

Mentorship:

An Effective Model in a Small School

By Teresa Di Ninno, CEGEP, B.A., B.Ed., M.A., and Jeney Gordon, B.F.A., B.Ed.,
CAPE Public Charter School

Collaborative projects allow skills, talents and aptitudes to emerge.

Skills, talents and aptitudes are identified and mentorships are established.

Mentorship provides opportunities and supports for candidates to develop administrative skillset; best candidates emerge.

Openings in administration are filled and supported through ongoing mentorship relationships, creating increased skills and efficacy, satisfaction, and low staff turnover.

Explaining the structure of our charter school to parents in Medicine Hat often involves the phrase “a jurisdiction of one,” meaning the jurisdiction has one school site, a Board of Directors, a Superintendent, a Secretary-Treasurer, and site administration consisting of one Principal, a Vice-Principal and a Director of Student Services.

Since charter schools are publicly funded on a per-student basis, as are other public schools, total funding is based on enrolment. In our charter school low enrolment, due mainly to capped class sizes, results in limited funds. As a result, our school often lacks resources for the identification, development, mentorship and support of system leaders. From its inception in 1995, CAPE has adopted a collaborative model of decision making at every level. Because of the belief that the school, parents and community working together in support of student learning is the optimal structure to meeting

student needs, a horizontal model of governance was—and continues to be—the preferred model. This horizontal model is used throughout the various organizational levels and is based on collaboration.

Within the collaborative model, people work together for various endeavours. Administration seeks to identify skills, talents and aptitudes within the teaching staff. The specific individual skills, talents and aptitudes become apparent through these collaborative working relationships. Strengths are then fostered through mentorship by peers or by administration. Developing individual strengths also requires a personalized model. Although mentorship was the preferred model and informal evidence suggested that this was an effective model for our organization, research data was needed to support what we believed. As a result, our school principal, Jeney Gordon, worked with Dr. Sharon Allen of the Medicine Hat College on a three-year study on mentorship. This effort yielded some very powerful and useful information.

While a plethora of research speaks to a multitude of vehicles used for professional development, much less research addresses the need for individualized teacher development and professional development programs, as noted by Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Zwart, Wobbles, Bergen & Bolhuis, 2007, as cited by Hilton et al., 2015. Furthermore, Clarke and Hollingsworth agreed that many models of professional development have failed to take into account individual learner variables and what is required for these individuals to change or improve practice.

Mentorship is personalized. It allows for the protégé to have an active role in the learning. Specific, learning-focused feedback is provided. Topics of discussion, pacing, timing and directions for action can all be individualized for the individual protégé.

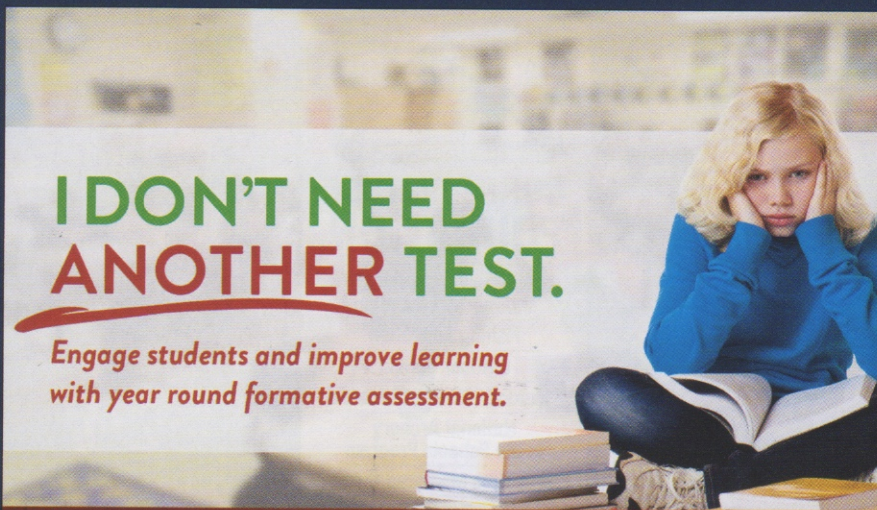
Mentorship involves the accumulation of skills to develop job satisfaction and personal satisfaction. Unlike coaching, which focuses on skill competencies alone, mentorship acknowledges the satisfaction that comes from being cognizant of one's development and working towards a goal to gain a greater feeling of self.

Mentorship offers both cognitive and affective benefits. Mentors offer cognitive expertise as they are knowledgeable peers. There are also social and emotional benefits offered by mentorship that group models cannot support. As a relationship builds between mentor and protégé, there is an increase in trust, safety and risk-taking as the social and emotional support are present.

Mentorship is reciprocal in nature. Unlike top-down or lecture-type strategies, mentorship has the capacity to exchange learning between the individuals in the

relationships. As relationships build and learning becomes a group process, the human capital of the organization increases and thus continues to support the organization.


One of the four main conclusions of this study is that the effectiveness of the mentorship relationship was firmly based in trust (Landsberg, 2015). The development of trust comes from working collaboratively and repeatedly with a group of peers. Being a small jurisdiction has been viewed as an asset in the development of relationships, and therefore a support for building effective




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and long-lasting mentorship relationships. J. Gordon's findings clearly indicate that, in our setting, mentorship is indeed a suitable vehicle for the identification, development, mentoring and support of skilled and confident school-based leaders as part of succession planning.

