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MAKE MENTORING MATTER

Support professional learning of new school leaders

BY CHERYL GRAY AND SUSAN WALKER

New school leaders need to hit the halls running with the ability to lead staffs to accelerate improved student learning. For many, the first opportunity to plan and implement school improvement actions will be as a principal. Preparing principals to successfully implement strategies to change a school will require focused professional learning as they make the transition from classroom teacher to school leader and throughout their initial years in this new leadership role.

High-quality professional learning experiences coached by experienced principal mentors and organized around student achievement problems can jumpstart a new principal's mastery of the skills needed to improve teaching and learning. Principal mentors can provide the rich set of job-embedded learning experiences that develop instructional leadership competencies.

High-quality mentoring and professional learning can help aspiring and new leaders address real school problems as they leave the starting gate for their first principalship.

OBSERVING, NOT PRACTICING, LEADERSHIP

Unfortunately, aspiring and new school leaders rarely are more than audience members when it comes to leading school improvement tasks. Too often, mentors for internship or induction programs focus on the wrong things. The concern for clock time, task checklists, and reporting requirements is greater than the concern for mastering the competencies for

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Our goal: All teachers in all schools will experience high-quality professional learning as part of their daily work.

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Skillful self-appraisal frees others to reflect deeply on their practice.

Personal reflection precedes school assessment

Before leaders can be successful at influencing individuals, groups, or systems, they first must take a close look at themselves. For principal leaders, influencing others is part of the daily work and reflective practices are the tools that enable their skillfulness in that arena. Reflection is a lot like the process of pausing in front of the mirror and taking stock. But, in this case, it's not the physical image but the mental models and accompanying actions that leaders need to assess. Reflection requires taking time and creating space to immerse your head, your heart, and your soul.

During these moments of personal reflection, educational leaders can find ways to come to terms with past challenges and anticipate future opportunities. They can examine the clarity of their exposed beliefs and goals, and document evidence of whether their practices and behaviors are aligned with their beliefs and goals. Such self-assessment informs a leader's professional judgments about their knowledge, skills, and beliefs. Documenting or journaling has the potential to insert honesty into the process. Having a written record of your thoughts can be a valuable tool for shaping future practice and behavior. In order words, effective principals use insights from personal reflection to reorient their beliefs and actions in a systemic manner.

In a similar vein, assessment is one of a leader's most powerful levers in the quest for school improvement. Rigorous attention to data empowers leaders to critically and carefully take an objective look at school culture, teaching, and student learning. Culture is largely determined through relationships among adults, and the interactions and practices in an organization. The socio-cultural environment of schooling is influenced by formal and informal relationships and structures. These elements largely determine the success of achieving intended schooling outcomes. That means an effective principal leader frequently and consistently assesses these conditions.

Educational leaders who structure, nurture, and assess the knowledge development of adults around school goals will guide schools towards their intended outcomes. These leaders are comfortable encouraging teachers to reflect on their practice by asking crucial questions. *What's working? What's missing? What needs improvement? Are students learning? How do we know? What if they're not learning?*

These leaders ensure that teachers focus on student performance and therefore realize that, as leaders, they must understand how to assess student learning. At an even more significant level, leaders ask probing questions that go beyond a mere examination of numbers. *Are collective dialogues guiding the teaching and learning? Do current structures and policies enable or disable adult skillfulness? Are adults collectively developing action plans to improve learning of all students?*

Skillful leaders use practices that work. Their wisdom sets the foundation for a collective focus on student needs. Their skillful self-appraisal frees others to reflect deeply on their practice and to critically assess and creatively innovate for what matters most, student learning.

Time to learn from and with each other

Even the most supportive instructional leaders are taken aback when they read that NSDC's advocates that 25% of an educator's work time be dedicated to learning and collaboration with colleagues. These principals barely refrain from scoffing at the very idea that they could find that kind of time let alone garner other resources necessary to accomplish that goal. Yet, an examination of other countries shows that educators have enormous amounts of time to develop new skills or hone established ones (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999).

