



International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Edu

As assistant principals enter their careers: a case for providing support
Catherine Marshall Elizabeth Phelps Davidson

Article information:

To cite this document:

Catherine Marshall Elizabeth Phelps Davidson , (2016), "As assistant principals enter their careers: a case for providing support", International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education, Vol. 5 Iss 3 pp. 272 - 278

Permanent link to this document:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/IJMCE-04-2016-0038>

Downloaded on: 10 November 2016, At: 02:06 (PT)

References: this document contains references to 20 other documents.

To copy this document: permissions@emeraldinsight.com

The fulltext of this document has been downloaded 25 times since 2016*

Users who downloaded this article also downloaded:

(2016), "Mentoring and induction for new assistant principals: the Kansas Educational Leadership Institute", International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education, Vol. 5 Iss 3 pp. 221-238
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/IJMCE-05-2016-0044>

(2016), "Supporting the development and professional growth of middle space educational leaders through mentoring", International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education, Vol. 5 Iss 3 pp. 162-169
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/IJMCE-06-2016-0054>

Access to this document was granted through an Emerald subscription provided by emerald-srm:563821 []

For Authors

If you would like to write for this, or any other Emerald publication, then please use our Emerald for Authors service information about how to choose which publication to write for and submission guidelines are available for all. Please visit www.emeraldinsight.com/authors for more information.

About Emerald www.emeraldinsight.com

Emerald is a global publisher linking research and practice to the benefit of society. The company manages a portfolio of more than 290 journals and over 2,350 books and book series volumes, as well as providing an extensive range of online products and additional customer resources and services.

Emerald is both COUNTER 4 and TRANSFER compliant. The organization is a partner of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE) and also works with Portico and the LOCKSS initiative for digital archive preservation.

*Related content and download information correct at time of download.

As assistant principals enter their careers: a case for providing support

Catherine Marshall

*School of Education, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill,
Chapel Hill, North Carolina, USA, and*

Elizabeth Phelps Davidson

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, USA

272

Received 19 April 2016
Revised 20 June 2016
Accepted 21 June 2016

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to offer a viewpoint on the challenges that assistant principals (APs) face and to make the case for intentional mentoring, coaching, and sponsorship of individuals in these roles.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors provide a professional viewpoint based on scholarly literature and their practitioner observation.

Findings – The authors propose that by focussing on APs, being systematic about supporting APs, and expanding and deepening understandings of the hurdles and dilemmas they face, the schools will have a more robust leadership pipeline and more satisfied and effective APs. They recommend that school districts, whether in the USA or internationally, consider adopting specific and intentional strategies to mentor, coach, and sponsor new APs, with what they call Mentor-Sponsor Models.

Originality/value – The author recommendation for school districts to create Mentor Banks of qualified, exemplary senior principals who can sponsor and mentor new APs as an “in house” model for developing district talent is an original idea that could be easily implemented in larger school districts.

Keywords Aspiring leaders, Assistant principals, Dilemmas, Early career leaders

Paper type Viewpoint

What are the challenges facing educators as they consider an administrative career? As aspiring administrators enter their first assistant principal (AP) position, they encounter “professional shock.” They may see fellow administrators seemingly doing lackluster jobs, or they see tasks that need doing but they are told “that is not your area of responsibility.” They may see administrators manipulating parents and maneuvering to avoid policies they do not like, and they sense that, if they make a fuss, or even if they decline their principal’s urging to join certain social groups, then they will lose recommendations and sponsorship for desired upward mobility. Females may fear that, when facing child-bearing decisions, they may not be viewed as go-getters who are upwardly mobile if they have a child. All may be torn when, after being hired with a job description focussed on curriculum and instruction, they find that 100 percent of their actual tasks are dealing with discipline crises (Marshall and Hooley, 2006).

To add to the shock and stress, APs quickly learn about the realities of the career “ladder.” When budgets are tight, they may see that their positions could be on the cutting block. For example, “Reduction in Force” (RIF) policies are in full force in some localities (due to the US economic recession). Having expected that attaining the AP position would be a step up the career ladder, or at least a way to make a school better beyond the limits of the classroom, APs are shocked to learn that they may face yet another stressor: involuntary exiting from the profession due to RIF. For the courageous



and competent AP, this additional threat can further undermine his or her confidence and determination. Given these numerous “professional shocks,” which APs are likely to encounter, providing support for them through mentoring becomes especially important.

