The Art of Mentoring Principals

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Abstract

Mentor principals and their assistant principals (leadership interns) from six school districts learned how being a part of a school-university partnership can help mentor campuswide leadership. Participating schools became leadership laboratories. This particular mentor–intern partnership program created dynamic results through campus change projects conducted by the leadership interns. Participating administrators addressed campus issues by becoming instructional facilitators of change. This was accomplished using specific steps in staff development in a novel leadership format.

Mentoring [can be a] rich and continuing part of [a principal’s] professional life. Principals often feel like isolated links in the chain of command, caught somewhere between students, teachers, parents, and the district office. Though they are surrounded and even overwhelmed by all the people clamoring for their attention, they often feel deeply lonely. They are starved for the opportunity to talk openly about what their life is like. But principals can become allies and guides for each other. They can help each other through reflection and dialog. . . . [T]hey can help each other create an inspiring and elegant conversation. In that way, they can find their own individual pathway to effective leadership. (Bolman & Deal, 1993, p. 64)

Preservice preparation, induction, and ongoing professional development programs for principals have typically taken a functionalist approach (Scheurich & Imber, 1991; Slater, 1995) to training school leaders. Principalship aspirants acquire in their preservice preparation program a set of knowledge and skills that "experts" in the field have decided they should have, and they are then sent out into schools to apply what they have learned. Subsequent professional development is left up to the principal—it is assumed that she or he will seek out appropriate training opportunities to acquire additional or more refined tools with which to do the job. Conceptualizing the principalship, and the preparation and training needs associated with it, in this scientific/bureaucratic fashion fails to take into account the complexity of educational environments (Walker & Stott, 1993) and what has been described as the "artistic" nature of the job in actual practice. As Knezevich (1984) pointed out:

Artistry in administration is based more on the "feel" of the situation, intuition, and experience of the practitioner. . . . The truly significant problems of top echelon administrators are too complex and interspersed with too many political,
psychological, and sociological intangibles to be resolved via pure science, that is, without the aid of an artistic component. (p. 10)

This complex and artistic role, the principalship, may best initially be learned and further developed by "observing, doing, commenting, and questioning, rather than simply listening" (Walker & Stott, 1993, p. 77) under the guidance of experienced exemplary principals who can serve as mentors and guides. Thus, mentoring of aspiring and new principals is gaining ground as a recommended approach in a number of countries, including the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and Singapore, as well as in the United States (Thody, 1993; Walker & Stott, 1993).

A New Training Model: The Leadership Laboratory

In the United States over the past decade, there have been numerous calls for changes in principalship preparation and professional development (see, e.g., Erlandson, 1997; National Association of Secondary School Principals [NASSP], 1992). The changes recommended by these commissions and reports have consistently included mentoring; in fact, "[T]he use of experienced administrators in the field serving as . . . mentors has been widely viewed as an effective practice" (Daresh & Playko, 1995, p. 4). Driven, in part, by this renewed focus on the importance of mentoring in preservice education and professional development programs for principals, a new training model has been created at Texas A&M University, College Station. In this model, the mentor plays the most important role in the shaping and cultivation of future school leaders.

Selection of Participants and Leadership Laboratory Sites

With the support of a three-year grant, 1

Texas A&M University initiated a principal preparation program in 1996 that focused on the professional educator’s experience after leaving the classroom to become an assistant principal. Selection of participating school districts was based on three criteria: (a) district commitment to the recommendations and content of NASSP’s 1992 monograph, Developing School Leaders: A Call for Collaboration; (b) district interest in exploring new ways to develop and mentor campus leadership in their schools; and (c) district consent for participants in the pilot leadership program to fully engage in professional development activities collaboratively with the Principals’ Center at Texas A&M University.

