

PRINCIPAL EVALUATION AS A TOOL FOR GROWTH

HOW TO HELP PRINCIPALS
LEAD AND LEARN



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How can we use principal evaluation as a tool for growth? We grappled with this question as we worked with principals and principal supervisors who were implementing new principal evaluation systems across the United States.

As we progressed, one thing

became clear: Principal evaluation systems without explicit and aligned professional learning simply re-create a system of compliance and fail to improve leadership capacity.

Although there have been concerted efforts at the national, state, and local levels to develop more comprehensive and rigorous principal evaluation

systems, few address the huge investment in learning that is needed to improve practice. Given the complexity of the role of today's principals, they must learn a new set of skills and knowledge to create innovative learning environments.

The intent of most principal evaluation systems is to both evaluate

and build leadership capacity. The Wallace Foundation has produced several reports (Anderson & Turnbull, 2016; Corcoran et al., 2013) targeting strategies to strengthen school leaders. For example, in North Carolina's Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District, principal supervisors meet with principals throughout the year to discuss their growth, assess progress, and establish professional development goals. In Florida's Hillsborough County Public Schools, principal supervisors are spending more time in schools and "are much more intentional about their work, collecting a lot more evidence and doing a lot of coaching with the principals" (Mendels, 2017, p. 55).

Nevertheless, despite research that shows that evaluation alone does not lead to improved leadership effectiveness, few principal evaluation systems include explicit professional learning opportunities for principals, such as how to coach teachers to build their instructional practice, how to conduct effective classroom observations and provide quality feedback, or how to create a shared vision and build an effective team.

Those charged with evaluating principals — principal supervisors — are typically, although not always, former principals who have been successful in moving a campus in a positive direction. However, the skills that enabled them to be successful as principals are not always commensurate with their job of leading the



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development of a diverse set of leaders across multiple schools.

To use principal evaluation as a tool for growth, they must be able to coach and give powerful feedback, develop and deliver adult learning, facilitate group learning processes, and cultivate a culture of transparency and continuous learning.

THE DISTRICT AS DRIVER OF IMPROVEMENT

The Wallace Foundation believes that principal evaluation, when used to both evaluate and improve practice, can be a powerful lever not only for developing school leaders, but also for improving student achievement (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004).

Principals and principal supervisors are uniquely situated to lead this effort. To succeed, however, these leaders must loosen their grip on the technical elements of their job, which they tend to do extremely well, and embrace the adaptive aspects of the work. Unlike technical problems, these require new ways of thinking, learning, and doing

(Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009).

For example, in addition to discussing the technical aspects of a given academic intervention (such as when to hold tutoring sessions or what assessments to use to identify students in need of intervention), principals must also address the adaptive challenges involved (such as how to deliver engaging instruction that reaches diverse learners or how to target interventions in terms of standards).

But the district itself must first be willing to engage in adaptive change. Failure to do so will result in futile attempts to layer transformative leadership practices onto an existing system that is focused on compliance and management. Districts must create the conditions that will allow principals to develop and grow. By functioning as a learning organization, districts can help create a learning culture in their schools and use principal evaluation to improve principal practice.

Just as "children grow into the intellectual life of those around them," writes Russian psychologist and child development expert Lev Vygotsky (1978, p. 88), we believe that adults also must be "enculturated" (Ritchhart, 2015) into a system that learns. Indeed, if we are to succeed in creating cultures of thinking and learning for young people, we must also create a rich intellectual life for adults in the system.

We often begin our work with district staff by asking the following question: What is the quality of

intellectual life in your district? The reaction and responses are revealing. Most are startled by the question. Pushed to reflect, they often admit that it's not as robust, rigorous, and aligned to leadership standards and expectations as it needs to be to improve leadership capacity.

Principal evaluation can result in constructive change if districts recognize the interdependency among evaluation, effectiveness, and learning. Creating a learning-oriented culture that includes systems and structures for teachers, central office staff, and principals themselves to learn is an essential part of implementing any new initiative — and principal evaluation is no exception.

How, then, can principal evaluations become a tool for change and continuous learning? How might they promote districtwide revitalization and sustainability, instead of merely serving as a tool for managing processes? How can districts — and, especially, principal supervisors — leverage principal evaluation to improve leadership capacity?

STRATEGIES FOR PRINCIPAL EVALUATION

Through our work in districts, we have identified a set of strategies that will enable districts to use principal evaluation to help principals learn their way into effectiveness.

