

LEADING BY EXAMPLE:

Principal Leadership Institutes  
as a Driver for Change  
in Metro Nashville  
Public Schools

Executive Summary



Annenberg  
Institute for  
School Reform

AT BROWN UNIVERSITY

*“How can we evolve and be better at what we’re already doing?  
There’s a better version of me that I’d like to grow into.”*

*— MNPS high school principal*

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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## **ABOUT THE ANNEBERG INSTITUTE**

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University (AISR) is a national policy research and reform support organization that collaborates with school districts and communities to improve the conditions and outcomes of schooling in America. Through three program circles of work – District & Systems Transformation, Community Organizing & Engagement, and Research & Policy – AISR helps these stakeholders to join forces and establish sustainable systems that ensure excellence, equity, and social justice for all students, especially in urban, high-poverty communities. This work is grounded in the vision of a “smart education system,” that is, a high-functioning school district that collaborates with community partners to provide a comprehensive web of opportunities and supports for students, inside and outside of school.

Over the past six years, AISR played a central role in observing and evaluating “MNPS Achieves,” the transformational change initiative of the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools. This work included the development of a National Advisory Panel of education scholars who advised Jesse Register and district leadership as they implemented their reform initiatives. Also included in this work was the observation and evaluation of the biannual PLIs that are the focus of this study.

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# Background and Context

In 2009, when Jesse Register became the director of schools, Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) was on the brink of state takeover, with low academic performance, significant achievement gaps, and a number of schools failing to meet performance targets under No Child Left Behind. Additionally, over the past decade, significant demographic shifts in Nashville have resulted in MNPS becoming much more ethnically and culturally diverse, with students now representing over 120 different countries. The district has also seen a significant increase in the percentage of economically disadvantaged students. Building the leadership capacity of principals in the district was a primary lever for transformational change for Register, and a core strategy for building their capacity was the implementation of the biannual Principal Leadership Institutes (PLIs).

Starting in the summer of 2009 and occurring twice annually over two to three days, the PLIs were not designed as “one-off” experiences, but as consistent, thoughtful professional learning that: 1) was responsive to the MNPS context and needs; 2) drove toward an overarching vision for long-term systemic transformation; and 3) laid the foundation for a district culture of adult learning. In constructing the PLIs, Register and Gloria Frazier, his chief design and strategy consultant, embedded and modeled effective practices for teaching and learning, and used this significant block of time with all 140 principals to begin

shaping the culture that he wanted to infuse throughout the district. Learning opportunities were results-based, experiential, and collaborative, and had practical application to the school context. Efforts were also made to scaffold learning experiences between the winter and summer PLIs, and to connect them to ongoing meetings for principals and administrators. Drawing from research and their collective years of experience in leadership development, they developed a set of key leadership competencies to guide both the content and design of the PLIs. In 2011, a design team formalized these competencies into the MNPS Leadership Performance Strands and Skills (LPSS), which are described in Figure 1 (page 2). With the focus on a collective vision as well as collective action, the LPSS have been the centerpiece for transformational leadership development in MNPS.

The Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University (AISR) observed and conducted principals’ evaluations of the PLIs since their inception, and we believe the evolution of principals as transformational leaders make this district one to watch. The purpose of this study is to explore this transformation through the lens of the PLIs as a driver for change. Our report captures major findings and the emerging signs of progress and challenge for MNPS during the first six years of PLIs, and it provides recommendations for future development of principals and staff as transformational leaders.

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*“So much gets done outside of just the sessions. When principals are able to collaborate and talk and share ideas, [the work] becomes a lot more transparent. It propels us away from being a building manager, to being an instructional leader. And it gives you a lot more tools.”*

— MNPS middle school principal

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FIGURE 1.

