

LEADING BY EXAMPLE:

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



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*

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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, and the district has also seen a significant increase in the percentage of economically disadvantaged students.

The lack of depth of instructional leadership capacity, both at the principal and central office levels, was of concern to Register when he entered the district. The district was characterized by some as having a leadership void; principals were seen as competent managers, but instructional leadership was not an area in which they were expected to excel.

In addition, staff at multiple levels of the district described the overall culture at the time as “top-down, and characterized by fear and a lack of perceived authority to carry out major responsibilities and decision-making,” with collaboration as neither the norm nor the expectation (Annenberg Institute 2010). Register noted the “big chasm between central office and schools,” and his chief design consultant Gloria Frazier noted that “overall, as a school district, there was no collaborative learning culture that was anywhere near a tipping point.”

### Major levers for change

The transformation of MNPS began with a two-pronged approach. The first part of the strategy was to create MNPS Achieves, an initiative that brought district and community leaders together in teams that were called Transformational Leadership Groups (TLGs). The TLGs were charged with researching and designing strategies to improve student achievement

through a focus on nine critical areas. More information on the implementation of MNPS Achieves can be found in the series of evaluation reports<sup>1</sup> conducted by the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University (AISR).

The second lever for transformational change was focused on building the leadership capacity of principals in the district. The development of current principals was key, but that effort was matched with a strategy to recruit principals from outside the district, reassign central office staff to lead schools, as well as promote promising assistant principals (see Appendix A). The vision for transformational leadership was not “a model, but a set of effective practices or systems” that Register and Frazier knew were necessary to achieve high performance from students and adults.

### Developing the Principal Leadership Institutes

A core strategy for building leadership 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 development 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. This was a marked change from the previous types of professional learning experiences in the district.

<sup>1</sup> See <http://annenberginstitute.org/?q=publication/Nashville>.

Register was clear from the outset that the PLIs were to focus on instructional leadership, rather than administrative or operational skills, and had to be driven by student performance. In constructing the PLIs, Register and Frazier designed and used the significant block of time with all 140 principals to begin shaping the culture that Register wanted to infuse throughout the district, and they were deliberate in embedding and modeling effective practices for teaching and learning.

Given this goal, PLI learning opportunities were designed to be results-based, experiential, and collaborative, and had practical application to the school context. Additionally, efforts were made to scaffold learning experiences between the winter and summer PLIs, and to connect them to ongoing meetings for principals and administrators.

### The first PLIs

The first PLI took place in July 2009, followed by the second PLI in January 2010. From the outset, the expectation was made clear that all principals would attend. To facilitate relationship building, these Institutes were held at out-of-town retreat centers where participants lodged overnight. At the PLIs, Register explicitly expressed the urgency around improving student performance, and his consistent, engaged presence sent a message about his beliefs, values, and vision for the district. He participated fully with principals during sessions, and modeled as a leader who was also a learner. Principals took note of his words and actions, and his constant presence was viewed as a welcome departure from the norm. From the evaluation survey of the first PLI, one principal said the biggest takeaway was that “our superintendent was an active participant.”

The July 2009 PLI featured two major themes: “Leadership and Cultural Competency” and “Leadership for Adult and Student Performance.” A mix of external consultants led the large group sessions, while small

group sessions on creating successful learning environments for students and adults were led by a combination of principals, central office staff, and external consultants.

The data collected from the evaluation of these Institutes revealed that while some principals gave low marks for a session or facilitator, overall the PLIs were recognized as a positive shift in how MNPS was addressing leadership development. Principals were pleased to have the time to spend together and seemed surprised that the sessions were really about leadership. (A complete listing of PLI content over the years can be found in Appendix B.)

### Leadership Performance Strands and Skills

Drawing from research as well as their collective years of experience in leadership development, Register and Frazier developed a set of key leadership competencies to guide both the content and design for the initial PLIs. These competencies were aligned with the goals and values for transformational leadership in MNPS and were informed by student performance and the existing district culture.

In 2011, a design team formalized these competencies into the MNPS Leadership Performance Strands and Skills (LPSS), described in Figure 1. With the focus on a collective vision as well as collective action, the LPSS have been the centerpiece for transformational leadership development in MNPS and are applicable to all leaders – from the director of schools to central office staff to principals and teachers. The LPSS were also foundational to the later development of a Teacher Leadership Institute.

### The evolution of the PLIs and a common vision

By the end of a full cycle of summer and winter PLIs, principals understood that Register had a plan and a road map for MNPS, and that his intent was to get them focused and moving in the same direction. In their evaluations of these events, principals commented that they were relieved to know there was a



“big picture” for the district and that perhaps the most important part of the PLI experience was hearing his vision, goals, and expectations. The continuity and regularity of the Institutes also helped principals see the theory of change in action.

An integral part of the vision for PLIs was to build the internal capacity within MNPS to plan, implement, and facilitate the sessions. In January 2010, the vast majority of PLI sessions were led by MNPS principals, who were recruited and selected by central office staff to demonstrate and explain the successful practices they used as school leaders. Although “outside” presenters have remained a part of PLIs throughout the years, this shift in presenters from the first PLI to the second demonstrated the commitment to identify and highlight internal expertise, and to have principals learning from each other.

Principals and central office staff also became increasingly engaged in designing the PLIs, and since 2012, leaders within the district have been fully responsible for PLI planning and implementation. The agenda emerges from an internal planning process based on the needs and areas of concern for the district, and is tied to the vision and the strategic plan.

Later PLIs were used to build understanding and ownership of the district’s strategic plan, “Education 2018: Excellence for Every Student” (see Appendix C), and

also supported the rollout of major state accountability initiatives, including Common Core State Standards and Tennessee’s TEAM teacher evaluation model. In the TEAM model, student performance results play a sizeable role in providing more frequent feedback to educators, which promotes the practices of the most effective teachers and increases accountability for teachers who are ineffective.

The PLIs also shifted in location. Initially, the retreat format supported efforts to build community, but since summer 2010 the PLIs have been held at the district’s Martin Professional Development Center, a site that contributes to increased sustainability of the PLIs over time. Opened in 2008 with support from a public/private partnership, this facility is dedicated to improving the quality of teaching and learning, and it proved to be more convenient for principals and cost-effective for the district to hold PLIs at the Martin Center.

The purpose of this study is to explore the transformation of MNPS through the lens of the Principal Leadership Institutes 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>

## Literature Review

In conducting a review of the literature, we sought to ground our understanding of the evolution of principals as transformational leaders reflected in: 1) their collective understanding and practice of transformational leadership; 2) the ways in which they engage in furthering their own development as transformational leaders; 3) the dynamics of collaboration among principals; and 4) the empowerment that principals articulate in leading their schools.

