

Farewell to the Lone Ranger

A retired principal from Coquitlam outlines a district program to support new principals and sustain school leadership.

by Greg McNally

We were often surprised how many principals operated like the Lone Ranger searching the landscape entirely on their own hoping to find the solution for the challenges that faced them. Only a few principals sought advice from colleagues, most felt confiding in colleagues was perceived as administrator weakness, admission of incompetency, risky and time consuming.

Recent literature confirms what those of us in the field have known for some time: the principal has a pivotal leadership role and influence on the culture, climate and ethos of a school in its work toward continuous improvement for students. Given the important role principals play in schools and the looming shortage of qualified candidates to fill these leadership roles vacated by increasing numbers of principals and vice-principals moving into retirement, what can be done to ensure that this leadership is sustained? Researchers point out that school districts can offer mentoring support to new

principals thus helping them avoid the typical sink or swim survival experience — and, at best, merely learning to ‘dogpaddle’ in their first administrative position. In this article I describe a form of mentoring that holds promise for supporting new principals, sustains leadership and is not a high cost item for school districts.

One month after retiring from rewarding careers as school administrators my colleague and I became involved in a pilot project initiated by the school district in consultation with the local principals’ and vice-principals’ association to support school administrators. The district

saw this initiative as an important feature in addressing the fact that 19 principals at the elementary level, representing 42% of all elementary principal positions, were either new to their schools or new to their positions. Additionally, the district profile of administrators revealed almost 70% of all elementary principals had five years or less experience in their roles. Clearly a significant knowledge and experience gap existed between new and seasoned principals. From the outset, there was an acknowledgment by everyone involved in the project that principals new to their position or new to their school assignment

need help as they start out. The district believed one way to bridge the gap and benefit principals in building capacity for leadership was ready access to a recently retired veteran administrator.

The district mutually agreed with us that the Pilot Project and our engagement with school administrators would only succeed built on the bedrock of trust and absolute confidentiality, anything less would be like setting a foundation on sinking sand. This agreement meant that there would be no identification of individuals or schools allowing principals to voice candid concerns knowing that whatever was said would remain confidential. In short, there was no expectation of 'reporting out' and no high stakes 'performance evaluation' process.

Access to Support

Support was offered to all school administrators but elementary principals who were new to their positions or new to a school took priority. Access to support could be requested by individual principals without going through district central office. In other words, school administrators could choose to make direct contact with the mentor by phone, email or arrange a face-to-face meeting on site or off site with the understanding that confidentiality would be maintained between the mentor and the school administrator at all times.

Differentiated Support

The assistance offered was differentiated and characterized as consultative, collaborative and coaching support.

Consultative support was frequently employed and focused on sharing of vital information about how the district and the school operate as a

system. It also included contextual advice about policy, procedure and practice for consideration or deliberation by the school administrator. The advice could include a suggested strategy for implementing change or explanations for gaining understanding of policy, procedure or practice. Our role was advisory and intended to guide, not monitor, administrator action. Similarly, we were cautious not to superimpose our own prescriptions or remedies for situations and decision-making to school administrators.

Collaborative support involved mutually generating possible reasons or causes for a particular circumstance or event, a variety of ideas or strategies aimed at problem solving and potential solutions or interventions holding promise for resolution. The discourse and dialogue arising in these discussions then became the stimulus in forming uniquely distinct ideas that were fitting for the situation and context of the school site. This kind of support was nearly as frequent as consultative support.

Coaching support with principals was almost always preceded by at least consultative support and usually included elements of collaborative support. Our coaching intent was to bolster, scaffold and probe a principal's thinking, problem-solving and goal clarification. It was less about information sharing and more about going deeper, reflecting on practice and decision-making through a process that

encouraged self-directed learning. We found this kind of support challenging and complex as mentors because it required us to stay sharp in using structured communication skills like paraphrasing, impression checking and clarifying. Coaching tended to evolve over time with a few individual principals; consumed more 'mentor' time and was more relationship-oriented.