MNPS Leadership Performance Strands and Skills, August 2011



PERFORMANCE STRAND 1	PERFORMANCE STRAND 2	PERFORMANCE STRAND 3	PERFORMANCE STRAND 4	PERFORMANCE STRAND 5
Setting Clear and Compelling Direction	Shaping Culture for Learning	Leading and Managing Change	Transforming Teaching and Learning	Managing Accountability Systems
<p>1.1 Develop shared purpose and coherent effort through mission, vision, and beliefs</p> <p>1.2 Communicate effectively strategic action plan – goals, strategies, initiatives, and responsibilities</p> <p>1.3 Establish a sense of urgency that leads to action</p>	<p>2.1 Establish desired culture through norms, rituals, traditions, common language, and cultural competencies</p> <p>2.2 Promote a positive and supportive climate</p> <p>2.3 Build community and shared accountability through collaborative structures and intentional relationships with all stakeholders</p> <p>2.4 Infuse diversity of perspectives, people, ideas, and experiences into the work</p> <p>2.5 Develop skills of influence, persuasion, and advocacy</p> <p>2.6 Make ethical and moral decisions</p>	<p>3.1 Distribute leadership and sustain high performing leadership teams</p> <p>3.2 Use individual, group, and organizational change research, processes, and tools</p> <p>3.3 Use reflection, inquiry, and assessment practices</p> <p>3.4 Maximize time for instructional leadership</p> <p>3.5 Engage as a community leader</p> <p>3.6 Reach scale with change efforts</p>	<p>4.1 Expect instructional competency in the craft of teaching</p> <p>4.2 Recognize themes and patterns of effective instruction</p> <p>4.3 Observe instructional performance and provide actionable feedback and coaching</p> <p>4.4 Gather evidence that learners are engaged in rigorous and relevant learning experiences</p> <p>4.5 Become literate as a leader of digital learning environments</p> <p>4.6 Ensure alignment of standards, curriculum, instruction, professional development, and assessments</p>	<p>5.1 Implement and use student performance-based accountability systems for decision-making</p> <p>5.2 Implement and use adult performance-based accountability systems for decision-making</p> <p>5.3 Allocate and distribute resources equitably (time, people, funds, resources, and technology)</p>

## Methods

Metro Nashville Public Schools commissioned AISR to conduct a qualitative review to capture the story of the PLIs as a key transformational change strategy for building leadership capacity. We anchored our data collection and analysis around the five LPSS categories: Setting Clear and Compelling Direction; Shaping Culture for Learning; Leading and Managing Change; Transforming Teaching and Learning; and Managing Accountability Systems (see Figure 1) to determine:

- In which areas of transformational leadership were principals most impacted by their participation in the PLIs?
- What areas of leadership development are foreshadowed for MNPS in the future?

Our qualitative review of the PLIs included two phases. In the first phase, we conducted a scan of the literature to ground our thinking in principal leadership development and transformational leadership. We also conducted a review and analysis of existing documents related to the PLI, including agendas and content from past PLI binders, field notes from AISR’s documentation, and the PLI evaluation data from principals and other participants.

In the second phase, we conducted interviews and focus groups using protocols developed with a focus on the LPSS framework. A total of fifty-one participants were interviewed, including twenty-two MNPS principals, fourteen teachers, twelve central office staff, and three key architects of the PLI design (including the director of schools). The teachers were matched to three of the principals we interviewed – one at the elementary, middle, and high school level – to gain a perspective about how principals enacted leadership in the school environment. More detail about teacher responses is included in the full report.

Though we have organized our findings according to the five major leadership performance strands, it must be noted that there is a high degree of overlap and interconnectedness between the strands. Given that Register identified transformational leadership as the driver for transformational change, the skill sets under each performance strand are interdependent for achieving the larger goal. While a particular strand may be the entry point based on the context and the leader, the approach to transformational change overall is not meant to follow a linear pattern that the visual of the LPSS framework might suggest. In fact, our study reflects the interplay between strands and across skill sets that principals experience during the PLIs and in their work.

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## Findings

### PERFORMANCE STRAND 1

#### Setting Clear and Compelling Direction

Setting a clear and compelling direction for MNPS was a first order of business when Jesse Register became the director of schools. Prior to his arrival, central office staff were not engaged in long-term or short-term planning, and principals often produced school improvement plans that were never implemented. A sense of urgency and a call to action had to be conveyed to “rally the troops” immediately because state takeover of the district was looming, but as one principal recalled, “With what was going on with MNPS, academically and culturally with the schools, something had to change.”