### Importance of principal leadership

The importance of school leadership in improving student learning has been documented in both quantitative and qualitative research. In fact, several studies have confirmed that leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to student learning (Louis et al. 2010; Wallace Foundation 2013b; Schmidt-Davis and Bottoms 2011; Leithwood & Jantzi 2008; Marzano, Waters & McNulty 2005). There has also been clear consensus from the research that principals need to do much more than what is required in a traditional managerial role, and primary among their responsibilities is “ensuring the spread of effective instructional practices to every classroom” (Wallace Foundation 2013a, p. 7). Wagner et al. (2006) note that in taking on tasks that require more than just management, the challenge for principals and districts alike is shifting from a focus on individual practice to fostering collective “communities of practice” that will have far greater impact on both school and district-wide change (p. 16). Shifting to leadership among many rather than a few, principals are increasingly expected to lead their schools within a framework of collaboration and shared decision making with teachers and other staff (NASSP and NAESP 2013), which requires them to develop a very different set of skills and practices. As Leithwood et al. (2004) state, “We need to be developing leaders with large

repertoires of practices and the capacity to choose from that repertoire as needed, not leaders trained in the delivery of one ‘ideal’ set of practices” (p. 10). In accomplishing this goal, whole systems must step up to the plate and meet the demand for more nuanced forms of district leadership.

The study conducted by Wagner et al. (2006) concluded that organizations that engage in ongoing dialogue around goals, priorities, and professional standards for individual and group performance intentionally foster the skills and norms that require everyone in the system to work more collaboratively and to be more accountable to one another (p. 16). Such studies reinforce that principals’ instructional leadership is not a content or skill area that principals are likely to learn solely from traditional pre-service or workshop formats. Rather, instructional leadership represents a set of work practices that principals must come to integrate into their ongoing work through sustained support for such integration over time (Gallucci & Swanson 2008). In the study noted above by Leithwood et al. (2004), the varied types of leadership in schools were emphasized, noting that while instructional leadership focuses primarily on classroom practice, transformational leadership requires a more expanded role that “draws attention to a broader array of school and classroom conditions that may need to be changed if learning is to improve” (p. 6). A central aim of transformational leadership, then, is to generate a collective *vision* as well as collective *action*, while enhancing individuals’ practice (Leithwood 1992). McIver et al. (2009) further argue:

Effective school leaders know how to focus the work of the school on the essential. They have a clear mission or purpose for the school and identify goals that align with that mission. They communicate the purpose and goals in a meaningful way such that all stakeholders understand what they need to do.” (p. 12)

## The role of the district in principal leadership development

The nuance and complexity of enacting these and other forms of leadership point to the important role that districts play in identifying and developing a range of leadership skills for principals. A recent study from The Wallace Foundation (2013b) identifies five key functions of effective principal leadership: shaping a vision of academic success for all students; creating a climate hospitable to education; cultivating leadership in others; improving instruction; and managing people. The Wallace Foundation report suggests that all five tasks need to interact for any part to succeed; when all five tasks are well carried out, leadership is at work (p. 7). Louis et al. (2010) suggest that principals are most effective when they see themselves as working collaboratively toward clear, common goals with district personnel, other principals, and teachers. In order for school leaders to develop this type of leadership, they need support from the school district (Knapp et al. 2010; Louis et al. 2010; Honig 2012). An American Institutes for Research report (2010) concludes:

School-level leadership is most productive when couched within a supportive and consistent district-level leadership that sets the vision and expectations but is willing to step back and take the risk of allowing the principal of the school to lead with some autonomy. (p. 5)

Numerous studies have suggested that central offices need to transform, to develop a customer service orientation, and to focus on the needs of schools and principals as a top priority (Echelson 2013; Wallace Foundation 2013b). According to Louis et al. (2010), “Higher-performing districts tend to be led by district staff who communicate a strong belief in the capacity of teachers and principals to improve the quality of teaching and learning, and in the district’s capacity to develop the organizational conditions needed for that to happen” (p. 197). The district leadership challenge

is to move from oversight to providing capacity-building support (Bottoms & Fry 2009), and a number of districts are moving in this direction.

In a large-scale study of urban districts focused on leadership support, Knapp et al. (2010) suggest that in these districts:

The improvement of teaching and learning became the business of the school and district, and those exercising leadership in central office positions or within the school were relentless in communicating this message. Second, to make this message more than a rhetorical exercise, they purposefully invested resources – all kinds of resources – not just money (and often not much money) but also time, materials, expertise, and even autonomy in this pursuit, with a special emphasis on instructional leadership as a primary target of investment. (pp. 7–8)

They reached a significant conclusion that “explicit and focused support for leadership work was intrinsic to learning-focused leadership” (p. 18). Therefore, in what areas can central office provide the best supports to principals? Knapp et al. suggest that those areas include: providing resources for leaders as well as teachers; engaging leaders in professional learning; fostering relationships with peers; attending to administrative needs in responsive, differentiated ways; and sponsoring and legitimizing leaders’ work (p. 18). Moreover, Louis et al. (2010) believe that “leaders in higher-performing districts communicated explicit expectations for principal leadership and provided learning experiences in line with these expectations; they also monitored principal follow-through and intervened with further support where needed” (summarized in Wahlstrom et al. 2010, p. 21).

Another departure from typical principal professional learning experiences is the concept of principals working together in networks. Honig et al. (2010) suggest, “Modeling or demonstrating particular ways of thinking and acting are essential strategies for helping people such as school principals change their work practices” (p. 33). They further contend that one way to do this is to create high-quality opportunities for principals to serve as resources for one another (p. 47). Access to peer networks or cohorts is an important way of allowing principals at every level of experience to have a chance to bounce ideas off colleagues (School Leaders Network 2014; Fullan 2006). According to Wagner et al. (2006), “Leadership practice communities are a strategy both for developing individual leaders’ capacities and for generating consistently higher performance throughout the system” (p. 77).

Several studies (Portin et al. 2009; Plecki et al. 2009) suggest that central office staff in some urban districts recognize that both novice and veteran principals need individual support as well as networked groupings where peer principals can support each other. Hitt, Tucker & Young (2012) contend that the foundation for continuing development for principals should be ensuring that time is available for “reflection, growth, and renewal” (p. 11). Many of the concepts discussed in the literature have influenced the design and development of Nashville’s PLIs and the degree to which they provide consistent opportunities for learning over time. Our findings offer further insight to the field about the ongoing needs and challenges of school and district leadership.

