

From the book:

Reshaping the Landscape of School Leadership Development: A Global Perspective
Philip Hallinger (Editor), Swets & Zeitlinger Publishers, February 2003.

Synopsis:

Twenty-two scholars from the U.S., Canada, Asia, Australia, and Europe contribute 18 chapters examining global changes in school leadership preparation and development during the past 20 years.

Includes this chapter by Dennis Littky and Molly Schen of The Big Picture Company:

Developing School Leaders: One Principal at a Time

by

Dennis Littky and Molly Schen

Abstract

Maverick school principal Dennis Littky's personal journey led to a realization that principal preparation can be done most effectively in the schoolhouse, at the side of an outstanding mentor principal. With the help of nationally known educators, he designed the Principal Residency Network. Believing that "getting the right people" is crucial, the program has an extensive selection process of both aspiring principal and mentor principals and recruits people of color with enthusiasm.

The program's design focuses on leadership learning for moral courage, moving the vision, and relationship building and is individualized to meet the needs of each aspiring principal. It is not enough to get the right people into the right program around core leadership challenges. The Principal Residency Network, based at the Big Picture Company, is also dedicated to changing the conditions of work by designing and partnering with small, personalized schools where the rewards of leadership can be realized.

This chapter is a principal's personal account of how an apprenticeship-based preparation program evolved out of his experience. Having a mentor, knowing oneself well enough to take important stands, cultivating leadership in others—these all figured prominently in Dennis Littky's work experience and were confirmed by research in leadership development. The creation of the Principal Residency Network, its mission, philosophy, design and program components, are detailed.

The program relies on a careful selection process of both aspiring principal and mentor principal, with attention to encouraging people of color into school leadership. Recognizing that people will only want to become school principals if the job is doable and rewarding, the Principal Residency Network acknowledges the need for small, personalized schools and, with its umbrella organization, the Big Picture Company, is working to do just that.

Raising Bulldogs

I walked into his office at 6 a.m. on February 4, 1969 after my first day of work as a school principal, to analyze a minor crisis. “Help,” I asked. “What went wrong?” From that day, Rhody became my mentor. He was a man fighting for African American students in New York City. He believed these kids had the right to be taught and cared about in the same way that white students were taught and cared about in the suburbs. Rhody was committed to saving these urban children and worked tirelessly and boldly to carry out his dream.

Most importantly, Rhody would not compromise when it came to saving students’ lives. He acted like a bulldog. (He also raised bulldogs, which always made me wonder: Who was the mentor in this situation?) Rhody was not afraid to die for his cause. He was a black man ahead of his time. He threatened people by his mere presence. He knew he could die for his cause and he was still willing to fight. In Rhody I observed moral courage in its purest form. Nothing is a risk if you are willing to die for your actions. Because Rhody was willing to die for his cause, he was free to stand up for what he believed. He did not have to compromise his views and actions. Rhody is still living today.

What a first mentor! It not only allowed me to observe moral courage in its purest form, but also influenced every decision I made as a twenty-five year old. I did not realize at the time the power that mentorship would have in the rest of my life. It was the beginning of my learning the real meaning of moral courage. I was not and am not today willing to die for my cause... what nor am I afraid to be fired. So in my own way, I have freed myself up to fight for the same urban children, thirty years later in a different city. In fact, in each of my jobs, there were major attempts to fire me. These situations gave me strength and freed me up to fight.

As a small school principal for twenty-five years, I have had the opportunity to witness and encourage many teachers in their pursuit of the principalship. I was a good role model for these teachers. I loved my job, worked hard and wouldn’t compromise when it came to providing learning opportunities for my students and support for my staff. My focus is and has always been building relationships with kids. It is both as simple and as complicated as that.

It makes sense to involve others in decisions affecting the school, and so in the schools I have led, teachers work through hiring choices and budget priorities and the direction of curriculum with the kids in mind. I realized early on that this student-focused, collaborative style of leadership appealed to many teachers and at the same time gave them the opportunity to hone their own decision-making and leadership skills. All of the teachers became leaders in their own way. Tom Peters, management guru, in his PBS video *Leadership Alliance*, looked at what we were doing and said that he found that all the teachers in this school had become outstanding leaders. He concluded that good leaders help develop good leaders.

