

It's Time to Invest in Principals

By Edward Roth, Jr.



I vividly remember how amazed I was when I received the phone call from our assistant superintendent telling me that I would be the next principal of the only school I had ever professionally called home. After all, I ended a previous interview

by telling the committee that I was too young and inexperienced to get the job (*if you are reading this and preparing for a job interview, I do not recommend including that line in your planned remarks*). However, after just three years as an assistant principal, I was about to take over as the building principal of one of the largest schools in America. Was I excited? Of course! Was I nervous? Way more than I cared to admit. However, it was already August and there was no time to dwell on it, let alone move my belongings into my new office.

My amazement about how much I was trusted by my two assistant superintendents (we were hiring a new superintendent), the school board and the others on the committee quickly turned to anxiety. I needed to hire two new assistant principals, including one to finish the building schedule! When we hired a new superintendent, he was from outside the district and had a stellar reputation as a high school principal (no pressure!). Before the news broke, I was observed by one of our curriculum supervisors, who commented that it was unfortunate that I wasn't older as I would have been an excellent fit for the position (I couldn't be angry since it's exactly what I said in my interview). Subsequently, I received a call from my supervisor informing me that the district intended to utilize a portion of its School Improvement Grant funding to hire a recently retired principal as my mentor. Even though I was quietly doubting myself, I was now insulted that anyone believed I required a mentor. Maybe I was too inexperienced after all.

Wayne McAllister, a former member of the PA Principals Association board of directors and of the magazine's editorial review board, becoming my mentor shouldn't have been a surprise. He retired after 30 years as an elementary school principal in that same school district. I did not know him well, but knew he had an incredible reputation and seemed to be a great guy. During the summer I was interviewing, he was the high school's interim administrator, so I got to see first-hand how he handled the position and the pressure our team faced in getting ready for the new school year. To be honest, I think that having him there that summer made it easier for

me to get the job in the first place since I knew that people valued and sought his opinions. It felt as though someone was assigned to keep an eye on me, but if that was what was needed, I was glad Wayne was the guy tasked with the job.

At the time, I did not realize that principal turnover was so common. The principal who came before me held the position for four years, and the principal before him was there for over a decade. Because of my limited expertise, I was unaware that around 20% of building leaders leave their positions *every year* (Winters, Kisida & Cho, 2023). My district was not assigning me a babysitter; they were investing in me so I could be the effective, long-term principal I wanted to be and that every school needs. I was not given the name of a colleague whom I could call and ask questions (while

they were putting out fires of their own). Instead, I received embedded, in-house assistance as I began a journey that many people were unaware would be difficult until they had actually completed it. Every first-time principal should have this same experience.

Wayne worked there a few days a week in addition to his other responsibilities outside of my building. I will always remember a few of our earlier conversations. He warned me that some people would treat me differently than I had ever been

treated. He gave me advice, saying that some people will always tell me what I want to hear, that some will sabotage my efforts and that some will try to tarnish my reputation in order to protect their own. He advised me to never stop leading with kindness and empathy, but also to make sure my kindness was never taken as a weakness. Speaking *my* truth to those above and below me is crucial, he continued; he had seen too many talented leaders lose the trust of others when they did not. He told me to sell my successes no one else would. I even remember him telling me that when the district spends \$100,000 on mechanical repairs to tell everyone, so they can take pride in knowing that investments were being made. These conversations taught me some valuable lessons as I got started in my administrative career. They have rung true for me ever since and helped me continue to be an effective principal 11 years later.

My first day as a principal was a complete disaster. The schedule was a mess, rooms were double booked, as were some teachers. The PA system, replaced during the summer, didn't work. We had several unfilled teaching positions. It was awful but my mentor still didn't tell me what to do. He

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answered questions if I had them, and he jumped in to help cover rooms and look up schedules. I told him I thought we needed an emergency faculty meeting at the end of the day. He just said it was a good idea and reminded me to be authentic. The day was a disaster, I told my faculty, and it would never happen again. I let them see I was upset, and they appreciated my candor. My mentor shook my hand as I walked off the stage and informed me that the day went much better than I even realized and to never forget how I handled that moment. He went home, and my team and I worked until 5 a.m. to fix the schedules. The next day was much better (minus our exhaustion). I learned a lot that day. Most importantly, I learned that even though I had an awful day, I was able to handle the job. How did I know? Wayne told me I could. Thankfully, he was there to tell me.

This job really is unlike any other. Every new principal should be fortunate enough to have an in-house mentor. Wayne helped me harness my talents and fit them into a system that I was only learning how to navigate. Whether it was how to understand in-district politics or by being a confidant when I had to make difficult personnel decisions, Wayne quietly steered me clear of some heartache in those

early days. Better yet, his words still ring true for me 11 years (and two schools) later. There have been many times when I didn't know what to do, and I referred back to his sage advice *to stay true to myself*. I can still hear him say, "Hey pal, do what you think is best. That's why they hired you."

True mentorship programs for emerging school leaders are not common. A literature review by Watts (2023) found only 45 scholarly articles on the topic. If we want to help new leaders evolve into experienced change agents, we need to find them better support structures. Wayne cannot mentor every new principal in Pennsylvania. However, forward-thinking districts and professional organizations like the PA Principals Association, are diligently working to assist those who are willing to take the keys to a school and the pressure that comes with them. Experienced principals should continue to seek out new colleagues and offer them mentorship and guidance. If you are reading this during your first year as a principal, or as you prepare for an interview (where you will not say you are too inexperienced), advocate for the help you need and don't be ashamed when it is offered. A mentor is an investment, and if we want to stabilize the world of education, we need to invest in leaders who can do so.

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