## 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 Leadership Performance Strands and Skills (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 study of the PLIs included two phases. In the first phase, our team of four researchers met bi-weekly to discuss and develop a shared understanding of the PLIs and to gather archival documents about its evolution. We conducted a review of the literature to ground our thinking in principal leadership development and transformational leadership. We also conducted a scan and analysis of existing documents related to the PLIs, including agendas and content from past PLI binders, field notes from AISR’s documentation, and the PLI evaluation summary data from principals and central office participants.

In the second phase, we conducted interviews and focus groups using protocols that we developed with a focus on the strands and skills outlined in the LPSS framework. A total of fifty-one participants were interviewed – forty-seven were interviewed in Nashville and four were interviewed by telephone. Among the fifty-one participants, twenty-two were principals (representing about one-sixth of all principals in Nashville), fourteen were teachers, twelve were central office staff, and three were key architects of the PLI

design (including the director of schools). All interviewees were guaranteed anonymity with the exception of the director of schools, as he is the only person in that role.

Eight of the twenty-two school-based principals we interviewed were Network Lead Principals – sitting principals who are also responsible for leading a network of principals that come together for collaborative support. These Network Lead Principals spanned all three levels (or tiers) and were interviewed in a separate focus group. The remaining fourteen principals were separated into three focus groups by level into an elementary, middle, and high school focus group. (See Appendix D for the demographics and grouping of our participants and Appendix A for the overall demographics of principals in MNPS.)

The fourteen teachers we interviewed were matched to three principals who we also interviewed – one at the elementary, one at the middle, and one at the high school level – so that we could gain some perspective about how principals enacted transformational leadership in the school environment. Prior to the data collection, the research team developed its coding schema using Dedoose software to conduct an analysis of the data and to organize our findings based on the LPSS framework. Forty-seven of the fifty-one participants were interviewed in small groups, and the findings that emerged within those specific groups became major themes, which were identified by the frequency of participant responses in the focus group and interview transcripts. We collapsed the principal tier groups because their responses across levels were so similar that we could represent their collective voice related to a particular strand or skill. We differentiated them only by quotes that could categorize them as an elementary, middle, or high school principal without compromising their anonymity. Whenever possible, without sharing uniquely identifiable information, we also identified their years of experience as a principal to give a more nuanced perspective on principals' com-

ments about the PLIs and leadership development. We have also taken into account our own observations of principals over the course of our five years of attendance at the PLIs, and in Appendix B have provided a chart detailing the content of the PLIs from their inception to the present.

To answer our second research question, we asked every participant to respond to the following question in all of our protocols: “What do you think should be the ‘next frontier’ for principal leadership development in Metro Nashville Public Schools?” The major themes from their responses are summarized in the section of this report entitled “The Next Frontier.”

We acknowledge that given the short time frame from January through June 2015, there was a limitation in the amount of data that we could collect and analyze. However, a strength that we bring to this research is our ability to draw on the previous five years of PLI data that we have collected, which captures the story of its evolution in a unique way.

Although 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 transformational leadership was identified as the driver for transformational change, the skill sets under each strand are interdependent in 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.

## 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 was 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.” When principals were asked to reflect about which strand had the most impact on their leadership, one principal commented, “Setting clear and compelling direction (Strand 1), for me, was about transforming teaching and learning (Strand 4). That set the stage.” This interplay between strands and across skills was evident in principals’ comments throughout the study.

#### ◆ *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. As principals began to not simply “buy in” but “own” his overarching direction and accept that he had faith in their potential to lead, they felt empowered to try new ideas and do things differently without fear of reprisal. If principals were willing to get on board and adopt a growth mindset,<sup>2</sup> they were promised the supports they would need to help them succeed. One principal commented on the significance of those early conver-

sations 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. Although his messages during PLI 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) 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. In 2009, the district began the transformational change process with MNPS Achieves and the PLIs. As the leadership continued to monitor progress from that effort, it became evident that the process was no longer moving them forward in ways they had hoped. The new knowledge gleaned about what it would take to transform the district was incor-

<sup>2</sup> Mindset (growth vs. fixed) is a term originally coined by Carol Dweck (see <http://mindsetonline.com>) that has been widely adopted in the field.

porated into Education 2018, introduced during the summer PLI in 2012 as the core of the district's strategy for achieving excellence for every student. The district's theory of systems change, catalyzed by the words "grow, achieve, empower," became the blueprint many principals were looking for to align with the instructional strategies they had learned about during previous PLIs. One principal commented about previous PLIs in this way: "I think some PLIs have been designed in a way that have too much going on. Then some have been really streamlined. . . . When you have Institutes with so much working that you don't know . . . it's like a potpourri, you've got to try and figure out what to take back." She later explained that the strategic plan gave her the direction she needed to lead her school.

Framing the goals for MNPS over the next five years gave what some principals described as "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 is now a process, not just a plan," and this shift in thinking "forced discussions about goals and their alignment to strategy and practice."

One principal recalled how the advent of Education 2018 was a turning point for the entire school, because it pushed staff to realize that in order to reach their goals, they would all have to develop their talents to implement a core set of instructional strategies such as project-based learning. While support from the principal and instructional coaches was promised and provided, these were the goals for the school and all teachers had to make a commitment to achieving them.

### ◆ *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. However, principals were also aware of the burden they pass along to teachers as a result of the urgency to implement multiple initiatives within a short span of time. One principal discussed how she uses the PLIs to handle some of the tension in this way:

The number of initiatives would be the greatest challenge. And finding time to plan for those roll-outs. . . . I'm collaborative, . . . I need someone to bounce ideas. So, definitely the number of roll-outs is a barrier, because sometimes you have to decide what you're going to rollout that won't overwhelm your teachers who are already overwhelmed with this, that, and the other thing. Timing is everything – just having time during those sessions to collaborate with teams, with schools, on how we're going to roll this thing out.

Principals acknowledged that many factors create the urgency for instructional improvement in MNPS including the rapid growth of charter schools, and that they had in some cases exercised "selective abandonment" to create more time to focus on teaching and learning (Lovely & Smith 2004). 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. As one principal said, “If you don’t have the climate and culture in place, you can’t do the other [leadership strands]. You can’t lead change, transform teaching and learning, manage accountability systems. Shaping culture for learning is integral. It’s the foundation that everything else builds on.”

This strand has emerged as a critical priority area given the wide range of diversity within MNPS. Jesse Register noted that in some sense, MNPS is still playing “catch-up” because as he explained, “One of the big cultural changes in [MNPS] is learning and knowing and appreciating the diversity in the school system. And the reason this district was in trouble was because it neglected that. . . . By that I mean the community changed and the district didn’t.”

