



# FROM PROCEDURES to PARTNERSHIP

## Redesigning Principal Supervision To Help Principals Lead for High-quality Teaching and Learning

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This publication is part of the Leading for Effective Teaching (LET) project, a partnership between the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the University of Washington Center for Educational Leadership. Growing from the Foundation's broader efforts to support teaching effectiveness, LET has two goals: supporting school districts that are working to improve instructional leadership, and producing research, tools and other resources to support educators across the country. For more information and access to LET resources, please go to <https://www.k-12leadership.org/bill-melinda-gates-foundation-leading-effective-teaching>.

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This publication is based on research funded in part by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

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CITATION:

Rainey, L., & Honig, M. I. (2015, August). *From procedures to partnership: Redesigning principal supervision to help principals lead for high-quality teaching and learning*. Retrieved from University of Washington Center for Educational Leadership website: <https://www.k-12leadership.org/publications/from-procedures-to-partnership-uwcel-dl2.pdf>

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# Contents

## 4 Executive Summary

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## 6 Introduction

---

## 7 Background

---

## 8 School Systems and Design Ideas

- 8 #1: DEFINE THE PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR’S ROLE AS FOCUSED ON PRINCIPAL GROWTH AND LEARNING
- 11 #2: DEFINE THE PRINCIPAL’S ROLE AS FOCUSED ON INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP
- 13 #3: PRINCIPAL SUPERVISORS REPORT TO, OR NEAR, THE SUPERINTENDENT
- 15 #4: PRINCIPAL SUPERVISORS WORK WITH A MANAGEABLE CASELOAD OF PRINCIPALS
- 18 #5: PRINCIPAL SUPERVISORS OVERSEE A SUBSET OF STRATEGICALLY GROUPED PRINCIPALS
- 21 #6: ENSURE PRINCIPAL SUPERVISORS VIEW THEIR JOB AS *TEACHING* PRINCIPALS TO GROW AS INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERS
- 24 #7: PRINCIPAL SUPERVISORS RECEIVE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOCUSED ON IMPROVING THEIR CAPACITY TO HELP PRINCIPALS GROW AS INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERS
- 27 #8: PROACTIVELY PROTECT PRINCIPAL SUPERVISORS’ TIME
- 30 #9: WORK TO TRANSFORM OTHER CENTRAL OFFICE UNITS FOR BETTER PERFORMANCE IN WAYS ALIGNED WITH THE PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR-PRINCIPAL RELATIONSHIP

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## 33 Conclusion

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## 34 References

# Executive Summary

Principal supervisors — the central office staff who traditionally have provided primary oversight for school principals — can be an important resource for school improvement when they emphasize principal growth and learning (Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, & Newton, 2010; Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2014). Through a collaboration between the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the University of Washington's Center for Educational Leadership, 11 school systems applied lessons from emerging research and practice to transform their principal supervisor positions as part of broader strategies to realize significant improvements in teaching and learning districtwide. Teams from these systems met quarterly since 2012 to grapple with the research, share their own experiences and develop various research- and experience-based tools to improve how their principal supervisors help principals grow as instructional leaders.

We talked with leaders in each of these school systems about how they redesigned their principal supervisor positions according to the lessons from emerging research, and how they have been tackling early implementation challenges. While each system had its own path to redefining the role and work of principal supervisors, the following trends appeared strongly across multiple sites:

**Define the principal supervisors' role as focused on principal growth and learning.** School systems re-crafted the principal supervisor job description and specified activities and uses of time in response to research finding that successful principal supervisors strive to focus 100 percent of their time on principals' growth as instructional leaders. However, when re-focusing the principal supervisor role, some school systems found other central office administrators and principals did not understand the new role of the principal supervisor. In response, leaders in these school systems communicated consistent messages about the new principal supervisor role throughout the entire school system.

**Define the principal's role as focused on instructional leadership.** To support principal supervisors' work with principals, the school systems refined their definitions of instructional leadership by identifying what principals need to do to support high-quality instruction in their schools. Because shifting their own definition of the principalship was difficult for some principals, leaders in several systems engaged principals in multiple ways to help them understand their new role.

**Principal supervisors report to, or near, the superintendent.** The school systems elevated their principal supervisors to report to the superintendents' direct reports as a signal of the importance of their work and to promote communication between school system decision makers and principal supervisors who hold significant amounts of information about schools. Because these districts did not want to overload their superintendents with direct reports, however, they generally had their principal supervisors report to cabinet-level leaders.

**Principal supervisors work with a manageable caseload of principals.** Research suggests that principal supervisors can know well and work intensively with between eight to 12 principals. The school systems profiled in this report worked to reduce principal supervisors' caseloads over time. To fund additional positions, school system leaders generally reallocated funds or converted existing positions. Some kept their principal supervisors' caseloads high but provided staff to assist with the workload.

**Principal supervisors oversee a subset of strategically grouped principals.** Several school systems heterogeneously grouped principals to help them learn from each other and support each other's learning. To minimize disruption to relationships, district leaders considered existing principal supervisor-principal relationships among other criteria when strategically grouping principals.

**Ensure principal supervisors view their job as teaching principals to be instructional leaders.**

Because research suggests that successful principal supervisors view their job as teaching principals to be instructional leaders, some school system leaders first evaluated the extent to which their existing principal supervisors took a teaching orientation to their work and then redesigned their hiring processes to evaluate candidates' orientation to principal supervision. When district leaders had a hard time finding a sufficient number of principal-supervisor candidates with the desired orientation, they chose to leave some positions open and wait for more appropriate candidates.

**Provide principal supervisors with professional development focused on improving their capacity to help principals grow as instructional leaders.**

To help principal supervisors operate as effective teachers of instructional leadership to principals, several districts provided professional development that was time-intensive, job-embedded and, importantly, primarily focused on how principal supervisors can support principals' learning. Some leaders used time during other principal supervisor meetings or from one-on-one consultations for such professional learning opportunities.

**Proactively protect principal supervisors' time.**

Because successful principal supervisors protect their time to work on principals' growth as instructional leaders, leaders in these school systems designated specific days for principal supervisors to work with principals and empowered principal supervisors to turn down requests that pulled them away from work with principals. Nevertheless, some principal supervisors still found that they did not have enough time for sufficient work with all their principals. Further protecting principal supervisor time, some leaders reassigned non-instructional tasks to new or existing central office administrators.

**Work to transform other central office units for better performance in ways aligned with the principal supervisor-principal relationship.**

Because successful principal supervisors work in a central office that is also working to transform other units to improve performance, district leaders in some systems initiated discussions about how to change the central office culture as a whole toward a goal of maximizing the amount of time teachers, principals and principal supervisors devote to instructional improvement. However, several systems struggled to engage other central office staff in improving performance. A starting point used by a few school systems was to pair principal supervisors with cross-unit teams to serve specific schools.

Overall, the experiences of the school systems profiled in this report demonstrate that redesigning principal supervision to support principals' growth as instructional leaders is possible in diverse types of school systems, but such work takes time, communication and people with the right orientation to the work.

# Introduction

Principal supervisors — the central office staff who traditionally oversee school principals — can be an important resource for school improvement *when* they emphasize principal growth and learning (Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, & Newton, 2010; Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2014). Recent research shows the value of principal supervisors shedding their many long-standing responsibilities and focusing on leading the professional development of principals for improved teaching and learning districtwide. However, in most districts, such principal support roles represent a significant departure from business-as-usual and present major implementation challenges.

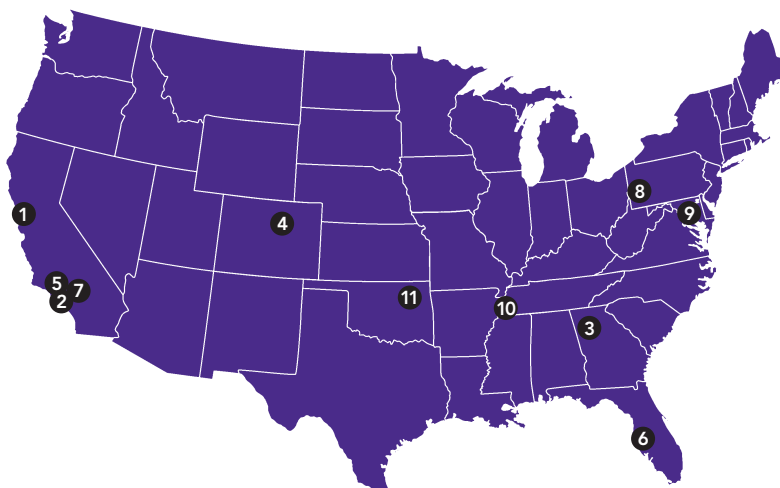
What happens when central office leaders understand the importance of remaking the principal supervisor role, turning it away from traditional supervision and focusing it on providing dedicated support for principals' growth as instructional leaders?

