



What Does It Mean for a School Administrator to be Supportive?

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The authors present research about graduates of pre-professional teacher training programs and the types of support which might be most beneficial for them.

Introduction

Most of us would agree that a key role of the principal – or any administrator – is to support teachers in their work. This idea is well documented in educational literature, particularly in studies of new teachers, where a “supportive” relationship with administrators is often cited as a key determinant of new teachers’ satisfaction and retention (Johnson et al., 2004; Kapadia and Coca, 2007; Smith and Ingersoll, 2004; Tamir, in press; Tamir and Magidin de Kramer, 2011). At face value, the idea seems self-evident. But what does it mean, exactly, for an administrator to be supportive?

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The word support has many different definitions. One of them, “to keep from fainting, yielding, or losing courage,” (M-W.com) refers to emotional support. When we think of early career teachers’ needs, this definition of support may come to the fore. Beginning teachers need shoulders to cry on, enthusiastic cheerleaders to bolster their courage, and friends who remind them of why they entered the field in the first place.

Yet support also means “to strengthen” or “to aid in the development” of something (M-W.com again). In the context of an administrator’s role, this aspect of support implies an active approach to helping teachers learn and grow professionally. Thirty years of research on teachers’ professional development makes it clear that teachers grow not in isolation but in collaboration with their peers (e.g., Lieberman, 1986). Furthermore, effective teacher collaboration does not just happen: it requires a shared vision of good teaching, ample, scheduled time, and targeted skill development (Little, 1990; Klechtermans, 2006). Therefore the administrators who support teachers are implicated in putting these elements of support in place.

We have long known that both kinds of support are important for new teachers, but only recently have we understood their relative importance. In a well-crafted 2004 study, researchers Thomas Smith and Richard Ingersoll analyzed the impact of different kinds of support on early-career teachers’ satisfaction and retention. They found that emotional support from administrators, described in the survey as “regular, supportive communication with the principal, other administrator, or department chair” had a small, positive effect on teachers’ retention that was not statistically significant. In contrast, support that strengthens teachers’ practice, described in the survey as “common planning time with other teachers in their subject area or participating in regularly scheduled collaboration with other teachers on issues of instruction” had a strong and statistically significant impact on teachers’ decisions about whether to stay in teaching or leave the profession (p. 703). This study confirmed that emotional support has its place, but professional support which offers opportunities for collaborative professional growth has far greater impact on teachers’ satisfaction and retention.

Given those findings, we would hope to see administrators in Jewish day schools investing their energy in the kind of support that helps teachers grow and develop: creating a shared vision of good teaching, ensuring that teachers have the time and skills to collaborate, building a culture of shared inquiry. That is why the findings from our recent survey of DeLet alumni both surprised and concerned us. (DeLet – the Hebrew word for “door” and an acronym for “Day school Leadership through Teaching” – is a graduate level program which prepares general and/or Jewish studies teachers for Jewish day schools. This 14-month program combines professional studies with a year-long mentored internship in a Jewish day school. For more details about the DeLet programs at Brandeis or at HUC go to www.brandeis.edu/programs/delet/ or <http://huc.edu/centers/DeLet/>.) Our findings suggest that new teachers in Jewish day schools are far more likely to encounter emotionally supportive principals than professionally supportive ones. Furthermore, the teachers’ responses evidence an incomplete understanding of the word “support.”

(The DeLet Longitudinal Study, a project of the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education, has collected survey data on Jewish day school teachers who graduated from the DeLet program since 2007. This research project is directed by Dr. Eran Tamir and is funded by the Mandel Foundation and Jim Joseph Foundation. The DeLet alumni responding to the survey (N=104) taught in North American Jewish day schools mainly in the

DeLeT alumni responding to the survey (N = 187) taught in North American Jewish day schools mainly in the Northeast and Southwest. While this is not a representative sample of teachers in Jewish day schools, the findings may reflect on more general trends in the field. For more details on the study and its various publications and findings go to www.brandeis.edu/mandel/research/deletracking.html.)

Emotional and professional support in Jewish day schools

Much of the research on new teacher support focuses on public school teachers; little research exists about how Jewish day schools stack up in terms of supporting their teachers. We wondered what kinds of supports alumni of the DeLeT teacher education programs at Brandeis University and the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion encountered in their first teaching jobs. To investigate this question, we analyzed survey data from a longitudinal survey of DeLeT alumni. We were struck by what at first seemed to be an anomaly. On the one hand, teachers reported that they received relatively high levels of emotional support from their administrators. 67% of the teachers responded that they very much agree or completely agree that Administrators support and value teachers' work. On the other hand, when asked to rank the collaborative culture at their schools, less than 42% of the teachers very much agreed or completely agreed that teachers have regular times to meet with colleagues to work on issues regarding teaching/learning. In addition, 42% responded that teachers share a vision of good teaching and a language for talking about it. How was it possible, we wondered, for teachers to feel that administrators "supported and valued" their work when those same administrators were not creating regular times for teacher collaboration or fostering a faculty-wide conversation about effective instruction?

