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Redefining *the* Role *of the* Principal:

Innovative Approaches To Empower School Leaders

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The State of the Principalship

Principals play a pivotal role in school systems nationwide, serving as catalysts for transformative change within and beyond their school communities. They are entrusted with overseeing management of the school, creating a positive learning environment, and ultimately ensuring that both educators and students can thrive. The principal's impact as a leader extends beyond school walls, serving as a bridge-builder between schools and local communities. Principals are uniquely positioned to respond to parents and teachers' priorities, which include safety and security, academics, and social and emotional needs.¹

Despite their critical role, the traditional structure of the principalship has failed to fully empower principals to enact the transformative changes they are capable of. Principals are constrained by antiquated structures and paradigms that stymie their leadership and impact. District offices and the expansive demands of the schoolhouse place a disproportionate burden on them to oversee every aspect of school: scheduling, staffing, instruction, building management, attendance, behavior, curriculum, and more. This deluge of expectations often leads principals to prioritize immediate decisions over long-term, student-focused planning.

In 2022, we wrote [Rethinking the Role of the Principal](#) because we recognized unsustainable trends in the principalship across the country and the potential for a new outlook on the principalship to accelerate learning and equity in schools. By engaging in candid discussions with principals and district leaders and drawing insights from recent research, we developed six shifts that state and district leaders can champion to make the principal role more sustainable, impactful, and responsive to current contexts.

The shifts are designed to cultivate coherent systems that integrate multiple strategies, offices, and actors into improvement efforts. New strategies and practices must be implemented in a concerted effort to refine the principal role. Districts and state systems must be strategic in their cadence, communication, and advocacy for change. Principal, student, and community input are pivotal, and buy-in from every office ensures change does not occur in a vacuum.

*Six shifts for a more **sustainable, impactful, and responsive** principal role:*

Shifts in Practice

1. Champion a learning culture
2. Cultivate a positive school climate
3. Lead with the community

Shifts in the System

4. Invest in authentic preparation
5. Align the system to advance principal priorities
6. Support and evaluate core expectations



Moving the Principalship Forward

Our current context requires us to redefine the principalship, aligning the role with what research suggests are the most valuable uses of school leaders' time. This reorientation requires state and district leaders to think differently about principal preparation, support, and development. District leaders will face challenges, perhaps funding or political constraints, that inhibit innovation. However, the current state of the principalship is unsustainable, and action is needed.

Districts across the country are already making progress. They are redesigning their systems to respond to research and the current realities of the principalship. Here are five systemic approaches that exemplify one or more of the shifts outlined in *Rethinking the Role of the Principal*. These exemplars, collected through research and in-depth conversations with district leaders and principals, represent a scholarship of possibility. They can be adapted to various contexts and span the tenure of the principalship—from entry pipelines to professional development and beyond. These interventions have been effective, and yet, the featured systems agree there is still much work to be done to ensure principals are fully equipped and empowered to drive transformative change in their schools.

What Research Says About Principals

- **Principals' influence on achievement is significantly larger in scope than teachers**, indicating that school leadership is among the most important school-related factors that contribute to student learning.²
- **Principals have the greatest impact on student learning when they foster a strong learning climate.** A strong learning climate includes consistent expectations for teachers, high expectations for students, continuous analysis of student data, and a culture of accountability across the school.³
- **The principal workforce has grown more diverse in gender representation** over the last several decades, increasing from 25% female in 1988² to 56% in 2021.⁴ However, the workforce has not made nearly as much progress in reflecting the racial-ethnic diversity of the public school population.²
- In 2022, 85% of principals reported experiencing **high levels of job-related stress** compared to 35% of the general working adult population.⁵
- **Principal turnover influences teacher turnover** and is associated with decreased student achievement.⁶
- **The percentage of novice principals has increased** over time. Principals with the least experience are disproportionately assigned to schools serving students from low-income families.²



Evaluating Principal Readiness Through Authentic Tasks

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MA DESE)

MA DESE administers the Performance Assessment for Leaders (PAL) to evaluate the readiness of school leadership candidates for initial licensure in the Commonwealth. PAL is a portfolio-model assessment, in which candidates submit artifacts and supporting documents as evidence of their mastery in core proficiencies. PAL's four distinct tasks are aligned with both competencies outlined by the state and authentic expectations and responsibilities of the principal.

