

Making the Case for Mentoring

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CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

- ◆ *The Importance of the Principalship*
- ◆ *Needed: Principals at All Levels, in All Communities*
- ◆ *Shortage in Applicants for the Principalship*
- ◆ *Rewards and Challenges of the Principalship*
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This chapter discusses the importance of the principalship, the needs of all new principals, and the number of new principals needed at all levels of public schools. Factors contributing to the growing need for new principals are explored, with examples from throughout the United States. The types of situations and issues new principals face are also considered, making it abundantly clear how challenging it is for new principals to enter school communities and be effective leaders.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PRINCIPALSHIP

Many educators and parents believe that the principal is the key to an excellent school. According to a recent report, “Virtually all superintendents (99%) believe that behind every great school there’s a great principal” (Public Agenda, 2001, p. 21). Many parents believe that the principal determines school quality, thinking “As goes the principal, so goes the school.”

There is significant research about the importance of the principalship and the impact school leaders have on student achievement and the wellness of the school community. In her research on highly effective principals, McEwan (2003) comments, “Policymakers have discovered that teachers, tests, and textbooks can’t produce results without highly effective principals to facilitate, model, and lead” (p. xxi). Many fine educators have left the classroom, drawn by the challenges and possibilities of being a principal. They know that being a principal is a unique opportunity to impact the lives of students, teachers, parents, and even whole communities.

When new principals are appointed, members of the school community may experience a variety of emotions, including curiosity, relief, apprehension, frustration, and/or excitement. Students may worry about possible changes in discipline policies, for example. Teachers may fear a loss of autonomy with a new principal. Parents may be concerned about their access to the new administrator. Other district principals may be wary of a newcomer who could garner the community’s attention, while others are relieved to have the attention off themselves. Central office administrators may be counting on the new principal to implement districtwide initiatives and carry their vision to the community at large. Will this person be someone who is able to meet the multiple challenges of the principalship?

How do newly appointed principals feel? With the initial elation about their appointment, they may be hopeful, eager, and possibly impatient to get started. They may also be nervous and uncertain. As they begin their new positions, how prepared are they for the diversity of demands they will encounter? For example, before the opening of school, they might have to deal with

- Sudden staff resignation(s)
- Building construction that is still not finished the week before the opening of school
- New student enrollment, including some students with significant requirements, as outlined in their individual educational plans (IEPs)
- No pencils and other necessary supplies
- Computer glitches in the schedule

Within the first month of school they might face

- Teachers demanding that a specialist be reprimanded and transferred because of inappropriate teaching methodologies with young children
- The former interim principal filing a reverse sex discrimination suit against the school board, claiming that the only reason the new principal was hired was because she was female
- Teachers acknowledging that the custodian doesn’t do routine cleaning and maintenance in their classrooms, but they are afraid to complain because in their experience, if they do, their favorite belongings are likely to disappear from their classrooms

- Parents demanding that their child be transferred to another classroom because the teacher is humiliating the child in class
- The fire department trying to schedule time to do fire safety awareness assemblies for the students, but a number of teachers objecting because they don't think the students' time is well spent
- Several teachers reporting to the principal that a teaching colleague is unstable and shouldn't be in front of students
- Bees' nests in the playground equipment
- Parents complaining to the superintendent after the principal spoke to their child after the child was referred by a bus driver for misbehavior
- Teachers complaining that a cafeteria worker is identifying children who receive free lunch as they get their lunch in the school cafeteria
- A teacher asking for an air-quality test because she suspects her classroom is literally making her sick

Are these situations exaggerated? They are not. I can verify every one of them, based on personal experience. Struggling to find equitable solutions to these issues is a challenge to experienced principals, let alone principals who are new to a school community. Too many principals have dealt with these issues in a vacuum, only to later find that their solutions did not solve the problem and antagonized people will remember their dissatisfaction for years to come. The facility with which new principals become respected and trusted educational leaders is crucial, since the entire school community is impacted by their effectiveness. In fact, there is research suggesting that the extent to which principals are socialized in their position in the first year is often an indicator of their future socialization in the school community (Parkay, Currie, Gaylon & Rhodes, 1992).

