

# Getting Our Educational Reform Priorities in Order

BY MICHAEL CONNOLLY



**T**hese days, virtually all of the talk about improving education focuses on curriculum, instruction, and assessment. That creates a challenge for superintendents and school boards that, if not addressed, will likely keep initiatives in curriculum, instruction, and assessment from moving forward in the way they should.

## **The Challenge**

A research study titled “Tenure and Retention of Newly Hired Principals in Texas” has generated a lot of buzz in the media and on the web. The study, by Ed Fuller and Michelle D. Young (2009) of the University of Texas at Austin, highlights a critical problem not just for Texas’s superintendents and school boards, but for others across the country as well.

Fuller and Young examined the retention rate of newly hired principals in Texas schools from 1996 through 2008. What they found should be a call to action. During this period,

only 50 percent of newly hired high school principals remained in the position for which they were hired for at least three years. Only 30 percent lasted five years. The average retention rate was slightly higher in middle schools (37 percent stayed four to five years) and elementary schools (46 percent remained for five years). These figures are alarming because, as Fuller and Young note, virtually all research on school reform indicates it takes at least five years to institutionalize change in schools—change that includes improving the quality of curriculum, instruction, and assessment. If a new principal leaves before the five-year period, that creates two major problems for a school district. First, it takes substantial time, resources, and energy to replace a novice principal with yet another new one. Additionally, principal leadership is a key component for improving student performance, second only to classroom instruction:

[T]he research shows that most school variables, considered separately, have at most small effects on learning. The real payoff comes when individual variables combine to reach a critical mass. Creating the conditions under which that can occur is the job of the principal (The Wallace Foundation, 2012).

The same research indicates that frequent leadership turnover in a school inevitably leads to other problems: faculty cynicism, lack of shared professional focus, and a resulting drop in teacher and student performance.

Superintendents across the country are finding it increasingly difficult to locate qualified principal candidates who have the skills, the energy, and the desire to fill the crucial role of school leadership. The problem will only get worse if, as some studies indicate, as many as 67 percent of public school principals will be eligible for retirement in this decade and if, as the Texas study indicates, school districts are now struggling to retain newly hired principals.

### A Reasonable Solution

As gloomy as this picture looks, there is a remedy that could alleviate many of the problems that drain new principals' energy, exhaust their enthusiasm for the job, and eventually drive a growing number of them out of the profession.

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Principals, of course, leave their positions for a number of reasons, some personal and some professional, but the following reasons are the ones most frequently cited by exiting principals: the pressure of ever-increasing accountability, the pace and intensity of the job, compensation that is minimally more than that of a teacher, feelings of isolation, burnout, and lack of support from the central office.

Superintendents and school boards can help new leaders cope with many of these challenges by providing them with a good mentor.

### How a Mentor Can Help a New Principal

A good mentor—one who has been trained and fully understands the role of mentor and principal—is a guide who can provide emotional support, opportunity for reflective discussion, guidance, assistance, and resources to help a new leader develop the skills and emotional balance necessary to become an effective leader. Because the mentor is not a supervisor, it is easier for a novice leader to share feelings of confusion, discomfort, doubt, and even powerlessness in his or her new role. The benefits of mentoring also apply to experienced principals who have changed jobs or simply need or want a professional boost.

A mentor helps a protégé deal with the wounds, some of them deep, that are an inevitable part of making leadership decisions that not everyone appreciates. The mentor helps a protégé find ways to bind up wounds, recover emotional balance, and move on. Mentors can do this because they have recovered from many of these same wounds. When I initially moved from teacher to a new role as assistant principal, I remember being shocked when a teacher I had considered a friend announced to the faculty that I had defected to “the other side”—I was an *administrator*. The way he said *administrator* left little doubt that, in his mind, I was now on a level with head lice.

A school leader's position is often a lonely one. The camaraderie the leader once enjoyed with fellow teachers can quickly disappear as former peers wait to see how they are treated now that their colleague is their supervisor. Even in the best of situations, the new leader recognizes it's impossible to maintain the same kind of relationship that existed with colleagues when she/he was a teacher. Adjusting to the isolation of the new position can be difficult for a novice principal, but a mentor can alleviate

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some of that isolation by providing friendship, support, and an opportunity for the protégé to express feelings.

A mentor, of course, does more than just provide emotional support for a new leader, as important as that is. Having assumed a new position, people expect the new leader will immediately be in complete command of all the knowledge and skills needed to be effective—an unrealistic expectation that the new leader often shares. These days, with the imperative that schools implement the Common Core State Standards, the expectation that all principals will expand their knowledge and skills is even greater. A new leader can easily be overwhelmed by all of this.

As one who has survived the many minefields that a leader must learn to navigate, an experienced principal/mentor can help a protégé feel less overwhelmed and develop the skills and the wisdom necessary to move from survival mode to eventual mastery of the new role as leader and instructional leader. Those skills might include such things as developing a map of the curriculum, instruction, and assessment territory that must be addressed by teachers as part of the Common Core Standards and assessing which are, and which are not, being well attended to in classrooms. The skills might also include identifying and working with the power brokers in the school and the community to ensure that school initiatives are understood and supported.

Additionally, a mentor might help a protégé question the assumptions she or he may have brought to the new position and recognize personal blind spots as well as identify and value strengths. The mentor might help the new leader develop strategies for observing teacher and student performance, for listening carefully to what is and is not said in conversations, and for committing to building a collaborative environment focused on constantly improving student and teacher performance.

For these reasons, it makes sense for a school district to invest in keeping a new leader with potential in place for at least five

to seven years. Getting the new principal a first-rate mentor is a way to achieve that goal. The financial investment is not burdensome. In New Hampshire, for instance, the New Hampshire Association of School Principals will provide a trained mentor to a district for \$3,750 a year. Many districts use Title II grant money to pay for a mentor.

Most districts that have provided new principals with mentors have discovered that it is best to find a mentor from outside the district, even when there may be leaders within the district who might be good mentors. It is difficult for a novice leader to share fears, insecurities, frustration, and anger with a co-worker, even if that person is a great listener and a supportive colleague.

### Conclusion

In 1980, when I moved from the classroom and began my career as a new school leader, my district provided me with a mentor, a retired principal. He helped me deal with the many challenges that I faced in my new and unfamiliar role. Over the years, I watched colleagues and friends undertake the leadership of a school without the benefit of a mentor. I've seen more than a few of them blow themselves up in one of the many minefields that lie along the path to becoming a successful leader—or simply give up in frustration before they became one. It doesn't have to happen, and it is in nobody's best interest when it does. Superintendents and school boards who want to ensure that their district's curriculum, instruction, and assessment initiatives ultimately lead to improved student academic achievement must place a priority on retaining effective school leaders. Putting the horse before the cart and keeping it there makes the most sense, doesn't it?

### References

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