

# THE LEARNING Principal

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

## Strategic opportunities

Matrix helps principals support multiple teacher teams



By Bradley A. Ermeling

**A**s professional learning teams or learning communities have grown in appeal, many schools and districts have carved out time for teachers to collaborate and solve problems of practice. But once teams are up and running, assisting each group to maximize the value of collaborative time can be a daunting challenge for any school or district administrator, particularly in large secondary schools with multiple content areas and more than a dozen teacher teams. Checking in with teacher leaders; keeping track of each group's progress; and assisting teams with analyzing data, identifying needs, and planning and reflecting on instruction requires a significant investment of time and effort.

Observations from my work with principals over the last decade suggest that most administrators respond to this challenge with one of the following three approaches:

- **Focus on the fires:** One approach many principals take, either by choice or by perceived necessity, is to devote all of their assistance to the most problematic groups—those that have less capable teacher leaders, weak content knowledge, or dysfunctional group dynamics.
- **Manage every meeting:** Other principals set out to accomplish the impossible, attempting to be directly present in every meeting and managing or directing the work of each team.
- **Back off and buffer:** Yet another response by some principals is to simply back off and serve as a buffer to protect teachers from distractions. These principals indicate that they cannot possibly manage or assist every team so it is better to limit their role to securing and protecting the time, and then trust team leaders to facilitate productive work.

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Each of these approaches is based on a clear rationale, but each also presents some clear limitations in regard to sustaining the kind of assistance and support required for teams and team leaders to get lasting results with teacher collaboration. Much like a classroom, focusing only on the problem groups prevents other teacher teams from receiving the assistance and support that they need and deserve. It also disproportionately shapes the principal's perspective of work in the building by limiting contact with stories and examples from more productive teams. On the other hand, the principal who tries to "do it all" and directly manage every team inevitably runs out of steam and also runs the risk of micromanaging team leaders who need a balance of support and autonomy. By further contrast, the principal who backs off and chooses to simply buffer the teachers from distractions leaves the teams and leaders without critical administrator assistance and risks being perceived as disinterested or de-valuing teachers' collaborative work.

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BELIEF**

Sustainable learning cultures require skillful leadership.

**STRATEGICALLY ASSISTING PERFORMANCE**

As with facilitating learning in the classroom, the artful task of leadership requires a delicate balancing act that incorporates elements of each of these approaches: securing and protecting time, identifying capable leaders, and distributing assistance efficiently and effectively across multiple teams. This represents a shift in emphasis from management and control to strategically assisting performance (Tharp &

"I've learned to apply what I'm learning to the structure of the whole school. Leaders at all levels of the school need to operate as 'facilitators' rather than managers. This takes more work than just setting policy and delegating tasks. But we have a feeling as a school that we're a community and everyone is learning. The role of the administrator is to be the primary model for this (assistance)."  
— High school principal, Nevada

Gallimore, 1989). Elmore (2000) describes it as the reciprocity of accountability and capacity. "If the formal authority of my role requires that I hold you accountable for some action or outcome, then I have an equal and complementary responsibility to assure that you have the capacity to do what I am asking you to do" (p. 19). Supporting collaborative teams and team leaders by matching expectations with capacity building so that each group responsible for improving outcomes has a direct line of assistance, feedback, and teaching

is one such responsibility.

This makes sense in principle, but practically speaking, how does a principal make this happen? There is no silver bullet or single answer to this challenge; however, my recent collaborative work with several administrators has produced

some productive practices that enable principals to execute this approach effectively despite the inevitable time constraints. One such practical routine is the use of a tool called the assistance matrix.

Simply stated, the assistance matrix is a planning tool that principals or administrative teams can use as they prepare for the strategic and differentiated assistance they will provide across multiple teams and team leaders on a weekly or monthly basis to build capacity and sustain productive work. The underlying premise of the matrix is to intentionally leverage the full range of existing settings and contact points in the building, and translate them into opportunities for assistance.

This is accomplished by aligning the scope and type of support required for a particular group with the setting or contact point that best accommodates that assistance strategy. Using this approach, even the most informal interactions in the faculty lounge or hallway can become a vehicle for teaching and learning if thoughtfully prepared and delivered. This frees up time to focus on those groups or leaders who might need more extensive assistance during a particular week or month. By monitoring and updating the matrix regularly, all teams receive different levels of support during different weeks or months based on their fluctuating needs across the year. The table on p. 5 provides an example matrix from Central High School (pseudonym). Below is a brief description of how the matrix is used.

**Customize settings and contact points.** The process begins by personalizing the matrix for a specific school, department, or other context where an administrator is responsible for supporting multiple teacher teams. For the row headings on the far left side of the table, the principal or administrative team makes a list of each participating teacher team or workgroup. For the column headings across the top, the principal or administrative team takes an inventory of all the potential settings or contact points that might be leveraged as opportunities for assistance. The example categories in Table 1 are a good place to begin, but schools may have additional contact points unique to their local context and routines.

