

THE LEARNING Principal

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

Strong principal networks influence school culture

By Elizabeth Neale and Mariah Cone

Despite the complex challenges of leading schools in the 21st century, principals work largely in isolation, and receive few opportunities for professional development. Experience with a supportive community of fellow principals is quite rare. Most principals receive training, are certified, and then become full-fledged school leaders, without systems of ongoing learning or support. And, often the original training can be lacking. A 2013 study by the George W. Bush Institute found that only five states require principal preparation programs to include all of the components shown to be critical for effective leadership development (Briggs, Rhines, Cheney, Davis, & Moll, 2013).



practitioners reach their individual and collective goals.

SCHOOL LEADERS NETWORK

Started with one network in western Massachusetts in 2006, the nonprofit School Leaders Network has now initiated networks serving more than 400 principals in six locations across the country: New York, DC metro area, San Antonio, Los Angeles, Florida's Hillsborough County, and Honolulu. Each network, consisting of 15 to 18 K-12 principals from high-needs urban schools, meets monthly to identify, reflect on, and accelerate critical leadership skills. Guided by a trained facilitator, school leaders use a researched-based learning approach that focuses on student achievement. They share best practices, challenges, and issues that foster or inhibit their individual leadership efforts. The network uses an inquiry-based, collaborative coaching model to discuss and solve challenges

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Learning Forward's Learning Communities standard documents the role of collaborative learning in helping



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Strike up the band: Lessons in leadership

It's hard to believe that later this year, I'll be traveling back to Burton, Ohio, to attend my 30th high school reunion. As I think back to those good ol' days, I remember when I played alto saxophone in high school band. Our band director, Mr. White, was passionate about music and had what some of us believed was an overabundance of confidence



in our abilities. Sometimes, during those first few days looking through the music he'd chosen, we'd simply laugh and think, "There's absolutely no way we'll be able to play this in time for the concert!" Mr. White, our organized, committed, and visionary band director and leader, believed much differently. In the end, he tended to be right.

Mr. White lived the Leadership standard of the Standards for Professional Learning. Like an effective principal or a department chair in a school, he **developed our capacity for learning and leading**. He struck that amazing balance between recognizing our learning needs and espousing unwavering high expectations. We were expected to practice at home, during our study hall periods, and of course during eighth-period band. Those playing like instruments were divided into learning communities that supported the members' growth and development, and often their members practiced together during shared study halls. In the end, often without even

realizing it, we worked harder than we ever imagined in order to be our best. He had built within us an intrinsic desire to learn and improve our abilities.

As a leader, Mr. White was also an **advocate for our learning**. A small rural district with limited resources, Berkshire High School's band members had everything they needed to be their best. Instruments were offered to those who couldn't afford to buy them. Practice rooms were available for those learning groups who sought to improve their abilities. Time was made available both during and after school for the entire band to prepare for its performances. I imagine Mr. White at times needed to work with the building or district office to secure the resources of people, time, and money in order to maintain those conditions that were so favorable to our learning. I imagine Mr. White worked hard on our behalf to cultivate those relationships among key stakeholders and community groups.

Finally, Mr. White worked to **create support systems and structures** that led to our individual and collective learning and continuous improvement. Many of those I've already mentioned, but let me describe another. In addition to Mr. White's role as director, there were also other leadership positions within the band, namely band sergeant and corporal. If for any reason he was held up in a meeting or phone call during eighth-period band, these student leaders without hesitation would pick up Mr. White's baton and lead the practices. Systems were in place that enabled

learning and continuous improvement to continue despite any unexpected changes in conditions.

A recent Wallace Foundation Perspective titled *The School Principal as Leader: Guiding Schools to Better Teaching and Learning* (2013) makes this thought-provoking statement: "Education research shows that most school variables, considered separately, have at most small effects on learning. The real payoff comes when individual variables combine to reach critical mass. Creating the conditions under which that can occur is the job of the principal." In our case, Mr. White operated much like an effective building principal. There were many variables in play that had an impact on our learning. However, as our leader, he harnessed the resources and created the conditions that enabled those variables to work on our behalf so that we could perform our best.