As APs enter
their careers

Anticipation and ambiguity

Educators who are contemplating a career ladder that includes moving into school administration may look for teacher leadership roles that will lead to upward mobility. Those who are astute will seek sponsor-protégé relationships with role models, based on common values, in order to gain opportunities for the relevant “task-learning.” Aspirants face hurdles and rites of passage as they are tested, in often subtle ways, to assess their determination to become an administrator. Aspiring APs may ask themselves:

- What kinds of people are in administrative positions and could I fit? Do I share their values? Would I want to be in relationships with them and share those lifestyles?
- Are there opportunities to learn the tasks, and will there be mentors giving feedback on how well I manage the gamut of daunting AP tasks? How will I know the standards or measures of whether or not I am viewed as competent?
- Along my potential career path, will I be able to identify sponsors with power and connections, who might see me as their protégé and might help me manage, giving me visibility for promotions up the career ladder?
- Will I be seen as having the “right look” when schools are considering whether they need to balance the race, gender, and ethnicities on their administrative teams? Similarly, are there particular hurdles or testing that I will face because of my “look?”
- What compromises must I face? Must I give up some closely held ideals and innovative insights in order to move into a position of higher visibility? Are there unforeseen norms and rites of passage and can I persevere and work within them?

We can foresee such pondering taking place before, during, and after being formally selected for an AP position. APs may see hurdles as they encounter evidence of the “good old boys network” or the grapevine of informal communication through which they feel they are constantly assessed. They may flounder among myriad tasks, given the ambiguity of the AP roles and duties. They also observe and encounter a range of unstated rules and norms that severely limit their choices about how to be an administrator. Case study research (Marshall and Hooley, 2006) reveals the following examples of these rules, which are not stated in leadership preparation texts:

- let the “higher-ups” initiate new ideas and programs (or at least give them credit);
- do not take risks, even when you see unmet needs or policies that simply do not work;
- make sure, if you must make a change, do it quietly; if you have disputes, keep them quiet, shared only with close and trusted colleagues;
- be sure to display agreement with the school cultures’ dominant values; do not use your position to overtly challenge the status quo; avoid intellectual and philosophical debates with “higher-ups”;
- avoid doing anything that could earn you the label “troublemaker;” and
- be sure to cover all assigned tasks, even when you are needed for other tasks, or even when a glaring need is left undone; further, protect your control over “your” tasks when other administrators intrude on that territory.

Observing these realities, the new AP is often shocked by the implications (Marshall and Hooley, 2006). A few may decide to back out voluntarily to return to their more autonomous classroom teaching roles. They may feel too uncomfortable living within the constraints and limitations of an AP position, which require them to juggle multiple responsibilities simultaneously. Their roles and duties are ill-defined and inconsistent, requiring flexibility, spontaneity, and an anticipation of needs and problems. New APs who speak out against the status quo may take criticism and suffer personally and professionally. Their educator ideals regarding equity and social justice entail creating carefully constructed strategies in their AP positions. Their choices regarding these professional and personal dilemmas require balancing acts. As a result, APs sometimes experience a decrease in job satisfaction, emotional problems, a loss of a sense of efficacy, and even a lack of confidence (Marshall and Hooley, 2006).

To add to the above dilemmas, APs may find that the senior principals often control the opportunities that APs have for other forms of leadership, for example, opportunities to participate in district level activities, chair certain committees, or lead curricular and instructional efforts. Thus, principals often control much of the task-learning and opportunities for visibility and career mobility for the AP. It goes without saying: the position of AP is very stressful.

What are the career realities?

APs who persist will find themselves working through the possible, even predictable ways of performing their role (Marshall and Hooley, 2006). Many see themselves as upwardly mobile and develop connections with displays of competence and loyalty so as to earn sponsors. Some may remain as career APs, creating some flexibility with the usual AP tasks and identifying ways to make the position quite rewarding, fitting well with their other life choices.

