



Principal supervisors can play an important role in enhancing principals' capacity as instructional leaders while supporting curriculum implementation.

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FOCUS ON PRINCIPALS

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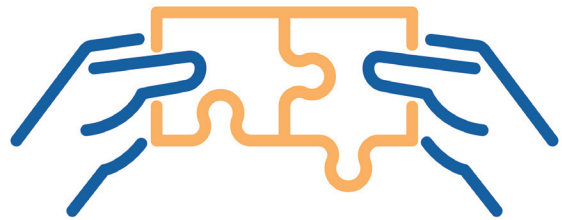
LEADERS PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN IMPLEMENTING NEW CURRICULUM

In the August 2024 issue of *The Learning Professional*, Learning Forward's Shannon Bogle emphasized the critical role of high-quality curriculum and materials, coupled with professional learning, to support student reading development and achievement. One point that resonated for me is the importance of equipping district and school leaders to support teachers with curriculum implementation through effective feedback, coaching, and ongoing data analysis (Bogle, 2024).

Like many districts around the country, my district — Newton Public Schools in Massachusetts — recently adopted a new high-quality, evidence-based reading curriculum for grades K-5. Last year, I took part in a powerful professional learning experience for leaders that emphasized the value of instructionally focused learning to support its implementation.

In my 14 years as a principal and three years as a principal supervisor, I had never experienced this type of professional learning structure. The power of this approach lies in its job-embedded nature, grounded in our specific curriculum and school contexts. It offers meaningful collaboration between district leaders, principals, and literacy specialists while engaging us in gathering, analyzing, and using data that principals and literacy specialists then apply toward developing specific action plans.

The insights I gained from this curriculum-based professional learning experience have prompted reflection and conversation with colleagues and are helping us to think further about how to best support teachers and other staff in their curriculum implementation.



WHAT CURRICULUM-BASED LEARNING FOR LEADERS LOOKS LIKE

As our district began implementation of the new curriculum — for all schools in grades K-2 and some schools through 5th grade — school principals, literacy specialists, and district leaders from multiple departments engaged in ongoing, facilitated learning to build curriculum understanding, analyze instruction, and monitor progress. This is consistent with the recommendation of the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching, which emphasizes the importance of investing in building leaders' knowledge and understanding of new curriculum so they can support teachers (NIET, 2020).

Guided by a common vision for effective implementation of high-quality instructional materials, as recommended by the Council of Chief State School Officers (2023), our team set out to address key questions about ideal classroom implementation, student experiences, and teacher actions to achieve equitable outcomes. This vision emphasized student engagement with complex tasks, deep discourse, and culturally responsive practices.

Learning sessions oriented our group of leaders to the fundamental structures and design components of the curriculum. We also learned how to support teachers through observations, learning walks, collecting implementation data, and providing feedback. With guidance and support from a coach, we developed tailored, data-driven action plans.

HOW IT'S MAKING A DIFFERENCE IN OUR SCHOOLS

Throughout last year, we collected data at each school and saw positive changes in how leaders are supporting teachers.

Principals reported a deeper understanding of curriculum implementation and an enhanced ability to support teachers effectively, including improved classroom observation practices, improved ability to provide targeted feedback for teachers, and stronger partnerships with literacy specialists.

They noted how they and their teachers benefited from coaching around the observation and data collection processes. “I had never experienced professional development that was so clear about implementation criteria,” said Principal Tony Byers of Williams Elementary School, noting that he learned to define implementation with integrity and then check that implementation during learning walks.

Becca Brogadir, principal of Ward Elementary School, said, “The coaching required us to use the observational data we collected to identify areas for growth. As a team, we (then) hypothesized what actions could positively impact instructional practices and put them into action.”

The principals also noted the ways this process sparked teachers’ interest in expanding their own professional learning. At Mason-Rice Elementary School, teachers asked to join the literacy specialist and Principal Jake Bultema in visiting classrooms to observe their colleagues teaching the new curriculum. They were especially interested in “seeing what student engagement looks and sounds like,” Bultema said. Together, he and his school’s literacy specialist developed plans to support teachers in unpacking curriculum indicators, co-planning lessons, and engaging in joint classroom walk-throughs in the year ahead.

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Through their involvement in curriculum-based professional learning, principals developed valuable insights about effective professional learning that they and district leaders will now carefully consider and incorporate while planning support for the entire principal team and broader curriculum implementation efforts.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

As we expand implementation to grades 3-5 in all schools, I will draw from this valuable professional learning opportunity to further develop structures and opportunities to effectively support principals across the district.

Principal supervisors like me can play an important role in enhancing principals’ capacity as instructional leaders while supporting curriculum implementation. Yet for many central office leaders, a myriad of issues often fragment their attention, diluting focus on instructional leadership (Honig & Rainey, 2020).

I experienced this myself during our professional learning experience last year, when meeting conflicts, school visits, unexpected events, and other competing demands limited my ability to consistently participate in scheduled learning sessions. While I learned a great deal from the sessions I attended, missing sessions limited my opportunities to fully engage in the work, more fully understand the curriculum, and critically reflect on the implications for principal and teacher support.

As I continue to grow in my practice as a district leader, I am committed to examining ways to center instructional leadership support in my work through deliberate focus and collaboration with colleagues. Aligning our work and focusing on our most important priority — supporting teaching and learning — is important for all principal supervisors because engaging in deliberate, focused, continuous practices to center instructional leadership and help principals grow improves principal leadership and outcomes for students. (Honig & Rainey, 2020).

When implementing a new curriculum, it is natural to think first about the needs of teachers on the front line of instruction. However, to effectively support them, we must focus on leaders as well. With deep curriculum understanding, leaders can better anticipate needs, establish support structures, and provide focused feedback to improve teaching practices and student outcomes. By empowering principals and district leaders, we support instructional leadership that maximizes the benefit of high-quality curricula through improved teacher support.

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