

The Untapped Potential of the Principal Supervisor

How Support for School Leaders Should Change



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When I visit a school, I am there as an active participant so that I become a new learner as well. I learn something in every leadership team meeting, every time I go into a classroom, every time I sit down with building principals. I learn, and that learning allows me to better support the other leaders in our buildings.

—Bob Bohannon, Assistant Superintendent, Perry Township Schools, Indiana

INTRODUCTION

A recent synthesis of research from the last two decades confirms that principals can have a significant impact on student learning outcomes, accelerating annual student learning by more than two months. Effective principals focus on high-leverage instructional activities, build a productive culture and climate, facilitate collaboration and learning communities, and strategically manage personnel and resources.¹ To accomplish these goals, and advance equitable instruction for all students, principals are under growing pressure to expand the time and effort they spend on instructional leadership – actions that can improve teachers’ effectiveness and students’ learning opportunities. In addition, support from principals is among the most important factors in teachers’ decisions about whether to remain in teaching, and in their school.²

In this paper we focus on the specific actions that principal supervisors can take to build the capacity of principals as leaders of instruction in their schools. A growing body of research points to principal supervisors as

a key lever for change when they shift from a focus on compliance to a focus on coaching.³ We explore what that coaching looks like in schools.

Research-based strategies to support teachers to improve, including classroom coaching, facilitating collaborative professional learning, and providing growth-oriented evaluation and feedback, are highly labor intensive. Given the many other demands on principals’ time, it is no surprise that principals manage to spend, on average, only 8-17 percent of their working hours on actions related to teaching and learning.⁴

In addition to a lack of time, many principals report that they do not know what to look for when observing teachers or how to provide strong feedback for improvement.⁵ They also struggle with designing ongoing collaborative professional learning that improves teaching and, as a result, many teachers continue to report that their professional development experiences are not relevant or useful.⁶

Principals themselves report a desire for professional learning and collaboration, but it is not always something they can access.

In a 2020 report by the Learning Policy Institute and the National Association of Secondary School Principals, only half of principals surveyed said they received professional development through mentoring, peer observation, or coaching. In the same study, 37% of principals in high-poverty schools shared, “My district does not provide adequate support to advance student learning.” Overall, 98% of principals indicated a desire for additional relevant and useful professional development.⁷

The combination of the increasing complexity of the principals’ job coupled with a lack of time and support is making the principalship an unsustainable job for many.

In fact,

- **75% of principals feel the job has become too complex.** This sentiment is shared by principals regardless of demographic characteristics such as school level, location, proportion of low-income or minority students, or proportion of students at grade level in ELA and math.⁸
- **48% of principals say they are under great stress** several days a week.⁹
- **About 20% of principals leave their school each year,** and turnover is higher in high-poverty schools.¹⁰
- **45% of principals report that they are considering leaving the profession.**¹¹

These statistics are well-known and startling at the same time – especially when we know that school leadership is essential for school success. While the evidence is clear that principals impact performance, it is increasingly important for principals to be able to identify learning gaps and equity issues, and to work with teachers to address these issues in ways that lead to clear and measurable improvements for students. But, principals, especially new principals, need relevant and useful support in growing their own capacity to lead teaching and learning and to develop the knowledge and skills of others.

Overcoming Current Challenges

Increasingly, the role of district leadership in setting expectations and providing support for school leaders to create more effective professional learning and coaching systems in their school has been highlighted as the difference-maker. NIET has found that district leaders and principal supervisors have greater impact when they provide coaching that is deeply connected with the day-to-day decisions of the principal, the work of the instructional leadership team, and what is happening in classrooms – but too often, that isn’t the case.

Many districts are giving principals greater autonomy and control over school improvement efforts, but systems, procedures and protocols at the district level may frustrate or conflict with changes principals are making in their school. In many instances, district support structures and roles are the last element to change.

The Untapped Potential of the Principal Supervisor

This builds off what other research is finding. The Wallace Foundation released *Changing the Principal Supervisor Role to Better Support Principals*, one of a series of reports highlighting the experiences of six districts working to transition the role of principal supervisor to focus on helping principals support high-quality instruction.¹² The report describes actions taken at three levels – district leaders, principal supervisors, and principals – to support this shift.

Districts reduced the number of principals that supervisors supervised, changed the job expectations for principal supervisors, and provided training for them to strengthen their skills as coaches. The changes that principal supervisors made in order to better support principals as leaders of teaching and learning included spending more time in schools, providing job-embedded feedback and coaching, and facilitating networks of principals.

In our experience, principals must expand their concept of leadership to include teacher leaders, along with assistant principals and other members of their leadership team, in order to provide the quality and quantity of support necessary to change teacher practice and student learning experiences. Principal supervisors can help principals to develop and manage this team in order to improve teaching and learning, and build a pipeline for leadership positions. Better support starts with the supervisor, but they should only be the starting place for more comprehensive district support for principals.

District leaders need to think carefully about who they place in the principal supervisor role, prioritizing experience as an effective school leader, along with the ability to coach others. They also need to examine their existing processes for placing school leaders, and ensure that the newest, least experienced principals are not being assigned to the most demanding schools.

