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The Changing Role of the Principal

How High-Achieving Districts Are Recalibrating School Leadership

By Lee Alvoid and Watt Lesley Black Jr. July 2014

Center for American Progress



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Introduction and summary

The principal has historically been portrayed in television and film as decidedly unheroic. From the hated Mr. Woodman on the 1970s television sitcom “Welcome Back, Kotter” to the mean-spirited and incompetent Ed Rooney in the film “Ferris Bueller’s Day Off,” the principal has been cast as inept at best and villainous at worst. While the creators of such characters certainly relied heavily upon comedic license in crafting such caricatures, there was nonetheless a kernel of truth in the stereotype upon which these depictions were based. In the public mind, principals were often thought of as mere school-building managers, individuals who were more interested in wielding power and enforcing compliance than in the loftier concerns of teaching and learning.

Today, however, those stale notions could not be further from the truth. The job of a modern-day principal has transformed into something that would be almost unrecognizable to the principals of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. The concept of the principal as a building manager has given way to a model where the principal is an aspirational leader, a team builder, a coach, and an agent of visionary change.

New teacher- and principal-appraisal systems are contributing to the principal’s changing landscape. These changes have rightly put student performance at the forefront, and principals are being asked to develop new competencies largely centered around data, curriculum, pedagogy, and human capital development in order to meet the new expectations. But make no mistake, the increasing emphasis on instructional leadership does not mean that the more traditional managerial concerns of school administration have disappeared. Indeed, principals are still expected to be effective building managers, disciplinarians, and public relations experts.

These changing expectations, coupled with insufficient training and support, have led many principals to the conclusion that the job is no longer sustainable. Attrition due to resignations and early retirements, along with a shortage of qualified candidates for open principal positions, is leading toward a crisis of leadership in American education.¹ Principals do not feel sufficiently prepared by their preservice training to successfully meet the demands of school leadership. Furthermore, once on the job, they do not feel adequately supported in their roles by their school districts, as districts' expectations of principals have traditionally been limited to simply being compliant, enforcing compliance from others, and managing conflict. In a 2011 survey of American educators, almost 70 percent of principals reported that their job responsibilities are much different than they were just five years before, and 75 percent of those reported that their jobs are too complex and have led to higher levels of stress and less job satisfaction.²

As new principal recruits assume positions of leadership, the difficulty of the job has often proved overwhelming. A 2012 study of first-year principals by New Leaders, a national nonprofit that develops school leaders, found that 20 percent of newly minted principals left their positions within two years. Principals placed at the lowest-performing schools were most likely to leave. Moreover, schools that lost principals were more likely to perform poorly the subsequent year.³ These findings indicate that a lack of continuity in leadership bodes poorly for schools and underscore the importance of districts having well-designed plans for recruitment, training, and ongoing support of their principals.

This report examines the changing landscape of school leadership, most notably as a result of increased expectations around instructional improvement and teacher development. Although teacher evaluation reform is not its primary focus, the report discusses the components of certain appraisal systems and the demands they place on school leaders in terms of expertise and time—demands that have prompted some school districts to consider more proactive ways to support principals and successful implementation of teacher evaluation reform at the building level.

Throughout the report, a series of case studies are referenced to shine a light on innovative ways in which districts are training and supporting school leaders so that they are able to meet the ever-increasing demands placed upon them, such as a strategic focus on coaching and instructional feedback, customized professional development, streamlining of the principal's job duties, and partnerships with universities and nonprofits to train the next generation of principals.

Furthermore, the case studies—which look at Gwinnett County Public Schools in Gwinnett County, Georgia; Denver Public Schools in Denver, Colorado; District of Columbia Public Schools in Washington, D.C.; Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in Charlotte, North Carolina; Uplift Education in Dallas, Texas; and Northeast Leadership Academy at North Carolina State University—were also used to inform the following eight principal professional-development recommendations for districts:

1. Redesign school organizational charts and job descriptions.
2. Develop instructional-leadership capacity around the principal.
3. Focus principal training on coaching teachers.
4. Build the capacity of central-office administrators to support principals.
5. Provide regular opportunities for principals to gather around self-selected problems of practice.
6. Develop partnerships with universities and nonprofits to recruit and train future principals.
7. Develop and train principals on district-wide teaching and leadership frameworks.
8. Provide technological supports that allow administrators to record and share instructional data.

Overhauling teacher evaluation substantially affects the job of the principal. Our initial findings indicate that the new models of teacher evaluation will not only dramatically change the amount of time principals spend observing and conferencing with teachers but will also alter the nature of their interactions with teachers. Principals must be able to manage the new demands; training in time-management strategies and structures that encourage strategic prioritization and delegation of administrative tasks will be of the utmost importance. Furthermore, these new systems require principals to function not only as evaluators but also as instructional coaches. Principals must have the requisite skills to function in the coaching role if reformed evaluation systems are to be successfully implemented.

While teacher evaluation reform is a national policy initiative that has been greatly accelerated by the Race to the Top initiative, success will be determined at the local level and will depend, at least in part, on whether principals are ready, willing, and able to implement more robust systems of evaluation. It is incumbent upon local districts to prioritize the development of their current and future principals by providing relevant professional development and appropriate support systems to ensure that the work is sustainable. Failure to do so will make it less likely that teacher evaluation reform will effect the desired change—instructional improvement at scale. This report explores how the principalship is changing and offers recommendations regarding how school districts can most effectively ensure that principals are able to meet the ever-increasing demands of their jobs. The accompanying case studies highlight districts and organizations that have successfully prioritized principal development.