The mentorship process began informally with the support of Dr. Robert Lowry in the summer of 1997. Under his guidance, the then-principal, Teresa Di Ninno, gained the expertise and knowledge needed for the principalship and developed the confidence to effectively manage a fledgling charter

school. Under his tutelage and guidance, the principal developed relationships with Ministry, other charter schools and other jurisdictions; gaining knowledge of the system as a whole and how it operates.

Just as importantly, she developed the skills necessary to work productively with teachers, support staff, parents and community. This led to the eventual move from principalship into superintendency. The investment of time over a number of years is what Mrs. Di Ninno, the current superintendent, credits as being the reason she

effectively and confidently serves in administration today.

The value of invested relationships was then repeated when CAPE needed to fill the principalship position. For a number of years, Mrs. Di Ninno provided opportunities, guidance and input for various administrative tasks that required competency and confidence. This process started with minimal requests of the proteges and evolved into larger and more varied requests so that the competency and efficacy of the candidates became increasingly apparent. Scheduling, supporting colleagues in parent meetings, writing IPPs and co-planning were only a few of the possible opportunities presented to proteges.

As competencies emerged, opportunities were tailored to suit the skillset of the individuals. While some teachers showed interest and aptitude, others did not. The candidates that showed promise and interest were then mentored further and assumed larger responsibilities, allowing successful candidates for administration to be identified. This process eventually led to J. Gordon assuming the principalship of CAPE Public Charter School in the fall of 2006.

Similarly, the person who serves as vice-principal was identified and mentored. Parent meetings, record keeping, tiered planning and applying the discipline policy allowed skills to be practiced and refined before a suitable candidate was identified. The mentoring relationships for all three of CAPE's administrators have remained intact for the continuous development of administrative skills and efficacy.

The Board of Directors has supported the identification and mentoring process philosophically and also in tangible ways. As CAPE grew and required the services of a counsellor and academic assessor, the Board financially supported one of the teachers in her desire to acquire a Masters of Counseling. While she was doing the coursework, the administration manipulated and adjusted the timetable and workload so that their colleague could attend courses, complete practica and still support her family. Afterward, she continued her studies in her area of interest, student assessment and program supports. As a result of this identification, mentorship and support, CAPE school now



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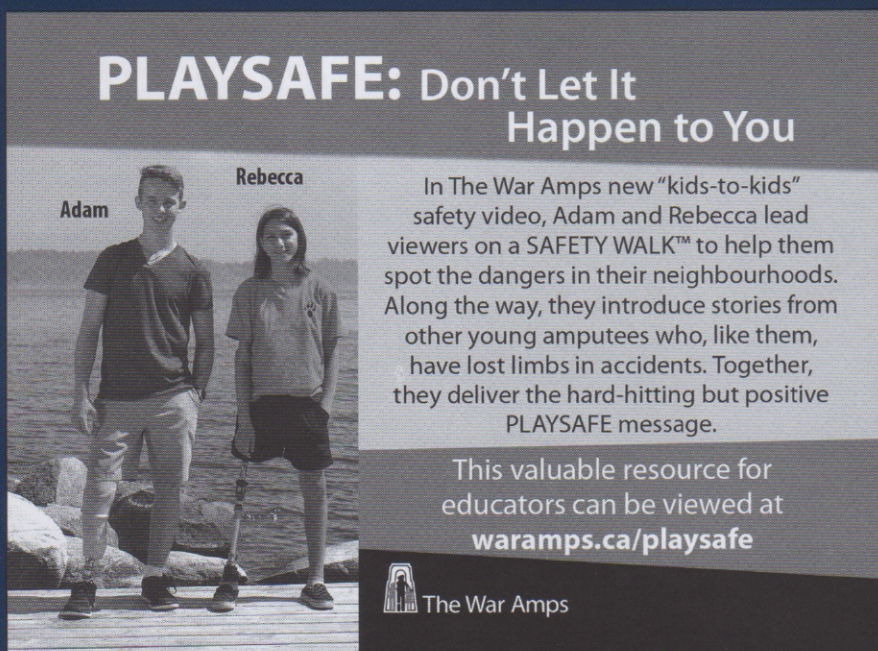
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Collaborative leadership identification and mentorship has also encouraged staff development to higher levels of education. In early 2000, the school hired an educational assistant with a unique skillset in an attempt to support a student with very specific needs. For the following two years, the then principal, Mrs. Di Ninno, worked closely with this assistant. She then acquired teaching credentials and returned to CAPE as a full-time teacher. As the relationship developed even further, the teacher expressed interest in seeking a Masters in Education, which again the Board supported. While the financial and logistical support of this individual as she worked full time while attending university in another city was an ambitious endeavour, it culminated in the school having in-house expertise in student assessment and neurological disorders.

The process has also resulted in the establishment of mentor teachers, lead teachers and the development of expertise within our building. It must also be noted that this same process has been utilized with support staff and has resulted in an excellent executive assistant, to mention only one example. As the school continues to grow, this cyclical process of identification, mentorship and support continues. In CAPE's experience, a collaborative, horizontal model of leadership has provided effective in creating skilled and confident school-based leaders with the ultimate goal of supporting our very varied student population. ■

Teresa Di Ninno, CEGEP, B.A., B.Ed., M.A., is an alumnus of McGill University and the University of Toronto. Teresa began her teaching career in Alberta in 1980. She is also the founder, past principal and current superintendent of CAPE Public Charter School in Medicine Hat, Alberta.

Jeney Gordon, B.F.A., B.Ed., Diploma of Vis. Com., is an alumnus of the University of Lethbridge. She was born and raised in Medicine Hat. She started her teaching career at CAPE in 1995 and spent all but three of those years teaching there. Jeney has been the principal of CAPE Public Charter School for the 13 years.





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