National College for
School Leadership

Innovation in Headteacher Induction

Case Study 4: Beginning Principals' Mentoring Program

Prince George's County, Maryland

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Contents

Background information

The Prince George' County Public Schools, Maryland, USA, is the 19th largest school system in the nation with 193 schools and 135,000 students. The school system will experience both opportunities and challenges. Examples of opportunities include the cultural richness and diversity of the community; the introduction of strong, research-based instructional programs designed to improve student achievement; and increased community support brought about by the settlement of the school system's desegregation case. Challenges include: a need to improve student achievement, an increased demand for certified teachers and administrators at a time when the candidate pool is shrinking, fiscal constraints related to school funding, growing numbers of children in poverty, and outdated technology that must be replaced.

In 1997, the faculty of the Department of Education, Policy, Planning and Administration of the University of Maryland College Park, responded to the request of the State Superintendent and the Superintendent of the Prince George's County Public Schools to develop a comprehensive and coordinated, school-based administrator professional development program. One component of this professional Development Program was the Beginning Principals' Mentoring Program. The formal implementation of the Mentoring Program began in the spring of 1998 and has now provided training and support for more than 113 new principals, in five cohorts. Each group of new principals participates in developmental activities over an 18-month period with an expert, veteran principal as a mentor.

The program was designed by a collaborative team that included several school principals and a central office administrator from the Prince George's County Public Schools, a faculty member from the University of Maryland, and an outside consultant who had extensive experience in developing, designing and implementing leadership and management training programs in school systems, businesses, and at the local, state and federal levels.

During the program design process a careful review of research was conducted. The major sources included the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), the

Principals Training Center (PTC) for International Schools, the Leadership in Educational Administration Development (LEAD) Center at the University of Maryland, and Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards.

The following key leadership components were identified:

1. **Instructional Leadership** – acquiring knowledge of current research in teaching methodology, understanding of curriculum and how it is developed and structured; developing instructional strategies; assessing student needs and using the information to plan and provide sound instruction; evaluating student progress.

2. **Supervision and Evaluation of Teachers** – gathering and interpreting data through classroom observations; planning and conducting feedback conferences with teachers; preparing written documentation of results; working with weak teachers; dismissing ineffective teachers.

3. **Data Analysis** – reviewing, reading and interpreting achievement data; examining information for root causes; engaging in problem analysis; generating implications and developing action plans for improvement; managing information technology and; understanding basic statistical processes.

4. **Shared Decision Making** – sharing power; working with parents, teachers and staff; guiding and providing leadership for the School Improvement Team; planning and organizing for improvement; using site-based decision-making.

5. **School Reform** – supervising the effective schools process, monitoring continuous improvement; managing change; visioning; monitoring strategic planning; creating positive organizational school culture and climate; building trust and commitment.

Strategic aims

The expressed purpose of the program is to identify the knowledge and skills required for exemplary school leadership that promotes increased student achievement and school effectiveness by matching beginning principals with veteran principals. The main purposes of the program are to:

- Provide and enhance skills and knowledge that promotes increased student achievement and the school effectiveness.

- Provide a caring, trusting partner who supports, guides and counsels the beginning principals.

- Improve competence and confidence of new principals in selected areas based on a skill assessment.

- Develop a collaborative network for a "community of practice" for beginning principals.

Program structure

New principals are appointed at the end of each school year in June. The formal mentoring program begins in the following September. The 18-month mentoring cycle allows principals to experience a school opening, closing and a transition period, with the assistance of a mentor. The number of new principals in each cohort varies from year-to-year depending on the number of vacancies due to transfers, retirements or resignations. The cohorts have ranged in size from a low of 15 to a high of 27. Racial and gender balances are considered during the hiring process.