The principal is the appointed leader of the school community. How many principals, whether they are new to the role and/or new to the school, experience moments of doubt about their ability to be an instructional leader as well as the manager of operations, staff developer, arbiter of justice, chief financial officer, and role model? How many experienced principals wish that more resources had been available to them when they assumed their first principalship? It is imperative that new principals have appropriate support through comprehensive induction and mentoring programs so that they can enter schools confident in their ability to foster a strong learning community and be sensitive to the culture they are joining.

NEEDED: PRINCIPALS AT ALL LEVELS, IN ALL COMMUNITIES

During the next decade, a substantial number of new principals will need to be hired. A number of factors are contributing to the growing need for principals. While some are demographic, the majority relate to the nature and expectations of the principalship.

There is the potential for a crisis in school leadership. Projected retirements and resignations predict an extremely high rate of turnover for school leaders in the coming years. Consider that

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- The U.S. Department of Labor projects that 40 percent of the country's 93,200 principals are nearing retirement (Malone, 2001).

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- The Maryland State Department of Education expected that 45 percent of the state's principalships would be vacant during the 2003–2004 hiring season (Maryland Task Force on the Principalship, 2000).
- In Minnesota, about 75 percent of current principals will retire or leave the profession by 2010 (Institute of Educational Leadership, 2000).

SHORTAGE OF APPLICANTS FOR THE PRINCIPALSHIP

Fewer educators are applying for principalships. How serious is the problem?

Eighty-six percent of the superintendents interviewed in 1998 discussed the difficulty in filling principalship openings in their districts (Institute of Educational Leadership, 2000).

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- Less than 50 percent of Connecticut educators who are certified as administrators currently work as administrators; the median number of applicants for principalships in Connecticut dropped from 60 to 30 (Committee on the Future of School Leadership in Connecticut, 2000).
- Fifty percent of surveyed superintendents indicated a shortage of qualified principal candidates during the previous year—at all levels (elementary, middle, and high school) and in all types of communities (rural, suburban, and urban) (Educational Research Service [ERS], 2000).

There are many reasons cited by principals and superintendents for the shortage of applicants for the principalship. Some of these reasons follow.

Insufficient Compensation

Principals may actually earn less than veteran teachers who are paid at the top of their career ladder. The executive director of the NAESP said, "They trade their 180–190-day work year for 210–240 days per year; they take on enormous responsibilities and headaches; they lose their job security (most principals do not belong to unions); and they may earn just a little more or even less on a day-to-day basis than they do now. It's a no-brainer" (Ferrandino, Tirozzi, 2000). In addition, the amount of money allocated for these positions reflects the decreased value placed on these roles by society at large compared to many other professions. This often demoralizes current principals and dissuades prospective principals from taking the job.

Job Stress

The number of tasks required daily of a principal is understandably a source of great stress. Principals make a strikingly large number of decisions each day, often with little time for full fact-finding and/or reflection. New principals can find it especially difficult to move to the next task without feeling they are shortchanging time given to the previous one. This is particularly the case when they are doing something for the first time or for the first time in a new context. New principals often need strategies to help them handle many tasks and issues simultaneously.

Elementary principals often have the additional stress of being the sole administrator in the school, in contrast to middle and high school principals who often have several layers of administration, including department heads and assistant principal(s). As a result, everyone feels that they need

to speak with the elementary school principal. When principals try to share responsibilities with other school personnel, they may be perceived as avoiding some of their work. New principals often need to learn how to share leadership and build the capacity of teacher leaders and other members of the school community.

Secondary principals are responsible for schools that are typically larger, with many challenges, including facility, budget, and human resource development and evaluation. Principals may feel torn if other building administrators do not share their vision for the school. For example, tenured department chairs are part of an embedded administrative structure that principals inherit when they assume the principalship.

Excessive Demands on Time

The number of hours principals work is increasing dramatically. The position often requires 60–80 hours of work per week, including many evening meetings and events. Worse yet, many principals feel that no matter how many school functions they attend, it is never enough. The Kentucky Association of School Administrators and the Appalachian Education Laboratory (KASA-AEL) found that the top inservice request of new principals was for time management.