The learning principal **allocates resources to support job-embedded professional development in the school** (Roy & Hord, 2003)**.** Job-embedded professional development includes **both informal and formal interactions** among teachers who develop lessons, share instructional strategies, examine student work, analyze achievement data, and observe each other and give feedback. Job-embedded work focuses on the core of instruction — the classroom —with the intention of improving educators' knowledge and skills so that students benefit. According to Easton (2005), these powerful professional development strategies:

*   Connect to and return benefits to the real world of teaching and learning;
*   Focus on what is happening with both student and adult learners;
*   Are collaborative;
*   Establish a culture of quality among staff; and
*   Allow time for inquiry and reflection that promotes learning and application.

More and more job-embedded strategies are being developed, studied, and shared every day. In her book, *Powerful Designs for Professional Learning* (NSDC, 2004), Easton identified 21 job-embedded professional development strategies, including action research, case studies, journaling, portfolios, shadowing, study groups, and protocols. These strategies structure teacher interactions and create opportunities for significant conversations about the classroom and instruction.

For example, a study team at a high-performing, urban K-8 school in Baltimore participated in an examination of student assessment data, dove deeper into content knowledge expected in their state's science standards, planned lessons together, and assessed the pros and cons of an instructional strategy they had been studying. The school had created a work schedule that allowed these teachers to meet once a day **during the workweek.** There also were other opportunities to learn together in day-long professional development days and seminars. The teachers reported that these daily interactions made a difference in their teaching and student achievement scores reflected that difference by being some of the highest in the state.

Crafting a schedule that allows time for colleagues to learn from and with each other is not easy. But, many schools and systems have found ways to create space in their day for teacher learning. The Spring 2007 issue of *JSD* is devoted to this topic and can provide information on what other districts and schools have done to create time for job-embedded professional development.

Resources:
Staff development that improves the learning of all students requires resources to support adult learning and collaboration.

Pat Roy is co-author of *Moving NSDC's Staff Development Standards Into Practice: Innovation Configurations* (NSDC, 2003).

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**Learn more about NSDC's standards, www.nsdc.org/ standards/ index.cfm**

MAKING TIME FOR READING

Reading is an essential part of being a professional. But reading can also feel challenging for teachers and principals who already have busy lives.

A Jigsaw Reading is one strategy that can make reading articles and books less taxing for your staff. Be sure that you read the article or book in advance yourself in order to make wise decisions about how to divide up the text for your staff.

Magnetic Questions can be used with the same group to prepare them for the reading.

Save the Last Word for Me is a strategy that can be used by the same group when they assemble for their final discussion.
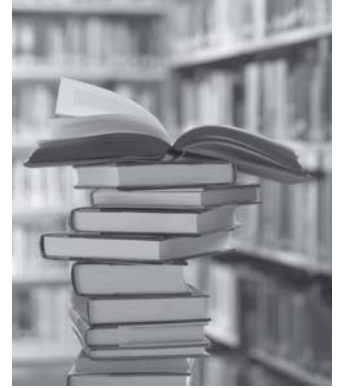
JIGSAW READING

Comments to the facilitator: A jigsaw provides a good way for staff members to learn new content and also provides an opportunity for staff members to teach each other what they have learned.

Time: One hour.

Supplies: Several articles or selections from books which would be helpful in a school improvement effort.

Preparation: Make sufficient copies of the readings for each participant.

Note: Although individuals will only be reading one section, the leader should provide the book or copies of each article for all participants. Encourage them to collect the material in a folder or notebook for future review.

Directions

1. Provide the selected reading(s) to participants.

2. Divide the group into small groups of three to five persons each.

3. Have each member of the small groups silently read a different topic. *Time: 10 minutes.*

4. Create new small groups from the individuals who have read the same material. Allow them time to discuss what they have read. *Time: 20 minutes.*

5. Re-create the original small groups. Have each person teach the rest of the group about his or her reading. *Time: 30 minutes.*

6. Conclude with the question: What are the implications of this for our school? For our district?

MAGNETIC QUESTIONS

Purpose: This enables readers to identify key issues and underlying assumptions before they read. This is best used by a large group that will be reading a lengthy article or book together or viewing a videotape.