After several initial meetings between six selected school districts and Texas A&M University, central office administrators from the chosen school districts recommended principals (mentors) and their campuses (leadership laboratories) for the program. The mentor principals had to have the same vision and commitment to building total campus leadership through (a) mentoring novices (usually assistant principals) into leadership roles, (b) permitting a selected intern 2
to participate in professional growth opportunities with Texas A&M University, and (c) supporting a "change project" to be jointly designed by intern and mentor principal. The goal would be to give the interns an opportunity to build their leadership skills as well as make a difference on their campus. Mentors and interns received financial support for attending professional growth opportunities, such as retreats, seminars, and summer institutes hosted by the Principals' Center at Texas A&M University. Program participants also received books and materials during the course of the pilot program. Monthly logs submitted by interns documenting their reflections on their leadership, their participation in professional growth opportunities, and the initiation of a campus change project in their schools were the basic activities required of each participating intern. Half of the interns and mentor principals were enrolled in university master’s and doctoral programs in educational administration. They incorporated their campus change projects and professional growth activities into their studies for university course credit. Other participants were not enrolled in a specific program of study. These participants chose to participate in the program just for their own professional growth.

This program, the School Leadership Initiative (SLI), included 31 campus administrators from six Texas school districts serving on 15 campuses. These campuses functioned as leadership laboratories. The first year of the SLI was described in a January 1997 NASSP Bulletin article (Zellner & Erlandson, 1997).

What Is a Leadership Laboratory?

A leadership laboratory is a campus committed to researching as well as implementing effective leadership activities that will encompass all campus staff, administrators, and faculty. In their quest to reform current leadership training practices, leadership laboratories in the SLI sought to do the following:

1. Focus available resources and materials on the redistribution of campus leadership responsibilities.
2. Identify strategies for creating a successful induction experience (i.e., an experience that results in a self-directed professional who has effective school leadership skills and is dedicated to his or her continued professional development).
3. Identify the components that enable a successful mentoring relationship to form and thrive (i.e., one that is mutually beneficial and results in the growing effectiveness of a future principal).
4. Develop this induction program as a model to be incorporated into the ongoing program for preparing future principals at Texas A&M, as well as replicated in preparation programs nationwide.

The main goal of the professional development offered in this three-year induction program was to promote reflective practice; that is, to have the assistant principals reflect on their actions, while in action, and to have that reflection be based on sound theory and research (Schon, 1987; Smith & Andrews, 1989).
How Did the SLI Leadership Laboratories Work?

Participating interns in the program engaged in monthly activities focused on developing or fine-tuning their leadership skills in preparation for the principalship (See Appendix A). The first year of the program primarily focused on (a) defining the leadership roles of the mentor and mentee, (b) learning techniques for becoming reflective leaders, and (c) identifying a campus change project that would make a difference for students, teachers, or the school climate. During the second year, the program primarily focused on developing strategies for effectively using campus assessments and test information. With mentor principal support during this second year, interns orchestrated their collaboratively designed campus change projects and learned how technology can be used to enhance student learning and staff development. The third year required further program development, evaluation, and reflection of progress. During the third year, professional development emphasis for the mentees evolved from "What do I need to do to become an effective principal (mentor principal)?" to "What do we need to do to meet the needs of all children on our campus?"

Success of the Leadership Laboratories

The SLI leadership laboratory training model was designed to prepare assistant principals for the principalship by mentoring them to become reflective problem solvers and agents in campus improvement. The philosophy governing the SLI program was that schools that are leadership laboratories are schools committed to continuous measurable improvement and are exciting, effective environments that provide suitable training grounds for the preparation of principals.

Monthly seminars, all-day retreats, and summer institutes that focused on specific topics coupled with targeted assignments (professional growth plans and campus change projects) made the program more than a series of inservices in leadership. Meaningful campus projects that gave the assistant principal responsibility for implementation made the training activities more than "gripe and advice" sessions. Specifically, the strengths of the program, as reported in survey data collected periodically throughout the 3 years of program operation from both mentor principals and intern assistant principals, have been:

1. Encouragement and support from participants in the collaborative (principals and assistant principals from 15 schools in six school districts) in designing, implementing, and evaluating campus change focused on meeting the needs of children.
2. Structured activities (based on the National Policy Board for Educational Administration’s 21 performance domains for the principalship) that required the interns to take time during the school day to focus on the effectiveness of their leadership (reflection in action).
3. Assistant principals (interns) and their principals (mentors) working together in implementing campus improvement projects, participating in shared professional development training, and developing mutually supportive personal/professional relationships.
Mentor principals and university staff were impressed with the professional growth of the interns as well as with the many excellent campus change projects conducted at leadership laboratories. Because teachers and districts recognized the benefits of their projects, many SLI interns have received numerous invitations to conduct seminars, presentations, and inservices. Many of the following intern change projects are still in implementation two years after the three-year experimental SLI pilot program.

