

An abstract graphic featuring a central teal circle surrounded by several overlapping circles of varying sizes and colors (teal and light green). Some circles are solid, while others are dashed. Small teal plus signs are scattered throughout the composition, particularly near the intersections of the circles. The overall aesthetic is clean and modern, suggesting a network or interconnected ideas.

**IDEAS**

# A sweet spot for principal growth and evaluation

BY SHELLEY HALVERSON AND GREG MAUGHAN

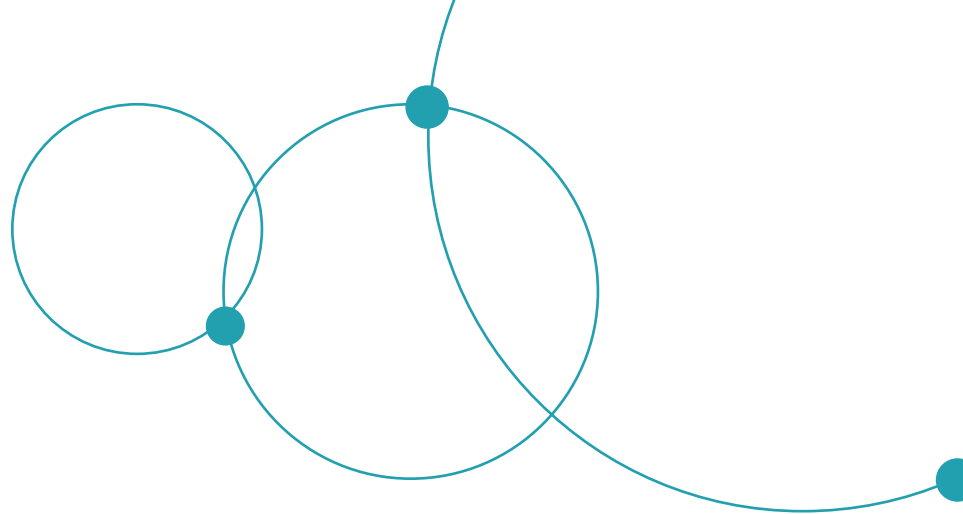
**W**e all have experienced evaluation systems that feel like a series of hoops to jump through. Some require goal setting, some require elaborate data collection, and some are a little of both. Regardless

of role, it often becomes a box-checking exercise and not a reflective, meaningful process that engenders growth for those engaged in it.

In the small rural district of South Summit School District in Kamas, Utah, where we lead, we hoped to go about principal evaluation in an

entirely different way. We envisioned something more useful and grounded in principals' work, specifically in the area of instructional leadership that would also promote growth.

In 2022, we set out to do just that. Following is an account of how we used survey results, formed a professional



learning community (PLC) with our principals, and built a framework of the four themes that emerged that function together for a meaningful process of collaborative inquiry and evaluation.

### **GATHERING INFORMATION**

To begin, we conducted a qualitative research study to gather data on what our principals thought was needed in creating an evaluation system that would promote leadership growth. Principals participated in two individual interviews and a group interview. We asked them what meaningful evaluation would look like in practice, what types of professional learning would be most beneficial for professional growth, and how a supervisor might support a principal through this process.

As we coded the data, we realized that principals needed to see the process as formative and supportive of growth. Without that, the logistical details, such as the number of observations, the goal-setting worksheet used, or even the set of leadership standards used to measure effectiveness did not matter.

At the heart of such a process is a foundation of relationships and trust. One principal said, “You really need to know me. You need to understand my heart and my soul and where I am coming from. I need to trust you. If we really want these kinds of evaluations, I need to trust that you are really on my side.”

During the course of our study, it became clear that we needed to co-create our evaluation system alongside our principals, an aspect we found to be generally missing in most existing

evaluation system components. In fact, without principal input, there was a danger of unintentionally creating a disconnect between leadership standards, expectations, and the real-world, day-to-day work of a principal (Lashaway, 2003).

Principals’ participation in the study gave us information to begin tailoring our work for the individual leader. It also supported building the foundation of trust and reframed the evaluation from an exercise in compliance to a process of personal growth.

Multiple times during data collection, discussions revealed areas of need. In one example, principals shared their desire to have time to sit together and dig into various topics relevant to instructional leadership.

As a result, we began building our evaluation system in partnership with them. We included a structure to facilitate collaborative, job-embedded professional learning with requested discussion topics and areas of reflection. Our goal, as district leaders, was to be as responsive as possible to their expressed needs while ensuring we continually moved the work forward.

