

# Tailoring

## Professional Development for a Better Fit

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### PREVIEW

Professional development should be tailored to the individual's and the school's needs.

Induction and mentoring programs are two of the best forms of professional development.

Professional networks enable principals to receive support and acquire insight from colleagues.

*Developing School Leaders: A Call for Collaboration* calls for professional development for principals that is a “seamless garment” that extends through preservice, induction, career changes, and retirement (NASSP, 1992). Daresh and Playko (1992) concur with this assertion, stating that training should not be fragmented but should occur throughout the career stages of the principal. This type of professional development is grounded in the belief that support for principals must be ongoing, tailored to their individual needs as well as the needs of their school, and crafted for every stage of professional development.

### Building a Support System

Authentic assessment and attention to adult learning theory must be evident in the development of *any* ongoing support system for school principals. Spradling (1989) characterizes the assessment element of the professional development process as the evolution of a plan, a “blueprint” to follow, based on specific knowledge of the problems and attitudes the individual brings to the job. Generalization can prove to be dangerous: Peterson and Kelley (2001) suggest that progress through career stages may often be closer to a spiral than a sequence and that a principal may be a master leader in some areas but a novice in others. Thus, one-size-fits-all development programs, even those that attempt to differentiate program substance on the basis of career stages, are likely to be acknowledged as “neither effective nor efficient” (Lauder, 2000, p. 24).

The content and substance of professional support must be consistent with what is known about how adults learn. The National Staff Development Council (2001) charges that professional development must take place within a delivery system that is supportive of adult learning theory, that the adult learner must be actively involved in the process, and that activities and new knowledge must be tied to prior learning. The approach must be job-embedded and ongoing to effectively support principals and their professional development. Unfortunately, this has not been the case. In a study of a cross section of 140 experienced principals, the principals identified lecture as the primary and least effective delivery method for their training (Ricciardi, 1997).

### Specific Strategies

Principals should consider each of the following strategies as an option for an individually designed professional development and support plan. Specific strategies should not be aligned solely with defined career stages of the principalship. Individuals should determine what pedagogy will maximize their opportunity to apply new knowledge, practice new skills, and receive regular feedback regardless of where they are in their career.



Too many principals are isolated in their jobs and need the professional support of mentors and professional peer networks.

### Induction Programs

Testimonials regarding principal induction reveal a history of neglect or, at best, minimal implementation. Sosne (1982) recounts one principal's all-too-typical experience from more than 20 years ago: "When he appointed me, the superintendent gave me the keys to the school, a city map to help me find the building, and wished me good luck" (p. 14). Almost 15 years later, Elsberry and Bishop (1996) describe the still-common practice through the words of another new principal: "I came into a 612 student school with a faculty and staff of 65-plus people with no prior training and no help. 'Sink or swim' was the attitude at the central office" (p. 32). Recent research, however, identifies strategies and practices that should be included as part of an initial orientation and induction agenda.

First-year principals in Alabama, Mississippi, and South Carolina identified induction practices they considered most effective (Elsberry, 1993). Foremost on the list were summer induction conferences in which the beginning principal could learn about the job and its specifics without the stress of the daily operation of the school. Elsberry concluded that it was important to allow beginning principals an orientation period that was long enough to assess various aspects of school programs and operations as well as to develop productive working relationships with staff members, students, and parents.

### Mentoring Programs

In Elsberry's 1993 study, principals describe the second most effective support practice as mentoring. A mentor can impart the norms, values, and mores that are specific to the organization. Hopkins-Thompson (2000) more broadly defines mentors as those who "support the being of the protégés, providing advocacy, counseling, support and protection—feedback and information they would otherwise not have" (p. 30).

The selection of mentors is vital to any successful program. A great principal may not be a great mentor. Hopkins-Thompson (2000) also argues that determining who should serve as a mentor should not be an exercise in calculation of longevity, rather that "careful consideration must be given to those who have the disposition and the skills to do the job" (p. 31). Walker and Scott (1994) suggest a potential for liability if

mentors are not carefully selected: "If mentors are selected for reasons other than their ability to communicate knowledge and experience, or their professional skills and competence, there is a risk of encouraging and reinforcing practices that may be less than effective" (p. 73). The mentor must have a high level of coaching competency, possess substantial success as a site administrator, and be available for ongoing feedback and constructive criticism (Bloom, 1999).

