A little over a year ago, one of us, Sheryl, became a principal for the first time. This role followed seven years as a special education teacher, five years as a high school teacher and administrator, and 18 years as a professor of education at a university. The transformation from education professor to elementary principal represented a significant and unusual career progression. Gayle, an elementary school principal for 11 years and a curriculum specialist and classroom teacher for more than two decades, became Sheryl’s mentor.

We had no idea if the mentorship arranged by the superintendent would be effective. Like other time-strapped principals suddenly placed in a mentorship role, could Gayle continue leading her school while supporting Sheryl’s learning and frequent need for advice? Would Sheryl, in the throes of a new principalship, find time to communicate her needs and digest feedback?

We navigated the mentor-mentee relationship without a prescribed program, prior relationship, structure, university affiliation, or focused project. What we did have was an experienced and passionate practitioner willing to commit her time and a first-year principal open to other perspectives.

The hope, of course, was the same as in all such relationships: that this model would sustain both principals in their work. Gayle would have a fresh perspective about her work, and Sheryl would feel competent...
enough in her new position to return for a second year. This aspiration was significant, given the data on principal attrition and the well-known shortage of willing and qualified principal candidates.

Even when school districts successfully recruit qualified principals, many leave within too short a time to effect change in a school community (Boris-Schacter and Langer 2006). The paucity of principal candidates and the low retention rate of new principals make ensuring the success of nontraditional applicants, such as Sheryl, increasingly critical. As the nation’s veteran principals near retirement, it becomes even more compelling to identify what matters most when acculturating new principals. Districts such as ours agree that it makes sense to pair more and less experienced principals, but haven’t provided a conceptual or procedural framework. Instead, each pair of principals constructs its own mentor relationships while still running separate schools. Since other role demands remained the same, we used strategies already at our disposal and within the ordinary course of our work. One such strategy was e-mail.

**Mentoring by E-Mail**

Using e-mail made sense. After all, e-mail was part of our daily routines. E-mail can be immediate, allow for a degree of precision in wording, leave a written record to be accessed at a later time, and accommodate the long hours and breakneck pace that often characterize a principal’s work. E-mail worked for us even though it ran counter to conventional wisdom that face-to-face communication is the bedrock of a successful mentorship.

Our analysis of our first year of e-mail exchanges revealed that we used e-mail in ways that contributed to enhancing our practice, building a relationship, and promoting our professional sustainability. Beyond exchanging information, we used e-mail to:

- Express reciprocal caring;
- Inject (much needed) humor into our work; and
- Provide emotional and intellectual nurturance.

**Building a Relationship**

Gayle initially welcomed Sheryl to the school district with a warm, personal note that included her home, cell, and school phone numbers. In case the intent was lost, Gayle wrote, “I hate e-mail and prefer talking on the phone.” But Gayle soon conceded that the telephone was impractical and frustrating.

In fact, Gayle changed her habit to accommodate...
Sheryl’s needs. Originally a nighttime e-mailer, Gayle noticed that Sheryl was routinely on line at 6 a.m. Since some of the e-mail was time sensitive, Gayle began checking her e-mail early in the morning in order to provide appropriate support for Sheryl. This proved to be pivotal because principals rarely sit in

their offices during the school day. In a job as dynamic, time-sensitive, and reactive as the principalship, a flexible vehicle for communication was necessary. Much of the essential information needed by a new principal was provided by e-mail and, in time, e-mail evolved into a medium for more than questions and answers.

**Information sharing, though central to getting the work done, is not enough to sustain new school leaders.**

COMMUNICATION WITH TEACHERS AND PARENTS

Dear Sheryl,
Attached are samples of my Friday notes to teachers and Monday newsletters to parents. If you have thoughts about ways to improve these communications, please let me know — I’d welcome feedback.

Gayle

Dear Gayle,
Thanks. These models will help me frame my communication with teachers and parents. I’m thinking of an e-newsletter to the community.

