

# Building Bridges:

## STRENGTHENING THE PRINCIPAL INDUCTION PROCESS THROUGH INTENTIONAL MENTORING

Most new principals are thrown into the job to sink or swim. We must do better if our schools are going to improve, and a well-designed mentoring program is one of the best ways to ensure success.

BY PETE HALL

**D**URING the 12th and 13th centuries, various associations began to form with the express purpose of building bridges. Similar to guilds, these Bridge-Building Brotherhoods were composed of master artisans who piously labored to aid pilgrims as they traveled. As master artisans, well respected for the quality of their work, they had advanced through the stages of unpaid apprentice and paid journeyman before earning master status. Throughout history, this system has been used with great frequency and reliability in many professions and trades. Craftsmen train and learn under the watchful tutelage of a master until they meet the standards of high-quality work.

In the field of education, the concept of apprenticeship and working under a master craftsman is not foreign. Nearly every employed teacher worked through a university-sanctioned, unpaid student-teaching experience in the home classroom of a master teacher. The continuation of this learning process as the teacher then ventures into school administration, however, has been erratic and inconsistent. Now, in the 21st century, in the midst of the Era of Accountability, the need to develop *principals as master artisans* is as dire as it is immediate. Unfortunately, we have often asked aspiring and new principals to go it alone.

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. Many school districts provide mentors for new principals to learn the ropes when entering the job. Unfortunately, says research analyst Robert Malone, these mentorships “are often ad hoc relationships, lacking any type of systematic implementation.”<sup>1</sup>

In 2002, realizing the need for high-quality administrators, the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) identified six key standards for

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what principals should know and be able to do.<sup>2</sup> The following year NAESP introduced the Principals Advisory Leadership Services (PALS) Corps, designed to meet the needs of aspiring, new, and experienced school principals. One component of this innovative framework is the National Principals Mentoring Certifica-

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tion Program, a yearlong professional development initiative that trains current principals to be *master artisans* who will guide, nurture, and support their protégés in a quasi-apprenticeship experience. The program includes a three-day institute and a nine-month mentoring internship that features in-depth mentoring practice, monthly chats, frequent professional reading, and continuous self-reflection projects.

### **WHY FORMAL MENTORING?**

What the PALS initiative has going for it is the element of formality. Rather than relying on “ad hoc relationships” or, worse still, abandoning new principals to the fate of “swimming without a lifejacket,” in the words of the Education Alliance at Brown University,<sup>3</sup> this National Principals Mentoring Certification Program provides definitions of effective mentoring performance and the training, practice, and skill development to achieve it. Following a formal scope and sequence, mentor participants exit with a true understanding of the process, learning goals, and relationship responsibilities of an effective mentorship. They become, in effect, *master mentors*.

Several other effective mentorship models have cropped up over the past decade. The Southern Regional Education Board developed a systemwide process of mentoring, the Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association created the First-Time Campus Administrators Academy, and the California School Leadership Academy operates a dozen school leadership cen-

ters statewide that provide structured support and mentoring for novice building principals. One of the better-known mentoring programs is the Albuquerque Public Schools’ Extra Support for Principals, which has produced some tremendous results.<sup>4</sup> This is an encouraging trend, but still the fact remains that the overwhelming majority of newer building administrators have no lifejackets, let alone effective ones.

Mentoring is not simple, warns the International Mentoring Association, and thus the element of formality is of paramount importance: “Since effective mentoring is a complex professional practice, the programs that develop and support mentors and their protégés could not be anything other than complex as well.”<sup>5</sup> Though many new principals have the wherewithal to reach out and obtain the support they need to survive the demands of the job on their own, many more find themselves totally at the mercy of the “tsunami of principalship.”<sup>6</sup>

Current principal and former president of NAESP Paul Young puts it succinctly: “Anybody that’s smart in this business has a mentor.”<sup>7</sup> Rick Harris, in the Washoe County School District (WCSD) of Reno, Nevada, lamented that his own experiences as a protégé would have been improved had there been “more of a formal process.” Such was the impetus behind his spearheading the development of the WCSD Principals’ Academy, which provides a 10-tier approach to the recruitment and development of novice and distinguished school principals — and includes a formal mentoring component.<sup>8</sup>

### **SPANNING CHASMS: OVERCOMING POTENTIAL OBSTACLES**

I’ve noted several reasons to promote a formal, intentional mentoring program. Even so, several components must converge to create a truly effective initiative. From defining key terms to outlining specific goals, each individual element of a formal mentorship is essential to the success of the program. It doesn’t take much to disrupt this process; thus a look at some of the potential obstacles can help refine our thinking about what constitutes an effective mentoring program.

*Lack of common language.* What is a mentor, exactly? Though we may each have a mental image of such a figure, the term *mentor* carries so many definitions (even within a single organization) that trying to bring it to life is haphazard at best. Characteristics of effective mentors are likewise nebulous and difficult to nail down. In order to create an effective mentoring program, all participants (from mentors and protégés to coordina-

tors and trainers) must agree upon these definitions and characteristics. Monica Janas summarized a slew of research studies that provide a foundation for some conversations about what a mentor is and does.<sup>9</sup> When the key stakeholders agree upon the terms and their meanings, the likelihood of an effective partnership increases.

