



Photos by MARY HAMMEL
Mike Mathes, left, and Mike Hull, both superintendent mentors in the Kansas Educational Leadership Institute, share coaching tips.

Dave Morrow, a principal mentor, meets Stephanie McNemar, a new principal, at the Kansas Educational Leadership Institute statewide orientation meeting.

I AM MENTOR, I AM COACH

EFFECTIVE
MENTORS HELP
NEW LEADERS
DEVELOP THEIR
OWN STRENGTHS

BY DONNA AUGUSTINE-SHAW AND MARCETA REILLY

Much has been written about the challenge of preparing good leaders within our schools. Smith and Smith (2015) note that effective leadership practices have a strong, measurable effect on student achievement, teaching quality, and schools.

Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, and Anderson (2010) say that leadership is important because it sets conditions and expectations in the school for excellent instruction and a culture of ongoing learning for educators and students.

Fullan (2010) asserts that the impact of leadership can become the single most important factor in moving

schools forward.

That said, preparing good leaders depends not only on providing good initial professional learning, but also on creating a strong support structure during the early years of practice. However, what good mentoring looks and sounds like varies widely in practice.

Many mentoring programs for

education leaders consist of buddy-like relationships that provide on-the-spot problem solving and random attempts at assistance or introducing the new leader in various settings.

These types of mentoring programs focus primarily on the nuts and bolts of the new role but lack robust components that have meaningful impact on long-term development. A buddy-type mentor, although well-intended, often does not encourage reflective practice, commit to ongoing support, or have the training necessary to coach new principals (Villani, 2006).

One mentee in this strong mentor/coach program recently said, “If the mentoring situation had been structured to ‘call me if you need anything,’ I wouldn’t have taken the time to stop and even think about what I needed, let alone take the time to initiate the conversation.”

Another mentee said, “I would have been in complete survival mode without the relationship I had with my mentor/coach.”

As leaders of a Kansas coaching program for mentors of new leaders, we believe there are more effective ways to provide support for new leaders. Learning Forward’s Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011) are an excellent resource to give direction for this more effective support.

For instance, the Leadership standard outlines the need for leaders to create a vision that values learning at

ABOUT THE KANSAS EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

The Kansas Educational Leadership Institute’s mission is to collaborate and share resources to support professional growth of educational leaders in the state’s schools. This support includes mentoring and induction of new leaders as well as professional learning for school and district leaders.

The institute has served 145 new superintendents and assistant superintendents since beginning in 2011, 120 new principals and assistant principals since 2013, and 12 new special education leaders since 2015.

The institute’s partnerships include the Kansas State Department of Education, United School Administrators of Kansas, Kansas Association of School Boards, Kansas School Superintendents Association, and the College of Education Department of Educational Leadership at Kansas State University. These partners establish programming direction and growth as well as meeting field-based needs.

Kansas practitioners, representing various professional organizations, provided initial recommendations on the mentoring and induction program structure. The institute’s design provides clear guidance on mentee requirements and mentor expectations because of these recommendations.

The program maintains a focus on continual improvement. Mentors serve as a critical friend, providing essential insight into field-based needs and recommendations on identified areas of growth. The institute administers end-of-year surveys annually to all program mentees and mentors. These data reveal positive trends:

- During the first five years of operation, 100% of district program mentors and mentees agreed the institute’s mentoring program helped mentees grow professionally. In addition, 100% of district-level mentors agreed that the institute’s professional learning helped them be a more effective mentor/coach.
- In a four-year trend, 90% of building-level mentors and mentees agreed that the institute’s mentoring/induction support is helpful to a first-year building leader, and 100% of building-level mentors agreed that serving as a mentor is a personal professional learning experience.

For more information about the Kansas Educational Leadership Institute mentoring program, contact Donna Augustine-Shaw at Donna5@ksu.edu.

all levels and develops capacity in others through distributed responsibility. Mentors can model continual learning and help new principals inquire about and be responsive to the learning needs of students and staff. This attention to *learning* helps new principals understand that, when staff make improvements, it not only increases their knowledge and skills, but also supports *system* growth.

Learning that is aligned to goals is key to implementation for lasting impact. In addition, *meaningful change*,

reinforced in the Implementation standard, requires time and sustained support to integrate new learning into current practice. Mentors can help new principals look for and recognize even small changes along the way. This keeps hope and positive energy for the change process flowing.

Finally, leadership development continues throughout one’s career and connects to the Learning Designs standard by creating conditions that establish face-to-face, individualized interaction along with reflective and

job-embedded collaboration (Learning Forward, 2011).