Implications of teacher evaluation on the principalship

Recent education reform initiatives such as Race to the Top and waivers out of the requirements under the No Child Left Behind Act have prompted states and districts to create and/or revamp teacher-evaluation systems throughout the United States. A unifying feature of the newer teacher-evaluation systems is their complexity. Twenty-eight states have redesigned their teacher-appraisal systems to require multiple measures, 45 states require classroom evaluation, and 25 of those require multiple observations.⁴ Other measures that have been used in redesigned teacher-evaluation plans are student and parent surveys, peer observations, self-evaluation, classroom- and school-level achievement data, and even evidence of professional-growth activities, such as certificates of completion or written summaries.⁵ There are many moving parts by necessity, and the more complex the plan the more difficult the implementation challenges—especially for principals who, in many cases, are the sole implementers of these systems.

While policy advocates have devoted much time and attention to the question of why teacher evaluation reform is necessary, there has been very little focus on the question of how such changes can be implemented successfully. Consider the state of Florida, which in 2010 overhauled its teacher-evaluation system to include consideration of student test scores. After the system had been in place for more than a year, it was revealed that even under the new system, 97 percent of all teachers were still at or above the effective measure. Reforms in Tennessee have produced similarly discouraging results.⁶

Florida undertook an effort to train administrators on the new evaluation system, including an online certification test to measure inter-rater reliability. Administrators passed the test at a rate of 97 percent.⁷ A state-commissioned study found that Florida's administrators were successfully able to identify the highest performers on their teaching staffs, but they "systematically failed to identify the lowest-performing teachers, leaving these teachers without access to meaningful professional development and their parents and students without reasonable expectation of improved instruction in the future."⁸

In 2012, Chicago Public Schools introduced a new teacher-evaluation system that incorporated multiple measures, including student growth.⁹ The system was referred to as Recognizing Educators Advancing Chicago Students, or REACH Students. The launch was preceded by a teacher strike, the first in Chicago in more than a quarter century, and the details of the appraisal plan were a well-documented point of disagreement.¹⁰ In September 2013, the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research published a study of the first year of implementation that in some ways was encouraging but also highlighted certain challenges for which other school systems would be wise to plan.

The study included randomly selected interviews with a number of classroom teachers and principals, as well as two separate surveys of district teachers—one in the fall and another in the spring.¹¹ An encouraging finding was that teachers overwhelmingly felt that the new system promoted professional growth and improved the level of professional communication between them and administrators.¹² Furthermore, teachers indicated that they had a high level of confidence in their principals' competence in terms of fairly observing and evaluating instructional practice.¹³ However, administrators expressed a strong desire for better and more frequent training on how to coach and give feedback and how to help teachers gain more clarity around score calculations. Accordingly, one of the questions raised by the authors for further consideration was how to “ensure appropriate and ongoing training across all participants in the evaluation program.”¹⁴

Building principals in Chicago also expressed concerns about the demands of the new system on their time and capacity. Considering the time spent on preconferences, postconferences, and data management, in addition to the actual observation, each formal observation cycle required an average of six hours of administrative time.¹⁵ Once extrapolated, this meant that elementary school principals were spending an average of 120 hours on observations specifically related to teacher evaluation; high school principals were spending an average of 180 hours on these observations.¹⁶ The resulting strain on administrators forced them frequently to choose between implementing their REACH Students responsibilities and performing other important job duties, such as interacting with students or parents and focusing on improving school climate.¹⁷

The Wallace Foundation, a national philanthropic organization based in New York City, has been focusing on this issue since the early 2000s. The foundation launched a pilot program in Louisville, Kentucky, in 2002 known as the School Administration Manager, or SAM, which effectively restructured the principal's job

responsibilities by creating an administration manager to whom the principal could delegate noninstructional tasks. Although the model envisioned the SAM as an additional position to be created, in practice, an existing employee is typically designated as the SAM—such as an assistant principal or member of the clerical staff.¹⁸

As part of the SAM process, the principal carefully tracks his or her time use and is able to make adjustments to more efficiently support instruction based on daily meetings with the SAM. The SAM program has spread, and it is now used in 82 school districts across 18 different states. Indeed, more than 600 individual school buildings are currently using the SAM model.¹⁹ The Wallace Foundation claims that an independent analysis done in 2011 shows that principals who utilized the SAM model for two years increased the percentage of time they were able to focus on instruction to the point that they were spending a majority of their time on it. Before these principals had a SAM, however, they typically spent approximately only one-third of their time on instructional work. The increase is the equivalent of an additional 90 minutes per day devoted to instruction.²⁰

What the research has yet to show is whether this increased time spent on instruction will result in improved student outcomes. In fact, some research suggests otherwise. A 2012 study found that principal time allocation had little predictive value in terms of the building success or the principal's longevity. High levels of teacher capacity and cohesiveness were most positively associated with school and principal success.²¹ Another recent study indicated that principals who spend more time on organizational management tasks are more likely to lead schools to improvement.²² A subsequent study suggested that the majority of time principals devote to instruction is in the form of informal walk-throughs, which are negatively correlated with positive student outcomes. On the other hand, principals rarely engage in coaching, an instructional activity that the researchers discovered has a significant positive impact on student outcomes.²³

These findings make it clear that it's not just how much time the principal devotes to instruction but also the quality and type of instructional involvement that makes a difference. Furthermore, a district cannot discount the importance of the soft skills of leadership—such as relationship building and praise—that enable principals to establish trust and nurture a cohesive, positive, and professional esprit de corps among the faculty. In order to improve instruction at scale, the principal must be able to coach, communicate, and motivate teachers to change and improve their practices.