As part of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Leading for Effective Teaching (LET) project, 11 school systems applied lessons from emerging research and practice to transform their principal supervisor positions as part of broader strategies to realize significant improvements in teaching and learning districtwide.

This paper describes the initial efforts of these school systems to change how their principal supervisors support principals — how they redesigned their principal supervisor positions and how they have tackled early implementation challenges. Their experiences demonstrate that redesigning principal supervision to support principals' growth as instructional leaders is possible, but such work takes time, communication and people with the right orientation to the work.

## LEADING FOR EFFECTIVE TEACHING SCHOOL SYSTEMS

- 1 Aspire Public Schools
- 2 The Alliance for College-Ready Public Schools
- 3 Atlanta Public Schools
- 4 Denver Public Schools
- 5 Green Dot Public Schools
- 6 Hillsborough County Public Schools
- 7 Program for Uplifting Communities (PUC) Schools
- 8 Pittsburgh Public Schools
- 9 Prince George's County Public Schools
- 10 Shelby County Schools
- 11 Tulsa Public Schools



# Background

The Leading for Effective Teaching (LET) initiative is a partnership between the Gates Foundation and the University of Washington Center for Educational Leadership (CEL), growing from the Foundation's broader efforts to support teaching effectiveness. Starting in May 2012, leaders from each of the 11 LET school districts and charter management organizations (CMOs) met quarterly to learn about research on principal supervision and more broadly about central office leadership in teaching and learning improvement. The main research findings came from a study of school district central offices that remade their principal supervisor role in ways that the District Leadership Design Lab (DL2) associated with supporting principals' growth as instructional leaders (Honig, Copland, Rainey, Lorton, & Newton, 2010; Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2014).<sup>1,2</sup>

As part of this project, teams from each school system grappled with the research, shared their own experiences and developed various research- and experience-based tools to inform their own plans for improving how their principal supervisors could help principals grow as instructional leaders. For example, CEL worked with participating school systems to synthesize the main lessons they took from the research and their own experience and distilled them into the Principal Support Framework<sup>3</sup>. School system leaders then used this framework to inform their plans to improve how they supported principals as instructional leaders.

For this paper, we asked these school system leaders how they had taken action to create a system of support to help principal supervisors succeed. Our interview questions referenced DL2's earlier research that identified nine main ways school districts can support principal supervisors and their work with principals. The following sections examine the ways in which the participating school systems adopted these supports and how they addressed the inevitable challenges along the way.

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<sup>1</sup>A subsequent study further examined how external support providers provided intensive, personalized support that helped to build principal supervisors' capacity to work with principals (Honig, M.I., Venkateswaran, N., McNeil, P. & Myers Twitchell, J. (In preparation). Research use as learning: The case of school district central offices. Seattle, WA: University of Washington.).

<sup>2</sup>Our earlier research used the following to measure principals' growth as instructional leaders: principals' engagement in progressively more challenging instructional leadership activities; principal and other professionals' reports of principal supervisors' work and efficacy; and our analysis of the consistency between principal supervisors' practices and practices identified in research as associated with helping adults deepen their professional practice.

<sup>3</sup>University of Washington Center for Educational Leadership (2013). Principal support framework. Seattle, WA: Author. Retrieved from <http://info.k-12leadership.org/principal-support-framework>.

# School Systems and Design Ideas

## #1 DEFINE THE PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR'S ROLE AS FOCUSED ON PRINCIPAL GROWTH AND LEARNING

Our earlier research underscores that successful principal supervisors strive to focus 100 percent of their time on principals' growth as instructional leaders. Such a focus does not mean that these principal supervisors spend 100 percent of their time in schools. Rather, the principal supervisors filter all decisions about how they spend their time based on the extent to which engaging in activities will help them advance principals' growth as instructional leaders in tangible ways. We have found that in larger school systems, principal supervision is dedicated to one or more positions and in smaller systems (e.g., those with fewer than 10,000 students), superintendents and directors of teaching and learning shift how they use their time to focus more of it on principals' growth as instructional leaders.

In most of the school systems profiled in this report, defining the principal supervisors' role to focus on principals' growth as instructional leaders marked a significant shift from their previous job description. As a leader from Hillsborough County Public Schools explained:

*This was a huge shift for Hillsborough because our [principal supervisors] were pretty much there to solve problems, fight fires, advocate for principals. ... So you can imagine, now we're telling them, "Your role is going to be to develop principal capacity to function as instructional leaders in their schools." Which means that you need to know their teaching rubrics. You need to be able to identify teaching practices, and give feedback, and coach people to develop them. You need to know what it is that principals [need to do]. You need to be in school to see how principals are doing these things.*

### FROM RESEARCH TO ACTION:

**Research-based design element:** Successful principal supervisors work to focus 100% of their time on principals' growth as instructional leaders.

**Early implementation:** School systems re-crafted the principal supervisor job description and specified activities/time allocations.

**Challenge and response:** When re-focusing the principal supervisor role, some districts found other central office administrators and principals did not understand the new principal supervisor role. In response, leaders communicated consistent messages about the new principal supervisor role throughout the school system.

To help facilitate this shift, these school systems met in fall 2012 to engage with tools and content that helped them re-craft the formal job description for that position. The main tools — a process protocol and sample job description — called on teams to remove various operational and/or managerial tasks from their current job descriptions and focus them on responsibilities directly related to helping principals grow as instructional leaders. The protocol first asked leaders to consider what supports they wanted their principals to have; it then helped them decide which of those supports the principal supervisor should provide and which might more productively fall to others within the central office. In so doing, these leaders were flipping some traditional processes for crafting job descriptions on their head: Rather than asking first what principal supervisors should do, they started with the question, "What do principals



need?” and worked backwards from there. As one Hillsborough County Public Schools leader remarked, “It was at that time [when we defined principal instructional leadership] that we addressed, ‘If we are expecting this, as principals, how can we not also address the role of ... our principal supervisors?’” A Shelby County Schools leader described a similar realization:

*[We] discovered that the majority of the things that principals needed, that were instructional and that would help them to improve their instructional leadership [were not being met]. ... I began the process of doing the research to look at what other districts are doing to support their principals in an instructional fashion. We developed what’s called a job analysis questionnaire within the district, and then wrote the job description ... with the [principal support] framework as a basis again to identify those roles and responsibilities that we would want to see in a [principal supervisor]. ... We were wanting to design the [principal supervisor] role so that those persons that do that role could support the principals in what they were expected to know and be able to do.*

Some districts specified in the job description and other documents how much time principal supervisors should spend on different activities related to supporting principals as instructional leaders. For example, Aspire Public Schools indicated that its principal supervisors should spend 70 percent of their time coaching principals. Green Dot specified that principal supervisors should spend 80 percent of their time in schools, and that 50 percent of all of their time in schools should be spent on instructionally related tasks. One Denver Public Schools leader explained why designating 50 to 60 percent of the principal supervisor’s time as time spent in schools was an important strategy for focusing the principal supervisor’s work:

***“Now we’re telling [principal supervisors], ‘Your role is going to be to develop principal capacity to function as instructional leaders in their schools.’”***

HILLSBOROUGH COUNTY PUBLIC  
SCHOOLS EXECUTIVE

*“It [supporting principals’ growth as instructional leaders] is our main priority. We just really believe that in order to do this work, you have to be in the schools. So we have to do whatever it takes to make sure that our [principal supervisors] are in the schools as much as possible.”*

Some district leaders underscored that a clear, consistent and regular communication plan helped staff throughout their systems understand the new instructional focus of the role, which, in turn, helped focus the principal supervisor’s role on instructional leadership. For example, leaders from the Alliance for College-Ready Public Schools established processes for communicating between other central office departments, such as instructional services or special education, to reinforce the principal supervisor’s focus. In Shelby County Public Schools, district leaders took steps to ensure communication about the new role of the principal supervisor covered the complete district of over 200 schools. One leader described this regular, ongoing communication in multiple settings:

*[The new principal supervisor] role has been communicated in cabinet. That role has been communicated in cross-functional teams. [We communicated] that the work of the [principal supervisors] is to support or coach principals, that it is not a compliance role where everything is dumped on the [principal supervisor] if the information needs to be communicated to the principals. It is a support role for principals. ... [The principal supervisor role] was also communicated to principals in our first principals meeting.*