Dareh and Playko (1990) suggest that mentors not only have successful experience as school administrators but also demonstrate general qualities of intelligence, good communication skills, decisiveness, clarity of vision, well-developed interpersonal skills, and the ability to accept multiple solutions to complex problems. They also must be able to ask questions that stimulate independence and exhibit awareness of the political and social realities of at least one school system to help the protégé understand how to survive within those realities. Mentors must also be able to accept another way of doing things. Regardless of past levels of effectiveness, "the way I used to do it" may not be the only, or the best, solution. Mentors must also be willing to accept—even applaud—a protégé who can excel beyond the mentor's level of performance.

The success of a mentoring program depends on the knowledge and expertise of the mentors, as well as their understanding of the role and its expectations, communication

and feedback skills, and sensitivity to the politics and the formal and unwritten agendas of the school district (Walker & Scott, 1994). Monsour (1998) recommends that mentors know about adult development and learning. Mentors must be able to help protégés understand and respond to the norms, values, and expectations of the organization and be able to use and analyze assessment instruments, develop professional growth plans, and implement reflective processes (Hopkins-Thompson, 2000).

Monsour (1998) identifies successful mentoring relationships as those in which the pairs met at least monthly or had frequent telephone contacts and in which the mentors made site visits to their protégés workplace and had a demonstrated commitment to the process. In addition, Monsour recommends that districts set aside two days at the beginning of the program for mentors and protégés to establish their relationship and that monthly half-day workshops be held throughout the year to focus on topics that emerge from ongoing needs assessments.

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Various other arrangements for interactions between mentors and protégés are also recommended: Hopkins-Thompson (2000) calls for fewer meetings and more technology-enhanced interaction, such as e-mail and online discussion forums. Kaye and Jacobsen (1995) suggest that mentors be assigned to groups of protégés so interpersonal and team skills develop simultaneously as protégés learn from the experiences of others. It is important for both mentors and protégés to invest time and energy in the relationship on an ongoing basis.

The role of mentor should not be coupled with the role of supervisor or evaluator (Gil, 1998; Hopkins-Thompson, 2000; Monsour, 1998). The success of mentoring is grounded, at least in part, in trust and open communication, which may not be consistent with the roles and expectations present in a supervisor-employee relationship. Protégés must be able to share deficiencies, admit to areas where they lack confidence, and confide in their mentors about professional and emotional needs. The assessments should be of a formative nature, not a judgement of the protégé's competence. Individual growth plans developed with the mentor should be confidential, encouraging the protégé to admit to inadequacies and allowing the mentor to guide, coach, and cheerlead. If the roles of mentor and supervisor are combined, "both the protégé, who may be re-

luctant to ask for help in weak areas, and the mentor, who has to use the information in the evaluative process, share the difficulty" (Hopkins-Thompson, p. 36).

The effectiveness of mentoring is not limited to the novice. Daresh and Playko (1989) maintain that mentoring is a beneficial form of professional development for both the protégé and the mentor: "Mentoring may be a particularly potent activity during the first years of a new career...it may also be viewed as something that can happen throughout a professional lifetime" (p. 2). Hopkins-Thompson (2000) asserts that "even champions need coaches" (p. 34) and even those who move from one level to another or are new to a district after significant experience elsewhere need a mentor and a support system to experience success. As Malone (2001) summarizes, "Mentor relationships need not be limited to the early stages of a principal's training. Even established school leaders can benefit from a mentor when trying to navigate the particularly difficult problems that all principals encounter" (p. 5).

Although mentoring programs are widely promoted in the literature, it is evident that they are not universally available in practice. Only 31% of the respondents in Elsberry's study had participated in a summer induction program, and only 21% worked with a mentor principal (Elsberry, 1993). Another study of elementary school principals reported that although 80% of the principals who had mentors found them to be very helpful, only 31% of the respondents in that study actually had mentors (Shelton, 1991). In a national study of middle level principals, 10% admitted that there was no one who had been influential in their professional learning during their first years as a principal (Valentine, Clark, Hackmann, & Petzko, 2002).

