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—James G. Martin

SUPERVISORS NEED SUPPORT, TOO

COACHING PRINCIPALS EFFECTIVELY
TAKES TIME AND SKILLS

BY JAMES G. MARTIN

In recent years, there has been an increasing focus on professional learning structures for teaching and finding ways to embed this learning into the daily

work of teachers. This is premised on the understanding that one-shot professional development yields little transfer or change of practice to ultimately impact student learning.

But how has this shift from professional development to professional learning filtered into the world of school leadership? I would contend that the reach has been limited and that when districts are juggling limited resources, they rarely prioritize the professional learning needs of school-based administrators (principals and assistant principals).

This article is not meant to be

principalship, our district office had replaced area directors with school support directors. The district office promise was that schools would see these individuals more often — and we did. School support directors met with principals regularly, attended meetings, and eventually evaluated performance of the principals.

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THE JOB OF A PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR

When I started as a principal supervisor, I was given little instruction other than to be in the schools on a regular basis.

I reached out to principals to introduce myself and set up a consistent visitation schedule. This transition was not met with enthusiasm by all of the principals in my charge. Some of them preferred the former system, where area directors and school support directors were available sporadically and when called. They didn't relish the idea of consistent and regular interactions focused on building their leadership capacity.

During this first year, I struggled. I had always perceived myself as a successful principal, but supervising principals is different than knowing how to be a principal. I had conflicts with a couple of principals who resisted my attempts to mold them into the principal I had been. As with other principals, I had my own style of approaching the work. I didn't understand that expecting others to replicate my approach and style would not necessarily work for them.

At the end of my first year as a principal supervisor, some of my schools improved their performance as measured by end-of-level district and state assessments. Others declined in student achievement. I didn't know how to measure my impact and wondered if I was making a difference. I contemplated returning to a school as a principal.

One of my colleagues did just that. She had been overseeing the turnaround schools. I was asked to take her position and thought it might be an opportunity to work with a different set of principals who, in their designation as turnaround, had committed to a high level of change through a collaboration with the University of Virginia's Partnership for Leaders in Education national program.

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a research study. It is one person's reflection on two years spent at the district office as a principal supervisor. It is meant to examine some of my own learnings about ways to support principals as learners.

BACKGROUND

The Wallace Foundation recently published a report on principal supervisors (Corcoran et al., 2013) that highlights districts across the country attempting to strengthen their principal support network by hiring principal supervisors. These principal supervisors play a variety of roles, including evaluator, conduits to district resources, and coaches.

When I began teaching in Utah's Salt Lake City School District in 1998, there were two individuals, called area directors, assigned to supervise all of the elementary, middle, and high schools. It was a running joke among schools and school leaders that they never saw these area directors.

By the time of my first

superintendent announced a change to the principal supervisor structure: There would be more principal supervisors, reducing the number of schools each was assigned. This would enable principal supervisors to be in school buildings more and to take on more of a leadership capacity-building function.

This sounded appealing to me, so I applied and was accepted for a position called school leadership support director. The first year, I was assigned to eight schools — seven of the eight identified as Title I.

The next year, one of the directors in our group returned to a school, leaving her director position open. She had been overseeing the turnaround schools in our district. These turnaround schools had been plagued by low performance. The district felt that, by reducing the number of schools the turnaround director was responsible for, this director could provide even more support to the neediest schools. So my responsibilities shifted from eight schools to six.

PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR, YEAR TWO

I now was assigned six principals instead of eight. This allowed me to create a schedule to support these six principals more regularly. I could be in the schools weekly, meeting with principals at least twice a month. I spent the remainder of my time in professional learning community (PLC) meetings, faculty meetings, and observing classrooms alongside principals.

I was definitely a presence in my six schools. During meetings with principals, we looked at data, discussed talent development, and planned next steps. Every meeting concluded with action items for me and action items for the principal.

During our one-on-one meetings (occasionally assistant principals joined us), I was able to impact the capacity of principals directly through on-the-job coaching. We met in their offices. We looked at their own data from school interims and other assessments. We talked about what the data suggested we ought to do to support teachers.

I use the term “coaching” in this article. I realize that coaching practices typically demand a clear delineation between coach and evaluator. However, there is a need for principal supervisors to act as instructional leaders who focus on building principal capacity through the “coaching relationship” (CCSSO, 2015, p. 5). Similar to the way that we now expect principals to coach teachers toward improved performance, principal supervisors must do the same with principals. Effective principal supervisors are able to navigate between the coaching and supervisory roles to get the most out of principals (CCSSO, 2015).

During my second year, I spent four to six hours a week in classrooms, calibrating observation protocols and improving feedback quality. Principals and I would often role-play feedback that they needed to give teachers. This

all served to help principals gain more confidence in observing, recognizing quality teaching, and providing actionable feedback.

