

Teaching in the Principal's Office

Every principal remembers the first few weeks on the job and the feeling of overwhelming responsibility settling on your shoulders. Nine years ago, I became a school principal without having the experience of being an assistant principal. I had been a classroom teacher, a reading interventionist, and a curriculum coach, but I had never led a school. They say that wisdom comes with age, and looking back, I realize that my lack of experience could have been a disaster.

I was very fortunate to have a supportive superintendent, Jan Harris, who believed in me. We met every week, and she not only helped me with issues that came up daily, she also gave her time to truly mentor me and help me develop my own style as a principal. Now as an experienced principal, I have begun to pay it forward by mentoring others.

Novice Principals Need Help

New principals have even more responsibilities now, especially in the area of instruction. According to a 2014 report by the School Leaders Network, *Churn: The High Cost of Principal Turnover*, school success requires “tenacious instructional leaders, who build trust with new faculty” over time. The report goes on to state that 30 percent of new principals who lead a troubled school leave their jobs in the first year, and half of the new principals leave by their third year.

States and professional organizations are recognizing the need to mentor administrators during their first years of leadership. And in the spring of 2015, I volunteered to host an intern enrolled in an educational leadership program. During the internship, I had someone shadow me for five months, watching everything I did all day, every day. In my mind, I wanted to give back what I had gained from my experience with my mentor. I also missed teaching and believed this could be a rewarding experience. What I didn't realize is this experience caused me to

reflect more on my practices and made me a better principal.

My intern, Jake Johnson, was a district teacher working on his degree in administration at the University of Alabama. His supervising professor visited with us throughout the semester and ensured we were both staying on track with NAESP's *Leading Learning Communities: Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able to Do*.

During his time at our school, Johnson had a wide array of experiences: scheduling, teacher observations, teacher interviews, student discipline, data meetings, and other situations that occur during a typical school day. He sat in on many observations and, together, we took notes, compared them, and met with the teacher to discuss the observations. He even conducted some difficult parent conferences. Each time, we would discuss the situation afterward and during these discussions, his questions often led to re-evaluations and changes in our procedures.

With my experience as a reading coach, I showed him the components of an explicit reading lesson, and showed him how to become an instructional leader as well as an administrator. This mentorship not only gave him a solid foundation, but it made me think about every decision and action that I made on a day-to-day basis.


More to Learn and More to Give

After the internship, I enrolled in the

two-day NAESP Immersion Institute, which had a focus on mentorship. The session was quite productive, and I met some amazing principals from all over the country. We studied how adults learn and mentoring techniques that were practical in any type of leadership situation. We practiced active listening and how not to tell our protégés what to do, but instead help guide them to make decisions that are right for their schools.

After attending that training, I was so energized and enthusiastic about the mentoring process, that I registered for NAESP's nine-month National Principal Mentor Certification program. The guidance counselor at my school had just recently completed her educational leadership degree and was interested in becoming my mentee. Once again, I had a mentee with me every day, but I was more prepared for the experience the second time around. The program equipped me with mentoring strategies and the online sessions kept me in tune with what my colleagues from around the country were working on with their mentees. Our leader provided guidance during the experience and made sure to remind us that we weren't creating versions of ourselves. In fact, Steven Spielberg said it best: “The delicate balance of mentoring someone is not creating them in your own image, but giving them the opportunity to create themselves.”

The mentoring experience will prove especially beneficial to our aspiring administrators who are in the Millennial generation (born between 1981 and 1996). Millennials expect to have clear goals and reasonable objectives set for them, and expect ongoing support and praise for work that is completed effectively. An effective mentor can help meet these expectations.

Becoming a mentor will help our profession and also will help you to become a more effective principal. 

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