District leaders play a key role in sustaining the changes that principals are working to make, such as funding teacher leadership roles that deliver more relevant, job-embedded learning for all teachers. District leadership is especially important in helping principals to recruit, hire and train teacher leaders, and they play a crucial role in aligning and integrating the work of school level teams with district initiatives.



Alice M. Harte Charter School, InspireNOLA Charter Schools, Louisiana

The National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET) has 20 years of experience in helping school systems implement research-based strategies to improve teaching and learning. Over that period of time, we have trained more than 10,000 administrators and 35,000 teacher leaders.

NIET’s report, [*Unleashing Teacher Leadership: How Formal Teacher Leadership Roles Can Improve Instruction*](#), describes the ways that principals are using teacher leadership roles to provide the additional expertise and capacity to implement high-impact levers for improvement: leading collaborative learning teams, conducting observations and providing feedback, and ensuring that all teachers benefit from coaching.¹³ Principals who have created teacher leadership roles focused on professional learning and coaching report significant and sustained improvements in teacher effectiveness and retention.¹⁴

Our experience in supporting over 275,000 educators across 9,000 schools is a constant on-the-ground reminder of what the research indicates – principals need relevant and useful support, particularly in their roles as instructional leaders. Key resources in facilitating principals’ success and continued growth include teacher leaders and other school administrators, as well as district leaders and principal supervisors. Principal supervisors are well-positioned to marshal the district’s resources and provide the coaching for principals to grow and succeed. Shifting the role of principal supervisors to a focus on coaching and support can help principals to address key instructional leadership challenges.

Instructional Leadership Challenges and Solutions

Below we describe four solutions that principal supervisors in our partner districts used to help principals address instructional leadership challenges.

Challenges for Principals	Solutions and Strategies for Principal Supervisors
<p>Principals struggle to find adequate time to support teaching and learning, and are often not visible partners in the work of instruction.</p>	<p>Be a visible partner and model being a lead learner with principals and their team.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schedule time in schools and classrooms with principals to understand their needs and their school’s needs. • Model being a learner in multiple settings with principals, including professional learning teams and classrooms, to build a culture of reflection.

Challenges for Principals	Solutions and Strategies for Principal Supervisors
<p>A lack of a common understanding and shared language around instructional leadership practices makes it more difficult to establish clear, measurable goals for improvement.</p>	<p>Develop a common vision and consistently use a shared language that describes expectations for principals around instructional leadership.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use research-based leadership standards to define effective practices, meet the needs of diverse learners, and provide clear priorities for principals’ instructional leadership. • Establish the purpose of standards as supporting growth, not just measuring effectiveness – and then show that through district feedback and actions.
<p>Principal coaching and support, where it exists, is often not tied to individual needs, school context, or curriculum, and lacks evidence or artifacts to support feedback and recommendations.</p>	<p>Establish a coaching, feedback, and support system that is aligned with expectations in evaluation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide job-embedded coaching for principals that is grounded in their needs, school context and curriculum. • Use frequent observations and a cycle of feedback and improvement to support principals to reflect on their practice and make improvements.
<p>Both teachers and principals benefit from collaborative learning opportunities but, because of time demands and a culture of “go-it-alone,” many educators do not collaborate or learn together.</p>	<p>Support principals to create collaborative professional learning structures in their school, engage teachers in leadership roles, and build a network of support.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide resources and support for school-based collaborative professional learning. • Expand leadership capacity by creating clear and specific roles for teacher leaders. • Develop opportunities for principals to collaborate and build a network of support.

Solution 1. Be a visible partner and model being a lead learner.

New principals, and many veteran school leaders, often do not feel confident in their abilities to lead teaching and learning. There are a range of possible reasons – being out of the classroom for several years, a new curriculum, or their experience as assistant principal focused primarily on building management or discipline issues – all of which took them away from a focus on teaching and learning. These principals are often strong building leaders but lack confidence in their abilities as instructional leaders, leaving them unsure how to strengthen this aspect of their role.

Principal supervisors can help. These positions already exist in most districts, and principal supervisors are uniquely positioned to support principals in reflecting on their mindset and their actions in ways that enable them to grow their own capacity as instructional leaders and increase the learning happening in their schools. Aligning expectations, training, and support for principal supervisors to what research shows is more effective makes better use of this investment in human capital, and requires clear direction from district leaders that this is the priority.

What is the principal supervisor role?

Principal supervisors are sometimes a dedicated district role, or they may be district staff with other responsibilities. In small districts, the superintendent may supervise principals. Principal supervisors work with principals to improve teaching and learning by coaching them to build and guide leadership teams, create collaborative professional learning for teachers, observe and provide feedback in classrooms, and create principal learning opportunities, among other activities.

Model Principal Supervisor

Professional Standards released in 2015 by the Council of Chief State School Officers describe eight key aspects of the role, with an emphasis on supporting principal growth.¹⁵

Strategy: Schedule time in schools and classrooms with principals to understand their needs and their school's needs.

While standards have evolved to emphasize support, the role of principal supervisor has generally not been structured to facilitate time for regular observation and feedback or site-based coaching for principals. Building a common understanding of expectations is more challenging when school visits by principal supervisors are infrequent.

