

BEYOND BUSES, BOILERS, AND BOOKS



INSTRUCTIONAL SUPPORT TAKES CENTER STAGE FOR PRINCIPAL SUPERVISORS

By Sarosh Syed

On a steamy morning in July, about 200 educators from around the country pored over model algebra and English lesson plans at the Relay Graduate School of Education's 12-day summer intensive program for principals in New York City. Their task: to identify why these lesson plans succeed and how principals can replicate them in their schools. The purpose: To allow principals to step away from the pressures of their schools and focus on how they can help students learn.

Participants flipped through bulky white binders, scribbling notes on worksheets or tapping them into laptops. The room was silent, save for an occasional whisper, a cough, or a buzz of a phone reminding its owner of responsibilities at the office.

After 12 minutes of reading and contemplation, participants started throwing out ideas as Relay staff members with wireless microphones raced after raised hands. When

people agreed with a statement, they would snap their fingers, a practice that allowed them to signal support without the clattering sound of clapping that could disrupt the flow of the class.

The statement that got the loudest, longest assent came not from one of the principals, however, but a man who supervises them. Antonio Esquibel oversees 10 principals in Denver. If principals want to replicate such lessons in their schools, he suggested, they have to manage their time. Esquibel used to run a school of 2,000 students and 122 teachers, he told the group, and found it impossible to review every teacher's lesson plan. The answer, he said, was to delegate the job to teacher leaders. The sound of eager snapping rolled through the room.

Why would Esquibel, a principal supervisor, need to attend a training session for principals? For school officials in Denver, the answer is that principals are most effective when their supervisors work in sync with them. "We want our principal managers to be able to model best practices in observation, feedback, and coaching with the principals they supervise," said Greta Martinez, assistant superintendent in



Jocelyn Foulke, center, is one of about 200 educators from around the country who participated in a summer intensive program at the Relay Graduate School of Education in New York City last July. Foulke is head of school at Excel Academy Charter School in East Boston, Massachusetts.

Denver Public Schools' Office of Post-Secondary Readiness. "We want our managers to have a deeper understanding of what we want our principals to know and be able to do."

Denver Public Schools, one of 14 districts that receive funding from The Wallace Foundation to improve principal effectiveness, is also one of a number of districts around the country emphasizing the development of principals' managers in the central office. The principal's job has changed over the last decade, going from a role that revolved around "buses, boilers, and books" to one that centers on promoting high-quality teaching and learning in classrooms. But in most districts, the principal supervisor's job hasn't yet adapted to that change.

A Wallace-commissioned study by the Council for the Great City Schools found that principal supervisors are often stretched for time, insufficiently staffed, poorly matched to the needs of their schools, and assigned to too many schools (Corcoran et al., 2013). A Council survey of administrators in 41 large districts found that principal supervisors manage fully 24 principals on average and that

their duties typically extend beyond helping principals. Close to 95% of respondents said their responsibilities included "district administrative issues" while almost 73% put "district compliance issues" among their job tasks (Casserly, Lewis, Simon, Uzzell, & Palacios, 2013).

The unwieldiness of the job as it is often structured can hamper a district's ability to support its principals. "Principal supervisors are the ones that are out in schools, in the field, working with principals," said Tricia McManus, director of leadership development at Hillsborough County Public Schools, the district encompassing Tampa, Fla., and another recipient of Wallace funding. "If we're going to maintain the quality of principals we're putting into that new principal role and continue their support and development, we're going to have to focus on the role that's in the schools the most."

To make sure principals get the instructional support they need, school districts are experimenting with several strategies.

IT STARTS WITH THE JOB DESCRIPTION

As in many districts around the country, until recently principal supervisors in Hillsborough County were largely responsible for evaluating principal performance and providing administrative supports such as help with budgets, communications, and community relations. Evaluations focused more on day-to-day operations than classroom instruction. And instructional support often came from departments operating independently of principal supervisors.

To sharpen its focus on classroom instruction, Hillsborough County has put principal supervisors at the center of all supports for principals, administrative and instructional. Supervisors now oversee principal coaches and coordinate all central office personnel that support principals, from those who help with employee benefits to those who



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work with students with special needs. To give supervisors time to handle their new responsibilities, Hillsborough has freed them from some community relations work.

“If you look at a job description previously and looked at one now and what we’re expecting of them, it has shifted dramatically,” McManus said.

NEW TRAINING TO MEET NEW NEEDS

Many principal supervisors have to develop the skills they need to support principals. That could mean everything from brushing up on teaching methods to learning best practices for site visits and school walk-throughs. In other words, principal supervisors need the right kind of professional learning to do their newly defined jobs.

Denver’s Relay program included a four-day course especially for principal supervisors. It took them through ways in which supervisors could make the most of site visits — how to spot common mistakes in principals’ classroom observations, what to look for when walking the halls and evaluating the school’s culture, how to budget time not just to observe principals, but also to offer feedback on performance. Trainees watched videos of other supervisors at work, critiqued what they saw, and, for practice, simulated their own school visits.

Relay’s approach is to familiarize teachers, principals, and principal supervisors with the basic practices that help children learn so teachers can provide sound instruction, principals can help teachers improve, and principal supervisors can ensure that principals are offering the support teachers need. “You start with what you want to see in classroom instruction,” said Lindsay Kruse, lead planner of the school leadership program at the Relay Graduate School of Education, “and then you have to work backwards from there.”

Some districts focus training on executive coaching. “What we were hearing from principals was their need for some actionable feedback, not just ‘you’re doing a really good job,’ ” said Ann Clark, deputy superintendent of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district, another Wallace grantee. “So we have been providing that coaching training to our principal supervisors to build their capacity to do that.”

