

# LEAN ON ME: PEER MENTORING FOR NOVICE PRINCIPALS\*

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## 1 Introduction

Unfortunately, several aspects of the building principalship indicate that the maxim, “It’s lonely at the top,” is true to the leader of an effective school. Numerous studies cite leadership as a key component in creating and maintaining effective schools (Edmonds, 1979; Sergiovanni, 1991, Supovitz & Poglinco, 2001). Historically, the principalship in American public schools is an isolated position where the leader’s role demands multiple definitions. The most serious concerns facing the principalship include role expectations, time commitment, lack of support, and community politics. These concerns, among others, have contributed to a decreasing interest in the position (Renihan, 1999). In addition to the listed concerns, pressures related to public accountability such as initiatives stemming from the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001) have exacerbated the difficulty in sustaining effective performance by school leaders (Daresh, 2004).

More than ever, it is paramount for school districts to respond to these challenges by preparing their leaders and providing support for leadership and school success. States and districts have recognized this

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fact since the mid-1980s, and administrative in-service programs have become a part of educational practice (Barth, 2003). Principal induction and principal mentoring are terms that have been used interchangeably and are not new topics in the educational arena. Researchers have emphasized the importance of induction and mentoring in recruiting and retaining educational leaders in the profession (Wilmore, 2004). Policy-makers have realized that training high quality leaders is pertinent, as evidenced by legislation requiring continued training during the first year of the principalship. For example, in Texas, the State Board of Educational Certification requires: (a) first year principals and assistants must participate in a program for one year, (b) induction period should incorporate assessment and professional growth, and (c) should be a structured systemic process to develop skills in operating the school, adjusting to culture and developing personal awareness. Mentoring is an integral component (Agency, 2001).

This study focused on the experiences of 10 new principals involved in a principal mentoring program in an urban school district. The study examined the connections of theory and practice from training received in the administrative preparation program to the practices of the principals, as shared through multiple media. The descriptive study sought to understand the impact of providing support and mentoring from an external source to the district program on (1) the retention of principals and (2) the positive influence on student success, as evidenced by state testing data. The researchers utilized participant observations, interviews, researcher observations, and document collection to ascertain the participants' perspectives of the value of the induction program and its influence on practice.

Three themes emerged from the data to contribute to the impact of experiences of the principals in the mentoring program: (1) the importance of networking with principals at different levels with similar experiences, (2) individualized support to provide researched-based solutions with mentors, and (3) continuous development and professional growth amongst peers. Induction and mentoring programs have the potential to provide administrators with quality experiences and support. The findings of this research contribute to an agenda supporting the importance of quality induction and mentoring of school leaders.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

New principals face a myriad of challenges when they accept responsibility as the primary campus leader. According to Lashway (2003), first year administrators suffer immense stress through the process of constructing cognitive meaning from textbook understandings to real-life applications. In large, candidates are prepared for their principalships through a training regime consisting of both theoretical and practical knowledge. Typically this training is more deeply rooted in theoretical knowledge obtained in the classroom than practical knowledge experienced in the field. Fleck (2008) states, "The university had prepared me well in theory, but practical knowledge was based on my teaching experiences and principal internship" (p. 27). A lack of practical training results in new principals being forced to "feel their way through" the early years of their principalship in order to accumulate the practical knowledge required to become effective leaders.

The dynamics of the principal induction period have gradually changed over time. Lashway (2003) indicates that today's induction period for a new principal is significantly shorter, more stressful, less forgiving, higher profile, and a much more involved process than it has been historically. While the challenges of the induction process have been amplified, the training process is still heavily rooted in theoretical knowledge with limited opportunities to obtain practical knowledge. Browne-Ferrigno (2005) reiterates, "New principals are often overwhelmed by situations for which their training left them unprepared" (p. 23). Lashway (2003) states, "Traditionally, rookie principals have been left to sink or swim; having completed a university training program, they are presumed to be prepared and get little direction beyond bland encouragement or an occasional practical tip" (p.2).