However, some APs' orientations to the position are less satisfying. Some become plateaued, applying for higher positions but being rejected, and then they become befuddled about how to make next career steps. The AP who is considering leaving the position is often young, finding it a bad fit ideologically and personally, and looking at other lucrative and satisfying career directions outside of education. Still other APs have performed every task competently, but still have no chance of promotion. Marshall *et al.* (1994) label them "shafted" in their typology of orientations to the career. They live out their careers, seeing others promoted, wondering if personal attributes, district politics, or some other mysterious factor has stilted their career advancement. In addition, orientations to the career now include current concerns about job insecurity and workforce reductions, given the economic recession effects and subsequent implementation of RIF policies aimed at reducing administrative positions (Davidson, 2015).

Mentoring, coaching, and sponsoring are needed

That was a lot of bad news we just shared. APs face many challenges and dilemmas. It is due to these dilemmas that APs find themselves pulled in many directions, which could produce a failing AP or a reluctant principal candidate. We suggest that sponsors and mentors can greatly help APs acknowledge these challenges, and strategize ways to navigate these realities. Given their own career experiences, those mentors can be effective advisors and role models.

Effective mentoring, coaching, and administrative collaboration may provide some important answers. Davis *et al.* (2005) described the primary roles of the mentor as a guide to resolve dilemmas, to boost confidence, and to help broaden the leadership

skills, which is done through modeling, coaching, and providing feedback. Further, extensive research literature (Bloom and Krovetz, 2001; Celikten, 2001; Oliver, 2005; Peterson *et al.*, 1987) concludes that the AP is mostly influenced by the principal with whom she/he works. Principals, given this knowledge, can establish a collaborative leadership model that includes mentoring and coaching, which can be a viable approach to reducing the dilemmas faced by struggling APs.

Mentors and coaches need to have a deepened understanding of the stressors on the AP. They need to acknowledge the complex orientations to the career, the dilemma-laden socialization process, and Marshall and Hooley's (2006) evidentiary-based "professional shock" syndrome. In a study by Rhodes and Bundrett (2006), APs were unanimous in stating their need for a support system that includes a sponsor (typically a principal). Thus, when school districts are making efforts to create a principal pipeline system, they need to provide a network of support in the form of mentors who understand these complex issues facing APs. How important is the individual chosen to be a mentor? What does a mentoring or partnering relationship look like? We now provide a description of various models of mentoring and partnering that can be used in schools to develop AP talent.

In-house models for developing AP talent

The most logical mentor for the AP is the senior principal with whom he or she works. One model chosen by Portin *et al.* (2003), to describe principal-assistant mentoring relationships, emphasizes that principals do not have to be a "One-Man Band." Principals mentoring a junior administrator can and should distribute leadership responsibilities and offer a form of induction to the principal role. The principal can serve as a guide, coach, and mentor preparing the AP for the principalship. This model, which is especially advantageous for APs who desire upward promotion, is the mentor-learner model (Wong, 2009). A more practical alternative metaphor may be The Principal as Jazz Band Leader in which leadership is distributed among the principal, AP, and teacher leaders. The mentor-learner model can be construed as an extension of job-embedded professional development (Fullan, 2009). School leaders primarily learn by experience (Portin *et al.*, 2003). Regardless of their training and preparation, most of them acquire the skills they need on the job. In that respect, they share the perspective of Fullan (2009) as well as advocates of on-the-job leadership development practices for APs (Chan *et al.*, 2003; Oliver, 2005; Rhodes and Bundrett, 2006; Wong, 2009). Under the mentorship of the experienced school leader, the upwardly mobile AP has opportunities to observe and carry out tasks related to the principal's job, and gain confidence and competence for being an effective school leader.

In another model, the principal and the AP form a partnering relationship that is formalized as a co-leadership form of administration (Wong, 2009). There is an increasing trend toward creating such collaborative school leadership teams due to the complexity of the principal's role (Cushing *et al.*, 2004; Eckman, 2007). The original partnering relationship (or co-principalship theory) consists of two administrators of equal stature who divide their responsibilities so that one serves as "principal of instruction" and the other as "principal of administration" (Eckman, 2007). The present generation of co-principals divides their activities based on their personal competencies and experience (Wong, 2009). Co-leadership is an excellent strategy for decreasing a principal's cumbersome workload and may be especially viable in schools where layoffs reduce the number of APs or teacher leaders. In 2006, a search of the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) database and other online sources

disclosed 170 people serving as co-principals in public and private elementary, middle, and high schools in the USA. (Eckman, 2007). Distributed and collaborative leadership improves educational outcomes (Hallinger and Heck, 2010; Louis *et al.*, 2010). Muijs and Harris (2003) observed that APs consistently say they would like to take more of an active role in school leadership. Frustration with a lack of formal authority is a common complaint. On the other hand, being part of a leadership team is a powerful source of job satisfaction (Cranston *et al.*, 2004).