Gratefully,
Sheryl

THE NORMS, CULTURE, JARGON, AND POLICY OF THE SCHOOL SYSTEM

Dear Gayle,
What do I do on Wednesday? What does “curriculum articulation meeting” mean on the system calendar? Would building-based articulation be appropriate, or is this something else?

Thanks,
Your clueless colleague
Sheryl

Dear Gayle,
Since there has been no articulation about “curriculum articulation,” you can use the afternoon as you choose. Since teachers just finished writing progress reports, I think they can use a planning and prep afternoon. That’s what we’ll do at Hardy.

Gayle

ROUTINES AND BUILDING MANAGEMENT

Dear Gayle,
Just checking with my guru of all things to see whether you agree with my grade configuration. Here are the enrollment numbers I currently have for next year and what I am thinking...

Sheryl

Dear Sheryl,
Too many variables for e-mail. I’ll call you on Friday afternoon after the dust settles on the week.

Adios,
Gayle
and Sheryl recognized that, though she was an experienced educator and writer, she did not know everything about being a principal.

**Respectful, Nurturing Responses**

Gayle initially provided information that helped Sheryl anticipate some of the rhythms and responsibilities of the principalship. Often, without Sheryl asking, because she did not always know what to ask, Gayle provided support ahead of the need. When Sheryl did pose questions about policies and procedures, Gayle answered them directly and without ambiguity or judgment. Gayle did not tell Sheryl how to think about something unless her opinion was specifically solicited.

This respectful stance was a key ingredient of the relationship and reflected a central characteristic of the school district culture. Although the systemwide context supported Gayle’s approach, her personal ability to embrace those values facilitated the mentorship’s success. She also customized her instruction to meet the needs of the student, and she purposely blurred the line between teacher and learner.

**Significance of Tone**

While e-mail typically is focused on information and seems an unlikely conduit for nurturance, we found that a quarter of our e-mail was characterized by a tone of caring, mutual support, and playfulness. We wrote to encourage, compliment, and check on each other’s feelings as well as to learn how meetings and difficult conversations transpired. We freely offered congratulations about a newsletter article or an insightful comment at a district meeting. Our communication pushed the boundaries of typical e-mail use by adding doses of emotional support, encouragement, and humor to practical information. Over time and without premeditation, a tone crept into our e-mails that supported the mentorship and fit into our workday.

**Beyond E-Mail**

While we eventually agreed that e-mail would be the primary vehicle for regular communication between us, the most sensitive collaboration was conducted by phone or in person. Conversations about strategies for meetings, personnel issues, and responses to parental concerns involved substantive give and take. Some issues required deep thinking and exploration, not quick answers. These constructive conversations supported us in our work and contributed to the success of our relationship. Consistent and fre-
quent communication in a variety of media allowed
us to gain access to each other’s thinking, philos-
ophies, and feelings.

Our mutual interest in discussing pedagogical is-
issues, an ability to disagree comfortably, and respect
for differences in style also contributed to the success
of the relationship. Humor and playfulness, sincere
caring about each other’s work, and a willingness to
listen and give time to each other enhanced our per-
formance as elementary school principals. The men-
tor-mentee relationship reduced the typical isolation
a school principal faces and provided mutual emo-
tional and intellectual nurturance. In cash-strapped
districts facing principal shortages, such a personal
approach to the administrator mentorship may help
pave the road to principal persistence.

As we reviewed the e-mail content, the overwhelm-
 ing prevalence of our affective outreach was striking.
We concluded that information sharing, though cen-
tral to getting the work done, is not enough to sustain
new school leaders. Rather, a steady stream of e-mail
communication containing necessary knowledge, au-
thentic feedback, and mutual and sincere caring can
build a strong foundation for an effective mentorship.
In a culture that routinely depends on e-mail, it
would be a missed opportunity to underestimate this
broader application to principal mentorship.

REFERENCE
Boris-Schacter, Sheryl, and Sondra Langer. Balanced
Leadership: How Effective Principals Manage Their