2. "Development of Strategies for Gang Prevention," by Davis Denny, Associate Principal, Caney Creek High School/Moorhead Junior High, Conroe, Tex.
4. "Development of Leadership Teams for Campus Decision Making," by Carlos Rios, Lead Principal of Freshman Center, Seguin ISD, Texas (former Assistant Principal, Stephen F. Austin Middle School, Bryan, Tex).
5. "Alignment of Campus and District Assessments," by Michael Laird, Assistant Principal, Holleman Elementary School, Waller, Tex.
6. "Development of Leadership Teams for Campus Decision Making," by Lillian Morava, Principal, Willow Creek Elementary School, Tomball, Texas (former Assistant Principal, Sam Houston Elementary School, Conroe, Tex).
7. "Drop Out Recovery Plan," by Jerry Cox, Associate Principal, Conroe High School, Conroe, Tex.
10. "Establishing Autonomous Teacher Teams for Problem Solving," by Carl Dethloff, Principal, South Knoll Elementary School, College Station, Tex. (former Assistant Principal, South Knoll Elementary).
11. "The Hard Realities of Instructional Leadership," Terresa Katt, Director of Elementary Curriculum and Instruction, College Station ISD, College Station, Tex. (former Principal, South Knoll Elementary School).
12. "A Positive Way to Prepare Students for TAAS (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills) at the High School Level," by Rick Hill, Assistant Principal, A&M Consolidated High School, College Station, Tex.

Implications of Mentoring for Training and Development of Principals
In reflecting on what has been learned about mentoring by all of us involved in the SLI project over the past 3 years (interns, mentor principals, Principals’ Center staff), several themes emerged that have implications for others involved in the preservice training and professional development of principals:

1. Mentoring can be a very powerful tool, an intensive teaching–learning relationship, that is well suited for transmitting the complex knowledge and "artistic" skills that are required for today’s principals to be successful in demanding educational environments.

2. Because of the artistic rather than scientific nature of mentoring, one cannot always predict in advance whether two people can develop mutually productive mentoring relationships. Research is needed in this area, especially, as Daresh and Playko (1995) pointed out, in the area of responsibilities of the mentee—what Owen and Slater (1996) would term "followership."

3. Ambiguity is a prominent feature of mentoring relationships. In the words of one of the SLI mentor principals, "Ambiguity is always present because you never know exactly where the relationship will lead. Going into a mentoring relationship, everyone has thoughts and expectations, but these thoughts constantly change. This ambiguity is part of education. This may be the greatest lesson a person being mentored can learn. There are no absolutes in education."

4. Structured activities contribute toward the success of mentoring. Specific activities used in the SLI project (campus change projects, charting leadership experiences, reflective journals, structured dialogs between mentors and interns) were seen by the participants as creating frameworks around which conversations could be had and relationships could be developed.

5. The best mentoring relationships are characterized by high degrees of trust and respect for individual styles. One mentor principal put it this way: "I hope that the person I am mentoring will accept others’ ideas and values their input as I do. I also hope he will remain open-minded and be proactive rather than reactive. I expect him to do things he feels comfortable with, not simply apply my styles." Another mentor said much the same thing: "I do not want my assistant principal to be like me. I respect her for who she is and the things she has already accomplished."

The key role of effective mentoring in professional development has been the most intriguing path for continued learning that has emerged from the SLI. Our experience with the SLI project has convinced us that in the work of creating leaders for tomorrow’s schools, mentoring is a crucial element that cannot be left to chance.

References


**Endnotes**

1Funding source: Sid W. Richardson Foundation, Ft. Worth, Tex.
Two participating principals choose two assistant principals to mentor in the SLI program. These particular mentors saw the importance of the leadership laboratory experience for all their assistants and potential school administrators.

All materials and books were provided free of charge to SLI participants. These materials were used for specific "book studies" and seminars during the course of the three-year program. The idea of taking the time to build time for personal professional growth was well received by participants. Many former interns are currently putting "theory-in-practice" as suggested by Schon (1987) and Smith and Andrews (1989), by having their faculty meetings include book studies and professional growth activities.