**Determine and record strategic assistance plans for each team.** The principal or administrative team schedules a regular meeting for the specific purpose of reviewing and updating the assistance matrix. These meetings can be scheduled on a monthly, biweekly, or weekly basis depending on the frequency of meetings for the groups receiving support. During this regular meeting, the principal or administrative team reviews the latest status and work of each team and determines the specific type of assistance, feedback, intervention, or teaching that might be required and the setting or contact

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**EXAMPLE ASSISTANCE MATRIX FROM CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL.** (Note: Number of teams has been abbreviated for space constraints.)

Central High School Assistance Matrix

Week of November 7, 2011

Settings for assistance	Hallway comment	Email exchange	Stop by classroom	Schedule a meeting	Visit team next week	Other
<b>Algebra I &amp; Geometry</b>	T: Graphing approach looks promising.					T: Needs new cable for LCD projector
<b>Algebra II &amp; Pre-Calculus</b>		T: Encourage Sal to stop by Steve's room during implementation this week.				
<b>World Language</b>	M: Using chart paper to list ideas was a great way to build consensus.					
<b>Life Science</b>			M: See if Tina is feeling ready for next meeting.			
<b>Physical Science</b>					T: Stop by during second half of meeting to see how lesson plan is evolving.	
<b>English 1 &amp; 2</b>				M: Need help with clarifying their assessment criteria.		
<b>English 3 &amp; 4</b>					T: Stop by during first half of the meeting to assist with strategies for English learners.	
<b>World History</b>				M: Meet with Joni to work on asking more questions and giving people time to think.		
<b>U.S. History</b>		M: Send Jose email with some positive feedback on his efforts to lead the goal setting discussion.		M: Meet for 15 minutes next several Mondays to create agendas prior to meeting.		

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point best suited for this assistance strategy. The information is recorded on the matrix in the appropriate cell with enough detail that it will serve as a productive reminder later in the week. When multiple administrators are involved, each administrator is given responsibility

for several teams and each entry is preceded by a first name or initial to signify the person responsible for that strategy.

**Involve teams and team leaders in identifying assistance needs.** As administrators develop relationships with their assigned teams, they should carefully explain their role to the teams and team leaders, emphasizing their commitment to serve as a resource for assistance and support. They should also encourage teams to identify specific areas where they would like guidance or feedback, perhaps making this a standing agenda item during

regular meetings with team leaders. Establishing these mutual expectations and demonstrating a commitment to listening and learning about each team's needs will help teachers begin to embrace and even seek out assistance.

**Review the matrix daily and implement assistance.**

Each administrator prints a copy of the matrix or uploads a copy to their tablet computer to reference and review on a daily basis as they implement assistance strategies. When appropriate, some administrators also like to update the matrix with notes, keeping track of how the team or team leader responds to the strategic assistance.

**Update the matrix and collaborate asynchronously.**

In the context of an administrative team, another productive method for updating the matrix is to store the document as a spreadsheet online in a web-based interface where members can asynchronously access, record, and update their strategic assistance plans. The matrix can be replicated with a new tab for each week or month of meetings and corresponding support. Follow this link to download the matrix as a spreadsheet template: [www.learningforward.org/assistanacematrix.xlsx](http://www.learningforward.org/assistanacematrix.xlsx).

**Reflect on outcomes and identify areas for improving assistance.** Over the course of a year, administrators can use the assistance matrix to look back and trace the patterns of assistance they have provided to teachers and reflect on the corresponding results of this support. Which groups or leaders seemed to experience the most growth and improvement? What aspects of assistance contributed to this

progress? What groups were less productive? How might an assistance strategy be adjusted in the future to increase the likelihood of success?

This reflection process will also reveal growth opportunities for administrators as they identify their own strengths and needs in providing assistance and communicating with teams. One improvement theme an administrative team might focus on is learning to provide clear, instructive feedback that includes useful information rather than vague statements of evaluation. For example, after observing a team meeting where the facilitator did an exceptional job of building consensus, the administrator might comment, "Using chart paper to list ideas was a great way to build consensus" as opposed to a more general comment such as "Good job in the meeting today." Other important skills to target for improvement might be learning to ask more questions before offering advice, or developing the discernment of when to intervene and when to let a group learn from their own experience. After setting and sharing improvement goals like those above, a principal or administrative team can then begin to brainstorm strategies for assisting various teams and even simulate scenarios for practicing and refining effective discourse and communication skills.

**FOSTER A CULTURE OF SUPPORT**

Sustaining teacher collaboration beyond an inspirational summer workshop requires a dedicated effort across many months in the midst of myriad potential obstacles and distractions. Teams that receive consistent support and feedback from their principal or other administrators are far more likely to remain focused and productive, which in turn improves the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom. For administrators who embrace the role of assistance, the driving question for each team is not whether or if support should be provided but how and when. By taking inventory of settings and contact points, intentionally planning and differentiating assistance to each team, and aligning the scope of assistance with levels of immediate need, administrators can foster a culture of support and encouragement that is highly valued by teachers, elevates the productivity of meetings, and nurtures an atmosphere of learning for both students and adults.

**REFERENCES**

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"The assistance matrix has been instrumental for my administrative team as we work to intentionally and productively distribute assistance to the almost 20 collaborative teams that we have on our campus. Specifically, the assistance matrix assists us in building coherence across our various professional development initiatives while allowing us to take advantage of a variety of contact points."

— *High school assistant principal, California*