Interview data from DeLeT alumni, collected through a separate study, helped illuminate the disparity. The interviews, conducted as part of the Choosing to Teach Project, tracked 30 beginning teachers (10 of these teachers were from DeLeT) in Jewish day schools, Catholic schools, and urban public schools for the past 6 years. (To learn more about the Choosing to Teach project, look for the project's forthcoming book by Harvard Education Press, titled *Inspiring Teaching: Context specific teacher education for the 21st century* (edited by Sharon Feiman-Nemser, Eran Tamir, and Karen Hammerness) or visit the project's website at www.brandeis.edu/mandel/research/choosing/index.html.) We asked these teachers to tell us about their overall school experience and about the specific kinds of support they received from their administration and from their peers. Their responses help us understand how they understand the meaning of administrative support. For example, Michal, a second year teacher, explained,

There's a lot of teacher support as people. The principal is wonderful and she is very supportive of teachers individually.... but I feel like there's not much planning time, there's not much built in time for teachers to really get things done during the day, or at least that's not a value. Like you're expected to be on all the time even when you're not.... I'm sure the school values teachers being productive and being able to meet with each other and plan and have planning time, but it doesn't always pan out that way.

Daniele, another second year teacher, describes a similar disjunction between the professional community at her school and the personal support she receives from her principal. She describes a professional culture in which teachers do not collaborate.

Not all colleagues are good colleagues... I mean I have colleagues who are sick a lot or who won't cover for you, if you cover for them. So good in that sense, like a team player... and it's annoying. But they're all nice people.... I suggested doing that lesson at recess with another teacher, "Why don't we teach our kids, we'll play games." And she was like, "I'm not really interested." She said, "You can do it." So she's not really invested in that sense...I think people say that they [value collaboration] but I don't think that they really do, or I don't really think that they know how to collaborate....I think it's also a skill that you need to be taught. I don't think that anyone's really been taught, or I think that people will say, "Yes, we'll collaborate", but it's not really collaborating the way we did it in DeLeT.

When asked who are her most important colleagues, Daniele replied,

I love my head of school. I don't necessarily think that she knows so much about education. I think she's learning. But she just leads by example and she's just like the nicest person. She's very blunt but she's very nice, she's cool, and I get along well with her.

Michal and Daniele's stories shed light on the disparity we found in our survey data. Both beginning teachers experience their principals as individually supportive, calling them "wonderful" and "very nice," respectively. Yet both say that the principals are not doing their part to ensure teachers' ongoing collaborative learning: creating time for teachers to work together, developing teachers' skill at collaboration, building a culture of inquiry and shared responsibility. In short, the principals are providing emotional support but not professional support.

Future considerations and next steps

These findings are worth noting for two reasons. First, they indicate that a majority of DeLeT alumni (58%) are working without the benefit of regular collegial collaboration or even a shared vision of what good teaching looks like. Second, the findings tell us that new teachers may experience their administrators as supportive, even "wonderful," although those same administrators are not promoting their development in the ways we know to be most powerful. Interviews with DeLeT alumni reveal that they do wish for collegial collaboration; perhaps they do not see fostering such collaboration as the principal's responsibility.

The findings have implications for the DeLeT program. The new teachers who graduate from the program do so with experience in genuine collaboration, and they express disappointment when they do not find a collaborative culture in the schools where they teach. Yet their survey and interview responses indicate that

collaborative culture in the schools where they teach. Teacher survey and interview responses indicate that these same teachers may not understand the mechanisms by which genuine collaboration happens, including the central role for administrators. Yet principals and school heads are at the heart of the matter, as they set the tone of the professional culture and control the meeting schedules and teachers' professional development agendas. Day schools have come a long way in the past decade. At the Mandel Center for Studies in Jewish Education, we have seen many school leaders take on the challenge of fostering genuine, productive teacher collaboration, some with our help. (For more information about our work with day schools around new teacher induction and ongoing instructional improvement, visit the Teacher Learning Project website at www.teacherlearningproject.com.) Awareness of new teachers' learning needs is increasing throughout the community. Yet the survey reminds us that there is still work to be done. We urge those who train and coach school leaders, as well as the leaders themselves, to take seriously the notion that a truly "supportive" administrator not only asks about your day but also works relentlessly to create the school-wide conditions that support teachers' ongoing professional collaboration and growth.

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