#### ◆ *Framing a Collective Vision and Purpose*

A collective purpose was framed in part by the urgency of the district’s problems, but there was still reluctance to change despite its abysmal outcomes. To marshal staff into action, Register had to establish a clear vision and mission that was compelling enough to engender trust in his leadership and a willingness among staff to work together to move the district forward. One principal commented on the significance of those early conversations by stating, “For us to get that message to do what you need to do – as long as these are the non-negotiables, this is our overall goal. But you’re going to have to take into consideration what your context is to make it work.” As director of schools, Register used the PLIs as his bullhorn to establish his belief that everyone had the potential for success at every level of the system. If principals were willing to get on board and adopt a growth mindset,<sup>1</sup> they were promised the supports they would need to help them succeed.

<sup>1</sup> Mindset (growth vs. fixed) is a concept originally developed by Carol Dweck (see <http://mindsetonline.com>) that has been widely adopted in the field.

Although his messages during PLIs were heard primarily by principals and central office staff, the same messages were expected to frame conversations at every level – whether between principals and teachers, teachers and students, staff and parents, or the district and community.

#### ◆ *Strategic Planning and Direction*

The rollout of the district’s five-year strategic plan (“Education 2018: Excellence for Every Student”) during the 2013 Summer PLI was an important marker for many principals because it increased their focus on instruction and gave more direction to their work. Principals acknowledged that while the range of strategies that were introduced at previous PLIs were invaluable tools for transforming their schools, “Education 2018” grounded their understanding of how to use those strategies in alignment with the school’s needs. Framing the goals for MNPS over the next five years gave principals “a new purpose” and set in motion a more “inclusive” process for school improvement planning that increased the participation of stakeholders inside the school and in the community. As one principal noted “school improvement planning was now a process, not just a plan,” and this shift in thinking “forced discussions about goals and their alignment to strategy and practice.”

#### ◆ *Balancing Tensions between Urgency and Time*

Time was viewed as a luxury of which principals never have enough, with the ever-present sense of urgency for some principals to turn around low-performing schools and for others to maintain their status as high-flyer schools. While the threat of state takeover may no longer be imminent, the urgency to improve academic test scores as a primary indicator of achievement was felt by participants at every level. Not surprisingly, the teachers we interviewed seemed to experience this pressure the most and were weary from all of the required testing and assessments. Principals acknowl-



edged that many factors create the urgency for instructional improvement in MNPS, including the rapid growth of charter schools. Yet, as one principal stated, “Time is one of those issues that I don’t think any of us can balance in the way we’d like to.”

## **PERFORMANCE STRAND 2** **Shaping Culture for Learning**

“Shaping Culture for Learning” is a complex aspect of transformational leadership that one principal described as “the foundation that everything else builds on.” It has emerged as a critical priority area given the wide range of diversity within MNPS. According to Register, MNPS is still “playing catch-up” since “the community changed, and the district didn’t.”

### ◆ *Educating the Whole Child*

Educating the “whole child,” which includes attending to the social and emotional needs of students and developing cultural competencies, has been increasingly emphasized as core to MNPS’s mission, vision, and beliefs and has become a focus – and also a challenge – for principals and their staffs. With the ongoing pressure of state and federal accountability systems and the urgent need to improve students’ academic performance, a focus on transforming teaching and learning took early precedence in Register’s tenure. Now, there is a growing desire and effort to move “beyond test scores,” with increasing attention to and appreciation of the diverse racial and cultural backgrounds, the social and emotional needs of students, and the experiences of their families. A focus on social and emotional learning and developing cultural competencies was central to the Winter 2015 PLI, reinforcing the message, “This is what our district believes in.” This theme seems to resonate with principals, and the PLIs have introduced new knowledge, resources, and support. However, it is widely acknowledged that

there is still much work to do to equip principals and their staffs to meet the diverse needs of their students, particularly those who are living in poverty. Teachers, in particular, noted the tension in attending to social and emotional needs while academic test scores remain such a prominent focus.