Many principals report seeing their supervisor once or twice a year, usually in an evaluative or compliance role. For principal supervisors to fully understand the needs of the school and of the principal, they need to join the principal and their team in various learning settings, including collaborative professional learning community (PLC) meetings, teacher planning, and school instructional leadership team meetings. Principals and supervisors need to plan and schedule this time or other issues will crowd it out.¹⁶

Dr. Roddy Melancon, principal of Gonzales Primary School in Ascension Public Schools, Louisiana, described the importance of his supervisor, Dr. Latatia Johnson, in supporting his growth as a leader. “Dr. Johnson came in and challenged me to be visible as an instructional leader. She modeled with me, and she pushed me to become more involved in activities like PLCs and conversations around student work,” he said.

“Looking back, it was very easy to switch to an instructional leader mindset by being visible. It was being visible in PLCs and engaging in conversation, being visible when teachers were doing planning and getting involved in looking at student work, and being visible and engaged in the learning of every student in the class. I had to show that I prioritized instructional leadership, protect that time, and not always be the one to leave the room to handle every issue or crisis.”

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—Dr. Roddy Melancon, Principal, Gonzales Primary School, Ascension Public Schools, Louisiana

For Dr. Melancon, his supervisor modeled the active engagement in teaching and learning that she wanted him to embrace as a school leader, and she did so side by side with him in a variety of settings. Her focus on his strengths, and specific actions he could take to improve, helped him to build his confidence as an instructional leader.

Dr. Johnson explained how she prioritizes the work of instructional leadership for principals she supports. “I attend every leadership team meeting on my campuses that I can. From there, we follow up and I support principals during walk-throughs. I find that if we put it on our calendars and we commit to, ‘This is what we’re doing, this is when we’re going in, these are the discussions that we’re having,’ that works for us,” she said. “I might go into a classroom to let the principal see me giving the teacher feedback as a model for them. Then in the next classroom, I tell the principal, ‘OK, now you give this teacher feedback and I’ll coach you.’”

For principal supervisors, it is important to be a visible presence in schools. While private conversations in the principal's office are critical, walking with them through their building – observing as they work and lead in different contexts – provides more comprehensive insight. These observations enable principal supervisors to gather concrete evidence of how a principal coaches individual teachers, leads professional learning, and solves problems.

Building trust and a true partnership depends on investments of time by principal supervisors to understand individual principal needs and provide timely, relevant, and actionable feedback. Creating this time depends on districts ensuring that principal supervisors have a reasonable number of principals to support, and a clear directive to keep their focus on coaching and improvement.

Strategy: Model being a learner while leading.

For principals to truly improve their leadership practices, they need a model of what that improvement looks like. Principal supervisors can provide this by modeling coaching, self-reflection, and goal setting.¹⁷ One of the most important things they model is how leaders are also learners. Bob Bohannon, assistant superintendent for career preparation at Perry Township Schools, Indiana, describes this shift in his district. “When I visit a school, I am there as an active participant so that I become a new learner as well,” he said.

“I’m there not just as a supervisor, but as a participant. I learn something in every leadership team meeting, every time I go into a classroom, every time I sit down with building principals. I learn, and that learning allows me to better support the other leaders in our buildings.” By engaging as learners themselves, supervisors help to create a reflective culture at the district level that principals can replicate in their own schools.

Digging into problems together enables principal supervisors and principals to build a common understanding of what is happening in classrooms, what the curriculum looks like, what students are expected to master, and how mastery is reflected in student work. This collaborative support enables the principal and supervisor to create common goals and models the reflective, collaborative working relationship that principals can build with their teachers.

“I had to really infuse myself in the content, and I had to be able to have conversations with each teacher on my campus about student learning,” said Roneka Coleman, principal at S.J. Montgomery Elementary School in Lafayette Parish School System, Louisiana. “In order for me to have conversations about instruction in math, I needed to understand the shifts in that curriculum. I had to have knowledge of the major work that was happening in my building. It started with being a lead learner and committing to that learning.”

With their broad knowledge of the curriculum and district priorities, supervisors can provide important insights and support as principals build their understanding of the work taking place in their building and how they can support individual teachers and students.

By engaging as a learner, principal supervisors build trust with principals. “Like anything that takes place in a school, it’s about establishing trust with the principal and getting them to recognize that it’s a partnership. I want results for their students and their teachers just like they want results for their students and their teachers. By establishing that partnership, teachers see me as a member of their school community,” said Dr. Johnson. “When the principal and I are conducting walk-throughs or we’re going in classrooms, everyone feels comfortable with me, allowing me to model behaviors or actions to replicate.”

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—Dr. Latatia Johnson, Federal Programs Supervisor, Ascension Public Schools, Louisiana

This modeling also sends a strong message that principal supervisors are learners along with principals, assistant principals and teachers, engaging in the work and being willing to go first, take risks, and not have all the answers.

By actively engaging with principals in the instructional challenges of the school, supervisors are modeling what it looks like to be a lead learner. This can be modeled even more explicitly by asking principals to provide feedback through surveys, focus groups, or other methods on the coaching and support that supervisors are providing, and having supervisors reflect on this feedback with the community of principals.

