

## CCSA's The Mentor Project: Lessons Learned from an Effort to Support New School Leaders

In an effort to bolster the instructional leadership capacities of new charter school leaders, the California Charter Schools Association (CCSA) developed The Mentor Project. Charter school leaders at new schools were paired with more experienced charter leaders with similar programs or within the same region of California. Over eighteen months, the CCSA studied Mentor and Mentees' engagement in the project, school outcomes, survey results, and interview data. The results from this study are discussed below in terms of the barriers facing new leaders, behaviors of effective school leaders, and takeaways from The Mentor Project.

### Barriers to Effective Charter School Leadership

#### *Prioritization & Time Management*

As was hypothesized when The Mentor Project was created, **charter leaders at new schools face constant operational demands and could benefit from support to improve their ability to prioritize instructional leadership.** Rather than focus on instruction, school leaders frequently spend most of their time managing school operations like facilities issues, community affairs, and parental relations (Ingersoll et. al., 2017). Due to greater autonomy and stricter accountability requirements than Traditional Public Schools (TPS), charter leaders are responsible for aspects of school operations and compliance that are typically handled by district administrators in the traditional system (NAPCS, 2008).

*"It is easy to get distracted, not manage your time appropriately, and have your attention drawn to the fire that's right in front of you rather than some of the big things." - Mentor*

#### *Other Barriers – Lack of Resources, Accountability, and Staffing*

Similarly, **charter leaders at new schools underestimated the challenges posed by a general lack of resources, quantity of accountability requirements, and magnitude of staffing challenges facing a new school.** These challenges can be exacerbated when a charter school lacks support from a home office (CRPE, 2018). Mentees reported being forced to negotiate facilities contracts and loan agreements during the school year due to a lack of funding. This experience is reflected in outside research, showing that despite lower average funding than other public schools, charter schools must often spend on additional costs, like facilities (Wolf et al., 2017). New charter school leaders also reported being blindsided by staffing challenges and compliance deadlines for federal and state-level accountability. New leaders, especially those at freestanding schools, did not expect the quantity of non-instructional work required.

### Behaviors of Effective Leaders

To surmount these challenges, The Mentor Project aimed to increase the effectiveness of newer charter school leaders by pairing them with more experienced Mentors. Mentors better understood how to exhibit key leadership behaviors, such as setting high expectations, sharing vision, and translating this vision into organizational structure. To help Mentors have conversations with their Mentees around leadership, CCSA created a framework of effective instructional leadership practices. This Instructional Leadership Framework can be found on the CCSA website.

#### *Setting High Expectations*

An effective leader isn't satisfied with middle of the road results. Studies of expectation setting have found that schools scored higher on academic assessments when teachers felt their principals had high expectations of them (Ingersoll et. al., 2017). In pre-project surveys, Mentors reported being more likely than newer school leaders to provide formal written feedback to teachers as a way of monitoring their staff (58% vs 27%). Several Mentors also referenced the importance of having a

*"... it's really, really important to continually look for how we can be better than we are." - Mentor*

constant focus on improvement, a topic that was not shared in Mentees' interviews. All the Mentors who responded to our pre-project survey reported having a clear vision for high quality student learning and shared that vision with their teachers, compared to 86% of Mentees.

### *Sharing Vision*

Effective school leaders not only share their vision of a high-quality school with staff but also encourage feedback and participation from staff, parents, and students in the development of their vision (McGowan & Miller, 2001). In surveys, 100% of Mentors reported discussing with their staff the academic struggles of students, something 40% of Mentees in our project did not report doing.

*"... attending to any one task or even all of the tasks won't solve the problem. But understanding how everybody contributes to all of those [tasks] will make a difference."*  
- Mentor

### *Translating Vision into Organizational Structure*

Finally, an effective leader also builds the structure for holding herself and her staff accountable for making their shared vision a reality (Ramsden, 1998). When results are not in line with a school's vision, effective leaders work with staff to develop new protocols or structures (Elmore, 2005). Mentors in the project provided formal feedback to teachers about instruction and had a process for analyzing student data and identifying achievement gaps. While Mentees often reported being bogged down in compliance-related work, Mentors understood how to develop strong teams and build capacity to manage school operations to better focus attention on instruction.

## **Results of The Mentor Project**

*"[My Mentor] would just motivate me more, encourage me, let me know I'm in the right zone."* - Mentee

### *Decreased Isolation*

Most Mentees (87%) reported feeling disconnected from other leaders going into The Mentor Project. Participating helped charter school leaders feel more connected to their peers and in some cases, led to increased morale and self-confidence in their leadership abilities.

### *Increased Emphasis on Instructional Leadership*

All Mentees agreed that their Mentors gave them strategies to increase their focus on instructional leadership. In a pre/post analysis, Mentees on average increased time spent on instructional leadership by 3 hours weekly.

### *Implementation Challenges*

CCSA staff found implementation a great challenge with The Mentor Project, possibly limiting the effectiveness of the program. For example, leaders found it difficult to meet on a regular basis, hindering the impact of the Mentor on the Mentee. When participants were able to meet, some Mentors felt the program's emphasis on instruction rather than operations was unsuited to the needs of their Mentees. Participants suggested simplifying program expectations and process and increasing the amount of in-person contact. Some pairings also felt that the Mentor/Mentee they were paired with was not an ideal match, limiting the richness of relationship built between the pair.

## **Conclusions**

New charter school leaders face many challenges which pull their focus away from instruction. As such, they value support from more experienced leaders as they work on setting high expectations and creating a shared vision for their school. A program like The Mentor Project can help new leaders feel less isolated and increase their focus on instructional leadership. However, the CCSA struggled to ensure ongoing participation,

particularly after the school year started. As a result, clear, positive effects were limited. Given Mentors and Mentees' lack of ongoing participation in the CCSA's Mentor Project, staff recommend future mentoring programs develop strong incentives for participation, and regularly check-in with participants. Mentoring projects must have simple frameworks for conversation, and standardized mechanisms for organizers to regularly follow-up with participants.

## References

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