

Mentors for Principals

ALLAN S. VANN

I feel strongly that every principal needs a mentor. Let me draw upon my own experience and what I have observed from colleagues to explain why.

When I first sought to leave the classroom for the principalship, I never envisioned that I would not be able to make the leap directly. I "knew" what an outstanding teacher I was, I "knew" I had the required skills to be a successful principal, and I "knew" districts would be climbing all over themselves to hire a catch such as me. It didn't take me long to learn that I "knew" precious little about reality! No matter how close I got to being hired, my lack of previous full-time administrative experience became the deciding factor against me.

Consequently, I started to apply for assistant principalships. Soon I met with success. When I proudly embarked upon my first full-time administrative position, my first meeting with the assistant superintendent for personnel went something like this:

Allan, you'll be working under Mike, the most organized, best "teaching principal" I've ever known. He'll put you through hell, and you may feel you'll never be able to take the pressure. You'll come to resent the work load he'll give you. But, I guarantee that in two or three years you'll be qualified to become a principal anywhere in this country, and you'll be a damn good one because of the training Mike will give you.

Those words could not have been

truer! There was no such thing as "slack time" under Mike. It was work, work, work—prepare for every eventuality and never, absolutely never, settle for anything less than perfection. The pace was incredible, but I learned from a master. I even learned from our disagreements. Mike taught me so much.

I liken the apprenticeship afforded as an assistant principal to having one's first house. That's where I learned to paint, became adept at making cabinets, discovered all that one learns upon moving from an apartment to a first house—and learned valuable lessons from many mistakes. It's much the same serving as an assistant principal. Opportunities to learn from the mistakes you will inevitably make, when consequences can be minimized by a principal, are truly golden ones. If you make a serious error in judgment, the principal will be there to straighten things out. If you are woefully ignorant of how to handle a new situation, an experienced principal is nearby for guidance and advice. Occasions to observe how a seasoned principal handles the touchiest and most delicate issues are truly experiences not to be missed.

Less than two years after beginning my assistant principalship, I obtained my first principalship. I have been a principal for eight years. Now that I mingle frequently with other principals and we swap stories, I find that most of us cherish our experiences as assistants. Although we may disagree with some specific mentor practices, none of us would deny the value of those few years spent as assistant principals. That is when we learned how to be administrators, how to deal with the myriad functions we would later perform on our own as principals, and how to recover from snafus and setbacks that were, in many cases, our own

doing. We are all much more knowledgeable—and much more polished—as a result of having had those opportunities.

No textbook on the principalship, no college course, no amount of discussion with anyone can substitute for "action under fire." The reality of serving as a principal today means dealing with increasing demands upon one's time and energies by a variety of constituencies. Although internships are a requirement in virtually every state, their quality often leaves much to be desired. Part-time internships whereby one is protected from these unending pressures do not allow one to fully experience life as a principal. For that matter, even a full-time assistant principalship doesn't do that, but it does allow for participation in most principal activities. Further, an on-the-job relationship with a mentor

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principal can fill in all but the smallest of the remaining gaps.

Serving as an assistant principal need not be a prerequisite for a principalship, but I would certainly recommend that experience to anyone able to obtain it. Under the watchful and caring eyes of a mentor, the potential for mistakes due to inexperience or ignorance is greatly reduced and, conversely, the potential for success is greatly enhanced. □

Allan S. Vann is Principal, James H. Boyd Elementary School, Elwood Union Free School District, 286 Cuba Hill Rd., Huntington, NY 11743.

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