Recommendations for principal professional development at the district level

With the changing landscape of education and the pressure it's putting on the principalship, districts must make it a priority to invest the requisite time, money, and effort into developing the capacity of current and future leadership ranks. In order to provide insight into how districts might best support the development of principals' instructional-leadership capacity, the authors compiled a series of case studies that profile the work being done in six different educational organizations around the country. The profiles include a mix of traditional urban public school districts, an urban charter school organization, and a unique partnership between a state university and surrounding rural school districts. The case studies revealed common approaches to leadership development at the school level, and those findings were considered when determining the following recommendations. Full profiles of the educational organizations can be found on the Center for American Progress website.

1. Redesign school organizational charts and job descriptions

Finding the time to spend on instruction is the principal's greatest challenge. However, principals have countless noninstructional responsibilities as well, such as influencing the building climate for both students and adults, overseeing a fair and equitable system of student management, and handling conflict within and between their constituencies. Furthermore, principals are now more acutely aware of issues involving school safety, emergency planning, and crisis management than ever before—an area of concern that rivals academics in urgency. The breadth of the job has left many principals feeling like the work is unmanageable, and this perception is causing attrition within the ranks of school leadership and discouraging capable teachers from aspiring to become leaders.²⁴

Teacher evaluation reforms have exacerbated the strain on principal capacity. This has been demonstrated in practice by the experiences of administrators in Chicago, who felt forced to choose between their traditional responsibilities and those related to the new teacher-appraisal program. The School Administration Manager pilot program—which has been successful in Gwinnett County, Georgia—is a good example of how, once freed of managerial responsibilities, principals are much more able to spend their time on what matters most: instruction.

Gwinnett County Public Schools

Gwinnett County Public Schools, or GCPS, has taken the bold step of closely examining and modifying the responsibilities of the principal to make the job more manageable in consideration of all the additional instructional-leadership responsibilities that come with reform. It is one of the districts nationally that participates in The Wallace Foundation's SAM pilot program. The district's leadership-development department manages the program, which is optional for school principals. Through the SAM program, the district has been able to train other personnel to assume some of the management tasks that distract principals from classroom observation and teacher support.

In GCPS, a few schools have repurposed existing positions to manage time-consuming tasks after retraining on specialized tools and technology. In an effort to underscore the centrality of instructional leadership in the role of the principal, the job descriptions of both principals and assistant principals have been rewritten to focus on human capital development, instructional support, and curriculum alignment based on achievement data. Current practice in GCPS suggests that districts leave autonomy to principals in key areas such as the collection and analysis of relevant data, budget, staffing, scheduling, and the selection of instructional techniques. The newly developed implementation guide for GCPS' systemic approach to school leadership also suggests that districts manage maintenance requests, policies on student discipline, and most compliance issues, including those in human resources.

Sources: Glenn Pethel, phone interview with authors, January 9, 2014; GCPS implementation guide received via personal communication from Glenn Pethel, executive director, Department of Leadership Development, Gwinnett County Public Schools, January 9, 2014. (see Appendix A)

In making the instructional mission central to the principal's job, districts should not discount the importance of sound management at the building level, particularly in a day and age of heightened security concerns. Uplift Education in Dallas, Texas, is onto a promising approach: creating what it terms a "peer-level" operations manager at the building level. (see text box below) However, under its structure, the responsibilities of dealing with student discipline and parental complaints remain under the auspices of the school directors and deans.

Uplift Education

Uplift Education is a highly successful and rapidly growing network of charter schools that operates in the urban areas of the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex in North Texas. At the recommendation of Bain & Company, a management-consulting firm working on a pro-bono basis, Uplift Education added at each school an operations director who is responsible for all the noninstructional aspects of the operation, such as budgeting, building maintenance, student health services, and student nutrition. The building operations director would report to a regional operations director. In contrast to the SAM model, where management duties might be delegated to an assistant principal or even to an administrative assistant, the building operations director would be a position of high authority and responsibility—a position that Uplift Education CEO Yasmin Bhatia referred to as a "peer-level" position to the building director. Unfortunately, finding qualified building operations directors has proven to be more difficult than expected, as Bhatia reports that candidates rarely have both the necessary management expertise and enough experience in an educational setting to fully understand how operational decisions affect the instructional program and culture of the school. With a highly functioning building operations director in place, however, the director and deans are relieved of myriad managerial responsibilities and duties and are better able to focus their attention on instruction and culture.

Source: Yasmin Bhatia, phone interview with authors, November 26, 2013. (see Appendix A)

As an alternative, districts might consider an administrative model where an executive principal not only handles traditional maintenance and operations issues but also handles student management, parental complaints, supervision of student services, budgeting, and compliance issues. Freed from these time-consuming administrative issues, a principal of academic programs would focus only on matters of curriculum and instruction, with authority over hiring, firing,

developing, and evaluating all professional staff, as well as authority over master scheduling, teacher assignment, and course development. The executive principal should be required to hold the same or similar credentials and qualifications as the principal of academic programs, since he or she would be involved in handling myriad student-related issues that would demand high levels of personal effectiveness, preparation, and a big-picture understanding of how to build and maintain a positive school culture. Ideally, a team of assistant principals would support the executive principal, and instructional deans would support the principal of academic programs.

