

RSS ROUNDUP

RSS ROUNDUP is written by your Regional Service Specialists (RSS): Dr. Dina Wert, East Region; Susan Martin, Central Region; and Cynthia Zajac, West Region

“Phone a Friend”: The Importance of Connecting with a Colleague

By Dr. Dina G. Wert, East Regional Service Specialist



About the Author: Dr. Dina G. Wert serves the Pennsylvania Principals Association as the Regional Service Specialist for the East Region. She retired as Principal of West Bradford Elementary School in the Downingtown Area School District. Dr. Wert served as an educator for 34 years, retiring with 17 years in the principalship.

She has been a member of the PA Principals Association for 21 years and is a PIL facilitator for the PA Department of Education. In addition, she is a National Distinguished Principal (2013) and has supported both the PA Principals Association and the National Association of Elementary School Principals in various roles.

Have you ever asked an eight-year-old the age-old question, “what do you want to be when you grow up?” who actually answered, “a principal!”? Let’s face it, there is nothing particularly glamorous or glitzy about the principalship (although my son did think that making announcements over the PA system and using the microphone during assemblies was cool). I can think of a plethora of adjectives to describe the daily role of the principal including active, demanding, rewarding, draining, hopeful, intimidating, gratifying, overwhelming, productive...but might I be bold enough to add the word “lonely” to the list? As principals, we often find ourselves stuck like the peanut butter in the middle of the sandwich between central office folk, school board, state/federal mandates, and policy on one half, and our staff, families and students on the other half. That’s a lot of people. And just one of us. Alone. *(insert sigh)*.

I strongly suggest that every practicing principal seek out a mentor, a guide, a confidant, a colleague who also lives, breathes and understands the ins and outs, the ups and downs and the daily surprises that our profession brings. While I live with the love of my life, he is not an administrator, and can’t advise or empathize with the educational, moral, ethical decisions, encounters or issues that we wrestle with as educational leaders each day.

Many years ago, my doctoral research focused on the lack of mentorship opportunities for new principals. Decades(!) later, while professional development experiences for principals have become mandatory for Level I Principals to move to Level II in Pennsylvania, mentorship is not a mandated piece of our PA principal induction program. A recent survey sent to the PA Principals Association membership showed that not only did the overwhelming majority of principals with 0-4 years of experience seek a mentorship opportunity, but a majority of 5+ year experienced principals’ responses indicated they would welcome the chance to support, work with and learn from both new and experienced principals.

Principals (at any level of experience) need a trusted colleague, someone with whom they can ask a question, use as a sounding board, seek advice, reflect, check if they’re “in the ballpark,” share experiences or concerns, vent, laugh, let loose or even cry! When you share that similar experience with someone who “gets it,” you are validated, valued and vindicated. As we intentionally build a culture of belonging for our school family, we need to make sure we are taking care of the unique needs that the principalship bestows upon us. Connect with colleagues through coursework or workshops, PIL work, your (or neighboring) districts, IU-supported principal meetings or PA Principals Association networking opportunities. Make it a habit to touch base via a phone call, text or email and designate a standard time to connect regularly. Reach out to your Regional Representatives or Regional Support Specialists. Use the long drive home (or into work) as a time to chat with a colleague. An authentic and supportive relationship is symbiotic and a healthy practice for both participants!

Who will you ask to be your “go to”? Make it *your mission*...put yourself out there. The principalship can be a lonely job. Don’t be afraid to reach out and ask for or offer to be a mentor. You both will be glad you did!

You may contact your Regional Service Specialist (RSS) at:
Dr. Dina Wert – East Region (I, II, III) – wert@papprincipals.org
Susan Martin – Central Region (I, II, III) – martin@papprincipals.org
Cynthia Zajac – West Region (I, II, III) – zajac@papprincipals.org