

# **ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS IN DOCTORAL PROGRAMS: ENGAGING SOURCES OF SUPPORT**

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## **Abstract**

This qualitative research study focused on 10 assistant principals currently enrolled or recent graduates of doctoral programs was the focus of this article. The perceptions and experiences of school leaders from Texas and North Carolina were shared with the authors through individual interviews and focus groups conducted over Zoom. Three key findings emerged from the data analysis: 1) faculty advisor role; 2) cohort model; and 3) programmatic initiatives. The discussion centered on the value that each of these findings played in the participants doctoral journeys. The article concludes with recommendations that faculty and staff in other doctoral programs could emulate to support student retention and completion of the dissertation.

This qualitative research study sought perspectives and reflections from 10 assistant principals who were currently enrolled or had recently graduated from doctoral programs. The data discussed in this article focuses specifically on the experiences of ten assistant principals who were enrolled in doctoral programs or were recent graduates of less than five years. The primary concept that we will emphasize is the type of support that the assistant principals found most helpful within their departments and universities. We will incorporate relevant literature, the methodological approach, and key findings. The latter sections of this article will then elaborate on what this means for the support of school leaders in doctoral programs and recommendations for doctoral program support systems.

*Keywords:* assistant principals, cohort model, dissertation completion, doctoral education, educational leadership, faculty advising, qualitative research, student persistence.

## **ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS AND DOCTORAL EDUCATION**

In the following section, we make literature connection to the focus of this article which was to learn from the experiences of ten assistant principals in doctoral programs and the support systems they found to be effective.

### **Assistant Principals**

The work that assistant principals conduct in schools includes a myriad of responsibilities ranging from instructional supervision to student discipline (Barnett et al., 2017; Oleszewski et al., 2012). Assistant principals have traditionally held duties that are secondary to the work of school principals. Assistant principals often engage in conducting teacher observations and classroom walkthroughs as part of supervisory feedback (Moyer & Goldring, 2023). Assistant

principals also traditionally have been considered as the disciplinarians in the school as a duty relegated to them by the principals that they work with (Barnett et al, 2012).

Assistant principals support the work of the principals they serve through opportunities for shadowing and to help grow them as instructional leaders (Bartanen et al., 2021). It is helpful for the leadership development of assistant principals to learn from their principals so that they can “hit the ground running” when they are assigned their own schools to lead as principals. Adversely, if assistant principals do not receive effective mentoring from the principals that they serve with then the assistant principals will have to learn new responsibilities and skills while “on the job.”

### **Educational Leadership Doctoral Programs**

Doctoral programs in educational leadership include both Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) and Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) degrees. The former is traditionally focused on the application of research for practice and/or policy that the candidates can apply to the school districts where they work. The latter degree has a strong focus on research that gives candidates opportunities for scholarly approaches to solving research problems. Both degrees offer coursework that supports leadership development, engagement with academic literature, and methodological approaches (Smith et al, 2021; Sverdik et al, 2018).

Traditional doctoral programs follow coursework with dissertation research that includes data collection and analysis. Doctoral candidates then submit their dissertations to their dissertation committee for review and feedback that culminates in an oral dissertation defense. This lengthy and rigorous process gives doctoral candidates opportunities to share what they have learned through their foray into the scholarly process of academic writing. Such processes are not only challenging regarding the work required, but also balancing dissertation requirements with full-time work responsibilities like that of assistant principals (Peters et al., 2016).

### **Cohort Models in Doctoral Programs**

The use of cohort models in doctoral programs in educational leadership is the traditional type of modality that students participate in. Cohort models offer students opportunities to take sequenced courses together. This helps students to develop friendships and partnerships to support them through their dissertation journeys (Leland et al, 2020). Learning side by side and sharing successes and vulnerabilities enhances relationship building (Jackman et al, 2023). Working through a new and challenging process like doctoral education with a close-knit group can make a positive impact on all involved.

The authors of this article both participated in cohort models in their respective doctoral programs. The first author is a doctoral candidate who maintains a close bond with her fellow cohort members. They are often in communication with each other to encourage each other and to share opportunities within academic organizations. The second author graduated from an educational leadership doctoral program that also emphasized a cohort model. The second author has sustained relationships with her cohort members across the over twenty years that have passed since the cohort graduated. They continue to present together at conferences and support each other both professionally and emotionally.

### **Faculty Advisor Roles**

Faculty members in universities have various work responsibilities rooted in the three areas of research, teaching, and service. When it comes to advising and mentoring doctoral students, faculty members integrate all three areas of their work responsibilities (Wollast et al., 2023). They engage in research support and development of the doctoral students that they advise. They teach their doctoral students about scholarly literature and context related to their dissertation work. Then they serve as dissertation chairs to support doctoral students through all phases of the dissertation process through final defense.

