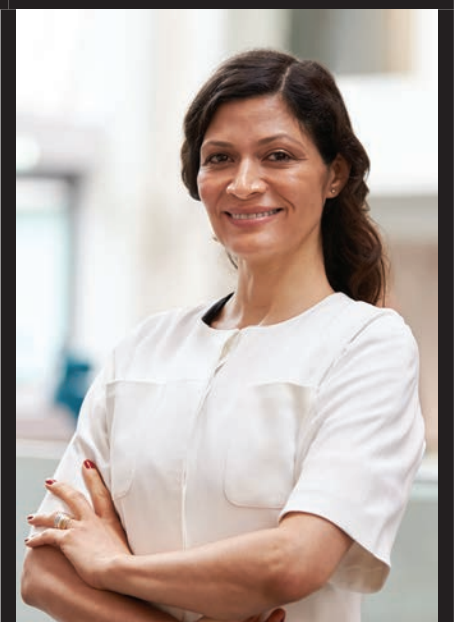# LEARNING LEADERS
FOR LEARNING
SCHOOLS

PRINCIPALS WHO
PAY ATTENTION
TO THEIR OWN LEARNING
SERVE AS MODELS
FOR OTHERS

6 key behaviors
pp. **28-30**

BY FREDERICK BROWN AND KAY PSENCIK

The field of leadership learning has evolved a great deal since the early 2000s, when The Wallace Foundation began its focus on education leadership.

We now know that leadership is second only to teaching among in-school influences on student success, and the impact is most pronounced in schools with the greatest needs (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). We have learned that leaders make a difference for both students and adults in schools.

What principals do every day, how they view and value student and educator learning, how they organize their staff into learning communities, and the designs they support for those teams to learn make a significant difference in the learning of those they serve.

While individual teachers play the primary role in supporting learning at the classroom level, it's the building principal who can create the conditions that enable every child in a school to experience great teaching and learning. That's because principals are "multipliers" of effective teaching (Manna, 2015).

Multipliers inspire teams of teachers to engage in ongoing meaningful learning. Multipliers assist teams in sharing their new practices with others

so that successes inspire others to engage in the learning and scale up the critical practices. Multipliers celebrate progress and build on the strengths in the school so that all accelerate their learning.

Although principals have significant impact on the success of all teachers in their school, they are the least likely to

1. EXERCISE AGENCY AND ADVOCACY

One of the most significant aspects of principal professional learning is principals' advocacy and agency for their own learning. Principal agency is the capacity of school leaders to act purposefully and constructively to direct their professional growth and contribute to the growth of their colleagues.

Rather than responding passively to learning opportunities or not valuing their own professional learning, principals who have agency are aware of the significance of their professional growth and its impact on teacher learning and student success (Calvert, 2016).

Highly effective learning leaders take ownership of their own learning. These learners engage in a cycle of continuous improvement to address issues in their school. They capitalize on others' expertise and purposefully and intentionally set goals for their own learning.

They establish a community of practice, knowing that the best learning is community learning. They seek out resources essential for them to shift their practices in ways that guide professional learning of everyone in their schools. Instead of waiting for the district or an outside entity to create some type of learning experience, the principal owns her learning gap and takes steps to fill it.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE:
The Twin Tiers Principals Coalition, Corning, New York

Unlike typical professional development, the Twin Tiers Principals Coalition in Corning, New York, provided an extended learning opportunity that emphasized depth of understanding. More than 150 principals from nine districts and Boards of Cooperative Educational Services participating in the coalition engaged in a long-term approach to their own learning.

The coalition, which began in 2003, ran until 2015 in large part because principals valued the learning and advocated for others to join the community. Even as state and local districts experienced many shifts during this time, the fundamental approach and structure of the coalition remained intact. Cohorts of principals learned relevant skills and practices during intensive summer sessions, followed by yearlong support and coaching.

Each cohort also formed communities of practice that met frequently throughout the year — no less than twice monthly. These meetings took place on-site so that principals could walk each other's campuses and share the school setting. During the school year, a Learning Forward facilitator met with the entire principal cohort for an additional four full days. These extension sessions provided an opportunity for sharing, coaching, extending ideas, problem solving, and overall support. After completing a three-year cycle, principals graduated. Each summer, all cohorts were invited back for a celebration. The coalition of graduates became advocates for their own learning and encouraged their peers to join the learning leaders' community so all could support each other.

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be supported with systematic, ongoing professional learning. There is growing data that suggests that acting principals are ill-prepared for the work they are called to do.

In a study conducted by Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003), a principal's years of experience was the greatest predictor of success for students. Highly effective principals can increase student achievement on standardized tests as much as 10% in one year. Principals can also affect other outcomes, such as student attendance, dropout rates, and graduation rates.

In addition, research by Leithwood et al. (2004) found that experienced, high-quality principals have the greatest impact on low-achieving, high-poverty schools.

And yet, even experienced principals need help meeting the expectations of today's schools. Simply stated, they need effective professional learning aligned to the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011) — ongoing, embedded work focused on issues in their schools for which professional learning is the response.