### ◆ *Shaping District Culture*

The PLIs have operated as a mechanism to shape and model a culture for learning throughout the district. In a notable departure from past professional learning experiences, the PLIs positioned principals as the district’s “lead learners,” as one principal noted, “and having that lived out through PLI is important.” The PLIs quickly established significance as a district tradition and have had consistent timing, structure, focus on collaboration, and rituals, such as opening remarks from the director of schools. Taken together, these elements of PLIs delivered a message to principals to “clear your calendars, and we’ll come together and discuss what matters.”

### ◆ *Principal Collaboration*

Opportunities for peer collaboration and relationship building are the elements of PLIs most valued by principals. The design of the PLIs has consistently incorporated small-group work and discussion, and principals have been grouped in various configurations including by tier, in clusters, and randomly assigned; central office participants noted that these sessions were often “where the learning happen[ed].” PLI designers have tried to avoid the type of “sit and git” professional learning experiences scorned by principals and were successful in most cases, but the opportunity for collaboration has become one of the standard criteria in how they judge the PLI experience. In the initial stages of Register’s tenure, the concept of collaboration “felt weak” to some principals, who worried that he would not take a stand and provide the kind of leadership they needed. Yet PLIs were purposefully constructed to build principals’ capacity to collaborate and learn from

one another, and peer-to-peer collaboration is now consistently named as something for which principals would like even more time during PLIs. One principal further stated that her worries were relieved as Register “really built that power and capacity for us to understand how to collaborate effectively.” Transferring the skills of collaboration to the school level, most principals are actively engaged in the ongoing work to establish a collaborative culture for learning with teachers, students, and other staff; however, only in some cases have they put structures in place to engage community members, and the engagement of parents was named as a common challenge in which both principals and teachers need support.

### **PERFORMANCE STRAND 3** **Leading and Managing Change**

“Leading and Managing Change” emerged as a key component of the MNPS overall transformation strategy and of the PLIs. This strand was built into the design of every PLI, and principals reported that along with Strand 4 (“Transforming Teaching and Learning”), this was the strand where they gave the most time and attention and had made the most progress.

#### **◆ Building Leadership Capacity**

As previously discussed, participants noted that low capacity among district leadership had been an issue when Register arrived, and therefore his primary objective through the PLIs was to build that capacity among principals at the school level, and within the central office as well. The theory of change expressed most often by principals and central office staff is that by building principal capacity, MNPS will be able to build the capacity of teachers, have a positive impact on teaching and learning, and in so doing boost student achievement. However, principals also noted that they were improving themselves for the sake of their own development, and not simply to improve others.

#### **◆ Focusing on Instructional Leadership**

The skill set “maximizing time for instructional leadership” is found in the “Leading and Managing Change” performance strand, but building the capacity of principals and central office staff to be effective as instructional leaders is clearly the main focus of the next strand (“Transforming Teaching and Learning”) as well. The overall goal of the PLIs was to develop principals as transformational leaders, and as one principal stated, “I think shoring up the instructional leadership component of being a leader within our urban district is important.” Additional comments from principal and central office staff confirmed the importance of placing the emphasis on instructional leadership, but as they pointed out, the focus of capacity building during PLIs was always centered on developing transformational leaders rather than on the “traditional, operational leadership training” that focuses on management skills.

#### **◆ Distributing Leadership**

MNPS placed a high priority on distributing leadership more broadly, both within the PLIs and in schools. Principals praised the PLI sessions that involved their fellow principals presenting issues, strategies, and best practices. We heard several instances where specific strategies that were shared by principals during PLIs were later implemented by their peers in schools, and principals received one-on-one guidance and support from their peers about implementation. Though limited at first, as time went on principals took a more active role in contributing to the design and planning of PLIs, and have increasingly become facilitators of small groups or breakout sessions that highlight a particular skill or strategy where they have developed competence. A number of principals referenced Open Space Technology, which has been used during several PLIs. Principals said that using this process gave them a sense of ownership and autonomy for their own learning experience. Almost every principal also mentioned the first panel of principals during PLIs, which marked for them a transition

from using only external expertise to using the expertise that existed in the district. In addition, in separate interviews, both principals and their teachers talked about similar practices within schools, where teachers have taken a more active role in designing and presenting professional learning experiences for their peers. As one principal commented, “It’s been tremendous, the opportunities that we have to learn and develop ourselves. . . . Then you pass it along to your APs [assistant principals], your academy principals, your teacher leaders. It is great.”