The importance of faculty advisors and dissertation chairs is critical when it comes to student retention in doctoral programs (Singe et al., 2021). The professional relationship between advisors and students is built on trust, respect, and aligned research vision (Santa-Ramirez, 2022). Thus, advisors can serve as role models for doctoral students by helping guide them with research and writing. They can also encourage and motivate doctoral students through the various phases from coursework through dissertation defense. Another element of support that faculty advisors can engage in is to support the academic socialization of doctoral students by co-authoring publications with them and co-presenting with them at professional conferences (Rodriguez, 2024).

In this section we made connections to scholarly literature around key areas of doctoral programs support for school leaders. We introduced literature related to assistant principals in doctoral program and key areas of support that included the role of the faculty advisor and the cohort model. In the following section we will briefly discuss the methodological approach that we employed for this study.

## **METHODS**

This qualitative research study began with the purpose of learning the experiences of school leader assistant principals currently enrolled in doctoral programs or who were recent graduates of doctoral programs since 2020. Our goal was to learn the most support practices that supported school leaders' retention in graduate programs. To this end, we sent a recruitment flyer through our social media outlets (LinkedIn and Facebook). Casting a wide net helped recruit 10 assistant principals for this research study. Participant selection criteria required participants to have been or currently be principals or assistant principals. Participants just have also been currently enrolled in a doc program or have graduated from a program after 2020. We were happy to receive participants' interests in participating in the study and confirmed 10 assistant principals to participate. Of the 10 assistant principals in the study, 6 were women and 4 were men. Overall, they shared a commitment to serving students in Title I schools with participants representing elementary, middle, and high schools in Central Texas, East Texas, and the East Coast.

The study was conducted through two individual interviews with each participant followed by three separate focus groups for the ten assistant principals with about 3 assistant principals participating in each group. All of these research sessions were conducted via Zoom to accommodate participants from various regions of the US. Interviews were transcribed using Zoom functions and all meetings were recorded with the permission of participants.

Data was analyzed using the transcripts and researcher notes through the literature connections that were previously discussed. Reference to the transcripts as well as re-watching interviews and focus groups helped the authors to internalize the data. Both authors engaged in weekly discussions and reflections based on the data to formulate the key findings that will be presented in the following section. The voices of the 10 assistant principals will be highlighted as a priority of their research study was to understand their supportive experiences in doctoral programs. Participants selected their own pseudonyms and those will be used in the presentation of key findings.

## **KEY FINDINGS**

In this section we will focus our presentation of the key findings specifically related to the programmatic support found within the participants' departments and universities. The first theme that will be presented is the important role of the faculty advisor. This will be followed by cohort support that the assistant principals in the study identified. Lastly, programmatic support systems within the department and university that proved helpful to the study participants will be presented.

### **Faculty Advisor Roles**

During our first interview with Acy, an elementary school assistant principal, she remarked that "Making sure they [faculty members] are available to us" as important for her to feel supported during her doctoral program. This reflects the need for faculty advisors to connect with doctoral students consistently. Clear communication could help to avail anxieties that students may have during their doctoral coursework and dissertation research phases.

Another example of faculty member availability was a comment made by Belen, a high school assistant principal, when she stated that she and her advisor were "best friends." She mentioned that her advisor had been supportive and accessible throughout her program. He was only "a text away" anytime that she needed assistance. Such a strong relationship between Belen and her faculty advisor could be because the same professor was her faculty advisor when Belen was in the master's degree program at her university. Thus, the years of study within the master's degree program and now into her last year of coursework in the doctoral program helped to cement the bond with her faculty advisor.

In the same vein, Dan, a middle school assistant principal, described his relationship with his faculty advisor as "vital" for his progress in the doctoral program. He called the guidance that his advisor offered as "stretching my thinking." They both co-presented on a panel that Dan found a rewarding experience.

Milo, a middle school assistant principal, also spoke about the value of the relationship with his faculty advisor. He described the ways that she supported him in his coursework and had recently invited him to co-author a publication with her. Milo emphasized that "she is always there when I need her." This comment reflects the important role of faculty advisors in supporting and motivating doctoral students.

Another aspect of faculty advisor support for doctoral students is through academic socialization. During an assistant principal focus group with three assistant principals, Dr. Salas, an assistant principal in an elementary school, explained that her dissertation chair has “absolutely been supportive” post-degree completion. They will be publishing two book chapters together and by participating in academic conferences together.

### ***Cohort Support***

Dr. Wayne, who was an assistant principal at the time that he earned his Ph.D., made sure to mention various ways that the cohort that he was a member of helped him during his academic path. During his second interview with us, Dr. Wayne explained how the cohort helped him to create friendships and professional networks. He remarked that the benefits of the cohort model extended beyond the program as he continues to remain in contact with other members of his cohort.

