**Empowering Principals with LCK:**

**Reframing Existing District Structures Can Bolster Instructional Leadership**

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**Empowering Principals with LCK:**

**Reframing Existing District Structures Can Provide Bolster Instructional Leadership**

School principals are tasked with a range of complex roles; chief among these are responsibilities related to instructional leadership. Instructional leadership itself is complex, as principals work at the intersection of standards, supervision approaches, coaching, and policies. Leading learning can be complicated further when principals work with teachers outside of their own areas of content expertise (what we term *instructional mismatch*).

A challenge to empowered instructional leadership is that principals may feel they lack credibility when working with teachers in situations of instructional mismatch (Lochmiller, 2019). One avenue toward addressing this challenge is helping principals develop leadership content knowledge (LCK). The idea of LCK suggests that while no principal can know *everything* about every content area, all principals can work to develop their understanding of unique aspects of effective pedagogy across various content areas (Stein & Nelson, 2003).

Although the work of developing LCK can (and should) start in preparation programs, the work cannot end there. Preparation programs are time-limited, so principals cannot fully develop their LCK during a single degree or certification program. Also, the evidence around pedagogy in content areas continues to evolve. LCK development is a responsibility shared by preparation programs, school districts, and principals themselves as leaders-of-learning.

How school districts structure principal learning for LCK, and how district leaders signal and support that learning across the system, are critical components of creating confident instructional leaders. Our conversations and ongoing work with aspiring leaders and school principals suggest promising avenues for empowering principals through the development of LCK. On a positive note, many school districts likely already have in place building blocks needed to support the development of LCK. Pathways to stronger principal learning supports involve reframing and repurposing these existing district structures.

**Structuring Learning for LCK**

A powerful approach to helping principals reframe thinking around effective instructional leadership is for districts to provide professional learning (PL) that explicitly centers on the development of principals’ LCK. For instance, Darren, an elementary school principal, shared that weekly principals’ meetings dedicated time for literacy and mathematics specialists to teach principals about elements of elementary mathematics and literacy instruction. Having the opportunity to learn directly from content specialists helped him better understand what he observed in classrooms.

Darren’s experience was not the norm in our conversations with principals. Though robust, LCK-related PL designed for principals is all too rare, and may require more substantial resources than some districts are poised to dedicate. At the same time, in many districts, existing structures are well-positioned to wrap LCK into principal learning.

***Structure 1: Teacher-Focused Professional Learning***

Principals who recognize gaps in LCK often take it upon themselves to address those gaps. For example, Chip, a middle school leader with a social studies background, talked about his strategy for addressing his LCK gap: “I went with math to their content meetings, their content professional development so that I could learn about Number Talks and those things.”

Teacher PL is typically an existing and robust component of district approaches to improve teaching and learning, whether episodic (e.g., training events) or ongoing (e.g., professional learning communities) in nature. Although a subset of this PL is designed to improve teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge, principals, like Chip, can also participate in this PL to develop LCK, while simultaneously strengthening relationships and credibility with teachers. To make systemic use of existing content-related teacher PL, districts should invite participation of leaders as well as teachers, and encourage principals to include such PL in their own professional growth plans.

***Structure 2: Learning Walks***

Principals commonly engage in the practice of *learning walks,* though how this practice intersects with developing LCK can vary. Learning walks described as effective at building principal learning around LCK integrated content-area specialists (e.g., instructional coaches, department heads, curriculum specialists) as well as teachers and administrators. For example, Beatriz (high school principal, former mathematics teacher) talked about integrating specialists into learning walks: “I call in district personnel ... curriculum content writers ... we’ll pull in department heads and say, ‘Hey, do you want to come with me? Show me what should be happening or what you think.’”

Although described by various names (e.g., conversation walks, instructional rounds), common components of effective learning walks include collaboration among teachers, campus leaders, school district leaders, and specialists to set a focus for the walks and build knowledge around what they expect to encounter during their time in classrooms. They then conduct observations of classrooms and debrief afterwards to inform next steps (with teachers and/or each other) (City, 2011; Zepeda & Lanoue, 2017). Although learning walks are often oriented toward improvements in teacher practice, adding a layer of intentionality focused on building LCK in this process can help principals understand nuances of content-area practices they observe and rethink approaches to engaging with teachers (Zepeda & Lanoue, 2017).

***Structure 3: Assignment of Support Personnel***

Some principals have ready access to content-area specialists; others have specialists assigned to their campuses to assist in teacher and leader support. Several principals we talked with struggled with inconsistent and unpredictable placement of specialists from their districts. Mateo, a middle school principal, shared his frustration: “Last year we had three [specialists] coming to our school constantly, and this year we have nobody.” The change was prompted due to slight shifts in student performance on accountability exams; limited resources meant that specialist support was shifted to a campus deemed in greater need.

In a time of limited resources, districts should reconsider how support personnel are assigned to schools. Principals often described the allocation of specialist supports based on results of accountability exams, regardless of the presence or absence of content-area expertise already in the campus context. Mateo, as a former mathematics teacher, was less in need of mathematics specialists to support teachers; he still needed support in other content areas. Mechanisms for placement of specialists should take into account principals’ areas of expertise so that personnel allocation can both address gaps (by supporting teachers) and build long-term capacity (by supporting leader LCK development).