Such focusing of the principal supervisor role was not easy, however. Whereas some systems were able to quickly dedicate resources to revamping job descriptions and moving operational responsibilities to other staff, some systems were not able to make such moves in the short term. For example, leaders in one site clarified that principal supervisors should spend 50 percent of their time on instructionally related matters and 50 percent on operations in part because many of their principals were new to the position and still needed significant support in operations and management. In another district, some principal supervisors confided to us that the district participated in activities at LET meetings related to shifting their job description but that in practice leaders had not actually taken other responsibilities off their plates. Similarly, a leader in another system said that while the staff most

directly involved with the principal supervisor role want to dedicate themselves to an instructional focus with principals, other leaders are concerned that given challenges in other parts of the central office, they still want the principal supervisors stepping in when other departments are not serving schools well:

*[Principal supervisors] are still called for things like [operations]. ... They're still doing some of that — that stuff has not gone away. Bottom line is although the role has shifted, our district's perspective on it is we can't let other things fall through the cracks. We're not going to go cold turkey from one side to the other. We still want to make sure principals are getting what they need across the board, and that they can be effective in all parts of their role.*



Image courtesy of Tulsa Public Schools

## #2 DEFINE THE PRINCIPAL'S ROLE AS FOCUSED ON INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

In our original study, we found that a main support for the principal supervisors' work was the districts' use of a clear definition of the principalship as primarily focused on leading instructional improvement in their school. In these districts, principal supervisors typically clarified their own definition and used it to come to agreement with principals about the kind of practice they would strive for together. Such definitions functioned as a support for principal supervisors because they provided an image of what their growth was toward — what is sometimes referred to in learning theory as the "target task." When systems did not adopt districtwide expectations of the principalship as instructional leadership, principal supervisors were the main communicators of that message and sometimes found themselves struggling against other messages to principals about their job expectations.

Some of the school systems profiled in this report started the process of defining the principalship by first determining which instructional framework or definition of high-quality teaching they would use as a system and then initiating a process to adopt a definition of the principalship aligned with that definition. For example, Aspire Public Schools began at the teacher level, and then, based on what teachers should be doing, determined what principals should be doing. Green Dot Public Schools developed its "college-ready teaching framework" and then determined specific supports principals would need to provide to teachers to realize the framework in every classroom. As one Green Dot Public Schools leader explained:

*We sat down as a group ... [and] we needed to define ... "What does that [principals acting instructionally-focused] mean?" It's observing classrooms. It's meeting with teachers to give them feedback. It's planning professional*

### FROM RESEARCH TO ACTION:

**Research-based design element:** A main support for principal supervisors' work with principals is a clear definition of the principalship as primarily focused on instructional leadership.

**Early implementation:** School systems refined their definitions of instructional leadership by identifying what principals need to do to support high-quality instruction in their schools.

**Challenge and response:** Shifting their own definition of the principalship was difficult for principals in several districts. To help principals, leaders provided multiple opportunities for them to discuss the implications of their new role.

*development. It's preparing for anything related to schoolwide goals and data analysis. All of that is instructionally focused.*

Most school system leaders reported challenges with moving beyond simply having a formal definition of the principalship as instructional leadership. Helping principals understand what were often new expectations for their work and otherwise moving the definition into practice has been more difficult. To address this challenge, several districts created multiple opportunities for principals to engage with the new definitions and discuss how they would affect their day-to-day work. For example, a leader from Aspire Public Schools noted that discussions among principals helped to deepen their understanding of what instructional leadership meant for their work:

*That personal relationship [gained from having principals talking together] has pushed them the furthest [in understanding their job as instructional leadership]. It would be great if I could say that the principal rubric did it, but all that really did was clarify what it was that we all believe and what it should look like.*

Similarly, Hillsborough County Public Schools started by identifying five specific competencies related to principal instructional leadership. They then created a goal-setting activity related to these competencies in which principal supervisors and principals gathered over the summer and developed goals that would help principals shift their day-to-day practice toward the competencies.

To ensure that other district staff also understood the new focus for the principalship, school system leaders also worked to communicate that definition not just to principals but *throughout* their school system, including to teachers, school board members, parents and central office staff. Some underscored that getting the definition into use in the central office in particular was an important factor in reinforcing the definition for principals. For example, leaders in Hillsborough County Public Schools held events specifically for central office staff to review the rubric for principals' instructional leadership and then talk about how their own work related to the competencies in it and how they could support a principal in those areas.

A leader from PUC Schools similarly described the importance of not simply sharing the definition but giving stakeholders meaningful opportunities to understand the definition as a strategy to realize true alignment of expectations of principals:

*We go to different stakeholders, and then we cross-reference what different people say so that we know what other people are thinking, so helping to create that alignment. ... If we know what each other is thinking, the alignment starts happening.*

### #3 PRINCIPAL SUPERVISORS REPORT TO, OR NEAR, THE SUPERINTENDENT

The 11 districts in this research project were clear that they aimed to elevate principal support to an executive-level function by having the principal supervisor report directly to, or near, the superintendent. In so doing, they were signaling that they viewed the job of school principal as so important that they wanted them reporting as close to the superintendent as possible. Through such streamlining, they aimed to increase the information about schools available at the superintendent level and, in some cases, their resources and authority for supporting principals.

Nearly all of the school systems profiled in this report either already had their principal supervisors reporting directly to a cabinet member or one of the superintendents' other direct reports, such as director of schools, or changed their organizational structure to reflect this research-based support. For example, in Hillsborough County Public Schools, an assistant superintendent, a cabinet-level position, supervises the principal supervisors. Here, and in other districts, leaders reported that they did not want so many people reporting directly to the superintendent, so they created a reporting structure that eliminated layers of bureaucracy between the superintendent and schools and streamlined the flow of information between the two.

Most school systems typically involved their principal supervisors in weekly district policy meetings in order to tap the valuable information principal supervisors have from spending so much time in schools. In Green Dot Public Schools, the principal supervisors are the only central office staff at the director level who also participate in weekly executive management meetings. In the words of one Green Dot leader:

#### FROM RESEARCH TO ACTION:

**Research-based design element:** A main support for principal supervisors' work with principals is elevating the position to report as close as possible to the superintendent as a signal of the importance of their work.

**Early implementation:** School systems elevated their principal supervisors to report to the superintendents' direct reports.

**Challenge and response:** Because leaders in these school systems did not want to overload their superintendents with direct reports, they instead worked to facilitate communication between the principal supervisors and superintendent and other cabinet-level leaders.

*The rationale is that they have such a large scope of impact in the work. Our work is schools, and they are supervising our ... schools, and everything that we discuss at the management team level, whether it's growth, or financial, or marketing, or whatever it may be, is about those schools. It doesn't make sense for them not to be a part of that conversation.*

Tulsa Public Schools has a similar model designed to ensure communication between principal supervisors and cabinet-level decision makers, as described by one of this district's leaders:

Our [principal supervisors] meet with the executive staff every Monday. They are part of that team that consistently has a voice at the table. ... [The principal supervisors] are consistently carrying messages from the field of what we see and what principals or teachers need and children need and communities need. We feel that they can inform some of the executive staff and some of the policy and procedures that they work on at that level. ... They absolutely have an elevated position.

***"Everything that we discuss at the management team level, whether it's growth, or financial, or marketing, or whatever it may be, is about those schools. It doesn't make sense for them [the principal supervisors] not to be a part of that conversation."***

GREEN DOT PUBLIC SCHOOLS EXECUTIVE

## #4 PRINCIPAL SUPERVISORS WORK WITH A MANAGEABLE CASELOAD OF PRINCIPALS

Based on the experience of districts in our previous research, we concluded that principal supervisors could know well and work intensively with approximately eight to 12 principals at one time — termed a “manageable caseload.” With too many principals, they did not have enough time to properly support each principal’s instructional leadership development; in these cases, the principal supervisors rationed their attention and support to certain principals, while they neglected others.

Most of the school systems profiled in this report found that their principal supervisors were often responsible for too many schools to be able to provide meaningful support to all of the principals. As one Green Dot Public Schools leader explained, “We think seven is the magic number [of principals reporting to one principal supervisor]. If you go over seven, we are not going to be able to provide the kind of detailed support that we want [principal supervisors] to provide [to principals].”

To set a manageable caseload of principals for each principal supervisor, the school systems generally developed plans to reduce principal supervisors’ caseloads over time. For example, Shelby County Public Schools, as part of a major, multi-district reorganization, reduced its principal supervisors’ caseloads from an average of more than 40 schools down to an average of 16 schools during its first year implementing the new principal supervisor model. The following school year, it added two additional principal supervisors and was able to further reduce the caseload to an average of 13 schools.