In the early years of my first principalship, I took a time management seminar. One suggestion was to block out time for specific tasks in your appointment calendar. When people come and start speaking with you without an appointment, the recommendation was to look at the schedule, look up at the person, and remark, “It says that at 10:00 I am working on the budget. Are you budget?” This would not be well received in most schools. People want their principal to be available when they need help to talk over a concern. Balancing the many role responsibilities with the professional and interpersonal needs of staff and community is challenging. Therefore, principals may need mentors who can help them work toward such a balance.

Principals leaving the profession often say that they want a life outside the principalship. In addition to principals being superb educational leaders, communities want principals who are concerned about their own families and friends, who have interests and hobbies outside of their work, and who take good care of themselves physically. Yet the more that is heaped on the shoulders of principals, the less likely they are able to do all of these things and still feel satisfied that they are meeting their responsibilities as principals. How unfortunate that peoples’ expanding expectations of principals may be driving away some of the individuals that schools most need to attract and retain and may be contributing to the shrinking pool of candidates. These expectations include the following:

Conflicting Demands

Principals work to satisfy the needs of all the constituencies in their school community: students, teachers, support staff, parents, central administration, and community affiliations. At times, satisfying everyone is clearly impossible, as needs may be mutually exclusive. For example, some constituents

- Believe that competition between students in the school is the key to motivation, while others believe children should not be stressed by the achievements of others and should be more focused on their own learning
- Believe that teachers’ salaries should be commensurate with other professions and should receive primary consideration in the school budget, while others believe the amount dedicated to teacher salaries must accommodate adequate funding for arts, technology, athletics, and other educational concerns

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- Advocate for increased taxes to reduce class sizes, while others advocate for focusing on affordable tax limits
- Want community-sponsored programs and services provided during the school day, while others want students to have protected class time for core academics.

Principals often find there isn't a way to honor the wishes, or perhaps demands, of some without alienating others. I once had an angry parent complaining to me about the increase in her water bill. I listened, trying to understand the connection with our school. Finally, I asked why she was telling me this information. "Well, you're a town employee, and the town did this, and I want someone to fix it."

Societal Changes

In order for students to be ready to focus on instruction and learning, they need to be

- Present to take advantage of what their school offers
- Safe, both physically and psychologically, inside and outside of school
- Clothed and fed
- Physically and emotionally healthy
- Trusting that their school is a good place to learn
- Able to study after school so that they may prepare for the next day

Unfortunately, these conditions do not occur for all children because of issues at home or in the community. In response to societal factors that interfere with students arriving at school ready to learn, principals and schools often devote significant amounts of time, money, and effort to students' basic needs so that they will be available to learn. Principals operate programs for before-school and after-school care, breakfast, health care, adult literacy, and English language learning. I know of a principal who drove daily to a student's home to pick him up in the morning because he was school phobic. Another principal had a washing machine installed near the nurse's office so that students who were homeless could have clean clothes. After doing any number of these activities, plus attending sports and musical events after school and in the evening, it takes an exceptional principal to have the stamina to focus on instructional leadership all day, every day.

Accountability Pressures

Accountability has become a major focus of state and federal legislation over the past decade. While it is a very important issue for education, many faculty and administrators are concerned that the legislation and testing requirements are counterproductive. They question the methods prescribed to assess student learning and/or the content that students are required to learn. Debates throughout the country and within districts are time consuming, as is the systemic change that is often necessary to improve student learning. Even when principals are in total agreement with these goals and procedures, these requirements take a significant amount of time and resources that may not be readily available.

Accountability and testing have become major factors that stress principals, particularly since the passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. Principals in every state are responsible for extensive testing schedules and demands related to tasks ranging from the mundane packing and distribution of tests to the complex issues related to reporting and documentation. In some districts, principals have been reassigned or fired when school scores have not improved, regardless of the population challenges or special needs of students. Many principals with whom I've spoken have cited mandatory state testing as one of the major stresses they face.

Another consequence of NCLB is the negative impact on districts' abilities to recruit effective principals for schools that haven't been meeting average yearly progress (AYP) goals. NCLB may have the unintended consequence of driving away talented leaders. Therefore, new principals need mentors who will help them through the procedural as well as curricular aspects of the testing, as well as the emotional and public relations aspects of communicating testing results.

New principals often face overwhelming, stressful, even bleak situations. While it is difficult to obtain attrition rates of new principals, consider these:

- After five years in the district, one-third of all principals hired had left that district (Denver Board of Education, 2002).
- Administrators with less than one year of experience have attrition rates of 23 percent (Illinois State Board of Education, 2001).