This article presents a glimpse of our emerging model for learning leaders. In the model outlined here, we highlight the importance of principals as the lead learners and lead facilitators of learning in their schools. This model includes six key behaviors (boxes on pp. 28-30) of learning leaders. Principals who are the lead learners and lead facilitators of learning in their schools:

1. Exercise agency and advocacy;
2. Lead professional learning and learning communities;
3. Lead curriculum, instruction, and assessment;
4. Give precise feedback;

2. LEAD PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Among the many responsibilities of principals is their role in leading professional learning. The Leadership standard of the Standards for Professional Learning identifies a specific set of behaviors for principals as leaders of learning: "Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students requires skillful leaders who develop capacity, advocate, and create systems for professional learning" (Learning Forward, 2011).

So how do principals develop the skills to lead high-achieving learning communities? Principals who are engaged in a community of practice and systematically learn with others know firsthand the significance of systems and structures to foster collective responsibility.

Since they focus on their own learning as a priority, they make time to analyze the needs for the learning communities in their schools and ensure those communities have sufficient time for learning. Though they allow flexibility in the learning agenda for their team, they insist that data conversations determine team and student learning needs.

They ensure teams understand the Standards for Professional Learning, focus on what teams are learning, and provide essential, precise feedback and coaching teams need to get through the hurdles of implementation of new approaches. They foster sharing among teams to encourage them to see that what others are learning can contribute to success around their own goals.

Systems and structures such as setting team goals based on their students' data, studying, planning lessons together, observing each other teach, and using learning designs that accelerate the learning are all a part of what effective principals design at their schools and what they experience in their own communities of practice.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE:
Galveston ISD, Texas

Four experienced middle school principals in Galveston (Texas) ISD have been working for more than two years to assist their teaching teams in developing units of study aligned across the district. Though they've had some success, they didn't see teachers take much ownership of the work. Everything felt like compliance.

In 2016, the principals formed a community of practice and worked in different ways with the teachers to strengthen the teaching teams' commitment and consequently produce better results. As they committed to learning more about effective professional learning by becoming a community of practice themselves, they began to see gaps in their work with others.

They designed a new approach for the start of the year: They would focus with the teachers on the "why" behind the work, the value of it to them, and facilitate the teams developing social contracts to clarify their commitments.

Teams analyzed their student performance data to determine their own learning needs. They observed each other, shared teaching strategies, and celebrated progress. With this new approach, they began to see a higher level of engagement with the teams and realized the power of focusing on "why."

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5. Coach effectively; and
6. Tap new talent.

A VITAL ROLE

The research on school leadership is very clear. Principals shape the conditions for high-quality teaching and are vital to the effectiveness of our nation's public schools (The Wallace Foundation, 2017).

As leaders of learning in their schools, principals pay equal attention to the learning experiences of both the students and adults in their schools, which results in effective teaching and learning at scale.

More important, principals pay attention to their own learning so that they are the models of what they want to see in their staff, students, and community.

We believe that every child deserves a great teacher and every school deserves a great principal.

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3. LEAD CURRICULUM, INSTRUCTION, AND ASSESSMENT

One of the primary expectations of principals is that they are instructional leaders. We disagree. Principals' primary role is to be facilitators of learning.

It is not significantly important that principals know calculus — teachers know calculus! But helping teachers of calculus get better at their job requires principals who support and facilitate their learning. Principals need systems and structures to foster the facilitation of teaching teams to design and implement high-yield instruction. Principals need to know how to guide teaching teams to design instruction based on the 21st-century skills essential for all students. Principals need skills to guide teaching teams to develop reliable and valid assessments of and for learning.

While student and staff performance data determine the work of learning communities, principals need to be experts in professional learning and assist learning communities in designing the learning they need to do to get better results for all students.

4. GIVE PRECISE FEEDBACK

Systems thrive on feedback, as we examined in the book *Becoming a Learning System* (Hirsh, Psencik, & Brown, 2014). It is the clarity about what we and others are observing (self-reflection and observations of others) that gives teams the information they need to make modifications in their approaches.

Feedback, whether developed jointly or given to a team from observational comments, is essential to the community as it continues to learn. As teams use the feedback to reshape their practice and make modifications in their work, they continue the cycle of continuous improvement.

5. COACH EFFECTIVELY

Coaching is another essential strategy for the principal to use both with others and to increase the effectiveness of the principals. Coaches listen effectively (a key skill) and know the right types of questions so teachers and others arrive at their own conclusions, thus deepening their learning.

6. TAP NEW TALENT

From a district's perspective, decisions about who should pursue leadership shouldn't be left to chance. Districts should take an active role in making sure those emerging leaders who have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions are the ones who get tapped to move into leadership positions.

The principal is uniquely positioned to see those emerging leaders early in their career. Tapping new leadership talent is a core responsibility of learning leaders. This could range from helping identify teacher leaders to encouraging aspiring principals and district leaders to continue on the path to leadership.

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