1. Ensure role clarity and leadership expectations for principals.

Principal evaluation systems must clarify the role of the principal, describe day-to-day leadership practices, and identify key principal leadership tasks that lead to deep and substantive improvements in teaching and learning. Such key tasks might include setting a vision for high-quality teaching and learning, creating systems for using data to inform instruction, routinely

observing classroom instruction, giving powerful feedback, or developing teacher leaders. Principal evaluation systems should also provide a road map that guides principals to address adaptive cultural changes and leadership behaviors instead of focusing on technical issues that are necessary but not sufficient. These elements will deepen the school's or system's capacity to function as a learning organization (Senge, 1990).

2. Transform the role of supervisors of principals to teachers of principals.

Principal supervisors must be able to balance and align the work of evaluation with the charge to build, coach, and teach principals to improve their practice. They must become instructional leaders who help principals prioritize problems of practice and identify high-leverage tasks. As teachers of leaders, they must be able to teach, model, coach, and provide specific actionable feedback to principals to improve their practice.

3. Provide targeted, differentiated learning supports.

Principal evaluation systems should include the same standards for novice principals as for more experienced ones, but with different rating weights based on experience. Principal supervisors should know each principal as a leader and learner and provide differentiated support to individual principals based on their experience and need.

4. Employ tools that provide frequent, specific, and actionable coaching and feedback.

Districts should develop and employ a coherent, aligned set of tools and protocols to support improved leadership practice. The tools should be public, well understood, and used regularly and with fidelity to improve principal leadership practice.

Such tools might include classroom observation protocols, learning walks, feedback and coaching models, discussion and inquiry protocols, checklists for effective meetings, processes for raising the emotional intelligence of a team, or tools that use data to inform instruction.

Principal evaluation systems become more robust when they include structured goal setting; reflection sessions based on a rubric of effective leadership practices tied to national, state, or district leadership standards; and regular review of artifacts and evidence of practice related to a principal's goals.

5. Provide structure for principals to become members of communities of practice.

Principals must be members of strong and effective communities of practice, both formal and informal, that are focused on learning, networking, and problem solving. These communities should focus on sharpening the leadership expectations identified in the standards. They should also serve as safe havens for shared learning and as incubators for innovation. Finally, they should provide feedback to the district and inform district policies and practices to support leader effectiveness.

6. Ensure the district functions as a learning organization.

Districts must be intentional about developing and sustaining rigorous learning for adults within the system. They must put human development at the center of the work, just as cutting-edge for-profit organizations have done. As Kegan and Lahey (2016) note, “deliberately developmental organizations” engage in radical transparency about learning and have ongoing systems for coaching and feedback, as well as processes for

effective conversations and meetings.

Districts must also embrace their adult learners' deliberate movement between the performance zone and the learning zone. As Eduardo Briceño (2017) explains, the performance zone is about executing and maximizing immediate performance, whereas the learning zone is about improving and targeting future performance.

Principals and principal supervisors should designate certain times as learning zone times, where principals are in improving mode and mistakes are accepted as part of the learning process. These designated times to experiment encourage transparency for everyone about their role as learners, and they build a learning culture.

7. Recruit, select, and train principals to function as leaders of learning.

Districts' recruiting and hiring processes should identify principals who embrace the demands of the new principalship. Candidates should not only be skilled at responding to issues they will face daily, but also be adept at creating, anticipating, innovating, and leading change in their schools. Further, candidates should demonstrate skills aligned to principal leadership standards (Anderson & Turnbull, 2016). Once hired, these principals should be trained to be both learning leaders and leaders of learners.

FROM WHAT TO HOW

Although developing new principal evaluation systems is necessary, it's not sufficient. Any new system requires a strong emphasis on building leadership capacity by providing learning supports. The principal supervisor is the key driver for ensuring principal evaluations harness all their potential power.

Districts simply cannot afford to implement new principal evaluation systems without attending to the policies, structures, and strategies

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needed to develop effective leaders. One approach, as Richard Elmore (Costante, 2010) suggests, is to shift from external to internal accountability. According to Michael Fullan (Thiers, 2017), this focus on internal accountability happens "when the group, individually and collectively, has a sense of responsibility about their work."

Moving from the *what* of the principal evaluation to the *how* of learning and growth is, in fact, a shift in focus from external to internal accountability. The role of the district as a learning organization, continually changing and adapting to support new initiatives and efforts that target improved principal practice, is key to the success of this new lever for building greater leadership effectiveness.

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