Abstract

Beginning principals struggle with the complexity of the job, the limits of their instructional impact, the loneliness of leadership, and the existing culture’s resistance to change. This is a problem in Henderson County Public Schools, in school systems across the state of North Carolina, and nationwide. This problem negatively impacts beginning principals and their respective school communities because they struggle to navigate school leadership transitions, to sustain district initiatives, and to experience consistent individual growth. Students and parents have a right to expect competency from a school principal regardless of their lack of tenure, and districts must decide to be proactive in accelerating the skills on new administrators. Effective mentoring programs can hasten the competency of new school leaders.

Given the absence of legislation, policy, and funding for beginning principal support in North Carolina, Henderson County Public Schools implemented a model designed to grow the leadership capacity of beginning principals in order that the impact of their service is maximized. The design of this purposeful intervention strategically matches beginning principals with mentors, while providing opportunities for professional growth through self-assessment, reflection, and group learning.

Using a Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycle of improvement science, the scholar-practitioners created a scalable model for the mentoring of beginning principals. Experiencing the hire of six new principals in one school year, which marked approximately 25% of the district’s school leadership, scholar-practitioners partnered with the district to implement a structured support plan for these new administrators. Rather than leave their success to chance, Henderson County Public Schools recognized and valued the importance of investing time and resources into leadership development. It is noteworthy that, following the period of initial research, the district has continued with and expanded the model of support. The results of this research inform not only the work of the partner school district, but also the practices of the current and future leadership teams of North Carolina’s 115 systems, who guide over 2,400 principals as they support more than 1.4 million students.