Principal supervisors often bring substantial personal experience as a former principal to these conversations and can share insights from their work with other principals in the district. Districts can build on this experience with training for principal supervisors to strengthen their coaching skills and their ability to serve as facilitators of principal collaborative learning. When leaders spend time in schools side by side with principals, and actively engage as learners, they contribute to the development of a culture of reflection and continuous improvement.

Solution 1: Reflective Questions

- How often do you schedule time in schools with principals?
- During those visits, what instructional leadership activities do you engage in with the principal and their team?
- How do you model being a learner?



Mansfield High School, DeSoto Parish Schools, Louisiana

Solution 2. Develop a common vision and consistently use a shared language that describes expectations for principals around the instructional leadership aspects of their role.

In NIET’s work with districts, we have found that using a common language around what strong teaching practices look and sound like is essential for improvement. The same is true for principals, who need clear and concrete language that describes what strong instructional leadership looks like and how they can continue to improve in various aspects of the job.

Developing a common vision and engaging others in pursuit of that vision is central to the role of a school leader. Successfully creating a common vision is closely tied to a positive school culture and climate where both teachers and students are engaged in learning. Principal supervisors can reinforce that vision by making connections between principal practice, classroom teaching, and student work.

Research-based leadership standards are an essential tool as principals and principal supervisors develop a shared language that describes leadership expectations for principals. Leadership standards provide clarity and focus beginning with the principal’s job description, through the hiring process, and into coaching, professional learning, and evaluation. This grounding in a shared understanding of priorities and goals gives principals the ability to keep the big picture in focus amidst the daily pressures and demands of the job.

Principal Leadership Standards

Principal leadership standards are a set of research-based indicators that define excellence in school leadership. Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) describe the elements of effective principal leadership.¹⁸

The NIET Principal Standards Rubric aligns with these standards, and covers multiple domains of practice, describing the skills and knowledge principals need to be effective. Descriptions of practice across a range of indicators and skill levels in the rubric create a roadmap for improvement and growth.

Strategy: Use research-based principal leadership standards to define effective leadership practices.

Principals are expected to build a community of adult learners, capable of continuously improving and responding to individual student needs, while creating and communicating a culture of equity. They have more responsibilities on their plate than ever before. But while there is general agreement that the job of principal has grown, there is far less clarity on how to support principals to meet these new expectations – or even exactly what these new expectations are.

Principals often figure out the job with minimal guidance, and what's immediately in front of them tends to shape their focus.

“When I became principal, there was no guidebook. It was essentially, ‘Here are the keys to the school, go start school,’” said Amy Whittington, a principal in Leon, Iowa. “I thought, I have to build a schedule, I have to hire people. What does this look like?”

Now, her district uses NIET’s Principal Standards Rubric to guide her as a leader. NIET’s standards provide a roadmap for improving practice by establishing and communicating a compelling vision of excellence and prioritizing and creating coherence across standards, curriculum, classroom practice, assessment, and evaluation and feedback. In addition, the standards include developing a culture of high expectations and equitable opportunities; building the capacity of others through a system of continuous learning, collaboration, data analysis, and coaching; and modeling integrity and building trust.

The NIET Principal Standards Rubric requires principals to identify barriers to opportunity and create plans for removing those barriers. Examples could be: increasing access for marginalized groups of students to advanced coursework, reviewing and adjusting class assignments to address inequities in access to highly effective teachers for poor or minority students, and reviewing and selecting curriculum to ensure that it includes resources or supports to enable all students to work with grade-level material. “I appreciate the standards because they take some of the mystery out of it while still providing flexibility to address your local context,” Principal Whittington said.

How these goals are accomplished should always depend on the needs of students and teachers, but the NIET rubric provides a clear vision for the most important aspects of the role. Using research-based standards to describe principal leadership practices brings a level of detail and specificity that is often lacking in the principal job definition.

Principal Michele Smith from Pierceton Elementary School in Whitko Community Schools, Indiana, describes the benefits of having clear standards to create focus and support growth. “Being a school leader is hard. There are multiple facets of the work and numerous distractors. The NIET Principal Standards Rubric allows me to focus on the areas that will impact our school success in the most effective ways,” she said. “Yes, it is daunting. Yes, it is overwhelming at times. But now I have direction and a tool that focuses my reflection on things that will have the biggest impact on our students and teachers. It is easy to get off track and spend time on things that pull us away from high-impact actions. Whenever I feel the wheels spinning (or coming off!), I get my head back into the rubric. It keeps me focused and allows me to move toward growth and success, one step at a time.”

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—Michele Smith, Principal, Pierceton Elementary School, Whitko Community Schools, Indiana

Providing this focus often makes clear the challenge of allocating a larger percentage of time to teaching and learning than has typically been the case, and brings to light what gets the most attention in everyday school leadership.

Strategy: Establish the purpose of leadership standards as focused on growth and capacity-building, not just measuring effectiveness.

The shared language in leadership standards makes ongoing, deep, and meaningful conversations and feedback possible and should set the foundation for both evaluation and coaching. The use of principal standards or “rubrics” forces principal supervisors to be more explicit about expectations and creating professional learning opportunities and coaching that help principals grow – the purpose of evaluation.



Slaton High School, Slaton Independent School District, Texas

The standards create a roadmap for growth for each individual principal by articulating levels of effectiveness across multiple indicators of practice. The use of standards quickly shines a light on whether principals are being supported in meeting expectations, and where they want and need to go further.