*Unclear roles and responsibilities.* Poorly trained (or untrained) mentors can damage budding administrators. Likewise, mentoring programs that are unclear in their expectations (Is participation mandatory or voluntary? How long will a protégé participate in the program? Who will determine the duration of the mentoring relationship? Is there a vision for the process?) are less apt to yield positive results.<sup>10</sup> However, explicit, formal training of mentors and protégés goes a long way toward keeping problems from arising.<sup>11</sup> As important as the participants' training and preparation is the readiness displayed by the mentor and protégé. When an experienced individual possesses the expertise, commitment, training, and readiness to serve as a mentor, and when a novice administrator is open to the learning opportunities provided by this relationship, then it is time to move forward.<sup>12</sup>

*Time constraints.* One of the biggest obstacles to sustaining an effective mentoring partnership is the lack of quality time for the participants to talk, banter, share ideas, ask questions, and grow together as professionals. In my interviews with dozens of educators nationwide, nearly 70% indicated time as a major impediment to a strong mentor/protégé program. Several mentoring programs offer incentives to individuals to serve as mentors, such as stipends<sup>13</sup> or professional recognition (e.g., the National Principal Mentoring Certificate provided by NAESP through the PALS Corps). Such rewards make the time commitments more attractive, thereby encouraging sustained mentoring service. Effective programs also arrange regular, frequent meeting times and require participants to dedicate a certain amount of time to the mentoring process. No matter how you slice it, all stakeholders (mentor and protégé as well as trainer and coordinator) must carve out a significant amount of time for this process to become mutually beneficial. It must become a priority.

*Mentor/protégé mismatching.* Ohio principal Jerome Sheets advises aspiring principals to "make sure they're matched up with someone who is pushing them beyond what they think they're capable of doing."<sup>14</sup> This simple piece of advice is often out of the protégé's control — which makes it quite a tall order, indeed. In our survey, Derek Cordell, an assistant principal in Nevada, stated bluntly, "If one individual, mentor or mentee, is incompetent, then the whole process fails."

Whether it is a lack of aptitude or a lack of compatibility, a poor mentor/protégé match stifles the learning of both parties. Recent research explains a variety of reasons for this breakdown, including a reluctance to assign responsibility,<sup>15</sup> jealousy,<sup>16</sup> trust and confidentiality issues,<sup>17</sup> and mentor pushiness,<sup>18</sup> among others. To counter these factors, it is essential to coordinate authentic relationships and properly match mentors with protégés.<sup>19</sup> Janas recommends using questionnaires and interviews to help make the most productive connections.<sup>20</sup>

*Absence of clear goals.* Just because the mentor and protégé can define their roles, understand the purpose of the mentoring process, dedicate adequate time, and have a positive relationship does not ensure success. Mentoring programs that establish finish lines but do not outline the course are doomed from the beginning. The relationships meander aimlessly, resulting in little growth and the failure to accomplish the primary objective. As in any other process, there must be benchmark goals along the way. These goals, which both mentors and protégés should create and refine together in an action-plan format, help to meet needs that have been identified, facilitate short-term progress, respond to situational changes, and address systemwide objectives.<sup>21</sup> As Janas succinctly puts it, "The importance of setting goals cannot be overemphasized."<sup>22</sup>

## THE KEY TO THE BRIDGE

Clearly, establishing a formal program as part of a professional development plan is crucial for the success of the mentoring process. The components listed above all contribute to a strong, productive, successful mentoring relationship on both sides. In order to build a bridge that lasts, and in order to bolster the efficacy of the protégé, what mentoring strategy is unequivocally paramount? What must every mentor do to ensure maximum professional growth from each individual mentee? And what is the ultimate learning outcome?

According to the surveys I administered, as well as other recent research, the desired outcomes are varied but share one common theme: developing the protégé's strengths and abilities by deliberately compelling him or her to engage in accurate and productive self-reflection.<sup>23</sup> As NAESP's Associate Executive Director Fred Brown said during a PALS training in January 2006, "The most important thing we can pass on to a new principal is self-reflection. It's the least-practiced thing we do." The mentor behaviors deemed most effective for cultivating this habit include the following:

- ask probing questions,

- provide honest feedback,
- listen,
- analyze decisions,
- propose alternative viewpoints,
- encourage independence,
- foster lifelong learning, and
- offer caring support.

Note that the list does not include directive feedback. Effective, positive mentors understand a key concept: the mentor's mission is to support the protégé's learning, not to help run the protégé's school.<sup>24</sup> As is often true when following the principles of adult learning, the voyage takes precedence over the destination. According to literacy specialist Alisa Simeral, in her *continuum of self-reflection*,<sup>25</sup> successful mentors, like coaches, ask, probe, challenge, and support — and maybe even guide or nudge — but rarely order or tell. Protégés' mistakes and blunders lead to powerful learning, buoying their chances of future success.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, fully 56% of current public school principals are age 50 or over, which puts them within reach of retirement age.<sup>26</sup> Fifty-six percent of nearly 100,000 principals is a lot of job openings, and with a widely acknowledged shortage of qualified candidates to take those jobs, the need for effective mentoring programs has never been more immediate and should "send sparks flying about the importance of providing quality mentorship programs for our rookie administrators."<sup>27</sup>

The power of an effective mentoring partnership is immense. The power of an ineffective or nonexistent mentoring relationship is equally great but with destructive consequences for the new principal. The NAESP's PALS initiative and its National Principals

Mentoring Certification Program provide a model after which any mentoring program could pattern itself. Following a strengths-based approach to mentoring for effective leadership, the education profession is now embracing a new vision of professionalization at the administrator level: *principals as master artisans* guiding less-experienced principals, formally and intentionally, building bridges to the future of school leadership.

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