### **DETERMINING PLC GOALS AND STRUCTURE**

We began by setting up a monthly principal PLC time for collaborative learning. These meetings were strictly for learning, and business matters were not allowed to intrude on that time. Based on the data and conversations, we determined that, to build a collaborative environment, we needed to be able to ask for help, share successes, be generous

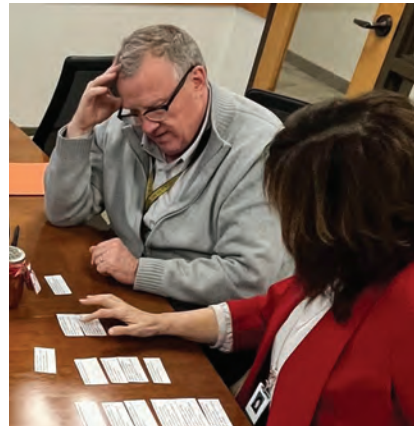
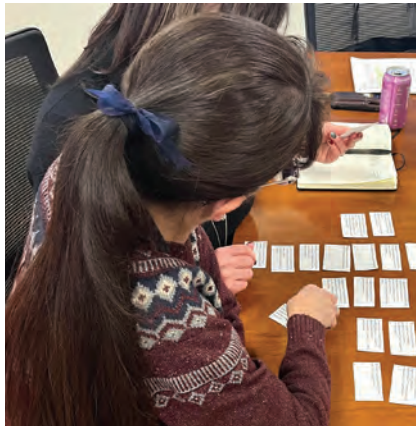
with our assumptions, and get curious.

To get a sense of principals’ priority areas, we sent a survey of topics from a list generated from things we had heard mentioned during the data collection or in other meetings and conversations and asked them to rank their top three.

In looking through their responses, the one common request was to create the nonnegotiables of what Tier 1 instruction looks like across the district, regardless of grade level, content, or school site. We discovered it was a high-leverage topic with a lot of productive crossover to other survey areas of interest and would also support district coherence around high-quality instruction.

As we engaged in the work, we used a specific structure for how we dig into the Tier 1 components — for example, engagement, rigor, reflection, and access. We defined components as the overarching elements of high-quality Tier 1 instruction. That structure developed as follows:

- Each principal defines the component for themselves.
- All definitions are captured in one place.
- Using those definitions, we create a shared definition of the component.
- We watch a video of teachers in elementary, middle, and high school to look for evidence of the component.
- We revisit and refine our definition and co-construct what evidence we want to see in the classroom of the component of Tier 1.



Principals from South Summit School District in Kamas, Utah, sort teacher definitions of engagement to look for themes as part of a districtwide professional learning community. Left photo: Laci McCormick and Kena Rydalch; right photo: Jeff Greiner and Lisa Flinders.

- We then answer two questions:
  1. What would you observe students doing and demonstrating during rigorous learning?
  2. What would you observe educators doing and demonstrating to cause rigorous learning?

Each month, we identify one component of Tier 1 to address and, when needed, we spend more time on a component as determined by the group. One of our next steps is to create an instructional playbook with instructional strategies that support teachers in reaching the expectations of the components of Tier 1.

Between PLC sessions, we spend three hours a week in the schools, observing three classrooms with the principal and assistant principal, looking for co-created evidence of that month's component of Tier 1. It becomes an opportunity for calibration between observers and is a means of testing our definitions and understanding.

Every observation is debriefed with robust conversations about what we saw, as well as how to give useful lesson feedback to the teachers. In this way, the learning is job-embedded and practical, occurring outside of a meeting setting. When the PLC reconvenes, we discuss principals' observations to

review and refine our definitions.

We engaged in these practices to foster the conditions for continuous cycles of improvement in instructional leadership. What emerged from the work was the discovery of four themes, which we like to conceptualize as four gears (See figure on p. 57.) Together, the four gears create the type of evaluation system and climate in which a principal can be vulnerable and grow professionally in meaningful ways.

## **TAILORING TO THE INDIVIDUAL**

Responding to our principals' feedback allows us to ensure we are tailoring our process to their individual needs — the first gear. We gathered their input throughout the process since we want anything we implement to be co-created. This is accomplished during the PLC reflection section, in individual interviews, and by comparing our experience with our established learning intentions and success criteria.