The two principals might share the public relations aspect of the job, attending public functions and communicating the vision and mission of the school to parents and the community at large. This means they would both be fully involved in the process of strategic goal setting and would both need to understand fully and be able to communicate the vision to others. But during the school day, the principal of academic programs and his or her team would be exclusively focused on the work of instructional improvement, while the executive principal's span of control would more broadly encompass the managerial aspects of running a safe, orderly, and focused school that is responsive to its community.

Although we are advocating for a reduction in the principal's span of control, we are also recommending that districts carefully consider which key autonomies they will reserve for the building principal and which ones will be retained in the central office. Granting instructional leaders unwanted or unneeded autonomies might overburden their capacity, but principals need enough autonomy in key areas to be able to respond appropriately to the unique needs of a building. For example, Uplift Education allows principals to have autonomy over hiring, student management, and instruction, within certain parameters. GCPS specifically grants autonomy to principals in areas of data collection and analysis, budgeting, staffing, and instruction, while centrally handling operational concerns such as maintenance requests and human resources. This type of bounded autonomy makes clear the chain of command, liberates principals from distracting operational responsibilities, and allows them the authority they need to make decisions that are in the best educational interests of their specific learning communities.

2. Develop instructional-leadership capacity around the principal position

The demands on the instructional-leadership roles of the principal require a deep and robust understanding of content standards; however, it is challenging for a school leader to become an expert in every content discipline. Development of a strong cadre of teacher leaders who have content expertise is key to helping a principal make an impact on instructional practice.

National attention has been focused on teacher leadership through initiatives such as the National Teacher Leader Standards project, sponsored by the Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium—a collaborative that consists of teacher organizations, universities, certification organizations, and the Council of Chief State School Officers. These standards can be used to develop strategies that leverage teacher expertise to support instructional improvement in buildings. Domain 4 of the standards is to “facilitate the improvement of instruction and learning” in a building.²⁵ With a formal teacher-leadership structure, principals can get assistance from master teachers with content expertise to implement peer observations and coaching components of evaluation systems, such as those in North Carolina; Georgia; Colorado; and Washington, D.C.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools in North Carolina has further increased instructional capacity around principals by entering into a partnership with Public Impact, an organization that helps schools create what it terms an “opportunity culture” that places teachers in formal leadership positions to support instructional improvement.²⁶

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, or CMS, created a teacher-leader support structure to assist principals with instructional-leadership activities. With the support of Public Impact, CMS implemented an opportunity culture across a subset of schools. In an opportunity culture, strong teachers assume formal leadership roles, such as that of an instructional facilitator or similar roles. Teacher leaders can assist the principal in the observation process and provide coaching feedback to teachers. The point of the program is to have great teachers expand their reach to more classrooms. Sometimes, they might be responsible for the development of a small group of teachers or assist with the implementation of instructional-technology initiatives. Selected buildings have also added a dean of students position; this individual is in place to support principals with student issues.

Source: Rashidah Lopez Morgan and Valda Valbrun, phone interview with authors, November 22, 2013. (see Appendix A)

Initiatives such as the Aspiring Leaders Program offered by Uplift Education and GCPS, as well as the New Leaders program in Washington, D.C., serve not only to create expertise among faculty members that can be a valuable support to principals but also to prepare these teachers to enter the administrative pipeline. Encouraging assistant principals to participate in aspiring-principal programs such as the ones in Denver, Gwinnett County, and Charlotte-Mecklenburg also creates capacity around a principal. Greater big-picture knowledge held by teachers and assistant principals creates a team that understands how the components of a school work together to support student achievement. Although it may create frequent turnover on a team, the benefits of pulling quality participants into the pipeline outweigh the drawbacks. If an assistant principal aspires to a future role as a principal, he or she often works in a more effective manner than those who view the assistant principalship as a terminal position.

3. Focus principal training on coaching teachers

Although research points toward coaching teachers as one of the higher-leverage instructional activities in which a principal can engage, it is also an endeavor that principals often feel the least comfortable and qualified undertaking.²⁷ Traditionally, teacher-appraisal systems have placed principals solely in the role

of evaluator. In contrast, new teacher-appraisal systems often require principals to function not only in the evaluative role but also in the less familiar role of coach. This can lead to challenges, as teachers might be less likely to openly reflect on their own performance deficiencies with a coach who also functions as an evaluator. Principals must be able to skillfully balance these dual roles if they are to be effective.

Lessons from Chicago's implementation of Recognizing Educators Advancing Chicago Students reinforce the notion that the primary training focus for principals should be around coaching teachers to higher performance. Principals reported that they were comfortable observing and recognizing best practice or areas of needed improvement, and teachers reported that they trusted their administrators' ability to do so. However, principals reported a lower comfort level in terms of knowing specifically how to work with teachers to facilitate improvement. Furthermore, there were issues around communication and trust that could be mitigated with training in coaching strategies and techniques.²⁸

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools

North Carolina's CMS has focused principal professional development on coaching strategies needed to implement its teacher-evaluation system. The district has designed district-level professional development focused on coaching and how to have conversations with teachers about changing practice. For example, principals are trained on how to differentiate their coaching strategies with teachers based on whether performance problems are the result of a lack of skill or a lack of will. Teachers who have performance deficits but a strong work ethic and desire to improve require a different coaching approach than teachers who have the requisite instructional knowledge but lack the motivation to do the work.

Community superintendents, who serve as principal supervisors, reinforce instructional coaching during learning-community meetings and meet monthly in order to calibrate feedback and coaching strategies used with building leaders. The community executive directors, who work under the superintendents, conduct walk-through visits and provide guidance and support to principals to make sure that everyone is clear on what good teaching looks like. Principals in CMS have also formed study groups to examine problems of practice, with many choosing teacher observation, feedback, and coaching as their practice issue for further study and collaboration.

