



EPISODE 6

Shoring Up Two Critical Roles: Assistant Principals and Principal Supervisors

Lucas Held:

I'm delighted to welcome our three guests today from Prince George's County Public Schools Maryland, which is near Washington, D.C. Dr. Douglas Anthony is associate superintendent of the Office of Talent Development in Prince George's. LaTanya Sothern has been assistant principal in Prince George's County for two years. Dr. Kasandra Lassiter is a principal supervisor, a position also known as an instructional director, in Prince George's County and has been for seven years. Prince George's County Public Schools is one of six urban districts participating in Wallace's Principal Pipeline Initiative.

One thing the six districts realized is that if they wanted to build their benches of highly qualified principals, they needed to rethink two other important jobs, the job of assistant principal and the job of principal supervisor. For assistant principals, the question was how can we find better ways to help groom folks, develop them to become principals? For principal supervisors, the question was how can we shift the focus away from compliance with administrative rules toward helping principals develop the skills to help ensure a consistently high level of instruction in a school? Let's turn to the folks who are actually doing the work to get a better sense of how this played out in Prince George's County.

Doug, you're associate superintendent for talent development. How did your district identify men and women with leadership potential and better prepare them for what we know is quite a demanding job?

Douglas Anthony:

Right. Lucas, we developed a strategy when we received the Wallace Foundation grant quite honestly. We had a lot of fragmented good intentions, well-intended programs, but there wasn't cohesion to how we looked at leadership and development across the district. The Wallace grant actually provided a frame for us to develop leader standards, to look at how we hire, how we select, how we build support, as well as how we evaluate. From there, we created our strategy around leadership development in the district. One of the things that we found is we had a number of people that had the right credentials.

We had several assistant principals that we believed were our inherent bench, but we weren't necessarily developing them in a way that would lead them to be successful as principals. We started to look at that particular challenge and grapple with this notion of how do you build assistant principals as the bench for your principal positions?

Lucas Held: What changed in how you worked with assistant principals?

Douglas Anthony: Right. We started to be a lot more strategic. One, we first worked to develop our own in-house curriculum. We worked with the National Institute of School Leadership to develop a curriculum and a program called ALPS, which is our Aspiring Leaders Program for seasoned assistant principals, so we could start giving them not only theoretical support, but actually some of the practical application that they would need to move into the job more effectively. Then we looked at how we were inducting assistant principals. Quite honestly we didn't have an induction program for assistant principals. We kind of gave them the keys and said, "There you go," and we left all of the responsibility to the principal.

We really started to pay attention to that from a central office standpoint, how could we provide the right level support. We developed an assistant principal induction program for a two-year experience, which our wonderful assistant principal here, LaTanya, is a part of. She's in her second year as an assistant principal. We didn't have those types of programs of support before.

Lucas Held: Really there was no kind of consistent approach to help developing a system to principals and that's a big change. Now we also heard that you held information sessions called "So You Want to Be an Administrator?"

Douglas Anthony: Oh yeah.

Lucas Held: Tell us about why those and what do they do.

Douglas Anthony: It is my favorite time of the year. What we found when we looked at our data in the system, we actually had over 4,000 folks who actually had credentialing to be an assistant principal or principal in the district. Obviously, we didn't have that many positions, but what we found is we continue to have people go get their credentialing that they figured once they graduate from a program, they should get assistant principalship and the rest is history. We wanted to actually give some ground truth to what that experience was like and make sure that people could look in the room and see how many people are really competing for these very prestigious and important roles in our district.

We started "So You Want to Be an Administrator?" where we pull everybody together who thinks they want to be an administrator and we actually just have conversations. We'll have an instructional director come in and talk about their perspective. We'll have a sitting principal come in and talk about the perspective and people who've come through the ranks come and talk about their perspective and just give them some ground truth and some perspective about the role.

Lucas Held: Well, it sounds to me like a bit of the philosophy of the Marines, which is to say one of the reasons folks are so attracted to the Marines is that very few folks

make it. You are, in a sense, dramatizing how difficult a path this has been. Let's turn to you, LaTanya. You're an assistant principal. Tell us what it was like, if you had gone through it, what the information session felt like from your perspective and then how the district supported you when you actually said, "Yes, I want to be a principal."