Using principal standards as a tool changes the way that supervisors think about supporting and coaching principals because it makes clear where there are gaps in support or differences in understanding of expectations.

“The NIET rubric is a great conversation starter,” said Jim Andrus, superintendent of Slaton Independent School District in Slaton, Texas. “We use the standards to guide our beginning, middle, and end-of-the-year reflections with principals and to help us identify where we need to push in with leadership or other training. It’s a great tool for me to coach principals, and it is a great study tool for principals to use on their own. Having come from the principalship, I value that the standards show what continuous improvement can look like and how to get to the next level of practice.”

The principal of Greenville Park Leadership Academy in Tangipahoa Parish School System, Louisiana, Bobby Matthews, shared how grounding his evaluation in NIET's principal standards shifted how he was supported by his district. "From the get-go, the beginning of the year meeting between my supervisor and me was more focused and clear," he said, "This year's initial meeting seemed less compliance-oriented and more meaningful and intentional. The structure of the goal-setting conversation and the principal standards provided me with a sense of clarity that I have not felt in quite some time. The support that I received from my supervisor did not seem like we were going through the motions, but our conversation was focused and evidence-based and it prompted me to reflect on focus areas that seemed more intentional than previous goals that I set on my own in the past."

Receiving support based on a clear understanding of expectations provides principals with the experience they are expected to provide for teachers. Principal Brian Knight from Southport High School in Perry Township, Indiana, describes the

support he now provides for individual teachers. "A lot of my focus, and that of my leadership team, is on individuals – making growth plans for each person in order to continue to stretch them and build their capacity."

One of the ways districts can create alignment and coherence between the role of principal and principal supervisor is through joint training on the standards or expectations for the job as expressed in the principal standards. By creating opportunities for principals and principal supervisors to build a common vision and language around strong leadership practices, districts empower supervisors to provide specific actions to foster growth and success and more clearly define exemplary performance.

In this way, the use of principal standards such as the NIET Principal Standards Rubric specifically defines the elements of effective leadership necessary to positively impact teacher growth and student achievement, and at the same time serves as a roadmap for improvement.

Solution 2: Reflective Questions

- Why is it important to ground your support for principals and align expectations for principal evaluation in the principal leadership standards?
- What actions do you take to develop a shared language and common understanding of instructional leadership practices with principals?
- How do you clearly communicate and show through your actions that your support is focused on principals' growth and improvement?

Solution 3. Establish a coaching, feedback, and support system that is aligned with expectations in evaluation.

Coaching teachers effectively is an essential skill that principals need to be a strong instructional leader. By asking reflective questions, seeking teachers' insights and expertise, and focusing on student work and student learning, principals show that they are a partner in efforts to improve teaching and learning. Despite the emphasis on individual coaching for teachers, coaching for principals is often informal, lacks clear and measurable goals, and is infrequent or disconnected from the daily work of principals and the teachers they support.

Recent surveys of principals report that virtually all school leaders desire additional professional development and overwhelmingly prefer support that is individualized and relevant to their specific needs and the needs of their school.¹⁹ Principal supervisors can and should show principals what it looks like to be an effective coach. This requires adopting many of the earlier strategies, like being present in schools and tying feedback to leadership standards and curriculum. Supervisors should guide conversations by asking reflective questions and tackling instructional challenges.

Strategy: Provide job-embedded coaching for principals throughout the school year.

Coaching enables principal supervisors to highlight what strong leadership practice looks like – focusing on strengths first, asking reflective questions and analyzing data and student work. The structures of support, leadership, and coaching need to start and be supported at the district level. “If we want our principals to get better at supporting individual teachers so that our teachers can get better at supporting individual students,” said Perry Township principal Brian Knight. “Then that has to start at the district level with supporting principals as individuals, not just as a holistic group of people.”

Effective coaching for principals can include feedback on specific, detailed actions that are grounded in the curriculum, as well as their individual needs and the needs of their students. For example, principal supervisors could help principals as they support teachers to use new instructional materials, as was recently the case in Caddo Parish Public Schools, Louisiana.

“Principals don’t have to be experts in every grade and content area,” Principal Marco French of Queensborough Leadership Academy in Caddo said. “They do need to be aware of the structure of the curriculum and capable of accessing resources in order to point teachers in the right direction. Their leadership team as a whole needs to carry this consistency into professional learning.” By coaching principals as they work with teachers in classrooms and on professional learning teams, principal supervisors can help principals to strengthen their ability to observe, provide feedback, and connect coaching to professional learning.

Bethany Loucks, principal of Rio Colorado Elementary School in San Luis, Arizona, has trained teacher leaders as coaches in her school, many of whom became principals themselves. This “grow your own” principal pipeline provides teacher leaders with a strong foundation for coaching when they become a principal. “You have to see potential and focus on strengths,” she said. “You find that skill and you build on it – sending a teacher to see how other teachers do something, analyzing how that skill advances student learning in the classroom, and presenting on that skill in a collaborative group. I encourage them to be learners themselves. Everyone can teach you something.”

Principals who experienced this frequent and job-embedded coaching as teachers are looking for the same kind of support from their supervisors at the district level when they become principals.