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REWARDS AND CHALLENGES OF THE PRINCIPALSHIP

Rewards

Why do educators become principals? They may want to

- Make a difference
- Impact a larger number of people
- Establish a safe environment
- Support teachers
- Ensure that all students learn and achieve
- Build or strengthen a professional learning community
- Work with many constituencies toward a common goal
- Make the decisions rather than be told them
- Find a better way

There are many examples of principals achieving and even surpassing their visions, turning a school around, uniting a community, and/or empowering a faculty. These principals manage to share with the school community their passion for student achievement and teachers' lifelong learning.

For example, a principal who was concerned about every student's proficiency in state-assessed learning goals worked with teachers at each grade level to set quarterly benchmarks for learning, create weekly tests to assess student achievement, and track student progress. He and the staff then instituted a half hour each day for small group remediation or enrichment (any student not attaining proficiency would receive remedial support, and the rest would receive enrichment). Every faculty member worked with a group of eight students or less, thereby ensuring individualized attention and

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student progress. This staffing arrangement was possible because everyone agreed to a 10-minute reduction of preparation time. This school leader had inspired the faculty to see the possibilities and collaborate to achieve them.

Another principal was determined to provide her students with an appropriate learning environment. She and parents painted over graffiti as many Saturdays as it took to keep the school free of defacement. Through this symbolic act, she forged alliances within the community that strengthened the school's voice in the district's policymaking and budget support.

Some of the very factors that make the principalship challenging also provide some of the rewards. Principals are leaders of complex organizations. To be an effective principal is to have a wide range of skills and knowledge.

Challenges

New principals may unexpectedly encounter experiences for which they are unprepared, regardless of their teaching experience and administrative leadership preparation. Principals need readily available support if they are to acquire the tools and insights needed to help them cope with the following:

Isolation

Principals are often unprepared for the isolation that comes from being an educational administrator. For some staff, the fact that the principal writes evaluations and is "the boss" creates a distance that may be new for principals accustomed to having close relationships with colleagues. As an evaluator, it is difficult for a principal to be personal friends with staff members; it could be perceived as creating inequitable relationships. In many schools, teachers are "we" and the principal and district administrators are "they."

Principals are often isolated from other administrators in the system. New principals need to spend a lot of time in their buildings, and as a result, they don't have much time to meet with other new administrators who are facing the same issues or experienced principals who work in the district and could share information about the culture and history of the school system.

The more overwhelmed new principals may feel, the less likely they are to take time away from work to take the "balcony view" of their work and context. Not surprisingly, the perspective and experience of mentors can be invaluable at this crucial time in a new principal's career.

Fear of Being Seen as Incompetent

Principals were often master teachers who were well respected and often loved in their school communities. A teacher who is accustomed to feeling confident and highly capable may suddenly feel uncertain, ineffective, or overwhelmed in a new role as principal. As well, principals may sometimes feel misunderstood or misjudged by people who are attributing motivations and intentions to the principals' behavior and decisions. Therefore, new principals need help seeking answers for questions and asking for help from staff or others without feeling or being perceived as incompetent.

Difficulty Setting Priorities

Principals are concerned about the welfare and growth of both children and adults in the school; therefore, a variety of things need attention. For example, principals might need to balance and/or choose between (a) parents' wishes for immediate access to the principal, (b) teachers' wishes for the principal to be in their classrooms for more frequent and lengthy visits, (c) lunch supervisors wanting

principals in the cafeteria during lunch periods, and (d) central office administrators wanting principals to do extensive committee work to implement systemwide initiatives. New principals are not in a good position to prioritize tasks because they have no way of knowing what is urgent, what or whom can wait, or what will need someone else's attention. New principals often need help determining what is essential to do and when to exercise selective neglect.