Educators moving into leadership roles, such as team leaders, instructional coaches, assistant principals, and principals, often feel most anxious about having all the answers for the people with whom they will be working. They assume their job is to be experts in what needs to be done and the best problem solvers in the room. And they fear that if they don't know enough, others will think they were not ready for the new position and they will lose the respect of their colleagues.

They think the new job is about knowing and doing. But it is really more about *being* — bringing their strengths to the table and *developing the capacity of others* to be brilliant. It's all about developing others, not about how good *I* am and how much *I* know.

This turns mentorship on its head. It's not about merely being a kind buddy to help new leaders learn the ropes. It's about coaching them to become clear about their own values, beliefs, and strengths. From this self-knowledge, new leaders can step into their leadership role with authenticity and grounded-ness. This is the solid basis for authority and respect.

In his book, *What Got You Here Won't Get You There: How Successful People Get Even More Successful*, Marshall Goldsmith (2007) explains that what gets you the new job (being smart, a good problem solver, natural leader) won't necessarily take you to the next level. Mentees need to learn new skills of building trust, rapport, and good communication. So a mentoring program that is responsive to and impacts the deeper needs of new leaders should have a new perspective.

Embedded in such a program is a focus on the growth of *mentors* as well as *mentees*. Mentors learn to develop a coach-like mindset to move beyond simply giving advice. Instead,

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their most important work is to help new leaders explore and develop their individual leadership strengths. In this type of program, mentors learn as much about good communication and giving good feedback as the mentees do about being the kind of leader they want to be. This results in a clear emphasis on the *being* for those in both roles — mentor *and* mentee.

DEVELOPING A COACHING MINDSET

This new way of being mentored changes the relationship between mentor and mentee. Mentors show up with a different mindset, ready to listen deeply and talk less. In this kind of relationship, mentees especially appreciate the listening ear and confidentiality of these conversations.

Mentors carefully listen to not only what is being said, but to what is *not* being said and lies just beneath the surface. Relying on their coaching training, mentors pose questions to enable new leaders to deepen their reflection and consider the impact of varied solutions. Their conversation creates a safe space for novice leaders to consider multiple options and decide for themselves about best action.

Through honest and nonthreatening dialogue, mentors show respect for the leadership style of mentees, which eases stress and helps move new administrators forward with increased confidence. In evaluation data collected where mentors shared perspectives on building capacity in new leaders, one mentor said, "Asking powerful

questions and listening are critical skills needed in today's environment." Another said, "The foundation is learning to be a committed listener. ... You have to listen to the response to the questions in order to provide the most appropriate feedback."

Training in coaching skills enables mentors to become more reflective in their own practice as well as develop skills to ask powerful *what* and *how* questions. This kind of dialogue allows new leaders to come to answers on their own. One mentor summed it up by saying, "My coaching mindset has changed significantly. My conversations are focused on the ability of the person I coach to find solutions. I am focused on listening and asking questions that are solution-focused and foster reflection."

In this kind of program, not only are mentors valued for their experience as successful practitioners, but they also have a willingness to be known as *coach-like* rather than as experts. They participate in professional learning on coaching skills to help them develop this coach-like mindset. Their work is focused on honing active listening skills, assuming positive intent, developing the innate strengths of the mentee, and providing reflective feedback (Cheliotis & Reilly, 2010).

Between professional learning sessions, mentors practice targeted coaching skills in practice labs. Participants get practice with feedback of their coaching in a low-risk environment. Its purpose is to bring to life real situations and application of the coaching mindset. Such guided professional learning enables mentors to hone the professional skills they can use in their daily practice with their own staff people as well as with their mentees.

In the Kansas Educational Leadership Institute program at Kansas State University, principal mentors attest to the benefit of participating in this type of coach-like mentor

professional learning. One mentor said, “I enjoyed all aspects and learned from all the opportunities. However, if I had to pick one, I would select the practice labs. The labs provided me a great opportunity for growth to be an effective mentor.”

After completing the professional learning for coaching, a new mentor said, “As a leader, we need to be able to look at each person’s situation and needs. We need to be prepared to listen and coach — every minute of every day. Improving as a listener might be the most important skill a leader can ever have and always improve on.”

Principal mentors often comment that professional learning for coaching helped them to slow down and remember the importance of reflection and empowering staff.

The emphasis on the mentor’s role as an active and committed listener, questioning for deep thinking, and having positive intent when working with mentees and others are valuable components of the professional learning. They provide lessons that are good for every leader to know and practice. In this way, the mentors become intentional about modeling the skills they want to help the mentees to develop.