Initially, each month we had scheduled one business and one PLC meeting, but after the first couple of PLC meetings, principals requested we dedicate some of the business meeting time for PLC work instead. When asked what wasn't working, one principal said, "I feel like anything that is not working is already fixed — like the schedule and having everyone there."

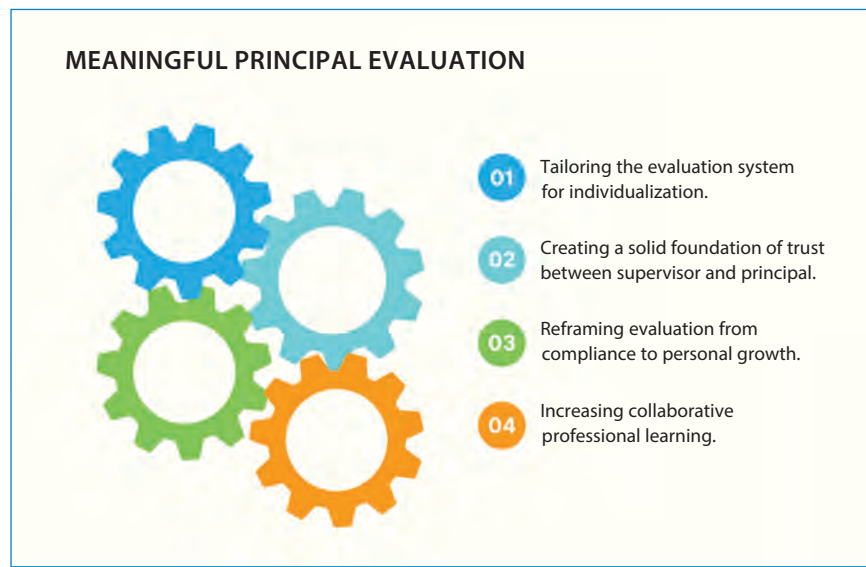
When we originally planned the PLC structure, we did not include a data collection piece. However, as we tried to define certain components of Tier 1, such as engagement, the group wanted to first collect its own data on how teachers and students define engagement so we could develop a common language.

How much PLC time we spend on each component has been adjusted multiple times in response to the principals' desire to dig into and reflect on certain components of Tier 1 instruction more deeply. Not only do we respond to any feedback that comes up during meetings, we also have added more formal data collection points to elicit their input.

Based on their responses, we adjust our process in the moment, as well as the district implementation timeline, and then calibrate our next steps for implementation.

## **THE GEARS AT WORK TOGETHER**

Our PLC has facilitated building a foundation of trust while also focusing on professional growth — the second and third gears. During the study, principals described why collaborative structures in professional learning are so important. They named the positive effects of being able to "work together," to "get to know [one another] and feel safe together," and that the PLC



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serves to “benefit them as a group and individually.”

They described this cooperative structure as their preferred option for professional learning. It helps to create an environment that is safe enough for them to be vulnerable in a way that is essential for engaging meaningfully in one’s own improvement (Brown, 2018).

We are beginning to see shifts in the culture of our PLC as principals are feeling emotionally safe enough to openly challenge our thinking as well as each other’s thinking. One principal said, “The exchange of ideas and the way we are working together is strong. It feels good. The interaction widens your scope of thought and ideas. I leave those meetings exhausted in a good way.”

Another said, “I love that we are creating learning together.” One principal mentioned how they “hope it continues to be an avenue of support for principals because the job is hard.” When we observe in classrooms to connect our theoretical work to the practical, we have observed that same level of emotional safety because we are

all honing our skills together. There is no hierarchy and what we see or don’t see is not used as a “gotcha.”

It actively builds trust and simultaneously validates what they are seeing and doing, gives them additional perspective, and pushes their thinking. One principal said that the PLC inspires her because we “are working toward something together, and the conversation is meaningful and shared.”

This year, we’ve focused more heavily on implementing the fourth gear of increasing professional learning in the PLCs. Meanwhile, we make sure to maintain the other three gears through the continual practice of assessing our responsiveness to their needs, checking whether our process feels collaborative, and assessing overall impact of the PLC process through feedback cycles.

Our goal has been to ensure our collaborative professional learning has engendered a foundation of trust, focuses on growth, and supports each principal’s leadership skills in an individualized way.

