



PRINCIPAL MENTORSHIP FOSTERING SUCCESS

Ron Sisson

Director of Principal Support and
Elementary Programs, AWSP

As the 2006 school year drew to a close, I remember sitting across the table from my superintendent, Dr. Jim Koval, reflecting on my second year as a principal. He asked me what I thought the differences were between my first and second years. I paused and told him in year one, I survived but felt run over a variety of different ways. I'd been hit by the cranky parent car, the headstrong teacher car and the spirited child car many times over. Often, I didn't see them coming, only realizing what happened after the collision.

In year two, I actually saw the cars coming, I just wasn't sure how to get out of the way.

He chuckled, the conversation turned to experience and developing the principal's "sixth sense."

PRINCIPAL EVALUATION CRITERIA

Managing Resources

Twelve years later, I still reflect on that moment and so appreciate Jim's mentorship. He guided and supported me as an early career principal. He was wise enough to know rookie principals are hired with a basic skill set, and that skill set needs refining. Enter my second mentor, Paula Quinn. With the patience of a saint, Paula mentored five (yes, FIVE) new principals in our district that year. She was methodical, knowledgeable and precise in her work. She took the time to know what each of us needed in order to succeed and delivered an entire year's support to a group of novices.

I've been fortunate enough to spend the last 14 months at AWSP really examining the critical roles a mentor plays in the success of an early career educator. In our state, we have the Beginning Educator Support Team (BEST) program through OSPI,

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which provides targeted support for early career teachers. As a principal, I was never interested in hiring a new teacher who was not interested in mentoring, and I ensured new teachers were wrapped in support from day one. New teachers come through the door with a base skillset, and I believed my job was to accelerate their practice by pairing them with a seasoned, skilled mentor who could guide and coach them through their early years. This

relationship often lasted well beyond any formal mentoring program.

But what about principals? Many of us moved into the principalship because someone saw in us a set of skills and characteristics they believed in. But any principal will tell you, those basic skills are not always the ones needed most to excel. They need to be refined, processed and reflected upon.

Principals need a sounding board and a coach. They need an encourager and someone who can let them know when they're about to make an "oops." When I think about my relationship with Paula, I realize her coaching and mentoring made the bumps in the road a little smaller and the ditches I drove into a little shallower. And when I was ready to pack it in and hand the keys off to someone else, my mentor was the light at the end of the tunnel who pushed, cheered and provided resources.

I didn't realize until many years later the critical part of making mentoring successful was the mindset of my superintendent. A successful principal mentoring relationship must have three components: a willing mentee, a skillful mentor, and superintendent who understands the dynamic of that paired relationship. The superintendent is a make-or-break piece of the puzzle. They provide the resources for mentoring to occur (release time, stipends, non-evaluative conversations, etc.) and set the tone and attitude around what mentoring truly is. Through a growth-minded system, a superintendent has the ability select the competent mentor, focus the skill and ensure the mentee has the conditions to maximize the mentorship.

Principaling (yes, that's a word) is a difficult and complex job. It consists of highs and lows and can be very isolated work. We know the data tells us only one in four principals is

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still in their job after five years. The churn is tremendous and is costly for a district. Think about the cost of recruiting, hiring and onboarding a principal. Think about the impact on students, staff and instruction when a principal leaves a building. A true mentor can be the influence slowing principal churn by ensuring new principals are supported.

At AWSP, we are proud of the work we've done to begin a more formalized principal mentoring program in our state, but there's plenty more work to be done. Our friends at OSPI are advocating for funding in the Legislature. We've

begun to partner with universities and ESDs to spread the word around mentoring and its impact on our system. The conversation must continue with seasoned principals and new principals alike as we talk about the benefits of mentoring.

We need to continue engaging our central office decision-makers about the benefits of mentoring support and increasing access to mentors for principals in the early stages of their career. When superintendents, principal mentors and mentees partner to refine principal practice, everyone in the system benefits, from the district office to the students we all serve.

Successful principals create more success for our children, our staff and our communities. Keep the conversations alive and your eyes open — you might be the one who makes a difference. ■

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