#### **PERFORMANCE STRAND 4** **Transforming Teaching and Learning**

The overarching theme in this strand is that instruction is the primary lever for change; as the director of schools often reinforced, students will achieve at high levels when there is high-quality instruction in every classroom, in every school, every day. Thus instructional leadership is at the core of “Transforming Teaching and Learning.” However, principals must maximize their time to do this, which is a critical skill in the third strand (“Leading and Managing Change”). This is a prime example of the overlap and interconnection across strands that make it necessary for principals to become learners and leaders with a broad view of the range of skill sets needed to transform their schools.

##### **◆ *Embedding and Sustaining Core Skills and Practices Over Time***

By far, the experience that had the most impact on principals and their capacity to transform teaching and learning was “Developing the Artisan Teacher” and the “Skillful Observation and Coaching Laboratory” developed by the Rutherford Learning Group and presented by Mike Rutherford. There are several factors contributing to the success of this training that are discussed as follows:

- **Theory-based content with practical application**  
Elements that made these sessions so valuable were, first and foremost, the thoughtful and theory-based

content, and secondly, the accessible, practical application in the everyday lives of principals. Several principals discussed how they use some aspect of this training every day; it has provided them with “a common language” that facilitates discussions about practice among their peers and conversations with teachers about improving instructional practice.

- **Alignment with district’s core values and beliefs**

Another critical element of the training was that it was closely aligned with the overarching values and belief system that the director of schools reinforced in his messages to principals during the PLIs. The training increased principal’s capacity to observe, coach, and give feedback to teachers, but equally important, it focused on how principals could do this by building on teachers’ assets as opposed to dwelling on their deficits – a strength-based approach consistent with the belief system embedded in the goals and design of the PLIs.

- **Sustained investment in development over time**

A key point that participants also shared about this development experience is that it was supported by a sustained investment from the district over time. One principal said that this was “probably the best example of how we’ve taken a program that maybe typically, Mike Rutherford would have come in, delivered, and left, and you would have gotten a one-shot deal.” Because MNPS chose to systematically move principals through the training in stages of change focused on their awareness, skill development, and then the transfer of training, the district was able to strategically build both individual and collective capacity of principals as instructional leaders.

- **Training of trainers for long-term sustainability**

Initially, all principals were trained over multiple days alongside the central office staff who support them. Follow-up training for principals and central office staff was provided during a PLI focused on managing

change as instructional leaders. Simultaneously, a cadre of principals was selected to participate in a train-the-trainers series. Teams of principals, assistant principals, coaches, and teachers were trained and rotated visits to host schools to practice their observation and coaching skills. This process helped to ensure that sufficient resident capacity exists to train other MNPS staff in the future, which increases the potential for sustainability.

#### ◆ *Developing a Perspective about Content and Process*

During the past five years, new knowledge has been shared with principals during the PLIs, and over time they have become increasingly aware of the processes as well as the content of their professional learning. A good example is the training they received about leadership in a multi-generational work environment. Principals described this training as having a breakthrough effect on the ability to understand the needs of their teachers in more nuanced ways than they had previously considered. The training actually expanded their concept of what diversity means within the context of the workplace, and it gave them tools they could readily put to use to have more productive conversations with teachers and other staff. However, they responded differently about other aspects of the training format and process, noting that at times the sessions involved too much presentation and they were unengaged, passive learners. When PLI sessions meet their needs related to content and process, principals have responded favorably, which indicates an increasing discernment of how the design, content, and processes of professional learning must adequately reflect their needs.