PAL Tasks:

- Analyze district and school-level data, determine an academic priority, and create a vision for change
- Create and facilitate a professional learning community
- Observe, assess, and provide feedback on teacher effectiveness
- Develop a proposal for family and community engagement at the school

Tasks must be completed as part of a 500-hour practicum, in which principals work in a school system alongside a principal mentor. Educators can complete the tasks at any point in their career before receiving an initial principal or assistant principal license. In addition to passing PAL, candidates must either obtain a post-baccalaureate degree from a leadership preparation program or complete an internship or apprenticeship as a principal or assistant principal. Alternatively, candidates who meet specific professional and educational criteria may pursue a panel-review route to demonstrate their qualifications.⁷

Recent research suggests PAL produces more promising outcomes than traditional licensure exams. In traditional exams, pass rates among test takers identifying as racial and ethnic minorities are substantially lower than those of White test takers with similar profiles. Furthermore, these exams are not reliable indicators of job performance.⁸ Studies on PAL show no significant difference in performance across gender, or race and ethnicity, in task score comparisons and total score comparisons. PAL candidates are also more likely to be retained or promoted after two years.⁹

Even in its eighth year, MA DESE continues iterating on PAL to ensure the assessment is responsive to the shifting expectations of the principal role. Currently, MA DESE is working to embed anti-racist, culturally and linguistically relevant expectations into the Tasks.

Resource Considerations:

MA DESE invested \$2 million using Race to the Top funds to design and pilot the assessment.¹⁰ Continuous improvement requires ongoing investments in time, funding, and personnel.

Lessons Learned:

Providing continuous feedback to individuals who are on the path to principal licensure is crucial. This practice allows candidates to integrate constructive feedback and provides them with sufficient time to comprehend and respond to any new requirements. The State Department of Education can play a significant role in socializing any updated expectations.

Why Principals Love It:

PAL effectively prepares principals by emphasizing technical and adaptive skills, both of which will have practical applications in their work.



Increasing Principals' Capacity to Focus on Strategic Priorities District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS)

DCPS is committed to the vision that every student feels loved, challenged, and prepared to positively influence society and thrive in life. To enable principals to focus on fulfilling this vision, DCPS created a new, school-based leadership role, the Director of Strategy and Logistics (DSL). The DSL oversees school operations, including enrollment, facilities, security, food and nutrition, and inventory management. DCPS developed this role to offload administrative responsibilities from the principal, allowing them to focus on strategic priorities such as academics, culture, and climate. Prior to the creation of this position, principals in DCPS reported spending nearly half of their time on building management, and teachers reported a lack of administrative support as a primary reason for departure.¹¹

DCPS developed this role to offload administrative responsibilities from the principal, allowing them to focus on strategic priorities such as academics, culture, and climate.

The DSL can supervise and evaluate operations and administrative staff without requiring approval from the principal. This reduces the workload for principals by decreasing the number of their direct-reports and the number of logistics-related decisions they need to approve. For example, if the custodial staff requires overtime, the DSL can work directly with the custodial staff to develop a schedule and determine how overtime pay affects the overall budget. While DSLs are supervised by the principal, they also have a direct line of communication to central services and vice versa. DSLs can ask questions and learn standard operating procedures from their colleagues in central office, and central office staff know whom to contact about logistical matters in the school. The operational nature of this position allows non-educators to apply, widening the potential applicant pool and ensuring schools can hire the best possible talent.

Resource Considerations:

As DCPS principals exercised discretion on their budgets, they had to decide between investing in a DSL or other administration positions, such as instructional coaches or deans. Other versions of a school logistics role exist in districts across the country. Some schools have offered the school logistics role as an additional set of responsibilities to an existing position to curb costs. Other schools have paid an additional stipend for added responsibility.

Lessons Learned:

The DSL role enables principals to prioritize instructional leadership by delegating administrative and building management responsibilities. However, offloading these duties does not guarantee improvement in principals' instructional leadership abilities. Districts can help principals continuously strengthen these critical skills through targeted support from principal supervisors and specialized professional development programs.

Why Principals Love It:

Principals have increased capacity to focus on instructional leadership and other strategic priorities.

This section draws extensively from *From Frenzied to Focused: How School Staffing Models Can Support Principals as Instructional Leaders*, authored by Melissa Tooley, published by New America in 2017. We acknowledge the valuable contributions of the original work to our analysis.