They want supervisors to help them to plan ahead and set specific, achievable goals. Frequent coaching is highly valuable to principals. “My best supports have come when my supervisor visits often and participates with my staff in professional development,” said Nathan Langlois, principal of Austin East High School in Knox County, Tennessee. “It gives them a sense of the pulse of the school.”

Principal supervisors provide a valuable perspective from outside the school, from someone who does not report to the principal. “I need somebody to question and make me justify every decision I am making to make sure it isn’t just my feelings and thoughts, but it is actually the right decision,” Principal Knight of Perry Township said. “The district is where I can get that.”

By providing coaching throughout the school year, principal supervisors are able to embed their support in specific needs, make strong connections to the principal’s goals, and provide a sounding board for principals.

Strategy: Use observations and feedback to support principals to reflect on their practice and make improvements.

Valid and reliable feedback based on observations is essential for principals to understand and reflect on their practice, yet nearly half of all principals report that their own evaluation does not produce useful information.²⁰

Julie Thompson, executive director of elementary education in Knox County Schools, Tennessee, describes the changes her district has made to better connect coaching with evaluation. “This year we focused our observations in more authentic situations where we were embedded for the day, visiting classrooms, attending team meetings, asking questions as appropriate, and working to be thought partners for principals and instructional coaches,” she said, “Our evidence collection was based on authentic observations at schools, interacting and being embedded in the work alongside principals and instructional coaches.” By giving feedback based on in-depth observations of principals’ practice, supervisors were able to make evaluations more relevant and clearly connected to the support that district supervisors are providing to principals.

Former principal Devon Willis-Jones describes her experience in Iberia Parish School District, Louisiana, being coached by her supervisor. “She challenged decisions and really made me think strategically about what was important and how it would support students and teachers. She was a constant coach, and one that pushed me to be my best. I valued that coaching

and support from the district level, and it was reflected in my overall effectiveness as a principal.” Having a plan in place to continue to grow and improve is motivating, particularly when the plan is detailed and action-oriented, and principals are able to take a shared ownership in it.

Feedback is also important for evaluation processes to be viewed by principals as meaningful and supportive, rather than punitive. “Everybody who goes into education has a desire to improve and understands the concept of being a learner,” said Assistant Superintendent Bohannon from Indiana. “Principals want the person coaching and supporting them to understand where they are working to improve and to ensure that progress is reflected in their evaluation. It is critical to help them make the connection between doing well on an evaluation and how changes in practice produced that result.”

Investing the time to ensure that principals receive feedback and guidance in connection with their evaluation builds trust, supports the development of their reflective practice, and strengthens the working relationship with district leaders.

Solution 3: Reflective Questions

- How do you provide coaching for principals in a variety of settings in their school (leadership team, PLC, classrooms) and grounded in their individual needs?
- How do you know if your coaching is effective?
- What can you do to strengthen the quality of your feedback?

Solution 4. Create opportunities for collaboration and capacity-building.

Principals need to be able to identify, engage, and develop other members of their team as leaders in order to meet the growing demands for improvement in classroom teaching and learning across the school. Even as principals share responsibilities among their leadership team members, they should be increasing opportunities for all staff to step up into leadership roles. Delegating tasks to teams and providing opportunities for staff to participate on teams is critical, whether selecting or providing training on the virtual learning platform, assessing student needs, planning and delivering professional learning, or identifying and creating a plan to address student learning gaps.

In addition, formal leadership roles and structures are essential in giving teacher leaders the authority, time, and resources to be successful in taking on tasks like coaching and facilitating professional learning. Principal supervisors play an important role in supporting principals to build school-based structures and processes for building the capacity of their leadership team members, and in making structures for professional learning and collaboration effective. Teacher leaders often advance into the role of assistant principal, and this offers

an opportunity to build a leadership pipeline, and to prepare assistant principals with experience as teacher leaders.

Leadership teams are essential in helping principals to advance an equity agenda and plan for addressing student social and emotional needs. For example, using data to identify needs and potential gaps, and create plans for supporting students in marginalized groups; ensuring a vision of student learning that includes academics as well as social and emotional skills and positive self-identity; and developing a school culture that addresses bias and creates inclusion and belonging among teachers, students and families. Creating a school culture that embraces equity and inclusion, and addresses the range of student and family needs in the community, requires active leadership of that vision by both administrators and teachers.

Changes to the leadership structures and processes in schools must be mirrored by changes in the ways that districts support schools, and principal supervisors can help to create this alignment. For example, districts can design professional development or collaborative learning opportunities in ways that take into account the growing role of teacher leaders.

To better support schools, central offices are being reorganized to create connections and communications between principal supervisors and other district staff working directly with schools. This support includes providing the resources and time for teams to build trust and learn to work together.

Strategy: Provide resources and support to build collaborative professional learning opportunities and systems in schools.

One of the most important skills for principals is building the capacity of others and empowering them to lead. “I can’t do it all by myself,” said Roberto Lopez of Fannin Middle School in Grand Prairie, Texas. “I have learned that, no matter how hard I work as an individual, that’s not going to bring the success that we need as an organization. Yes,

hard work is very important, but even more important is building your team at various levels to move the organization forward.” Establishing structures and protocols for collective leadership and collaborative learning enables principals to expand the leadership capacity in their school.