Budding APs learn a great deal from partnering relationships, both from having a role model and also from sharing the administrative load, gaining practical experience. However, it takes a secure and generous principal to distribute the leadership responsibilities without overly micro-managing. Without attention to providing systematic supports such as these, APs' potential may be lost in a survival-of-the-fittest contest. In the following section, we provide additional suggestions for how AP success can be fostered.

Ways to foster AP success and to create a prepared leadership pool

By focussing on APs, being systematic about supporting APs, and expanding and deepening understandings of the hurdles and dilemmas they face, our schools will have a more robust leadership pipeline and more satisfied and effective APs. We recommend that school districts, whether in the USA or internationally, consider adopting the following strategies.

Create a formal sponsor-mentor model

APs who have sponsors or mentors will greatly benefit from the specific advice, confidence building, access to opportunity, and caring guidance given by seasoned veterans. Some benefit from the visibility and sense of belonging that comes from being a protégé of a powerful sponsor. But these relationships do not just naturally develop for all aspiring administrators. One caution needs to be given here, however. These relationships may have built-in replication effects, according to Valverde (1987), whereby sponsors notice and promote aspirants who look and think very much like themselves. This may not work well for many women, people of color, or those of increasing age.

Given this, what can we do to support a more systematic and inclusive approach utilizing a sponsor-mentor model? We offer the following suggestions:

- Identify and recruit, and then distribute a directory of sponsors: to achieve the status of sponsor-mentor, persons must provide evidence that they have helped other administrators gain competence and move up in administration. They must prepare a statement for a directory of sponsor-mentors, discussing particular areas of expertise and interest and displaying their mentoring credentials.
- Select highly qualified sponsors: particular preference should be given to individuals with an ability to think about how to shape the assistant principalship and how to develop potential leaders. They also should be individuals who can demonstrate that they have helped women and people of color gain access to administrative positions. These participating leaders should be able to bridge any gaps between universities and practitioners and, for example, help negotiate roles, work through dilemmas, and assist in discussions for rethinking assumptions about administration.
- Create sponsor-mentor banks: when the most talented recruits are identified and agree to sponsor, school districts could create sponsor-mentor banks. These lists

of administrators should represent those who have experience and are part of a network of school administrators. These people would agree to be resources and sources of career advice for aspiring administrators. Mentors and sponsors can learn to take pride in their contributions to molding future leaders and could list their names on their resumes.

- Distribute such sponsor-mentor banks in widespread fashion: administrators should be able to draw from the resources in neighboring districts if regional sponsor-mentor banks could be coordinated, perhaps by a professional association, a state department of education, a county/regional system, or a university. All conferences and professional meetings should have specific times set aside when aspiring administrators can meet with those in the sponsor-mentor bank.
- Expand the sponsor-mentor network: to include university programs, state departments of education, administrator associations, and foundations for collaborations in AP-focussed workshops, academies, celebrations, staff development, and special conferences. Too often, administrators are lumped together as if all are alike. Shared expertise of practicing administrators and professors would highlight APs' special dilemmas and needs (Peterson *et al.*, 1987).

Principals often engage in mentoring and sponsoring when they see someone they think has the potential to carry out a school administrative career. Thus, sponsors and mentors can provide support and serve as encouraging role models. Those who aspire to administrative careers without this support may flounder, and may never attain high positions in administration.

In the above opinion piece, we have highlighted the many challenges facing APs and thus the need for effective sponsors and mentors. We need school districts and senior school leaders who will embrace that broad-based supports for APs are needed, that alternative modes of shared leadership are valuable and viable, and that greater understanding of the AP role ambiguity and complexity is required to build a strong continuity of leadership. We believe that if these concepts are embraced, the AP pipeline will flourish with eager, prepared, and competent school administrators.