The Constraints of Confidentiality

Administrators must honor confidentiality with many people in the school community. While others may speak, sometimes at great length, about negative interactions with the principal or about perceived or poorly made decisions, the principal is not typically at liberty to share the professional or personal circumstances behind her or his decisions, particularly when related to personnel and student behavior. Principals must maintain confidentiality for both ethical and legal reasons. For example, a few situations I've experienced include the following:

- Angry teachers who couldn't understand why I tolerated a teacher's late arrival to school or occasional departure during the school day (I couldn't reveal that the teacher was fighting cancer and dealing with chemotherapy treatments)
- Teachers who worried that a new colleague was incompetent and falsely believed that I wasn't doing anything about it
- Parents, angry about the behavior of their child's classmate, demanded that I immediately remove the classmate from the classroom (it was not appropriate for me to discuss that classmate's educational and psychological challenges nor the specific support and remediation that the teacher was providing in consultation with doctors and other service providers)

Principals, like anyone else, may be inclined to justify decisions and actions that may be misunderstood. However, they often don't have the option to do so, and the court of public opinion may unfairly judge them without benefit of full disclosure of information. A critical skill for principals is to know when to maintain information as confidential. New principals need mentors who can help them work through difficult situations involving confidentiality.

Technical and Logistical Problems

Running schools smoothly requires attention to a lot of details. Principals need to anticipate and address logistical issues before they become problems. Often what might seem like a management issue has larger implications for the practice of the teachers and staff. Becoming a principal could include having to address the following situations:

- Resetting the hall bells in accordance with daylight savings time changes
- Dealing with an outbreak of head lice and the nurse's recommendation to remove all pillows and stuffed furniture from the entire school
- Understanding how to read and utilize a spreadsheet for budget preparation and tracking
- Developing a master schedule
- Working out a complex testing situation so that it has a minimal impact on instruction

Classroom teachers who become new principals often don't have experience dealing with these problems and don't always know where to turn for support while everyone else is turning to them for solutions. New principals need mentors who can share their own experiences and help principals problem-solve or determine where to go for more information or assistance.

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Legal and Moral Responsibilities

The principal is a leader in establishing a safe and accepting learning environment and a stable and moral school culture. Many issues have been added to the responsibilities of schools, including nutrition and health issues, drug education, societal issues such as multiple family structures, AIDS awareness, and computer literacy. For instance, a principal might have to address the following situations:

- Clarifying the rights and responsibilities of high school students cross-dressing and being provocative with football players in the locker room
- Providing a safe environment for a student with life-threatening allergies to peanuts
- Discontinuing the appearance of Santa Claus, who historically had been personified by the head of the school committee
- Balancing issues of free speech with student dress or student publications

Regardless of their personal beliefs, principals have the legal and moral responsibility to uphold the laws of our country and to protect the rights and feelings of students and their families who are in the minority. New principals need mentors who can direct them to find the legal information needed and can provide help in dealing with the delicate interpersonal aspects of difficult situations.

School Culture and History

What is school culture? Schools, like other institutions, have cultures that shape their operations. Although school culture is not written down anywhere, if you've unknowingly violated it, you will soon experience the negative emotions and behaviors your faux pas evokes.

A new principal's arrival is an opportunity for anyone who is dissatisfied with a school policy or practice to try to get it changed. Not knowing the history, a new principal may respond in ways that alienate others while trying to be responsive and demonstrate competence; new principals may inadvertently do something "wrong" or undo something that many people do not want changed. Unfortunately, these "mistakes" may haunt the new principal long after the specific situations are forgotten. As a result, it is imperative that new principals learn about the school and district cultures during the earliest stages of their work. New principals need mentors who will help them anticipate issues related to school or district cultures and help them find ways to resolve missteps the new principal may make. It may also be necessary to balance this walking-on-eggs-hells strategy with the need to understand when it is necessary to break a few eggs as an ethical responsibility.

Heightened Visibility

For new principals, heightened visibility can be disconcerting, as everyone seems to be watching their every move. Each constituency in a school—faculty, students, staff, parents—have their own expectations of the "new" arrival. In addition to expectations about role responsibilities, a new principal may experience behavioral expectations that are culturally based. New principals who have a cultural identity that is in the minority in the school community may rightly feel that they are being watched even more closely (Gupton & Slick, 1996). There were times when I wondered, "What am I doing in a fishbowl if I'm a mammal?"

From my own experiences and those of others, principals need to share information with the staff and community. This is also an effective means of rumor control. Mentors can help new principals write introductory letters as part of their entry plan and can help new principals draw the line between public information and their personal lives.