In general, the principal supervisors working as part of Charter Management Organizations (CMOs) at the start of the initiative oversaw fewer schools than the principal supervisors working in traditional school districts. These systems only reduced their caseloads slightly. For example, Aspire Public Schools’ reaffirmed its principal supervisors’ caseloads of 10 to

### FROM RESEARCH TO ACTION:

**Research-based design element:** A caseload of approximately eight to 12 principals allows principal supervisors to know well and work intensively with each principal.

**Early implementation:** School systems reduced principal supervisors’ caseloads over time.

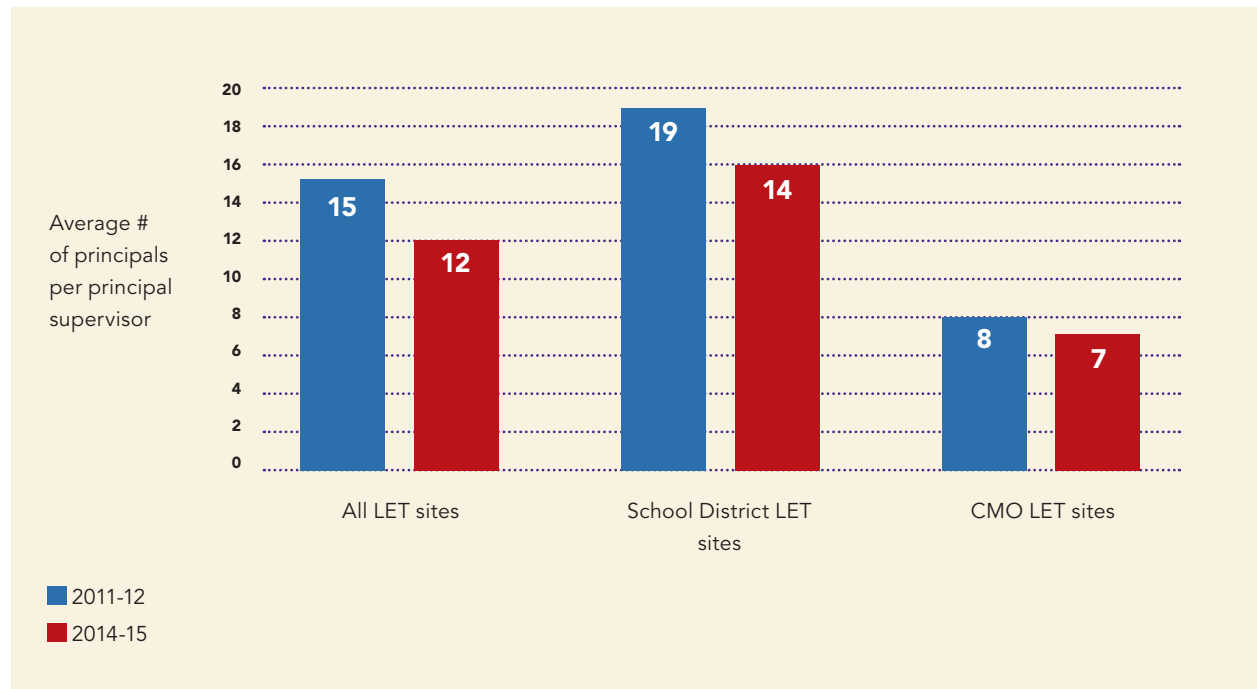
**Challenge and response:** To fund the additional positions, these school systems reallocated funds or converted existing positions.

12 schools. See Table 1 for a summary of the changes in school systems’ principal caseloads between the 2011-12 school year and the 2014-15 school year.

Most of these 11 school systems struggled to find the funds to add new principal supervisor positions to reduce their caseload, especially given their goal of maintaining the principal supervisor positions as executive-level posts that generally fall at a relatively high pay level. One leader from Hillsborough County Public Schools explained that they were reluctant to add additional staff at such a pay level, especially given recent budget strains related to increases in teacher pay.

Some systems used temporary grant funds in the short term to cover the additional salaries of adding principal supervisors at an executive level, with the long-term goal of redirecting core dollars to such principal supervisor lines. Some systems, like Green Dot Public Schools, managed potential fiscal challenges by setting the principal supervisor position as a priority and not investing in other areas in ways that might have jeopardized its number of principal supervisors. In the words of one Green Dot leader:

**Table 1: Principal Supervisor Caseloads Across LET School Systems**



*It's always been a budgetary priority to keep the span [ratio of principal supervisors to principals] small. ... We have made financial concessions — things that we would have liked to have either spent more money on or more resources on in order to get. ... There were things in the budget like professional development or conferences, or trainings that went down in order to find room for that salary.*

Others reassigned existing staff to free resources for the principal supervisor positions. For example, Tulsa Public Schools converted five existing central office leadership positions into principal supervisor positions, and then also used grant funds to hire two additional principal supervisors. As one Tulsa Public Schools leader explained:

*We previously had two superintendents, and then under those two superintendents were two supporting superintendents as well. We originally had probably five positions that were allocated toward that [the additional principal supervisor positions]. We went ahead and expanded to two more potential positions by looking at some grant initiatives that we had going.*

Instead of hiring additional principal supervisors, other districts invested in less-expensive principal supervisor support positions. These support positions report to the principal supervisors and, like the principal supervisors, are charged with focusing almost entirely on supporting principals' instructional leadership. In this arrangement, principal supervisors themselves still have relatively large caseloads, but they can deploy people in the support positions to expand the supports they provide to principals.



For example, in Denver Public Schools, leaders created deputy principal supervisor positions to report to each existing principal supervisor. With this strategy, Denver leaders aimed to increase support to principals while also maintaining consistency with their long-standing regional groupings of principals. They developed a structure that, in one district leader's words, was "similar to what you see in schools" where assistant principals report to principals. Hillsborough County Public Schools took a similar approach and chose to move existing principal coaches away from solely focusing on principal orientation to also supporting existing principal supervisors. In the words of one Hillsborough County Public Schools leader:

*Rather than add more [principal supervisors], our superintendent and staff agreed that we were going to shift our principal coach role. They are going to spend the majority of time coaching, but instead of just coaching principals in the induction program ... they now will be able to work with the principal supervisor to split the caseload, and be strategic about who is going to provide what support to a principal, based on their individual needs.*

This leader went on to explain that the school system based this decision on its concern of adding staff that might not be financially sustainable, as noted above, and instead decided to take a wait-and-see approach: "If it doesn't work, she [the superintendent] is always the type that will say, 'It's not working. Let's shift it.'"

***"It's always been a budgetary priority to keep the span small [ratio of principal supervisors to principals]. ... There were things in the budget like professional development or conferences, or trainings that went down in order to find room for that salary."***

GREEN DOT PUBLIC SCHOOLS EXECUTIVE

## #5 PRINCIPAL SUPERVISORS OVERSEE A SUBSET OF STRATEGICALLY GROUPED PRINCIPALS

Our research demonstrated how the composition of principal supervisors' principal groups can matter substantially to their success. For instance, some district leaders argued that with the different challenges involved in leading elementary, middle and high schools, principals should be grouped by their school level and have learning experiences in their principal network appropriate to their particular principalship. Another district grouped principals that used similar whole-school reform approaches, since leading a school with an emphasis on certain experiential education philosophies differed in some systematic ways from being principal of a school with a more traditional focus. Another district allowed principals to pick their own principal supervisor, based in part on the theory that principals would self-sort themselves into groups particularly supportive of their learning. We called such arrangements the "strategic grouping of principals" because each choice rested on a clear, plausible theory about why the composition of such a network might create environments particularly conducive to principal learning. When districts organize principals by student feeder pattern, high school and middle school principals in particular often find they need to create other meetings for opportunities to confer with colleagues in similar posts.

Table 2 provides a summary of the approaches to grouping principals into communities of practice used by the districts included in this report during the 2014-15 school year.

