Activity Guide

Leader-to-Leader Mentors

Grooming an assistant principal to lead a school is a privilege for any principal and enables him or her to launch a colleague’s successful career and leave a larger mark on the field as well. Although assistant principals are ultimately responsible for their own professional growth, principals must not underestimate their responsibility to help train aspiring principals.

To prepare assistant principals to lead schools of their own means giving them opportunities to see all aspects of how to run a school. Principals need to provide experiences, give constructive feedback, and identify professional development opportunities. Most importantly, principals must model the way to lead people. Assistant principals need explicit professional guidance as they learn the skills necessary to become principals.

In this article, the authors interviewed 10 principals who are helping their assistant principals prepare for promotion to the principalship and determining which experiences effectively groom assistant principals. On the basis of the comments and experiences of these principals, the authors have identified some specific strategies that help “build the bench.”


Large Group Activity

- Provide participants with copies of the article, “Next in Line: Preparing Assistant Principals for the Principalship.” Assign the article as individual reading prior to the activity.

- After convening the large group, ask each participant to identify a partner with whom they will practice a listening dyad (depending on the size of the group, these may also be triads).

- Ask participants to discuss, with a partner, the following prompt: Based on what I read in the article (or learned previously), what practices or strategies do I need to implement or improve to assure that my assistant principal is effectively prepared for the role of principal?
Establish the following listening protocol:

1. Each person is given equal time to talk.
2. The listener does not interpret, paraphrase, analyze, give advice, or interrupt with a personal story.
3. The listener captures speaker’s major ideas on sticky notes. One per note.
4. Confidentiality is maintained.

Each person has two minutes to respond to the prompt. Ask the listener to recapture the speaker’s major practices/challenges/concerns on individual sticky notes.

The facilitator signals when two minutes have elapsed and the pairs change roles.

When the listening time is over, ask participants to post the notes on large chart paper available on walls around the room. Allow time for pairs to review the work of others. Encourage participants to capture additional ideas on sticky notes that they would like to add to their own collection of strategies.

Facilitate a full group discussion. Ask participants: How did this process work for you? What was the most difficult thing about the process? How/when might you use the process at your school to encourage focused faculty conversation or problem-solving?

**Extend and Apply**

Although all principals are generally aware of their responsibility for modeling and preparing assistant principals for the leadership role, the necessary intentional, structured guidance can often get lost in the challenges of day-to-day school administration. As a mentor to an aspiring principal, new assistant principal, or other school leader, what strategies and experiences have you identified are needed for success in the current position or in a future position?

Principals can benefit from focused opportunities to specifically identify the scheduling, professional development, modeling, and feedback practices most likely to assure the solid preparation of assistant principals. After viewing the “requirements of the job” sticky notes, develop a list of needed experiences for success in the new position. Consider which skills and strategies you are prepared to provide. Who on staff could be identified to provide experiences and support in the other skill areas?

Select an aspiring staff member or an assistant principal who could benefit from your expertise and experiences. Provide an opportunity for him or her to talk about practices and identify gaps. Create a more intentional and effective plan for supporting the growth of this assistant principal under your supervision.