

THE LEARNING System

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EVERY EDUCATOR ENGAGES IN EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EVERY DAY SO EVERY STUDENT ACHIEVES

High-performing districts provide clear and specific support to principals

By Valerie von Frank

For some school principals, traditional administrative training consisted of courses in law, budgeting, curriculum development, evaluation, research design, community relations, and politics.

But increased pressure on principals to be instructional leaders who can shape a school's culture and create an environment of continuous improvement in teaching and learning requires a set of skills not often learned in the classroom.

According to research, after the classroom teacher, principals have the most direct effect on student achievement (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). Marzano and colleagues conclude from a meta-analysis of research on school leadership



that “a highly effective school leader can have a dramatic influence on the overall academic achievement of students” (2005).

That means that for districts to have the greatest effect on student learning, central office should focus some effort on supporting frontline administrators.

“It often comes down to superintendent leadership and defining a theory of action,” according to Bradley S. Portin, a former principal and now

professor of educational leadership and policy studies at the University of Washington. Portin has been a lead researcher and writer on numerous leadership studies, including *Leadership for Learning Improvement in Urban Schools* (2009). The study was conducted as part of a Wallace Foundation-funded series on creating and supporting effective leaders.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Read more about supporting principals, p. 5.



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“The districts in the study all had a clear improvement agenda,” Portin said, “including aspects that support principal leadership.”

According to Portin, a reform message — explaining and describing what the district is doing — is a crucial element of the work. Central office needs to connect the dots for principals, he said, articulating how parts of the system come together on the path toward the district’s mission and goals. Clarity and focus from the top are the beginning, he said.

The next step is specific support for building leaders, he said.

In successful districts, Portin noted, “There is a (more meaningful) relationship between principals and those who supervise them. It’s not just supervision and evaluation, but help and support for principals in their learning.”

One example he cited is New York City’s Leadership Academy, an organization that develops and supports school leaders who are preparing for jobs in the city’s high-needs schools. The academy uses teamwork, simulations, and job-embedded learning to build individuals’ practice.

In Atlanta, Ga., another district included in the study, the district’s 100 schools were divided into geographical areas, each of which had resources specifically directed to schools within it, including professional development for principals.

“The principalship in many districts is quite isolating and lonely,” Portin said. Portin and his colleagues’ research (2009) found four specific ways that principals’ work differed in districts where they received support, enhancing principals’ learning and leadership ability:

- A cultural emphasis on keeping conversation and attention focused on learning;
- A connection between work in schools and district and state policy;
- An emphasis on effective use of data; and
- A difference in how principals distribute leadership.

FOCUS ON LEARNING

Portin said the conversation in many districts among administrators focuses on operations and management, but in districts making advances in student achievement, interactions between people tend to focus more on instruction and student learning.

“It is tough for principals to reallocate time from crisis management and operations to a learning-focused agenda,” Portin said. “In these districts, there was a purposefulness in shifting that conversation.”

CONNECTION TO POLICY

A second aspect was a clear mission.

“The central office was more than a transmitter of policy,” Portin said. “They didn’t just say, ‘Here’s the policy directive, now implement it.’ There was a planned approach for what was expected and asked for from teachers. Teachers’ needs were assessed to provide better learning opportunities for kids.”

Portin said a consistent message across the district was an integral strategy in enacting this expectation. He said effective districts brought principals and teacher leaders together to jointly plan school improvement and professional learning around their individual needs.

“There was a richer connection between parts of the system than in a traditional, hierarchical system,” he said, “mediated through activities and people. Principals and assistant principals were able to talk about direction and policy shifts around teaching and learning — not in a compliance sense, but in how to connect policy to strategic planning to help teachers be more successful working with students.”

EMPHASIS ON DATA

Rather than simply collecting data as evidence or providing reports, central office staff actively worked with principals around the data, Portin said.

“They helped schools query the data so that they could do substantive planning,” he said.

DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP

Portin said districts that support principals often have their own leadership development programs that include preparation in using data, job-embedded learning for teachers, and mentoring for new leaders.

And, he said, “a big part of the story” is helping principals learn about the role of instructional coaches and how to distribute leadership.

“It’s a big change from principals being the sole instructional leader to principals being leaders of instructional teams,” he noted. “They need a lot of professional learning around how to work with and support teams.”

While district leaders may know and understand that principals need support, thoughtful action sometimes lags behind.

LEADERSHIP DRIVES REFORM

Although many educators believe Fullan, Cuttress, and Kilcher, who stated (2005), “There is no other driver as essential as leadership for sustainable reform,” the knowing-doing gap often remains. Districts advancing professional learning for teachers may overlook similar investment in

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Learning Forward BELIEF

Sustainable learning cultures require skilled leadership.

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school leaders. Why?

“One reason is the sheer volume and turbulence of the work,” Portin said. “Leadership turnover is another reason. Some may lack resources. Others may be overwhelmed by what they need to do to get through the day and week, which can limit the ability to be strategic. And, people may not always know how to do it.”

Portin said data suggest central office can take specific actions to help principals:

- Provide flexibility and opportunities for principals to be creative, such as allowing the principal to budget staff in an alternative way. One example would be redistributing the school’s resources to create an instructional coaching position.
- Facilitate collaboration and partnerships among schools, bringing together cadres of principals, teacher leaders, and coaches. “Giving principals the opportunity to learn from colleagues is something every district can do to help principals manage a highly stressful job,” Portin said. “More than just administrative meetings, effective districts convene meetings that help principals share.”
- Provide district-level support for professional learning. “If nobody is paying attention to professional development, it’s not likely to be effective or to happen as often as you’d want,” Portin noted. “More than traditional staff development, learning needs to be driven by people with a keen interest and focus on both student learning and professional learning.” He said a districtwide perspective is useful, such as from an executive director or zone director whose primary role is to focus in this area.

Large districts may consider zoned support in key areas, such as special education or curriculum, to provide service. “Then critical resource people are able to develop a relationship with 20 schools instead of 100,” Portin said.

Overall, the researchers agreed, high-performing principals are not born leaders. They are created, through targeted support from the districts they serve in.

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