training and professional development

By Ian P. Murphy

Much as districts and states don't often delineate a recommended distribution of tasks between principal and assistant principal, they rarely state whether the AP's role should be seen as a sort of understudy or apprenticeship for the principal position, or as a career position in itself.

"The position is such a linchpin in leadership development," says Ellen Goldring, lead author on "The Role of Assistant Principals: Evidence and Insights for Advancing School Leadership," a report released in April from Vanderbilt University and Mathematica and commissioned by The Wallace Foundation. "But we really don't know that much about it."

Pathways to the Principalship

What the report does reveal is that school leaders typically start out in teaching. When an aspiring administrator decides to pursue a leadership role independently or is "tapped" by a colleague, they join a preservice program to get the appropriate training and licensure.

Pre-service training focuses on the principalship, the report notes, even though graduates are more likely to serve as assistant principals initially. A 2019 study reported that 90 percent of graduates of North Carolina State University's principal preparation program took AP positions upon graduation.

While this is a well-traveled route to building leadership, pathways vary. Some candidates are appointed to a principalship as soon as they satisfy pre-service requirements, while others' paths are affected by factors such as school size, available positions, equity issues, and levels of support.

Looking Forward to Leadership

Once in the role, the report says, most assistant principals aspire to be principals. A 2011 study of educators in Miami-Dade County, Florida, found that 80 percent of APs wanted to be principals eventually, and 63 percent of first-year principals had been APs the year prior.



“Most APs in our county have aspirations of becoming a principal,” says Glenn Messier, principal of Mechanicsville Elementary School in Sykesville, Maryland. “Candidates typically have a long-term plan [that] strengthens the AP experience and develops essential leadership skills for a school administrator role.”

“For me, the AP position is an introduction to school leadership,” says John Courtney, assistant principal at Mechanicsville Elementary. “I see the AP role as a temporary position on the way to other leadership opportunities.”

The minority of APs who prefer to stay in the role say they enjoy its more limited scope and lower levels of stress, the report notes. The available research is unclear on whether ongoing support should be differentiated according to an AP’s career aspirations.

On-the-Job Experience

Assistant principals are traditionally charged with tasks such as discipline, scheduling, staffing, testing coordination, and facilities management. But

assistant principals who want to move up say they appreciate on-the-job training in instructional leadership, finance and budgeting, and assessing school performance data—all primary tasks of a building leader.

Adria Whitworth, assistant principal at Jefferson Middle School in Jefferson, Georgia, likens the ideal AP development process to a management strategy practiced by restaurant chains such as Waffle House. “Their thought process is that to run the organization well, you must be exposed to all areas—you must start at the store level as a cook, server, manager, etc.,” she says. “The same goes for schools: Serve lunches, take out the trash, direct traffic. Knowing the experiences that your staff and students encounter helps you lead your greatest resource: people.”

Connecting with school staff and stakeholders is big focus for budding administrators. “I built relationships with every group of staff that works in a school, from the custodial and nutrition staff to the teachers,” says Jerod Phillips, who took on the

principalship at Cedar Lane Elementary School in Ashburn, Virginia, this summer after five years as an AP.

Advocating for Enrichment

Professional development opportunities intended to help APs master their current roles, move further down the path to the principalship, or both are not widely available, the report says. In a nationally representative 2015 survey of U.S. public school principals, only 36 percent reported that their districts provided APs with PD other than mentoring or coaching at least monthly.

According to a survey of 69 APs in Texas, mentors can help by focusing on:

- **Skills development.** APs appreciated assistance in developing communication skills, building strong relationships, guiding staff development, and honing decision-making strategies.
- **Personal/professional development.** Formal and informal growth opportunities include advice on personal qualities such as hard work, patience, and persistence.

