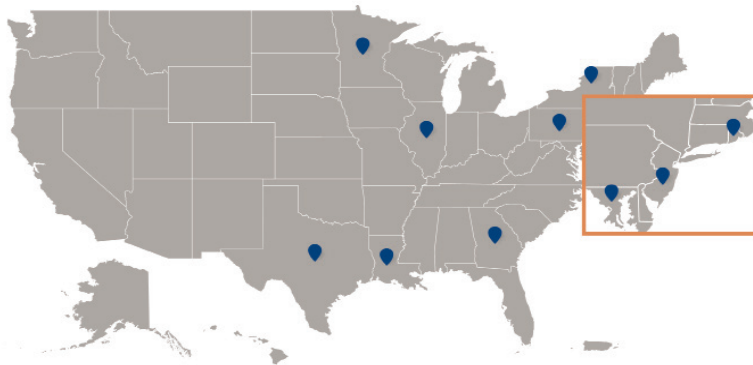


# Prioritizing Leadership: Principal Supervisors in ESSA State Plans

## INTRODUCTION

Historically, principal supervisors' work has focused on ensuring principals comply with local policies and state regulations. This focus on compliance has changed "as recent research suggests that principal supervisors can positively affect student results by helping principals grow as instructional leaders" (CCSSO, 2015). During the past five years, principal supervisors have increased their focus on instructional leadership, are overseeing fewer principals (down from an average of 24 to 16), and are staying on the job longer (Council of the Great City Schools, 2019). Further, as principal supervisors have increased the time they spend in schools working side by side with principals, they have begun to provide higher-quality support. This support helps principals become more effective instructional leaders, which, in turn, positively affects student achievement and other outcomes (The Wallace Foundation, 2018).

Despite a growing research base on the need for and value of instructionally-focused principal supervisors, few states have addressed principal supervisors in their plans to implement the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). In those plans that include strategies pertaining to principal supervisors, there is limited detail.



**In their ESSA plans, 10 states call out investments in principal supervisors.**

## FEDERAL FUNDING AVAILABLE FOR PRINCIPAL SUPERVISORS

States and districts have new opportunities to use federal dollars to invest in evidence-based strategies to improve the selection, training, and support of principal supervisors. In [guidance released by the U.S. Department of Education](#), the federal government makes clear that principal supervisors who are responsible for the daily instructional leadership and managerial operations in elementary school or secondary school buildings are included in the definition of "school leader" in section 8101(44) of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The Department makes explicit that principal supervisors are eligible for Title II, Part A-funded support and "encourage[s] SEAs and LEAs to extend Title II, Part A-funded services to these principal supervisors to the extent that those individuals actively and frequently take responsibility for helping principals with instructional leadership and the school's managerial operations." States and districts may also use Title I, Part A dollars to invest in strategies to help students meet challenging academic standards, which could include leadership investments that meet the definition of "evidence-based" in section 8101(21) of ESSA.

This resource highlights the work of a state—Minnesota—that is building such a strategy, providing insights on why and how state leaders are integrating principal supervisor investments into their education agenda. Further, we offer specific recommendations and select resources state officials can use to strengthen how principal supervisors are included in their states' overarching vision for outstanding, equitable leadership and their specific plans for ensuring every school is led by well-prepared, well-supported leaders.

*A Note on Terminology: The term "principal supervisor" includes a wide range of district and charter management organization (CMO) leaders who serve in such roles as Assistant Superintendent, Instructional Superintendent, or Network Superintendent, among other positions. We use the term "principal supervisor" as a nationally recognized way of capturing the district or CMO central office staff responsible for managing, evaluating, and supporting networks of principals. The overall job responsibilities of principal supervisors vary from district to district depending on local governance and conditions. For example, large districts may employ dozens of network chiefs to oversee school principals while the superintendent of a smaller district may serve as principal supervisor along with the many other hats she wears.*

## Q&A: ANN MITCHELL, MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Ann Mitchell brings 34 years of experience in education, including 22 years as a school principal, to her work as a Principal Leadership Specialist with the Minnesota Department of Education (MNDOE).

### Tell us about your vision for effective principal supervision across the state. What does a successful principal supervisor need to know and be able to do?