Materials: Poster paper, markers.

Time: 30 to 60 minutes.

Directions for the facilitator

1. Before the group gathers, write several key questions related to the reading or video. The facilitator should strive for provocative, thought-provoking questions. Write the questions on poster paper and post around the room.

2. After introducing the topic, invite participants to read the questions and choose one that appeals to or angers them.

3. Invite participants to stand by their chosen question.

4. Invite these small voluntary groups to talk with each other about what they find intriguing or important about the question.

5. After participants have talked about the questions, invite each group to report out or invite participants to individually speak up about what they discussed.

6. Capture on poster paper the big ideas raised by this group discussion. These questions can be used to guide the group's discussion after the group has finished its reading or viewing activity.

"If you do not have time to read, you do not have time to lead."

— Phillip Schlechty

SAVE THE LAST WORD FOR ME

This strategy works best for groups reading articles, but it could be adapted for a book club by breaking down the book into chapters.

1. Have an entire group read the same article silently.

2. If the group is large, break down the larger group into smaller groups of five to six participants for this discussion.

3. Invite one participant in each group to begin by selecting one idea that they most want to share with others. There should be no dialogue during this sharing. *Time: 2 to 3 minutes.*

4. In a round-robin fashion, the next person suggests another idea. Again, no dialogue during this sharing. *Time: 2 to 3 minutes.*

5. Continue this until every participant has had an opportunity to talk. Continue doing rounds of sharing until participants have exhausted their comments or your time has expired.

Make mentoring matter: Support professional learning for new school leaders

PROBLEM-FOCUSED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EXPERIENCES INCLUDE:

• **Identifying effective leadership behaviors** of principals in diverse school settings;

• **Focusing on specific leadership competencies** in the context of authentic, school-based problems;

• **Assessing curriculum and instructional gaps** for different groups of students;

• **Drawing on research** to understand and improve teaching and learning;

• **Leading a team to solve a problem** related to student achievement;

• **Seeking research-based solutions** based on sound judgments about best practices; and

• **Developing skills, testing beliefs, and questioning assumptions** about student learning and achievement gaps.

leading school improvement. The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) recently surveyed university-based leadership program mentors and learned that more mentors (62%) said their responsibility was to help interns complete tasks determined by the university than to help implement a project focusing on school improvement (53%) or to develop and implement a professional growth plan for mastering leadership competencies (33%).

The professional learning strategies these mentors reported using leave little doubt that many aspiring and new school leaders have minimal opportunities to learn how to lead school improvement in diverse school settings and to practice the skills necessary to lead teams of teachers. Fewer than half of the principal mentors surveyed by SREB reported creating opportunities for interns in educational leadership programs to lead activities that would demonstrate essential skills, such as understanding the change process (25%), developing high expectations for learning (36%), or providing quality professional development (42%). About half of the mentors indicated that they assigned interns to observe in classrooms to determine instructional quality. The most frequently assigned learning activity was observing staff meetings (79% of respondents) — often meetings in their own school that the intern would have attended without benefit of an internship.

Mentoring adds little value if it does not provide learning experiences that go beyond theory, books, and course work to advance understanding of how school principals set the tone and culture for high performance and continuous school improvement. Many mentors misconceive their role to be solely a listener rather than a provider of professional learning. This diminishes the potential for fostering the understanding and mastery of critical skills needed to get results for student learning.

Yet, the potential is promising. Mentors surveyed believed they can model the competencies necessary to improve teaching and learning.

But mentors need more than self-confidence. They need assistance in creating structured professional learning experiences, time to assess proteges who are leading a team of teachers, and training in how to skillfully provide coaching and feedback that will benefit their protégé.