There are four main components in the program:

1. **Matching New Principals with Veteran Principals**. After new principals are selected, an orientation is held to give information about the Beginning Principals' Mentoring Program, to assess their present level of skills and needs using the five components outlined earlier, and to ask them for their preferences for a possible mentor to be assigned to them. Possible mentors are then considered and then matched with a beginning principal. We have found that a most important part of the program is this matching process. When the program began a pool of mentors was identified from principals who had demonstrated success in raising students test scores over a two-year period. However, we found that this significantly limited the pool and the selection process was modified to increase the number of mentors needed to accommodate the growing number of beginning principals. In addition, we have tried to consider successful principals from other counties in the state. For their work, the mentors receive a $3,000 stipend, plus mileage costs.

2. **Staff Development Opportunities**:
   a) The Monthly Meeting – The beginning principals meet and work with their mentors once per month for three hours at the Staff Development Centre or at a school location hosted by a new principals or mentor. One of the most powerful and practical components of the Staff Development phase is the opening of each meeting with something we call, *Successes &*

Challenges. Each new principal has a few minutes to share victories and successes they have experienced as well as problems and concerns. Mentors and peers cheer their successes and provide immediate feedback along with practical solutions to their challenges. After sharing their successes and challenges for 30-45 minutes, the balance of the monthly meetings is spent on instruction and discussion that focuses on one of the five major leadership components.

b) Professional Materials – During the program, beginning principals and mentors are provided with books, reading material or professional videos, including the following:

The Skilful Leader, Platt, Ogden & Fraser (2000)

Collaborative Leadership, Rubin (2002)

How to Make Supervision and Evaluation Really Work, Saphier (1993)

The Team Handbook, Scholtes, Joiner & Streibel (2001)

Groupthink video (1996)

The Abilene Paradox video (1998)

Celebrate What's Right with the World video (Starthrower, 2002)

All new principals are also given a copy of a handbook which contains highly practical advice from experienced principals: *A Guide for Beginning Principals: Everything They Need to Know*, Prince George's County Public Schools (2001).

c) Special Consultants – Beginning principals are given the opportunity to have professional consultants work with them on areas of importance and interest. Since the program began, most of the consultants were members of the school system; they were asked to work with the principals and mentors during the monthly meetings and the annual retreat. For the most part, these individuals were central office administrators who had the key responsibilities for program areas. For example, the central office administrator with the responsibility for monitoring and coordinating student and school testing gave a presentation on accountability, and human resources staff would help provide information on the teacher supervision and evaluation process.

The selection of these speakers would be based on an assessment of the needs of the beginning principals and the sequence of the five program elements and topics during the year. Sometimes an outside consultant would be used during the monthly meetings or at the annual retreat. For example, presentations have been provided on such topics as school improvement, data analysis, community relations, and teacher evaluation by outside consultants. In addition, outside consultants are sometimes used as mentors (retired principals) and the program coordinator provides an "outside" perspective, since he has broad experiences in the education, business and government arenas.

3. **One-on-One Shadowing** – In this phase, mentors are expected to spend a minimum of fifteen full-days with the new principal on-site throughout the program. Sometimes they meet at the new principal's school; at other times they may visit an exemplary or model school in another district; they stay in contact frequently by telephone or email to discuss issues or problems. Mentors and beginning principals are asked to shadow each other at least once during a semester. There is no particular structure to the shadowing, but mentors are asked to concentrate on the five key leadership components given above.

4. **Retreat** – Each new principal is invited with their mentor, to a one and a half day, off site retreat. During the retreat, participants review key instructional and leadership skills, conduct and participate in workshops on areas of interest, conduct program evaluations and celebrate participants' successes. A sub-committee of principals plan the program which in 2003 will focus on team building, opening and closing school, relationship building, school organization and time management. Together with other principals, the new principals also attend the three-day Leadership Institute. This offers training in basic school management techniques such as legal issues and budgeting etc. A special forum and reception is held at the summer institute to celebrate the new principals.

Program content

All aspects of the program are designed to improve learning and student achievement, and to provide focus in the five areas identified earlier. Mentors are selected because they have a proven track record of success as principals in guiding schools toward improved student achievement and school improvement. They provide a wide variety of assistance and guidance to their partners. For example, a mentor might help the new principal plan a classroom observation, assist in planning the post-observation feedback, plan for improvements in instruction, analyse test scores, develop School Improvement Plans, or bring access additional resources for the principal.