For years, I watched teachers in my schools—at least one dozen teachers—make the decision to pursue the principalship and then embark on many semesters of evening coursework at a nearby college. Typically, these courses had little connection to teachers’ work in the school. There may have been a project here or there, or an interview or occasional job shadow. But there was a gulf between theory and practice, between their course-based principal preparation and the long-term, many-layered complexities of taking the lead for something consequential in the life of school. I couldn’t help but note the chasm between the preparation of principals and the work of principals. As an avid reader of leadership literature in many fields, I

have no bone to pick with reading lists or with theory. I just think that, on balance, people need a lot more practice in walking like a leader.

For years, I garnered occasional commentary from these same teachers in my schools, many of whom are now principals with schools of their own. They told stories about how they had truly learned the art of the principalship. It was not from their courses, although they gleaned important tidbits of legal knowledge, historical perspective and analytic skills from their coursework. (In truth, many could not even remember their courses.)

Their practice, they said, had been influenced by working with me, watching me, and reflecting on why we were doing the things we were, and how things were turning out. They talked about how the most crucial learning—how to be strong, not to back down, to persist in doing what is right for kids—could not be taught through textbooks. They spoke of my vision and how they remembered me pushing the staff to stay on track. They spoke of the tenacity we had as a staff to examine and re-examine our practice. And they talked about the important role that communication played in our school, with three group meetings each week, individual meetings with me once a month, weekly newsletters to which all staff contributed, journal sharing between them and me, regular retreats and summer workshops.

These principal colleagues appreciated the stances I took and structures I created. They understood that I needed to exercise moral courage to sustain the vision for our kids. They realized that the various forums for meeting with one another—through writing as well as conversation—were necessary vehicles for communicating with different people. It was clear that their in-school opportunities to be teacher-leaders and my modeling of leadership qualities, more than formal coursework or short-term internship, had shaped these aspiring principals.

Creating The Big Picture

Then the time came when I became more than casually interested in their comments. In my own work, I moved from a school reformer to a school creator to a school designer. I developed an eye toward growing many schools with certain features, schools we now dub Big Picture Schools. Each of our new Big Picture Schools would need a principal. Suddenly it was apparent that I had landed squarely in the land of leadership preparation. Even as I put a tremendous amount of stock in leadership, I put very little stock in leadership preparation as it was traditionally carried out.

A rapid scan of the field was rewarding. Fellow principals of democratic, student-centered schools reported that they also had an unusually high number of teachers go on to become principals. They, too, found that their aspiring principals relied heavily on mentoring and modeling to learn the craft of the principalship. Research confirmed these anecdotes. In a study by Brent, Holler and McNamara, principals rank formal coursework last in relation to impact on their practice. Our aspiring principals were the lucky few who had an experienced mentor help them learn to lead through the cycle of action and reflection, augmenting the knowledge and skills they were acquiring in their courses.

Time to Formalize

My colleagues and I were heartened by the possibility of preparing principals differently, and we decided to get together to dream up the ideal way for principals to be prepared. Our group included Roland Barth, founder of the Harvard Principals' Center; Elliot Washor, Co-director of the Met School; and exemplary principals from across the USA.

Together, we dreamed up a new model of school leadership training. We met a creative, entrepreneurial dean from Lewis and Clark College, Jay Casbon, who was willing to grant certification to promising aspiring principals who took part in our intensive, school-based principal residency. (Since then, Northeastern University, Johnson & Wales University, Rhode Island College, Providence College, and Keene State College have also put their college seals on the program.) We have been assisted considerably in our work by the support of the Wallace-Readers' Digest Funds, and by Rhode Island's Business Education Roundtable and Human Resource Investment Council.

A group of exemplary principals from around the country who believed in mentoring were brought together in Rhode Island to design the specifics of a new model of school leadership training. It was a pretty simple idea, as I told Bess Keller of *Education Week*: "You get the best people in the field, and the students get trained by them" (Keller, 2000).