Conveying practical knowledge to individuals without actually placing them in an administrative position, outside of a brief internship, can be challenging. Several authors, including Hall (2008), suggest ways to provide practical knowledge during the mentoring process. A common suggestion among the authors is the introduction of formal mentoring and/or coaching programs intended to provide training and support to new principals. According to Hall (2008):

## 2.1

Most administrative certification programs include an internship, which may or may not be beneficial to the candidate, depending on how much actual hands-on experience is gained. Classes in research, theory, and discussion can prepare a candidate only so much. But a viable solution has taken root in the administrative realm. Recent research indicates a rise in the frequency and depth of mentoring programs for school administrators, in particular building principals (p. 449).

Additionally, Hall (2008) points out that in order for mentorship programs to be successful, they must be structured and systematically implemented, not just ad-hoc relationships. Bloom, Castagna & Warren (2003) address emerging mandates for supportive programs:

## 2.2

"National principals' organizations and new legislation call for induction programs for novice principals that include mentoring. It is clear that experienced principals also need ongoing support and professional development, and that a coach or mentor can be a key element of this process" (p. 20).

Sorenson (2005) reinforces the need for highly structured, standards-based growth and development programs that are designed to mentor new principals through support networks and field-based experiences during their first three years in the position.

A common theme in principal mentoring research is the lack of practical knowledge available to new principals prior to assuming their new role. The acknowledgement of this shortcoming sparked a movement within the educational administrative community, resulting in the creation of formal induction, mentorship, and coaching programs. These programs are designed to balance the theoretical knowledge gained in the classroom with practical knowledge provided by experienced administrators. Programs designed to enhance the principal mentoring process and expedite the rate at which new principals establish themselves as the campus leader have been successfully implemented. However, under the current system, new principals continue to enter campus administration with a base of knowledge primarily rooted in theory.

Daresh (2004) contends that school leaders must be assisted to ensure that schools are made more effective. Reforming principal preparation programs is necessary to enhance the success of school leaders, thereby improving school leadership (Casavant & Cherkowski, 2001). Mentoring is an effective strategy for accomplishing this (Casavant & Cherkowski, 2001). Novice principals who participate in some form of mentoring program feel they have a more successful start to their careers than their counterparts who do not have mentors (Daresh, 2004).

Daresh (2004) argues that mentoring is an essential part of the socialization and professional development process for school administrators. Mentoring is a form of career development that socializes new members of a profession (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004; Daresh, 2004; Reyes, 2003). Mentoring serves to help novice principals have a more successful socialization and transition from the role of teacher to that of administrator (Daresh, 2004). Browne-Ferrigno and Muth (2004) suggest socialization by way of quasi-administrative positions for protégés. This means that protégés are given full-time assignments in administrative roles and do not have any other role on campus, such as teaching (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004).

Mentoring is also valuable in training novice principals to learn knowledge, skills, and behaviors needed for professional success (Daresh, 2004). It also serves as a form of professional development for veteran administrators as well as novice administrators (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004).

Novice principals who participate in mentoring as part of a principal preparation program develop a network of administrators that they can use as resources throughout their career (Reyes, 2003). While this network can help with job acquisition and the formation of professional friendships, it is also important because the novice principals join their peers at local and regional principal meetings for the duration of their posts in school leadership (Alsbury & Hackmann, 2006). In response to state and national demands for induction programs, school districts provide mentoring and induction to novice principals.

Another purpose of mentoring programs is to bridge the gap between theory and practice in school administration (Reyes, 2003). One way to do this is by combining mentor-supported fieldwork with seminar-workshops in the principal preparation program (Browne-Ferrigno & Maynard, 2005).

### 3 Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and gain an in-depth look at the impact of participating in a principal induction/mentoring program for novice school leaders. Participant observation and semi-structured interviews were dominant in the first phase of the study. In the follow-up phase of the study, the use of the theoretical framework informed the construction of interview questions that were administered to the program participants.

Four questions guided the research study and aligned with theory: How did the principal induction/mentoring program impact

- a. level of support as a building principal;
- b. networking with principals and other leaders across the district;
- c. participant experience with an individual coach/mentor;
- d. new skills or ideas that emerged while in the program?