A recent study reinforced earlier findings that simply increasing principal time on instruction will not improve student outcomes if the time spent is purely evaluative and is not focused on coaching teachers toward performance.²⁹ The study indicated that teachers who believed that a principal's presence in their classroom was part of their professional development—as opposed to simply an exercise in compliance—had better success at improving student achievement. In short, while the evaluative role the principal plays is critical, it is the quality of his or her coaching skills that has greater potential to close the achievement gap.

Source: Rashidah Lopez Morgan and Valda Valbrun, phone interview with authors, November 22, 2013. (see Appendix A)

4. Build the capacity of central-office administrators to support principals

The span of control of the person who observes, supports, and evaluates the building principal is a critical issue. Denver Public Schools, or DPS, addressed this through the addition of deputy instructional superintendents to its elementary-area clusters, to rave reviews from the principals within those building clusters. Washington, D.C., also doubled the number of instructional superintendents prior to implementing IMPACT—the evaluation system for the nearly 6,500 school-based personnel in the District of Columbia Public Schools—for school leaders, as it realized that principals would need support if they were to meet the increasingly difficult expectations of their job descriptions.

Denver Public Schools

In 2010, after receiving federal grant money, DPS took steps to enhance the capacity of the central office to coach and support principals whose schools were underperforming. The district regrouped 20 of its lowest-performing schools geographically into two clusters and appointed an instructional superintendent and a deputy instructional superintendent to supervise each cluster of schools. This effectively reduced the number of buildings and principals each supervisor was responsible for to five, significantly lower than the number that those who supervise principals are typically assigned.

The feedback from principals within those 20 schools was so overwhelmingly positive that Patricia Slaughter, the assistant superintendent of elementary education at the time, decided to expand the model by hiring a deputy instructional superintendent to pair with the instructional superintendent in charge of the southwest cluster, which consisted of 17 buildings. Principals in the southwest cluster immediately noticed the greater level of access to and support from their direct supervisors—and the supervisors found that the arrangement led to an increased level of meaningful professional discourse and idea sharing from building to building. The reorganization within the southwest cluster proved so popular that principals in other regional clusters began requesting similar changes, which the district facilitated by cutting other central-office staff considered less essential.

Source: Sean Precious, phone interview with authors, December 17, 2013. (see Appendix A)

District of Columbia Public Schools

In anticipation of the IMPACT rollout for school leaders, District of Columbia Public Schools, or DCPS, doubled the number of instructional superintendents in order to facilitate greater support for building principals, including more observation and feedback, as well as opportunities for school clusters to meet more regularly for customized professional development. According to Hilary Darilek, the deputy chief of principal effectiveness at DCPS, “the goal was to move the superintendent role from a compliance-based position to one where the superintendent could observe and support principals and have a consistent and significant presence in schools.” As a result, the instructional superintendents have developed stronger relationships with principals.

Source: Hilary Darilek, phone interview with authors, January 15, 2014. (see Appendix A)

The traditional principal's position is lonely, with no one at the building level with whom he or she can discuss a problem or seek quality feedback or guidance. For many administrators, greater access to central-office staff to answer questions, give feedback, or simply act as a sounding board would be a welcome support. It bears mentioning that there is a fine line between providing support to and micro-managing a principal, and districts should take steps to ensure that those who supervise and evaluate principals have the type of growth mindsets that would encourage principals to trust them enough to speak openly about work-related concerns.

CMS has undertaken training for district leaders who coach and supervise principals. District officials there meet together to discuss coaching strategies and training needs they observe while engaging in frequent meetings and observations with principals. GCPS' central office has assumed responsibility for supporting building leaders in multiple ways to allow them to focus on instructional concerns. District leaders attend principal-training sessions so they are able to utilize content to reinforce positive practices during coaching sessions.³⁰

Gwinnett County Public Schools

Support for principals from central-office staff is a hallmark of GCPS' focus on quality leadership. The district's senior leaders, including the superintendent, spend significant time and energy creating a culture where all district employees—including central-office staff—support the district's school leaders in order to drive student success in GCPS. Some examples of this effort include coaching and mentoring during the first two years of an individual's principalship and the creation of peer-support networks of other school leaders who face similar demographic conditions and related opportunities. Assistant superintendents are the direct supervisors of principals and deliver professional development and real-time training as principals' needs are discovered through the supervisory process.

Source: Glenn Pethel, phone interview with authors, January 9, 2014. (see Appendix A)

5. Provide regular opportunities for principals to gather around self-selected problems of practice

The principal experience varies dramatically depending on the school climate; the community; and the individual talents, traits, and characteristics of the principal. Districts that wish to support and develop leadership capacity must embrace what researchers at the University of Illinois call the principles of “flexibility” and “equifinality”—principles that recognize the reality that there are often multiple routes to the same destination.³¹ While it is vital for districts to provide uniform trainings in order to establish common practices and calibrate evaluation reliability, school districts cannot take a one-size-fits-all approach to professional development for principals. Training models must reflect the complexity of the job and the diverse needs of the principals in different districts.

Uplift Education

Ongoing observation and feedback is a central theme within Uplift Education, and it is applied at both the teacher and leadership levels. Managing directors are assigned as coaches to school directors, who are observed three times per semester—once while leading a data meeting, once while conducting a staff-development session, and once while conferring with a teacher. Based upon these observations, directors are given midyear feedback on a core set of competencies and also receive quarterly visits from Uplift Education CEO Bhatia and Chief Academic Officer Richard Harrison. Furthermore, directors undergo a critical exercise, known as a “case consultancy,” in which they present their building strategic plans for peer review by other school leaders. This practice allows directors a safe environment to pose problems of practice to their peers and receive specific feedback for improving their building plans.

