

Mentorship: Companions on the Journey

By Barbara McMorrow, Professional Development Director

The role of the principal in our Catholic schools is undoubtedly more challenging now than at any other time in our history. Meeting the diverse academic, social and spiritual needs of our students, providing the necessary resources, support and leadership for our staffs and ensuring the meaningful engagement of our parent communities are all awesome responsibilities that can often seem overwhelming.

The palpable shift of principal from manager to instructional leader that began with the grass roots and is now a direction of the Ministry is a welcomed affirmation of why we became educators in the first place.

But ensuring that our teachers utilize effective instructional practices that will enhance the success of all our students in learning environments that are deeply caring and respectful and well managed is something we cannot do on our own. It requires a network of both lateral and vertical support that allows for ongoing meaningful dialogue and professional development. It means that school boards need to embrace at all levels the reality of a genuine

Catholic professional learning community and increase in practice, not just rhetoric, the ideal of shared and distributive leadership.

One approach that more school boards could take to help build capacity in operating as truly collaborative learning organizations is to implement a formal, system-wide mentorship program with a clear focus on nurturing both new and experienced principals as authentic lead learners.

Of course we know from experience and from the researchers that informal mentorship already takes place in all organizations. Often the informal mentorship can be an excellent source of support, growth and inspiration. It can also tend towards a form of minimal survivorship. A truly effective mentorship program must go beyond the "old folks teach the new folks" model. There has to be recognition that mentoring is a form of learning that requires proactive participation from the mentor and the protégé if the goal is to promote leadership and not just "survivorship". If done well, formal mentorship can be a powerful means of job-embedded professional development.

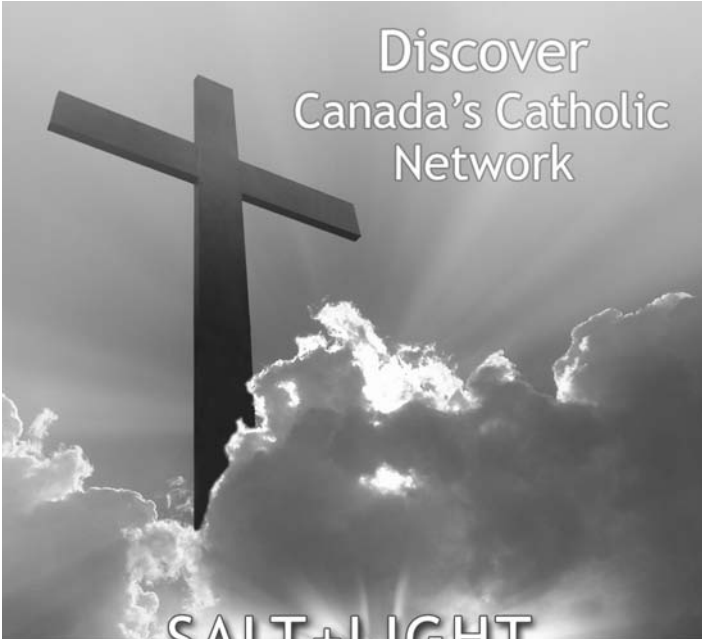


A successful system-wide mentorship program for school administrators requires the commitment of all the stakeholders within a board. It is essential that the school district has a clear focus and commitment. Supervisory officers should be involved with the facilitators in the planning and preparation of the program. They need to participate in the wise and judicious selection of the mentors and in matching them appropriately with the protégés. Then they must be afforded the time and the ongoing encouragement to allow their professional relationship to grow in support of their mutual goals.

Training of mentors is also integral to an effective program. Enhancing listening, coaching, modeling and facilitation skills is important. For successful leaders, these skills are often intuitive, or develop over time, but explicit instruction in these areas can attune mentors to these skills and give them the necessary tools to articulate them. The process of sharing what we know with another often clarifies our beliefs and actions. This builds confidence and a sense of efficacy. Encouraging their protégé to ask questions, to seek guidance and assistance, inspires courage in the protégé to reach further and go deeper. Mentorship then becomes a mutually beneficial experience which lessens significantly the sense of isolation of school leadership. It emphasizes the importance of a true collegiality centered on our professional goals of making a positive difference in the communities that we serve.

Since Homer's time, the word *mentor* has evoked the image of a loyal, wise and trusted friend whose knowledge and experience is generously shared in a trusted relationship to help another learn and grow. In the Odyssey, Ulysses entrusts his young son, Telemachus to his good and caring friend, Mentor. During Ulysses' twenty-four year absence, Mentor serves as a wise and trusted teacher, counselor, and guardian to the young prince. He helps Telemachus to understand and embrace the challenges and difficulties that lie before him. This notion of mentorship also has its roots in both the Old and New Testaments: the stories of Eli and Samuel (Samuel 1:3), Naomi and Ruth (Ruth 1:6-22) and Elizabeth and Mary (Luke 1: 39-56) are just a few examples taken from our Catholic faith tradition that illustrate poignantly the importance of mentorship in our life's journey as we discern our path by seeking support and affirmation. Jesus was keenly aware of this when he "summoned the twelve and began to send them out, two by two..." (Mark 6:8).


A caring relationship rooted in trust with a sense of shared vision and a respect for the wisdom, experience and gifts of the other is key to successful mentorship. Investing time and resources in the planning and preparation of such a meaningful, formalized program to support both new and experienced leaders in our Catholic educational system makes good sense. We need leaders who are able to demonstrate a high level of instructional expertise, emotional intelligence and cultural competency in a time of rapid and unprecedented change. Mentorship programs designed and delivered in the spirit and faith of the gospels can go a long way to making this a reality.



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