



THE PRINCIPAL'S ROLE HAS CHANGED.

IS PROFESSIONAL LEARNING KEEPING UP?

BY REBECCA A. THESSIN AND KAREN SEASHORE LOUIS

Does this scenario sound familiar? Principals are called to districtwide professional learning four to eight times a year. Central office administrators give presentations on new district initiatives, curriculum, protocols, and procedures. Administrators listen, sometimes for

hours, to new information that district-level administrators believe they need.

For most principals, this format hasn't changed for several decades. Yet today's principals do not have the same job as they did 20 years ago. Performance-based accountability measures have increasingly impacted the demands placed on school leaders,

as have increased expectations to ramp up direct instructional leadership (Fusarelli & Fusarelli, 2018).

Furthermore, research shows that this passive approach has little impact on practice if not accompanied by job-embedded follow-up learning and support (Curry & Killion, 2009; Zepeda, 2013).

Just as teachers need ongoing learning opportunities and support from their principals to provide high-quality instruction to all learners, principals need ongoing support to build their capacity for instructional leadership.

How do principal learning opportunities need to change, and who should be leading this change effort? The school district central office plays a vital role in principal learning by providing supervision and support for principals. Just as teachers need ongoing learning opportunities and support from their principals to provide high-quality instruction to all learners, principals need ongoing support to build their capacity for instructional leadership.

Based on current research and our experience as scholars and practitioners, we offer three recommendations for central offices — and principal supervisors specifically — to address these needs.

CHANGING ROLES REQUIRE CHANGES IN SUPPORT

First, it's important to understand the evolving role of principals and the broad slate of their responsibilities. We expect today's principals to manage all school building operations successfully, ensure safety, serve as the curriculum expert, be the disciplinarian, and assign and supervise teachers, as just a few examples from their list of responsibilities.

For more than a decade, we have also expected them to serve as instructional leaders, working closely

with classroom teachers to improve teaching and produce improvements in student learning (Grissom, Loeb, & Master, 2013). Recently there have been calls for an even larger role for principals under the label of leadership for learning, which includes new responsibilities for reshaping all aspects of the school, including teaching and student support services, to focus on student academic and social development (Leithwood, 2018).

But we have paid little attention to how principals are developing the skills to meet these new expectations, and principals have had limited opportunities for their own learning, both in the U.S. and internationally.

Principals know that monitoring and supervising are no longer enough to ensure teachers are designing instruction to meet every child's learning needs in every classroom. Yet, in many school districts, principals continue to be monitored and supervised themselves in the same manner.

Principals, like the teachers they supervise, benefit from ongoing, intensive, school-based, professional learning to assist them in improving their own leadership practices, as detailed in Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning (DiPaola & Hoy, 2013; Honig, 2012;

Learning Forward, 2011; Zepeda, 2013).

To address this gap, many of our nation's largest school systems have responded over the last decade by changing expectations for those who support and supervise principals (Honig, 2012; Thessin & Louis, 2019). In these school systems, principal supervisors are being asked to fill a new role by providing ongoing learning and coaching support to build principals' capacities as instructional leaders.

In other countries, such as Norway and Australia, we see the same: Supervisors are now being asked to support and coach principals in their learning. This is a positive development, but many districts still have questions about how to engage in effective, ongoing learning and instructional leadership support to current and new principals.

Findings from studies published in the September 2019 special issue of the *Journal of Educational Administration*, for which we were the co-editors, highlight the significant work needed to prepare principal supervisors to be effective in their new roles (Thessin & Louis, 2019). The following recommendations draw from these articles to guide central offices as they conceive of this new work.

1. Establish a long-term commitment to principal learning.

Shifting the way districts support principals requires long-term thinking; developing deep capacities to take on new roles will rarely provide an immediate boost to test scores. Whether school districts and other agencies can provide the needed long-term, job-embedded coaching and instructional leadership support to principals depends on federal, state, and district policies and funding decisions.

