



EPISODE 4

Mentors Support Novice Principals on the Job

Lucas Held: I'm pleased to welcome our three guests today, who are from Gwinnett County, Georgia. Glenn Pethel is assistant superintendent for leadership development for the Gwinnett County Public Schools in Georgia. Vivian Stranahan was an elementary school principal in Gwinnett for 14 years and now is back working as a mentor to new principals. And Tamara Perkins is a novice principal whom Vivian is mentoring.

Gwinnett, which is near Atlanta, is one of the six school districts participating in Wallace's Principal Pipeline Initiative. And 89% of Gwinnett's 139 schools are led by a graduate of the district's own aspiring leaders program. But the district realizes that novice principals would benefit from support once they got on the job. So the district expanded its leader mentor corps to work with brand new and novice principals. And one of the findings of an ongoing evaluation of this initiative is that novice principals felt benefits, and those benefits were immediate from mentoring. So, Glenn, welcome. Why don't you tell us why mentoring new principals is important?

Glenn Pethel: I will, thank you so much. So we know that even with all of our efforts, and all of the strategies to prepare principals for that role, that like most of us, once we're on the job, the value and the benefit of having someone who can support us, provide us with additional emotional support, provide us with factual information, it's really, really important. And we've learned that, as we've expanded our mentor corps from three leader mentors to the current number of 12. So we've seen the value of that work, that again, really, really reinforces the things that we've done to prepare individuals for the role.

Lucas Held: How does the leader mentor corps work, Glenn, and how do you match up mentor to a mentee, and what are the five practices that they're focusing on?

Glenn: So the matching process is much like it is in anything else in life. It's finding best fit. And best fit includes, what are past experiences, what are interests, how do our personalities mesh along the way. Certainly with school leaders, it's ensuring that the person has practical what we would call on-the-ground or boots-on-the ground experience. So level experience is important in that matching process. But it starts with looking, assessing the needs of the mentee, the person that we're going to support. So what are the particular areas perhaps that they need more support, or that we need to focus on? And then I look at the available corps of leader mentors, and begin to consider what I know about those individuals. Again, a matching process. And in the end, hopefully, putting the two people together, making the introductions, and again, being very clear about what we hope this relationship will be about, and the kind of results that we'll see.

Lucas Held: So it sounds like it's really wonderfully individualized. And like any good relationship, there can be a great fit. And maybe less great, otherwise. Are there some common practices that the mentors are focusing on?

Glenn Pethel: Absolutely. So one of the things that a new principal really needs to do is to help work with the staff to shape the vision. So what is it that we are looking for in terms of student performance? And shaping that vision means that you're bringing people along. In other words, you're gathering momentum, you're gathering support. The second pivotal practice that we want to see is that this new principal is able to create a climate. A climate that is conducive for teachers, certainly conducive for students. So we often refer to this as a climate that is hospitable to all of the stakeholders in education. Obviously, we want to see our new principals creating a culture of leadership. So the same culture perhaps that they were a part of, that they grew up, with people encouraging them to take on new roles and responsibilities. We want them to be focused on improving instruction. So, being out in the hallways, in the classrooms, observing, and listening carefully. And being reflective, and helping teachers in particular to be reflective about their practice.

And finally, a really important area is that of managing processes, people, and data. So knowing what student performance data tells us is important. But again, some of the process, you've got to make sure kids get off the buses and out of the cars safely. You need to make sure that when we have fire drills that kids are out of the buildings the way they should be. It means that when we have opportunities to employ support staff, that we're doing that extremely well and very effectively.

Lucas Held: Well, that's a terrific list. And let's turn to Vivian. So you're a mentor to new principals, and out of those areas that Glenn mentioned, are there particular ones that are more pressing than others?

Vivian Stranahan: There are. As a principal begins his or her tenure, certainly there's the focus on transitioning. So the new principals or the novice principals were highly effective as assistant principals. They knew their task. They worked closely with their principal. In our case in Gwinnett, they also had the advantage of being part of the principal preparation program or the pipeline program. They've had a residency by that point as well. So our focus is on transitioning. We look at thinking systematically, looking at managing data, just as you were mentioning, managing people, getting to know teachers and their strengths, getting to know the community as well. But as that relationship moves on, we really focus a great deal on dispositions of leadership. So we're looking at personal behaviors as the school leader. We're looking at communication. Situational problem solving. Resiliency. Because the principals as we embed in their work are dealing with a lot of different challenging situations. And by working and walking alongside the principals, we're helping them to look at each of those situations from a lens of greater purpose. So they can instructionally build their skills.

Lucas Held: Very interesting. So just to paraphrase that, and correct me if I'm mishearing that, in a sense the first phase is about establishing relationships, getting embedded, understanding the environment, and then the second phase is really becoming

increasingly reflective about how my own leadership behavior is contributing to consistently excellent teaching. Did I hear that right?

Vivian Stranahan: You did hear that right. I think the only tweak on that would be that these often happen concurrently. So we don't end one phase and then begin another. But it is always about embedding in the work, and taking a step back, so you build that reflective piece of the craft of being a leader.