LaTanya Sothern: I actually missed *that* session. I just came to the conclusion that that was I wanted to do that I wanted to go into administration. I started around 2012, which coincidentally was around the same time that our county implemented the Wallace grant for the first year. I was one of the first-year cohort recipients. I was able to get my Administrator 1 Certification through a program that we had at Bowie State University. I went on that same summer to get my Administrator 2 Certificate as well.

Lucas Held: Let me just interrupt you and ask what was motivating you to become a principal?

LaTanya Sothern: I had been teaching about 15 years and I was already nationally board certified and was given the opportunity through multiple experiences with the county to present to other people districtwide to run professional development and interact with leaders. I really felt that I had more to offer as a leader; that it would be difficult for me to continue on as a classroom teacher. At the end of the year, I was able to move into an instructional lead teacher position, which is a teacher leader position out of the classroom, but really working with the school building across the board that gave me a little bit more training and a broader perspective. After three years of doing that, I was able to get an assistant principal position.

However, even as an assistant principal, we get a lot of work just as Dr. Anthony has said through the Assistant Principal Induction Program. That's been extremely valuable for me personally and I know with the cohort of assistant principals that I work with.

Lucas Held: It sounds like you're really continuing to pick up new skills and approaches. That sounds exactly what the hope was, Doug.

Douglas Anthony: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Lucas Held: Let's turn to Kasandra. Tell us a little bit about what the new role or the evolving role of principal supervisors is and why that role is important.

Kasandra Lassiter: Well, it's an important role because especially in our district we touch every aspect of what happens with the schools that we supervise. Currently, I have 14 schools, and I have three new principals, and I have one principal that has two new special-needs programs in her building. We are able to help the principals with their coaching and feedback, with their teachers, modeling, developing their instructional leadership teams, scoping out new talents such as Miss

Sothern and also just doing focus learning walks and paired observations and those sorts of things to help to build their instructional leadership capacity.

Lucas Held: This is a real process again of helping to continue to develop, invest in talent. Take us through what a typical day might look like. Are you in your car a lot?

Kassandra Lassiter: Oh boy. A typical day. A typical day actually starts for me two weeks prior because I do my calendar out two weeks in advance. We use the SAM (School Administration Manager) process. The SAMS calendar helps me to really calibrate around how I'm working with different schools, how much time I'm spending in different places. I do use that data to kind of map out the direction that I'm going to go in. A typical day does start in the car. It starts on the phone. It starts on the phone about 4:30 in the morning sometimes depending on what's going on. Then I head onto the schools that I'm planning to attend. At the schools, I always have a focus around what my purpose for going is going to be and observation, a paired walk checking on a principal, attend a meeting. It's pretty intense, but we definitely manage it.

Lucas Held: Right. You definitely sound like a planner.

Kassandra Lassiter: For sure. You have to.

Lucas Held: Clearly the planning gene comes in handy here. Maybe just say a word about how from your perspective ... You've been a principal supervisor for seven years. Since this effort started, how has your role changed?

Kassandra Lassiter: The role has changed tremendously. There's a huge focus on coaching and feedback. We've been fortunate in our district to have lots of opportunities for professional development to make sure that we're sharpening our skills and that we're helping our principals to sharpen their skills as well. Our role is definitely operational, managerial and instructional. We try to stay more self-focused on the instructional side, but the other pieces do come into play at times. It's evolving because there's more work to be done. We have more principals in our district now that are newer principals. Just bringing them onboard and making sure that they start out on the right foot is definitely a charge for us.

Lucas Held: That's terrific. Maybe a question for the three of you, which is what challenges do each of you see ahead for your work? Doug, in strengthening these processes of continuing to strengthen the processes of assistant principal development, principal supervision and the role itself.