WHAT I LEARNED

I’m hoping that my learning from two years as a principal supervisor can lend support to other principal supervisors and districts and that it helps them rethink the way that principal supervisors are supported and deployed to provide on-the-job professional learning to school-based leaders.

Principal supervisors need training, too.

As mentioned, I received little to no direction in supervising or coaching principals. Until this time, principals viewed me as a colleague, so there was some resentment at a role shift that not everyone welcomed. Districts contemplating the use of principal

on the right track when he advocated a transition from principal supervisors who oversaw many schools to principal supervisors/coaches responsible for a small number of schools.

Since working with the six turnaround schools, I, too, decided to re-enter a school as principal. The district didn’t replace me as a principal supervisor, meaning that the remaining principal supervisors had to cover more schools. Here is what one of the principals I worked with said about the difference between having a principal supervisor with a small number of schools and her current reality:

“When my school support directors had six schools versus 16, I was able to receive weekly support rather than monthly,” the principal said. “This was especially needed when I was a first- and second-year principal in a turnaround school. The support I received was tailored to my individual

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supervisors need to be mindful about creating conditions where these principal supervisors can be successful.

When I was reassigned to supervise the six turnaround schools, I also benefitted from some professional learning through the University of Virginia. This helped me bolster my skills as a principal supervisor/coach. All principal supervisors need this type of professional learning in an ongoing, systematic way (CCSSO, 2015).

Overseeing fewer schools is better.

Our associate superintendent was

needs and was key in helping me develop my leadership skills.

“We [the principal and the school leadership support director] did observations together, looked at data and planned next steps, worked through all the compliance elements of a principalship, and navigated the social and relational aspects of being a school building leader. While I have 2½ years under my belt, I still need the support in a position that is often isolating and always taxing.

“During my first two years, my directors were able to help relieve

some of my day-to-day stresses while allowing me the space and time to step back and look at the big picture on a regular basis. I would love to get the kind of support I had in my first two years. Their support was invaluable. My directors knew my school, they knew me, and they had a positive impact on my school.”

Having fewer schools allowed me a better picture of what was going on in all the schools. I could attend meetings and special events. I could spend time in classrooms. I could meet with principals regularly. Getting a comprehensive view of a school better allows a principal supervisor/coach to identify opportunities for principal professional learning and growth.

Another principal I worked with reflected that “[a] school director who supervises a small number of schools connects with teachers and staff in each school ... well-known by all, seen as a resource and help, [contributing] to the overall success at the school as a member of the team.”

The Council of Chief State School Officers (2015) advocates for principal supervisors whose main responsibility is principal supervision and coaching. I was able to devote myself completely to my role as a principal supervisor and coach because it was my primary job, not one of many jobs I was expected to complete. When the supervision of principals is one of many tasks assigned to a district-level administrator, the support provided to principals suffers (CCSSO, 2015).

Principal support should be systematic.

I knew where to find my area director or my school support director. I could call them and ask for help whenever. This is similar to the coaching model that some teachers enjoy. They can call a coach and get what they need when they need it. To some, this is an appropriate role for a coach to play.

As demands on schools continue to

grow, the support structure also needs to grow. Coaches need to step outside of a service role into one that is about coaching for impact (see The University of Florida Lastinger Center for Learning, Learning Forward, & Public Impact report, 2016). Coaching for impact means that coaches and teachers are assigned to work together deliberately.

One of the reasons my second year as a principal supervisor was stronger than my first is that I was better matched with the principals I coached. The first year, there was not much thought put into the schools or principals I was assigned.

In the second year, I was chosen because of my knowledge of turnaround efforts and the turnaround work I had done in one of my principal assignments.

When matching coaches with teachers, there ought to be consideration of need. The match ought to be deliberate to address the needs of the teacher as evidenced by student learning outcomes. Similarly, principal supervisors/coaches ought to be matched according to principal and school needs.

While it is great for principals to have a resource when needed or called upon, principal supervisors/coaches should function in a more deliberate professional learning role. Their time in schools should be scheduled and unscheduled.

Principal supervisors/coaches need to create conditions where the principal is challenged to recognize additional needs emerging from student outcome data and coached to act on this in ways that positively impact student learning. Interactions between principal supervisor and principal ought to be collaborative and abide by adult learning best practices (CCSSO, 2015).

THE RESULTS

Three of the schools I worked with in my second year had notable student

growth. The district awarded one of the schools as the top-performing Title I school (meaning it had the best growth of any Title I school in the district).

I am not willing to accept credit for this growth. I was just part of a larger picture that included regular, systematic, on-the-job professional learning for principals. The most telling results are the reactions of the principals with whom I worked. A majority of them have reflected on the difference they now feel in not having the same level of professional learning support. Now, as a return principal, I am longing for the kind of intensive professional learning that I was able to provide to my schools as a principal supervisor.

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