While several of the school systems decided to keep schools in their original groups — typically organized by geography or feeder pattern — some of the systems reorganized their principals into new groups that promised to promote principal learning. In Tulsa Public Schools, for example, leaders aimed to create heterogeneous learning groups of principals by considering several factors. As one explained:

### FROM RESEARCH TO ACTION:

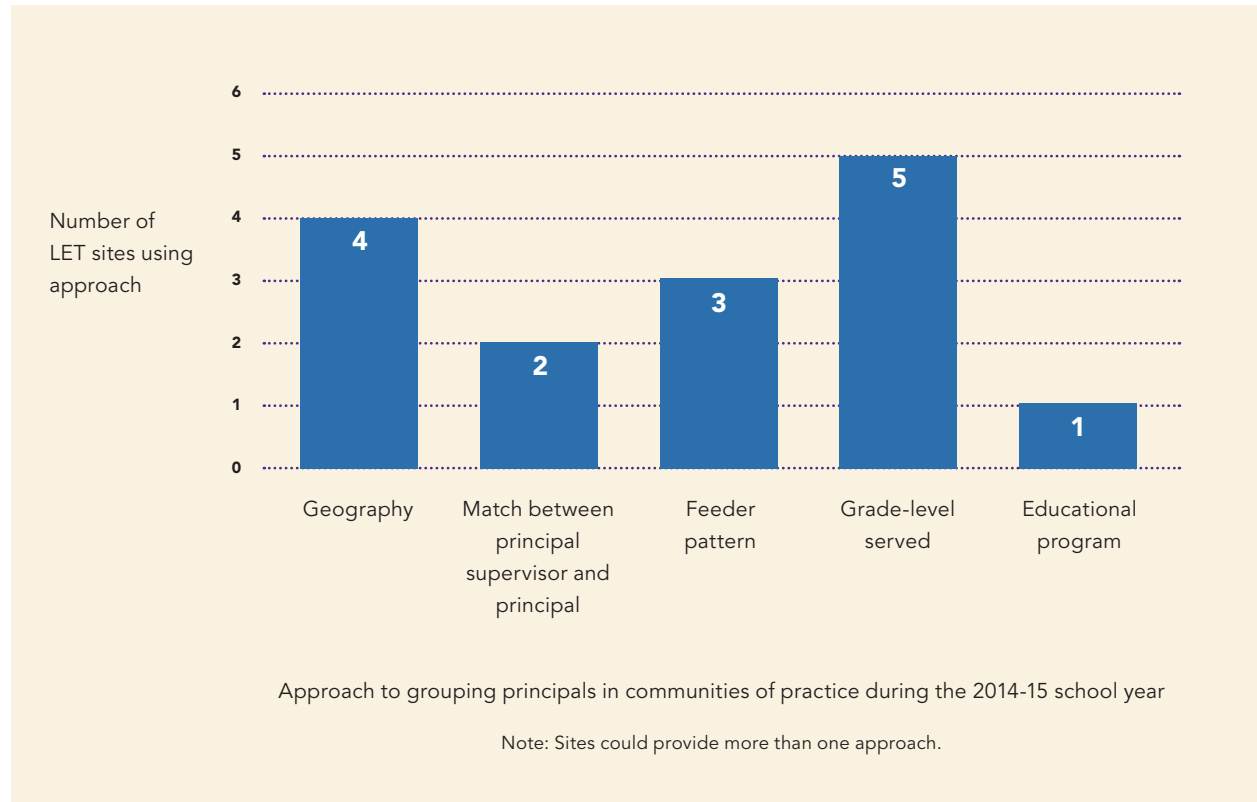
**Research-based design element:** A main support for principal supervisors' work is a group of strategically grouped principals who can learn from each other and support each other's learning.

**Early implementation:** School systems heterogeneously grouped principals.

**Challenge and response:** To minimize disruption to relationships, leaders considered existing principal supervisor-principal relationships among other criteria when strategically grouping principals.

*We know that groups need to be heterogeneously mixed so you have a variety of different styles and opportunities and demographics and situations so that principals and teachers can learn from each other. We really looked at numerous different indicators to ensure that we had a good heterogeneous group in each portfolio. ... We looked at building culture and context, what were similar issues that schools were working on, such as high populations of our Hispanic or Latino community, schools that might have similarities there that they could work collaboratively together. We did consider geographic proximity and building networks so schools [that] are close can come together and work. We looked at reading scores and just overall academic proficiency and where schools were. We considered tenure of principals. Are we putting all schools with brand-new principals together? Do we have a mixture of experienced principals and new principals? Those*

**Table 2: Approaches to Grouping Principals Across LET School Systems**



*are a few examples of some of the things that we considered. We spent a lot of time, lots of hypothesizing, lots of putting names on Post-it notes and moving and shifting. It was time-intensive.*

In Shelby County Public Schools, leaders took a simpler strategic approach and grouped principals and their principal supervisors by grade level. According to one leader in this system:

*As far as the superintendent's perspective, he felt like principals would trust that [because their principal supervisor] did most of [his/her] work at the elementary level, [principals think,] "I know that she knows instruction and she knows leadership at the elementary [level]." Principals would trust that there's a level of knowledge there. ...*

Green Dot Public Schools and Denver Public Schools had been paying attention to the grouping of

principals for some time before the interviews for this report and therefore intentionally decided to maintain the groupings they had. They explained that early on they had been intentional about organizing principals for learning, and while they routinely revisit the effectiveness of their groupings, they generally

***"We looked at numerous indicators to ensure that we had a good, heterogeneous group [of principals] in each [principal supervisor's] portfolio. ... We spent a lot of time, lots of hypothesizing, lots of putting names on Post-it notes and moving and shifting. It was time-intensive."***

TULSA COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS EXECUTIVE

refine rather than reorganize, given the relationships principals have created around their growth as instructional leaders. One Green Dot leader explained that while they revisit their groupings of principal supervisors and principals every year, they also consider the historical knowledge built when principal supervisors work with a school over multiple years. A Denver Public Schools leader similarly explained:

*We decided not to do that [adopting a model where principals are matched beyond geography] because three years ago, the first thing I heard from our principals was that [their principal supervisor] was the third, or in some cases the fourth [principal supervisor they had had]. ... Having the stability in the relationships is so important. ... Being able to develop and support their growth over time, you are really*

*able to see what their needs are and where their struggles are, and you are able to provide that pinpointed, accurate coaching to them because you know them. Over time, you build trust, too. ... And it helps to know the school at a really in-depth level.*



Image courtesy of Prince George's County Public Schools

## #6 ENSURE PRINCIPAL SUPERVISORS VIEW THEIR JOB AS TEACHING PRINCIPALS TO GROW AS INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERS

Some principal supervisors in our original study, whose practice we associated with supporting principals' growth as instructional leaders, engaged in their work with principals in ways that reflected they were taking a teaching stance. Like excellent classroom teachers, they made intentional moves to help principals think and act in ways that built their capacity for instructional leadership. Such moves included "joint work" — helping principals value their growth as instructional leaders and view that goal as one they work on in partnership with their principal supervisor and other principals — as well as modeling, developing and using tools, and brokering outside resources to strengthen principals' instructional leadership practices. We observed these principal supervisors take a teaching stance in both their one-on-one work with principals, as well as when leading principal networks or communities of practice. A primary condition we associated with the principal supervisors engaging in such moves was the extent to which they came to their role with a view that they should operate as teachers rather than directors, evaluators or more traditional supervisors.

The importance of such a teaching stance, and the skills and will to take such a stance, were main emphases in the quarterly meetings of school systems. All of the leaders we interviewed for this report highlighted the importance of hiring principal supervisors who see their job not as traditional supervision but as that of teacher of instructional leadership for principals. Some districts found they already had people in the principal supervisor roles with the right orientation to the work. For example, at the Alliance for College Ready Schools, leaders reported that their existing principal supervisors were happy — and had the requisite skills — to shift their role to teaching principals.

### FROM RESEARCH TO ACTION:

**Research-based design element:** Successful principal supervisors view their job as teaching principals to be instructional leaders.

**Early implementation:** School system leaders first evaluated whether or not their existing principal supervisors had a teaching orientation and then redesigned their hiring processes to evaluate candidates' orientation to principal supervision.

**Challenge and response:** Several districts had a hard time finding enough principal supervisor candidates with this orientation. To avoid hiring a principal supervisor without a teaching orientation, leaders in these school systems left some positions open and waited for ideal candidates.

However, most districts reported that they had to restaff some of their principal supervisor positions since their existing staff either did not want to take on the role from a teaching stance or their particular skill set was better suited to other central office roles. As one leader from Prince George's County Public Schools remarked, "Just because someone was a very successful principal does not mean they will be a very successful principal supervisor. ... Many principals have a very narrow view of the school systems' world."

Most school systems modified their hiring processes to emphasize the selection of principal supervisor candidates with a teaching orientation. For example, Tulsa Public Schools and Shelby County Public Schools required applicants to demonstrate their orientation

to the work through such activities as watching a video of classroom instruction and then rating the teaching and describing how they would provide feedback to the principal based on that video. They also had candidates deliver a presentation before a group of principals explaining the new role of a principal supervisor and how they would work with principals. Another activity involved candidates reading a case study and responding to questions about how they would address problems in the case and talk to principals about those strategies. Table 3 summarizes the phases of the Tulsa Public Schools principal supervisor hiring process.

