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The Principals' Role in Mentor Programs

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Rick, an experienced elementary principal, was concerned about the failure rate of the beginning teachers in his school. When he initiated the mentor program this year, he was confident that he had solved the problem and that the outcome would be positive. Now he was shocked by the beginning teachers' evaluations.

"My mentor gave me great suggestions, but I would like to hear the principal's views on what he considers good teaching and appropriate discipline. He is the person who will evaluate me and I want to know if I am doing OK."

"My mentor told me that the principal wasn't pleased with the noise level in my room. I feel uncomfortable that they are discussing me. I wish the principal would speak directly to me instead of telling my mentor."

"I wish my mentor would meet with me regularly. She tells me to see her if need something, but I feel like a bother when I go to her with a problem."

Rick, like many principals, recognized the need for beginning teacher induction and assumed that the solution to the problem rested solely with the assignment of mentors. He randomly assigned experienced teachers as mentors without providing guidelines, training, or support for them. To compound matters, Rick assumed that the mentors would "handle things" and he ceased interacting with the first-year teachers.

The problems that Rick experienced are commonplace in many schools. Busy principals, grasping at solutions to assist their beginning teachers, randomly assign experienced teachers as mentors. Confident that they have solved the problem, the principals move on to other tasks, leaving the mentors solely responsible for inducting the beginning teachers (Brock and Grady, 1997; Brock and Grady, 1998). The mentors struggle, achieving varying levels of success, and the beginning teachers wonder why their principal doesn't interact with them. As one beginning teacher reported, "My principal welcomed me to the building and assigned me to a mentor. Now I don't ever have an opportunity to talk with her."

Initiating a Program

Principals play a key role in inducting beginning teachers into their schools (Hughes, 1994; Lieberman and Miller, 1994). One of the most effective induction methods is a developmental teacher induction program that includes a mentor program. The mentor component is an organized and systematic process in which a skilled and experienced teacher provides guidance to a novice (Heller and Sindler, 1991).

The role of the principal in the mentor program is to lead the initiative for program development, provide ongoing monitoring, and evaluate program effectiveness. Steps in program development include: 1) conducting a needs assessment to determine a rationale for the program, 2) evaluating the availability of funding and resources, and 3) determining if the school community will support the program. To be effective, a mentor program requires the commitment of the entire faculty and a supportive school atmosphere (Brock and Grady, 1997).

Once a decision is made to create a program, the principal guides the development of goals that tailor the program to the specific school setting. These goals provide the framework for the program (O'Dell, 1989). The next steps include: a) defining the needs of the beginning teachers, b) establishing criteria for selection of mentors, c) defining mentors' roles, and d) determining the length of mentors' service and commitment (Heller and Sindler, 1991).

Defining the Needs of Beginning Teachers

Commonly thought of as new college graduates, beginning teachers are actually a diverse group. Some beginning teachers are simultaneously embarking on adulthood and a professional teaching career. Others are mature adults who recently completed teacher training, or are re-entering the profession after raising a family. Some beginners may be experts in a discipline but have had no teacher training (Brock and Grady, 1997).

Given the diversity of beginning teachers, the content and process of mentoring need to adapt to their specific circumstances (Brock and Grady, 1997; Brock and Grady, 1998). A needs assessment before school begins and repeated periodically throughout the year will allow the principal to structure a program that is responsive to the needs of the beginning teachers. Mentors will understand and be able to respond to the more specific needs of their mentees. If the mentor program is well designed, it has the potential to be responsive to individual needs and deliver continuing professional development throughout the first years of an individual's professional experience.

Selection of Mentors

The ability of the mentors is a critical component of a mentor program. However, the mentors in many schools are randomly selected. In some schools, the mentor teacher's personality, similarity of teaching assignments, or proximity to the newcomer's classroom is the sole determinate of mentor assignments. Although this method occasionally produces desired outcomes, a more structured approach is

more likely to yield consistent success (Brock and Grady, 1997).

A quality mentor program provides specific criteria for selection of mentors. Principals determine criteria that are based on the goals of the school and the program. Suggestions for criteria include: a) experiences appropriate to the teacher's assignment, b) pre-requisite knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values and c) familiarity with the school and district's policies, procedures, organizational structure, curriculum, courses of study, and competencies (Gordon, 1990; Haupt, 1990).