#### ◆ *Educating the whole child*

Increasingly emphasized as core to MNPS’ mission, vision, and beliefs, educating the “whole child” – attending to the social and emotional needs of students and developing cultural competencies – 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. However, PLI participants expressed a growing desire and effort to move “beyond test scores.” One principal said:

I think the social and emotional learning piece, the responsive classroom has been a really important initiative. Any district or school can become guilty of focusing just on test scores. That’s what we’re measured by, that’s what our director’s in the paper for, that’s what our names are in the paper for in terms of is this a good school or not. But that’s not the only measure of a good school.

. . . We were guilty of focusing so much on test scores and the end results, that we were ignoring a critical piece. . . . We’ve got to equip our children to be able to perform in society.

The district did place significant and early attention on inclusive practices for students with disabilities. However, in retrospect Register regretted not placing more focus on social and emotional learning and the broader issues of diversity earlier in his tenure, noting that although accountability for the academic achievement of all students must be the top priority, “you can’t do that and neglect the social and emotional development of children. You can’t do it and not be attentive to diversity in a school system like this.”

Social and emotional learning and developing cultural competencies were the central focus of the winter 2015 PLI, reinforcing the message, “This is what our district believes in.” These themes seem 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 between attending to student’s social and emotional needs and academic test scores. As one teacher stated, “It’s difficult to teach real world skills and still have time for the testing.”

#### ◆ *Shaping district culture*

The PLIs have operated as a mechanism to shape and model a culture for learning throughout the district and have had content addressing several aspects of culture and climate (see Appendix B). 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 that fostered a climate of high expectations and high support. Taken together, one participant noted that 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. One central office participant noted that these sessions were often “where the learning was happening.” 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 peer collaboration has become one of the standard criteria in how they judge the PLI experience. The PLIs were purposefully constructed to increase principals’ capacity to collaborate and learn from one another, but one principal shared initial skepticism at even the concept of collaboration:

When Dr. Register came in, he used the word “collaboration” a lot. Some of us who were used to a top-down style thought the word collaboration felt weak. We worried that nobody was going to take a stand. But then he really built that power and capacity for us to understand how to collaborate effectively.

In both the evaluations from PLI and our interviews, peer-to-peer collaboration is now consistently named as something for which principals would like even more time during PLI. We heard numerous examples of best practices that principals learned from their peers, and adapted and implemented within their own school context. And several principals called for more informal opportunities to talk and network with their peers about topics of interest, potentially in a format

such as Open Space Technology,<sup>3</sup> which was an optional component during the summer 2013 PLI.

The opportunity to plan with peers who have similar demographics or are grappling with specific issues at their school such as homelessness or racism was suggested by one principal as a potentially useful way to address major concerns within the district:

What if you were collected around [major issue being faced], and you developed what the next steps were? You didn’t just get information, but actually left with a plan, not only for you but for a collection of [principals] that were working together on a common challenge?

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. Teachers at one school noted the principal’s concerted effort to build a positive culture for learning by fostering a collaborative faculty environment:

“In faculty meetings, [my principal] starts with an opener to get all of us together. The first day, we met off site. Especially in [my] first year, I liked that, getting to feel comfortable with who I’m working with. There are really good relationships between teachers on different grade levels. I noticed as a first year [teacher] a very collaborative faculty.”

However, only in some cases have principals 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.

<sup>3</sup> Open Space Technology is a meeting facilitation process developed by Harrison Owen. See <http://openspaceworld.org/>.

### PERFORMANCE STRAND 3 Leading and Managing Change

“Leading and Managing Change” emerged as a key component of the MNPS overall transformation strategy and a central focus 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 spent 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 Jesse 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 PLI 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 principals 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. A Network Lead Principal described to us how he sees the difference in the approach that MNPS has taken to principal leadership as compared to other districts:

I’ve gone back and looked at the things I did on a daily basis twenty years ago as a principal. It was managerial, very little instructional stuff, maybe observing teachers. And you look at how much the role of principal has changed even in the last eight years. What has set MNPS apart is the role of principal has changed, but . . . in Metro the training has [also] changed. I think we’ve really evolved with our training of principals and kept up with the changes more so than a lot of school systems that have just said, “Yeah, it’s changing, but we don’t know how to train you.”

#### ◆ *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.

Although varying MNPS staff at the central office and school levels have been involved in planning and designing the PLIs, some participants expressed concerns that the planning process has not consistently

been done collaboratively, and that there have been some missed opportunities to identify and address the “whole picture” of developmental needs within MNPS.

A number of principals referenced Open Space Technology (see page 12), 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. They also suggested that in addition to principals’ meetings, Open Space could be used with instructional leadership teams, faculty meetings, and grade-level meetings, as the format “allow[s] teachers to be expert in best practices that are implemented in their classroom.”

Almost every principal also mentioned the first panel of principals during PLI that marked for them a transition from using only external expertise to using the expertise that existed in the district. One principal recalled her experience as a PLI presenter in this way:

I presented at an Institute, but I felt honored with presenting. And to be honest, I got a lot of positive feedback on the spot after the presentation. Those were presentations where you could choose [breakouts]. So it wasn’t something that was pre-programmed, and you were there and didn’t have a choice. The people who came were people who chose to come. . . . I remember that year, being able to choose, and I liked that. Also I remember presenting – it wasn’t something that I took back, but sharing best practices.

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. One of the teachers we interviewed talked about how the principal has increased

the leadership and professional learning opportunities in her school:

Myself and two other teachers have organized a way for teachers to be in different groups, observe one person in their group, and then be observed themselves by the end of the year. He [the principal] has put in place different protocols. Even on days when we have planning days or professional days, he will ask teachers to come up, say a quick intro to something they have done lately that works for them, and then we get in groups based on who we want to hear.

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 [assistant principals], your academy principals, your teacher leaders. It is great.”

A specific concern among some of the principals we interviewed is providing leadership opportunities for younger teachers that are new to the profession. Teachers from the “millennial” generation are entering the workforce with their own ideas about a teaching career that may not be the same as their predecessors. Longevity in a particular role is not always as important to them as having options to grow and expand into multiple arenas within the workplace, and they are fairly confident in asking for leadership opportunities even when they have been on the job for a short time. One middle school principal explained it this way,

As I’m bringing in these new young millennial teachers, now [I’m] having to make sure I create leadership opportunities for them. . . . I really started thinking about, these guys are asking for leadership, and that’s what I’ve been wanting. So I’ve got to find ways to reward them. I’ve got to find ways to involve them. . . . It made me rethink how I hire and retain teachers by being more intentional about what they’re able to learn and do in this school.