Valued Experiences

“The Role of Assistant Principals: Evidence and Insights for Advancing School Leadership” outlines a number of mentoring, networking, and on-the-job experiences important to assistant principals’ professional growth:

1. **Instructional leadership.** APs were eager to assist with the principal’s primary task by learning to oversee curriculum development, observe instruction, and provide feedback.
2. **Staff development.** In addition to developing the teacher corps through instructional leadership, APs can benefit from participating in hiring and staffing decisions.
3. **Change management.** APs appreciated opportunities to define school goals and champion change initiatives in preparation for building-level leadership.
4. **Data assessment.** Assessment of what works toward school improvement and what doesn’t often relies on data, and APs expressed a desire to learn to crunch the numbers.
5. **Extra efforts.** Study participants said they grew professionally when they pursued experiences beyond their school’s typical assignments for APs.
6. **Building a cohort.** APs said it was important to build a network of trusted administrators outside their own schools to ask for advice or compare notes.

APS RISING

- **Values clarification.** APs said they appreciate direction on developing achievable, realistic goals while maintaining work-life balance.

APs who aren't exposed to a variety of responsibilities or lack support must be prepared to spearhead their own enrichment, says Aqila Malpass, Ed.S., assistant principal at Rocky Ridge Elementary in Hoover, Alabama. "APs should advocate for the ability to experience all aspects of the principal role and/or other leadership roles toward which they aspire."

As the only full-time AP for 1,000 students, Whitworth has the opportunity to do "a little of everything." She says APs who want to be principals should get involved in professional organizations such as NAESP and ask to switch positions with another AP if their job becomes static.

Ambitious APs should take advantage of opportunities wherever they can be found, says Sonia Hurd, assistant principal at Clemens Crossing Elementary School in Columbia, Maryland. She suggests "taking an active role in school improvement planning [and] asking to take the lead on various projects with the principal, shadowing principals in the surrounding area to gain other experiences, and participating in aspiring principals cohorts or workshops."

The Principal's Patronage

A principal can contribute greatly to the development of an assistant principal, APs agree.

Since preparation programs can never mimic the on-the-job experience completely, principals should attempt to expose APs to every aspect of building leadership. "The single most important thing a principal can do is trust their AP," Courtney says. "Allow the AP the autonomy to champion not only the logistical operations of the school, but also instructional initiatives."

Former NAESP National Distinguished Principal Melanie Sigler "made sure to include me in all aspects of running a school, from parent meetings to policy decisions to curriculum decisions," Whitworth says. "She made sure to educate me on the budget. She let me lead data meetings, and we worked together on the master schedule to maximize funding.

"Your administration team will only be as good as [its] communication," she adds. "Principals, ask yourself: 'If I am absent, can my APs run the school without me?' If you have trained your APs well, a principal should have peace of mind, knowing their APs are well-prepared to handle anything that happens." ●

Ian P. Murphy is senior editor of *Principal magazine*.

More Resources for APs

APs Rising NEWSLETTER
Improving the Work of Assistant Principals

IN THIS EDITION

The October edition of *APs Rising* says that while AP numbers are expanding nationwide, few districts offer a roadmap for career development. Most APs will need to seek out learning opportunities independently if they want to advance while supporting the principal's vision. And those who might be unsure about moving up will want to take inventory of their energy, excitement, and enthusiasm before taking that next step.

Researching the AP's Role

Ellen Goldring, the lead author of "The Role of Assistant Principals" report, discusses the rise in AP numbers and leadership development. [Read More](#)

Learning Opportunities

APs Rising Discussion Group: What do you think of the *APs Rising* digital newsletter and professional learning community? What topics should we address? [We want your feedback!](#)

Twitter Chat: Building a Thriving Learning Community

Webinar: Empowering Assistant Principals to Lead Learning Communities

Join this interactive session to learn what current research is saying about the role of the assistant principal, what experiences an assistant principal perceives to be missing from the position, and how you can empower your assistant principal to lead a thriving learning community.

Dec. 15, 2021 at 3-4 p.m. ET

Register today: naesp.org/event/wallace-webinar-empowering-assistant-principals-to-lead-learning-communities



Wallace

This article is brought to you in partnership with The Wallace Foundation. The foundation works to foster equity and improvements in learning and enrichment for children and in the arts for everyone. Research commissioned by and produced by the foundation is available without charge from the Knowledge Center at wallacefoundation.org.