Douglas Anthony: I just think the complexity of like the national landscape around leadership is one that we grapple with every day. We have new assessments that we haven't had before. What does that look like in the school house? What does that look like for supervision, and how do we approach that so that we continue to have a coaching stance and a supportive stance? From a central office standpoint, I

think some of the things that we're challenged by is just making sure that we're actually providing support and not dictating support. How do we provide the right level of guidance, tension and pushback and feedback, so that people feel us as a help and not a hindrance to doing our job?

Lucas Held: Sounds like a delicate balance. LaTanya, how are we doing in that balance?

LaTanya Sothern: I think for me it's making sure that I support my principal in the ways that she needs support. Making sure that of course I complement her instructionally and with organizational management on one end. Then on the other end, ensuring that our teachers are prepared and have the correct and the proper pedagogy so that the information and the curriculum that they're communicating and facilitating with students is rigorous and ensuring that our students are actually achieving.

Lucas Held: Terrific. Thank you. How about you, Kasandra?

Kasandra Lassiter: Just something just to add on, the theory of change in our district is around culture, data and performance. We have a razor-like sharp focus on that. To do that, it takes us leveraging the strengths and the talents of each department and how we bring on our new leaders in our buildings and in our school system and how we support them and continue to coach and to help them to develop their skills so that we continue to have this pipeline. That's what we're all about, continuing to build a strong pipeline and putting the resources that are necessary to support that work moving forward.

Douglas Anthony: Our structures. I think of the structures that what's unique about the three of us is that we sit on the same leadership development team. As an assistant principal, we have a program where we provide central office support to Miss Sothern and it requires the principal supervisor, a central office executive, the principal and a leadership coach, as well as an office of improvement specialist. We actually sit with her quarterly to look at her goals or progress and to give her those various perspectives that we bring to the table to improve her practice. Those structures need to remain intact.

Kasandra Lassiter: Absolutely.

Lucas Held: These structures really sound like a cohesive approach to investing in the development and support of leaders. Maybe as a closing question, Doug and others, feel free to add to this, what advice would you give other districts as they think about the question of how to garner support for an investment in developing and supporting effective leadership?

Douglas Anthony: That's a great question. It's a loaded question, but it's a great question. I think the first thing you have to do is really organize a collaborative work. We use the Data Wise process in our district. One is just grounding your conversation with all the right stakeholders from the beginning, right? You have to have the

champion. You have to have your superintendent. You have to have others who value this prospect of leadership development in a way that is owned by the system. It can't just be owned by a shop. It can't be owned by just one instructional director or a leader in a building. It has to be owned by the system and people have to feel invested in that way. Our coherence framework gives us that space.

We all see our role in the district, and we're integrated and coordinated, at least we try to be and we get better at it, to do so. I think that that would be my main advice is have your stakeholder group invested in the same goal and be very clear about what that goal is.

Lucas Held: Early and intentional. LaTanya, Kasandra, anything to add?

LaTanya Sothern: I was going to say for me one of the most valuable pieces of our Assistant Principal Induction Program is the leadership development team. I would say to other districts to please make sure that you do offer your aspiring principals opportunities to interact and get feedback from and be coached by people who are at different levels within a district so that they can give their different lenses and perspectives on what areas they need to do to utilize as they're growing.

Lucas Held: Collaboration and teamwork.

Kassandra Lassiter: Absolutely, and having that outward mindset. As a part of her leadership development team, one of the things that we are very intentional about is what she needs to develop and how can we be more helpful to her and not a hindrance to her continuing to grow in her practice. We have established a culture where we're all in each other's way. We're all in Doug's shop. He's in my shop. We kind of cross integrate to get it done.

Lucas Held: Well, that's a terrific note on which to end. Let me thank our three guests, Dr. Douglas Anthony, associate superintendent of the Office of Talent Development in Prince George's County, LaTanya Sothern, an assistant principal in Prince George's County, and Dr. Kassandra Lassiter, a principal supervisor. Thanks to each of you for an informative and insightful conversation.

Douglas Anthony: Thanks for having us.

Kassandra Lassiter: Thank you.

LaTanya Sothern: Thanks for having us.