

A teaching-and-learning approach to principal supervision

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Providing equitable and effective instruction for all students will require principal supervisors to change their focus.

District leaders typically agree that it is not enough for school principals to be capable school managers. They also must be agents of educational equity, striving to ensure that all students — especially students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and others who have not, historically, been well-served by our public schools — receive excellent instruction. Recent events, including widespread school closures caused by COVID-19 and demonstrations for racial justice led by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, only highlight just how urgent the need is for principals to play such a role, providing strong and equity-minded instructional leadership.

But what can school districts do to help principals strengthen their equity-focused instructional leadership? Our research and extensive work with districts points to an answer that may surprise some readers: They should look to the principal supervisor.

In many districts, principal supervisors have long served as compliance monitors, evaluators, and operations managers — not as supports for principals' instructional leadership. The rapid shift to remote learning in the spring prompted many principal supervisors, and principals too, to double down on operational matters like meal and laptop distribution and modeling scenarios for school safety. Our research, however, suggests that a better option is for principal supervisors to leave that work to others and focus on helping principals ensure high-quality teaching and learning for each and every student.

Our findings come from more than 10 years of research in districts of various sizes that were working to strengthen their central offices as engines of educational equity (Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2014, 2019, 2020; Honig, Venkateswaran, & McNeil, 2017). As part of their efforts, leaders in all these districts took concrete steps to focus principal supervision on supporting principals' growth as instructional leaders, but they ended up with quite different results.

In the positive cases, principal supervisors took what we call a teaching-and-learning approach — engaging in modeling and other practices characteristic of high-quality mentoring — to help principals grow as instructional leaders. A wealth of research on learning suggests that those practices should lead to positive results for principals (e.g., Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Lave, 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Tharp & Gallimore, 1991; Wenger, 1998). And, in fact, we found that the principals whose supervisors took this approach over time spent more time on instructional leadership, engaged in progressively more challenging instructional leadership tasks, and identified their supervisor as a support for their instructional leadership.

The principal supervisors in the negative cases, on the other hand, still engaged in traditional forms of principal supervision, such as monitoring principals' compliance and attending to operational matters, despite their district's substantial emphasis on shifting their roles. Also consistent with the research on learning, their principals did not grow as instructional leaders and reported that their principal supervisor did not support and sometimes even impeded their ability to lead instructional improvement.

We elaborate on these differences and describe how districts can help their principal supervisors shift from an emphasis on compliance and management to a real partnership with principals, helping them grow as instructional leaders.

How to support principals' instructional leadership

When we say principal supervisors support principals' growth by taking a teaching-and-learning approach, we mean that they help principals lead their own learning — actively taking steps to continuously assess and improve the quality of their leadership. Principal supervisors use specific teaching moves as they work directly with principals one-on-one and in learning communities.

Helping principals lead their own learning

Research on learning shows that professional growth depends not on formal training or even coaching but on learning opportunities that professionals create for themselves and pursue on the job as they go about their regular work (Brown, et al., 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Principal supervisors in the positive cases helped principals lead their own learning in ways consistent with this idea.

For example, several principal supervisors started the year partnering with principals to conduct systematic self-assessments of principals' leadership along with their district's principal performance standards. The principals and their supervisors then worked together to use the self-assessments to identify the principals' strengths and to develop specific learning plans to support the principals' growth. Those plans tended to emphasize principals' learning on the job by, for example, inviting other school principals to observe their leadership in action and give them real-time feedback.

Principal supervisors in the positive cases also supported principals in leading their own learning by modeling how to do so. For example, one principal supervisor routinely shared her own learning plans with principals, which reinforced the value of principals' leading their own learning and demonstrated that learning was truly their shared work. Others helped principals access resources they could use to lead their own learning. For example, one principal supervisor encouraged a principal to visit the principal at a neighboring school to deepen his understanding of how to support teachers in their literacy instruction. The principal supervisor said, "I'm like a matchmaker. I love helping my principals get to know each other that way."

By contrast, principal supervisors in the negative cases tended to begin the year with traditional goal-setting meetings in which principals set improvement goals primarily for their schools, not their instructional leadership, based on test score results, not evidence of their own practice. In these cases, principal supervisors did not work with principals to create specific plans to achieve these goals or revisit the goals and discuss progress together throughout the year. These principal supervisors tended to position themselves as the main leader of principals' learning. Some provided such extensive coaching that principals became somewhat passive learners in ways not conducive to their growth; others mainly directed and monitored principals' work.