At the federal level, ESSA (U.S. Department of Education, 2016) prioritizes the role of principal supervisors and suggests Title IIA funds can be used specifically for supporting principal supervisors' professional learning. Yet the changes required of school systems also require consistency in structure and policy, protected from the often-rapid turnover among superintendents that leads to central office reorganizations and reprioritized funding initiatives.

As a result, achieving this goal without the involvement of numerous stakeholders at the local and state levels will be challenging. While some large city school systems in the U.S. allocated additional funding to reduce the ratio of principal supervisors to principals within the last 10 years (Goldring et al., 2018), many of these same districts, like those in the mid-Atlantic region, have subsequently made drastic cuts to their central office staffing.

Cuts that occurred after superintendent turnover resulted in an increased number of principals assigned to each principal supervisor, from 10 to 12 to 18 or more (Thessin & Louis, 2019). Such high ratios serve as a barrier to ongoing engagement in collaborative coaching and partnership in leading improvement between central offices and schools.

Finally, this commitment to developing new capacities at the central office level also requires principal supervisors to be buffered from other responsibilities often added to their plates, such as leading central

office committees, facilitating the budget process, and finding homes for ineffective staff members at other schools, as just a few examples.

2. Dedicate time and intention to selecting and guiding principal supervisors.

Principal supervisors should be thoughtfully selected and prepared. Not every successful principal will be an effective principal supervisor. Facilitating improvement in one's own building requires different competencies than building relationships with current leaders, identifying needs and goals to guide improvement, and coaching principals to implement instructional change across a variety of different contexts and student populations at the district level.

To begin, central office needs to communicate clear expectations about the principal supervisor role. As Manning (2017) states, "Without clearly defined roles, coaches can strive to be all things to all people" (p. 14), resulting in becoming stretched too thin to be effective. Questions to consider include:

- How much time should each principal supervisor spend in each school, and how often should visits occur?
- How does a principal supervisor assess the current needs of the principal and the school to know where to begin in facilitating instructional improvement?
- What leadership knowledge, skills, and content should be the focus of the coaching that the supervisor provides?
- How, and to what degree, should a principal and his or her leadership team work collaboratively with the supervisor to lead improvement?

Answering these, and many other, questions will provide a starting place for recruitment and hiring decisions, as well as a guide for supervisors once hired, to ensure consistency across schools and

alignment with district goals.

In selecting principal supervisors, districts must identify highly capable leaders who have the capacity to motivate other leaders to employ new practices, empower others to distribute leadership, and share responsibility, with the principal, for designing and leading improvement at each school site to benefit student learning (Thessin, 2019).

3. Prioritize engagement in joint work.

Most importantly, changes to support principal learning and development must ground experiences for professional growth in what we know about how adults learn, as the Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011) point out.

Research across fields has demonstrated that these real-time learning experiences must be contextually relevant, and self-reflection on learning leads to better adult learning outcomes (Boyatzis & Kolb, 1999). And the purpose and benefits of the learning must be apparent to the individual engaged in it (Knowles, 1996).

Particularly relevant for the principal supervisor-principal dyad, some recent research specifically highlights the value of engaging in joint work, when participants mutually engage in activities that both sides find meaningful (Honig, 2012; Thessin, 2019). For example, the principal and supervisor can collaborate to design leadership team meeting agendas, lead administrative teams in classroom visits, and plan data analysis conversations with departments and grade-level teams so that they have the time and space to learn and reflect with their teams.

AN INVESTMENT THAT PAYS OFF

Investing in principal supervisors takes money and time, but without this investment, principals will continue to want for the coaching and support they need — and we will all have to temper our expectations about their ability to foster better student outcomes.

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We must commit to systems of continuous support and growth if principals are to become leaders of learning and for learning in their schools. We know that the traditional sit-and-get model of learning is not enough for students or teachers; it certainly is not enough for principals.

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