Designing Responsive Principal Professional Development Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD)

CMSD recently redesigned their principal professional development to home in on the areas where principals have the most impact. The focus of professional development shifted from procedural updates and compliance to areas such as teaching, learning, and leadership. CMSD administers much of its professional development through the School Leaders Institute, a monthly professional learning program for principals and assistant principals.

The institute's planning team consistently solicits and responds to feedback from principals about their experience with the program. For example, when the central office received feedback from principals and assistant principals that full-day learning sessions were difficult to attend due to time limitations, they split the programming into half days, with principals learning in the morning and assistant principals learning in the afternoon.

The planning team also conducts pulse checks, in which a central office team member observes teachers in classrooms against established indicators to ensure that instructional guidance is moving from school leadership to teachers in classrooms. Pulse checks are aggregated at the school level to provide insights to the central office. They do not serve as accountability measures for principals. If data indicates instruction is not on target, the central office reflects on their professional learning delivery and how they can create more effective opportunities for principal learning.

In preparation for learning days, the planning team meets weekly to synthesize and reflect on feedback and data from the pulse checks. They craft a learning agenda that is responsive to principal feedback and data.

CMSD's central office has done much of its redesign work with principals, underscoring that a core function of their work is done in service of principals. Successful implementation of the redesign included an overhaul of systems and procedures as well as intentional cultivation of a service-oriented mindset toward principals.

The School Leaders Institute is a space for central office and principals to learn together, share feedback, and establish a sense of mutual accountability.

Resource Considerations:

CMSD built upon the existing School Leader Institute and utilized a one-time investment with philanthropic support to engage a professional-development partner organization to redesign their professional development strategy. Ultimately, districts have to make perennial decisions about priorities for their limited, yet critical, time with principals.

Lessons Learned:

Districts can build trust and buy-in by seeking and implementing principals' feedback about their professional development experiences.

Why Principals Love It:

Principals were able to provide feedback, contributing to the creation of rigorous and relevant learning opportunities. The commitment to focusing on research-based practice instead of "administrivia" assures principals that the district shares student achievement as a priority.



Supporting Principals with Content Specialists

Tulsa Public Schools (TPS)

TPS has established a team of content specialists who collaborate with principal supervisors and principals, offering them additional content expertise and support. As a result, principals do not need to possess expertise in all areas, but instead can draw from a team of supportive experts.

Principals in TPS have access to a School Partner Team, representing key central office departments. The team members include a School Strategy Partner, Talent Management Strategist, Data Application Partner, and an Academic Partner. If the principal is early in their career, they also have access to a Leadership Development Coach. Principals meet bi-weekly with their School Partner Team to analyze school-level data, determine strategic shifts, and discuss leadership interventions to improve outcomes. After each meeting, the School Partner Team debriefs with the principals' supervisor, who will follow up with their principals and reflect on their planned next steps during site visits.

Principals do not need to possess expertise in all areas, but instead can draw from a team of supportive experts.

Each School Partner Team supports multiple principals. Their responsibilities include:

- **School Strategy Partner:** support making resource allocation decisions based on school-level data and provide budgeting support
- **Talent Management Strategist:** provide support around staffing (contracts, retention efforts, recruitment, etc.)
- **Data Application Partner:** offer guidance on data and education technology applications that enable teaching and learning
- **Academic Partner:** analyze student achievement data to adjust strategic planning

Resource Considerations:

TPS allocated budget to add School Partner Team support. Districts must weigh the benefits of investing in central staff positions versus school-based roles. For central staff positions, they must determine how much time is allocated to working onsite in schools.

Lessons Learned:

School Partner Team members need clarity and alignment around the role and responsibilities of their principals. To prevent the emergence of a compliance-focused culture, School Partner Teams should consistently foster a sense of shared ownership and collaboration with principals and their supervisors.

Why Principals Love It:

School Partner Teams' role as thought partners and content experts expand principals' capacity. Content leaders are responsible for finding and synthesizing data to help principals make informed decisions.



Developing Differentiated Professional Learning for Principals

Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD)

LBUSD provides differentiated professional development that meets principals at every stage of their career—from before they start the position, to when they exit the role, and beyond. They aligned on the competencies and leadership dispositions that effective principals should demonstrate and the subsequent support principals need to achieve those competencies. Then, they designed a continuum of support personnel and processes that help principals develop throughout each phase of the principalship.

