

Throw Out a

Lifeli



ne

The supports that can help new school leaders stay afloat in the principalship.

By Sandra A. Trach

In a fast-changing world where leaders are expected to adapt to rapid reform, perform at high levels, and meet steep accountability expectations, new—and even experienced—principals can quickly find themselves in fast-rising waters, where a lifeline is desperately needed. Research shows that 50 percent of principals leave their jobs after the third year; after that most principals are left on their own to build their skills and fulfill their professional learning needs independently. Even more sobering, some principals have reported that the job has become so overwhelming that they no longer have time to seek and pursue the necessary learning requisite for their changing role.

While supports are available—some of which are provided through school districts, but most of which school leaders seek out on their own—many principals are turning to peer-to-peer, informal means of support. In particular, opportunities for principal connection online has grown exponentially. Principals are proving to be active leadership voices in the social media scene, using Twitter, LinkedIn, Google Hangout, Voxer, and blogs as some of the tools they use to connect with one another 24/7. In addition to the power

of virtual learning and networking, principals continue to meet in person with trusted mentors and coaches, and through local area networks. Some principals continue to find that informal support has the most meaningful and long-lasting impact on their practice. All of these efforts help individual principals learn and grow.

Nationally, there is an urgent call to action to reverse the staggering likelihood that principals will leave the field in their first three years. Collectively, we must focus on improving principal persistence and strengthening principal tenacity to help school leaders rise to the complex and shifting work, and ultimately support their long-term fulfillment and success. By helping aspiring principals into the profession, designing induction programs, serving as collegial coaches, and digitally networking with fellow principals, we can make improved inroads toward increasing principal development.

Mentoring Aspiring Principals

A principal coach once said to me, “If you’re not warming the bench with your successors, then you’re not fulfilling your principal obligation.” After the initial shock of her provocative statement, it made me think about how many teachers and staff I might be inadvertently overlooking among my faculty who might be interested in a formal principalship one day.

The literature calls for school systems to establish a “principal pipeline,” responding to the urgency that school districts must actively grow leaders from within and prepare them for future leadership roles. From that moment on, I made it a professional commitment to encourage my staff to consider formal leadership opportunities, bridge them into principal training certification programs, and connect them with our local principal association. I also made it a personal passion to mentor principal protégés myself.

Teachers and staff aspiring to the principalship need and want positive and healthy principal models to demonstrate the delight of the position, balanced with the realities and responsibilities. It’s only then that aspiring principals won’t be intimidated by attempting a principal internship and, ultimately, pursuing it as a career.

There is no question that taking on even one protégé for the year can prove to be significant work for a principal. However, I have found that serving as a principal mentor is one of the most rewarding roles within the principal profession. The learning for both parties is enormous and reciprocal. When helping aspiring principals learn about the principalship, it is important that they have a well-rounded experience of not just encountering you and your leadership interactions, but also the opportunity to study, question, and interact with other principals in different schools and districts. This helps protégés open their lens to the many different leadership styles and challenges that each principal faces.

Give your protégés authentic learning dilemmas and partner with them in the twists and turns they'll take as they solve problems and make decisions along the way. Throughout the process, a mentor principal must model and encourage routine reflection to help protégés learn from the various experiences.

Keeping a journal is a professional expectation in my mentor-protégé relationships, and after protégés vocalize their initial worry about keeping up with the demand of leadership journaling, they've never come to regret it. Recently, I began shared journaling with my current protégé, where she and I write back and forth in a dialogue, in addition to our in-person meetings and work together.

Aspiring principals have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to study to be a principal. The relationship with their principal mentor must be a close and positive experience to help them have the greatest learning experience possible. Mentors must be ready to put in the time and energy for weekly meetings, shadowing opportunities, project work, and reflection time.

Induction Conquers Principal Turnover

Too often school districts overlook the important necessity of induction programming for principals and new leaders. As a result, new principals are typically left to fend for themselves and learn by default on the job. Statistics show that the lack of an induction program has dire consequences that undo the skillful preparation of the principal certification programs and the best mentoring efforts, which leads to routine, costly, and academically damaging principal churn.

According to a School Leaders Network 2014 report on principal turnover, 25 percent of the nation's principals leave their schools each year,

and 50 percent of new principals resign in their third year of the principalship, with the remaining principals unlikely to lead high-poverty schools. Induction, then, can serve as a program of early support as well as a retention strategy for high-quality principal talent.