***“Just because someone was a very successful principal does not mean they will be a very successful principal supervisor.”***

PRINCE GEORGE’S COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS  
PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR

**Table 3. Tulsa Public Schools Principal Supervisor (Instructional Leadership Director) Hiring Process**

<b>Phase 1</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Central office staff screens candidate qualifications and certifications.</li> <li>• Central office staff conducts a screening telephone call with candidates.</li> </ul>
<b>Phase 2</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Candidates view a teacher video.</li> <li>• Candidates develop a “Personal Development Plan” for teacher featured in video.</li> </ul>
<b>Phase 3</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Candidates develop a 10-minute presentation to introduce the ILD process to principals.</li> <li>• Candidates make presentation to ILD team.</li> </ul>
<b>Phase 4</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Candidates develop an action plan based on a school case study and discuss plans one-on-one with the leadership development director.</li> <li>• Candidates role-play a conversation between an ILD and a principal for the ILD team.</li> </ul>
<b>Phase 5</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Final interviews with superintendent and deputy superintendent.</li> </ul>

Denver Public Schools used a “score card” in its hiring process to help identify candidates likely to be successful as principal supervisors. As one leader explained:

*[We] created a scorecard with leading indicators of what a successful person in this role would have, then the process follows from this list. ... What the scorecard helps us do is identify what is the main purpose of this role. ... [and then] starts to pull out ... some of the*

*specific outcomes that we would want to see [our principal supervisors achieve in order to reach these outcomes].*

Some systems re-staffed the principal supervisor role, when necessary, shortly after they recast the role, while others restaffed as the roles became vacant through natural attrition. Leaders in the latter districts argued that they wanted some long-standing district staff in the group of principal supervisors to help with the transition to new staff. In Tulsa Public Schools, district

leaders chose a hybrid model that opened some of the new principal supervisor positions to applicants, but also retained two existing principal supervisors so that they could access their institutional knowledge. As one leader said:

*We had ... sitting [principal supervisors] reapply except for two individuals — those individuals had been the lead superintendents earlier. ... I believe the executive staff [made this decision because they] ... wanted to ensure that there were two people in place that represented the history and the context of where we had been and help support the transition in moving forward. Both of these individuals ... [understood] where we were going, they had the vision, they had the skill set, they had the will to learn and adapt and change. ... They were almost like a buoy or an anchor that helped people with processes and procedures and systems that already existed and getting the work and moving them forward. ... We saw it as a good transition and support for the team as a whole.*

But such a strategy of keeping existing staff — especially those with more traditional orientations toward supervising principals — could also dampen the transition to a new role in which the principal supervisors support principals' growth as instructional leaders. For instance, one district described how its hiring and organizational decisions stalled the transition:

*We didn't do a nationwide search, we picked people from within the organization, that were principals that we were afraid were maybe going to leave the organization, and created this outlet for them. Just the typical legacy-driven decisions that an organization makes when they aren't thinking about the big picture. And so the great work that was done to envision what this could be was very much aligned to what [the principal supervisor suggests], but the actual implementation decisions that were made were made for the wrong reasons. And implementation didn't take place.*

The limited pool of strong principal supervisor candidates posed significant challenges for some districts attempting to hire people with the right orientation. Several, including Aspire Public Schools, Green Dot Public Schools and Tulsa Public Schools, responded by not staffing those positions until they found the right candidates — sometimes leaving positions open for multiple years. Tulsa Public Schools managed such vacancies by asking other principal supervisors to take on additional schools in the short term. As one Tulsa Public Schools leader explained:

*We had always planned for eight [principal supervisors]. We couldn't find the eighth [principal supervisor]. We did lots of interviewing, lots of recruiting. We just couldn't find the individual we were looking for. We made a conscious, purposeful decision that we were committed to certain expectations and standards, and that we weren't going to budge on that. We sat on one position until earlier this spring, and then we were able to fill that position and an additional position.*

Similarly, a leader from Green Dot Public Schools explained its rationale for waiting for the right candidates:

*You can't take your current people and put them in this [new principal supervisor] role. You have to first evaluate what are the skills that you want this role to execute, and then look at your people, and say, "Do you have those skills?" If they don't align, it's going to be tough conversations, but the worst thing you could do is put somebody in this role that's going to fail.*

## #7 PRINCIPAL SUPERVISORS RECEIVE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOCUSED ON IMPROVING THEIR CAPACITY TO HELP PRINCIPALS GROW AS INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERS

The principal supervisors who participated in our research had access to little if any professional development to strengthen their capacity to teach principals how to engage in instructional leadership. Most had time set aside for learning opportunities, but what the district provided did not always contribute to their learning. Further, in one district the few opportunities that existed were frequently interrupted by other matters. Those negative examples — and our positive experiences observing subsequent partner districts as they enhanced their professional development for principal supervisors — have underscored the importance of professional learning opportunities for principal supervisors as a key support for helping them partner with principals in ways that enhance principal learning.

In a follow-up to the original study, we found how external support providers helped build principal supervisors' capacity for helping principals grow as instructional leaders by providing intensive, personalized support consistent with high-quality teaching in other settings. Nevertheless, the external support was not always enough; principal supervisors actually grew in their ability to support principals in districts where leaders internally led the learning of their staff, also from a teaching-and-learning approach.<sup>4</sup>

Consistent with the research, leaders in the school systems profiled in this report argued strongly that all their principal supervisors, even those hired for their teaching stance, needed intensive professional development focused on how they support principal growth. Below, a Shelby County Public Schools leader described how professional development helped

### FROM RESEARCH TO ACTION:

**Research-based design element:** A main support for principal supervisors' work is professional development focused on helping them be teachers of instructional leadership to principals.

**Early implementation:** School systems provided professional development that was time-intensive, job-embedded and, importantly, focused on how principal supervisors can support principals' learning.

**Challenge and response:** To ensure enough time for professional development, leaders used time during other principal supervisor meetings or one-on-one consultations.

at least half of the district's principal supervisors clarify how their role was now focused on supporting principals' growth as instructional leaders:

*Out of the 10 ILDs, maybe four or five of them had the 'aha' moment in January ... [meaning until that point they did not yet understand], "What am I supposed to be doing? How am I supposed to go about making certain that I'm improving the instructional leadership practices within the principals that I'm assigned?" [Our professional development intermediary] was instrumental in creating that 'aha' moment.*

<sup>4</sup>Honig, M.I., Venkateswaran, N., McNeil, P., & Myers Twitchell, J. (In preparation). Research use as learning: The case of school district central offices. Seattle, WA: University of Washington.



The professional development topics in these school systems tended to focus on helping principal supervisors learn to support principals' growth as instructional leaders and included instructional leadership and adult learning principles. For example, Tulsa Public Schools' professional development took a deeper dive into particular topics, such as how to have powerful conversations with principals. One Tulsa Public Schools leader described the rationale for this focus:

*We thought a foundational component [of the principal supervisor work with principals] is the ability ... to coach and have a conversation, but we had never been clear [in our district] with expectations or what does that look like? What does that sound like? How do you do that? We just relied on the skill set that people brought to the table. We felt that that was a concern and an area of weakness, so we spent the year last year focusing on blended coaching.*

Shelby County Public Schools by contrast focused more generally on helping principal supervisors move away from their tendency to direct and do things for principals toward taking on more of a coaching stance. One principal supervisor described the importance of this approach to professional development this way:

*We were all effective principals, which meant we were pretty good at fixing stuff pretty fast. What we are learning to do now [through our professional development] is to slow down and help principals ask the right questions with less judgment. [We are moving away from] stuff like, "Why haven't you done this already" and more about helping them unpack their own thinking. So that has been a change where we have slowed down and help people discover from a coaching or teaching and learning stance, as opposed to a "let me tell you how to fix this."*

Other districts found that they needed to cover a wide variety of professional development topics or tailor professional development to the needs of individual principal supervisors. As one leader in Hillsborough Public Schools described it:

***"What we are learning to do now [through our professional development] is to slow down and help principals ask the right questions with less judgment ... as opposed to a 'let me tell you how to fix this.'"***

SHELBY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS  
PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR

*The ones [principal supervisors] that have been around longer, they may have a stronger learning curve when it comes to instructional leadership, [but] they are very strong in relationships, they are very strong in management. So their learning curve comes in in the instructional leadership. Whereas the new ones [principal supervisors] that have been appointed in the last year, they don't have that learning curve. They know what they have to do as an instructional leader. Now it's getting them to figure out ... 'You're responsible now for those 25 schools — how do you get your principals where they need to be? How are you holding them accountable? How are you getting in schools to support their development?' ... The support being given to them at this point is differentiated.*

Leaders in these school systems paid attention not only to the topics of their professional development for principal supervisors, but also the methods by which they provided the training. Many intentionally moved away from old models that typically involved single sessions on various topics and toward varied, in-depth and multiple linked sessions in different formats. For example, one leader in Tulsa Public Schools described its professional development on how to have difficult conversations with principals with their "blended coaching" model in this way:

*We had six days of full-day training throughout the school year on blended coaching and a variety of coaching strategies that fall within that framework. We also built in a significant*

*number of field visits with people who were experts at blended coaching. They shadowed our [principal supervisors] in the visits to the school site and were able to really give job-embedded, real-time feedback on the conversations and the coaching that [principal supervisors] were doing with the principals.*

Consistent with our more recent research on the importance of leaders internally providing professional development, executives (e.g., the chief academic officer) in both Prince George's County Public Schools and Green Dot Public Schools provide most of the professional development themselves during one-on-one coaching sessions with principal supervisors. In other systems, leaders found that outside organizations or intermediaries were better suited to come in and run their professional development and provide one-on-one coaching to their principal supervisors.