## 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. Therefore instructional leadership is quite naturally at the core of “Transforming Teaching and Learning.” However, to be effective as instructional leaders, principals must learn how to maximize their time, which is a critical skill set in the third strand, “Leading and Managing Change.” In the district’s relentless pursuit of teacher quality, principals are well aware that effectively dealing with inadequate performers is another skill set (found in the fifth strand, “Managing Accountability Systems”), which they must develop as instructional leaders. The intersections and overlap of these strands is another example of how necessary it is for principals to become learners and leaders across a broad spectrum of skills that are necessary to transform schools. One principal noted that it was the approach to becoming an effective instructional leader that was now different:

In the past, . . . our superintendent would always say, “I want you to deal with your ineffective teachers and build those teachers up, and try to retain those teachers that are doing a great job for you,” . . . but we didn’t have any formalized training to do either of those things.

#### ◆ *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 professional learning experience 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 their discussions about practice among 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 principals’ 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. In reflecting on the impact the training had on his personal growth, one principal commented, “I felt like [this professional learning] was about me improving my skill, but not from a remediation standpoint; sometimes PD comes at you like, ‘You’re not doing this and this, so here’s what you need.’ This was about making you better wherever you are on the spectrum.”

- **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 has helped to ensure that sufficient resident capacity exists to train other MNPS staff in the future, which increases the potential for sustainability. This has meant that the primary consultant, key architects of the PLI, and even the director of schools could leave the district and as one principal stated, “We have a cadre of people who can continue that work.” The effort to place the Rutherford training at the forefront of leadership development for principals and provide subsequent opportunities to embed the work deeply as core practices in schools has helped the district to gain traction needed for systemic transformation.

- ◆ ***Developing a perspective about content and process***

Over the past five years, principals and central office staff have been exposed to a wide range of knowledge and information during the PLIs, and one central office participant explained how thoughtful, flexible session design facilitated deeper learning:

For me it’s been, what issue are we going to dive deeper into, what new knowledge can we bring into it, and what is the best format for learning and taking away? So it’s not hard and fast that it’s going to look like this. What’s hard and fast is that we’re going to engage in a way that we can take away from. At least that’s the goal.

Over time, principals have also 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. One principal also commented about the sessions in this way: “The generational piece, . . . there was some time in there, exercises that allowed us to practice then and there. So I had my critical conversation completed when I left that session. That was extremely helpful.” 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.

It should also be noted that principals expressed concern about how cultural diversity issues are addressed during training, noting that some sessions may have reinforced rather than dispelled myths and stereotypes and did not contribute to the transparency they hoped to achieve as a group. This example points to the combination of culturally relevant content, skillful facilitation, and an environment conducive to thoughtful dialogue as critically important, especially in areas where principals and their staffs are facing sensitive diversity issues.

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 different 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. A few participants commented that the “front-end” communication and understanding of what will be needed to deepen the learning that has begun at the PLIs could be increased. As one central office participant said, “Get us all in the room before PLI [and say,] ‘Here’s what we’re going for, how can you support it?’” There was no mechanism identified by participants to coordinate the activity of all central office support to principals, 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. One central office participant explained the support that is needed for the other tiers in this way:

So we’re teaching principals how to impact teaching and learning in their building not just by what they say and by giving coaching advice, but going in and modeling. . . . Because they are the ones that are going to impact what goes on in that building. Not just by saying, “This is what you need to do,” . . . and not just assume that by saying it that teachers will know what to do.

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.” Developing a deeper understanding of instructional strategies such as blended or project-based learning were viewed as continual steps the district must take to embed good instructional practice. The PLIs were identified as the platform and the place to ensure such clarity across the district, recognizing that to have a sustained impact the district would need to, as one participant said, “stay with it, stay on it!”

Gaps in knowledge notwithstanding, several principals wanted to spend more time at PLIs 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 its inception, but the focus on data has only gotten stronger as the district has moved toward providing more school-based autonomy in areas such as budgeting. Several principals mentioned that the “use of data” and “utilizing data to make instructional decisions” were key messages that stood out to them in Register’s opening remarks at 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. In particular, principals said that the data warehouse was becoming a part of the district’s culture. 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?” When you have that kind of info at your fingertips, it’s very

powerful for teachers and students and the whole community. I think that transformation is remarkable. . . . But having all these resources at PLI, and people showing you different ways to use data, . . . you’re able to come back and share with the teachers – it creates another level that they can go to when it comes to seeing where students are and need to be.

A number of principals also identified the “continuous improvement (CI) model,”<sup>4</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. An elementary principal said that she had seen a dramatic increase in the level of teacher engagement in her own data since the implementation of the CI model and that it seemed to be a factor in increasing student achievement:

Before we implemented CI, all of our meetings used to be about logistics — kids who weren’t behaving, hallway problems and in the cafeteria. Now our team meetings are focused on the data and what strategies we can use to improve our data. Also, talk about specific children who are not meeting benchmarks, once we do our common assessments from the CI model. I can’t say with 100 percent certainty that our TVAAS [Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System score] increased . . . last year because we used a CI model, but it’s a contributing factor.

<sup>4</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>.



Instructional coaches were also cited as having played an important role in teachers' understanding and use of data to improve instruction and student performance. Principals talked about building their own ability to use data and then transferring that knowledge and skill to instructional coaches. One principal explained how the transfer has continued "from coaches to teachers, . . . and now from teachers to student ownership of their data, . . . making it visual, owning it, no longer hiding what you're doing." This principal went on to say, "Our data is changing, the sources are changing. Therefore, we have to be really flexible in how we're looking at it, and how we're using it."

### ◆ *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. One example that principals gave was their ability to hire coaches based on their own data, needs, and demographics. 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 autonomy and flexibility somewhat overwhelming for some principals. One central office participant shared that sometimes principals are not fully aware of how much autonomy they actually have in deciding how and what to implement in their schools:

That's what we've not done with our principals. They think they have to do everything they hear. The reality is that they don't. . . . Principals hear [this initiative], then they see over here [this initiative], then over here [another initiative]. . . . All of these are tools, . . . but you don't have to do everything under this and everything under this. You have to integrate various aspects.

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 have this autonomy now 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. As Jesse Register noted, "Some of your best leaders are in schools, and we don't want them to have to come to the district office." 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, and one reflected that despite the title, “Still, we’re peers.” 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. As one NLP stated, “We’re worried about our school’s test scores the same way they’re worried about theirs. We’re worried about developing our teachers just like theirs.” Most principals thought if given the choice, the role should be focused on mentoring and support rather than on evaluation.

.....  
*“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  
.....

## 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. Principals want to move beyond awareness in many areas and are seeking tools and further support. They also 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, articulating the specific competencies required for various leadership roles, and providing an academy-like structure where staff can develop competence.

