

Advocating for the **1** Beginning Principal

For several years, Albuquerque principals and district administrators realized that the school principalship was becoming increasingly more stressful and demanding. District expectations, federal guidelines, complex budgeting processes, at-risk students, dysfunctional families, increased violence, drugs, teen pregnancies, weapons on campus, a litigious society, and demands and expectations of *No Child Left Behind* made the principalship an exceptionally challenging experience. At the same time, some districts have made positive adjustments in teachers' salaries. Those adjustments may have taken away the financial incentive for teachers to become principals: less stress and a shorter contract for about the same money can be justifiable reasons for teachers not pursuing demanding principalships.

For the novice principal, there is often a difficult transition from the classroom or from an assistant principalship position. Increasingly, educators are seriously considering the challenges of the principalship before pursuing that step in their careers. Fewer applicants are available for consideration as school leaders; administrative positions are advertised frequently when no qualified candidate responds. It has become challenging for school districts to retain experienced principals. These are some of the reasons why mentor support for principals is essential and increasingly popular.

WHY MENTORING IN OUR DISTRICT?

The Albuquerque Public Schools District and some active principals recognized those concerns. The Albuquerque Extra Support for Principals advisory board sought principal input about generating a new principal mentor program. The board determined that practicing administrators

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did not want more activities that would be a distraction from their own school responsibilities. As one principal reflected, “We are already called away from our schools enough by the district. We don’t need another program that will add to the problem. I don’t have the time as it is. If you can provide a simple program that will not demand a lot of my time, I will support it.” Recognizing that time was an important issue and that beginning principals would not always feel comfortable openly expressing their frustrations or asking a question that a supervisor might perceive to be naïve, the advisory board felt a responsibility to become an advocate for the new principals. The mentor advisory board began developing the “Safe, Simple, and Supportive” concept that has become the heart of the Albuquerque principal mentor program.

It was clear that the program must maintain a **safe** environment for both mentees and mentors; nothing in the program would be implemented that could compromise the trust or dignity of the participants. To keep the process **simple**, principal involvement would be on the most basic level possible. Mentors and mentees were expected to commit 95 percent of their mentoring time addressing the needs and concerns of the mentee. The remaining 5 percent of time spent on mentoring would be devoted to mentor training and professional development. District-level administrative and management training were not part of the mentor-mentee program, although the district provided all the mandatory training opportunities for new principals. The mentor was encouraged to assist the mentee with clarifications, explanations, or resolutions to the training sessions the mentee attended. In some instances, the mentor would be invited to attend the training sessions as a resource. **Support** would remain the major reason for the existence of the program. The program is designed to provide an experienced principal who will commit to being available when the mentee needs to ask a question, seek advice, or just share or vent. The intent of the program is to help minimize the stress and frustration many new principals experience and to provide positive support. This program should help with principal retention. Information and statistics reflected in the ten-year program study on ESP (1995–2005) are found in this volume, Chapter 7.

In reviewing recent research conducted by the National Association of Elementary School Principals, superintendents from across the nation were asked to identify the primary factors that discouraged qualified teachers from pursuing a principalship. Their responses indicated that the factors were compensation 58 percent, time 25 percent, and stress 23 percent (Guterman, 2007).

- **Compensation** is not always commensurate with the additional commitment of time and responsibility. Because there is little

difference between an experienced teacher's salary and a beginning principal's salary, it could be difficult for some qualified educators to justify pursuing a career as a principal. In some situations, a senior teacher seeking a principal position might be taking a cut in salary (calculating the pay differential on the additional responsibilities and time spent on the job). Some have been willing to accept the challenge, but many cannot justify the disparities. They often return to the classroom after a year or two in the principalship (Villani, 2006, p. 6).

- **Time** has always been a major concern. It is not uncommon for a principal to work ten to twelve hours a day on a regular basis. Dr. Susan Villani reflects, "Principals leaving the profession often say that they want a life outside the principalship. . . . How unfortunate that people's expanding expectations of principals may be driving away some of the individuals that schools most need to attract and retain and may be contributing to the shrinking pool of candidates" (Villani, 2006, p. 7). The time issue will be addressed in depth in Chapter 9.
- **Stress** becomes part of the job. With *No Child Left Behind* mandates and standards, jobs can be threatened if school performance declines. The feeling of loneliness and isolation can become a real issue for some, leading to increased stress. The stress factor will be discussed in Chapter 10.

THE ANATOMY OF A BEGINNING PRINCIPAL

Educators usually begin thinking of becoming a principal while still in the classroom or in other related areas in education. They are often the ones to step forward to volunteer for additional assignments and will accept additional responsibilities within the school or district by serving on or by chairing committees. Principals and other supervisors may work with them to encourage their pursuits of administrative certification.

An aspiring principal working toward certification or licensure may take advantage of an opportunity to leave the classroom for a midlevel district position (possibly as an instructional leader or a curriculum specialist) to gain additional experience. As administrative certification or licensure requirements are achieved, attention may be directed toward more administrative roles in a school.