Source: Yasmin Bhatia and Richard Harrison, phone interview with authors, November 26, 2013. (see Appendix A)

Just as each principal has a unique set of professional-growth targets, most principals also have areas of great strength that would be a valuable resource to their peers. However, the isolated nature of the job often provides principals with no way to communicate and interact with their peers about problems of professional practice. Professional-development models, such as the affinity groups established by DPS, allow principals to select areas where they need support and provide them a safe environment where they can share and learn from other principals experiencing similar challenges.³²

In CMS, principals meet in small groups and select problems of practice for year-long study.³³ DCPS allows principals to self-select into professional-learning communities to study specific and relevant problems of practice.³⁴ In the Northeast Leadership Academy, or NELA—a program organized by North Carolina State University to provide a principal pipeline and support to 13 high-need rural school districts in northeast North Carolina—graduates maintain contact and conduct frequent consultancy conversations with cohort members via technology such as Skype, since travel to common sites is challenging.³⁵ This type of flexible approach encourages collaboration, creates more-relevant training opportunities, and allows principals more ownership of their professional growth.

6. Develop partnerships with universities and nonprofits to recruit and train future principals

Most successful districts that have strong leadership pipelines have discovered how critical it is to have strategic partners who are aligned with the needs, values, and beliefs of the district. There are several types of partnerships that appear to facilitate the creation of effective pipelines of new leaders to replace the alarming number of retirements that loom in the near future. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the attrition rate for all principals during the 2007-08 school year was 12 percent, with roughly half of those due to retirement.³⁶ Principal three- and five-year turnover rates have been steadily increasing over the past 15 to 20 years, and recent research has emerged that suggests that fewer than half of the newly hired principals sampled last more than three years in their jobs.³⁷ Attrition rates are greater at the middle school and high school levels, and they are even higher at schools where more than 50 percent of the students are classified as economically disadvantaged.³⁸

The most prevalent partnerships are those with university preparation programs and/or nonprofit organizations, but other unique partnerships can be found around the country.

Partnership between Achievement First and New Haven Public Schools, Hartford Public Schools, and Bridgeport School District

One unique partnership between a charter management organization and three public school districts in Connecticut is worthy of study. Achievement First, a successful charter system with a distinctive leadership-training track record, has partnered with the New Haven, Hartford, and Bridgeport school districts to develop a leadership-pipeline program called the Residency Program for School Leadership. The program consists of two intensive skill-building summer workshops, a year of mentored residency in an Achievement First school, a mentored year-long residency in a school district school, weekly leadership classes, and weekly coaching sessions.³⁹ Funds to support the program and the subsequent follow-up coaching were jointly raised by Achievement First and the three participating school districts.

District candidates remain district employees with full benefits, including tenure and union status even during their year of Achievement First residency. Since Connecticut does not require a graduate degree for certification, candidates who complete all requirements can be certified through the program. The districts and Achievement First jointly conduct the evaluation of candidate success, but each district retains rights to placement. According to Paige MacLean, senior director of strategic partnerships for Achievement First, the unique partnership has leveraged the best of both organizations to strengthen leadership in Achievement First schools as well as the participating school districts.

Source: Paige MacLean, phone interview with authors, November 26, 2013. (see Appendix A)

University partners are often necessary for credentialing purposes. Many states require a graduate degree and certification requirements from a state-approved certification program. Districts then add their own pipeline-training requirements to fill in perceived gaps in more traditional preparation programs. Most of the districts featured in this report have approved university programs that are acceptable for credentials if one wants to be a candidate for leadership in a district.

GCPS works with five university programs that specifically align with the Aspiring Leader Academy pipeline program in the district. CMS has partnerships with Winthrop University and Queens University of Charlotte to develop programs that align with district priorities, and it also works with New Leaders, an organization for potential leaders who aspire to lead in schools with great need. DPS partners with the University of Denver and the University of Colorado, Denver, to support multiple principal-pipeline programs. The NELA program at North Carolina State University is an interesting flipped partnership program, where the university designed the program and sought partnerships with high-need school districts in rural northeast North Carolina.⁴⁰ All of these university partnerships take time and effort to cultivate and develop. In the process of aligning programs with the demographic needs of the partner districts, university partners often have been forced to abandon tradition and become more responsive to the communities they serve.

Uplift Education

For those who aspire to earn their state credentials as well as their master's degrees, Uplift Education is a partner district with the Urban Principal Preparation Program—a collaborative partnership between the Teaching Trust, a Dallas-based nonprofit, and the Annette Caldwell Simmons School of Education and Human Development at Southern Methodist University, or SMU. The Teaching Trust was co-founded by Uplift Education's founder Rosemary Perlmeter, who transitioned from Uplift Education with a keen awareness that leadership—at a variety of levels—is a high-impact lever in both a charter organization's ability to grow with quality and a traditional school district's ability to successfully manage transformational change.

The Teaching Trust-SMU partnership is part of the Alliance to Reform Education Leadership, or AREL, network run by the George W. Bush Institute, which is housed in the George W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum on the SMU campus. Uplift Education employees accepted into the program take classes for a full year, during which time they interact with aspiring leaders from other partner districts and organizations. Upon completion of the classwork, candidates are placed in a building leadership role for a year-long residency. Students in the program are granted scholarships that cover a large portion of their tuition and expenses in exchange for an agreement to work in the Uplift Education network for a minimum of three years after completing their residency. This makes the entire program a five-year commitment.