PROBLEM-FOCUSED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Opportunities for learning about school improvement and the importance of strong and effective leadership teams must be at the core of the professional learning. Job-embedded learning through observing, participating in, and leading activities that improve teaching and learning ensures that aspiring and new leaders will have an experience with depth (of leadership practices) and breadth (with diverse school challenges). Authentic professional learning experiences focus on working with teams of teachers, distributing leadership, to address student achievement problems.

Experienced principal mentors open the doors to authentic learning by providing a problem-focused school improvement experience. Mentors provide day-to-day feedback and coaching to help their protégés begin to solve a range of school problems, first through observing and participating and then by actually leading teams in identifying, implementing, and evaluating improvement strategies. Mentors help aspiring and new leaders shape beliefs — about whole-school change, relationships with staff and community members, and ethical leadership practices.

Effective mentoring is a skillful combination of demonstrating leadership practices and observing, assessing, and coaching others' practices. Mentors model what leadership looks like in practice and describe behaviors that may have become second nature. Mentors analyze their routine and intuitive decisions — such as why one direction was taken rather than another and why one choice was selected from among many — and explain choices and actions to aspiring and new principals.

Effective mentors purposefully guide

TIERED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EXPERIENCES

	Examples of job-embedded learning experiences
Observing *school leaders in both high- and low-performing schools*	**Observing:** • The performance of teachers by comparing what happens in different classrooms to promote student achievement • The behaviors principals use to assess and improve instruction and the extent to which these incorporate critical success factors for improving student achievement • The actions of the school improvement team to identify school challenges and strategies to improve curriculum, instruction and student achievement • The support of parents and the community for school improvement goals and strategies
Participating *in a variety of school improvement initiatives that develop breadth of competencies and demonstrate leadership standards*	**Participating in:** • Analyses of student achievement data with teams of teachers • Presentations with the mentor principal on a school improvement strategy to the school staff and community • Facilitation of content or grade-level meetings that focus on using a new instructional strategy • Discussions of resource reallocation to support school improvement
Leading *by assuming building-level leadership responsibilities of a team of teachers solving a key problem of student achievement*	**Leading:** • A team of teachers in identifying root causes for the identified problem of student achievement • A process of data analysis to probe more deeply root causes of the problem • A study team to identify best practices and develop an improvement strategy that focuses on the identified problems • The process to evaluate programs and strategies that were identified as solutions to the problem under study

Aspiring and new school leaders need to be the lead actor in their professional learning experiences — on stage and practicing their performance until the mentor applauds their mastery.

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The SREB Study of Mentoring Principal Interns is available as an online document at the organization's web site, **www.sreb. org**. This article is adapted from the report of the study's findings by Cheryl Gray, Betty Fry, and Gene Bottoms (in press).

aspiring and new principals through three tiers of professional learning experiences: observing other school leaders, participating in school improvement initiatives that develop competence, and leading by assuming building-level leadership responsibilities for solving a key problem of student achievement.

Mentoring demands careful planning and support from the district office. The mentor is responsible for creating professional learning experiences that extend beyond the boundaries of any one school. A professional learning plan describes what will be observed, participated in, and led with each activity selected based on competencies needed. Without district support, carefully crafted plans, and appropriate self-reflection by the protégé, professional learning can default to conversations about everyone's leadership skills but theirs.

Mentors can provide a lens that focuses on an insider's view of school leadership — decisions that are made behind closed doors, in front of school staffs, and under stressful conditions. The mentor's role is to provide the opportunity for interns to encounter difficult or ambiguous situations and be accountable for the effects, intended or otherwise, of decisions. Aspiring and new school leaders need to be the lead actor in their professional learning experiences — on stage and practicing their performance until the mentor applauds their mastery. ■

Does professional learning matter?

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• You share NSDC's belief that providing all teachers in all schools with high-quality professional learning will lead to improved student learning.

• You can demonstrate that high-quality professional learning has made a difference in student learning.

We want to showcase schools and districts that can demonstrate that high-quality professional learning for teachers and principals is making a difference in student learning. We want to hear from every kind of school and district.

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