Using specific teaching and learning moves

All of the principal supervisors worked directly with principals, both one-on-one and when running principal meetings. During these interactions, the principal supervisors in the positive cases stood out for how they used specific teaching-and-learning moves consistent with adult learning research on the importance of apprenticeships to learning (e.g., Brown et al., 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Tharp & Gallimore, 1991).

For example, principal supervisors in the positive cases typically *modeled* for their principals how to think and act like an instructional leader in particular situations and gave the principals opportunities to practice with progressively less assistance. For example, during a principals' meeting, one supervisor role-played with a principal how to help school leadership teams create stronger improvement plans by interrogating the rationales for their choices and then prioritizing focus areas. The other principals then debriefed what they observed and took turns role-playing with each other and receiving feedback.

In another instance, when working with a principal novice at identifying high-quality instruction, a principal supervisor first met with the principal to discuss classroom observation strategies, including how to talk with students about their learning. In the classroom, the supervisor used the new strategies with the principal observing and taking notes followed by debriefing. In subsequent visits, they switched roles, with the principal talking to students and the principal supervisor providing feedback. Ultimately, the principal visited classrooms without the supervisor, documented their own practice and self-reflections, and shared those with the supervisor for feedback.

Principal supervisors in the negative cases generally did not model for principals but told principals what to do or stepped in to do tasks for principals rather than showing them how. One principal supervisor went so far as to go into her principals' budget to make changes, and another assigned coaching staff to teachers — tasks important for principals to learn to conduct well, especially because principals are ultimately responsible for their budgets and staffing. But one supervisor explained that some issues were too "high stakes" to take the time to teach principals how to handle them.

Principal supervisors in the positive cases also used *talk moves* to help principals see and improve their instructional leadership. For example, one principal supervisor observed consistently unambitious teaching in one school's classrooms, but the principal gave every teacher a high rating on their evaluation. In a series of conversations with the principal, the supervisor juxtaposed the observational and evaluation data and asked the principal to reconcile the two. Another principal supervisor repeatedly asked his principals to provide evidence to support claims they made about the quality of teaching they had observed together in classrooms, sometimes playing devil's advocate by saying "show me" or "convince me" that those teachers are or are not teaching to particular standards. Such strategies helped principals internalize ways of thinking like an instructional leader and eventually ask themselves those questions.

In the negative cases, principal supervisors also asked questions of their principals but not in ways that supported principals' learning. For example, during principal meetings, one principal supervisor asked his principals to report on their "wows" and "wonders" following a series of classroom visits. In response, the principals made brief superficial comments such as, "Hopeful," "Nice vibe," and "No distractions," after which the principal supervisor called for a break and then moved on to other topics.

When they ran principal meetings, principal supervisors in the positive cases intentionally brought outside resources in to support principals' instructional leadership growth and protected the meetings from outside interference that distracted from that focus — moves learning research refers to as *bridging* and *buffering*. Principal supervisors worked intensively with outside guests in advance to ensure that their visits would advance principals' growth as instructional leaders, and they frequently refused requests from central office staff and others for time with principals mainly to share information, instead asking them to put information in writing for distribution in other ways.

Principal supervisors in the negative cases also brought outside guests into their principals' meetings, but they did not ensure their participation supported principals' growth as instructional leaders. Many allowed a virtual parade of outsiders to dominate meetings, presenting on a wide range of topics, from writing assessment procedures to potential grading software to how to install a skylight in their school buildings. One three-hour meeting we observed included eight different topics, only one of which related to instructional leadership; the remaining seven pertained to operational and administrative matters.

How to prioritize the right work

When we share our findings with principal supervisors, we usually hear a sigh of relief, but sometimes some concern. In larger districts, some principal supervisors tell us that they always thought their job would involve a partnership with principals around their instructional leadership growth and that they know that is the right work. But once they took the job, they found their central office colleagues and school principals were so used to principal supervisors not focusing on instructional leadership that they struggled to do so. In smaller districts, superintendents who also supervise principals tell us that they understand the importance of an instructional focus, but because their professional success has hinged on their proficiency in other areas, they are not sure how to make the change. These concerns have grown more acute as principal supervisors feel the pressure to address pandemic-related operational matters, even after the all-hands-on-deck phase of remote learning has ended.

Principal supervisors are in particularly strategic positions to help principals lead for high-quality teaching and learning, especially now, and our research shows there are things central office leaders can do to support these instructionally focused partnerships between principals and their supervisors.