While these school systems invested significantly in professional development for principal supervisors, thanks in part to resources available to them through LET and other initiatives, they also sometimes struggled to carve out the time for the intensive support that principal supervisors needed to improve their practices. A Denver Public Schools leader articulated this challenge:

*Having feedback and observation and feedback loops in place for [principal supervisors] is very important. I didn't have that when I was [a principal supervisor] for three years. ... I am seeing it as a big struggle for me [as a supervisor of principal supervisors] to get out to schools, to see the principal supervisors in action and work, and then give them feedback. That is a big need that we are still struggling with. I think that we need to get it figured out, because I think that everyone needs some form of feedback.*

Similarly, a leader from Green Dot Public Schools described the system's difficulties with maintaining a consistent PD schedule:

*The biggest challenge is time. ... I tried to have the separate professional development session with the [principal supervisors] last year. It was only once a month, but the number of times I cancelled it, or one of the three of the [principal supervisors] couldn't be there was more than I would have liked it to be. [This year] I made the decision to say I have to prioritize getting that into our [existing] Friday meetings. I think time is the biggest thing.*

As this leader notes, Green Dot Public Schools attempted to recoup some time for principal supervisors' professional learning by working the professional learning topics into an existing weekly 3-hour principal supervisor meeting, as well as focus on one-on-one observations and PD.

## #8 PROACTIVELY PROTECT PRINCIPAL SUPERVISORS' TIME

Protecting principal supervisors' time, not only for professional development, but also to focus on principals' instructional leadership development, emerged as essential to principal supervisor success in the districts in our original study. In many cases, the protections came in the form of policies and procedures that the district adopted, such as "blackout days" — days on which no one could request meetings with principal supervisors or principals. In other districts, executive staff stepped in and handled issues for the principal supervisors that threatened their focus on instructional leadership. In addition, some principal supervisors protected their own time. In order to be in schools 50 to 75 percent of the time, one principal supervisor explained, "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.'"

Leaders of some school systems profiled in this report reported that they continued to face demands on their time that took away from their focus on their principals. Such demands include going with district executives on school visits, responding to requests from other central office departments, attending professional development and/or conferences not obviously related to principal support, and hiring principals, among others.

As such, these districts themselves took steps to protect the principal supervisors' time so that they could focus on supporting principals' growth as instructional leaders. As a principal supervisor from Green Dot explained, "Most of it [system leaders' support for our work], honestly, is just protecting our time, making sure we aren't being called away from the work that we do at the school level. That is really the biggest support."

### FROM RESEARCH TO ACTION:

**Research-based design element:** Successful principal supervisors protect their time to work on principals' growth as instructional leaders.

**Early implementation:** School system leaders helped to protect principal supervisors' time by designating specific days for principal supervisors to work with principals and empowering principal supervisors to say "no" to requests that pull them away from work with principals.

**Challenge and response:** Some principal supervisors in these districts still found that they did not have enough time for work with their principals. To further protect principal supervisor time, leaders reassigned non-instructional tasks to new or existing central office administrators.

To address these interferences and take steps to protect principal supervisors' time, the executive leaders in these school systems communicated throughout their district central office and the wider community the expectation that principal supervisors would be in schools, focusing on instructional leadership. They also modeled through their own actions the practice of not making requests of principal supervisors that took them away from their core task. As a Tulsa Public Schools leader explained:

*We just messaged clearly to all departments, to principals, to the community, to the school board, all of our stakeholders, this [principal supervisors' focus on supporting principals' growth as instructional leaders] was one of the non-negotiables for the work moving forward. Our deputy superintendent, our chief*

*of staff, our chief human capital officer [and] our superintendent clearly explained those expectations and adhered to it. ... It's just the way the work was done.*

Like the districts in the original study, some of these school systems also adopted the idea of “blackout days” and designated specific days of the week for principal supervisors to be in schools, as well as for meetings in the central office.

A leader from Prince George’s County Public Schools described their need for blackout days and what the district did in response:

*So many individuals from different departments [in the central office were] ... coming to them [principal supervisors] asking for something repeatedly. ... Individuals weren't only asking questions, but also requiring them to attend certain meetings. Last year we decided that Monday through Thursday would be protected days for the [principal supervisors] and during those days they would need to be in schools. Fridays are the days we have opportunities for PD and for other individuals to come in who they did not have an opportunity to speak to during the course of the week. There are emergency situations that do occur from time to time, but we definitely and deliberately are trying to protect Monday through Thursday this school year for all of the [principal supervisors].*

Another approach to help protect principal supervisors’ time was to allow just one principal supervisor to attend meetings on behalf of the whole group, as a Green Dot Public Schools leader described:

*We have a variety of trainings that happen for our leaders and teachers. ... We all sat down as a team and said, “You don’t all need to go to those.” We did a little bit of a tiered responsibility. Rather than having four [principal supervisors] cancel coaching and be at the training, because it is important that one of them is there, one of them is going to go and*

*then report back to the team any updates or things like that. [We are] trying to minimize the impact that other trainings we have on pulling them out of coaching [principals].*

Similarly, leaders in other systems empowered their principal supervisors to say “no” to requests that fell outside of their line of work. As a Hillsborough County Public Schools leader described:

*[The principal supervisors] have said ... [there are still] a lot of district-level meetings that they are pulled in to. ... A lot of them [the meetings] are people saying, “Well, we have a committee, and we need a [principal supervisor] on it,” and it’s just to keep them in the loop, but what ... [In response, our superintendent said] the [principal supervisors] have the ability to say “No, I’m not going to be on those meetings.” Their focus is to be in schools. That has been stated by the superintendent; that has been stated by the assistant superintendent in charge of the [principal supervisors]. ... They [principal supervisors] have the autonomy to create their schedule, and if they are in schools they have the autonomy to say, “I can’t be at this meeting because I am in my schools.”*

Finally, some of these school systems found that they could protect the principal supervisors’ time by assigning non-instructional tasks that used to belong to principal supervisors and that were not

***“We just messaged clearly to all departments, to principals, to the community, to the school board, all of our stakeholders, this [the principal supervisors’ focus on supporting principals’ growth as instructional leaders] was one of the non-negotiables.”***

TULSA PUBLIC SCHOOLS EXECUTIVE

the responsibility of others to new central office positions. Hillsborough County Public Schools and Tulsa Public Schools each created positions to address parent complaints that used to fall to their principal supervisors. As described by a Hillsborough County Public Schools leader:

*We provided them [the principal supervisors] support through creating a call center. We [the principal supervisors knew that] ... was preventing them from being in schools, and based on what they said, a lot of it was parent issues, and so we created this centralized call center that would take some of those things off their plate.*

In some cases, the non-instructional tasks that were distracting principal supervisors were actually responsibilities of other staff people for whom the principal supervisors were stepping in for to help their principals. Leaders who recognized this dynamic worked to protect principal supervisors' time by clarifying roles and responsibilities for those other central office staff.

