

Developing a pipeline of future principal supervisors

Preparing for Success as an Impactful Principal Supervisor

High-potential future candidates for the principal supervisor role benefit from the opportunity to practice skills and develop experience that will prepare them for that role. Strong preparation impacts both performance in the role (success) and perceptions about its sustainability (retention), thus districts benefit from thoughtful preparation of future district leaders.

Research has shown that the richest professional learning opportunities are job-embedded, accounting for 70 percent of an individual's development.¹ These are also the most accessible and efficient opportunities for districts to provide to prospective leaders, although they do require districts to focus time and attention on identifying opportunities, matching them with high-potential developing leaders, and—in some cases—providing central district resources to ensure the right opportunities are available. Because this is such a high-leverage strategy, we focus the majority of our recommendations in this domain.

It is worth noting that an additional 20 percent of professional growth can be ascribed to the type of coaching and feedback professionals get from strong managers, mentors, and well-positioned peers. For this reason, districts should consider enriching these developmental experiences by coupling them with mentorship programs, communities of practice, and support for existing district leaders to cultivate leadership talent on their teams. Finally, 10 percent of learning is supported by targeted professional development, and there are opportunities for districts to provide focused opportunities for developing content knowledge in district-wide strategies, processes, and/or tools.

Experience as a Principal

We recommend that everyone who is targeted for development as a potential principal supervisor has multiple years of experience as a principal and has demonstrated broad success in that role. The attention within the education field on the principal supervisor role is largely driven by a growing understanding of the importance and impact of principals and school leadership. To understand the competencies that define an effective principal supervisor, it's important to understand the evolving expectations for the principals they manage, driven by research on principal effectiveness. A principal who serves as a true instructional leader views student learning as the primary purpose of schooling. Successful principals focus on building strong instruction in their schools through establishing a shared vision of effective instructional practice, ensuring alignment and rigor of curriculum and unit/lesson plans, and using data to inform and improve instruction. They reinforce these expectations by observing, sharing feedback, and following up to ensure meaningful practice change on the part of their teachers. Their success in these areas results from a strong focus on talent development and adult learning in support of student outcomes: they recruit the right teachers and other staff members, match them skillfully to roles, and build teams with distributive leadership to ensure shared ownership and engagement in instructional outcomes. Increasingly, there is a focus on the importance of the principal's role in ensuring a culture of student support and high expectations at each school, and in working with the staff, students, and other stakeholders to ensure that all students are valued and provided with the expectations, structures, and supports needed to be successful. Finally, successful principals operate within their district context, and understand how to work within district constraints to effectively align all systems and resources to meet their school goals.

¹ The 70:20:10 Model in Learning and Development was developed by Morgan McCall and his colleagues Robert W. Eichinger and Michael M. Lombardo at the Centre for Creative Leadership in the year 1996.

These principals must be supported by strong managers who themselves deeply understand the role of the principal and have demonstrated success in school leadership. An effective principal supervisor should be able to bring her expertise to bear in each area of the principal's role. Defining leadership competencies for the principal supervisor is particularly important because they serve as leaders of leaders: they must model leadership knowledge and practice with their direct reports and more broadly in the district.

In order to be successful as a principal supervisor, someone in that role must (1) have demonstrated effective leadership actions and strong outcomes in a principal role and (2) have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that allow them to develop this practice in others. Principal supervisors should have the opportunity to develop and demonstrate these skills before taking on the role, and they may also need support in applying these skills in new ways as principal supervisors. For example, principal supervisors stepping into the role after the principalship may be very comfortable with direct management relationships, but may need to practice peer-to-peer engagement to solve problems and to marshal resources from across the organization.

The competencies below also relate to two other broad responsibilities of the principal supervisor role. Principal supervisors serve as an important pivot between the needs of individual schools and principals and the priorities and needs of the broader school system. They influence the design of district policies, goals, and initiatives based on their experience of how these elements play out at the school and student level. Once the district vision, goals, policies, and initiatives are established, they ensure alignment between the goals and priorities of individual schools and the goals and priorities of the larger system. And finally, principal supervisors broker resources and supports from across the central system to meet the specific needs of individual schools and leaders.

Because these responsibilities related to central office policies and functions are so crucial, and because new principal supervisors who are hired directly from the principalship often lack important access to central office perspectives, resources, and skill-sets, our recommendations below should guide districts in thoughtfully considering other leadership roles beyond the principalship that can provide high-potential candidates with exposure to these areas, either as a next step for their career progression or through lighter-touch participation in shorter-term committees or summer duties.

