Preparing Assistant Principals for the Principalship

BY CINDY JOHNSON-TAYLOR AND MARY B. MARTIN

Is it your professional responsibility to groom your assistant principal to become a principal?

A successful principal recently responded to this question by saying, “When I was a classroom teacher, I knew that I had direct responsibility for the children in my classroom, their progress, and their achievement. When I became an assistant principal, I realized that my responsibility had grown to include not only the students in the classrooms but also the teachers in the building. The day I became a principal, I realized that my area of responsibility also included providing for the professional development and success of my assistant principal. I absolutely believe it is my responsibility to help my assistant principal become ready for the complex job of being a principal.”

Because most new principals have served as assistant principals as part of their career path (Bloom & Krovetz, 2001), it seems logical that principals should take the responsibility for grooming assistant principals as seriously as this principal does. Principals already spend a great deal of time and energy supporting their teachers and helping them grow professionally, and they need to spend the same amount of time and energy on the development of their assistant principals. Just working beside a principal each day is not enough; assistant principals need more-intentional help to reach their potential.

In Search of New Principals

There is an alarming shortage of qualified aspiring administrators to meet the current and future need for school leaders. As a result, school districts need to “build the bench” to ensure that their schools will have effective principals when vacancies arise. To attract the very best educators to school leadership positions and to keep them in such positions, school districts must offer a network of support and foster a career-long approach to administrator development (Pounder & Crow, 2005).

One challenge to fully preparing assistant principals is the prevailing approach to the role that is referred to by some as a “narrowing” of the position. In other words, assistant principals are given a limited range of responsibilities and do not see and experience the whole picture of school leadership (Bloom & Krovetz, 2001; Pounder & Crow, 2005). Assistant principals are often primarily responsible for school discipline and managerial issues and are given very little responsibility in the area of instructional leadership. Such narrowing negatively affects their professional growth and prevents them from being viewed as instructional leaders in the school (Marshall, 1985). This problem is exacerbated by most assistant principals holding their positions for only a short time before being promoted (Bloom & Krovetz, 2001).

Strategies That Build Principals

To determine which strategies effectively groom assistant principals, we interviewed 10 principals who are helping their assistant principals prepare for promotion to the principalship. On the basis of the comments and experiences of these principals, we have identified some specific strategies that help build the bench.

PREVIEW

Assistant principals need explicit professional guidance as they learn the skills necessary to become principals.

Ten principals share how they help assistant principals understand how to lead.

Assistant principals need opportunities to run all aspects of the school and make difficult decisions.

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Inquire about career goals when hiring. Most of the principals we talked with ask directly about career aspirations when they conduct interviews for administrative openings in their schools and do not hire career assistant principals (see editor’s note). One principal stated, “It gives an assistant principal an entirely different perspective on each situation if he or she knows that in addition to doing a good job, preparation is also taking place for the principalship.” From the beginning, principals build on this career goal, giving assistant principals feedback and asking them to reflect on difficult decisions.

Hire only assistant principals who are solid in instruction. Because administrators are instructional leaders, it is imperative that assistant principals have strong instructional skills. Credibility in this area is essential. Assistant principals must be able to analyze test data, determine the effectiveness of curricular programs, monitor instruction in the classroom, and be able to collaborate with teachers as they make decisions about their instructional programs. They must also be able to coach teachers as they implement a variety of teaching techniques, which means getting into the classroom frequently to model, support, and plan with the teacher. Such visibility increases the perception that the assistant principal is an effective leader.

Get on the same page quickly. After a new administrator is hired, staff members rapidly begin to formulate their ideas about whom to approach about certain issues. To avoid problems, the principals we spoke to used several strategies to present a united front with their assistant principals. For example, principals always speak positively about their assistant principals to their staff members. These principals also model specific tasks before asking their assistant principals to take the lead. For example, one principal described her team-based teacher evaluation process. After doing classroom observations, the principal and her assistant principal talked about what needed to go in the written reports. The principal would write the first reports to show the format she wanted in the summary. Then the assistant principal would write a report and share it with the principal before the teacher conference. This step allowed the principal and the assistant principal to come to consensus, which was conveyed during the teacher conference. The principal reported, “Teachers could easily see a united approach. There was never any confusion over what we were both looking for and expecting.”

Other activities that united the administrative team included interviewing potential employees together, attending PTA board meetings as a team, and sharing the agenda items. Sometimes new assistant principals are so intent on learning their new role that they don’t give enough time and attention to teachers. This problem is minimized if the administrators walk the building together every day for the first few weeks, talking about instruction, student needs, and facility issues.