### 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 PLI 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 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, school context, and 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.

### Create 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. We believe that Metro Nashville Public Schools is positioned to advance leadership that is not only transformational, but also transformative (Shields 2010). Drawing on Carolyn Shields’ research, transformational leadership in MNPS has been focused on the organization – understanding the culture, setting direction, developing people, and managing instruction. However, transformative leadership moves beyond the organization to put issues of equity, justice, power, and privilege at the center of the critique, the challenge, and the change that must happen to positively impact all students in a diverse district like Metro Nashville. It is our hope that MNPS 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 Nashville community.

.....  
*“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”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See Appendix E.

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## Appendix A: Characteristics of MNPS Principals, 2009–2015

### Hiring Information for Incoming Principals, 2010–2015

MNPS Newly Incoming Principals								
	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015	TOTAL	% of newly incoming principals	% of total district principals
New hire	5	6	4	2	2	19	24.7%	2.9%
Promoted from AP or other school-based position	6	11	9	10	9	45	58.4%	6.8%
Moved from CO	2	1	1	1	1	6	7.8%	0.9%
Returned from retirement	1	0	0	0	1	2	2.6%	0.3%
Rehire	0	0	0	1	3	4	5.2%	0.6%
Unknown	0	0	1	0	0	1	1.3%	0.2%
Total newly incoming principals	14	18	15	14	16	77		
Total # of schools/principal positions available	133	132	134	131	130			
% newly incoming principals	10.5%	13.6%	11.2%	10.7%	12.3%	11.7%		

MNPS Transferred Principals						
	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015	TOTAL
Principal Transfers	4	14	11	5	8	42
Total # of schools/principal positions available	133	132	134	131	130	
% transferred principal positions	3.0%	10.6%	8.2%	3.8%	6.2%	6.4%



## Demographics of MNPS Principals, 2009–2014

MNPS Principals: Race					
	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014
ASIAN/PI	<1% (1)	<1% (1)	0	0	0
BLACK	41%	37%	37%	39%	38%
HISPANIC	0	<1% (1)	2%	2%	2%
WHITE	59%	61%	61%	59%	60%

MNPS Principals: Gender					
	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014
FEMALE	73%	71%	63%	61%	59%
MALE	27%	29%	37%	39%	41%

MNPS Principals: Race and Gender						
		2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014
FEMALE	ASIAN/PI	<1% (1)	<1%	0	0	0
	BLACK	33%	29%	26%	27%	24%
	HISPANIC	0	<1% (1)	<1% (1)	<1% (1)	<1% (1)
	WHITE	40%	41%	36%	34%	34%
MALE	ASIAN/PI	0	0	0	0	0
	BLACK	8%	8%	11%	13%	14%
	HISPANIC	0	0	2% (2)	2% (2)	2% (2)
	WHITE	19%	21%	25%	24%	26%

## Appendix B: Summary of PLI Agenda Content

The following information was compiled from the PLI agendas. It includes a list of PLI session titles and indicates, where known, whether session facilitators were MNPS staff (\*), MNPS principals (#), or external presenters (+). In addition to work sessions, almost every PLI included opening and closing remarks from the director of schools.

<b>SUMMER 2009</b>	Successful Leadership: A Logic Model for Instructional Leadership+
	Leadership and Instructional Leadership+
	Leadership and Cultural Competency+
	Leadership and Systems Change*
	Leadership, Accountability and Culture: SUCCEED Training+
	Successful Learning Environments for All Students: Acceptance, Recognition and Sense of Belonging+#
	Successful Learning Environments for All Students: Inclusive Practices*#
	Successful Learning Environments for School Leadership Teams: Who, What, When, Why*#
Successful Continuous Learning by All Adults: Quality Instruction and Leadership+#	

<b>WINTER 2010</b>	Instructional Leadership*
	Instructional Decision Making: Use of Data*#
	Quality Teaching and Learning: Refining the 3Rs*#
	Instructional Leadership Teams: High Yield Strategies to Improve Teaching and Learning*#
	Networking: Professional Learning Communities*#
	Instructional Leadership: Synthesis, Reflection, Next Steps*

<b>SUMMER 2010</b>	Leadership for Results: Student and Adult Performance*
	Leadership Development: Capacity Building*
	Leadership for Results: System Change Leadership*#
	Leadership for Results: Collaborative Leadership+
	Developing the Artisan Teacher: Talent and Effect Size+
	Developing the Artisan Teacher: 23 Themes of Teacher Talent+
	Developing the Artisan Teacher: 7 Tools for Developing Teachers and Teaching+

<b>WINTER 2011</b>	Leadership for Results*
	Instructional Strategies: Differentiated Instruction, Inclusion, Instructional Rounds*#
	Collaborative Leadership and Learning Structures*#
	Continuous Improvement Process*+#
	Use of Data for Leadership Decisions*#

<b>SUMMER 2011</b>	Managing Accountability Systems: Development/Coaching and Assessment/Evaluation+
	Managing Accountability, Teacher Evaluation System: Overview*#; Questions+; Principal Panel*+#; Central Office Support to Principals*
	Managing Accountability Systems: Development/Coaching & Teacher Evaluation+
	Leading and Managing Change: Management of Time for Instructional Leaders+
	Transforming Teaching and Learning*
	Transforming Teaching and Learning: Making the Transition to the Common Core Standards+
	Transforming Teaching and Learning: Unpacking an ELA Standard in Parallel*+
	Transforming Teaching and Learning: Applying the Common Core ELA Standards to Other Subjects+
	Transforming Teaching and Learning: Reflecting on the Instructional Strategies, Scaffolding the Strategies, and Aligning the Strategies both Horizontally and Vertically+

<b>WINTER 2012</b>	Tennessee Teacher Evaluation TEAM Data Reports*
	Cognitive Coaching in the Post-Observation Conference*#
	Roundtable Options#: Motivating Students Questioning Academic Feedback Grouping Students Thinking Problem Solving
	Digital Learning: Standards, Taxonomy, Applications*
	Digital Learning: Setting the Context: ISTE and Bloom's Digital Taxonomy*
	Digital Learning, Solving the Mystery (Applications)*#: Interactive White Board, Netbooks, iPads, Social Media/Edmodo, Google/Powerpoint, Podcasts/Student Projects
	Digital Learning: Student Experience in MNPS Virtual School*
	Optimize to Maximize: How School Leaders Build Capacity, Maximize Impact, and Sustain Improvement+
	Optimize to Maximize Showcase Sessions+: Grim, Good Great – Where Are You on the Continuum? Way Beyond Expectations – Ordinary People Doing Extraordinary Things; Key Strategies that Have Helped Turnaround Schools; Introducing the ISP Online Tool Navigator#; Exploring an Innovative Approach to Embedding Use of Data at the School Level; Challenging More Able Students in Elementary and Middle Schools; Developing Student/Learner Voice in Elementary and Middle Schools
	Optimize to Maximize: Sharing the Learning from the Morning Plenary, The Leader as Detractor+, Implications for MNPS*
	Literacy: Diversity, Opportunity Gaps, and Teaching Practices: Setting the Context for K-12 Literacy*; Start Where You Are But Don't Stay There – Understanding Diversity, Opportunity Gaps, and Teaching in Today's Classrooms+; Sharing K-12 Literacy Strategies and Best Practices#; Deepening Effectiveness of K-12 Literacy Teaching Practices#