#### ◆ *Central Office Supports for Principals and Schools*

Central office leaders at various levels and across departments play a significant role in supporting the development of principals as transformational leaders, and from its inception, many central office leaders have been involved in PLI design and implementation. However, there was a lack of clarity expressed at differ-

ent levels of central office leadership about their roles in supporting principals and how those roles interface or intersect with other central office staff. In some instances, clarity of roles appeared to be the primary issue, and in other cases a lack of communication across roles seemed to be the reason that principals detected fault lines in the messaging and support they receive from the central office. There was also lack of clarity and focus in discussions with central office leaders about what “back-end” support might be needed for principals after PLIs and about the range of supports that central office staff could provide, and it was implied, but not an explicit expectation, that departments would collaborate on the supports they offer schools, based on the needs and requests of principals.

#### ◆ *Variation and Gaps across Principal Levels*

One important finding that emerged is the issue of variation and gaps across tier levels (elementary, middle, and high school) in principals’ specific, as opposed to general, knowledge about instructional strategies and practices. Without a doubt, principals at every level acknowledged that the focus of their work is on instructional leadership. However, there was concern among some central office participants that gaps in learning exist when principals have to articulate a deeper knowledge of instruction, and some still seem to focus too heavily on management. Developmentally, the entire district has moved forward in the transformation of teaching and learning. However, high schools began the transformation sooner than middle and elementary schools and received external support for the academies model. Therefore, they have moved the farthest and the fastest, and there is some degree of catch-up necessary for the middle and elementary tier levels.

Central office participants also shared that variation in the depth of principals’ knowledge of instructional strategies can make it difficult to gauge teachers’ effectiveness with implementation of a particular strategy

and may result in their misreading the degree to which scale has been reached within or across schools. As one central office leader cautioned, pockets of excellence can exist in a school, yet school-wide implementation is “not a way of life.” Gaps in knowledge notwithstanding, several principals wanted to spend more time focused on K–12 alignment, so that a seamless transition takes place for students from elementary to middle to high school. As one elementary principal stated, “To be really effective, we need to start working more on tier to tier. I don’t think we have that opportunity as much as we probably should in making those tier connections.” It was noted by one central office participant that many of these issues will be addressed at an upcoming PLI.

## **PERFORMANCE STRAND 5** **Managing Accountability Systems**

“Managing Accountability Systems” has emerged as a more prominent component of recent PLIs. Participants noted that looking at data has played a central role in PLIs since their inception, but the focus on data has only become stronger as the district has moved toward providing more school-based autonomy in areas such as budgeting. Many principals talked about the “use of data” and “utilizing data to make instructional decisions” as key messages and a content focus during several PLIs.

### **◆ Culture of Data Use**

MNPS and the PLIs have placed significant emphasis on establishing a culture of data use in the district, which has been a goal for the PLI designers from the start. When the PLIs began, principals and central office staff were not regularly engaged in discussions about using data and there was no infrastructure for principals to access summary level data for their schools. The district made huge investments in resources and supports that included a data warehouse and data coaches, which were bolstered by PLI sessions on understanding and using student and adult performance data. Principals talked about the positive

impact that an increased focus on data has had on them, their teachers, and students. They explained how they now use data in evaluation post-conferencing and have “data talks” with teachers and students about progress. One principal noted signs of progress in this way, “Now when we take a benchmark assessment, teachers can’t wait to see how the kids do. There’s not that fear anymore. It’s, ‘Where do I go from here? Is it cause to celebrate? Is it cause to reevaluate the way I taught those standards?’” A number of principals also identified the “continuous improvement model,”<sup>2</sup> introduced at the PLI in 2011, as an essential part of establishing a data-informed culture that helps their staff chart how students are doing throughout the year. Instructional coaches were also cited as having played an important role in teachers’ understanding and use of data to improve instruction and student performance.

### **◆ Autonomy and Flexibility**

From the first PLI, principals were given a great deal of flexibility in deciding which instructional strategies they would implement in their schools. Many principals said they have more autonomy and latitude to make decisions now than at any other point in their careers, which allows them to tailor resources to meet their school’s specific needs. However, the breadth of strategies introduced during the early PLIs, coupled with a nascent ability to choose the best fit for their school from among the options presented, made the

<sup>2</sup> This model originated in the business sector, part of the total quality management movement inspired by the work of W. Edwards Deming. See, for example, <http://asq.org/learn-about-quality/continuous-improvement/overview/overview.html>.

autonomy and flexibility somewhat overwhelming for some principals. As previously mentioned, principals credited “Education 2018,” the district’s strategic plan, and Common Core as providing the anchors they needed to align their goals and instructional practices. As they have increased achievement results and gained responsibility for decision making, some principals are taking full advantage of the flexibility, but others have not.