While all prompts functioned to illustrate the impact of the program, one of the research questions was dominant: How did participants perceive the experiences of participating in a principal induction/mentoring program? The researchers selected the theme of this research question to provide additional contributions to the literature on novice principals' involvement and impressions in structured induction/mentoring programs. The researchers interpreted the findings within the theoretical framework to define and discuss implications for best practices and additional research pursuits.

### 4 Methods

Each of the principal induction/mentoring participants received the opportunity to participate in the qualitative part of the study. Interested parties recorded their names, school level, and years of experience. The information gathered was collected over a ten month period from monthly evaluations, telephone interviews and one interview where participants could provide written responses. The interviews with each participant lasted 30 to 60 minutes. Each of the 10 participants in the district's program responded to the study.

The project was conducted in an urban school district with about 24,000 students. The district is located in the southeast region of Texas in a mid-size city of about 120,000 residents. The community has residents representing Anglo, African-American and a growing population of Hispanic and Asian students. The school principals participating in the study led campuses representing a mixture of student diversities. The district leaders composed the group of principals based on years of experience in the principalship (two years or less), campuses rated by the state from exemplary to acceptable on the standardized test, and campus demographics that mirrored the district.

During the study, the principals participated in a year-long mentoring program (Cadre) that provided a minimum of two formal meetings per month with two university faculty members (mentors) who had experience as public school administrators. The first meeting each month was one in which all participants met with the two mentors to address and discuss standards-based concepts in a curriculum designed to provide a mixture of educational leadership theory with the practical aspects of building-level leadership. The second monthly meeting was an on-campus meeting between the mentor(s) and each principal. This meeting typically dealt more specifically with personal and professional issues that were campus-related, rather than the themes or areas of emphasis that were addressed in the first meeting.

The participant group consisted of administrators representing high school, middle school and elementary campuses with years of educational experience ranging from 8 to 18 years. There were five males and five females in the group. The researchers conducted monthly evaluations, telephone interviews, and one final semi-structured interview where they could provide written responses.

The administrators' responses were examined using content analysis techniques to discover common themes in responses to the final interview questions. The questions were used as an organizational device to present the information. Conclusions were drawn from participant responses.

## 5 Results

### 5.1 Question 1: What kind of support has the principal induction/mentoring program provided throughout the 2007-2008 school year?

A major purpose of the research was to identify aspects of participating in an induction/mentoring program and what kind of impact it could potentially have on novice administrators' practice. Each participant was asked: What kind of support as a building principal has the principal induction/mentoring program provided throughout the 2007-2008 school year? Based on coded phrases and key words, similar themes emerged from principals, despite the diversity in campus level and student demographics.

A prevalent response from the participants dealt with the need to keep abreast of issues impacting educational leadership. As a result of the format of the curriculum aspect of the program, discussions took place in large-group meetings that provided participants with constructs and strategies to situations that occurred in the ensuing month. Participation in the groups were largely constructive, affording the principals the opportunity to ask questions, seek suggestions and stay grounded in promising practices that are considered effective. An example of a participant's response can be seen in the statement from an elementary principal below:

#### 5.1.1

*The Leadership Cadre has provided instructional leadership skills and valuable research-based information and dialogue that assisted in situations that were occurring on my campus at that time.*

A second response to the prompt detailed an assertive use of the Cadre meetings by the participating principals. Many of the participants concurred that there were several situations in which they needed answers to questions, and the Cadre was the forum for them to address their issues in a "safe" manner to receive helpful feedback. A middle school principal noted the helpfulness of the resources:

#### 5.1.2

*The Leadership Cadre provided resources, materials, and practical strategies I could take back to my school immediately and implement. The suggestions were beneficial and specific to issues occurring on my campus.*

The existence of a forum and practical resources was an important component for the administrators. It added value to the experience for the participants to become vested in the program.