So, Mr. White, if you're reading this, let me just say now what I didn't back then: Thank you for being a leader of learning!

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Data contribute to a cycle of continuous improvement

By **Jacqueline Medina**

Throughout the last five years, Talman Elementary School (Chicago, Ill.) has grown to foster a data-responsive culture. The “Talman Way,” as it is affectionately referred to, includes continuously improving our students, our methods, and ourselves through analyzing data and addressing what is working and what needs work. As this work continues, we attempt to integrate best practices from everywhere, including other top-performing schools, to present quality instruction to our students.

This process has included many changes to the programs at Talman, including staffing. Initially, 0% of our 3rd-grade students were meeting or exceeding state standards. This reflected on all of our primary teachers, so we replaced two teachers to ensure that we were holding our students accountable to high expectations from the moment they entered Talman’s doors.

Another change has been the initial change from a dual language to a transitional language program. Although I wanted to ensure that the language and culture of our students and families was not shortchanged, I also needed all of our students to be able to read and write fluently in English. In order to supplement those cultural elements, we also employ a mariachi band and folkloric dance group.

Of course, these changes could

not have been effective without constant reflection and honest conversations. I had to be honest with the staff and say, “Yesterday, I thought this, based on this data. Today, I feel this is what we need to consider, so what do you think?” I can’t be afraid to say that we can do this a little bit better. When something wasn’t working, I would immediately address the staff members and solicit their opinions on how the process could be improved. This process happens over and over again.

These changes have led to tremendous outcomes for our students. Our student population, which includes more than 40% English language learners, with 97% of students qualifying for free and reduced lunches, has grown from 57% of students meeting or exceeding reading standards in 2006 to 84% in 2011, and from 69% meeting or exceeding standards in math to 90% in 2012.

The Talman Way does not only apply to students; we have made sure that learning was essential for adults in the building as well. Through grade-cycle meetings, modeling lessons, evaluating student work, and building classroom libraries together, we strive to build the capacity of everyone in the Talman community. Professional development for staff members also includes collaborative conversations referencing educational

research, student data, and reflections about desired outcomes and the necessary steps to achieve them.

Student data is routinely referenced to determine students that need more support. This support comes from layers of adults providing services to students, including college tutors, parent mentors, student teachers, and student observers. These adults provide small group instruction and



ensure that students are growing academically and emotionally.

We also try to identify schools we can learn from — schools with high ELL numbers and high free lunch numbers — that have been able to make significant increases in learning. That’s part of the cycle of continuous improvement, to figure out how to keep growing.

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from individual campuses. By creating a sense of community, increasing capacity, and implementing action, principal networks show strong trends of changing school cultures and improving student achievement (Intrator & Scribner, 2008; UCLA, 2011).

Strong network culture is critical to successful learning communities. Specifically, School Leaders Network culture is based on trust, collaborative learning, and collective responsibility.

BUILDING TRUST

School Leaders Network's new communities of principals focus on developing the glue of trust and rapport that serves as the foundation for constructive engagement. Facilitators actively foster relationships among diverse groups of principals, creating conditions necessary for participants to share their challenging questions of practice.

Case study findings of principals within the School Leaders Network revealed that participants learned about themselves as leaders and implemented new efforts at school when they believed the network was a safe space. Principals attributed the safety of the group to facilitator skills, group norms, and modeled risk-taking by long-time group members

(Cone, 2010). The emphasis in these collaborative networks is around sharing, listening, learning, and taking steps to increase leadership capacity and student achievement. The facilitator makes these practices transparent while at the same time using a research-based approach to accelerate instructional leadership skills.

SUPPORTING COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

School Leaders Network sessions are designed to harness the knowledge and capacity that individual principals bring with them and build upon their existing strengths. In their networks, principals discuss national leadership research, explore school-based problems, examine possible solutions, and share their experiences with implementation. Principals consistently cite this collaborative dialogue as a

The job of principal is becoming more complex and stressful.

75% Three-quarters of principals feel the job has become too complex.

69% Seven in 10 principals say the job responsibilities are not very similar to five years ago.