### **Professional Networks and Peer Support**

In a study of the first-year career-transition issues of new principals, Ginty (1995) identifies a clear need for new principals to build a new system of support with other administrators and recommends that professional development programs "promote peer interaction and collegiality among beginning administrators...(recognizing) a strong desire to come together periodically to share common problems, gain peer support, and acquire additional insights from colleagues" (p. 40). Skrla, Erlandson, Reed, and Wilson (2001) specify that peer networking might be one of the most

Figure 1

<b>Checklist for Professional Support and Development</b>			
To ensure that the professional support system a principal is designing is consistent with the model proposed, the following questions should be answered yes. If this is not the case, the system should be redesigned for maximum effectiveness.			
<b>QUESTIONS</b>	<b>YES</b>	<b>NO</b>	<b>IN PART</b>
Is the content based on individual assessment?			
Is the content tied to prior learning?			
Is the learning job-embedded?			
Is the training ongoing?			
Is any induction program long enough to assess various aspects of school programs and operations as well as to develop productive working relationships with staff, students, and parents?			
Was the mentor selected based on the identified skills?			
Is there opportunity for regular protégé/mentor meetings and frequent feedback?			
Is the mentor someone other than the immediate supervisor?			
Are networks or peer groups established with people with common concerns?			
Do networks or peer groups have a plan to meet regularly?			
Is reflective practice an expectation in every strategy?			
Does the plan have the support of your supervisor?			

effective sparks for professional growth because it can lead to reflection, questioning, and problem solving.

Successful networks consist of individuals with common concerns who meet on an ongoing basis and have some element of structure to their setting. This strategy is not limited to the beginning principal. A report from the elementary and secondary principals' associations calls for increased formal and informal opportunities for networking among new principals, as well as between experienced and aspiring principals for purposes of professional growth (Educational Research Service, 2000).

Other forms of peer support have also been shown to be beneficial. Peer-evaluation programs have been used successfully with beginning and experienced principals. In one such program, new and experienced principals in a district participated in classroom observations, conducted formal interviews with parents and staff members, and analyzed student work. They also participated in regular meetings to assess strengths and weaknesses, provided timely and honest feedback, and identified areas for improvement (Gil, 2001).

Weaknesses of the program included a lack of time to meet, a lack of consistency in expectations, and an unwillingness to offer criticism; but in general, the peer-evaluation program enjoyed considerable praise from new and veteran

principals. Respondents valued the trust that developed through frequent, candid conversations. They reported that they benefited from the diverse perspectives and varied expertise, the opportunity to brainstorm solutions, and the support they received to deal with difficult issues. The program was credited with "providing an effective structure for continuous principal support, allowing the superintendent and assistant superintendent to focus on the individual with the greatest needs" (Gil, 2001, p. 30).

**Reflective Practice**

The literature suggests reflective practice as a method to support change, foster professional growth, and enhance school reform. Schon (1987) suggests that reflective practice could help principals address ill-defined problems better and rethink them in different ways. Osterman (1998) advocates for reflective practice as a primary means for changing behavior through analysis of a person's beliefs and actions that leads to new understanding and strategies. Clark and Clark (2002) call for a process of inquiry and reflection about programs and practices that will enhance learning.

Reflective practice can be incorporated into professional development in any number of ways, such as journals, online chat rooms, small-group discussions, and daily

reflection. The reflective process forces individuals to critique the assumptions upon which an action was taken, challenge those assumptions, evaluate the action taken as well as its results, and design alternatives. Stepping back, analyzing, reconceptualizing, and then designing better strategies are fundamental to reflective practice and serve as an important means of professional support and development for school leaders (Osterman & Kottcamp, 1993).

## A Sound Investment

If no single individual is more important to initiating and sustaining improvement in student performance than the principal (Jackson & Davis, 2000), there is no alternative but to invest resources in those principals. The capacity to improve schools depends on the quality and effectiveness of the leaders in each school. The national outcry for school improvement, the anticipated retirement rate of current principals, and the increased accountability of the position demand that comprehensive professional support systems be designed and implemented for all stages of the principalship. **PL**

### Author's note

This article has been adapted from "Support for New and Experienced Middle Level Principals: A Proposed Model for Professional Development" by Vicki Nord Petzko in *Leaders for a Movement: Professional Preparation and Development of Middle Level Teachers and Administrators*, Volume III of the Handbook of Middle Level Education, edited by P. G. Andrews and V. A. Anfara (Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing).

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