While each of the four gears is

important on its own, their real power lies in their interdependence. When one gear is not implemented with the others, it directly impacts the principal’s experience. It also hinders the principal from being able to be vulnerable, stifling their leadership growth process.

District leaders are tasked with ensuring that specific and intentional actions are taken to make sure all four gears are present so the conditions for vulnerability are present. In this type of evaluation system — when functioning well, co-created with principals and supported with professional learning — district coherence around high-quality Tier 1 instruction is a natural result.

## HOW PLCS HAVE CHANGED PRINCIPALS’ PRACTICES

Recently, we asked our principals to reflect on how this PLC process affected their leadership and practice. Their responses were positive across the board. The principals described the process as “finding the sweet spot of what we want our Tier 1 to be, versus what we can actually do and make it real.”

# IDEAS

Another said, “It has also facilitated conversations between principals so I can learn from other people’s strengths, suggestions, and ideas.” Our first-year principal mentioned that the PLCs have supported her work in this new role through “sitting with everyone and working through what we want to see as a district.”

When we talked with principals about how it has changed their practice, they mentioned specifically how it supports individual school planning. Speaking of her school’s 90-day planning cycles and professional learning, one principal said their PLC process “guides my planning. I love that it is co-created and gives us direction. I am always thinking about how I will take it back to my teachers.”

Another principal agreed: “The content is meaningful and relevant. It mirrors and matches what I am trying to do with PLCs in my building.” A third principal said that the PLC process has helped hone her skills in planning meetings and professional learning at her school. She said, “I am trying to be more thoughtful in my meetings and with my leadership team — I am more thoughtful in putting the agenda together (and) ... about how I do professional learning with my staff.”

We have made sure to make the process visible to others outside of our PLC in board meetings, conference presentations, faculty and staff meetings, and in many conversations with individuals and groups of teachers. In making visible what is typically invisible, principals have shared with stakeholders the power of what they are learning.

One principal said, “I even brought it up to my community council. I told them about what we were working on and that ... regardless of grade level or content areas, any student could walk into any class and be guaranteed a certain experience. They loved it!”

As district leaders, we collaborate intentionally to structure the way our PLC runs to model the best practices we are learning about. We spend time debriefing after each PLC and

planning for the next one. We facilitate the discussion but do very little of the talking so principals will feel empowered to speak rather than simply listen to what a supervisor says.

We were pleased to learn that principals had mirrored that modeling and responsiveness. One said, “I appreciate, and it is obvious, that you guys are leading out and being thoughtful. It is clear to me the work you put into putting everything together. You are facilitating and listening to our thinking, and we all enjoy the learning together.”

The process impacts individual leaders and their practices, which guides the combined implementation of all four gears to ensure principals can be vulnerable and therefore focus on leadership growth.

## NEXT STEPS

This year of co-created collaborative learning around Tier 1 is our first step in building a meaningful evaluation system for our principals. This starting point was necessary to create a collaborative understanding of what we wanted to see in classrooms first. Without that shared understanding, we would not be able to support or evaluate their instructional leadership with the depth that we have.

And, while we have these steps listed in a linear fashion, we are moving between them all the time, touching on where we have been and where we are going, building skills and understanding along the way. The work has led us to clearly picture where we are headed next:

- Complete and refine the components of our nonnegotiables of Tier 1 and present to our school board.
- Align Tier 1 nonnegotiables with the state teaching standards to leverage our teacher evaluation system to support high-quality Tier 1 instruction.
- Define high-leverage instructional leadership practices to support implementation of nonnegotiables of Tier 1.

- Align those high-leverage practices with state leadership standards and our evaluation process to support continuous cycles of leadership improvement.

## FOCUSING ON PRINCIPAL SUPPORT

We are pleased with the results in using the four gears of meaningful principal evaluation as we co-create a culture of trust that supports individual growth and collective learning. Our initial focus on the fourth gear of increasing collaborative learning has brought about growth in all participating educators’ leadership — including ours — as we learn alongside one another.

Instead of designing “systems to meet all kinds of exacting requirements except the requirement that they contribute to the fulfillment and growth of the participants” (Barth, 1985), we strive to do the opposite. Our goal is to be as responsive as possible to the needs of the group and each individual principal to bring about relevant, worthwhile collaboration.

And, while we have done that, we have also supported the other three gears. Equipped with our new knowledge, we will be able to put the fulfillment and growth of our principals at the center of our evaluation system and keep that as our focus in supporting them to lead.

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