***Structure 4: Using Artifacts to Deepen Dialogue***

Every school district has documents and artifacts (e.g., content-area standards, rubrics, walkthrough forms) that guide classroom practice and observations. These have the potential to foster principal learning. Karen (an elementary principal) described “a lot of planning with teams and digging into the curriculum and standards” as part of her instructional leadership and collaboration with teachers. Still, principals can hit roadblocks. Vanya (elementary principal with a reading background) shared that applying the [state-required teacher evaluation] rubric, “in a content area where you have no knowledge base, it’s going to be a little harder [to use].”

These documents can be positioned as springboards to developing LCK. PL around these artifacts can shift from general overviews (e.g., how to apply the process) to deep-dive dialogues around how to recognize and connect content-specific practices with the language of the documents. For example, questioning may be viewed generically (e.g., “teacher asked questions of multiple students”) or in more nuanced, content-specific ways (e.g., “teacher pressed students for mathematical justification”). This level of noticing requires LCK, and developing LCK requires the opportunity for principals to discuss issues such as: *What does effective questioning sound like in the mathematics, science, English language arts, or social studies classroom?* Including time and space for such discussions—ideally facilitated by content-area specialists and bolstered by follow-up learning walks—can help empower principals as savvy observers and coaches for teachers.

***Structure 5: Integrate LCK into Leader Professional Learning Networks (PLN)***

Principals need to connect and learn with other principals, since the principalship can isolating in terms of opportunities to learn alongside peers. PLNs can facilitate idea-sharing and learning across campus boundaries as well as a range of topics. Several principals talked about participating in PLNs within their districts. For instance, Danelle, an elementary principal with a secondary science background, talked enthusiastically about her Superintendent’s book study group (comprised of campus leaders), which was reading *The Speed of Trust* by Covey and Merrill (2006). Other topics addressed in principals’ PLNs included social emotional learning, content-neutral practices, and “how to be a better principal.”

Though principals we worked with acknowledged LCK-related gaps, none described ongoing PLN structures that intentionally included texts or topics aimed at building LCK. The use of PLNs is a wide-open opportunity for districts to empower principals by helping them build LCK. Without giving up the important topics already being addressed in PLNs, district leaders can incorporate regular space in PLNs for LCK-related readings, dialogues, and activities.

**Signals & Supports**

In moments of limited or dwindling resources, restructuring PL for principals can seem a daunting and even impossible task. Our work with principals suggests that districts don’t need to recreate the wheel: Many existing structures can be reframed and repurposed to empower principals by helping them develop LCK. This work requires two commitments among district leaders: a commitment to signal the importance of LCK as an essential component of instructional leadership, and a commitment to provide explicit opportunities for the development of LCK within existing structures.

To the first, district leaders must wrestle with how district policies and operating procedures acknowledge or downplay the role of LCK in instructional leadership. Where the development of LCK is not openly and regularly discussed, or is not explicitly encouraged (for example, in job descriptions or summer professional learning catalogs), principals may infer that the development of LCK is low priority. Or, they may assume that bringing content knowledge into teacher supervision is the job of others (i.e., content specialists). On the other hand, district leaders signal the importance of LCK when they bring LCK to the forefront of conversations about instructional leadership and provide supports for principals to develop LCK.

To the second, districts can provide explicit opportunities for principals to develop LCK. The *good news* for district leaders is that this work can be accomplished without necessarily creating new or expensive structures. Principals we’ve worked with describe a constellation of existing structures (Figure 1) that, if marketed to principals and reframed or repurposed, could create ample space for LCK on principals’ learning dockets. Opportunities for purposeful development of LCK include:

**Figure 1**

*A Pathway to Bolstering Instructional Leadership Through Reframing and Repurposing District Structures*

1. **Inviting and Integrating Principals into Teacher-focused Professional Learning.** When events, workshops, and other professional learning events are developed for teachers, advertise these to principals as well, and encourage participation in tandem with teacher teams.
2. **Restructuring Learning Walks to Attend to LCK.** Ensure that content-area specialists are integrated into learning walks and that specialists preconference and debrief with principals to build LCK in addition to providing teachers with content-related support.
3. **(Re)considering How Support Personnel are Assigned to Campuses.** Rather than assigning instructional coaches or personnel based solely on needs highlighted by test scores, consider principals’ strengths or gaps in LCK in priority areas and use intentional assignment of content-area experts/coaches to address such gaps.
4. **Using Artifacts to Deepen Dialogue.** Use existing documents and artifacts such as content-area standards and forms used in supervision, evaluation, and walkthrough processes to anchor principal professional learning and to explore how research-based, content-specific practices are evidenced in classrooms.
5. **Integrating LCK into Leader Professional Learning Networks (PLN).** Without discarding important areas of focus like team building, leadership qualities, and social emotional learning (to name a few), create regular space for ongoing development of LCK within PLNs.

Instructional leadership can be a daunting task, given all the responsibilities school principals bear. LCK is a critical component of instructional leadership, and empowered and transformative principals require support in enhancing their LCK. In many school districts, structures that could support the development of LCK already exist. With slight adjustment, these can be reframed and repurposed to support the development of a cadre of principals with robust LCK who are able to engage in rich feedback processes with teachers across content areas.

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