Four years and fifty-three aspiring principals later, the design that was once radical has already become a state-approved program. The article continues by saying that our program is "more radical than other programs," but the good news is that it "is far from the only recent attempt to move the training of principals in new directions (Keller, 2000).

Quietly, under the cover of educational lingo and university requirements, reformers around the country have established beachheads of clinical education for principals. The programs view schools—not university lecture halls, as the proper training ground for future leaders" (Keller, 2000). In truth, we do hope to help reshape principal preparation around the country.

In a *Commonwealth* article, Ann Duffy, associate commissioner of education in Massachusetts, says we already have. According to Duffy, the Principal Residency Network has "influenced Massachusetts Department of Education's rules governing administrator certification" and adds, "They are the benchmark. We are really looking hard to see what we can learn from the success they've had" (Gerwin, 2001, p. 34).

Rigor in the Residency

What does the program look like? In this section, we describe the heart of the program—what we are training people to be able to do as school leaders—as well as the design principles and program components. Aspiring principals in the Principal Residency Network learn the craft of the principalship by working as full-time interns under the guidance and with the support of a strong mentor principal for at least a year.

At the core of the Residency are consequential school-based projects that contribute to the school while fostering the individual's leadership learning. Through this project work, aspiring principals "walk the high wire" of school leadership, taking risks in their project work. They know full well that they may take a fall, but trust that the safety net beneath will prevent lasting damage to them and to the community. The mentors are close by, coaching, pushing, encouraging, and sometimes pulling the plug when the risk is too great. In this model of real-world training, performance assessment is inevitable and meaningful. Aspiring principals

recognize that their work impacts and is evaluated by the entire community. The goal of project work is not to earn a grade or credit, but to contribute to the school community, to earn the trust of one's staff and the respect of one's community.

The Principal Residency Network is based on the belief that people learn best through an ongoing cycle of action and reflection. Experience alone is not sufficient for growth and development as a leader, but it is essential. Similarly, theory without practice is ineffectual in the action-oriented world of school leadership. The Residency is designed to allow aspiring principals to engage in consequential action while ensuring that they have ample opportunities to think, talk, read, and write about their work.

We formulated a mission, philosophy and design that flow from our experience and from research on adult development. The Principal Residency Network's mission is to "develop a cadre of principals who champion educational change through leadership of innovative, personalized schools." Our philosophy is grounded in teaching "one student at a time" at all educational levels. We believe that the best learning takes place in small communities that integrate academic and applied learning, promote collaborative work, and encourage a culture of lifelong learning. That goes for the schools that we help to create at the Big Picture Company, and it goes for the design of the Principal Residency Network for aspiring principals as well.

Moral Courage and Other Leadership Qualities

In its three-year history, the Principal Residency Network has identified a set of leadership skills that its founders and mentor principals hold dear. We understand well that school principals need skills that extend well beyond management of the three "B's": buses, boilers and budgets. Our six leadership areas are:

- moral courage,
- moving the vision,
- instructional leadership,
- relationships and communication,
- management through flexibility and efficiency,
- public support.

These six areas "cross-walk" onto the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards and various state competencies. That is, even as the program emphasizes these desired qualities, aspiring principals have been able to organize their portfolios around state requirements. Each of these qualities takes much-treasured traditional leadership qualities (such as having a vision, decision making, teambuilding, supervision and evaluation, community involvement) and builds on them. The program pushes them to the place where the leader is both thoughtful and dynamic, and where planning and reflection are spurs to immediate action. Below we describe each of the leadership qualities in more detail.

Moving the vision. An effective school leader must develop and maintain a consistent vision and inspire others to work towards it. S/he is able to say no to ideas that do not support the vision, for he understands the direction in which the school is moving and is able to predict the desired outcomes.

Moral courage. An influential principal has the courage to stand alone. S/he has a commitment, above all else, to doing what is best for children despite the dictates of others. S/he challenges assumptions and traditions and helps others do so as well.

