



Principals rediscover their joy and purpose through coaching

BY KAY PSENCIK

P rincipals are feeling the stress of these tumultuous times. According to a recent report sponsored by The Wallace Foundation, principals report that, for the last two years, they have spent most of their time on

COVID-19 responses, teacher absences and retention, and designing online instruction (Clifford & Cogshall, 2021). They also feel the urgent need to catch students up academically and provide emotional support for students, staff, and parents.

Amid all these challenges, principals want to regain their purpose and return their schools to the core values of educating every student to high standards. They see professional learning as a way to address acceleration, biases in the school, use of curriculum

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materials, assessments of student learning, and instructional practices and to strengthen a culture of empathy and listening to help heal the widespread fatigue, anxiety, and grief (Clifford & Coggshall, 2021).

Principals cannot do this work and lead this learning on their own. Fortunately, coaching is a powerful approach to assist principals in being leaders of high-performing schools where students and staff thrive. More than just mentoring or shared brainstorming, coaching helps principals see new possibilities for themselves, their schools, and those they serve. Through inquiry and reflection, coach and coachee explore new ideas for meeting today's challenges.

Coaching and supporting principals is an important part of our professional services work at Learning Forward. For many years, we have recognized the significant role principals play in leading learning at their schools and increasing student success by increasing educator effectiveness. Our work in this area goes back decades.

For example, the Twin Tiers Principal Coalition, which started in Corning, New York, in 2003, engaged over 150 principals for more than 10 years in using the Standards for Professional Learning in leading learning communities. A study found that it resulted in principals gaining confidence in facilitating data and curriculum conversations with teachers and developing skill in using a variety

of learning designs (Resources for Learning, 2015).

Galveston County Learning Leaders in Texas and the Arizona Learning Leaders for Learning Schools projects are two of our other principal-focused models that were co-designed with states and districts, reaching hundreds of principals. We have designed numerous learning resources, including a collaboration with The Wallace Foundation to create materials and activities to support use of its PBS film, *The Principal Story* (Learning Forward, 2014). All of these learning efforts were grounded with The Wallace Foundation's work on effective principals.

From these projects and others, coaching emerged as a critical aspect of

personalizing support for principals. We learned that when coaching is added to high-quality professional learning for principals, the learning experiences become actionable.

Principals can explore strategies for implementing what they are learning that work for their specific staff and communities. Time and again, we and the principals we work with begin to see significant shifts in teachers' work and student learning. Through this professional services work, we continually gain new insights and learn new lessons.

In the last two years, since the start of the COVID pandemic, we have continued and deepened our commitment to learning from leaders even as we support them to engage in their own learning. As we reflect on education today, we have identified key themes about principals' current needs for support and opportunities for coaching right now.

Because the principalship is a microcosm of educational systems at large, these themes are reflective of the larger professional learning needs in schools and districts today. They are informative for us as we plan our work going forward, and we believe they can be informative for other educators and those who support them as well.

PRINCIPAL WELLNESS

What principals need more than anything right now is permission to take time to practice wellness for themselves. Wellness is basic to leadership. But the urgency and constant state of flux of the past two years have made it hard for leaders to remember that.

I have been talking with the principals I coach about the impacts of stress and the way our bodies relay messages about stress to those we work and interact with. After principals recognize those negative impacts, we work on strategies to help them find some peace.

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District 130 in Illinois who have not been giving themselves permission to take care of themselves. Through our conversations, they have committed to taking time for centering, deep breathing, and silence.

They have committed to taking walks around the school with the intent of experiencing what a great place the school is for children. The goal is to rediscover the peace, gratitude, and joy in being principals who serve children and adults.

I was working with a principal in another district who felt very down about her work and inadequate about her leadership. When I explored with her the challenges she was facing and her responses to them, she said she had no idea how to answer my questions.

