

RESEARCH UTILIZATION BRIEF:

MENTORING AND SUPERVISING SCHOOL PRINCIPALS



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Mentoring new entrants into the professional practice of school leadership is “recent and varied” (Gross, 2009, p. 530). For example, aspiring principals observe school leaders in action and then engage in leadership activities under supervision by practicing principals, a strategy perceived to support role transformation from teacher to administrator (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004). Novice principals are mentored by veteran peers to socialize them into the profession (Crow & Glascock, 1995; Daresh, 2004; Hall, 2008) and to induct them into a particular community of practice (i.e., district or system). Although research on educational leadership mentoring has reported benefits for participants, “pitfalls and problems with mentoring” (Daresh, 2004, p. 507) are likewise evident. For example, the “confusing, often contradictory, roles associated with mentoring” (Mertz, 2004, p. 542), a term used for both formal and informal processes as well as interpersonal relationships ranging from casual interactions to assigned responsibilities, often create uncertainty about mentoring goals. Another challenge is the availability and willingness of principals to serve as mentors. Until recently, educational administrators were typically White males, which limited opportunities for those different in gender, race, or ethnicity (Méndez-Morse, 2004) to be viewed as viable principal candidates. Another concern is that mentoring can perpetuate the status quo within districts because principal candidates who are different are overlooked and innovative principals are stymied (Grogan & Crow, 2004; Gross, 2009). Although principal mentoring in multiple scenarios has been investigated, little attention has been paid to the supervision of principals beyond their early years of practice.

This Brief summarizes findings from two investigations about principal support conducted by The Wallace Foundation. The first examined lessons learned from unique mentoring programs in two urban districts; the second shares findings from a national survey and six case studies to uncover current expectations for principal supervision. Recommendations from both studies have potential for broad utilization.

GETTING PRINCIPAL MENTORING RIGHT: LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

Several studies commissioned by The Wallace Foundation consistently revealed common shortcomings in principal

mentoring that can “seriously limit the good that mentoring accomplishes” (Mitgang, 2007, p. 40). Among the many districts that the foundation awarded grants for developing school leaders, New York City through its Leadership Academy and Jefferson County Public Schools (KY) are unique with regard to mentoring and professional development for new and veteran principals. Site visits involving representatives from multiple stakeholder groups revealed strategies proven to foster “leaders of change who are willing and able to reshape the status quo” (Mitgang, 2007, p. 9). Following are the five recommendations for effective mentoring programs:

- High-quality training for mentors should be a requirement and should be provided by any state or district with mentoring.
- States or districts that require mentoring should gather meaningful information about its efficacy—especially how mentoring is or is not contributing to the development of *leadership behaviors and dispositions* that are needed to change the culture of schools toward improved teaching and learning.
- To adequately support new principals as they develop from novices to self-assured leaders of change, mentoring should be provided for at least a year, and ideally 2 or more years.
- State and local funding for principal mentoring should be sufficient to provide quality training, stipends commensurate with the importance and time requirements of the task, and a lengthy enough period of mentoring to provide new principals a meaningful professional induction.
- Above all, the primary goal of mentoring should be clear and unambiguous: to provide new principals with the knowledge, skills, and courage to become leaders of change who put teaching and learning first in their schools.

RETHINKING LEADERSHIP: THE CHANGING ROLES OF PRINCIPAL SUPERVISORS

The Council of the Great City Schools is a coalition of 67 large urban districts located in 37 states. Member districts must serve over 35,000 students in cities with populations over 250,000

residents or serve students in the largest city of a state regardless of its size. Using grant funds awarded by The Wallace Foundation, the council conducted a two-phase study on principal supervisors—district administrations responsible for overseeing, supporting, and evaluating principals. Phase 1 was administration of a survey to gather information about the characteristics and roles of principal supervisors. Phase 2 involved case studies conducted at six districts participating in The Wallace Foundation’s Principal Pipeline Initiative: Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (NC), Denver Public Schools (CO), Gwinnett County Public Schools (GA), Hillsborough County Public Schools (FL), the New York City Department of Education (NY), and Prince George’s County Public Schools (MD). All six districts implemented a continuum of new processes intended to prepare and support effective principals. The goal was to test this hypothesis:

If an urban district and its principal training programs provide a large number of talented aspiring principals with the right pre-service training and on-the-job support, the result will be a pipeline of principals able to improve teacher quality and student achievement, especially in schools with the greatest needs. (Corcoran et al., 2013, p. 8)

Research was conducted in the six districts to understand the role and impact that principal supervisors have on this agenda, particularly since little is known about this district-level position.

The report provides a summary of study findings as well as common themes and comparisons across the six districts related to organizational structures within which principal supervisors work. Also included are descriptions of the roles, responsibilities, professional development, and evaluation of principal supervisors. Of interest here is how principal supervisors support principals.

The role change of the principal from school manager to instructional leader in recent years also changed the type of support provided by principal supervisors. The top five reported principal-support activities were “(1) conversing with principals about student performance data, (2) visiting classrooms with principals, (3) conversing with principals about their performance, (4) conversing with principals about teacher performance, and (5) assisting principals in responding to issues raised by parents or community” (Corcoran et al., 2013, p. 57). Among the “nine recommendations for building more effective principal supervisory systems” (Corcoran et al., 2013, p. 49) were five that relate directly to support for principals:

- Strategically select and deploy principal supervisors, matching skills and expertise to the needs of schools.
- Provide principal supervisors with the professional development and training they need to assume new instructional leadership roles.
- Provide early and sustained support to new principals in the form of coaches.

- Hold principals—and principal supervisors—accountable for the progress of their schools and ensure alignment in the processes and measures used to assess teacher, principal, and principal supervisor performance.
- Provide clear, timely, and actionable evaluation data to principals.

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