After the principalship appointment is acquired, reality sets in. Being responsible for the school will have an impact as the new principal realizes this is truly a new and lonely frontier; feelings of isolation may—and often do—occur. Why does anyone aspire to become a principal? What are some of the positive reasons considered by educators for wanting to become

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a principal? Each person must be driven by personal motives. The following are some reasons educators might consider a principalship:

1. Some see it as a stage in the professional growth and development process.
2. Others see it as an opportunity to reach beyond the classroom, to make a positive difference, or to promote leadership.
3. Some educators view it as a stepping-stone to other administrative positions.
4. An inspiration could be the desire to design a role as an instructional leader.
5. Honor and prestige of the position could be an incentive.
6. Some will accept a principalship just to increase their monthly paycheck, even though the responsibility and workload may be disproportionate to the additional compensation.

Whatever the reason or rationale, aspirants want to accept the challenge. One focus for a school district should be to provide opportunities and encouragement for potential leaders; a program or process should be in place that will encourage qualified teachers to strongly consider the principalship. Research may reflect practices that support and encourage pursuit of administrative certification. Currently, programs are in place that are as simple as grooming and encouraging strong teacher candidates or supporting teachers who are pursuing administrative certification. Some districts find ways to compensate individuals for pursuing administrative training. Grant money or leaves of absence for aspiring administrators are often used to support these programs.

Some attention is given to the use of district grants or universities to immerse administrative candidates in induction programs rather than in theory classes. Research supports the concept that practical experience under direct guidance is much more effective than an academic classroom approach (Bloom, Castagna, Moir, & Warren, 2005). New leaders are hired without special grooming or practical experience. Those leaders can become strong administrators, but they are also more susceptible to mistakes. Providing a strong support system can help prevent or preclude major issues from arising.

PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Professional organizations should be considered one of the strongest advocates for the principalship. From the beginning, new principals

should be encouraged to join their national, state, and local organizations. The research data and best practices shared through membership become invaluable to principals as they embark on their careers. (Membership can be obtained by contacting the National Association of Secondary School Principals or the National Association of Elementary School Principals or state and local principal organizations.)

SCENARIO: SHARING THE WEALTH

Carl had been a sixth-grade teacher for three years. He was conscientious and enjoyed his situation. Ray, Carl's principal, had been observing Carl's performance and attitude and concluded that he had potential for becoming a school leader.

One morning Ray met Carl in the hall and suggested that he might want to consider pursuing a principalship. During the discussion, Ray offered to involve Carl in administrative practices at the school. He also suggested that Carl become more involved in serving on or chairing school- and district-level committees. Carl was given additional school responsibilities, including that of head teacher, which implied responsibility when Ray was off campus. This situation continued for three years. During that time, Carl pursued his administrative certification at the local university.

One afternoon after school, Ray called Carl into his office to introduce him to another principal, Ken. Ken's school was nearby. Ray and Ken were good friends and collaborated on a regular basis. Ray began the conversation with an apologetic tone in his voice, wanting to reassure Carl that what he was about to suggest was in his best interest.

Ray told Carl that he wanted him to transfer to Ken's school for the coming year. He indicated that he and Ken had discussed the situation and had concluded that working for a different principal would provide more opportunities for growth. On that advice, Carl agreed to the transfer.

During Carl's second year at Ken's school, Ken was appointed to direct a new summer Head Start program. He was relieved of his school responsibilities for the second semester and recommended Carl be appointed acting principal for the remainder of the school year. Later, Carl became a principal within the district and remained in the principalship for twenty-two years.

Scenario Conclusions

It is not just coincidence that the names of the teacher in this scenario and the author of this book are the same. This is a true account of how I was directed toward the principalship. Because of the willingness of two

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principals to embark on the task of instilling confidence and trust in a young teacher, they were able to help guide a career that has touched many lives.

The importance of administrators taking on the additional task of advocating for the principalship by encouraging and supporting educators is vital to the survival of the profession; principal recruitment can begin with on-site administrators. We may never realize the impact or influence we may have on the people touched by our actions and deeds. Educators have the opportunity to touch lives far more than others do because of the nature of the field of education.

KEY POINTS

1. School- and district-level administrators should be advocates for aspiring administrators and for the beginning principal.
2. School districts provide the resources to establish an early productive principal selection process for potential leaders.
3. Districts should have programs in place that address recruitment, support, and retention.
4. An assessment of a district's philosophy might include a survey on the retention and longevity of the principals and assistant principals in the district. If most active principals and assistant principals have fewer than five years' experience, it might be worth reassessing how they are recruited, hired, and supported. District neglect of this process could have ramifications on a district's educational environment. It is difficult to move forward effectively if there is little continuity in leadership.
5. Supporting new leaders during their transitional period and providing mentored advice and extemporaneous support can promote growth beyond survival.
6. The "Safe, Simple, and Supportive" approach was designed to support the beginning principal. It is not a package that addresses all areas of concern, but it is a component of the total advocacy for the principalship.

RECOMMENDED READING

Young, P., Sheets, J., & Knight, D. (2005). *Mentoring principals: Framework, agendas, tips, and case stories for mentors and mentees*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.