Building Skills and Experience

We have outlined below a set of principal skills and experiences that rising system leaders should be building and refining. As district leaders think about building their pipeline, it's important to begin by defining expectations for the role's responsibilities and impact. Ensuring effective principal supervisors requires both refining opportunities for their development before they are selected for the job, and meaningful support for new principal supervisors through an onboarding and early tenure process that fills gaps in their skills and knowledge. Over time, stronger preparation and pipeline development will change support requirements for new principal supervisors.

1. Instructional Leadership, *demonstrated as the ability to:*

- Apply research-based knowledge and content, best practices, resources, and current technology to address the needs of principals and schools in building instructional capacity.
- Guide a principal in applying effective instructional leadership practices within their own school context against their specific goals.
- Observe and evaluate instruction, including planning and practice, giving actionable feedback and monitoring for implementation.
- Ensure alignment among a school leader's actions, changes in learning and teaching within each classroom, and improved student outcomes.
- Act from a deep knowledge of key curricular strategies and their application within context.

Opportunities for Preparation in the Principal Supervisor Pipeline		Areas for Support: Principal Supervisor Onboarding and 1 st Year Support
In- Role Preparation as a Principal	Other Developmental Opportunities from the District	
<p>Preparation for instructional leadership can begin at the assistant principal or teacher leader level, and should continue through the principalship. Future principal supervisors should have the ability to hone their skills by practicing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitoring instruction and providing detailed, actionable feedback to teachers through both informal and formal observation. • Matching school-wide instructional priorities to specific, prioritized needs for student learning, and ensuring that support and expectations for teachers are aligned to these priorities. • Creating and maintaining an effective culture of support and high expectations for students; successfully addressing student engagement, attendance, and behavior by creating positive systems for goal-setting and progress monitoring. • Faithful implementation of district-wide instructional initiatives, formative assessments, and guiding frameworks in ways that are responsive to school-specific context and goals. • Impacting student achievement outcomes through team and—ultimately—school-wide leadership. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Service on a central Curriculum Team, working on curricular alignment to standards on the district level, developing or advising on the selection of aligned curricula. • Service on a central Instructional Standards team, advising on the development or revision of the definition of instructional expectations within the system. • Work in a dedicated Curriculum and Instruction staff role for the district, especially those providing direct support to schools and school leaders around instructional strategies, assessments, or curriculum implementation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New Principal Supervisors will need support to deepen their understanding of the district-wide instructional needs, priorities, strategies and resources, so that they can support implementation across their network in flexible ways. • They will also need focused training and support for their role as managers and monitors of implementation. • As part of preparation for their role as evaluators of principal performance, principal supervisors will need to have a deep understanding of the expectations for principals as instructional managers.

2. People Management and Growth, *demonstrated as the ability to:*

- Apply effective management practice in working individually with principals in the network by supporting their performance and professional growth.
- Support network principals and other direct reports with individual goal-setting and monitoring progress towards those goals, ensuring accountability and providing guidance, strategies, and support resources as appropriate.
- Have evidence-based, authentic conversations about both performance and professional growth.
- Apply a diverse set of coaching strategies, including facility with both inquiry and advocacy protocols with direct reports, and seek to apply coaching strategies in the majority of management situations to build capacity in leaders on the team.
- Implement the district’s principal evaluation system with both an accountability and developmental lens.
- Identify and evaluate talent, both for development within the school leadership pipeline and as part of a hiring process for leadership roles within the network. This includes strong skills in interviewing and applying evidence-based practices for evaluating skills within a talent-identification or hiring process.

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<p>Future principal supervisors in the principalship should have the ability to hone their skills by practicing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Timely sourcing and hiring of strong teacher candidates as well as other team members within the constraints of the district hiring process. • Creation of a school staffing plan to strategically align specific faculty members to roles that best utilize and develop their skills and to teams where they add maximum value. • Implementation of the district’s teacher evaluation system with fidelity as both an accountability and developmental tool, and in support of a strong instructional culture. • Identifying and addressing under-performing teachers. • Implementation of distributive leadership strategies, including establishing effective teams to ensure teacher leadership and school-wide ownership of strategic priorities. • Talent development, with a demonstrable impact on the performance of teams over which they have leadership. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serve as trainers or mentors for new teachers at other schools, either by serving as faculty for a summer institute or as mentors through cross-school collaboration. • Develop other school leaders through roles as mentors to newer or struggling principals (relevant for highly effective principals). • Serve as managers of rising school leaders at talent “hot spot” schools within the district (districts should explore opportunities to create and incentivize these practices). <p>In many of these roles, the district can provide training and support on the specific skills of gathering evidence of school leader practice aligned to local standards and coaching school leaders against identified growth areas.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New principal supervisors, who will have had experience with the principal evaluation system as principals being evaluated, will need extensive support for their new role as evaluators, starting with a comprehensive understanding of the vision for school leadership and how it is translated into performance standards. • They also need information and practice connecting the information they collect about principal skill and performance deficits to strategies and resources for improving practice. • New principal supervisors also benefit from building their portfolio of developmental coaching skills and frameworks to prepare them for the talent development focus of the role. • They also need space to practice holding authentic conversations about both performance and professional growth with principals and others in their network, and this is fertile ground for principal supervisor communities of practice.