The program content of the monthly meetings is based on the key leadership components and includes the following modules:

- Building Relationships for Effective Leadership
- Setting Expectations and Tone
- Supervision and Performance Appraisal
- Shared Decision-Making: Building School Teams
- Data Analysis & School Performance Measures
- Instructional Leadership and Situational Leadership
- School Reform & Improvement and Managing Change.

Learning culture and program principles

At all times coordinators, presenters and facilitators remember and respect that adults come to a learning experience with a wide range of experiences, knowledge, skills, interests, and competencies. Additionally, in drafting the program, the awareness of the general principles of the adult learner remains paramount. Knowing that adults have many professional commitments and demands on their time, program developers took great pains to develop goals and objectives that were realistic, job related, and immediately useful.

Our training is primarily based on research done by Dr. Pat Wolfe and Dr. Pam Robbins regarding brain-based learning and the general principles of the adult learner. Those general principles are:

a. Adults have many commitments and demands on their time. As a result they commit to learning when the goals and objectives are realistic, job related and perceived as being immediately useful.
b. Adult come to a learning experience with a wide range of experiences, knowledge, skills, interests, and competencies.
c. Adult learning is ego-involved. There is often a fear of external judgments, which produces anxiety during new learning situations. Adults often resist learning situations they believe are an attack on their competence.
d. Adult learners need to see the result of their efforts and have accurate feedback about progress and toward goals.

Participants have ample opportunity to learn from each other and to build their knowledge base using the group's composite knowledge. The monthly opening activity, *Successes & Challenges* lends itself perfectly to sharing experiences and problem solving.

Training for mentors and facilitators

Due to the demanding criteria for the selection of mentors, minimal training is required. However, the coordinators of the program conduct an initial training session during the summer with mentors prior to the commencement of each new training cohort. Coordinators, former principals and central office administrators, continue to work with mentors throughout the program in order to provide one-on-one as well as group counsel and support.

Learning outcomes and impact

The University of Maryland conducted a comprehensive review of the leadership development program in year 2000. As a result, and due to budget constraints, all portions of the leadership development program were eliminated except for the Beginning Principals' Mentoring Program.

At the end of each six-month period, mentors are asked to complete a pay voucher which requests an outline of their visits and topics addressed with their assigned beginning principal. This provides useful information as the program coordinators evaluate the impact of the program.

Data are gathered at the retreats regarding the impact of all parts of the Beginning Principals' Mentoring Program. Key features were seen to include the following:

(a) a good matching results in the development of a positive, caring, nurturing relationship between the mentor and beginning principal
(b) the quality of information and training provided at monthly meetings
(c) the opportunities to communicate with peers whose experiences are similar
(d) opportunities to discuss school-based concerns with experts and problem solve for solutions.

The most significant shortcoming of the program, according to the feedback obtained at retreats, is the time limitations for formal meetings. Although the monthly meetings are seen as useful, the short amount of time limits the opportunity for extensive, formal skill building. Most businesses and government agencies, unlike educational institutions, provide much more time for extensive leadership development opportunities.

What we have found from anecdotal information, is that most principals leave the program with more confidence, learn to better navigate this large school system, understand where and how to find answers to problems and generally experience less teacher attrition.

Changes to the curriculum occasionally take place during the training cycles. We like to respond to the needs of the participants, but we do so only when there is consensus.

Recently, we changed the timing of one module in order to address the principals' anxieties regarding the activities associated with the closing of school.

Finally, of the 113 new principals who have completed the Mentoring Program, 106 remain in their positions.

Additional information

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Commentary

by Bruce Barnett

The Beginning Principals' Mentoring Program (BPMP) in Prince George County, Maryland has been in operation since 1998 and has served over 100 new principals. Program developers have incorporated a series of effective instructional design features, which will be described below as well as areas for future improvement.

Key features

Although a relatively new program, the BPMP has been well received by participants and continues to be funded despite severe budget cuts. Strengths of the program include: (1) the implementation of a relevant curriculum, (2) substantial contact between new principals and their mentors, and (3) the use of program evaluation data.