<b>SUMMER 2012</b>	Leadership for Transformation Change*
	Transform Teaching and Learning*
	Transform Teaching and Learning: Social Emotional Learning*
	Transform Teaching and Learning: Learner-Centered*#

<b>WINTER 2013</b>	Transforming Teaching and Learning Through Common Core State Standards
	Expectations of Project Based Learning Implementation PBL Cycle of Inquiry
	8 Essential Elements Deconstructing CCSS Project Design
	Critical Friends Protocol
	Looking at Student Work with Rubric
	Breakout Sessions: Look at PARCC Assessment
	My Journey to Standards Based Education*
	Standards Based Education: What? (Philosophy)*# Why?; (Student Panel)*; How? (Ambassador Panel)#
	Transforming Teaching and Learning Through Teacher Evaluation*/Principal Panel#
	Project Based Learning and Teacher Evaluation#
	Evaluation with Fidelity
	Inter-Rater Reliability+*
	Special Services and Alternate Group Evaluation: How to Measure*
	Roundtable Discussions (Elementary: Thinking Indicator, Problem Solving Indicator, Academic Feedback Indicator, Questioning Indicator, Creating Extended Planning Time for Teachers; General: Post Observation Conferences, Evaluating Assistant Principals)
	Communicating CCSS to School Communities*
Tools and Timing for District-Wide Communications*	

<b>SUMMER 2013</b>	Open Space Technology
	Strategic Action Plan
	Using Data to Develop Teacher Talent
	Big Picture - End in Mind*#
	Formative Assessment+
	GradeSpeed Overview - Tech 1 and 2
	High School Plans*#
	Report Card (Elementary)*#
	Round Table (Middle School)*#
	Tying it All Together+
	SEL Going Forward - What's Next?+*
	The "Nested Leadership" Approach: How Successful School Leaders Blend Instructional and Transformational Leadership; MNPS Logic Model, Artisan Logic Model, Discussion and Action Planning+
	Leadership Skill Development: Transformation Change Agent; Reading and Shaping School Culture; Time and Life Management for Instructional Leaders+

<b>WINTER 2014</b>	Creating Rubrics for the MNPS Theory of System Change*#
	Formulating a Rubric Collectively*#
	Critical Friends*#
	Needs Assessment and Reflection*#
	Crosswalk of Rubrics and School Improvement Planning*
	Breakout Sessions#: Standards-Based Grading for Exceptional Students; Standards-Based Grading: What It Means, What it Looks Like and How It Can Benefit Teachers and Students; Our Chapter of Literacy: RTII; Promoting Quality Teaching Utilizing PBL and SEL; Excellence is the Norm; Teacher Peer Excellence Groups; Literacy is for Everybody; Paideia Seminar Strategies to Increase Student Literacy; Maximize Resources & Opportunities for Learning; PBL with a Personalized Touch; We Got You Pegged!; Grading for Learning; Empowering Individual Learning; How to Empower Student Learning
	RTI2 Overview and Work Sessions*

<b>SUMMER 2014</b>	Being Generationally Savvy: Working Effectively with All Generations+
	Having Hard Conversations+
	TELL Survey Results+
	Change Management+
	Open Space Technology with Exemplars#
	Dos and Don't of Data Usage+

<b>WINTER 2015</b>	Diversity and Cultural Competence Leadership+
	Poverty Simulation*
	SEL *#
	PASSAGE*+##
	Restorative Practices*+
	Putting the Pieces Together+
	Strategic Planning with Clusters*#

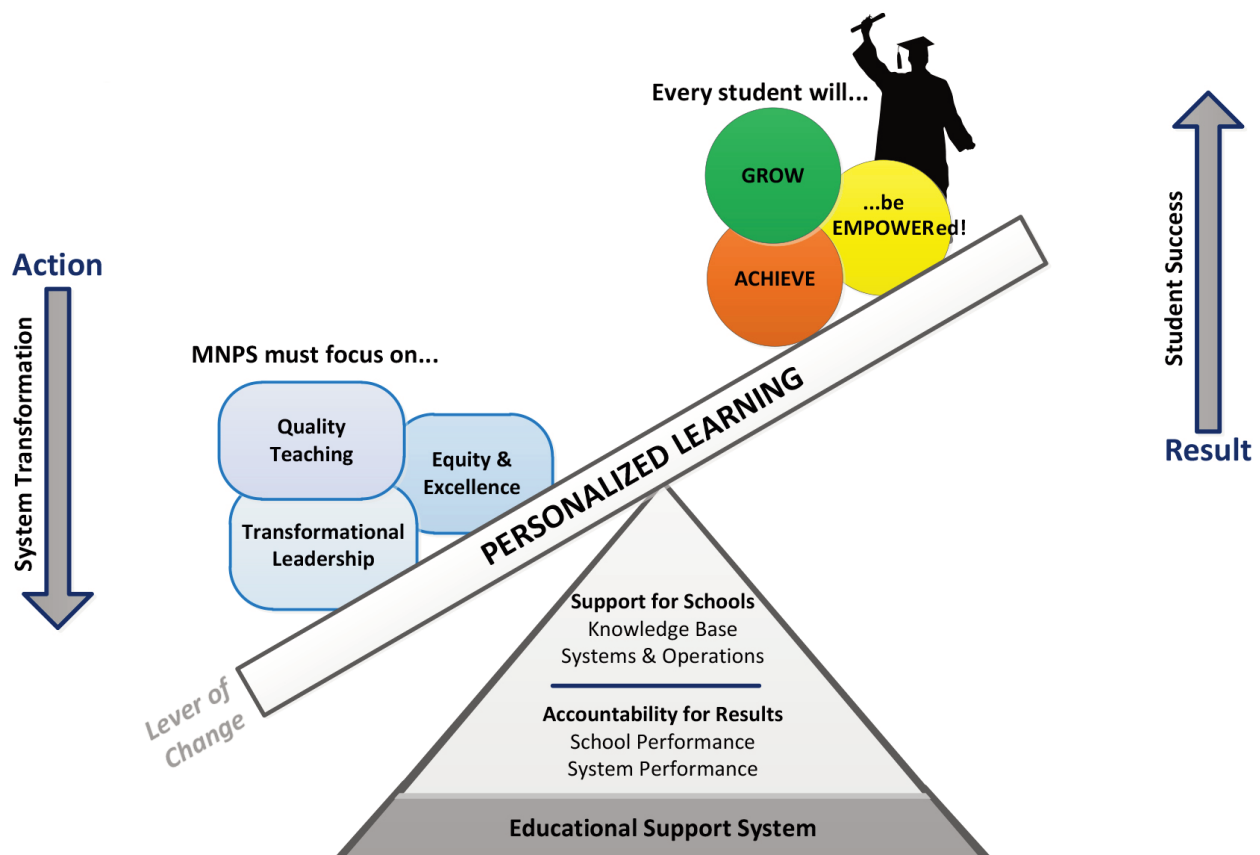
## Appendix C: Education 2018: Theory of System Change