Principals as Middle Managers

Teachers, students, and parents may think of the principal as the leader and ultimate decision maker of the school. Yet many principals feel bedraggled by trying to implement systemwide initiatives and directives and being responsive to faculty and staff-initiated school endeavors. Principals often wonder when they will be able to implement some of the initiatives they feel are important.

Clearly, the challenges are enormous and the stakes are very high. If that is the bad news, the good news is that the problems have not gone entirely unnoticed. Induction and mentoring programs designed to support new principals can be found throughout the United States, in urban, suburban, and rural districts. Some programs are coming from the top down through legislative actions, while others have been developed by one or two people in a district. They are generally new, vary enormously, and as yet, many of them have just begun to collect data about their effect on principal performance and retention, as well as school improvement and student achievement. More research is needed to better inform these important beginnings.

LEGISLATION LEADS THE WAY

As states begin to grapple with the increasing need for principals and the shortage of qualified applicants, new legislation is emerging to ensure careful attention to the induction of new principals. For once new principals are hired, it is imperative that they are supported in order to enhance their performance and increase the likelihood that they will want to remain in their positions.

Certification requirements for mentoring, or state requirements that school districts revise their evaluation and support of new principals, provide an external force for the establishment or revision of mentoring and/or induction in your district or state. There are significant variations in the ways states approach principal induction and mentoring. Some of these, from Hartzler and Galvin (2003), include the following:

- Mentoring training and a training manual (Kentucky)
- Face-to-face and online mentoring (Louisiana)
- Standards for induction programs (Massachusetts)
- Joint training for mentors and new principals at the beginning of the program (Mississippi)
- Performance assessment (New Jersey)
- The state Department of Education is required to give eligible beginning administrators in qualifying districts in need up to \$3,000 per year to help with program costs (Oregon)
- One-week summer institute and three or more full-day follow-up sessions for training in essential leadership and management skills (South Carolina)
- A 30-day assessment process that requires principals to demonstrate the standards for the Principal Certificate (Texas)
- Development of a customized professional development program developed jointly by the principal, superintendent, university, and mentor (Tennessee)

An example of legislation addressing the need to support beginning administrators is the following excerpt from the State of Iowa, House File 2299, bill introduced: H.J. 319:

Section 1 *New Section.* 256F.1 LEGISLATIVE FINDINGS

1. The general assembly finds and declares that the purpose of school administration is to provide leadership for school improvement and student achievement. Large numbers of

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new principals and superintendents are entering the field of administration just as many experienced administrators retire and expectations for student achievement rise. . . . Research indicates that administrators who have quality mentoring experiences remain in administration longer. Administrator mentoring is also likely to reduce the isolation felt by many new administrators in rural Iowa. Therefore, it is the intent of the general assembly to establish a school administrator mentoring and induction pilot program administrated by the department of education. . . .

2. The department shall adopt rules establishing a grant application process and award criteria. The criteria for a quality school administrator mentoring and induction pilot program shall include, but shall not be limited to, all of the following:

- An effective screening process for mentor applicants
- Coaching tied to the Iowa standards for school leaders developed by the school administrators of Iowa, with increasing school achievement as the cornerstone of the program
- Support networks for new administrators, augmented by use of technology to facilitate networking opportunities
- Systemic support offered through regional coordination by area education agencies with skill-building professional development opportunities
- Time for self-reflection and development of professional growth plans based upon research-validated administrator assessment instruments
- Multiple opportunities for formative assessment, leading to a culminating portfolio for summative evaluation
- Opportunities to observe experienced and successful administrators in the administrator's environs
- Practical assistance in the day-to-day managerial tasks for operating a school

More and more states are identifying the need to support new principals. These initiatives are intended to both enhance new principals' ability to promote high student achievement in their schools and increase the retention of new principals. Legislation is mandating ways to induct new administrators, emphasizing the roles of professional development, observation and networking with successful administrators, and mentoring. National and state reform efforts have also focused public attention on school performance.

As educational leaders, principals are under careful scrutiny by their many constituencies. Considering the potential rewards as well as the challenges principals face, it's clear that there need to be thoughtful and planned initiatives to induct new principals and retain them in the profession. Chapter 2 discusses the components of effective mentoring and induction programs and a variety of ways to support new principals.