Trinidad, an elementary school assistant principal, expressed that “the cohort is there to uplift you” during a focus group with three other assistant principals in the study. She explained this sentiment because the cohort model has brought her close to other school leaders in the program and they rely on each other. They began sitting together during classes and were able to extend course context into their school leadership roles by debriefing and reflecting together.

Other assistant principals in the study also referred to the value of the connections made with cohort members. Milo, who is in his last year of coursework, called his cohort members his extended family. Specifically, he said that “I couldn’t have done it without them” as he reflected on the impact that the cohort had on his academic journey. This is certainly another example of the benefits of doctoral students learning together within their respective university programs.

Likewise, another middle school assistant principal named Jack reflected “I hit on the right cohort.” He explained that he made good friendships and described the ways that his cohort of twelve Ph.D. students remained in constant communication through a group chat. He mentioned how they keep each other informed about upcoming assignments and cheer each other on when taking on new professional positions or winning awards. This showed that they care about each other, and that they respect the stages where everyone in the cohort is on their journeys.

Arely, an elementary school assistant principal who is currently in the coursework stage of her doctoral program, told us that she found a “sister” in the cohort. They bonded instantly based on similar professional backgrounds and goals. In this way, they act as support systems for each other. Meeting likeminded individuals and those with similar research interests through a cohort model enhances the value that such learning models have on doctoral students.

### ***Programmatic Initiatives***

Several of the assistant principals in the study referred to university library staff who provided assistance during literature review searches. Milo, a middle school assistant principal in his last year of coursework, called the dedicated university librarian “a lifesaver” for the time that the librarian has given to assist him. Then, Trinidad, an elementary assistant principal, also referred to the dedicated content librarian as providing invaluable assistance during her coursework. Having individuals that they could turn to for support was helpful in reducing some anxiety. This

also shows the ways that university staff can collaborate with faculty members to offer seamless resources for doctoral students.

Another supportive program that some of the assistant principals in the study mentioned were workshops dedicated to dissertation writing sponsored by their respective departments or graduate schools at their institutions. Acy, an elementary school principal who was a doctoral candidate when she participated in the study, informed us about a dissertation writing camp that her university sponsored on weekends. Andrea lives about 90 minutes away from the university, but made time to join the writing camp that other students had told her was very helpful. A few assistant principals in the study observed that most of the workshops were offered during the workday. Thus, as assistant principals, they were not able to take advantage of these opportunities given their busy schedules.

Then a few of the assistant principals described writing circles as extremely helpful in keeping them accountable with their dissertation writing. Elise, an elementary school assistant principal, mentioned how writing circles have helped her to find dedicated time for writing. Similarly, Dr. Salas who is also an elementary school assistant principal, mentioned how writing circles proved to be a supportive resource when she was writing her dissertation. Bringing students together in-person or virtually to focus on writing was a good motivator.

## DISCUSSION

The three themes presented under key findings elaborated on strategies and activities that the assistant principals in the study found helpful. See Figure 1 below for a visual representation of the three themes: 1) faculty advisor; 2) cohort model; and 3) programmatic initiatives. Each of the themes reflects value-added activities to help sustain the assistant principals during their doctoral student journeys.

