



**Principal supervisors can play an important role in promoting supportive peer networks that foster meaningful ongoing learning for school leaders.**

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## FOCUS ON PRINCIPALS

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# PRINCIPALS BENEFIT FROM PEER INSIGHT AND EXPERTISE

**W**hen I was a school principal, some of my most meaningful professional learning came through dialogue with other principals. I found the opportunity to share challenges, explore new ideas, grapple with problems of practice, and reflect on my leadership with trusted colleagues immensely helpful.

These valuable experiences motivated my doctoral research into the characteristics of peer dialogue that make it an effective form of professional learning for principals. I found that principals value relationships with other school

leaders that are characterized by high levels of trust, reciprocity, and commitment to learning and growth. These relationships are a resource for developing principals' skills and knowledge to lead effectively and bolster their confidence and feelings of competence.

These lessons have proved valuable in my current role as a principal supervisor, in which I develop and facilitate systems and support that help principals continuously learn and grow. Because my goals include helping principals navigate the myriad challenges of their roles, breaking down feelings of isolation, and supporting their professional fulfillment, it is a priority for me to foster and sustain strong collegial relationships that promote ongoing peer dialogue among principals.



## BENEFITS OF PRINCIPAL PEER DIALOGUE

In my research (Frag-Davis, 2013), I found that peer dialogue provides principals with two main types of support, which I refer to as *instructive* and *affective*. *Instructive support* involves sharing knowledge, resources, and information that help principals address specific leadership challenges. *Affective support* focuses on principals' internal states and reactions, often taking the form of conversations centered on processing emotional reactions and experiences that enhance or recharge their confidence, motivation, and commitment to lead in the face of challenges.

These two types of support are mutually reinforcing. When principals receive instructive support from peers, they often end up feeling more confident and competent, and when they receive affective support, they often feel more able to reinvest in creative and productive problem-solving and navigate other demands of the role.

This support from peers helps principals expand their practice in three ways, which I refer to as *leadership inventory*, *leadership judgment*, and *leadership integrity*, which are represented in the table on p. 15.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRINCIPAL SUPERVISORS

It can be difficult for principals to find regular opportunities for peer dialogue, given their busy schedules and physical distance from one another. Even when they do find such opportunities, their networks may not be broad or deep enough to challenge their thinking

## AREAS OF PRINCIPAL PRACTICE

<b>Leadership inventory</b>	<i>What I know as a leader</i>	Principals' repertoire of ideas, strategies, information, and resources they use to address matters of leadership practice.
<b>Leadership judgment</b>	<i>How I operate as a leader</i>	Effective leadership requires school leaders to make astute and savvy decisions. Dialogue with peers helps principals consider multiple and varied perspectives and develop their professional reasoning and responses.
<b>Leadership integrity</b>	<i>Who I am as a leader</i>	Principals' systems of beliefs, values, and attitudes that shape their leadership and their confidence, will, and passion to lead with congruence to their inner convictions.

and consider new approaches to their work. Principal supervisors can play an important role in promoting supportive peer networks that foster meaningful ongoing learning for school leaders.

The following is a list of strategies principal supervisors may consider to encourage peer dialogue, offering opportunities for school leaders to share and consider new ideas and perspectives that promote critical reflection and strengthen their professional practice.

**Consultancy protocol:** A process and structure for principals to focus deeply and collaboratively on a specific dilemma or problem of practice, reflect, and explore possible courses of action.

**Instructional walks:** A structured way for principals to observe teaching and learning in each other's schools. By observing and reflecting with a supervisor or peers, principals can calibrate their instructional expectations and adjust their practice accordingly.

**Principal peer observations:** Organized opportunities for principals to observe each other in action — for example, leading a staff meeting or intervention team meeting.

Principals can then provide feedback to one another and explore leadership strategies and approaches they could apply to their own practice.

**Scenario-based discussions:** Case studies or vignettes that engage groups or pairs of principals to examine and analyze complex situations, explore varied perspectives, and identify and evaluate possible courses of action. Together, principals can then consider what aspects of the scenario or action steps identified could be applied to their own schools.

**Co-planned faculty meetings or staff professional learning sessions:** Strategy for principals to collaborate with one another to plan faculty meetings or professional learning sessions so they can learn from and apply each other's expertise and past learning, and ask and address questions or challenges.

By taking an active role in providing structure, time, and support for principals to learn and engage with one another in purposeful ways, principal supervisors cultivate a culture of collaboration, connection, and professional growth that supports principal learning.

## TAPPING INTO AN UNDERUSED RESOURCE

The phrase “professional learning” often brings to mind workshops, conferences, seminars, and classes. Although these events can be valuable sources of learning, research and experience have shown me that peer dialogue can be a meaningful and job-embedded resource for professional learning for principals. The insights and expertise of our colleagues are an often-untapped resource, one that can help us fulfill our collective responsibility to provide all children with high-quality, responsive, and joyful learning experiences. Principal supervisors can play a pivotal role in facilitating and nurturing these opportunities as a way to enrich principals' ongoing growth and capacity to address the challenges of school leadership.

## REFERENCE

**Frag-Davis, S.A. (2013).** *School leaders and networks: Understanding principal peer dialogue as a resource for professional learning* (Publication No. 3602609) [Doctoral dissertation, Lesley University]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing. ■