Increasingly, MNPS is also providing principals with a great deal of autonomy around budgeting and the flexible use of resources in their schools. Principals noted that recent PLIs have increased the focus on school-based budgeting, and they are looking forward to opportunities in the next school year to share their budgets with other principals and get feedback and suggestions on how to use their funds to more effectively meet the needs of their students. Principals and central office staff suggested that not all principals who now have this autonomy are taking advantage of it.

#### ◆ *Principal Mentorship versus Evaluation*

The Network Lead Principal (NLP) structure was seen as a powerful concept to help develop school-based leadership capacity. By grouping a cluster of schools that could meet and collaborate under the direction of one sitting principal with an established track record of school success, principals could learn from and be a resource to each other about effective strategies and

problems of practice. Almost universally, participants said that the NLPs had built school-based leadership capacity and helped to empower school-based leaders. Both principals and NLPs said that they appreciated the opportunities to network with other principals to discuss common experiences, and there was consensus overall about how effective a mentoring relationship could be.

However, after two years, there is tension within the role. Most principals – including those who were NLPs and those who were not – expressed discomfort with evaluating or being evaluated by their peers and concerns about how effective the NLPs can be when evaluation is a part of their role. Principals said that it was hard to have an honest mentor/mentee relationship with someone who is also your direct supervisor; in fact, some principals who were not NLPs stated they would have been interested in pursuing that role were it not for the evaluative component. Likewise, NLPs also talked about how difficult it was to build rapport and trust with principals and then turn around and report on their performance. NLPs also lamented that it was a challenge to find quality time to assess and evaluate another principal’s performance while at the same time continuing to lead their school. Most principals thought if given the choice, the role should be focused on mentoring and support rather than on evaluation.

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*“Now I wonder about MNPS – are the things that we’ve done . . . are we going to have the sustainability to keep it moving in that direction, or are we going to make a ninety degree right hand turn and all of a sudden we don’t know where we are again?”*

— *Network Lead Principal*

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## Transformational Leadership: The Next Frontier in Metro Nashville Public Schools

In reflecting on their work to date and looking ahead to transitioning to a new director of schools, each participant was asked to identify what they felt the “next frontier” should be in the development of MNPS principals as transformational leaders. The following themes emerged from their collective voices.

### Sustaining Current Efforts

Many principals commented on the strong foundational work that has been done throughout the district, but cautioned that that work has not yet reached scale. Participants expressed needing time to practice and refine what they have learned. They suggested a sustained focus on current efforts, such as project-based learning.

### Developing and Distributing Leadership Throughout the District

Participants expressed a desire to expand the practices of collaborative and distributed leadership. They remarked that by sharing leadership, the district could more effectively bring people together to work toward a common cause. They suggested creating “professional learning communities” among principals, offering multiple leadership trajectories for teachers and principals, and articulating the specific competencies required for various leadership roles.

### Balancing Autonomy with Accountability

While many participants appreciated the increased autonomy around school-based budgeting and decision-making, they expressed the need to couple this autonomy with accountability. They desire clarity on where they have autonomy versus where they are expected to adhere to district-wide norms and expectations.

### Educating the Whole Child

Participants expressed a strong desire to strengthen their ability to meet the needs of a diverse and changing MNPS student body, and to develop the skills and resources necessary to support students in all areas, not just academically. Suggestions include an increased emphasis at PLIs on social and emotional learning and cultural competency.

### Embedding Technology into Teaching, Learning, and Leadership Development

Several participants expressed the desire to expand practices such as blended and flipped classrooms and virtual schools. Others stressed the need to embed technology into leadership development practices. In all cases, the emphasis was on using technology in “appropriate, relevant, and meaningful ways,” rather than “technology for technology’s sake.”