Seventeen participants (mentor principals and interns) included the SLI activities in their graduate coursework. Seventeen participants (mentor principals and interns) had certification and/or a graduate degree and participated in the SLI program solely for personal professional growth.

Not all projects are listed in this article. Change projects that provided a definite impact on the leadership laboratory or professional growth of the intern are described here. Some projects never got off the ground in some leadership laboratories. This was due to a variety of circumstances, including mentor principals or interns moving to different positions in a district or changing jobs, or laboratories dropping out of the program after the first year. The key to having a successful change project was (a) consistency in leadership and (b) participant commitment to the goals of the SLI.

Appendix A: School Leadership Initiative (SLI) Program

The First Year (focus on creating a mentor relationship)

1. Mentor principals participated in workshops and a summer institute where they:
   - Identified what principals need for preparation as a campus leader
   - Identified and described the role a mentor principal should play in mentoring their intern(s)
   - Identified specific needs of their campus and listed ways those needs could be met by their intern (assistant principal)
   - Identified the responsibilities a mentor principal should have in mentoring their intern(s)
   - Identified the skills they felt interns should acquire during an internship
   - Designed what an ideal leadership training program should look like.

2. Mentor principals and their interns met monthly to:
   - Collaboratively design intern experiences that would enhance and build the role of the intern
   - Collaboratively plan a professional growth plan of action for the intern
• Collaboratively investigate and select methods and strategies for supporting campuswide involvement in leadership (e.g., development of academic teams and special interest cadres).

3. Interns practiced reflection of their leadership skills by:

• Completing bimonthly evaluations of their leadership activities
• Studying the effectiveness of their leadership
• Keeping a reflective journal
• Voicing (through e-mail) their concerns and solutions regarding the leadership responsibilities they faced with university faculty serving as facilitators.

The Second Year (focus on the intern)

1. Mentor principals and interns focused on:

• The implementation of intern change projects
• Issues of campus assessment and the use of assessment information
• Expanding their leadership roles through development of site-based decision teams.

2. Mentor principals and interns studied how:

• Technology can be fully integrated within the campus (this took place during a second summer institute)
• Intern change projects were being implemented by participants in the SLI program (participants visited leadership laboratories during the Spring semester)
• To evaluate the effect of intern change projects on the school culture, climate, and academic performance
• To use information gathered from campus evaluations to modify and enhance campus goals
• To become reflective leaders.

The Third Year (focus on intern professional growth and reflection)

1. Interns continued self-evaluation and reflection of their leadership performance based on the 21 domains of leadership defined by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (Thompson 1993).

2. Interns continued implementation and modification of intern change projects to meet campus needs.

3. Interns attended special topic seminars during the academic year

4. Interns visited show case schools (leadership labs), highlighting campus change projects orchestrated by mentor principals and their interns.
5. Interns focused on how schools can prevent marginalizing students by addressing their academic, social, and health need in the following ways:

- By attending retreats focused on meeting the needs of all children
- By participating in monthly seminars to design plans for campus action
- By reflecting on their own professional growth over the past three years.

### Appendix B: School Leadership Initiative Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Campus Setting</th>
<th>No. of Schools</th>
<th>Average No. of Students</th>
<th>Socioeconomic Status</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Elementary Schools (grades preK–5)</strong> a</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Rural (pop. 1,000–10,000)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Small-Medium (pop. 11,000–50,000)</td>
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<td>City suburb (pop. 51,000–120,000)</td>
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<td>700</td>
<td>low–high</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Middle / Junior High Schools (grades 5–8)</strong> b</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Rural (pop. 1,000–10,000)</td>
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<td>500</td>
<td>low</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td><strong>High Schools (grades 9–12)</strong> c</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Small-Medium (pop. 11,000–50,000)</td>
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<td>low–high</td>
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<tr>
<td>City suburb (pop. 51,000–120,000)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2,700</td>
<td>low–high</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:**

a Mentor principals = 7; intern assistant principals = 10.
b Mentor principals = 4; intern assistant principals = 4.
c Mentor principals = 4; intern assistant principals = 5.

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