I asked, "What do you do for fun?" She stared at me for the longest time. Finally, she said, "I used to play the piano every evening. Now, I get home, rush to start supper, then turn on the TV to watch the news. I feel I must know what is happening, but it just heightens my tension."

I asked her to walk me through her evening schedule minute by minute. As she did, she suddenly paused and said, "I don't have to watch the news!" She started a new practice: Start supper, then play the piano for 30 minutes. By our next weekly visit, she said that simply returning to what she loved for 30 minutes a day changed her attitude toward work. She laughed as she pointed out that the news was the

same at 10 p.m., but her day was now different.

The following questions can help the coach focus on the coachee's emotions and physical well-being:

- In what ways can you find time to be still, quiet, and reflective so that you can rejuvenate your energy?
- How might this help you renew your sense of purpose and feel deep gratitude for your opportunity to serve?
- What are the long-term consequences for you of not making time for yourself? What is the impact on your attitude toward your work? On your emotional and physical health? On your relationships? On your opportunity to achieve your purpose and goals for life in and outside of just work?

REBUILDING LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Principals aren't the only ones feeling stress, of course, and school leaders have a responsibility to guide their staff through the challenges to renew their passion for the work and help students achieve their potential. In many schools, staff learning communities have suffered from lack of time, abundance of urgent needs, and general sense of exhaustion.

Nurturing learning communities is central to all of Learning Forward's work, and we integrate it into all of our coaching. Knowing that nothing is the same as it was pre-COVID-19, I have been exploring with principals new approaches to rebuild their learning communities and refocus the work of those communities on students' needs.

Some principals don't want to start this work right now — they want to let things settle down. They remind me how different and challenging things are right now. During COVID shutdowns, some students forgot how to do school. Some adults did, too. After experiencing long periods of teaching and learning online, being in

a classroom still feels new, especially with COVID mitigation measures and the stress of political tensions over those measures.

But in this environment, learning communities are even more important. Educators need to connect with one another and lean on and learn from each other. In working with overwhelmed or resistant principals, I ask, “Are there ways to renew the learning communities so that adults are happier, smarter?” Often, we discover together that there are.

It’s important that we focus the work of learning communities on student needs. So, acknowledging that nothing is the same as it was pre-COVID 19, I explore with principals new approaches to rebuilding their learning communities that focus the work on their students’ needs. The first step is figuring out who students are now, how they’ve changed, and what they need.

While I was coaching principals in Galveston County in Texas, we explored how they could learn more about their students so that the school teams could set meaningful short-term goals. I asked questions like:

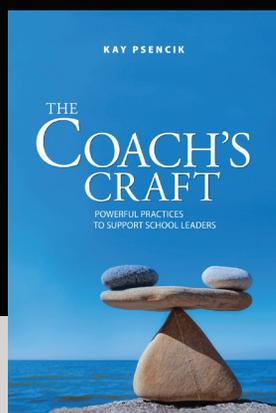
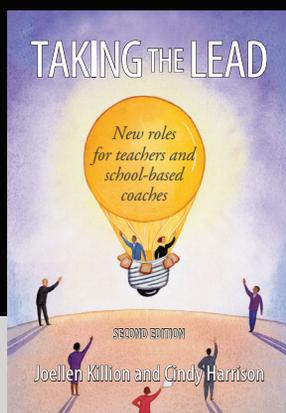
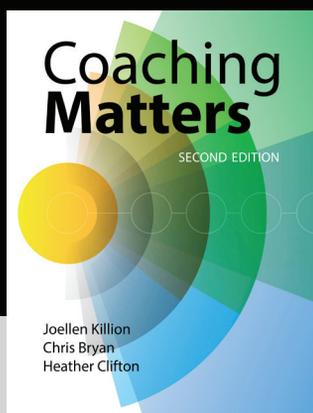
- Where have students historically not performed well in your school?
- What do we know about your students now? What data do we have that we might count on?
- In what ways can we chart this data so that we can understand what students and staff know and do not know?
- What do you think your teachers need from you to host meaningful data conversations?
- Where are logical curriculum materials, assessment strategies, and instructional strategies that would make the most sense to use right now?