Instructional leadership. A successful principal creates joy around learning. S/he deals well with adversity, loves leadership, and thrives on her work. S/he is committed to continual learning and growth for himself.

Relationships and communication. An exemplary school leader pays attention to the personal. S/he is thoughtful, understanding, and just. S/he shows respect for and trust in his staff and promotes the spirit of democratic collaboration. S/he knows how to support, delegate, and offer input. S/he listens carefully to the thoughts, feelings, and concerns of others. S/he knows the questions to ask and is able to collect and share information as needed. S/he is tactful yet direct and has a talent for both one-on-one and group communication.

Management through flexibility and efficiency. An effective principal is able to juggle many tasks and thoughts at once. She is patient but willing to move, organized, and good at following through on tasks.

Public support. A strong principal has a gift for public relations. She is able to present and articulate school results and is an effective fundraiser.

Design Principles of the Principal Residency Network

We have already given some clues about the central importance of the schoolhouse. Indeed, the Residency is where the aspiring principal learns most of the craft of leadership. The other design principles underscore the importance of reflection, of assessing competence and skill as close to the action as possible, and our commitment to recruiting people of color and women into the principalship.

The Residency

The schoolhouse is the best place for developing the next generation of school leaders. Aspiring principals, selected for their leadership capacity and commitment to school change, learn the craft of the principalship through full-time, site-based residencies, under the guidance of a mentor principal. Aspiring principals serve their school communities for twelve to twenty months and are awarded principal certification upon completion of the residency. Rigorous, individualized learning plans guide their experiential study and ensure that project work is supported by substantive reading, writing, and reflection. The program is committed to building an authentic curriculum around in-school stewardship that is relevant and responsive to the needs of the school community and the aspiring principal.

Learning from Experience Is Not Inevitable

Learning from the experiences of the schoolhouse requires deliberation, self-awareness, and constant feedback. Aspiring principals are trained to be reflective practitioners who derive insight from their experiences and know how to modify their practice accordingly. Journal writing and regular, in-depth discussions with the mentor principal are critical to this process. Retreats, readings, and school visits add perspective and depth to reflective practice.

Real-World Assessment

Aspiring principals learn through the real-world consequences of their projects. They document their efforts and results and create extensive portfolios that illustrate project work, writing, research, and reading. At least twice each year, they give formal exhibitions through which they publicly present their work and reflect upon their learning goals and growth. Aspiring principals receive ongoing written and verbal feedback from colleagues in the program cohort and from a school-based feedback circle.

The Greater the Diversity, the Greater the Learning

The Principal Residency Network recognizes that respect for equal opportunity enhances learning and promotes the common good. In order to develop a cadre of leaders that reflects the diversity of our student populations, the program works directly with schools to find and recruit talented educators who have not traditionally been represented in school leadership positions.

Program Components and Requirements

For those interested in what aspiring principals are responsible for doing, in a more concrete way, the description that follows may be helpful. There is individual work, group work, and a considerable responsibility for showing one's work in different ways for assessment purposes.

Individual Work

Learning plan. Aspiring principals craft individualized learning plans with their mentor principals, incorporating state standards and school needs with professional and personal learning goals.

Project-based learning. Each aspiring principal initiates a consequential project to address a challenge or need in the school. Through this project, aspiring principals must analyze school-based data, develop and implement strategies for change, evaluate program outcomes, and make mid-course corrections as necessary. Aspiring principals review critical literature associated with their projects and visit other schools to inform their work.

Writing. Aspiring principals continually reflect on their work and leadership development through formal and informal writing. They share journal entries with their mentor and the program cohort and are expected to produce a publishable piece of writing during the course of the program.

Group Work

Team meetings. Each aspiring and mentor principal team meets daily for at least half an hour and weekly for an extended meeting to allow for ongoing planning and deep reflection.

These meetings provide aspiring principals with the opportunity to connect scholarship to practice, revise learning goals, and continually assess progress.