LBUSD provides aspiring principals with a principal mentor, structured job shadowing, and aligned professional development. First and second-year principals participate in monthly and quarterly support meetings, respectively.

All principals have a principal supervisor and a coach. Principal supervisors provide guidance, evaluate performance, and act as principals' advocates. LBUSD views this role as a critical inflection point in the development of principals as instructional leaders. Although coaches do not have supervisory responsibility for principals, they are essential to principals' success, providing technical support and guidance on leadership and strategy. Once principals have established a record of success, LBUSD helps them become certified coaches, placing them in the pipeline for principal-supervisor roles.

When a principal decides to leave their role, LBUSD organizes a Change of Principal Workshop. The workshop begins with a team of 15 school staff who represent every level of school personnel. A facilitator guides these staff through a conversation about what is going well and what issues a new principal can address. This workshop provides critical insight into staff-wide culture and expectations. The incoming principal then meets with the outgoing principal. Outgoing principals share insights on connecting with the community and staff. Based on these dialogues, incoming principals and staff align on three to five long-term goals for the school. Central office provides incoming principals with their school's historical climate, culture, and safety data.

Resource Considerations:

Aligning a system around the right supports for principals takes time. It requires several years to build a robust, interlocking set of supports and expectations. Starting this work requires cohesive professional development and a cultural shift at multiple tiers. Throughout the process, the district office orients support with the outlined dispositions of the principal. Central office staff must remain committed to principals as the priority.

Lessons Learned:

Developing an effective, differentiated professional development system is an iterative process. LBUSD began by engaging with principal supervisors, principals, and coaches to align on expectations. They are constantly calibrating across support teams, including principal supervisors, coaches, and the curriculum office to ensure they are aligning with current research and optimizing professional development for principals. LBUSD is now building on these processes by embedding equity-centered leadership in the evaluation rubric.

Why Principals Love It:

Principals receive support from coaches or principal supervisors who were once also principals, providing them with an additional layer of understanding and support.



Conclusion

Several themes emerge across these exemplars: coherent district offices, professional development and evaluation in areas where principals have the greatest impact, and strategic and administrative support to increase principal capacity. Impactful shifts in systems and practice communicate a renewed commitment to developing and supporting the principal's leadership and influence. Strategic shifts should be conveyed explicitly from district or state leadership and be complemented with policy changes.

While these districts represent bright spots across the nation, there are still opportunities to improve how systems design the role of the principal. As districts advance this work, leaders should consider and address the following:

How can system leaders work to abate deep inequities that persist in the principalship?

Race and power play implicit and explicit roles in the systems that recruit, train, develop and sustain principals. In addition to public commitments to equity (which are important), districts must also assess any new, systemic shifts through the lens of correcting institutionalized biases and existing disproportionalities between school leadership and the students they serve.

How do systems leaders empower principals to develop a healthy school climate and community orientation?

In the wake of the standard-based movement, state and district leaders have narrowed accountability measures to focus on academic achievement, leaving principals with little time and resources to work on creating positive school climates and strong community orientations. Principals need training and development to establish and sustain a healthy, productive climate and community orientation. District leaders can address this challenge by working with policymakers and higher education institutions to leverage their locus of influence to infuse culture and climate-centered learning into preparation for the principalship. Districts that collect climate and culture data should also leverage the data as a metric in principal evaluation and professional development.

How do we ensure the responsibility of principal development and support does not solely fall on the district?

District leaders can utilize partnerships with higher education institutions to align occupational learning and training with what districts need. Districts can leverage their position as potential employers for graduates to open a dialogue about robust, authentic preparatory standards. Higher education institutions, alongside districts, should prioritize diversifying the principal pipeline and developing culturally responsive leaders.



How can policymakers engage practitioners to design effective policy?

Our close work with districts and principals illuminated a need for stronger connections between policymakers and practitioners. Policymakers can support the needs of the districts and design more effective policies by:

- Engaging with practitioners to better understand the “lived experience” of principals
- Creating new policies and interrogating existing policies to ensure they align with what research says would positively impact the principalship
- Analyzing existing data to gain insight into challenges and solutions surrounding the role of the principal

The challenges and opportunities above emphasize that strong connections between policymakers and practitioners are vital. District and state leaders must work together to design thoughtful policies and practices that position principals to be effective leaders. When principals are supported and empowered, they can create schools that are safe, inclusive, and academically rigorous. These are the schools and principals our students need and deserve. ■



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