Source: Yasmin Bhatia and Richard Harrison, phone interview with authors, November 26, 2013. (see Appendix A)

Nonprofit organizations are often part of a three-way partnership. Since nonprofits such as New Leaders and the Teaching Trust—which partners with Uplift Education—are typically unable to certify students in the states where they operate, there is often a university partner involved along with the nonprofit and school district. While complicated, navigation of such rich resources can contribute to an enriched pipeline program where districts help provide internships and residencies, participate in the training of fellows or candidates, and leverage the capacity of cutting-edge nonprofit agencies that are passionate about providing strong leaders for complex schools.

The most challenging partners can be the universities: When institutions based on a 16th century model of education encounter entrepreneurial-training-program demands, there can be conflict. However, the necessary negotiations between the two types of entities are timely, as the nation is questioning the accountability of higher education in matching the needs of the communities it serves. Such partnerships can result in the best of three worlds—universities, school districts, and nonprofit sectors—coming together for the benefit of strong school leadership development.

Denver Public Schools

In addition to supporting in-service principals in the aforementioned ways, DPS has also invested heavily in the leadership pipeline. In partnership with the University of Denver, the district supports two different programs that enable future leaders to earn both principal credentials and master's degrees: the Ritchie Program for School Leaders and the Executive Leadership for Successful Schools, or ELSS, program. Both cohorts are part of the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program in the Morgridge College of Education at the University of Denver and are members of the George W. Bush Institute's AREL network. The Ritchie Program for School Leaders features a paid internship in a Lead in Denver-approved school, and its classes are conducted in person. The ELSS program is a blended model that is partially online and features an unpaid internship.

Also part of the AREL network of principal-preparation programs is the Get Smart Schools initiative in Denver. Get Smart Schools is a nonprofit organization that provides intensive summer training, ongoing day-long seminars on a monthly basis, executive coaching, opportunities for students to visit exemplary sites, and ongoing support after program completion. Program graduates who complete the tuition-free program, according to the literature, will be specifically prepared to "lead turn-around efforts, transform schools to innovation or open new schools in neighborhoods where there is a need."⁴¹ DPS also works in concert with the University of Colorado, Denver, or UCD, which offers a blended online and in-person program that is specifically aligned with the DPS School Leadership Framework. Students in the UCD program can earn their principal certification as well as a master's degree or an education specialist degree in administrative leadership and policy studies.

Source: Sean Precious, phone interview with authors, December 17, 2013. (see Appendix A)

7. Develop and train principals on district-wide teaching and leadership frameworks

In order for principals to move the work of instructional improvement forward within an organization, they must share a common understanding of what outstanding instruction looks like in practice. The districts profiled in this report have sought to accomplish this through the development of robust teaching frameworks that reflect a deep understanding of a wide range of high-leverage instructional practices. Districts must also ensure that proper training and accountability measures are in place so that principals develop sufficient expertise around these frameworks. In Denver, for example, principals must demonstrate proficiency in assessing instructors against the framework before being certified to appraise teachers in the district.⁴²

In addition to frameworks for instruction, successful districts are also investing in the development of leadership frameworks to clearly define expectations for school leaders. Framework competencies may be skills or knowledge based but are often dispositional in nature, providing expectations for leader behavior that align with the central goals and mission of the district. While desirable dispositions alone do not make a leader, these competencies are necessary to coach and manage human capital effectively, to establish an aspirational and inclusive vision, and to inspire and motivate students and adults to work toward that vision. Dispositional competencies within a framework provide exemplars of the type of behaviors that districts expect from their leaders and provide a tool for professional goal setting and development that would otherwise be absent.

Denver Public Schools

Along with the DPS Framework for Effective Teaching,⁴³ the district developed the DPS School Leadership Framework, a shared definition of leadership practices that serve as the criteria for principal appraisal. Together, the district views the dual frameworks as “the foundation for ensuring that we have excellent teachers and school leaders to serve our students and fulfill our vision.”⁴⁴ The School Leadership Framework comprises leadership expectations around culture, equity, instruction, and human resources. Additionally, there are expectations around strategic, organizational, and community leadership. Principals self-assess and goal set in these areas and meet twice annually with their evaluators. During the midyear meeting, principals and evaluators collaboratively agree on target areas and plan for professional growth. Each principal must have a professional-growth plan in which target areas and goals are identified and professional-development plans are articulated. Additionally, principals are allowed to self-select into affinity groups of approximately 15 school leaders who come together around a particular problem of practice. According to Sean Precious, DPS’ senior manager for leading effective academic practice, or LEAP, training & systemization, principals are “over the moon and through-the-roof satisfied” with this particular model of professional growth.

Source: Sean Precious, phone interview with authors, December 17, 2013. (see Appendix A)

Locally developed leadership frameworks also help cultivate the kind of leadership that is responsive to the specific needs of a community and help unify stakeholders around a central vision. CMS, for example, engaged in the development of localized standards to support the state Leader Keys Evaluation System and found that the process had an important impact on creating buy-in and fostering implementation of the evaluation system.⁴⁵ Specifically, principals felt that their voices were heard during the development of the “super standards,” which has made the implementation of the system go more smoothly.⁴⁶ The super standards represent the standards that have the greatest leverage to drive improvement in student achievement.