The network. Aspiring and mentor principals come together for monthly network seminars and quarterly institutes to share best practices, provide support and critical feedback, and discuss theory and research related to educational leadership. Seminars regularly involve book and article discussions, journal sharing, or subject-specific workshops on topics such as law or finance. At institutes, aspiring principals present their work and receive in-depth assessment of their learning plans, project-work, and portfolios.

Cross-school visits. As part of the program, aspiring principals must visit a number of schools both within and outside the program network. These visits expose participants to a range of school practices, designs, and cultures and help build critical friends' groups within the network.

Performance Assessment

Portfolios. Participants develop extensive portfolios that illustrate project work, writing, research, and reading. Graduates use the portfolio to document and demonstrate their leadership experiences and work readiness.

Exhibitions. Twice each year, aspiring principals present their project work to a panel of fellow participants, mentors, university faculty, and school community members. Exhibitions allow participants to publicly reflect on their growth, demonstrate mastery of learning goals, and identify competency areas that demand further work.

Mentor narratives. Twice each year, mentor principals write detailed narratives that assess the aspiring principal's service to the school, scholarship, growth, and leadership potential.

Feedback circle. Aspiring principals enlist community members from the school to provide on-going in-house evaluation. Members of this feedback circle check in regularly with the participant and meet formally at least three times in the course of the year. Members write a detailed evaluation at the end of the program.

“Who -- me?” Tapping Teacher Leaders (especially people of color) for the Principalship

“If it weren't for all of the leadership opportunities in our school, I never would have considered becoming a principal.” —Amy Bayer

“I was honored to be tapped for this program by my principal.” —Renee Lamontagne

It is not easy to get into the Principal Residency Network. The selection process involves not just the aspiring principal, but an understanding and commitment on the part of a mentor principal, superintendent, and district that this person is heading for a principalship. The demands on entrance into the program, while complex, are quite deliberate. We want the best people to be tapped. We also want to attract more people of color to the principalship. While the challenge of recruiting diverse leadership talent is daunting due to the lack of diversity in the teacher ranks, we have made a commitment to finding and recruiting a diverse group of aspiring

principals. Our strategy is to work directly with superintendents, schools, and principals to identify those people who have leadership promise but might not have otherwise considered administration.

People go into the principalship for all kinds of reasons—to make more of a difference, to make more money, or because it is one of the few shifts from the classroom that is possible in education. They might start taking classes in school administration, one or two at a time, perhaps without fully committing to the idea of becoming a school leader, but just to dip toes in the water of leadership. If they are unsure about their goals, it is quite likely that those around them, their colleagues and supervisors, are even less aware of potential aspirations. We have met more than one superintendent who did not know that several teachers in the district had principal certification. (In fact, some researchers say that there is no shortage of certified principals in the country; rather, the problem is that many people received certification without any intention of entering the job.)

In the Principal Residency Network, aspiring principals “go public” early on. They might step forward with interest in the program, or they might be tapped by a principal or a superintendent. Either way, prior to applying, the principal and the aspiring principal discuss the applicant’s leadership potential. The superintendent is involved in these discussions as well. Several superintendents and principals report that they debate their choice of aspiring principal candidate from among several possibilities. Some principals talk about the program and application process with their entire staff.

These conversations distinguish our pre-application process from traditional programs. In a very important way, schools and districts actively participate in growing their own future leaders. One aspiring principal says, “You have faith in the people you’ve chosen.” In the Principal Residency Network, the superintendent and principal know from the outset who is aspiring to the principalship. In fact, they have a chance to recruit and select their successors.

The project director still has to screen applicants carefully, both on paper and through site visits to the schoolhouse. It is up to the project director to ensure that applicants have the interest, confidence, and entrepreneurial spirit to be leaders of innovative schools. We believe that our program can take good people and make them very good, and we can take very good people and make them exceptional. However, we are not able to take applicants with weak skills and work magic.

Also, mentor principals have the very highest level of competency, commitment and capacity to train an aspiring principal. Because the mentor principal is the primary teacher, it is crucial that he/she be both an exemplary leader and an exemplary coach, able to observe, support, listen and give feedback to, the aspiring principal. As one researcher cautions, “Well-intentioned individuals who are genuinely interested in mentoring others may not possess the skills to effectively do so” (Medeiros, 2001, p. 84).