Our vision is that every principal has regular access to a skilled coach who can support their professional growth and leadership practice. In some ways, this vision requires us to rethink our use of the term “principal supervisor.” School leaders do not need supervision as it is traditionally defined, with a focus on oversight and compliance. Rather, what they need most is strong, consistent support in their day-to-day work as instructional and community leaders. One avenue for this support comes in the form of personalized coaching and mentoring. Principals also benefit from opportunities to connect regularly with other principals to share challenges, discuss new strategies, and engage in the type of open, honest self-reflection that leads to personal and professional growth. With adequate training and supportive conditions, supervisors can provide or facilitate this support for the principals with whom they work. They can also share resources and tools to support principals’ personal leadership development and school improvement priorities. Three key skills are critical for principal supervisors to effectively support school leaders:



**For principal supervisors, past experience as a successful principal is crucial.**

- 1. Principal supervisors must be able to build authentic, trusting relationships.** Individuals who oversee and support principals must be able to thoughtfully and transparently balance supervisory responsibilities with a nurturing, supportive leadership coach role, creating a safe setting where principals are supported to take positive risks and innovate.
- 2. Principal supervisors must be able to help principals identify and maintain a focus on their top priorities.** To do this well, it's important that supervisors deeply understand the school setting and can support the principal to accurately diagnose priorities. They must be able to simultaneously and collaboratively identify and strategize about how to overcome barriers getting in the way of principals' most important work.
- 3. Principal supervisors must be able to provide consistent, timely, actionable on-the-job feedback and support.** This work requires important knowledge and skills and allocation of the bulk of supervisors' time in schools working with principals.

### How is this vision different from 5 or 10 years ago?

There has been a clear shift in how we think about administrators, from one focused on their managerial skills to one focused on their instructional leadership abilities. This is true for principals and it is increasingly true for principal supervisors. In line with this shift, here in Minnesota we are now focused on filling state and regional positions focused on supporting principals and principal supervisors with individuals who have past experience as successful school and district leaders.

Another important shift that has taken place has to do with the role of evaluations in supporting school leaders' growth. There was a time when many officials argued for a clear separation between the performance management and professional development systems. The result was a stressful, unhelpful, mandatory evaluation process layered on top of—yet sometimes perceived as separate from—the meaningful feedback, learning, and improvement taking place via other channels. With support from the Bush Institute here in Minnesota, our team created a set of growth-focused evaluation and support tools principal supervisors can use in their work with principals. We are now working on making sure those resources are not only available, but deeply understood and regularly used by principal supervisors across the state.

## Q&A: ANN MITCHELL, MINNESOTA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (CONTINUED)

**We see in Minnesota's ESSA plan that you intend to provide support to supervisors overseeing principals of schools identified for improvement. Can you tell us more?**

All schools identified for improvement in Minnesota have access to on-the-ground assistance from specialists housed at our Regional Centers of Excellence (RCEs). Though my position is completely funded by Title II dollars and I am, therefore, available to support all schools, the other Principal Leadership Specialists (six) are based in RCEs to signal a priority focus on and access to the schools with greatest need. About 75 percent of the school leaders I support serve schools identified under the state accountability system. In the past, RCEs did not always work directly with principals and it was rare for principal supervisors to be brought into the mix. This was understandable for a number of reasons, and we're learning a great deal about the importance of support for both the principal and supervisor to ensure effective and sustainable school improvement.

We are still grappling with how we can best integrate principal supervisors into this work and provide them with the tailored support they need. Assistant superintendents, often the individuals serving as principal supervisors within the districts I support, are overwhelmed by compliance and struggling to find the time to truly support principals. Even with high-quality support, it is hard to help principal supervisors overcome barriers built into their job descriptions or the way district offices function. This summer, I'm co-delivering a session at an annual back-to-school professional development event coordinated by the MNDOE and the Minnesota Association of School Administrators (MASA) entitled, "Principal Support: Restructuring District Office for More Effective Principal Support." Drawing on research from the Wallace Foundation and other experts, we'll help district leaders identify strategies for reframing principal supervisor roles to focus on supporting principals as instructional leaders, including by removing or deprioritizing other aspects of their jobs and reducing or being more strategic about the number of principals they oversee, among other tactics. We also aim to help district leaders understand why changing principal supervisor roles cannot happen in isolation from other fundamental changes to the way school systems operate.

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**What other principal supervisor-related supports and resources does the state make available to districts?**

Our team of specialists has built a robust set of resources we regularly draw from to support district and school leaders in our networks. We are now in the process of fleshing out these resources into modules that we hope to make available online for all district and school leaders across the state. The venture requires a significant investment, but I believe it will be well worth it when principals and principal supervisors can access crucial, shared information and resources wherever they are, whenever they need them. These resources may be especially valuable for school and district leaders serving rural communities across Greater Minnesota, where the geographic isolation of schools combined with the reality that rural leaders often have multiple roles (e.g., superintendent and principal supervisor) presents unique challenges. Our goal is to have the first module live by the end of school year 2019-20 and to introduce new modules on a regular basis thereafter.