Obviously, the mentor should be considered an expert teacher who has exceptional abilities in relating and communicating with other adults. A mistake, commonly made by principals, is assuming that an individual who works well with children will relate well with an adult in a mentoring situation. Mentors who work with adults have exceptional listening skills, are able to define a problem, generate alternative solutions, and work with a novice to select, implement, and evaluate a course of action. Most important, good mentors are able to offer suggestions and possibilities without encroaching on and diminishing the confidence and decisions of the novice teacher (Feinman-Nemser and Parker, 1990).

Practical considerations for mentor selection include proximity of classrooms, similar grade levels or course assignments, shared planning periods, philosophies and teaching styles. Gender, age, personalities, and interests are variables to consider for compatibility. Criteria should also take into account the respect of the mentor by peers, commitment to the teaching profession, desire to work with a novice, and willingness to spend the time and energy required (Brock and Grady, 1997).

Defining Mentors' Roles

Mentors need to know the intended goals for the mentor program and their role in attaining those goals. A mentor may serve in a variety of roles, such as role model, sponsor, teacher, coach, encourager, nurturer, and friend. Usually it is assumed that the mentor's role is to assist a less-experienced person for the purpose of promoting the novice's professional development. Whatever the specific function of the mentor program, program goals and the role expectation for mentors must be clearly stated and with plans established for their attainment (Janas, 1996; Heller and Sindelar, 1991).

Along with role expectations, the duration of the mentor relationship should be defined. Formal mentor periods usually extend for one or two years. However, if a friendship or strong personal bond develops, informal mentoring may continue for several years (Janas, 1996; Heller and Sindelar, 1991).

A typical scenario is the pairing of a master teacher with an inexperienced teacher for the purpose of socializing the

newcomer into the school. Usually this formal induction process lasts for one year or throughout the probationary period of the school district. Ideally, a positive relationship develops between mentor and novice during the formal mentoring period. When this occurs, informal mentoring and professional collaboration often continue long after the formal process ends.

A committee composed of faculty plus the principal should determine the roles of the mentors. If possible, input from novice teachers should be included. These roles will likely be re-visited and re-revised throughout the mentor program as mentors and new teachers evaluate their effectiveness (Heller and Sindelar, 1991).

Training for Mentors

Training, although seldom provided by schools, is equally as important as mentor selection (Brock and Grady, 1997; Brock and Grady, 1998). Mentors need orientation to familiarize them with the mentor program and then ongoing sessions to update skill (Janis, 1996). The orientation could occur during a one-day training period of four or five hours prior to the opening of the academic year (Heller and Sindelar, 1991). Subsequent sessions should be scheduled throughout the year to provide opportunities for skill development. Time should be provided for mentors to discuss their roles and obtain feedback from others.

The process and substance of the training should be determined by the goals of the mentor program and the school context within which it operates (Heller and Sindelar, 1991). A good starting point is a mentoring handbook that includes topics, such as: the purpose of the program, suggested roles of the mentor, guidelines for classroom visits, and summaries of the school's discipline, due process, and attendance policies and procedures (Heller and Sindelar, 1991). If mentors are expected to perform classroom observations and share insights with novice teachers, they need to be taught these techniques. Training should be provided that includes skills in pre-conferencing, classroom observation techniques, data collection and interpretation, diagnostic strategies, effective questioning, reflective listening, and post-conferencing (Brock and Grady, 1997). To facilitate smooth relationships between novice and mentor, skills in conflict resolution should be included (Janis, 1996).

Principal's Involvement

The principal needs to initiate the mentor program by meeting with the new teachers and mentors to clarify expectations for the program, the working relationship of participants, and the non-evaluative role of the mentor. Throughout the process, principals should monitor the interactions of teachers and mentors without breaching the confidentiality required in the mentor-mentee relationship. If relationships between teacher and mentor prove unsatisfactory, the principal should quickly provide an alternative mentor (Fischer,

1997). Some principals meet regularly with mentors to discuss issues that need to be resolved and solicit suggestions for program improvements (Heller and Sindelar, 1991).