The district is working with Queens University’s McColl School of Business, which provides customized leadership training for professions ranging from financial services to medicine to education. McColl is developing a program in which Charlotte-Mecklenburg’s principal supervisors will study the basics of effective management, simulate interactions with principals, and get feedback on their coaching skills from well-regarded leadership experts.

According to Linda Christopherson, executive director of McColl’s Executive Leadership Institute, a key part of the curriculum is to help supervisors build principals’ abilities, not just solve problems for them. “Supervisors are busy,” she said. “The temptation to just give principals the answers is often too

strong. But they have to understand that by asking the questions and waiting for answers, they can expand the capacity of principals to get those answers themselves.”

In Prince George’s County, Md., another Wallace-supported district, the district’s 20 supervisors gather weekly to beef up their mentoring skills. They simulate school environments to learn how to draw information from conversations with principals, identify potential problems, and determine the resources principals need to address those problems.

The goal, according to Sito Narcisse, an associate superintendent in the district, is to help principal supervisors make a transition from a focus on compliance with regulations to a focus on advice and counsel. “We want them to be more of a coach and a thought partner,” he said.

MATCHING THE SUPERVISOR TO THE SCHOOL

Training is crucial, but an equally important consideration for districts is to make sure that they make the right match between supervisor and school.

Georgia’s Gwinnett County Public Schools, another Wallace grantee, hires as principal supervisors only those who have a record of success as principals in the district. The requirement, according to Gwinnett County leaders, ensures that supervisors already have a firm grounding in best practices of classroom instruction, school leadership, and Gwinnett County’s procedures and protocols. But until last year, the district assigned supervisors to schools based on geography. They would oversee all schools in a particular neighborhood, be they elementary, middle, or high schools.

The structure was not ideal for principals, according to Glenn Pethel, assistant superintendent of leadership development at the district, which is located outside of Atlanta. “If I’m an elementary school principal and I have a supervisor with high school experience, I don’t want to spend months trying to get them up to speed on what literature circles look like,” he said.

Such realizations led the district to reassign its supervisors so they now oversee only the sorts of schools in which they have experience. The new structure, according to Kevin Tashlein, associate superintendent of school improvement and operations at Gwinnett, has enabled supervisors to support principals not just in matters of administration but also in matters of instruction. “The reorganization by level allowed us to really think strategically about school improvement as the focus of the principal supervisor’s work,” he said.

MANAGING THE WORKLOAD

Even if supervisors perfectly match their schools, they cannot be effective if they have too many schools to oversee. Gwinnett County is a district with 134 schools spread over 437 square miles, but until last year it had just five principal supervisors. Some managed as many as 26 schools, visiting principals as infrequently as three to five times a year.

“One individual attempting to supervise, evaluate, coach, and facilitate that many individuals is almost impossible,” said Pethel.

Ann Clark at Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools experienced a similar challenge. Her district had just six supervisors for 180 principals, with each supervisor overseeing between 16 and 40 schools. “There was an inability to physically be present in schools and conduct instructional walk-throughs, or conference with the principals and the school leadership teams at the schools,” she said. “We weren’t able to provide responsive support to schools.”

Both districts are hiring new principal supervisors to lighten each supervisor’s load. Others such as Denver hired deputies to split the work. The goal is to ensure that supervisors oversee no more than 10 to 12 schools.

Results of the expansion are still coming in, but Denver, an early entrant into the area, has received some positive feedback. In 2013, principals and central office staff members said the reduced workload had made principal supervisors more readily available and quicker to address principals’ needs, according to a written account of the Denver effort (Gill, 2013, pp.5-6).

FOCUS ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

Principal supervisors don’t work in a vacuum. To make sure they are able to provide principals with instructional support, districts may have to re-evaluate policies and procedures

beyond the role of the principal supervisor. Some districts are reallocating resources and revising organizational charts to ensure that the energy of principal supervisors is focused squarely on teaching and learning in the classroom.

In Hillsborough County, the new focus on principal supervisors has led to a realization that “the entire system has to shift,” according to Tricia McManus. “It started at teacher effectiveness and then up to principal effectiveness and then up to principal supervisors,” she said. “And now we’re looking at the way we do business at the central office altogether.”

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Partners in achievement

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celebrations of progress.

Last year, the district’s high schools created an annual report chronicling their progress. The findings demonstrated that when students witnessed formative assessment in three or more classes, they exceeded Canadian norms on effort, sense of belonging, rigor, and intellectual engagement — the most important of outcomes for high school students.

Saskatoon students continue to report intellectual engagement at 13% above national norms, and the direct relationship between formative assessment practices in their classrooms and their level of intellectual engagement is clear.

Because school-based leaders felt strong ownership of both their targets and their results, they view this progress as their own and value the contributions of central office team members in creating a school in which they can all be proud.

Brent Hills, a high school principal, notes: “Over the past few years, what I keep finding myself saying to staff is that the power of the inquiry process is placing professional development where it belongs ... in the hands of professional teachers! Inquiry teams share their questions and progress (successes and challenges) with one another often, sparking ideas and creativity. This sharing has led to better learning opportunities

for all students.”

Ultimately, Saskatoon Public’s central office has built, collaboratively, a structure that supports the work of its schools. The central office facilitates planning to clarify goals, helps narrow the focus, marshals evidence of progress, and lays a research foundation for district leadership and teaching practices.

In helping create this structure, central office leaders learned that the work is best achieved cooperatively. The entire learning community has worked together to raise the work inside schools, where professional learning lives.

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