Relevant curriculum.

Concerted efforts have been made to develop and deliver a curriculum that allows beginning principals to gain new skills and knowledge with the support of a field-based mentor. One of the aims of the program is to assist school leaders in promoting increased student achievement and school effectiveness, which is a clear focus of the curriculum. The five components driving the curriculum--instructional leadership, supervision and evaluation of teachers, data analysis, shared decision making, and school reform--closely match this intent. An interrelated series of learning activities and resources are available to novices, including monthly meetings of all participants and their mentors, an extensive list of professional readings and videos, and consultation with experts in specific areas of need. Being sensitive to the work demands of new principals and their mentors, great care has gone into developing practical, job-related activities. The experiences of novices are recognized and celebrated, as evidenced by the Successes and Challenges activity conducted at the beginning of each monthly meeting.

Contact with mentors

Although extremely time consuming, the quality and quantity of contact between mentors and their assigned principals is the hallmark of the program. Beginning principals spend

substantial amounts of time with their field-based mentors. Because participants are involved for 18 months, they have contact with their mentors for one full school year and half of the next year, affording beginning principals more time to learn and apply information in their schools. To their credit, BPMP organizers also acknowledge the value of mentors by paying them a stipend for their efforts. Many mentoring programs provide sporadic contact between mentors and new principals; however, BPMP participants meet monthly, engage in 15 days together on site, and attend a one and a half-day retreat. Many of their on-site activities focus directly on ways to encourage improved teaching performance and learning outcomes for students. Beginning principals also provide some input into who their assigned mentor will be, a feature overlooked in many mentoring programs.

Program evaluation

Formal and informal evaluation data are used for improvements as well as an indication of how the program is meeting the BPMP's strategic aims. There is clear evidence that the program is achieving its goals based on reports of new principals creating a supportive and productive relationship with their mentors, building their self-confidence, and establishing a support network of peers across the system.

Suggested improvements

Evaluation data indicate the program is meeting the needs of new principals, which has led to continued financial support for the BPMP. As the program evolves, adjustments may be made to allow new principals to build their skills as instructional leaders and for mentors to build their capacities to assist novice administrators.

Time for instructional leadership development

The curricular content of the program and mentoring processes are aimed at assisting beginning principals to develop their instructional leadership capacities. Evaluation data indicate that not enough time has been devoted to build these skills during the monthly meetings. In addition, mentors and beginners do not report that the first strategic aim-- enhanced knowledge and skills that promotes increased student achievement and school effectiveness--has been achieved. Such reactions are not surprising because becoming an instructional leader is extremely complex, even for experienced principals.

Novices need sufficient time to assess their schools, and build trust with their staff before introducing changes intended to affect student learning. The program structure might be altered to devote more time to topics dealing with instructional improvement and school effectiveness. For instance, the program might be expanded to two years, encouraging instructional leadership skill development during the second year. To allow more in-depth attention to skill building, meetings in the second year might be day-long events every two months, rather than the monthly half-day sessions utilized during the first year. Another option might be to hold periodic two-day retreats in place of or in combination with the monthly sessions.

Mentor support

Mentors are provided with some training at the beginning of the program. Perhaps more advice could be given on the shadowing component of their work. Because mentoring is a demanding and time-consuming role, consideration might be given to ways to provide ongoing support, particularly in ways they can assist beginning principals in developing their instructional leadership capabilities. During monthly meetings or retreats, mentors might meet separately to discuss progress, suggest strategies to one another, and explore resources that may assist them in focusing on instructional leadership. Establishing electronic networks between mentors might also allow for continued communication and sharing of successful mentoring approaches.

Commentary

by Kent Peterson

The Beginning Principals Mentoring Program in Prince George's County, Maryland begun in 1997, provides a variety of experiences to support new principals. The program is thoughtfully structured around a set of clearly delineated goals, a set of key conceptual areas for new principals, and a group of regular activities for mentors and new principals.