Fundamentally rethink the role

Some districts will need to fundamentally redesign the principal supervisor job to make supporting principals' growth as instructional leaders the main work of principal supervisors (in larger districts) or a progressively more substantial part of the superintendent's job (in smaller districts) and then actually hire people who are ready to take on that core focus. When districts in our research simply added support for principals' instructional leadership onto long-standing principal supervisor job descriptions filled with various other responsibilities, those other responsibilities tended to dominate principal supervisors' time.

Sometimes district leaders ask us, "Then, who is going to do all the other work a principal supervisor has always done?" The answer: "Someone else!" When we help principal supervisors map out their long-standing work, they often find that the vast majority of that other work is actually already someone else's job, whether in human resources, facilities, or elsewhere in the central office — it might even be the job of principals themselves.

Some district leaders wonder if times of extreme budgetary and other challenges are right for such transformations. In fact, times like these are especially the right ones. When principal supervisors do other people's work, they create costly redundancies. Even during more usual times, each central office staff person should be taking a hard look at their performance and focusing resources on what is most essential to and supportive of excellent and equitable teaching and learning in schools.

Organize for principals' learning

Many districts will need to rethink how many principal supervisors they have and which principals report to them. When principal supervisors have large numbers of principals who report to them, they simply cannot work intensively with each one. Our study districts lowered the number of principals who reported to each supervisor, typically by identifying inefficiencies elsewhere and redirecting resources to add principal supervisor positions, and other districts can do well to consider similar strategies. Districts should also organize principals into groups that are small enough to enable principal supervisors to truly partner with each one of them while also being large and varied enough in terms of experience to make a rich principal professional learning community. In our study districts, this meant moving away from long-standing principal meetings that involve all principals, grouping principals by school feeder pattern, or setting apart low-performing schools in their own group. Because the work of instructional leadership varies by school level, we've found that districts often do better to create separate groups for elementary and secondary school principals.

Help principal supervisors lead their own learning

Districts should support principal supervisors' growth by making that a core responsibility of their own supervisors — often chief academic officers or superintendents in mid-sized to large districts. The main new cost our study districts incurred in making these shifts was for outside coaches to provide professional development to principal supervisors. But, surprisingly, the principal supervisors who had access to the higher-quality coaching did not grow or persist in taking a teaching-and-learning approach while those who grew tended to have access to weaker coaching.

We found the most persistence and growth in districts where the supervisors of principal supervisors (SPSs) engaged in the cost-neutral strategy of directly mentoring principal supervisors in their new role. These SPSs modeled how supervisors could handle challenging situations with principals, helped supervisors access resources to support their work, and buffered them from distractions from their instructional leadership focus. In other words, they used many of the same strategies for the supervisors that supervisors used with principals.

Principal supervisors in the positive cases across districts — especially small ones where the superintendent served as supervisor — also stood out for leading their own learning. Many of these supervisors not only created and implemented their own learning plans, they also connected with like-minded colleagues to seek and share advice about their work with principals. Also, these supervisors protected their time from any distractions that took them away from their instructional leadership focus. As one put it, “You have to have the courage to say, ‘I can’t serve on that committee, can’t go to that meeting, can’t do that right now. Sorry. Tied up in a school doing my business.’ ”

Don't stop there — improve the whole entire central office

In the districts we studied, the effort to improve principal supervision was one part of a larger plan to redesign the whole central office to ensure that each and every central office function worked together to support equitable teaching and learning. These broader efforts stemmed from leaders' understanding that central offices generally did not support such results and to do so required significant changes to the status quo. And yet, when principal supervisors attempted to change their own practices, they often ran up against resistance from other district systems — in human resources, teaching and learning, facilities, and other areas — that were slower to change. Their experience reinforces the importance of districts shifting principal supervision while also transforming other parts of their central office to ensure principals' growth as equity-focused instructional leaders and, ultimately, provide an equitable and excellent education for each and every student.

The pandemic and protests of the past several months have shone an especially bright light on persistent inequities in our public school systems and generated a broad consensus that school districts must not return to business as usual. The approach to principal supervision that we describe offers one step forward. And as principal supervisors embark on this new work, their experience will show district leaders that other central office systems are misaligned with their instructional focus and must also chart a new course.

Note: This article is based on their recent book, *Supervising Principals for Instructional Leadership: A Teaching and Learning Approach* (Harvard Education Press, 2020).

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