Entry and Awareness

Assisting individuals in gaining self-awareness about emerging or even existing issues or concerns that may be blocking efficacy of a school assumes that time and energy are devoted to exploring and discovering what is known and what is not known about organizational climate and culture. For that reason, as mentors, we discovered early on to initiate contact with school principals and not wait for the school to make contact with the mentor. The goal here was bringing awareness to the forefront through informal discussion and open-ended questions. In several instances it was apparent that new principals lack experience anticipating things that could quickly cause havoc and shipwreck as they encountered uncharted waters. Quite simply, 'they didn't know what they didn't know.' Our task



was helping principals 'sound' these waters and chart them before hitting rocks.

Timing

In our work we saw demands on school administrators peak at certain times of the school year, namely, school startup in September, the spring staffing process and planning for next year's school organization and the close of the school year. From our experience we found timely contact by a mentor at these peak periods prudent, often averting potential calamities. We found most principals (even experienced ones) were, at these times, overwhelmed by rising system expectations and subsequent demands impacting principal time and energy. At the same time, we also found that these peak periods did not preclude assistance needed when 'episodic' challenges can and do arise unexpectedly for school administrators at any time of the school year.

Nuts and Bolts

Nuts and bolts, or how things work in a school, are part of the mentor's mandate in providing assistance. The nuts and bolts of a principal's work are often centered upon managing a school. Management of the organization, operations and resources for a safe, efficient and effective learning climate are primary responsibilities for principals. We found the following management topics were a helpful starting point in our discussions with novice principals that then led into a dialogue surrounding aspects of leadership:

- Policies and procedures arising from the *School Act*, District Administrative procedures and regulations.
- Collective Agreements: What do they say? What do they

mean?

- Forms, for example, 1701, 1601, Consultation forms, etc.
- Staffing & Personnel: What is the process for allocation of staffing to a school? What is the process for selecting staff?
- Finances: How much money does the school have? How do you access it? How is it tracked? How is it dispersed? Are budgets designated?
- Information: How is information shared and dispersed? What information is disseminated?
- Record Keeping: Where is vital information kept? How is it stored? How is it retrieved? Who looks after maintaining it?

Another important feature of the nuts and bolts of a principal's work is gaining understanding about the unique features of a school's culture. We used the term 'social dynamics' to identify parts of a school's culture by exploring with principals questions about the following topics:

- Exploration of organizational norms and how people are 'normed' into the culture?
- Are there facets of the norms that are positive? Negative?
- Do people have ownership in the goals of the school?
- Staff relations, what are they?
- Who are the formal leaders, informal leaders?
- Meeting protocols,

for example staff meetings, how are they conducted?

- Patterns of communication: What are they? What have you observed?
- Decision-making: Is there a process? What is it? Is it followed?
- What are the traditions of the school and who are the guardians?

These questions served as a starting point, not a prescription, in opening avenues of awareness, discussion and understanding, all with the intent of extending learning for practice and helping principals go beyond just dogpaddling in their craft.

Mentor feedback to district officials in concert with the local principals' and vice-principals' association was an important feature of the Pilot Project. The nature of our feedback was systemic, meaning that emerging patterns of system problems or concerns were identified along with



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recommendations for change in practice or policy. Feedback did not identify administrators or schools. This feedback included awareness about the challenges facing school administrators new to their position or new to their school. It also included suggestions for 'norms of practice' that we believe would benefit the district in the leadership growth and development of school administrators. Some feedback:

Training: Is varied and different from site to site for vice-principals. Most receive opportunity to grow and get exposure to all aspects of administration. A few do not.

Norm: Consistent training across levels can only be beneficial – selection and training of 'principals' who mentor vice-principals should be given high priority.

Culture Shock: Administrators coming from a secondary or middle school experience into a single administrator elementary school can be overwhelmed by the broadness of responsibilities coupled with a teaching assignment and feeling all alone.