The program has four major, interconnected components: (1) Mentors for new principals, (2) numerous staff development opportunities such as monthly meetings with their mentors and a set of professional materials, (3) extensive shadowing by mentors and mentees alike, and (4) a one and a half-day retreat. The content and activities in these four components are aligned around four strategic aims described in the case. Additionally, monthly meetings are structured around seven key leadership components with training modules for each. The clarity of the content, goals, expectations, and structures are well articulated and delineated offering participants a clear and integrated program, which can guide their learning.

The design of the program reflects a careful review of current research and best practices concerning school principals. The five key leadership components and the detailed list of elements in each component are extremely thoughtful. They represent a coherent body of knowledge and skills based on best practice and the conceptual models undergirding practice. The descriptions of these elements are clearly defined as actions of principals. Of particular note is the focus on skills of school leaders who are using current methods for improving student performance through data based decision making and school improvement.

Similarly, the Strategic Aims clearly identify four key aspects of the program's goals: development of skills and knowledge to enhance student learning in schools, collegial work with a mentor, use of skill assessments to identify areas for growth, and the

importance of developing a professional network of colleagues. These four aspects are useful guideposts for the program.

The length of the program allows new principals the opportunity to work with mentors over an entire yearly cycle from the opening through the closing of school. The program, lasting an entire 18 months, provides experience of school cultural events and structural requirements with opportunities to observe and discuss natural organizational "biorhythms".

The size of the cohorts (from 15-27) and their composition seem a wise choice. Cohorts that are much larger find it difficult to build strong within-cohort relations. Also, attention to the mix of the group by race and gender increases diversity.

The selection and compensation of mentors are both important to the program. The case description suggests that the selection and matching of mentors is rigorous and therefore only some training is needed. The program understands the commitment of time and effort that mentors provide and offers significant compensation for their work.

The one-on-one shadowing and fifteen school visits per year is quite unique and one of the most extensive among mentoring programs. This number of face-to-face, on-site visits provides an intensive look at the work of the new principal and extensive opportunities for feedback and coaching. Similarly, the collegial visits to exemplary schools may increase the effectiveness of the more formal skill and knowledge learning. These school visits make it possible to apply ideas, models, and concepts in real contexts. The discussions after such visits must be quite rich.

Recommendations

These recommendations are provided to suggest ways to refine, fine-tune and enhance existing qualities of the program. All programs are designed within fiscal, social, and contextual parameters. The ideas are provided as thoughts to consider as these programs move forward.

The program should consider formalizing and expanding the training for mentors. This could provide useful knowledge and skills for the mentors that might transfer to the way they nurture teacher leaders, but also enhance their mentoring efforts.

The program has a very thorough description of the concepts, models, and knowledge base. The program might consider organizing the list of "professional materials" and readings around the key leadership components.

The program might develop a website with links to information related to the core content of the program. Many of the professional materials, suggested additional readings, and even short audio clips could be made available for going back over ideas, topics, or skills initially addressed in the workshops.

The program might consider having more social, culture building events throughout the year. These could be organized for various groupings of participants, sometimes beginning principals, sometimes those with similar schools, or sometimes mentor-mentee gatherings. These sessions could have some professional content, but would offer time to build social relationships as well. This may also address the concern that there was not enough time to meet.

The Guide is an excellent publication for new principals. The program could add to the Guide based on what new principals are facing each New Year. There could be yearly updates made available to alumni of the program as well.

One of the most difficult tasks of principals remains working with conflict, whether with staff, students, or parents. Though it is probably embedded in the leadership components, it might be useful to make that topic explicit to highlight its importance.

Some leadership programs have found it useful to acquaint new principals with the research and descriptions of the realities of principals' daily work. Too many new principals do not realize that their work days are going to be hectic, demanding, fragmented, filled with a wide, wide variety of tasks, and comprised of upwards of 2000 daily interactions (see the work of the two authors, Peterson and Barnett).

Finally, one of the strengths of a program is the professional network that is built. The program should consider developing learning opportunities (special training sessions; speakers; book study groups; alumni "college") for graduates of the program.