59% Job satisfaction among principals has decreased nine percentage points in less than five years, to 59% very satisfied from 68% very satisfied in 2008.

48% Half of principals feel under great stress several days a week (MetLife, 2012).

key source of new ideas. One principal said, "For me, having the opportunity to talk to colleagues and our leadership is important because I am able to think about the problems at my school from a different perspective. Going through the consultancy protocol with my colleagues is significant. The problem we discussed was dealing with negativity and toxicity in the school environment. I need to work on building trust and celebrating successes. I also need to work on having individual conversations with staff members that are causing the negativity."

Embedded in the School Leaders Network model is a research-based rubric about the five most essential leadership responsibilities for principals to benchmark their skills and work concretely toward improved leadership practices. Facilitators use this rubric throughout network meetings, which help principals become more facile with thinking through all leadership actions through the lens of these five responsibilities.

A case study of School Leaders Network principals in San Antonio found that 60% of the members in the group adopted new leadership tools and facilitation techniques they learned from their network. Additionally, nearly three out of four principals said they became stronger, more confident leaders as a result of learning with other principals. They also found that these changes influenced the frequency and manner in which they engaged in tough conversations about performance with staff (Cone, 2010).

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Learning Forward BELIEF

Improving student learning and professional practice requires ongoing systemic and organizational change.

Principal job satisfaction declining

Higher job satisfaction is associated with principals feeling well prepared for their responsibilities and participating in a professional learning community (PLC) with other principals. Principals who are very satisfied with their job are more likely than less

satisfied principals to agree that their training prepared them well for their responsibilities as school principal (82% vs. 70%) and that they participate in a PLC with principals of other schools (93% vs. 79%). In addition, participating in a PLC is more common among principals who say they are not likely to leave the profession than among those who say they are likely to leave (89% vs. 82%) (MetLife, 2012).

Continued from p. 4

FOSTERING COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

Successful learning communities maintain a sense of mutual accountability for all of their members. Principals with School Leaders Network commit to hold each other responsible for applying what they learn in their schools. The network analyzes leader actions at each meeting. This mutual responsibility reassures and inspires principals, as they know that they are working with the encouragement and push of their network of colleagues.

In internal surveys, School Leaders Network leaders also frequently implement learning communities within their own school settings, further creating alignment between network and school goals. Participants may visit each other's campuses and share resources, which develops the sense of collective ownership within the learning community.

MAKING AN IMPACT

The University of California Los Angeles Educational Evaluation Group conducted a study of School Leader Network principals across the county. Their findings revealed the extensive benefits of learning communities for school leaders. According to the study, the network's principals felt more confident in their ability to make cultural changes, change classroom practices, and ultimately improve student outcomes (UCLA Educational Evaluation Group, 2011).

Even beyond school leader testimony, it is plain that collaborative principal networks have an impact on student achievement. An analysis of 2009-10 student achievement data for principals in 13 networks in the New York, Massachusetts, and San Antonio geographic clusters shows that School Leader Network-led schools outperformed peer schools (Marland, 2010). In Massachusetts, high schools led by network principals outperformed the state graduation rate, with an average of 83%. In San Antonio, 74% of network-led schools increased proficiency rates in math, compared to 65% of non-network schools, a difference of 9 percentage points. Additionally, New York City network principals, on average, led schools to higher than the city average scores across all culture indicators, including expectations, communication, engagement, and safety.

Principals require myriad tools, practices, and beliefs to lay the groundwork for highly effective schools. All too often, school leaders are only trained in the technical aspects of their work — develop a schedule, put together a budget, host a parent meeting, etc. These issues are persistent and do not have easy answers. However, by working with networks of like-minded peers, principals can coach each other to solve these problems and become 21st-century educational leaders who can meet the learning needs of all students.

Professional learning networks serve as a powerful experiential model that network principals can replicate by

building leadership teams and professional learning communities of teachers at their schools. In this way, the direct connection between collaboration, leadership, and student achievement can be realized.