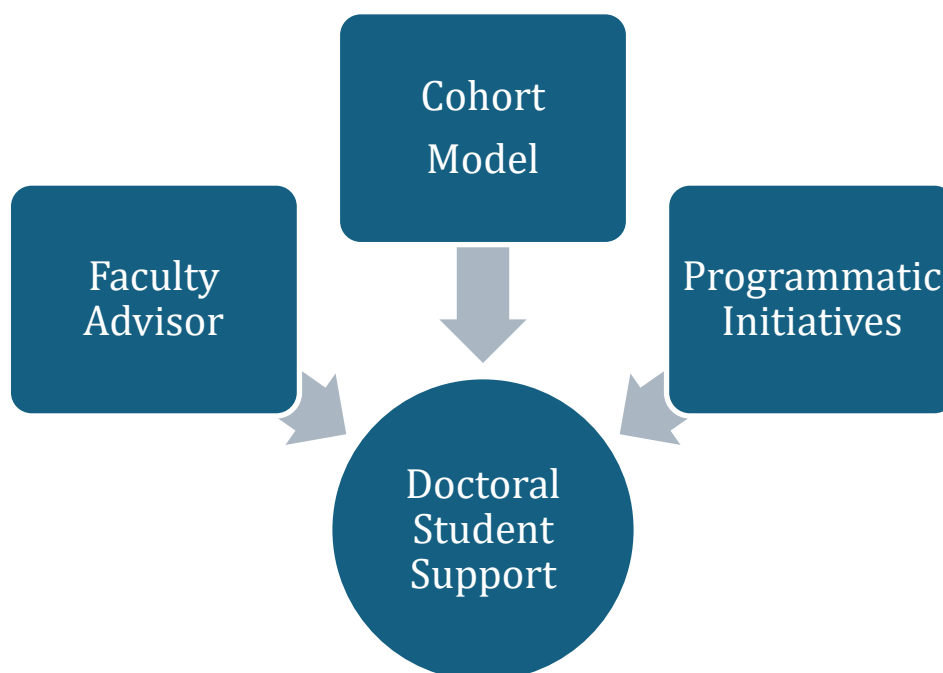


Figure 1: Sources of support for doctoral students

The findings confirmed the important role that faculty advisors serve in supporting doctoral students. All ten of the participants in the study referred effusively to the critical ways that their faculty advisors/dissertation committee chairs mentored them. The participants referred to specific examples and instances when their mentors provided emotional and academic support. It was evident from the ways that the assistant principals so caringly referred to their dissertation supervisors that the bond that unites them will continue post-graduation (Rodriguez, 2016). Faculty mentors for doctoral students provide writing support, research support, and career enhancement through activities like co-publishing manuscripts and co-presenting with students at conferences. Thus, they contribute to the academic socialization of doctoral students.

Each of the ten assistant principals in the study referred to the critical ways that members of their respective cohorts had played in helping the participants to remain in the program and to feel motivated. Cohort models emphasize ways that students find support, motivation, and encouragement with classmates in the same doctoral program. This team approach to the learning process offers students opportunities to not only take courses together, but to build professional networks. Cohorts of doctoral students provide engagement experiences that foster a community-building approach (Roberts, 2021).

A few programmatic initiatives sponsored by the participants' departments, colleges of education, and/or graduate colleges were mentioned by the participants as helpful to their growth in academic writing and dissertation preparation. A few of the participants mentioned writing circles as an important component that helped them to grow in their academic writing. Engaging in the writing process with other students (in-person or virtually) helped the doctoral students in the study to find structured time to dedicate to their writing. It was also a way to have accountability partners in the writing process.

In the following section we will offer recommendations for doctoral programs based on the aforementioned discussion of findings from the perspectives and experiences shared by ten assistant principals enrolled or recent graduates of doctoral programs. The recommendations are presented in the spirit of service for students, especially those who work full-time and are part-time doctoral students. The recommendations could also be helpful to faculty members and university staff members responsible for developing professional growth initiatives for doctoral students.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DOCTORAL PROGRAMS**

Now we get to the traditional “so what?” question. What can faculty advisors, dissertation committee members, mentors, and professors learn from the key findings presented in this study? One item that resonated across all of ten of the assistant principals in the study was the mentoring relationship with their faculty advisors and dissertation committee chairs. A recommendation is for departments to invite faculty advisors who have an extended and successful record of student completion to graduation to serve on panels and/or webinars. These faculty members could share tips and strategies with university colleagues based on how they work with doctoral students effectively, especially those who are school leaders with extremely

busy schedules like the assistant principals in this study. Likewise, the faculty members and their doctoral student mentees could all participate in an informational session where they would share the foundation of their mentor/mentee relationship and how such a relationship remains steady through the doctoral program process.

Cohort models proved very helpful to the participants in this study. Therefore, doctoral programs that currently offer a cohort model could conduct a needs assessment with their students to identify strengths and areas for growth within the cohort model to continue to sustain it as an effective tool for student motivation. Then doctoral programs who do not offer cohort models need to begin learning about ways to generate such helpful groups. They could visit (physically or virtually) with program faculty at other universities to determine the next steps for implementing their own cohort models within their doctoral programs.

Most of the assistant principals in the study affirmed helpful programmatic initiatives like writing support, library research support, and dissertation writing support. Institutions of higher education could bring together staff members from the graduate college and faculty members from various departments to conduct webinars and/or in-person workshops about topics that could help doctoral students continue to pave a path to degree completion. Given that assistant principals work during the workday, universities should plan writing activities and learning events after 5pm so that the part-time students who are full-time school leaders can participate in the trainings and webinars.

## CONCLUSIONS

This article shared the voices of 10 assistant principals in doctoral programs, currently enrolled or who were recent graduates. Through individual interviews and a focus group, data was gleaned that focused on areas of support for students in doctoral programs. The discussion and recommendations sections following the presentation of findings elaborated on the myriad ways that university programs could develop or strengthen mentoring relationships between students and faculty advisors, the benefits of cohort models in doctoral education, and programmatic initiatives that serve to meet student needs in helping to get them to the next level. Approaches and actions to support doctoral students to dissertation completion were offered so that other doctoral students, especially those who are school leaders like the assistant principals in the study, could benefit from what was discussed in this article. This work could also benefit faculty advisors and those who develop programmatic initiatives to identify ways that can best support the students that they serve.

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