Involve assistant principals in all aspects of running the school. Assistant principals benefit from what Pounder and Crow (2005) call “behind-the-scenes” leadership experiences. Assistant principals will feel that their jobs are valuable if they know that they are part of the process that leads to improved instruction and student achievement. “I involve my assistant principal in everything, including how decisions are made from the principal’s desk,” reported one principal. “While the most important aspect of running a school is being an instructional leader, I also make sure my assistant principal knows how to handle the budget, how to deal with parents and the media, and how to reset the burglar alarm on the school when it goes off by accident.”

Several principals assign certain grade levels to an assistant principal who is completely responsible for the teachers, parents, and students in those grades. Another principal stressed that assistant principals need to know how to deal with angry adults and how to problem solve. These lessons are not learned by observation; they must be learned through experience.

Get out of the way. At some point, an assistant principal needs to take the lead. He or she has to jump in, make decisions, and run the daily operations. Principals frequently need to be away from the school for meetings or conferences. At these times, assistant principals should be trusted to be in charge and move ahead with the school’s business. Although the principal is often only a phone call away, the assistant principal gains confidence when he or she is in charge. Assistant
principals can also begin to understand the stress of being in charge and learn firsthand how to prioritize their time.

Principals must trust their assistant principals and support them in their effort to assume the leadership of a school. One principal said that he has to remind himself occasionally that his assistant principal was hired because he was good and it is his job as principal to help him become even better: “I can’t be afraid to let him go out on a limb and make some decisions alone. If I want to send him out to be a fellow principal, I have to trust him.”

**Have the difficult conversations.** It is important that tough issues, problems, and concerns are discussed thoroughly. Honesty, integrity and respect are required. Some principals meet weekly with their assistant principals to reflect on the week and make plans for upcoming events; other principals meet with their assistant principals daily.

It is not enough to talk about progress on a surface level. Principals must ask questions that make their assistant principals think critically about their leadership skills. For example, one principal said that she always tried to explain the rationale for her decisions and to think out loud about what would happen as a result of certain actions. Then she began to expect the assistant principal to do the same with her.

Often difficult discussions focus on interpersonal skills and the relationships that assistant principals are building with teachers. Assistant principals need specific feedback about the way they work with people. When an assistant principal makes mistakes and does not display appropriate leadership skills, the principal must explain the perceptions that result and the negative effect that mistakes can have over time. The principal must be sure that after giving tough feedback, the meeting ends with support and coaching. Confidence comes from learning from mistakes and doing things better the second time around. “We remind our assistant principals that all administrators need to be reflective practitioners and seek to grow from all our mistakes,” one principal remarked.

**Provide professional development.** Effective principals encourage their assistant principals to attend one or two professional conferences every year and ensure that they have the means to attend. When assistant principals return to their schools, they can share what they have learned and incorporate some of their new knowledge into the school. One principal shared leadership books with her assistant principal. After they both read the book, they went to dinner and talked about what ideas struck them and how they might support each other in building or refining their skills. District meetings are also opportunities for assistant principals to grow professionally.

**Cheer for your assistant principal.** When the assistant principal is ready for promotion, these principals let their superintendents know. The principal becomes the advocate and the marketing agent. For example, one principal invited the superintendent to the school to meet with the assistant principal. It is important to show supervisors recent evaluations of the assistant principals that show their competence. Offering specific examples of projects they have managed alone is also helpful. Giving them credit for the instructional progress that they have initiated or monitored in the school is a must.

Once these principals let their superintendents know that their assistant principals are ready for promotion, they continue to help their assistant principals prepare to lead schools of their own. Principals can highlight their assistant principals’ strengths and weaknesses and can talk about opportunities to grow continuously as leaders.

**Taking the Challenge Seriously**

Grooming an assistant principal to lead a school is a privilege for any principal and enables him or her to leave a larger mark on the field. Although assistant principals are ultimately responsible for their own professional growth, principals must not underestimate their responsibility to help train aspiring principals.

Preparing assistant principals to lead schools of their own means giving them opportunities to see all aspects of how to run a school, feedback that makes a difference, and professional development. Most important, principals must model the way to lead people. Although the schools that assistant principals eventually lead as principals may be quite different from the one they currently serve, the lessons they learn while they are assistant principals will hold true anywhere.

**Editor’s note:** NASSP recognizes that although the position of assistant principal is a pipeline to the principalship, many assistant principals have chosen to make the position a career and fulfill a valuable role in education. *PL*

**References**