Learn more

2012 MetLife Teacher Survey

The current report along with reports in the entire series are available online.

www.metlife.com/teachersurvey

2012 MetLife Teacher Survey webinar

The Alliance for Excellent Education and panelists discuss the findings for policymakers and education leaders to note as they work to enable school leaders to meet increased expectations for educational outcomes. Panelists include John Jenkins, regional director for School Leaders Network in New York City, and Laurie Barron, the MetLife/NASSP National Middle Level Principal of the Year.

<http://media.all4ed.org/webinar-mar-4-2013>

School Leaders Network

The mission of School Leaders Network is to expand educational opportunity for all students by transforming leadership practices.

<http://connectleadsucceed.org>

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Understanding the Learning Communities standard

Use this tool to have participants in groups of three better understand the Learning Communities standard, consider what behaviors represent the standard in action, and rewrite the standard in their own words.

DIRECTIONS	TIME
<p>1. Read the Learning Communities standard to the group or post it where all can see: <i>Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students occurs within learning communities committed to continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and goal alignment.</i></p>	1 minute
<p>2. Identify the three big ideas in the Learning Communities standard:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage in continuous improvement; • Develop collective responsibility; and • Create alignment and accountability. <p>Assign one concept to each person in the group.</p>	2 minutes
<p>3. If equipment is available, watch the video from Learning Forward’s website that discusses the standard in depth.</p>	5 minutes
<p>4. Refer to the Learning Communities note-taking guide on p. 7. Review the standard at www.learningforward.org/standards/learningcommunities/index.cfm.</p> <p>Record information to complete each square in the Learning Communities note-taking guide. Use these questions as a guide.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key ideas: What are two to three key messages associated with the big idea? • Relationship to standard and professional learning: Why is this big idea integral to this standard and effective professional learning? • Evidence in practice: What might this standard look like in practice? What behaviors will educators demonstrate? 	10 to 15 minutes
<p>5. Ask group members to share their responses to the tool, spending five minutes per big idea. Record additional notes as others share. Assign a timekeeper to guide the process.</p>	10 minutes
<p>6. Have each group rewrite the standard based on members’ understanding of its components. Record the revised standard on flip chart paper, and post it at the front of the room if more than one group is participating.</p>	10 minutes
<p>7. Invite each group to read its new statement.</p>	5 minutes
<p>8. Close the session by asking participants these questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was one benefit of rewriting the standard? • What new insight do you have as a result of this exercise? <p>Form groups of three and ask each person to describe one big idea.</p>	10 minutes

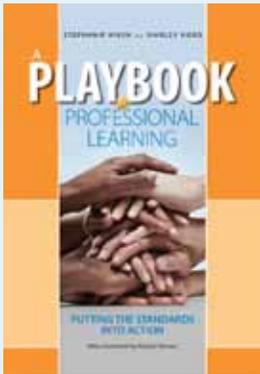
Learning Communities note-taking guide

Learning Communities standard

Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students occurs within learning communities committed to continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and goal alignment.

Component	Key ideas	Relationship to standard and professional learning	Evidence in practice
Engage in continuous improvement.			
Develop collective responsibility.			
Create alignment and accountability.			

Rewrite the Learning Communities standard:



This tool is adapted from:

A Playbook for Professional Learning: Putting the Standards Into Action
By Stephanie Hirsh and Shirley Hord

Explore real problems facing educators and how to apply the Standards for Professional Learning to resolve these issues. Use this book to move knowledge into action to benefit all students. *(Learning Forward, 2012)*

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School-Based Professional Learning for Implementing the Common Core

Explore four units created to help

principals and teacher

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tive professional

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with background infor-

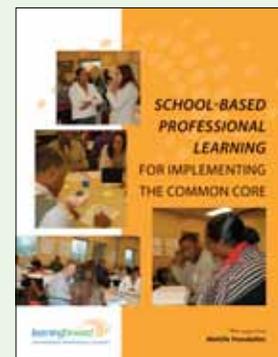
mation, tools, slides, and handouts, the four mod-

ules cover key topics in leading professional learning

tied to implementing content standards: Managing

change, facilitating learning teams, learning designs,

and Standards for Professional Learning.



Download the units at:
[www.learningforward.org/publications/
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