Effective school-based professional learning structures are aligned and focused on cycles of improvement. Goals identified by the leadership team guide the work of PLCs. Coaching by leadership team members in classrooms provides teachers with follow-up support. Based on results, the leadership team develops new goals and the cycle repeats.

School-based Professional Learning Structures

- **Instructional Leadership Team** – This group should include administrators and teacher leaders. The leadership team meets at least weekly and monitors all aspects of instruction and professional learning, analyzes data, sets goals, and creates plans to advance equitable and high-quality teaching and learning.
- **Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)** – These are small teams of teachers led by teacher leaders that meet weekly to analyze data and student work and learn research-based strategies for improvement using high-quality instructional materials. The work of the PLCs is driven by the goals set by the leadership team. PLCs should be focused on digging deeply in the foundations of effective practice, and supporting teachers to ensure all students are engaged in learning at grade level.
- **A cycle of coaching and feedback** – Observation and feedback should be provided for each teacher as they work to improve their practices and meet student needs. Support is provided as teachers implement the strategies learned in PLC, and based on their individual needs. Principals, teacher leaders, and other members of the leadership team provide coaching support.

Developing the capacity of others also creates a leadership pipeline to continue the school's vision and create more stable transitions. "Being a teacher leader truly prepared me for the role of principal because I was able to see what the principal did, observing those structures, and being part of those structures," said Willis-Jones. "That model really prepared me to be instructionally focused and supportive of teachers. I took what I knew about being a teacher leader and supporting teachers and did that on a bigger scale."

Districts play a key role in providing resources and support for principals to create the kinds of collaborative learning structures and coaching opportunities that are necessary to improve teaching and learning across classrooms. Teacher leadership roles, for example, are an essential element of school-based, job-embedded professional learning, and teachers say increased leadership opportunities make them more likely to remain in the profession.

Attending leadership team meetings provides principal supervisors with insight into the principal's leadership in action and offer a high-impact leverage point for change. "As soon as I became the assistant superintendent, I focused on the instructional leadership teams because, having been a principal, I know how important they are," said Jim Andrus. "When I became superintendent, I continued that practice because when principals report to

you, it is coming through a filter and you need to see without a filter. I want to see strategies and what is prioritized, the relationships between people, and how it is affecting classrooms."

District support for the leadership structures that principals establish is critical. Engaging with the leadership team, and in teacher collaborative learning teams, creates strong alignment between district- and school-level improvement efforts. Principal supervisors use this deep knowledge of school goals and relationships to coach principals more effectively. It also positions them to advocate for schools in terms of policy, funding or other resources, and to mediate between school needs and district priorities.

Strategy: Build instructional leadership capacity by creating roles for teacher leaders.

Knowing how to select, support, and engage teacher leaders as part of a distributed leadership structure is essential to increasing leadership capacity across the building. Donna Wiktorowski, principal of Prairie View Elementary School in Goshen, Indiana, describes the importance of the leadership team to her school's success. "The leadership team includes teacher leaders, making it possible to include practicing teachers in setting goals, managing data, and taking the lead to implement the best practices we want to see in every classroom," she said. "The leadership team helps to create a shared vision and a plan for improvement."

In addition to bringing new knowledge and skills to the leadership team, teacher leaders expand the principal's ability to identify instructional challenges and plan how to provide support. "Including teacher leaders on our building leadership team makes it so much more powerful," said Principal Whittington. "I can't be everywhere, so I rely on that team to tell me who is struggling and what support they need. Then we plan together the most effective support and who is in the best position to provide that support." Teacher leaders, together with other administrators on the team, make it possible for principals to ensure that each teacher receives individualized, targeted support. Teacher leaders also lead PLCs, and communicate the learning and needs identified in PLCs with the leadership team.

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Including teacher leaders on our building leadership team makes it so much more powerful. I can't be everywhere, so I rely on that team to tell me who is struggling and what support they need.

—Amy Whittington, Principal, North and South Elementary Schools, Central Decatur Community School District, Iowa

As principals expand leadership opportunities in their school, principal supervisors must adjust their support to reflect the distributed leadership structures and the different role that principals play in different settings.

In some situations, a principal may be the leader and driving the agenda in the weekly leadership team meeting. In others, they may take on the role of facilitator and coach for the teacher leaders who are leading a PLC. By supporting principals in multiple settings, supervisors can support a range of skill development.

Assistant Superintendent Bohannon describes the support that principal supervisors provide on collaborative learning teams. "When we visit a school, we will go into professional learning meetings with the principal," he said. "We spend time after that with the other leaders including master teachers, mentor teachers, and administrators. Immediately following the meeting, we offer reflective coaching opportunities for these leaders."

District leaders might reflect on the strengths of the professional learning with the principal and their team and explore ways that it could be improved based on what they observed. This approach provides principals with direct support in developing their skills and knowledge with their leadership team.

Supervisors can also open up principal meetings to assistant principals, instructional coaches, and teacher leaders and facilitate the learning of the leadership team as a whole. By doing this, the principal supervisor is able to help principals build their skills in developing others and sharing leadership in ways that increase the overall success of the school.

Strategy: Develop opportunities for principals to collaborate and build a network of support.

