



Being Your Own Best Advocate

Assistant principals must seek out the experiences and feedback they need to grow their leadership skills and meet career goals

By Ian P. Murphy



Assistant principal is a supporting role that itself should come with lots of supports. But career development doesn't happen automatically or with on-the-job training alone; APs often need to advocate for their own growth and advancement on their leadership journeys, whether they expect that journey to continue to the principal's seat or not.

Formal supports aren't uniformly available to assistant principals even when a district has a principal preparation program in place, says "The Role of Assistant Principals: Evidence and Insights for Advancing School Leadership," a research review commissioned by The Wallace Foundation and published by Vanderbilt University/Mathematica.

APs in rural areas and smaller districts are less likely to have access to mentoring, professional development, and networking than assistant principals in larger districts. While further study is needed to measure the efficacy of such supports, the researchers say, assistant principals feel they are important. And regardless of the school setting, it's up to APs to seek out these opportunities.

"If you don't advocate for yourself, you won't learn what you want to learn," says Zachary Korth, assistant principal of Jose de Diego Community Academy in Chicago. "Craft your vision and mission for yourself as an individual leader. What led you to want to impact a school's culture and instructional leadership? Make sure you bring the change you want to bring."

Principal recently asked three school leaders for their advice on advocating for one's own leadership journey, on the job and off.

On-the-Job Training

Learning on the job is a convenient place to start career self-advocacy. Whether or not your district has an aspiring principal or pipeline program in place, you are working in concert with the principal, and he or she can help you access the experiences and PD you'll need to advance. Build that relationship.

Talk to your principal. "The assistant principal should have a conversation with their principal about the experiences they would like to have in order to build their leadership capacity," says Dr. Shanessa Fenner, principal of William

T. Brown Elementary School in Spring Lake, North Carolina. “APs should also take the initiative to look for new solutions to solve issues at school. Take advantage of any opportunity to learn and grow in leadership skills and abilities.”

Seek an array of experiences. “I would recommend working at multiple levels,” says Todd Stanzione, assistant principal of Waugh Chapel Elementary in Odenton, Maryland. “I have been an AP at the middle and elementary levels, and this has been a tremendous learning experience. You get to see the commonalities that exist and also different structures. You are very connected to instruction, the needs of students and teachers, and families.”

Listen to learn. “Your toolbox of experiences needs to include having critical conversations with other adults and getting buy-in from them,” Korth says. “Listening is obviously huge, but it’s vital to have input from teachers and pivot if it’s not the right time. Make sure you are at an appropriate space and place where you can have the most fruitful conversations to make change and progress.”

Recognize the little lessons. Some career advancement will come from above: Your principal might recommend you for a leadership training program, for example. But everyday experiences can help, too. “You might have had an experience where you had a difficult parent,” Korth says. “That becomes an experience where you learn something about yourself.”

The Feedback Loop

Operating in parallel with input that relates directly to the tasks at hand, mentorship might be

provided by the district or sourced independently; either way, it can provide the AP with advice separate from formal evaluations. APs can also look to outside sources to ask for advice or an unbiased assessment of the choices they make.

Learn to like feedback. “As an AP, it’s hard to receive feedback because you truly give your heart and soul to what you’re doing, but it is necessary because you aren’t always aware of how to improve,” Stanzione says. “In my first two years, my mentor—provided by the school district—watched me interact with the students, parents, and teachers. We would discuss the interactions and, at times, she would challenge my thinking. I still keep in touch with her.”

Check your progress. If in doubt, ask students, teachers, and families for honest input. “Instead of trying to infer how someone is feeling, I like to ask the person directly,” Stanzione says. “Then, if a decision that I am standing by is not popular, I do my best to explain

why I made [it]. I will revisit the values of the school district, PSEL standards, and our district’s equity policy to get a better sense of my core values and those of the organization. Understanding the mission of the organization you work for is important to crafting your own personal leadership identity.”

Establish outside relationships.

“I seek out people at the central office and on social media who bring a lot of energy and enthusiasm to their jobs,” Stanzione says. “I look for people who are willing to challenge the status quo and embrace change, and I try to build relationships with them. There are a lot of brilliant educators in your school, district, and beyond; don’t hesitate to strike up a conversation with them.”

Network socially. Korth says Twitter has been invaluable in helping him hone a vision for his career and school. NAESP chats; introductions to author/educators such as Hamish Brewer, Adam Welcome, and Todd Nesloney; and topical

9 Career Questions

Fenner offered several questions that can help guide APs toward the proper career-building experiences based on their ambitions:

- What led you to want to impact a school’s culture and instructional leadership?
- Am I a career assistant principal or an aspiring principal?
- What am I doing well, or what are my strengths?
- What are the areas in which I need improvement?
- What are some areas in which I would like or need more hands-on experiences?
- Am I getting the job done?
- What do I enjoy most about my position?
- Am I dissatisfied with any aspects of the job?
- Is this occupation part of my purpose-driven life?

hashtags “allowed me to collaborate, communicate, and bounce ideas off people as I was seeking an assistant principalship,” he says. “[It helped convince] me that what I was doing and thinking were things that the kids needed.”

“Anyone whose opinion I value, I will ask for feedback,” Korth adds. “I have other assistant principals whom I connect with on Twitter to talk to about my goals and the strategies I’m using: ‘What have you done to do XYZ?’ Finding two or three people who you can trust to give you honest feedback can help you determine if your goals are really realistic.”

Make a Plan

If you can set schedules and make plans for the principal, teachers, and students to follow, you can do the same for yourself. Flesh out your goals and note the steps involved in reaching them, including any targets or benchmarks you’d like to see yourself achieve.

Define your goals. “Let’s say the goal is to become a principal,” Fenner says. “Next, you will define the steps and resources that will be carried out to reach that goal. The defined steps should entail things such as professional development and training, being a part of an AP program that builds your leadership skills, etc. Then establish a deadline for when the steps will be completed. Last but not least, you should have a measure to evaluate progress.”

Get comfortable. “When setting goals, I have to feel comfortable with the progression of my skills, the feedback I am receiving, and the relationships that I have formed,” Stanzione says. “If I am fortunate to lead a school one day, I need to feel that my foundation is solid, and I want my supervisors to believe in me. I suggest talking with the people who love you, then examining if the pressure of leadership is something you are comfortable with.”

Find the time. Regardless of other responsibilities and independent of any downtime you take to recharge, set aside time exclusively for leadership development. “It takes a lot of time, effort, and change to make things happen,” Fenner says. “You have to remain focused and work hard. Make time for your career development, and continue being a lifelong learner who will become highly skilled in your role.”

“If it is important to you, you will find the time,” Korth adds. “That is not to say to bend over backward and kill yourself trying to squeeze every iota out of an opportunity—find a balance.” ●

Ian P. Murphy is senior editor of Principal magazine.

More Resources for APs

Last month’s *APs Rising* e-newsletter featured a recap of a recent webinar from Project Implicit, “Commit to Being a Bias-Free Leader.” The session offered an examination of cognitive bias, its effect on decision-making, and ways leaders can mitigate its impact. Watch for more coverage of topics you can use to improve your practice in your email inbox, and stay up to date on all of NAESP’s resources and events at naesp.org!



This article is brought to you in partnership with The Wallace Foundation. The foundation works to foster equity and improvements in learning and enrichment for children and in the arts for everyone. Research commissioned by and produced by the foundation is available without charge from the Knowledge Center at wallacefoundation.org.