8. Provide technological supports that allow administrators to record and share instructional data

Districts that are making strides in the area of teacher appraisal have invested in data systems that enable them to record and monitor the observation and feedback that is taking place in the district. These systems enable principals and other observers to quickly enter data on a teacher and for the central office to monitor and track what's happening in the building in real time. Not only are they able to monitor the amount of time and number of observations each principal is conducting, but they also are able to track feedback and identify trends in instruction that help plan for future professional development. Furthermore, in systems where there may be multiple observers for one teacher in the appraisal system, this is a vital efficiency for the principal, saving him or her the time of collecting and inputting observation data from multiple sources.

Gwinnett County Public Schools

GCPS has created a dashboard system that allows principals to track observation data to assist with the analysis of teacher-performance patterns for summative conferences. District officials can monitor if a principal is on track with his or her observations and feedback conferences with teachers. Data are available almost immediately to help principals with time management and planning.

The performance indicators from the teacher-evaluation system are part of the dashboard system. As principals upload findings from observations, connections are made to the performance indicators. Principals and district officials can assess if there might be a school-wide issue with the positive-learning-environment indicator or a differentiation of instruction in order to support student performance. Data from trends in the observation findings can be used to diagnose professional-development needs for individual teachers, groups of teachers, or the school.

Source: Glenn Pethel, phone interview with authors, January 9, 2014. (see Appendix A)

NELA uses technology in a variety of ways to facilitate communication and conduct training with program participants at remote sites. Whether posting video-taped coaching sessions for online commentary or using electronic conferencing to provide feedback to participants in their programs, technology is an essential tool in making the NELA partnerships effective.⁴⁷

Obviously, technological advances have already enhanced principal efficiency in countless ways, and innovation continues at a remarkable pace. The organizations featured in this report have all wisely made it a priority to invest in technology in ways that strategically advance the capacity of their school leaders to positively affect instruction.

Conclusion

The job of the school principal has never been an easy one, with increased accountability making it even more challenging and the stakes higher than ever before. Education reform advocates can shape the direction of policy, but without skilled implementation at the building level, even the most worthy reforms are likely to fail. Principals must receive adequate on-the-job training and support in order to successfully lead change. Districts must be committed to the job of developing building leadership and be willing to invest the time, energy, and resources necessary to do so.

This report has highlighted some educational organizations throughout the country that are engaging in innovative and strategic approaches to rethink leadership development. The examples set in places such as Denver, Colorado; Gwinnett County, Georgia; and Charlotte, North Carolina are instructive for educational administrators and policymakers. The type of partnerships modeled by North Carolina State University and the small rural districts in northeastern North Carolina can serve as a template for other states and universities to help rural school districts across the country make a difference for students—a difference that might be out of their reach otherwise.

The organizations profiled in this report are on the leading edge of these promising principal practices. While there has been a heavy focus in the educational community on reforming the way teachers are evaluated, there has been less focus on evaluating principal practice, and even less on supporting and developing school-building leaders professionally. This must change, as strong school leadership is essential in order to successfully reform schools and move student achievement forward.

Appendix A:

Interviews with district experts

The interviews that are part of this report were conducted during November and December 2013 and include the following participants:

Glenn Pethel, executive director, department of leadership development, Gwinnett County Public Schools, Gwinnett County, Georgia

Sean Precious, senior manager, LEAP training & systemization, Denver Public Schools, Denver, Colorado

Hilary Darilek, deputy chief, principal effectiveness, District of Columbia Public Schools, Washington, D.C.

Meredith Zackey, coordinator, school leadership strategy and principal effectiveness, District of Columbia Public Schools, Washington, D.C.

Rashidah Lopez Morgan, then-executive director of talent management, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, Charlotte, North Carolina

Valda Valbrun, executive director of organizational development, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, Charlotte, North Carolina

Yasmin Bhatia, CEO of Uplift Education, Dallas, Texas

Richard Harrison, chief academic officer, Uplift Education, Dallas, Texas

Bonnie Fusarelli, director of and principal investigator for the Northeast Leadership Academy; associate professor at North Carolina State University, Raleigh, North Carolina

Paige MacLean, senior director, strategic partnerships, Achievement First, New Haven, Connecticut

About the authors

Lee Alvoid is a clinical associate professor and chair of the Department of Education Policy and Leadership at the Annette Caldwell Simmons School of Education and Human Development at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas. She earned her doctorate degree in reading with a minor in educational leadership at Texas Woman's University in 1983. She has 32 years of experience in public schools, including 21 years in leadership roles. She served as a middle school and high school principal prior to joining the SMU faculty in 2001. Since the Education Policy and Leadership Department was founded in 2008, Alvoid has launched three innovative graduate programs in school leadership that span pre-K through higher education. Her belief is that all students deserve great leaders regardless of their ZIP codes or levels of education. The department faculty has doubled in size and continues to be recognized as a unique leader-preparation department in the field.

Watt Lesley Black Jr. is a clinical associate professor of education policy and leadership at the Annette Caldwell Simmons School of Education and Human Development. He earned his doctorate degree in educational leadership from the University of North Texas in 2002. A legal researcher and writer, his interests include student and faculty rights as well as diversity and equity in public schools. He has published in *West's Education Law Reporter* and authored a book titled *Public School Diversity and Affirmative Action Admissions: The Constitutional Implications*. In fall 2013, he presented his article, "Omnipresent Student Speech and the Schoolhouse Gate: Interpreting *Tinker* in the Digital Age" at the annual conference of the Education Law Association. Prior to coming to SMU, he worked for more than 20 years as a public school teacher and administrator, culminating with an eight-year stint as principal of a large urban middle school.

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