BUILDING CAPACITY IN NEW LEADERS

New leaders don’t know what they don’t know. As leaders move from their preparation program focused on acquiring knowledge, skills, and attitudes of effective leaders, they often feel as if their learning begins anew when they accept their first administrative position. The continued opportunity for professional learning on the job is essential.

A viable and structured mentoring and induction program lessens the need for new principals to feel as if they are self-taught with gaps in skills and a lack



Photo by MARY HAMMEL

Coach Marceta Reilly (standing) talks with new leaders about coaching at the Kansas Educational Leadership Institute statewide orientation meeting.

of understanding of key responsibilities. The impact of making decisions daily, needing to respect local traditions and values, and embracing opportunities for necessary change can present daunting challenges for any new school leader.

Skillfully trained and trusted mentors address these needs through specific coaching practices and confidential conversations focused on perspectives from outside the local district. Mentors provide a continuum of development and application aligned to leadership preparation standards. They support the development of new leaders by identifying and helping them focus on their strengths. This builds their capacity by enabling them to develop authentic professional presence and empowers their continued professional growth.

Mentors model being coach-like in many ways. They deepen the mentee’s understanding of the local context through performance observations held in the local school or district. Their goal-setting conversations focus on *mentee-directed* needs, drawing on the mentees’ strengths, and building understanding of the mentee for the school and district community.

One mentor in the Kansas program said that the most helpful part of the

mentoring program was “development of a professional/trusting relationship to support the needs of a new leader. Not only is the mentee looking for guidance, he/she truly appreciates the opportunity to communicate with an experienced colleague in a confidential manner.”

Another mentor noted, “Mentees know that their mentor is not there to judge or to evaluate them. The mentors are there to support and coach them in a safe environment. No topic is too trivial or too deep to talk about. I know I would have appreciated a mentor that had no stake in the decision other than to support me.”

Mentees, too, speak of the value of this coach-like relationship. “Getting to know my mentor and building a positive relationship that was built on collaboration and trust” was most helpful to one new principal.

Another new building leader said, “My mentor is a very good listener and is willing to spend the time to help me become a successful principal. He helped me think through different solutions to situations that I may not have come up with on my own without his coaching. I always felt safe to share information with him and his responses to my questions were honest and nonthreatening.”

A CULTURE FOCUSED ON “WE”

Bailey and Reilly (2017) speak of the importance of today’s leaders to create a school culture that moves from “me to we.” This teaming mindset promotes a continued focus on growing as a professional educator, developing competence and teaming with others to achieve individual growth, and increasing the level of learning within the school by raising the level of competence within the team to learn together.

Developing relationships and culture are critical to any new leader. One mentee said, “I was hired to establish a vision for the district. We had a vision on the wall that no one knew!”

Staff lacked consistent implementation of goals aligned with the vision. After extensive work, the new leader told staff, “We are ready to formalize the vision *we’ve* been working on.” He continued, “We are clear about the purpose and what we truly mean by collaboration, so it’s time *we* create a vision together about our shared beliefs.”

By taking time to have meaningful conversations with faculty and emphasizing meaning over task completion, this leader took the first steps in creating a culture of collaboration.

Another new leader envisioned continual learning and collaboration, but only a few people participated. To foster a culture of learning, this new leader said, “We all get better when we work together.” This became the mantra of the faculty as she emphasized the theme “Better Together” throughout the year.

It is these kinds of strong mentoring relationships, founded in trust, that give new administrators the courage to delve into delicate and purposeful conversations that embrace a spirit of teamwork dedicated to working toward

common goals.

School and district leaders provide an inspiring and visionary approach to motivate others and achieve desired results.

A commitment to improved teaching practices and student learning, insistence on equity and culturally responsive learning environments for every student, and meaningful communication with school and community stakeholders to engage in common work are all hallmarks of today’s leader.

Today’s leaders must understand the value of building a strong team to accomplish these collective goals. Strong mentoring support in the first years of practice continues a pattern of success and is necessary for every new leader. Mentors support this, equally engaged in professional learning, through acquiring a mindset that assists new leaders in becoming the best they can be in reaching a shared vision to accomplish agreed-upon goals.

One principal mentor summed up a strong and thoughtful approach to leadership and desire to impact staff and mentees. “As a principal, I want to show up as a leader and not a manager. This entails empowering others to be primary decision-makers where possible and using coaching techniques to help teachers and staff think through the decision-making process. It’s also about using a continuum of skills to be a flexible leader who reinvents herself and works one-to-one to give the very best to her employees and those who follow.”

Clearly, this kind of program changes the mentoring process that creates new learning for both mentee *and* mentor. It gives successful midcareer educational leaders opportunities to grow and contribute professionally, and it provides a dedicated focus on mentees’ needs as they forge their own path in their local school setting.

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