### Attracting and Retaining Students and Staff

Participants recognized the increasingly competitive nature of schooling, noting that staff can choose whether or not to work for MNPS and that students are being recruited by charter schools. In response, they suggest continuing to build a positive and collaborative climate among staff in order to make MNPS an attractive place to work. Additionally, they recommend an increased focus on developing skills in community engagement to establish a positive reputation among families in the district.

## Recommendations for Districts and the Field

The recommendations provided in this section reflect issues that emerged during our study, as well as from five years of observation of the PLIs and numerous conversations with principals. While the recommendations originate from our experiences in Nashville, they are also relevant for other districts engaged in leadership development and for the field.

### Provide Differentiated Professional Learning

Ensure that opportunities for development are differentiated so that principals can engage in learning that is meaningful and relevant to their particular leadership development needs and school context and appeal to their learning style. Professional learning opportunities should also include a focus on self-care and work/life balance, reflecting the complex role that principals play in leading and transforming schools.

### Provide Career Paths to Leadership for Teachers

Establish on-ramps to leadership for teachers that go beyond traditional roles and do not necessarily require them to leave the classroom or the school. This is especially necessary for teachers who are part of the millennial generation, who are often looking for opportunities for leadership much sooner in their work careers than previous generations.

### Coordinate Central Office Support to Schools

Develop a structure or mechanism, based on input from principals and their staffs, that coordinates a responsive continuum of central office supports to schools, from within and across departments and throughout tiers of authority in the district. Train central office staff in the specific skills areas they will need to effectively provide support.

### Allow Time for Reflection and Encourage Peer Learning

Dedicate time at regular principals' meetings for dialogue and reflection following each leadership development experience and create opportunities for principals to lead sessions or groups to expand the impact of collective learning and build a culture of collaborative leadership.

### Support Risk-Taking and Self-Empowerment

Encourage and empower principals to take risks and accept increasing authority for the leadership of their schools by fostering environments that scaffold their growth and development with supportive and trusting relationships.

### Increase Skills in Culturally Responsive Community Engagement

Increase the leadership skills of principals and central office staff to engage with the community in ways that are responsive to the cultural, racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of students and their families, and that reflect the specific needs of their community.



## Leading by Example: A Cornerstone of District Improvement Efforts

In conclusion, our findings suggest that the Principal Leadership Institutes in Nashville have had a significant impact over time on the development of principals as transformational leaders, and they have been a cornerstone in the district’s effort to improve teaching and learning. The Leadership Performance Strands and Skills provide a sound framework for principals to understand and reflect on their development, both individually and collectively, and to explore the connections across strands that are vital to their work in transforming schools.

We have come to understand the evolution of principals as transformational leaders as reflected in their collective understanding and practice of transformational leadership; the ways in which they engage in furthering their own development as transformational leaders; the dynamics of collaboration among principals; and the empowerment that principals articulate in leading their schools. Over the years, principals have sharpened their skill sets through ongoing leadership experiences; but equally important, they have developed their mindset. From the first PLI, principals who

were willing to change their beliefs about what was possible for themselves and MNPS created enough space in the room to allow a new vision for the district to flourish. In turn, as new leaders came on board, a collective sense of empowerment beckoned them forward to be bold enough to take risks and try new ideas. And in doing so, their ability to learn and to lead has grown tremendously.

As we look at our work with districts across the nation, we have seen that one of the greatest challenges for leaders is to focus on sustainability yet remain open enough to critically and continuously examine the beliefs, structures, policies, and practices that ultimately determine how effective they can be in an ever-changing context. It is our hope that Metro Nashville Public Schools will continue to empower principals to “lead by example” and deepen the work that has contributed to their development and to the growth of their students and staff, and that the commitment to a transformative vision will continue to guide the work ahead for the district and the community.

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*“Leadership is a force that enables us to choose a destiny and move intentionally towards it. We choose to transform MNPS, not just to oversee it for a time and then pass the responsibility to others.”*

— MNPS Belief Statements, “Leadership for Transformational Change”

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