### 5.2 Question 2: What opportunities were provided to build relationships with other colleagues?

Another important aspect of the program highlighted through the participants' answers was the perception of networking advantages that were afforded to them. Because of the group structure of the first of each of the monthly meetings, both a common theme and individual and group campus issues were discussed comprehensively. The monthly meeting allowed the participants to build relationships with peers at different school levels and engage in interactions that would not have otherwise occurred. Many of the members shared feelings of isolation with respect to the position of principal and commented on the benefits of the structure of the program meetings to provide assistance and resources.

#### 5.2.1

*The Leadership Cadre has been an additional avenue of support, providing an opportunity to connect to other individuals from the district who have similar concerns and questions (Elementary principal).*

*The Cadre provided a sounding board for me. We were able to discuss ideas, problems, and review literature. It allowed me to look at things from a different viewpoint. It also gave me an opportunity to network with both elementary and secondary principals and have time to breathe (Middle school principal).*

*Being able to have a broad spectrum of new, experienced, elementary and secondary principals gave different perspectives and viewpoints to make us all better in working together. It even provided for some vertical teaming with some of the different levels (High school principal).*

### **5.3 Question 3: What was your experience with an individual coach or mentor?**

In the program, the administrators were provided individual facilitators to meet with them on campus, on a monthly basis, to assist them with specific concerns. In addition to the monthly campus visits, the facilitators interacted several times monthly by phone and e-mail to enable the principals to confidentially share concerns and seek guidance. The consensus from the participants was highly favorable regarding the facilitators as invaluable resources during the school year as concerns arose.

#### **5.3.1**

*The on-site coach allowed me to ask questions that I may not have asked with the group. It also allowed me the opportunity to get different insight and perspective for some of the challenges I faced during the year. It was a huge benefit to have someone to talk to, one-on-one, confidentially on different matters. They provided time to think and reflect on situations and lessen my stress level (Middle school principal).*

Another principal commented on the facilitator's ability to spend time in the schools to see the administrators' individual environments:

#### **5.3.2**

*Discussion could be more on a one-to-one basis in a non-threatening environment. They were able to see first-hand the culture and climate of the school. It also gave me a chance to get to know them and seek input from their experience in my own school. Also, it gave me the ability to express my feelings, concerns, and opinions and not feel intimidated or embarrassed. Sometimes it just helped to be able to vent without judgment being passed (Elementary school principal).*

### **5.4 Question 4: What new skills or ideas did the principal induction/mentoring program provide?**

As stated before, monthly meetings were held for the principals to discuss relevant themes tailored to connecting theory, standards, and practice. The sessions went from August to May in half-day settings. They were designed to address themes the principals would be dealing with at different times during the school year. Each themed meeting was structured to build a common knowledge base and get the principals involved with the group. The principals remarked on the topics and structure of the meetings:

#### **5.4.1**

*I liked getting the variety of subjects provided by the themes. They seemed to always be able to address issues, some which may not have crossed my mind without being a part of the program (Elementary school principal).*

*I learned topics such as team building, dealing with difficult teachers and other things we deal with on a daily basis. To be able to discuss these topics with peers and seek suggestions on how they deal with them on their campuses was invaluable to me (Elementary school principal).*

Additionally, the principals alluded to the flexibility of the meeting structure:

#### **5.4.2**

*The on-site visits let us share topics confidentially, but if we had concerns that could benefit the group, the coaches implemented the ideas to help us. It was truly beneficial to see that they were here to help us and showed us how to share with each other to get assistance (Elementary school principal).*

## 6 Discussion

This research represents the first-year results of an-ongoing program designed to provide meaningful mentoring and induction to novice administrators. The responses to the assessment prompts provide a clear understanding of the participants' perceptions of the value of the mentoring activities and the activities that were considered most beneficial. As Lashway (2003) argued, the stresses of the job allow minimal constructive cognitive meaning in their practice. The forum of the cadre meetings provided the opportunity for participants to share and reflect their current experiences with other professionals in their practice. Since the principalship is traditionally an isolated position, these opportunities provided an outlet to vent in a safe environment and learn from one another. Additionally, it provided an opportunity for the administrators to link theory acquired from in their training preparation program to practice through observations and sharing with their network of principals (Reyes, 2003).

