



MENTORING AND NETWORKS —

Sustaining the Profession and the Professional

By Pat Fontana

TRUST. CONFIDENTIALITY. SUPPORT.

These are not only critical aspects of mentorship but are also integral to an education professional's personal and professional development, in every stage of their career. As the usual responsibilities and challenges of an administrative position have continued to be complicated by pandemic uncertainties, having someone to talk to is even more vital.

In essence, mentoring comes in many forms but always has the same basic goal — offering both new and seasoned leaders the support network they need to continue to grow professionally — to not only survive, but thrive.

MEETING TODAY'S CHALLENGES

Across the country, school leaders now face the challenges of the pandemic, in addition to the usual stress of a very demanding job. In New York, many educational leaders are also dealing with continuing uncertainties around the new experiences of mask mandates, remote learning, vaccine requirements, and COVID tests.

Burnout among all school leaders is increasing for these and many other reasons. Principals particularly bear the brunt of the frustration and even danger of current trends, such as TikTok challenges among students and heated board of education policies and meetings.

Lisa Meade, Granville Jr/Sr High School principal and past NYS Principal of the Year, points out the high rate of turnover in the profession. Meade emphasizes that, as school leaders, "we want to be connected." When individuals do not feel connected or supported, they tend to move on.

When a school administrator is struggling with what to do and how to do it, where do they turn? Whether the administrator is new to the leadership role or has been in the position for years, access to a mentor, formally or informally, can make a huge difference.

SAANYS MENTORING

While in-district mentoring can be helpful, offering insight into the culture, history, and routines and procedures of a district, many leaders need and seek out the confidentiality, trust, and objectivity that an experienced external mentor can provide.

The SAANYS Mentor Coaching Service features one-on-one and group mentoring that provides a mentee with a focus on overall professional growth by advancing a mentee's ability to think through challenges and strengthen his or her leadership skills using impactful questioning, active listening, and reflection.

In 1:1 Mentor Coaching, a mentee works with a seasoned professional individually, working collaboratively toward the achievement of mutually

defined goals to develop the mentee's skills, abilities, and thinking. This one-to-one program can benefit the leader who needs that confidential and individualized support that takes place over the course of ten months.

The SAANYS Group Mentor Coaching model provides the opportunity to learn from other mentees as well as the facilitating mentor. Ninety-minute group sessions over ten months are augmented by four one-on-one sessions, all designed to build leadership capacity by identifying strengths and delving into concrete day-to-day situations.

LEARNING BENEFITS MENTEE AND MENTOR

Monticello Central School District mentor coach Maryellen Symer, who retired in July 2019 after 36 years in K-12 education in New York, started working with a mentee in September 2020. She went through the training for the SAANYS Mentor Coaching Service and says, "I don't know how to say enough good things about it." Even with her extensive experience in the field and with a doctorate in educational leadership, she adds that she "still learned from the SAANYS training program."

Joining in the midst of pandemic restrictions presented some challenges for her new endeavor into formal mentoring, since her sessions had to remain virtual. She says she and her mentee "had to build a relationship over the screen. It would have been nicer to have been in person." However, the end result was rewarding for both individuals and the benefits of virtual and frequent connections outweighed the negatives.

When describing her role as a mentor coach, Symer says that "a coach is going to listen to your problems, try to get you to reflect, and develop leadership skills. A mentor teaches you things you didn't know."

Throughout her years in education, Symer says, "I can pinpoint in my head the people who took me under their wings and supported me."

"I ask you a question and you always throw that question back to me. You knew what I had to learn. You knew I had the answers in me. You guided me in finding them."

It's incredibly helpful just to have someone who will listen, she explains.

MENTEE CENTERED

The mentoring relationship benefits both participants. Tom Mangano, Long Beach Public Schools and mentor coach for Brentwood UFSD's group mentoring sessions, says that mentoring "taught me a life lesson." He further explains that "we are in education. We are always learning." Mangano's "entire career has been dedicated to educational leadership." Yet, he says, "I've gained more from my mentees than they have gained from me. It's tremendously enlightening."

Although mentoring is "great for all persons concerned," Mangano, who also serves as the director of student teaching and clinical field experience at Stony Brook University, emphasizes that the "whole idea of making this mentee centered is very important." One of his one-to-one mentees was Lorie Beard, principal at Long Beach Middle School. Beard says that her sessions with Mangano gave her the opportunity to really "dig into what I'm doing."

Beard emphasizes that "you don't always know how well you're doing or that what you're doing is the right thing." It's important for leaders at all stages of their career to have a mentor, someone to "support your ideas and give you validation." She says that Mangano cheered her on, giving her suggestions as she worked through her thoughts and ideas.

SELF-DISCOVERY AND SELF-ACTUALIZATION

As for his part in the mentor-mentee relationship, Mangano says that his role is to provide others "with the opportunity to find their

own strengths.” Much of his work as a mentor coach, with an emphasis on mentoring, is providing mentees the opportunity for self-discovery and self-actualization. When asked about his success stories, he replies that “all of my mentees are my success story.”

Mangano relays that his mentees “will often tell me, ‘I ask you a question and you always throw that question back to me. You knew what I had to learn. You knew I had the answers in me. You guided me in finding them.’” He describes his approach as Socratic, when the mentee realizes they have the ability to find the answers within themselves.

