April 2004 | Volume **61** | Number **7** **Leading in Tough Times** Pages 87-88

Mentoring New Leaders John H. Holloway

How do new principals gain the skills and knowledge they need to survive and thrive in their first years on the job? Lashway's research review (2003) found that by all accounts, new administrators experience intense, unrelenting stress as they try to adjust their textbook understanding of leadership to the real world of practice.

He found that major sources of stress include the need to master technical skills; the demands of a wide range of constituents; personal feelings of inadequacy; the fast-paced environment; the task of supervising teachers; and most of all, the sense of isolation in their new role.

Brown, Anfara, Hartman, Mahar, and Mills (2001) surveyed 98 principals and interviewed 44 of them to examine the learning process of new administrators. They found that, unfortunately, many beginning principals learn their jobs through on-the-job training. When asked what methods would help them adjust more effectively, the survey participants cited sharing experiences with colleagues as a preferred activity.

Two studies of administrator shortages conducted by Educational Research Service (1998, 2000) confirmed beginning principals' need for collegial support. One of the opportunities for development that principals requested most frequently was the chance to network with other principals to exchange ideas, evaluate the demands of their jobs, and discuss how to implement change at their schools.

Mentoring programs can provide the collegial support that new principals need. Unfortunately, such programs are not available to most new principals. Fewer than half of the districts in Educational Research Service's 2000 survey had formal principal mentoring programs.

Researchers who have studied administrator mentoring programs have drawn some conclusions about the benefits of mentoring and the characteristics of effective programs.

Mentoring Programs in Operation

Wilmore, McNeil, and Townzen (1999) studied one model of administrator mentoring based on an innovative collaborative program between the University of Texas at Arlington and the Dallas/Fort Worth public schools. This program for future school leaders featured a schedule of seminars and mentor-guided internship experiences that focused on school-based issues. During the first year, each administrative intern worked with an experienced principal mentor to choose and address a school improvement topic. This model of combining traditional seminar instruction with mentor-supported, field-based experiences proved effective. All participants successfully completed the preparation program, and all were hired for leadership positions of their choice.

Dukess (2001) interviewed mentors, mentees, and program supervisors in a new principal mentoring program in six New York City community school districts. The participants reported that the program's greatest benefit was having someone to talk with and consult for advice, thus lessening their feelings of isolation. The program also benefited the experienced school leaders who served as mentors, stretching their thinking about teaching and learning. On the basis of participants' reports, Dukess recommended that principal mentors should have relevant expertise as instructional leaders, strong interpersonal skills, a ready supply of ideas to meet the challenges faced by mentees, and good organization skills.

Howley, Chadwick, and Howley (2002) looked at a statewide Ohio mentoring program that supported new principals through a regional principal academy and a network of mentors. The program participants completed port-folios based on the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium Standards for School Leaders, with the assistance of a cadre of trained mentors. Nearly three-fourths of the participants (69.6 percent) ranked mentors as the most crucial component of the program. Participants reported that their mentors had shared personal experiences relevant to their work, conveyed empathy for their concerns, communicated feelings of respect for participants, and helped them finish assignments on time.

Characteristics of Successful Mentoring Programs

Crocker and Harris (2002) gathered information from mentors and mentees in a principal preparation program to explore the participants' views on the important components of successful mentoring programs. These researchers concluded that mentoring programs should

* Provide mentors with extra time to spend with their mentee, perhaps by releasing the mentor from other duties.
* Make specific guidelines available to mentors outlining meaningful activities and ways to involve mentees in these experiences.
* Require mentors to participate in formal training that emphasizes relationship building and professional collaborative behaviors.

Dukess's 2001 study affirmed some of the same points. She concluded that successful mentoring programs need to have the following characteristics: careful matching of mentors and mentees; clear expectations and guidelines for participants; an honest and trusting relationship between the mentor and mentee built on confidentiality; a nonsupervisory process, with mentors not required to judge job performance or to report performance to the mentee's superior; and a participatory relationship, in which mentors actually participate in some of the mentees' work.

Well-Structured Programs

Too often, school districts seem to assume that newly minted principals possess all the skills and abilities needed to lead their schools successfully. But the task of the new school leader can be lonely and intimidating. An effective mentoring program can greatly ameliorate the isolation felt by new administrators if it includes trained and competent mentors who engage their mentees in structured, thoughtful activities and experiences.

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