

Missing a Mentor: A Cautionary Tale

I've spent more than 20 years in education, and I have never had the opportunity to work with and learn from a mentor. So many principals need a mentor—and I know I definitely could have benefited from such a rewarding relationship.

I began my career as a 39-year-old mother of four who had been a stay-at-home mom for 10 years, followed by a part-time, flexible stint with the March of Dimes. I had thought seriously about teaching as a college student. However, at the time, jobs were scarce and many of us were discouraged from taking that path. I always knew I needed and wanted a mentor or a coach, but could not define what that would mean for me personally and professionally. As I found my way from teaching to elementary school administrative work, I often fumbled on my own to figure out how to work with parents, students, and staff.

As a new principal in a small school district—my first leadership role in a public school—I requested a mentor. Although under Massachusetts law every district needs to have a mentoring program for administrators, the frustrating answer I received was that I should “write a letter stating you have a mentor and I will sign it.” No help there.

Alone in the Storm

There were countless times I could have used the wisdom, confidentiality, and experience of a seasoned administrator. I remember once asking the central office for assistance working through a difficult situation with two teachers. The district didn't want to get involved. I wish I could have turned to a mentor to talk through the situation and various scenarios. Instead, I was on my own. With my limited experience dealing with this sort of challenge, neither teacher was satisfied with the outcome.

As a principal, you stand alone in your school—personally and

professionally. If you have no assistant principal, you answer alone to your central office, school committee or board, parents, and staff. Virtually everyone else in your building is a member of a union. You do not have that protection, and your relationships must be guarded. I made the mistake several times of befriending a teacher. I learned the hard way that teachers and principals are in different

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positions, and as a leader, you may not be able to share everything. Therefore, it's easy for rifts to develop.

For a principal, having a mentor isn't just beneficial and helpful—I'd venture to say it's essential for our survival. My district had a very strong teachers' union and, a few years into my principalship, some teachers attacked me personally and professionally. Their tactics were harsh and hurtful. A mentor would have been someone for me to bounce ideas off of (and, yes, complaints, too). A mentor would have helped me stay the course and continue my work for the school. Instead, after a few years, I left to save my own health.

Calling for Change


Massachusetts and many other states require teacher mentor programs

for every district. These are usually very formal with required sessions, logs, projects, and opportunities for confidential discussions. Though Massachusetts also has a similar law for district administrators, these programs are not as well defined. I would venture to say most districts do not adhere to this law. Many principals are likely in the same situation as I was: They're looking for support, but can't find it.

New school administrators face many challenges not covered in college courses. Interpersonal communication and relationship-building are the foundations of success. A trained mentor will provide the sought-after listening, problem-solving, and professional conversation needed.

But what if you are not offered a mentor? In hindsight, my advice is to go directly to your supervisor and request a meeting. Arm yourself with a smile (very important) and research-based information on the benefits of a mentor relationship. There is most likely someone in your district who can provide the guidance.

In a perfect world, a district mentoring program would mirror what is offered teachers, including scheduled meetings and ongoing conversations as situations arise. A strong mentor-mentee relationship is fluid, flexible, and based on mutual respect.

When I discovered the NAESP Mentoring Certification program, I jumped at the opportunity. I paid my own way because I wholeheartedly believe in this concept and plan to open a new chapter in my career: mentoring and coaching elementary school administrators. When you have been without something you instinctively know is vital, you are apt to want that opportunity for someone else. 

Sandra F. Cummings, a former principal in Woburn, Massachusetts, recently completed the NAESP Principal Mentoring Certification Program.