In addition to the collaborative learning structures within their own school, principal networks provide connections to other principals and ideas for new initiatives or ways to best approach specific requirements, and they give principals an opportunity to learn about best practices and research-driven strategies.

“What I need as principal is a collaborative environment. The support that I most value from my peers and district leadership is focused on how to sustain change and how the change process can move forward,” said Grand Prairie, Texas, Principal Lopez. “We all have some grand ideas, but what does it look like to sustain that in October, in February, in April?” District leaders can offer opportunities for collaborative learning among principals that enable them to share effective practices and successful strategies with their peers.

These networks also offer a sounding board for new initiatives. “There is always new research that tells you this practice works, and that practice works, but there is an implementation gap. One of the reasons I like being around other principals is that they’ve already taken some of those implementation steps,” said Principal Langlois. “You have to have thought partners, people you can bounce ideas off, and people who have done the work you are just starting.” Districts can facilitate these connections, and use the issues and challenges that principals raise to make professional learning for principals more relevant.

Districts can also make principal professional learning more meaningful by building in opportunities for principals to work with colleagues on similar challenges. “The principal job can be a very lonely job, and so being able to support them with colleagues going through similar situations is really beneficial,” said Thompson from Knox County, “Our principals realize that there's no glory in having your own private success. People are embracing sharing and supporting one another because they realize that's really how we work best, when we can lean on each other.” By approaching support and capacity building as a team, districts create a powerful model for principals to do the same in their efforts to work with teachers and administrators to build leadership capacity at the school level.

Solution 4: Reflective Questions

- What school-based systems for professional learning and collaboration are currently in place in your district?
- How do your leadership team, PLCs, and classroom coaching goals align and support a cycle of improvement?
- What roles do you currently have for teacher leaders, and how are teacher leaders, along with assistant principals or other campus leaders, supported to grow their capacity and skills?



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CONCLUSION

Many principals struggle to dedicate significant time to teaching and learning, and are not confident in their ability to provide instructional leadership. Building the principal's instructional capacity requires structures and resources, including the ability to tap into the expertise of teacher leaders on their campus and establish a team that acts on their vision for teaching and learning. District leaders, especially principal supervisors, provide an important source of support for principals in creating school environments that include opportunities for collaborative learning, as well as observation and meaningful feedback to improve. That starts with modeling for the principal the support that they are expected to provide their teachers.

If principal supervisors do not see themselves as coaches for principals, districts are failing to employ a key resource that is already in place in most school systems. By intentionally focusing on the supportive aspects of their role, principal supervisors can model being a reflective lead learner, engaged in the work of teaching and learning, and helping principals to build a strong school culture that advances equity for all students.

To do this, their support must be job-embedded – based in classrooms, in professional learning moments, in leadership team meetings, and in the variety of settings where the work of the principal takes place.

Principal supervisors can support principals through four key solutions focused on teaching and learning:

1. Be a visible partner with principals in their schools and model being a lead learner.
2. Develop a common vision and consistently use a shared language that describes expectations around the instructional leadership aspects of the principal's role.
3. Establish a coaching, feedback, and support system that is aligned with expectations in principal evaluation.
4. Support principals to build professional learning structures in their school and engage in collaborative learning to grow as professionals.

The coaching and collaborative learning provided for principals will shape how they in turn coach and support teachers – giving them the skills and experience to observe classroom teaching and provide meaningful and actionable feedback, build collaborative learning opportunities, and create a culture of coaching, reflective practice, and professional learning in their own school. These changes are essential to creating a school culture of continuous improvement and equitable opportunities, where every student is engaged in high-quality learning.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Solutions for Districts

- Set clear expectations for the amount of time principal supervisors spend in schools, and ensure they have sufficient time to provide individual coaching for the number of principals they supervise.
- Use principal leadership standards to create a common language around strong practices.
- Define the role of principal supervisor to focus on coaching and growth of principals, and provide training and support to improve these skills.
- Provide resources to support school-based professional learning including teacher leadership roles, and use school-based professional learning structures to deliver district initiatives.
- Increase communication and collaboration between principal supervisors and other central office staff working with schools (i.e., curriculum office).

Solutions for Principal Supervisors

- Be visible and engage as a learner alongside principals in their school during classroom observations and coaching, professional learning, and leadership team meetings.
- Build a common understanding of strong principal leadership with principals by using research-based leadership standards.
- Provide individual coaching and support for principals to reflect on and improve their practice, and align coaching and expectations in evaluation to the most important work of principals.
- Support principals to build collaborative learning structures, engage teachers as leaders, and create opportunities for principal collaborative learning and networking.
- Shift support for principals from compliance to coaching, and advocate for the necessary time, training, and resources to do this.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Solutions for Principals

- Be visible and actively engage in the work of teaching and learning – in classrooms, professional learning, and leadership team meetings.
- Build a common understanding of strong leadership practices with your supervisor based on research-based leadership standards.
- Use coaching and support from your supervisor to reflect on and continuously improve your own practice, and strengthen your ability to coach others.
- Build collaborative learning structures, engage teachers as leaders, and engage in opportunities for principal collaborative learning and networking.
- Invite your supervisor to participate in the work of teaching and learning in your school, and actively seek their engagement and feedback.



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