As mentioned, mentoring sessions can be one-on-one or in a group setting. Often, Mangano adds, the mentees in a group meeting will learn from each other. In addition, “their comfort level goes up and their anxiety level goes down. In these challenging times, that’s exactly what we need.”

The group members typically will come up with likely alternatives for their challenges, not necessarily solutions. They refer to their situations

as challenges, rather than obstacles, so they are not characterized as negatives. Everyone in the group, Mangano says, realizes “they’re all in this very challenging situation and it’s not going to get easier.”

The importance of having others in similar positions to turn to cannot be overstated, particularly now. Mentees are reassured that they are not alone in their concerns, that they all have a great deal in common, no matter how long they have been in their leadership position. Again, the trust is integral. As Mangano explains, the “most important thing is to establish an atmosphere of trust.” It is that sense of mutual trust and support that makes the difference to each leader in the group.

Just as the mutual and candid sharing of ideas and concerns makes the difference in the group session, trust and confidentiality are also critical in one-on-one sessions. Mangano says that the key is that the “mentee has full confidence that everything is based on mutual trust. We can communicate with each other about specific concerns.”

PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL NETWORKS

While a professional mentoring program is an ideal option, a PLN, which can mean a professional learning network or a personal learning network, can prove invaluable as well. Communication within the network is usually virtual and immediate, conducted via the messaging app Voxer and especially the social media platform Twitter.

Donald F. Gately, EdD, Jericho Middle School principal and member of the SAANYS board of directors, explains that the virtual connections provide some clarity, saying that “we would probably interrupt each other a lot in person.” He adds, “I can’t imagine doing this job if I didn’t have such a great PLN.”

Part of a PLN that includes people from all across the country, Gately points out that he can access them in minutes on the virtual platform. Messages recorded on Voxer and posted on Twitter bring more immediate responses than trying to

WE’RE WITH YOU FROM
ORIENTATION TO
GRADUATION.

AND EVERY MOMENT
IN BETWEEN.

Elevating student experiences
for more than a century.

vipbranding.com • herffjones.com



VARSITY BRANDS

BSNSPORTS™

VARSITY SPIRIT

HERFF JONES

VIP BRANDING
POWERED BY VARSITY BRANDS

arrange an in-person meeting at a coffee shop.

Gately uses the term “personal” to refer to his learning network, as he says it “captures more of the emotional support you get from people invested in your success.” His PLN consists of about 12 to 13 principals, most of whom he has met in person at various conferences. He listens and responds to messages on Voxer during his commute to and from work. He emphasizes that they have “become a really great community of people who support each other.”

Likewise, high school principal Lisa Meade says that a PLN can be a significant part of mental wellness for an educational leader. In particular, she points out the benefits of “being able to vent to someone not in my school.” The group is safe as each person can “process problems without being judged. There is a huge amount of trust that we take for granted in that group.”

Meade also uses her long commute time to review and respond to Voxer messages. Of her connections on Twitter, all of whom are education professionals, she says, “I literally have about eight people I could reach out to today and they would respond with a solution.”

GETTING TOGETHER AGAIN

Dr. Don Gately also recommends participating in EdCamps whenever possible. The EdCamp, billed as an “unconference,” brings together teachers and school leaders who have insights to share and who want to learn from each other. An EdCamp does not have a structured schedule — the content is determined the morning of the event, by the people participating in it.

Gately says the EdCamp has become a “kind of personal learning network.” He adds that he is able to “count on them for solutions to problems.” EdCamps are held both in person and virtually. The event participants become an informal mentoring group for professionals at all levels.

And thankfully, in-person conferences are also back! After a year or two of having only virtual connections,

school administrators missed, and perhaps even forgot the value of, professional gatherings and networking. SAANYS was back in person for its annual fall conference this past October and participants were notably gratified to be physically in the same room connecting and sharing once again. “The opportunity to network with fellow colleagues and meet new people in the field was much-needed interaction in a world that often feels isolating,” reflected one attendee.

MODERN MENTORING — NOT JUST FOR NEWBIES

The mentoring relationship and other professional networks, whether between a new leader and a recently retired professional or among experienced administrators, can serve to guide everyone involved toward the solutions, comfort, and camaraderie needed in these unprecedented times.

Meade reinforces the idea that a supportive level of trust is critical at all stages of a person’s career. Now in her 29th year as an educator, she says about her PLN group of mentors and mentees, “I can’t imagine doing my job without them. I look really smart.”

PAT FONTANA is a business writer and communications trainer with a background in corporate training and community college instruction. Her business, WordsWorking, focuses on improving workplace communications, concentrating on the fundamentals of human interactions.

PLN TIPS

Mentors and mentees who participate in PLNs agree that the level of trust and support of those in their group is unmatched. The convenience of communicating with someone virtually, through the app Voxer or the social media platform Twitter, gives participants immediate access to questions and answers. Some tips they shared include:

- You can start your own PLN
- Use the connections you’ve made through social media or by participating in conferences
- Invite only trusted connections to participate in the PLN
- Keep the group small, limiting participation to eight to 12 people
- Choose group members from different school districts
- Listen to Voxer messages on your morning and evening commutes
- Respond to messages promptly

Voxer is a walkie-talkie messaging app, which can be used as a type of voicemail system. Listeners can hear messages as they are being recorded or save them to review later.

Twitter can also be used to develop a PLN group. Lisa Meade says that, although she follows and is followed by many people on the social media platform, “Those I interact the most with I count as my PLN. There are about 15 people I would count on the most.”