We look for candidates who have the spirit of inquisitiveness, openness, and a mixture of patience (with process) and impatience (to get important things done). The project director looks carefully at the aspiring principal candidate to see if he/she has initiative. If accepted into

the program, the aspiring principal will have to be a self-starter in order to be successful. We believe that knowledge and performance can be readily coached, but new dispositions are difficult to coach in a one-year program.

Walking through the hallways and into some classrooms with the aspiring principal and mentor principal gives us an initial assessment of their rapport with staff and students. Because this program holds a very high value on relationship building, this qualitative information is crucial. Without real strength in human relations, school leaders are unlikely to succeed. At the same time, the project director is learning as much as possible about the school context, since 90% of the learning is done through real-world projects at the school. In essence, the aspiring principal candidate and mentor principal and school are all applying to the program, for we need to select the right people to be aspiring principal, the best principals to be the primary teachers in the program, and healthy school conditions for optimal leadership learning.

Contrast this entry process with the more traditional course-based program. The benefit of this highly selective and complicated selection process is that people start to sit up tall when they hear about the program. Applications are flowing in at a far greater rate than available space (and we are determined to keep the programs small). Word is getting out: this is a great way to learn to be a leader!

The Art of Mentoring

We have described the importance of leaders doing the right thing, of designing the right kind of program, and of selecting the right people for school leadership. Once aspiring principals are selected, the program rests largely on the mentoring within the schoolhouse. How should the mentoring principal coach the aspiring principal?

So much has been written about the isolation of school leaders (and, indeed, of teachers as well) that it is well worth examining how mentor principals and aspiring principals work together. It all starts with the relationship between the mentor principal and the aspiring principal. The relationship is key. I have to open up who I am and what I do, and I have to get to know someone else exceedingly well. We all lead from who we are. When I mentor someone, I commit myself to a relationship characterized by candor, mutual responsibility and trust. To mentor well, I have to give thought and time to the aspiring principal and really establish a working relationship.

A recent study of mentoring in the Principal Residency Network found that mentor-mentee relationships are indeed characterized by strong relationships. The researcher, Medeiros, found that “open communication with reciprocal feedback” was an important element of the relationships (Medeiros, 2001, 64). Aspiring principals said of their mentor principals, “There is continuous feedback,” “We debrief and reflect...every day,” and appreciated that the mentor was “willing to be vulnerable to share disasters as frequently...[as] successes” (Medeiros, 2001, 61-62). Experts in the field of mentoring confirm the importance of building trusting relationships as the basis for learning” (cited in Medeiros, 2001; Allen & Poteet, 1999; Daresh & Playko, 1990).

Thought and time may not be enough: there is also the issue of sharing space. Many mentor principals work in more cramped quarters, or even move into a different room large

enough for two desks, so that they can be in close proximity to the aspiring principal. Aspiring principals value this closeness, prize the in-the-moment reflections with the mentor and access to the complete range of the principal's work. Closeness in time and space opens the possibility for sharing oneself. Chris Hempel, who graduated from the Principal Residency Network, notes that the program provided for "personalizing the mentoring" and that the mentor "is able to say the right thing at the right time."

I know, myself, that people learn from powerful role models. Careful observation and thoughtful listening teach one a great deal! As Charlie Plant, a graduate of our program, now a principal, said recently of his mentor, my colleague Elliot Washor, "I watched how he [Elliot] worked with the kids... and he really modeled how to do that work."

Another graduate, Jill Homberg, who is also now a principal, learned about "the balance between when you let a thing play out, versus making a call." She learned by watching "how Dennis does it." Sometimes she finds herself imagining how I would handle something if I were there, as a way of approaching a situation. While she has her own quiet style of warmth, she reflected on one situation and remarked, "It was funny. I behaved exactly as Dennis would have, if he'd been there."