3. Team Learning and Professional Development, *demonstrated as the ability to:*

- Apply a strong background in adult learning theory and in the design and facilitation of communities of practice.
- Match network goals to adult professional development needs and provide for aligned learning experiences.
- Apply experience in designing and delivering adult learning opportunities and connecting practitioners with concepts, resources, and strategies that support their own professional development.
- Measure impact of adult learning opportunities and monitor ongoing changes in practice.

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<p>Future principal supervisors in the principalship should have the ability to hone their skills by practicing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating a successful school-wide community of practice among faculty and staff focused on pedagogy, content knowledge and alignment, and adult efficacy in advancing student outcomes. • Creating the capacity for effective adult peer learning in structures beyond school-wide professional development sessions. • Creating effective teacher teams or professional learning communities. • Designing and facilitating adult learning opportunities matched to a school’s goals and prioritized strategies, including successful utilization of school-based professional development time such as monthly staff meetings or designated professional development days. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitate learning opportunities for other principals within the district (for highly effective principals). The district can provide developmental feedback on how principals design and structure effective adult learning sessions with other principals. • Serve on committees to propose and design professional learning sessions for principals, providing input to central office teams and staff. • Design and deliver professional learning to teachers at a system level, to continue practicing skills in designing and delivering effective adult learning beyond their own school community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitating formal professional development opportunities is often an area of growth for new principal supervisors, who as principals often employ a more directive and hands-on approach to shaping adult learning. • Many new principal supervisors will need support for their role as facilitative leaders of a principal community of practice, designing and facilitating authentic learning opportunities for principals, who—as leaders themselves—need space to hone their skills and their problem-solving abilities.

4. Strategic Planning and Data-Driven Implementation, *demonstrated as the ability to:*

- Apply a deep understanding of district-wide structures for planning and progress monitoring coupled with the ability to use them in an organic, school-driven process of diagnosing, prioritizing, planning, implementing and monitoring progress as demonstrated by student data and other outcomes.
- Monitor and manage school progress through use of qualitative and quantitative data and strong practices of planning and follow-through to determine impact.
- Apply an understanding of how schools progress towards strong outcomes through improvements in practice, culture, and systems by applying the cycle of improvement outlined above.
- Demonstrate capacity to build a culture of reflective practice and goal-driven action within a school and a network of schools.
- Manage time well as a crucial resource, both within the context of personal practice and—through support of the principal—within schools as well.
- Build coherence between multiple district initiatives and supports, so that principals can see how all expectations fit together and are able to effectively implement and communicate this coherence with their own school teams and communities.

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<p>Future principal supervisors in the principalship should have the ability to hone their skills by practicing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applying a cycle of goal-setting, action planning, implementation, and adjusting practice with measureable impact on school improvement. • Monitoring progress with data by establishing aligned data streams and building practices of data-driven analysis throughout the school team. • Building a culture of reflective practice throughout the school in both staff members and the student community. • Aligning district-designed planning and progress monitoring systems to the school context in support of a school-driven improvement plan. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serve in roles that take part in developing district planning and progress-monitoring policies and practices. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New principal supervisors will require support to develop a deeper understanding of district-wide systems for planning and progress monitoring, including understanding the role of school-based plans, data, and outcome tracking in district management. • They will also need training to understand their role in managing these processes, using their implementation and the results to manage their own network.

5. Communication and Stakeholder Engagement, *demonstrated as the ability to:*

- Lead from a place of commitment to the school leader’s role in implementing a vision and expectations for students and other stakeholders, and an understanding of the importance and the means for engaging all stakeholders in support of the school’s work with students.
- Communicate consistently the system’s values, beliefs and priorities.
- Gather input from a broad range of stakeholders to inform personal practice and recommendations for changes in team goals and priorities.
- Provide leadership to the network in a way that fosters a trusting, reciprocal relationship with principals, direct reports, and other stakeholders.
- Use a broad range of communication skills to build and reinforce relationships. Communicate effectively with all stakeholders within the network, employing strong listening, speaking, and writing skills.