Lucas Held: So, Tamara, speaking of that reflective craft, this is your third year as an elementary principal, after years as an assistant principal, where we hear you were a star already, and a teacher before that. So, how did having Vivian as your mentor help you when you became a principal?

Tamara Perkins: When you're a classroom teacher, you have this large group of peers who are able to support you in your work. Even as an assistant principal, you have partners working alongside you, but you also have your principal, who is helping to direct your work. And as an assistant principal, it's more task oriented. When you move into the role of the principal, you are the one and only in the building. You do have peers, but they are in other buildings dealing with their own situations. So having a mentor literally from the day that you're named, and you're standing in front of your staff, and you're introduced, help you with the transition, with working with the principal at that time, who was going to be transitioning out, and I would be coming in. Helping you to maintain your focus about what are the key things that you need to keep your eye on as the new principal, questions that are good things to ask as you're preparing to take over. And how to start to wrap up your work as an assistant principal, but start to meet with the key leaders in your community.

Making yourself very visible, meeting your children, getting to know your staff members. And as the school year goes along, and different pieces of the job evolve, staffing concerns, budgets, things that as an assistant principal you kind of have an idea that they're out there, but they're really not part of your day to day work. But when you have someone who has literally sat in the seat and has done the same work that you are now working on, is just very reassuring. Even though they are not directing your work, but it's just someone that you can either think out loud with in a very objective, non-judgmental, and even sometimes when you're in difficult situations, it's someone who may not be as emotionally invested in it as you are. And so they're able to kind of have a listening ear, maybe ask some guided questions. But I think the biggest aha moment as a principal is that now you are trying to move your work through other people, and how to figure out that balance of honoring the work that's already taken place before you arrived, but also understanding that your job also is to establish your vision, but how to find or develop those relationships to help to get the people in the building to help you move the work. Because you absolutely cannot do it without them.

Lucas Held: That sounds like a terrific definition of leadership itself, in a complex organization, which we know that schools are. Glenn, say a little bit about what you have done, and how you have cultivated and sustained support for programs like the mentor program, that are focused on strengthening and supporting the work of principals.

Glenn Pethel: One, we start with data, with evidence, that when you do provide mentoring and coaching, that it does have an impact, a positive impact. In other words, we achieve a desired result. Because a leader-mentor employee is in place, and a young, inexperienced principal is able to do their work. They're able to make those transitions that Vivian talked about. It helps the principal as Tamara talked about, to have someone there that they've grown accustomed to in their career progression. But to have that. And again, a person to hear this, I'm doing the work through other people. So, showing that, and being able to communicate that clearly to superintendent, to board of education, to other audiences, helps us to sustain this program, and actually to grow the program, because again, the evidence is so pervasive that this kind of support is really one of the key components to success.

Lucas Held: So, Tamara, tell us about a specific example of a case where your mentor Vivian was helpful in coming to a solution for a problem.

Tamara Perkins: I would say it was entering my second year, during the end of my first year, working with my assistant superintendent, we reviewed the school's data, and the school that I'm currently working at is very high-performing school. But as we looked at some of our data, we saw that student growth. High-performing, but maybe our students were not moving at the same rate as children who perform in a similar way. So we made some shifts, the decision to shift the instructional focus, but also move some staff members to different grade levels. While I could see maybe the long-term vision, some of the staff members had a very difficult time with that. Just going back to making sure that they felt validated, that I honor their previous success. And that change was a little unsettling for them. And so, just working with Miss Stranahan, again, just a listening ear. She never really guided me to a direct solution, but maybe some ways to approach the staff. Ways to hear their voice, hear their concerns.

But also maintaining the instructional focus. That piece would not change, but how could I help to support them, guide them toward the change, or to help them to see why the change was necessary, why it was important for the children, but important to their daily work. And so, it took quite some time, most of the school year to work through. But it was something that, again, having someone who was there, that I could, once I got feedback from the staff, think about some next steps, resources that were available at the district level that I could call in. Because again, it's not work just on my own, while my role is to shape and to guide, but also to make sure that I tap in, also use my fellow administrative assistant principals, but then tapping in, once I learned my teachers, who were those key teacher leaders, who had credibility, so to speak, in the building. That once I could get them to drift toward my team and see that vision, that they alongside me could help to guide the work.

Lucas Held: So this sounds like it was really assistance in thinking through how to manage the human side of change. And Vivian, any comment, thought, on Tamara's description?

Vivian Stranahan: I was listening to Tamara's description, and what I was thinking about was the focus that she had decided on early in her second year. She wanted to collaborate with her staff. She wanted to work on situational problem-solving, and she wanted to work on communication. And as you describe your year-long journey, those three attributes

keep coming to my mind. Because by being very intentional about her work she got at the instructional leadership and the results that she was seeking, and by coming back and being very reflective, Tamara was able to move step by step. So that a year later, her school and her students are in a very different place.

Lucas Held: Well, congratulations for that, Tamara. And I think it underscores what Tamara had said early, which is that working through others is a complex process that requires careful thought and maintenance of relationships. So with that, let me thank our three guests. Glenn Pethel is assistant superintendent for leadership development for the Gwinnett County Public Schools. Vivian Stranahan is a mentor to new principals in Gwinnett, and Tamara Perkins is a new principal with three years under her belt. Thank you for joining us.