It is one thing for an aspiring principal to observe me as I talk with kids and parents and staff; it is quite another for me to explain aloud why I'm doing what I'm doing. It is one thing for the aspiring principal to facilitate a staff meeting; it is quite another for us to analyze the agenda together, and debrief the meeting when it is over. Our conversations have to be candid if we want powerful learning to emerge.

That means that I have to trust the aspiring principal, be confident of his or her abilities even as I think of ways to coach him or her to be bold, to be organized, to be strategic for the long haul, to be more reflective—whatever it is that the aspiring principal is working on. I have to be comfortable in my own skin as a mentor, ready and willing to hear all questions—including those that make me rethink my practice! In short, it means I have to be a teacher.

Jill remembers the modeling—and conversation—about the difference between how one feels and how one behaves as a leader. As Jill said, I really "let it all out [in private]. Alone with her, I was able to say, "I can't believe so-and-so..." She marveled, then when she saw me address the individual later in the school day: "And then hearing you talk to the person in calm tones..."

The contrast was noteworthy for her, as she figured out the importance of behaving as a leader. Medeiros found that, "the skills or qualities of effective mentors...in this study included the ability to model, the ability to listen and reflect, and the ability to question and teach"(Medeiros, 2001, p. 78). Indeed, mentors need strong communication skills to help the aspiring principal make sense of the modeling.

Powerful as it is to observe and gain insights from a skillful mentor, a residency needs to get the aspiring principal into the action. We want aspiring principals to be doing, to be taking on important school projects, not just observing. What is a mentor principal to do, exactly? A principal intern in another program, Teresa Gray, suggests several tips for mentor principals, such as "integrate the intern into the school" and "provide time for continuous evaluation" (Gray, 2001, p. 663).

Over the past three years, we have learned a lot from mentor principals in the Principal Residency Network about the seemingly little moves that turn out to be incredibly significant in the mentoring process. Here are a few actions we have found quite powerful, actions that speak volumes about the mentor's commitment to and trust in the aspiring principal.

The mentor principal takes home a “dialogue journal” on Friday afternoons, writing brief reflections and questions to the aspiring principal and returning it on Monday morning.

The mentor principal and aspiring principal meet for breakfast at 7 a.m. at the local diner each Tuesday morning for 90 minutes of in-depth reflection and analysis of one or two moments (where either the aspiring principal or mentor principal is the key actor) as well as careful planning of an upcoming event.

The principal invites the aspiring principal to lead a key piece of the August professional development days with returning staff.

The principal is matter-of-fact about having the aspiring principal as a welcome colleague at every meeting, every walk through the halls, hearing every telephone conversation, for the first weeks or month of school—until the aspiring principal begins to work on his or her own consequential project.

Recognizing that this is an internship in preparation for the principalship, the principal protects the aspiring principal from responsibilities normally consigned to the “assistant principal.”

Together with the aspiring principal, the mentor principal talks with the teachers’ union representative about ways that the aspiring principal can gain experience in supervision and evaluation, under the guidance of the mentor.

Probably the most poignant aspect of the relationship—and the most significant—is how so many of the mentors are committed in an enduring way to the aspiring principal. And aspiring principals need this! No matter how terrific the experience of the aspiring principal, no matter how vast the learning during their year of internship, it is far different being a principal than being an aspiring principal.

Now, instead of talking as they walk down the hall together, there are flurries of phone calls and emails. The mentor principal typically asks, “How are things going?” If the phone call comes from the aspiring principal, there are questions such as “How would you have handled this?” and “What else should I consider, before I make this decision?”

The project directors of the Principal Residency Network have a commitment to the graduates, too. We realize the program is not over when a student gets her certification. The real work and learning in the school has just begun, and the importance of the Network now comes into play in important ways. The Network helps with job referrals, suggestions for those just entering the Network as aspiring principals, newsletters, continued staff development, and support in graduates’ new positions.

Should We Find Charismatic Principals or Change the Job?

We know we need to attract the right people to the principalship and give them the right kind of training so they have the courage and relational skills to do the right thing for kids. We know we need powerful mentoring. But that sidesteps the question of whether the job of principal is doable, whether the conditions of work are even tenable.

