HIGHLIGHTING MENTOR PROGRAM

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Principals should have a candid discussion about a school or district’s teacher mentor program during interviews. Candidates may be more inclined to accept a job in a school with a quality mentor program over a position in a school without one. Principals should offer basic information about the mentor program, especially the program’s goals, procedures for selecting mentors and pairing them with new teachers, and program activities. If incoming teachers with previous teaching experience are required or eligible to participate in the mentor program, the principal should explain how the program is tailored to their experience.

The principal should describe how the program complements other forms of assistance the district provides new teachers (e.g., orientation, staff development activities) and those the school provides (e.g., guidance from school administrators and department chairpersons or team leaders).

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SELECTING MENTORS

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THE PRINCIPAL AS

New teacher mentor

Leader’s active support keeps the wheels turning

BY TOM GANSEK

School principals have always been responsible for orienting new teachers. But mentor programs create new roles that may not have been covered in principals’ preparation programs. Teacher mentor programs are a major part of new teachers’ orientation. And like so many other professional development activities, the program’s success depends on the principal’s active support. Here are some suggestions for principals who want to maximize the benefits of a teacher mentor program.

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qualifications and are endorsed by a selection team. It is the principal’s job to support the selection process, whatever it may be.

When principals select mentors themselves, they should give prospective mentors information about the mentor’s roles and responsibilities before teachers decide to take on the responsibility. If the principal is selecting a mentor for a specific new teacher, the principal should share information about the mentee, as well.

If the mentor selection process involves applications and group action, principals should facilitate the process. For example, the principal should arrange meetings of the mentor selection committee to develop criteria, review applications, and select mentors.

Mentoring demands can be heavy. Without regular, often daily, contact between mentor and mentee, the possible benefits of a mentor program are compromised. And, not surprisingly, the teachers most qualified to mentor are also in demand to serve their profession in other ways. They are likely to serve on school or district committees, to have leadership positions in professional organizations and teacher associations, and to supervise student teachers. Principals should free mentors from other responsibilities whenever possible to give them the necessary time to be effective. That may mean replacing that teacher on an important site-based management team.

By supporting the mentor selection process in these ways, principals show that mentoring is an important professional development activity that starts with taking care how mentors are chosen.

TEACHING ASSIGNMENTS

When it comes to making teaching assignments for mentees and their mentors, principals can promote the mentor program’s success in two ways. The first is by carefully determining the new teacher’s room assignment and the new teacher’s and mentor’s teaching schedules. Whenever possible, principals should assign new teachers to rooms near their mentors so they have easy access to each other during the school day.

Principals also may be able to set schedules so new teachers and their mentors share lunch and preparation periods.

Principals also can promote new teachers’ success by ensuring that their assignments give them “breathing room” to make adjustments. Historically, unfortunately, new teachers have been assigned the most challenging students or classes and the most difficult supervisory duties. Principals can avoid perpetuating this mistake.

ORIENTING FACULTY AND STAFF

Many times, information about mentor programs is given only to participants. The school’s entire faculty and staff should understand how a mentor program fits in with other forms of professional development for teachers.

When faculty don’t understand how a mentor program complements but does not replace pre-existing programs for new teachers, they may hesitate to interact with mentees, fearing that they are interfering with the mentors. If the mentor and the mentee have different teaching assignments, this can be particularly unfortunate since a secondary, informal mentor with a similar teaching assignment might also provide valuable guidance. When faculty don’t understand the program, other teachers may begin to see mentors as “fix-it” people responsible for the new teacher’s progress and neglect their own professional obligation to welcome newcomers into their school community.

The principal also plays a crucial role in helping veteran teachers understand the professional development value of mentoring a beginning teacher.

Principals can help faculty and staff avoid these pitfalls by making sure the orientation program is more than a list of roles and responsibilities. Principals need to address how the school community can support the program’s goals. For example, middle or high school principals can help teachers address the new mentor program’s goals in their departmental or team strategic plans. In addition, principals at every level can urge faculty and staff to include elements of the mentor program’s goals in their own annual professional development plans, especially if the district requires them.

INFORMING

Principals should inform parents and students about the mentor program and how it supports new teachers. Use a variety of media, including the school newsletter, the district’s website, and the school’s parent-teacher organization.

Students need to understand the purposes of the mentor program, and particularly the relationship between new teachers and mentors. They may be curious when mentors and mentees spend time in each other’s classroom.

Parents need to understand the purposes of the mentor program so they don’t jump to the conclusion that assigning a mentor to a new teacher is an attempt to cover for a poor teacher.

RESPECTING CONFIDENTIALITY

As both the mentor’s and mentee’s immediate supervisor, principals may ask mentors to report on “how things are going” for mentees, reasonably believing that mentors have important insights into the new teacher’s experiences. This undermines the confidentiality and trust upon which the mentor/mentee relationship is based. Principals should make it a point never to talk to a mentor about the mentee’s progress.

Instead, principals might meet with mentor and mentee together to talk about the new teacher’s experiences, perhaps after the principal and mentor together observe the new teacher in action.

Principals also may be inclined to ask mentees about the quality of the mentoring they are receiving. This information is critical to monitor and improve the mentor program. However, asking mentees to provide this feedback jeopardizes the integrity of the mentoring relationship. Other forms of evaluation should be used instead.
FACILITATING

No matter who is responsible officially, the principal has to support the mentoring program on a daily basis.

Principals need to arrange teaching schedules so mentors are regularly accessible. Successful mentoring requires regular contact between mentor and mentee, not just contact “when needed” — which can mean only during a crisis.

The principal should find ways for mentors and mentees to see each other teaching. Talking about teaching is valuable, but effective support requires that mentors see new teachers in action, and new teachers observe experienced teachers’ classroom strategies. Using substitutes is one solution, but at a time when there is a critical shortage of substitutes, principals may need to work with an entire school staff to find creative ways to provide mentors and mentees with opportunities to see each other at work.

Perhaps the most important role principals have in supporting a teacher mentor program is providing a link between mentors and mentees and the other professionals working in the school and in the district, including staff developers and curriculum specialists. As complex, formal organizations, schools and school districts can be confusing places. Principals should do whatever possible to prevent mentors and mentees from getting lost in policies and procedures so they can focus their energies on critical mentoring activities.

STAFF DEVELOPERS CAN HELP

While principals need to understand their roles in the mentor program’s success, staff developers should provide principals ongoing support. Staff developers should help principals understand the importance of keeping their distance from the mentoring relationship so they don’t threaten the trust between mentee and mentor that is necessary for an effective mentoring relationship.

Principals are more likely to support the mentoring program consciously and less likely to undermine it unconsciously if staff developers include principals in mentor training and make sure they are familiar with the knowledge and skills associated with effective mentoring (Ganser, 1996, 2000). Equally important is helping them understand the program’s impact not only on mentors and mentees, but on the entire school community.

Asking principals to role-play the mentor or mentee will help them understand the mentor/mentee relationship. As principals learn what can reasonably be expected of a teacher mentor program, they will be more comfortable and skilled in working with their staff to maximize the benefit of the program for their new teachers and ultimately for students.

CONCLUSION

New teacher mentor programs will continue to expand quickly in the foreseeable future. Support for new teachers is a top priority in schools today and teacher mentor programs are a major part of that support (Fideler & Haselkorn, 1999; National Foundation for the Improvement of Teaching, 1999; Scherer, 1999). Staff developers should recognize principals’ central role in effective mentor programs and assist principals in contributing to the new programs’ success and to the ongoing improvement of programs already in place. Principals, with guidance, can ensure that new teachers benefit from the programs and realize their full potential.

REFERENCES