School systems and state professional associations are striving to change this trend by ensuring that first-year principals and early career principals (typically in their first three years) take part in a systematic induction program. The bottom line is that the nation has a serious principal retention problem, and every school system should be urgently developing and investing in a principal induction program for the sake of their schools, teacher retention, and student achievement.

Coaching Builds Principal Capacity and Pays Dividends

New principals need time and support to understand policies and procedures, and to learn how to maneuver through complex adaptive issues. Being coached by an experienced principal helps early and developing principals sustain and succeed.

Accessing principals within the district is one of the most instructionally effective and cost-efficient models for providing principal coaching. Alternatively, districts may consider investing in private leadership coaches or retired principals, which is more expensive. No matter which route districts take, they should cyclically provide coaching opportunities to continually onboard new principals and leaders without delay.

In difficult financial times, principal coaching often doesn't make the final financial cut in comparison to other pressing budgetary issues. It's time to start investing in principal coaching as a means to retaining high quality talent, thereby positively impacting teacher retention, student achievement, and overall school success.

When I was an experienced principal starting my second principalship, I had a principal mentor in my first year, followed by a private principal coach from outside the district the second year. Anecdotally I can attest that both benefited me immeasurably, and I attribute my sustained success to both of them.

Continued Professional Learning Sustains Success

While we know that professional learning is essential to a principal's success, the reality



RESOURCES

Want to implement the ideas in this article? Access the following resources to deepen your knowledge.

- **National Panel of New Principals**
Get the latest input and ideas from new principals, plus information about how to participate in this exciting and prestigious national program.
newprincipal.org
- **National Mentor Training and Certification Program**
This cutting-edge training is designed to create a cadre of mentors to shape the next generation of leaders.
naesp.org/mentor
- **Education Chats**
This chat calendar provides a listing and description of popular education discussions, as well as a subscription feature. bit.ly/23WMDKE
- **NAESP EdCamp 2016**
Experience an EdCamp on July 5 at NAESP's Best Practices for Better Schools Annual Conference at National Harbor, Maryland.
naespconference.org



remains that most principals must be the seekers of their own professional development. A 2008 NAESP survey reports that principals in the second and third year of the profession lead in isolation without supports. Picking up on this thread, according to a 2013 National Center for Education Statistics report, principals who said they received no professional learning in the previous year left their school 1.4 times more often than those who received some type of professional development or investment.

To offset the chances of principal turnover and increase principal tenacity and persistence, principal peers can turn to one another for meaningful sources of collaborative professional learning experiences. Consider some of these ways to grow and learn with principal colleagues:

- 1** Contact your state and national principal association to learn about local principal networks you can join;
- 2** Participate in social media networks with principals and educational leaders. Follow principal hashtags such as #cpchat, #PrincipalsInAction and #LeadUpChat;
- 3** Participate in a local or virtual EdCamp, which is an organic meetup of educators on topics of interest;
- 4** Present at professional conferences or hold a workshop;
- 5** Join or start a principal book club;
- 6** Contribute your expertise and insights to periodicals and online columns;
- 7** Read principal blogs or start your own principal blog;
- 8** Mentor an aspiring principal or coach a developing principal;
- 9** Serve as a critical friend/colleague for an experienced principal, or seek one out for yourself; and
- 10** Keep a professional journal or engage in shared journaling with a colleague.


What will you put on your professional learning plate to keep you nourished this year?

Mutual Support

Principals experience the greatest long-term success with strategic, real-time, and meaningful support that is structured from the aspiring principal stage through to experienced principal levels. Principals, themselves, are often the most immediate and viable support for other principals. However, systemic supports are critically needed for the complex leadership work they will encounter over their leadership terms.

No matter where principals are in their own stage of career and development, or where they lead and learn, the need for systemic support is reaching a peak. Leaving principals alone to lead and learn in isolation inevitably contributes to the likelihood of principal churn, resulting in adverse consequences for student achievement and teacher retention.

Principals are increasingly refusing isolationism as a norm in their roles. They're reaching out to peers, networks, and associations, demonstrating passion and commitment for mutual connection, and supporting and leading growth that helps colleague principals in real time.

School leaders need to remember that no matter how complex the role, we are all connected through the important work of leadership and learning. Increasing principal capacity is a win-win strategy for everyone. Unity and support among principals—coupled with a focus on principal persistence among districts, associations, and states—will contribute to positively solving this leadership crisis. 

Sandra A. Trach is principal of Joseph Estabrook Elementary School in Lexington, Massachusetts.