## #9 WORK TO TRANSFORM OTHER CENTRAL OFFICE UNITS FOR BETTER PERFORMANCE IN WAYS ALIGNED WITH THE PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR-PRINCIPAL RELATIONSHIP

Perhaps the most important finding about principal supervisors from our original studies and subsequent experience working with districts is that if districts only reshape the principal supervisor role so it focuses more on principals' growth as instructional leaders, but leave the rest of the central office unchanged, then principal supervisors will continue to struggle in many respects. Our initial findings about principal supervisors were that principal supervisors realized positive results for principals when they engaged in certain practices *in the context of a central office transforming to improve its performance in particular ways aligned to the new principal supervisor roles.*

In general, the comments from leaders of the school systems profiled in this report reflected that they heard the warnings about not just adding new principal supervisor positions to an otherwise unchanged central office. Even so, only a few of the school systems had taken concrete steps in this direction. As one Prince George's County Public Schools leader commented, transformation means a cultural shift throughout the central office, and changes of that depth and magnitude take time:

*[We've started] to look at how we can transform central office ... to start creating a different culture around support for schools. ... Are we by any means there? Absolutely not, but have we started having really different conversations in trying to support schools? Absolutely.*

One way leaders of Green Dot Public Schools began to engage with the broader ideas about central office transformation was to scrutinize what else would need to change in their central system, beyond the principal supervisor role, to maximize principals' focus on instructional improvement. One leader described what this shift involved:

*We looked at the other 50 percent [of principal time not spent on instructional leadership] and said, "How do we start to put systems in place*

### FROM RESEARCH TO ACTION:

**Research-based design element:** Successful principal supervisors work in a central office that is working to transform other central office units for improved performance.

**Early implementation:** Districts initiated discussions on how to change central office culture toward supporting schools and maximizing the amount of time teachers, principals and principal supervisors have to devote to instructional improvement.

**Challenge and response:** Several systems struggled with engaging other central office departments in improving their performance. A starting point used by a few school systems was to pair principal supervisors with cross-unit teams to serve specific schools.

*to help support this 50 percent of time?" Not because it can go away, but we want to make sure it's as streamlined and efficient as possible, so that principals can start to move that 50 percent instruction up to 55 or 60 [percent].*

Other school systems initiated broader central office transformation by examining communication between schools and the central office. They generally found that the volume of requests from the central office for deliverables, requests for information, notifications, "FYIs" and other one-off needs took significant time away from principals' instructional focus. Denver Public Schools responded to this problem by consolidating all central office communications to principals into two weekly emails, coordinated by the chief of staff. As one Denver Public Schools leader explained, "Everything goes through there. ... There are a lot of things that we ask school leaders do, so it

has helped us be a little more aware around what it is that we are asking our school leaders to do, and what can we take off.”

Green Dot Public Schools has a similar weekly newsletter, *News from the Dot*. As a leader from Green Dot Public Schools explained:

*It [the newsletter] came out of a frustration from folks at the home office, ... [but] instead of reprimanding the principals [for not responding to email, we said,] “Let’s try and figure out what is the root of the problem.” And the root of the problem was, “Your email is buried in 100 others, and not to be disrespectful to you, some of those other ones might need to take priority.”*

Some school systems moved beyond these initial steps to more fundamentally rethink the work of each central office unit in ways consistent with the research by re-crafting the work of some central office departments to provide higher-quality support for instructional improvement at schools. For Aspire Public Schools, such rethinking meant regionalizing staff so its central office personnel would get to know specific schools well, essential for supporting them at high levels. As one Aspire Public Schools leader explained,

*We’ve regionalized a bit. ... There is now a regional HR person, IT person and a regional observer. Since we’ve regionalized and the [principal supervisors] have formalized their meetings with them, ... [moving to a regionalized system] was just better service for the schools.*

Leaders in Hillsborough County Public Schools created cross-functional central office teams in ways that also increased central office staffs’ knowledge of schools and each other’s work. One leader described these teams as a next step in improving central support for schools:

*The [principal supervisors] meet with their team [of administrators from various central*

*office departments] weekly and their team is discussing what are the needs of schools and what are the needs of principals, and they’ll go out and do learning walks as a team, and then they will get resources or support needed ... so they make those decisions as a team. So that level of communication allows central office team members to go back to their divisions and inform about what is happening in schools.*

While these cross-functional teams have some short-term advantages for schools, such as improving central office responsiveness, leaders have typically added them on to long-standing central office functions in ways that do not bode well for their long-term productivity. As one Denver Public Schools leader described the transition in its instructional services department:

*They revamped the expectations and roles of some key central office people from literacy coordinators to math coordinators to ELA coordinators. ... [Each principal supervisor] now has a partner in some of those key areas that is assigned to their network. ... That has been a real blessing and a real challenge. ... It is a really positive thing we have created to provide more support to schools. The challenging thing is that some of the coordinators that have been assigned as partners also have other full-time jobs, and they haven’t been as available to the networks as someone who is strictly dedicated to the network. So we’ve had to do a little scrambling there and use other people for different solutions.*

Our research and experience underscore that, going forward, it will be crucial for these districts to ensure that they have not simply created single points of contact for each central office function but that the work within each function is actually the right work done in the right way to support districtwide teaching and learning improvement. One Green Dot Public Schools leader described one way their district has started to adjust how the central office administrators actually work with schools to improve the capacity of principals to lead and teachers to teach:

*In most of our departments ... we categorize schools as targeted, limited and basic. Targeted being a school that needs a significant amount of support, basic [means] "you're doing just fine," and limited, it's a hands-off, "let us know if you need us" approach. Our human capital department, in terms of supporting hiring ... took that same approach and looked at all of the schools' past [performance], like schools that don't follow up to emails, schools that aren't consistent in communicating with candidates, schools that will get sent a candidate and then not contact them for a week. They [the human capital department] looked at a variety of things that happened during the hiring season, and identified the schools as targeted, limited and basic, and then identified what extra support schools may or may not receive based upon their past hiring practices.*

While many districts tier their support to schools based on test scores, what stands out about the Green Dot Public Schools approach is that each department tiers schools according to their needs vis-à-vis that department's functions, not on test scores that may or may not be related to the services the departments deliver to schools.



Image courtesy of Hillsborough County Public Schools



## Conclusion

Research highlights the importance of principals leading for effective teaching as essential to improving teaching and student outcomes.<sup>5</sup> To address that need, the Leading for Effective Teaching (LET) project of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the University of Washington Center for Educational Leadership helped 11 school systems come together to learn from each other and the latest research on principal supervision to redesign how these staff can help principals grow as instructional leaders. The research calls on school systems to move away from traditional conceptions of principal supervision toward having principal supervisors partner with their principals to support their growth as instructional leaders.

Leaders of the school systems profiled in this report seemed to find the research-based ideas relevant to their own systems, and this paper describes some steps these systems took to implement them. In the process, they encountered — and addressed — various implementation challenges. For example, when other central office staff continued to ask principal supervisors to participate in meetings that were not directly related to their work with principals, several sites devised ways to protect principal supervisor time. The experiences of these districts can help others better anticipate and address implementation challenges as part of their own efforts to improve the supports they provide for principals' success.

The experiences of these school systems also raise some cross-cutting questions that they and other districts might consider as they move forward. For one, how can school systems continue to access and use available and emerging research to enhance the performance of their principal supervisors and their central offices overall? Initiatives such as the LET project provide a critical venue for system leaders to learn about new research, to think about the implications the research has for their own systems, to develop plans and policies to adapt research findings to their school systems and to innovate beyond them.

***Going forward, how do these and other school systems interested in redesigning their approaches to principal supervision use the important lessons already learned to avoid falling into predictable implementation traps and push the field forward?***

Relatedly, how can universities, foundations, school support organizations and other external organizations support school systems as they engage in the challenging work of improving the performance of their central offices? Research and experience show that school systems typically benefit from external partners with the right capacity to help them advance challenging change initiatives such as those related to central office performance improvements. However, such partners may be necessary but not sufficient for success of such efforts. We have found that external support providers may not help realize central office performance improvements absent significant internal leadership of the work (Honig, Venkateswaran, McNeil, & Myers Twitchell, Under Review). ***How might leaders of external organizations and school systems work together to enhance internal leadership necessary for realizing ambitious reform results?***

Lastly, how might school systems proceed with their central office improvement efforts in continuous improvement mode — viewing their current efforts as short-term steps toward the ambitious, longer-term goal of realizing dramatic and sustainable improvements in performance throughout their central office? The work of improving principal supervision itself is so intensive in many school systems that some leaders may lose sight of the broader central office changes of which revising the principal supervisor role is a necessary part. As underscored above, principal supervisors in our earlier study realized positive results for principals when they worked in certain ways within a central office that was also working to align itself to their instructional support work with principals. Reforming the principal supervisor position can be a first step toward those broader essential changes, but these changes are not enough. ***How can school system leaders continue and broaden their focus to improve the performance of the whole central?***

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<sup>5</sup> See for example, Blase & Blase, 1999; Grissom, Loeb, & Master, 2013; Heck, 1992; Heck, Larson, & Marcoulides, 1990; Supovitz & Sirnides, 2011; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008.

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