Recommendations for Future New Charter School Leader Support Programs

The Mentor Project was a year-long research project aimed at increasing the instructional focus of charter school leaders at new schools by pairing them with a proven charter leader as a mentor. The following recommendations emerged for future school leader support programs:
- Tailor resources to support the challenges of new school leadership
- Emphasize similarities in leadership role for mentoring pairs
- Simplify program structure and resources

Tailor Resources to Support the Challenges of New School Leadership

The Mentor Project curriculum and resources may not have been aligned to the unique challenges facing the leader of a new charter school. The Instructional Leadership Framework (ILF) was intended as a guide for Mentors as they turned the attention of Mentees away from operations and toward the pedagogy and vision of their school (the full Framework can be found on the CCSA's website). However, since the Mentees in CCSA's program were leaders of newly established schools, the problems they faced were less about instruction and more existential. Mentors found CCSA's framework for conversation with their Mentee frustrating and rarely applicable to new school leaders. Some participants wanted a simpler program structure that could support the changing needs of their Mentees. Mentors found it difficult to discuss pedagogy, for example, when their Mentees were struggling with more pressing problems, such as having enough teachers to fill classrooms. While most Mentees found CCSA's ILF interesting and helpful, others wanted the program to focus more on the various compliance requirements facing charters.

Focus on Pairing Leaders with Similar Roles

The Mentor Project may have been more impactful if new leaders had been assigned Mentors who shared more similar responsibilities. Although all pairs shared similar titles, organizational roles often differed considerably between Mentors and Mentees, making it difficult for the Mentors to offer constructive feedback to their Mentee. CCSA's Mentor Project could have paired leaders not only based on their school's instructional model or location, but on similarities in leaders' responsibilities.

Simplify Program Structure and Expectations

Given school leaders' busy schedules, The Mentor Project may have expected too much with its three-hour-a-month commitment. In reality, very few participant pairs were able to follow this guideline, and a couple reported that they were not even aware of the number of times they were expected to meet. Interviews suggest that this was due to both time and geographic constraints. Despite difficulties finding time to meet and following the program's structure, participants valued face-to-face time for developing a rapport with their mentor/mentee.

By design, The Mentor Project used Mentors as the delivery mechanism for programmatic information. However, not all Mentors opened CCSA communications and less than half participated in CCSA webinars. Mentors also found the reporting tools CCSA developed cumbersome. As a result, some Mentors felt that CCSA's programming did not facilitate the Mentor and Mentee relationship.

Conclusion

While feedback and a fall in participation suggested areas for improvement in future programs, participants who remained involved with The Mentor Project to its completion reported having a positive experience. As such, CCSA agrees with the body of research showing the potential for mentoring programs to decrease leaders' feelings of isolation, help leaders prioritize instructional leadership, and thereby improve outcomes for students (Ehrich et. al., 2004). Instructional resources like the CCSA developed Instructional Leadership Framework can be a helpful guide for leaders at schools with developed infrastructure. These resources may not be relevant to new school leaders though, who struggle with operational challenges. Planners should carefully align mentor programming with the unique needs of its participants, and ensure resources and expectations of participations are simple, understandable and accessible.

References

Ehrich, L., Hansford, B., Tennent, L. (2004). Formal Mentoring Programs in Education and Other Professions: A Review of the Literature. *Education Administration Quarterly, 40(4),* 518-540. doi: 10.1177/0013161X04267118