Adult learning theory was evident throughout the course of the leadership cadre in how the principals were involved in the professional development topics and support. The program addressed topics that were relevant to the principals and could potentially impact their practice immediately. Also, the on-site visits ensured that future meetings would keep the cadre current with the discussion of topics most useful to them in their district. Speck (1996) argues it is crucial for adult learners to see the professional development learning to be in alignment with their day-to-day activities for it to be utilized. Essentially, with the principals sharing the concerns, the program allowed for them to receive what they needed most to excel as leaders.

Novice principals rarely receive additional support and are overwhelmed by multiple aspects of the principalship (Browne-Ferrigno, 2005). The leadership cadre not only provided professional development, it also gave them a coach or mentor to confide in and help guide them through different situations without judgment. One particular advantage as evidenced by one of the principals was the benefit of having an outsider to assist them. None of the principals shared any concerns or fear of evaluation from the coaches that worked with them throughout the program. This was an important aspect to the cadre members.

Lastly, the structure of the program assisted in helping the principals to not only evaluate but find hidden curriculum that might not have been seen without assistance. Sorenson (2005) highlights the need for a structured, standards based program, however the flexibility of looking for effective correlates are just as important (Daresh, 2004). The alignment of professional development activities with the principals input contributed to them gaining a practical knowledge base and aspects that were implemented on their campuses during the school year. Overall, the program design was beneficial in giving the novice principals needed assistance and non-threatening mentoring.

## 7 Conclusion and Recommendations

Peer mentoring for novice principals is an important component school districts around the nation are beginning to invest more of their resources. The assistance and intervention of a mentor or coach could contribute to lowering the attrition rates of administrators in the K-12 system and give novice administrators the needed support to be successful. The principalship is a stressful job and isolates the individuals who are the instructional leaders of the school which is not beneficial to the overall growth of a campus.

Analyzing the participants' responses, led to recommendations for future programs that could continue to provide additional support for principals. *First*, principals need regular, structured support throughout the entire school year. This study found that off-site meetings gave them the opportunity to focus on improvement without distractions or stresses while in their building. It provided a safe-haven for them to come together to share with one another concerns and possible solutions on day-to-day issues.

*Second*, practical experiences they can implement immediately were beneficial to the principals as well. (I'd leave this sentence out as your emphasis was on the "practical" and you really don't comment on any "theory" discussion at all. Also, allowing them to influence the topics was critical because they are in the trenches and know what is needed. The experiences added value and ownership to the program, which contributed to their continued involvement in the cadre.

*Third*, the group setting with principals of multiple levels was another added advantage to the leadership

cadre. For many of the participants, it was surprising to see they had similar issues with the different ages and student demographics. The dialogue allowed them to see their similarities as well as differences to help them in their journey together. Closer knit networks were formed with some members who may not have seen the benefit before working together in this setting. Finally, the mentors or coaches from outside are a very important factor in assisting the administrators. Evaluations and judgments from superiors who evaluate them are huge components that could impact the advice sought for fear of inadequacy with novice administrators. In these relationships, trust has to be earned, and it's hard for a principal to expose vulnerabilities to the person signing their evaluations.

In closing, this research contributes to the field the benefits of school districts providing additional supports for their novice administrators. It also leaves questions that need to be answered as educational leadership research on novice principal mentoring continues to evolve. First, with mentoring programs, is it more advantageous for novice principals to have coaches or mentors from beyond their district boundaries. This study found it to be beneficial; however, are there other personnel who could provide the same supports without the threat of judgment from within. Second, do these programs help retain principals and what are the key components that assist the principals. Lastly, do these programs have an impact on student success as the principals develop their knowledge base as an instructional leader?

Induction/Mentoring programs, such as the one highlighted in the study, are important to the education profession if we want to retain and develop the best school leaders. Providing support and understanding for novice principals as they navigate through the principalship are keys to retaining quality personnel and equipping them with the tools necessary to be effective in their positions.

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