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Principals are extremely creative, and these strategic questions led the Galveston County principals to generate amazing ideas for their school families. They created new strategies for facilitating examination of curriculum materials, revising assessments, charting data, building high expectations for students and staff, engaging their

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instructional coaches in different ways, and implementing effective cycles of continuous improvement. All of these strategies involved collaboration among staff and strengthening the learning community.

EXPANDING PRINCIPALS' KNOWLEDGE

One of the joys of working in education is that we always have more to learn. In coaching principals, I emphasize that this is a positive thing and not reflective of weakness. I also emphasize that when principals model learning and expanding knowledge, it rubs off on teachers.

Last year, I worked with a middle school principal whose goal was to increase student achievement in language arts and math in his Title I school. His focus was on creating collaborative teacher groups engaged in intense work around state standards, using cycles of continuous improvement. The principal doubted that he would be able to get his teachers to engage in the work.

The process began slowly in October but quickly gained momentum and continued through the rest of the year. Teachers began to learn together about the standards, instructional strategies, creating assessments, and analyzing their data.

His own learning and growth, facilitated by coaching, was a key part of this. He said, "It was eye-opening to me how much I was learning about my students and about the math curriculum as I worked with the math teaching team. When teachers realized what I knew about students and what was expected of them, they began to pay greater attention to their own data and their understanding of the level of rigor students had to achieve."

This experience has allowed him and his teachers to gain confidence in their knowledge of standards and instruction. According to his supervisor, he has continued to work with the same team he started with but has now expanded the collaborative work to

more teacher teams.

I have also seen principals spread their learning to other schools and districts, exponentially increasing the impact of the coaching. For example, I coached two elementary principals from Mesa, Arizona, who were focused on engaging their school teams to analyze new curriculum materials and new state standards. When I traveled to Mesa to work with them, they asked me to stay for a meeting they were about to host with 15 other elementary principals, who had become interested in what they were learning.

Voluntarily, they formed a yearlong learning community focused on ensuring all their teachers understood the new standards and how their new curriculum materials would support them in teaching and learning. It was an amazing extension of work that began with two principals.

HELPING PRINCIPALS FIND THEIR INSPIRATION

It can be hard for leaders to find inspiration and joy when times are as stressful as they have been in the last two years. Coaching can help principals step back and rediscover their motivation or find new sources of inspiration.

For example, a colleague of mine was working with a principal who was frustrated by a team that seemed resistant to every idea he shared. Sensing that the principal's frustration and anger were threatening his morale, she asked, "Is there a team that gives you joy and energizes you?" The principal said that the 7th-grade math team inspired him because they work hard, learn together, and really commit to their learning and the success of their students.

The coach then asked, "What would it take for you to spend time with them today?" After reflecting for a few minutes, the principal cleared his calendar to make the time. When the coach checked in with him at the end of the day, the principal could not wait to share what a wonderful day he had had.

The coach could have worked with him on how to deal with the team that was frustrating him. That would have been a valid approach, and perhaps one that coach would choose to do at a later date. But she recognized that what he needed most at that moment was a boost of inspiration. That's one of the benefits of responsive coaching — it matches the right strategy to the right moment.

HELPING PRINCIPALS SOAR

Principals are skilled in many ways, but, like all of us, they learn exponentially when working with an expert coach. In my coaching, I always try to remember that principals became principals because they really want to see their students and staff soar. And I always try to stay cognizant of the fact that I became a principal coach because I want to see principals soar.

My Learning Forward colleagues and I focus our coaching on what matters in leading high-performing schools. Through coaching, we help others shape their own future and achieve their own goals. We bring comfort, optimism, increased effectiveness, and, most importantly, audacious hope.

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