**How will you know if your efforts to strengthen principal supervision in Minnesota are successful? What information are you using to evaluate the effectiveness of your strategies?**

Ultimately, our goal is to improve outcomes for students. We know the work of improving schools takes time. We have a coaching impact survey to understand how the principals and principal supervisors we support are experiencing our work together as well as evidence of how they are changing their practices, processes, and decision-making in support of stronger, more effective and responsive teaching and learning. These leading indicators are important. If you are going to engage in deep work, it cannot be measured solely based on student achievement—a crucial but lagging indicator.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND RESOURCES

As state officials implement and continuously improve their ESSA plans, these are specific steps they can take to ensure all principals have access to knowledgeable, skilled, well-supported supervisors. For more ESSA research and resources, visit the [New Leaders ESSA page](#).

**States should develop a coherent vision for principal supervisors** aligned to their comprehensive vision of effective leadership, including offering guidance on defining the role of an effective principal supervisor.



- [Model Principal Supervisor Professional Standards](#) (Council of Chief State School Officers). The Model Principal Supervisor Professional Standards provide a consistent framework of the knowledge and skills principals supervisors need in order to improve principal effectiveness and are designed to be adapted by states and local school systems.

**States should support districts to adopt high-quality selection and hiring processes for principal supervisors** to ensure those processes truly screen for the skills, experience, and dispositional qualities required to coach principals to success. These processes should focus on candidates' demonstrated success and, in so doing, build a strong pool of diverse prospective supervisors.



- [Principal Supervisor Selection and Development: A Toolkit for Strengthening the Pipeline](#) (New Leaders). The toolkit includes guidance for hiring qualified principal supervisors and cultivating a strong pipeline among current principals so that the next generation of principal supervisors is ready to step up when the need arises.
- [Breaking Through: Shattering the Glass Ceiling for Women Leaders](#) (Chiefs for Change). The report explores the lack of diversity in education leadership, especially at the district level, and offers strategies for creating a clear path to leadership for effective educators historically overlooked for senior leadership positions, including women, people of color, and particularly, women of color.

**States should encourage districts to structure principal supervisor roles and networks to support priorities** and address their local needs. In many cases, these efforts will require reducing the number of schools within principal supervisors' networks so that they can provide sufficient, targeted support to principals based on individual and school strengths and needs.



- [Principal Supervisor Network Redesign: A Toolkit for Building Stronger Systems](#) (New Leaders). The toolkit outlines questions that districts and charter organizations should consider when designing principal supervisor networks, and it provides practical tools to enable system leaders to develop an optimal network design based on local needs and goals.
- [A New Role Emerges for Principal Supervisors: Evidence from Six Districts in the Principal Supervisor Initiative](#) (The Wallace Foundation). This resource summarizes lessons from the first three years of the Principal Supervisor Initiative, finding that it is feasible to significantly change the role of the principal supervisor so it can focus more on principal support.

**States should invest in or encourage districts to invest in high-quality professional development for principal supervisors** tailored to their role. While it can be beneficial for principal supervisors to learn alongside the school leaders they support, it is crucial that they also have access to resources and support specific to their needs and the challenges and opportunities their position presents.



- [Principal Supervisors](#) (New Leaders). The Principal Supervisors program draws on New Leaders' evidence-based leadership development for principals to build supervisors' skills to enhance instructional leadership across an entire school system, which may be adapted or combined with other leadership programming to address local needs.
- [Executive Development Program](#) (National Institute for School Leadership). NISL's evidence-based programming builds district leaders' capacity to coach and support principals via flexible delivery options, including a train-the-trainer model and other coaching supports.

**States should create or make available high-quality, user-friendly resources to support principal supervisors to carry out their responsibilities**, ideally offered in conjunction with high-quality professional development and ongoing support.



- [Principal Leadership Evidence-Gathering Tool for Minnesota Principal Supervisors](#) (MN Department of Education). The tool supports principal supervisors to initially assess principals' leadership capacities and to gather evidence of their individual strengths and growth areas over time.
- [Transformational Leadership Framework](#) (New Leaders). This leadership framework, based on practices employed by some of the nation's most successful principals, can be used by principal supervisors to help principals diagnose and address their schools' most pressing needs.