References

- Bloom, G. and Krovetz, M. (2001), "A step into the principalship", *Leadership*, Vol. 30 No. 3, p. 12.
- Celikten, M. (2001), "The instructional leadership tasks of high school assistant principals", *Journal of Educational Administration*, Vol. 39 No. 1, pp. 67-76.
- Chan, T.C., Webb, L. and Bown, C. (2003), "Are assistant principals prepared for principalship: How do assistant principals perceive?", Report No. EA032850, paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Sino-American Education Consortium, (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED481543), Kennesaw, GA, October 10-11.
- Cranston, N., Tromans, C. and Reugebrink, M. (2004), "Forgotten leaders: what do we know about the deputy principalship in secondary schools?", *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, Vol. 7 No. 3, pp. 235-242, doi: 10.1080/13603120410001694531.
- Cushing, K.S., Kerrins, J.A. and Johnstone, T. (2004), "Work worth doing", *Leadership*, Vol. 33 No. 3, pp. 12-15.
- Davidson, B. (2015), "Impacts of reduction-in-force (RIF) on the assistant principalship in North Carolina public schools: a repeated measures two way ANOVA analysis", doctoral dissertation, dissertations and theses database (UMI No. 3715684), NC.

- Davis, S., Darling-Hammond, L., LaPointe, M. and Meyerson, D. (2005), *School Leadership Study: Developing Successful Principals*, (Review of Research), Stanford University, Stanford Educational Leadership Institute, Stanford, CA.
- Eckman, E.W. (2007), "A dynamic duo", *American School Board Journal*, Vol. 194 No. 4, pp. 47-49.
- Fullan, M. (2009, October), "Leadership development: the larger context", *Educational Leadership*, Vol. 67 No. 2, pp. 45-49.
- Hallinger, P. and Heck, R.H. (2010), "Collaborative leadership and school improvement: understanding the impact on school capacity and student learning", *School Leadership and Management*, Vol. 30 No. 2, pp. 95-110, doi: 10.1080/13632431003663214.
- Louis, K.S., Leithwood, K., Wahlstrom, K.L. and Anderson, S.E. (2010), "Investigating the links to improved student learning: final report of research findings", Learning from Leadership Project, Wallace Foundation, available at: www.wallacefoundation.org/KnowledgeCenter/KnowledgeTopics/CurrentAreasofFocus/EducationLeadership/Documents/Learning-from-Leadership-Investigating-Links-Final-Report.pdf (accessed June 15, 2008).
- Marshall, C. and Hooley, R. (2006), *The Assistant Principal: Leadership Choices and Challenges*, Corwin Press, Thousand Oaks, CA, pp. 243-265.
- Marshall, C., Mitchell, B. and Gross, R. (1994), "A typology of the assistant principalship: a model of orientation to the administrative career", in Preston, N.A. and Thurstone, P.W. (Eds), *Advances in Educational Administration: Vol. 3 New Directions in Educational Administration: Policy Preparation, and Practice*, JAI Press, Greenwich, CT, pp. 243-265.
- Muijs, D. and Harris, A. (2003), "Assistant & deputy heads: key leadership issues and challenges", *Management in Education*, Vol. 17 No. 1, pp. 6-8, doi: 10.1177/08920206030170010301.
- Oliver, R. (2005), "Assistant principal professional growth and development: a matter that cannot be left to chance", *Educational Leadership and Administration*, Vol. 17, pp. 89-100.
- Peterson, K.D., Marshall, C. and Grier, T. (1987), "Academies for assistant principals", *Educational Leadership*, Vol. 45 No. 1, pp. 47-48.
- Portin, B., Schneider, P., DeArmond, M. and Gundlach, L. (2003), "Making sense of leading schools: a study of the school principalship", Report No. EA032811, Center on Reinventing Public Education, University of Washington, (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED481977), Seattle, WA.
- Rhodes, C. and Bundrett, M. (2006), "The identification, development, succession and retention of leadership talent in contextually different schools : a case study located within the English West Midlands", *School Leadership and Management*, Vol. 26 No. 3, pp. 269-287, doi: 10.1080/136324306000737124.
- Valverde, L. (1987), *Succession Socialization: Its Influence on School Administrative Candidates and Its Implications to the Exclusion of Minorities From Administration*, National Institute of Education, Washington, DC.
- Wong, P.-M. (2009), "A conceptual framework for understanding the working relationship between school principals and vice-principals", *School Leadership and Management*, Vol. 29 No. 2, pp. 157-179, doi: 10.1080/13632430902775558.

Corresponding author

Catherine Marshall can be contacted at: marshall@email.unc.edu

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:

www.emeraldgroupublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm

Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com