The current lament about the principalship is loud. “Most principals are little more than building managers, overseeing everything from bus schedules to lunch duty. At the very moment when there is huge pressure to improve student performance—and when the buck stops in the principal’s office—principals have lost most control over the things that affect how well

students learn” (McVicar, 2000). That is a huge problem. We are tackling it head-on, by working simultaneously to design and create small, personalized schools around the country. These learning communities are good for kids, first and foremost. But they also make it possible for the school leader to do his or her job well.

Peter McWalters, commissioner of education in Rhode Island, agrees that the job of the principal needs to change. “You have a critical position increasingly powerless, other than through charisma. If we’re going to revolutionize American education, do we think the answer is a million charismatic people, or restructuring the job?” (McVicar, 2000).

Our work carries us to the new small schools movement, where we have been embraced. Small schools are “fragile ecosystems, often parched for political cover, eager for recourses” and concerned about “the ability... to survive and to thrive after the departure of a powerful leader,” as participants in the program wrote (Myatt & Alexander, no date, p. 4).

Participating in the Principal Residency Network can give these schools some additional leadership hands while shoring them up in case a principal retires or the community calls for the formation of another small school. Specially designed small schools are often run democratically, with principals and teachers taking on broad leadership responsibilities for work in the school.

At Fenway High School, for example, “every staff member... plays many roles and has multiple obligations leading toward the success of students and the smooth, yet complex, operation of the school” (Myatt & Alexander, no date, p. 8). As a consequence, many of the teachers in these small schools already have demonstrated leadership potential—and are more eager about the prospect of being a principal someday.

The Future

The Wallace-Readers’ Digest Funds has made school leadership a major funding priority. With their support, the Big Picture Company has been able to develop the Principal Residency Network, looking more deeply into residency programs that work and that can be expanded to states and countries all over the world. Our commitment is to be clear about the design principles and to develop materials that help with the training, so that people can develop more sites of the Principal Residency Network throughout the country and beyond. The Principal Residency Network is connected globally, but the work is done locally.

While we continue to develop the Principal Residency Network, we are simultaneously creating more small schools and searching for small school networks interested in partnering with us. And we search for ways to bring more people of color into school leadership positions.

Our dream is that the graduates, aspiring principals who are now principals, will in a few years’ time become mentoring principals—and that they will profoundly change the design and culture of schools so that kids have better opportunities. As one African-American graduate of the program, Karen Edmonds, wrote, “As an aspiring principal, I am looking forward to the day that I can continue the cycle and become a mentor to a young, deserving leader of color” (Edmonds & Perez, 2000, p. 3). The circle then continues, and new principals are grown.

References

- Allen, T.D. & Poteet, M.L. (1999). Developing effective mentoring relationships: Strategies from the mentor's viewpoint. *The Career Development Quarterly*, 48(1), 59-73.
- Brent, B.O. (1998). Teaching in educational administration. *Newsletter of the American Educational Research Association*, 5(2), 3-4.
- Daresh, J.C., & Playko, M.A. (1990). Mentor programs: Focus on the beginning principal. *NASSP Bulletin*, 74, 73-77.
- Edmonds, K. & Perez, G. (2000). Racial equity: The forgotten child of leadership reform. Unpublished manuscript. Providence, RI: The Big Picture Company.
- Gerwin, C. (2001). A matter of principal: Aspiring administrators learn school leadership by doing. *Commonwealth*, 34, 31-36.
- Gray, T. (2001). Principal internships: Five tips for a successful and rewarding experience. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 82(9), 663-665.
- Keller, B. (2000). Building on experience. *Education Week*, 19(34), 14-16.
- Medeiros, S. (2001). *Mentoring aspiring principals to improve principal preparation*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Johnson & Wales University.
- McVicar, M. (2000, September 11). Principal losses: Restore leadership to top job, advocates urge, [The Providence Journal](#).
- Myatt, L. & Alexander, K. (2000). Growing champions. Unpublished manuscript. Providence, RI: The Big Picture Company.