Norm: Selection of principals 'match-to-fit' at the level they were trained for would seem to make sense.

Transitions: Transferring from one assignment or school to another should include an embedded process of information exchange between incoming principals and exiting principals.

Norm: District procedure established to ensure a process of information sharing occurs during transition stage. A topical list is a helpful tool for accomplishing this.

Financial Knowledge: This necessary and vital part of school operation requires sound stewardship on the part of the principal. Don't assume that administrators enter with a common understanding about finances.

Norm: Provide specific training about managing budgets and school finances.

Staffing Organization: Fitting the many pieces of a school organization together can seem like an insurmountable jigsaw puzzle even for the experienced administrator. How much more daunting for a novice.

Norm: Sessions using sample organizations would help. Like levels sharing 'how to' in organizing a school is of benefit.

Networking: Each school site is different in its context and culture – no one can possibly know everything or even anticipate what may unfold in the day and life of a principal.

Norm: Since the nature of work is episodic and unpredictable principals need to build a network of trusted colleagues they can access for advice whenever needed.

We were often surprised how many principals operated like the Lone Ranger searching the landscape entirely on their own hoping to find the solution for the challenges that faced them. Only a few principals sought advice from colleagues, most felt confiding in colleagues was perceived as administrator weakness, admission of incompetency, risky and time consuming.

In our work we also found some common recurring concerns voiced by principals during our visits with them. These concerns were almost endemic and predictable across schools in our discussions with principals.

- Leading employees from mediocre and less to competent and more.
- Dealing with interpersonal conflict between staff members.
- The chronic and intrusive malcontent parent.
- Roadblocks to accessing services for students.
- The isolation feeling of elementary principals with no vice-principal.
- Loss of flexibility, constraints of contract language, rule bound by statutes and regulations.
- Staff intransigence to change.

Know More

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Lipton, Laura & Wellman, Bruce, *Mentoring Matters, A Practical Guide to Learning-Focused Relationships, 2nd Edition*, Sherman, Connecticut, Mira Via, 2003.

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School stuck, not moving, teachers remain at same school for years, have seen principals come and go – will wait out the principal.


- Increased frequency of added layers of responsibility and expectation.

Although these concerns were common across schools what surprised us was the reluctance of school administrators to disclose issues to a superordinate because it seemed too trivial to bother them with and also the fear that disclosing issues might reflect poorly on performance and be career limiting. We encouraged school administrators to bring substantive issues to the attention of a superordinate sooner rather than later.

In contrast, we found school administrators candid about work related challenges and expressed feel-

ings of inadequacy, personal issues affecting performance and wondering about their own efficacy in their roles. We also found many school administrators enthusiastic and celebratory about student success, teacher acceptance of improved instructional practice and other positive change efforts they had been involved in. In several ways our presence in schools gave principals a voice to hear their own thoughts, perceptions, hopes and dreams about the work they were doing as we provided feedback and encouragement to them.

In casual conversations with family, friends and acquaintances about our 'mentoring' of school adminis-

trators we often hear 'what a great idea, it makes a lot sense.' While we find our involvement as mentors highly satisfying and equally rewarding we readily admit we have much yet to learn. We believe that assisting school administrators through mentoring efforts early on directly benefits districts in the long run and holds much promise developing and sustaining leadership in schools. For those riding the saddle of the Lone Ranger, remember, even the Lone Ranger had Tonto. We agree with Andy Hargreaves: "If change is to matter, spread and last, sustainable leadership must also be a fundamental priority of the systems in which leaders do their work." 

Greg McNally was an elementary school administrator for 19 years and is now retired from the Coquitlam School District. He served as Vice-President and a BCPVPA Chapter Council representative for the Coquitlam PVPA. He can be reached at mcnallygw@gmail.com Greg and retired colleague, Brad Aitchison have been working periodically as consultants for Coquitlam School District.



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