Principal's Interactions

Mentors provide assistance but are not a substitute for beginning teachers' need to interact with the principal. Beginning teachers identify the principal as a key figure in their assistance and support. The principal is the person likely responsible for them being hired and the individual who will evaluate their teaching. Thus, beginning teachers want and deserve feedback from the principal. When this support and affirmation isn't received, beginners feel abandoned and frustrated. Novice teachers need assistance from both principals and mentors. Each provides unique perspectives, with the mentors' work complementing that of the principal. (Brock and Grady, 1997; Brock and Grady, 1997).

The area most elusive to beginning teachers is the school's culture. Culture constitutes the routine behaviors defined by the unwritten rules and norms developed over the years of the school's existence (Brock and Grady, 1997). When teachers say, "It's the way we do things around here," they are referring to school culture. As new teachers join the school, their views are shaped by and in turn perpetuate the culture (Hanson, 1996).

Beginning teachers often have trouble understanding the school's culture because it is unwritten and thus elusive. They can find answers to explicit rules and procedures in handbooks. However, it's the maze of unwritten rules that are more likely to govern what people do than the written policies and procedures. Teachers are more likely to teach according to the prescribed norms of the school than any directives from the administration. These are the "rules" that aren't written down anywhere that pose problems for beginning teachers. So ingrained are the rules, that even well-meaning mentors and veteran teachers don't think to share them (Brock and Grady, 1997; Sergiovanni, 1994).

As developer and nurturer of the school's culture, the principal plays a pivotal role in sharing that culture with beginning teachers. The perceptions of the social and cultural factors of a school have a greater influence on novices than the schools formally-stated goals. Beginning teachers need to know the school's history, traditions, legends, and myths. They need to hear the stories of the school's heroes and heroines. This process helps the novice gain a sense of membership and participation in the culture (Brock and Grady, 1998).

In addition, new teachers want to know the principal's goals and expectations for teaching. While the mentor's classroom experiences are valuable, knowing the principal's expectations for instructional methods, time management, discipline, grading, student achievement, and parent relationships is essential. Sharing examples of accepted ways of doing things provides examples of acceptable standards of

behavior. Although beginning teachers need and appreciate the assistance of mentors, the principal is the person they need please, who will likely evaluate them (Brock and Grady, 1996).

Evaluations and Confidences

Careful consideration must be given to whether or not the mentor is to have a formal role in the evaluation of novice teachers. If mentors are to have a role in formal evaluation, the procedures must be an established part of school policy and clearly defined and explained to mentors and mentees. With trust being an integral component of a successful mentor program, it is essential that principals adhere to existing evaluation policy, are mindful of the fragility of the trust factor, and respectful of confidences between mentor and novice teacher (Haupt, 1990; Brock and Grady, 1998).

Evaluating the Program

Evaluation is an area often overlooked in mentor programs. An annual evaluation by both mentors and mentees is an integral component of a successful program. Mentors should provide feedback regarding program goals, matching of participants, role expectations, time management, resources available and administrative support. Mentees should be asked to evaluate the program in light of their socialization into the school and development as teachers. Information gathered should be used by the principal to determine if program revisions are needed (Heller and Sindelar, 1991). Other data sources include indicators of student learning, principal's observations of mentees, and parent feedback. These data provide the basis for planning and program revisions. The needs of first-year teachers are not static; thus the program needs to adapt to emerging needs perceived by mentors, mentees, and principal (Brock & Grady, 1997).

Conclusion

The success of beginning teachers is critical to student success, and the success of both is largely the responsibility of the principal (Fischer, 1997). Each new hire has the potential to either enhance or diminish the overall quality of learning in the school. Given the significance of the principal's responsibilities, providing a developmental first-year teacher induction program that includes a mentor program should be a top priority (Lee, 1994; Sergiovanni, 1994; Brock and Grady, 1997).

Effective mentor programs require the support of the faculty and all levels of the school's administration, including the superintendent and school board. The principal, however, is the pivotal figure whose direct involvement in each step of the program's development and implementation is crucial. Principals who understand the benefits and are willing to invest the time required in developing and maintaining effective mentor programs will be rewarded richly with successful entry-level teachers.

This article was based on information contained in *From First-Year to First-Rate: Principal's Guiding Beginning Teachers*, co-authored by Drs. Barbara L. Brock and Marilyn L. Grady and published by Corwin Press, 1997.

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