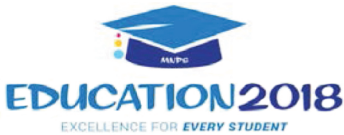

Our mission is predicated on the success of every MNPS student. Because every student is unique, success will look different for every graduate. This presents a compelling challenge. How do we provide excellent educational experiences for every student, given the diversity in our student population with respect to culture, language, race, socioeconomic status, learning style, interests, abilities, and needs? We know diversity is an asset, but we also recognize the high expectations it sets for educators. We are preparing our students for life beyond graduation, but given the rapid pace of change in our economy, and our world, how do we prepare students for careers that have not yet been invented, or college experiences that require broad application of knowledge to increasingly complex fields of study? We believe the answers to these essential questions are found by personalizing learning experiences for all students. We define personalized learning as the creation and development of learning experiences that:

1. Value the contributions of every learner;
2. Raise the rigor in academic content, and set high expectations for all learners;
3. Support progression based on mastery of individual goals;
4. Customize content and instruction to meet the diverse strengths, needs, and interests of every learner; and
5. Strengthen relationships that lie at the center of teaching and learning.

We believe when we personalize learning, our students will grow, achieve, and be empowered, leading to student success in college, career, and life.

—From *Education 2018: Excellence for Every Student, Executive Summary*, available at [http://www.mnps.org/pages/mnps/About\\_Us/District\\_Strategic\\_Plan/More\\_about\\_the\\_Education\\_2018](http://www.mnps.org/pages/mnps/About_Us/District_Strategic_Plan/More_about_the_Education_2018).



Theory of System Change				
		STRATEGY 1	STRATEGY 2	STRATEGY 3
		Quality Teaching	Equity & Excellence	Transformational Leadership
<b>Objectives</b>				
<b>LEVER OF CHANGE</b>  <b>Personalized Learning</b>  Learning experiences that strengthen relationships, value every learner, raise expectations for learning and customize content and instruction to meet learners' diverse needs, interests, and strengths.	<b>GROW</b>  Are all students <b>growing</b> academically, socially, and emotionally, every year?	<b>GROW Objective G1.1</b>  Transform teaching and learning using personalized approaches that meet the unique strengths, needs, and interests of every learner.	<b>GROW Objective G2.1</b>  Direct resources and supports to the specific needs of learners.	<b>GROW Objective G3.1</b>  Increase principal and teacher autonomy and accountability for leading and managing academic and cultural change.
	<b>ACHIEVE</b>  Are all students <b>achieving</b> high academic standards?	<b>ACHIEVE Objective A1.2</b>  Continuously increase the rigor and relevance of learning content and experiences, for every learner.	<b>ACHIEVE Objective A2.2</b>  Expand all students' access to relevant learning content, resources, and opportunities, in and out of school time.	<b>ACHIEVE Objective A3.2</b>  Create a culture of continuous improvement focused on high expectations for every learner.
	<b>EMPOWER</b>  Are all students <b>empowered</b> by having voice, choice, and ownership in their learning experiences?	<b>EMPOWER Objective E1.3</b>  Empower learners with knowledge and support to create learning goals and frequently monitor progress.	<b>EMPOWER Objective E2.3</b>  Maximize and leverage parent and community partnerships to ensure shared accountability for student outcomes.	<b>EMPOWER Objective E3.3</b>  Expand opportunities for students, parents, and teachers to use their talents, skills, and experiences to accelerate school improvement.
		<b>Support for Schools</b> Knowledge Base Systems & Operations	<b>Accountability for Results</b> School Performance System Performance	
<b>Educational Support System</b>  "We believe when we personalize learning, our students will grow, achieve, and be empowered, leading to student success in college, career, and life."				



## Appendix D: Demographics of Interview Participants by Role, Race, and Gender

ROLE	Black Females	Black Males	White Females	White Males	Latina Female	Total Black	Total White	Total Latino	TOTALS
Network Lead Principals (across levels)	1	1	3	3		2	6		8
High School Principals	0	2	2	1		2	3		5
Middle School Principals	3	1	0	2		4	2		6
Elementary School Principals	0	1	1	1		1	2		3
<b>TOTAL PRINCIPALS</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>		<b>9</b>	<b>13</b>		<b>22</b>
High School Teachers	1	2	0	2		3	2		5
Middle School Teachers	0	0	4	0		0	4		4
Elementary School Teachers	2	0	2	0	1	2	2	1	5
Central Office* Leadership & Learning	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	8
Central Office* Executive Staff	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4
PLI Designers			1	2					3
<b>TOTAL INTERVIEWEES</b>									<b>51</b>

\* NOTE: When participants were uniquely identifiable, disaggregated data are not provided.

## Appendix E: MNPS Belief Statements, “Leadership for Transformational Change”



### Leadership for Transformational Change

***We choose leadership.*** Leadership is our first and best strategy for the transformational improvement of our schools.

***We define leadership in our own terms.*** 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.

***We describe leadership as:***

- Setting Clear and Compelling Direction
- Shaping Culture for Learning
- Leading and Managing Change
- Transforming Teaching and Learning
- Managing Accountability Systems

***We distribute leadership throughout the system.*** We recognize leadership to be a function embedded in every part of the organization, not a position held by a few at the top. Leadership permeates all positions and propels all actions.

***We develop leaders.*** We design learning experiences that build the capacity of leaders to deliver results.

***We choose leadership to create a culture built to last,*** a culture that endures and continues to shape attitudes and behaviors long past the tenure of individuals.



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