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<p>Future principal supervisors in the principalship should have the ability to hone their skills by practicing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishing a school-wide vision and culture that is owned collectively and values the contributions of all stakeholders (students, parents and family members, faculty and staff, as well as other community members and resources). • Communicating with—and building relationships with—a diverse set of school stakeholders, utilizing a wide range of listening, writing and speaking skills. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speak on behalf of the district at community events or at conferences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New principal supervisors benefit from ongoing support in building their communication and stakeholder-engagement skills.

6. Problem-Solving, demonstrated as the ability to:

- Creatively identify and match system resources—time, talent, and funds—to specific school needs and priorities.
- Apply skills in collective problem-solving and demonstrate success in building a shared understanding of a challenge and enlisting input and buy-in for addressing the problem.
- Ensure problem-solving is focused on transformational change, impacting actions, outcomes and beliefs in support of meaningful change.

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<p>Future principal supervisors in the principalship should have the ability to hone their skills by practicing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Applying problem-solving frameworks to identify and address root causes of challenges. • Building a personal network of problem-solvers and internal district resources on call to address school priorities. • Creatively and flexibly applying internal and—where available—external resources of time, talent, and funds. • Building a culture of problem-solving, initiative, and creative resource use within the school. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serve on a district task force or committee focused on a specific system-wide challenge and applying a rigorous process of problem-solving and action. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New principal supervisors benefit from training and practice in applying a district-wide lens to accessing resources for principals and schools in their network. • Another area of support and exploration for new principal supervisors is in creative school design and school staffing to match specific school needs and priorities.

7. Systemic thinking, demonstrated as the ability to:

- Advocate within the central office for needed policy decisions and resources and at the same time represent district-wide strategy and initiatives within their network.
- Represent district-wide strategy and initiatives within their network.
- Apply principles of system design to create sustainable and equitable solutions.

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<p>Future principal supervisors in the principalship should have the ability to hone their skills by practicing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexible application of district-wide policy, processes, frameworks and resources to meet school-specific context and needs. • Taking leadership actions based on an awareness of complex and interdependent consequences. • Successfully building equitable policies and systems and in balancing competing interests and priorities at the school level. • Taking school-based leadership actions based on a commitment to advancing district-wide goals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participate in district-level policy setting and have exposure to considerations and circumstances across the district. • Serve in a role directly related to setting and supporting district goals and policy in the central office as a precursor to the principal supervisor role (such as a year as a “Superintendent Fellow” working with the Superintendent and Chief of Staff on key district issues, or in a similar role on the Academic team). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is a domain where new principal supervisors particularly require support, guidance, and opportunities for learning, as they shift their perspective from the school to a network and the district as a whole. Often, principals are successful because they are able to maneuver around limits in the district systems; principal supervisors have an obligation, as district leaders, to address systemic challenges and build equitable, scalable, and sustainable solutions. • New principal supervisors benefit from training in principles of system design to help them apply this lens to their new role. • They also benefit from exposure to senior district leadership and decision-making, learning the considerations, perspectives, and priorities of system leadership.

Dispositions for Leadership as a Principal Supervisor

The vast majority of the prerequisites for success as a principal supervisor can be developed over time through learning, exposure, and applied practice and reflection. As districts make decisions about investing resources—including access to developmental opportunities—to high-potential future principal supervisors, it's important also to note that many of the characteristics that make individuals predisposed to success in a role like this are captured in the principal supervisor dispositions. We recommend that districts look for ways to cultivate and expand these dispositions in high-potential future principal supervisors, but that they also invest pipeline resources in individuals who already demonstrate them in ways appropriate to their current role.

These dispositions include:

1. Belief in student potential

Belief in the potential of all students, demonstrated by a relentless focus on meeting the needs of all students. Commitment to equitable opportunities and outcomes for all students, and a willingness to reinforce this expectation across the network. Commitment to the craft of learning and teaching as the most crucial lever for supporting students in reaching their potential and to establishing school communities that reflect the same.

2. Commitment to continuous improvement and learning

Commitment to building adult professional practice. Personal investment in guiding the success of others and in building collective leadership capacity. A focus on reflection and personal professional growth and development. A personal growth mindset, as well as the ability to identify and cultivate the same in others. A commitment to staying in “coaching” mode with direct reports as often as possible, avoiding telling or directing, so that team members can build their independent leadership skills and own their leadership actions.

3. Resiliency

Commitment to action and individual agency, especially when faced by challenges or complexities. Commitment to personal responsibility and a strong sense of personal efficacy. Grit and tenacity, even when faced with setbacks, mistakes or challenges.

4. Focus on results

Focus on evidence of impact and reaching goals, combined with a tenacious and flexible pursuit of results. Focus on time management and matching effort to the highest-priority actions. A commitment to high expectations and—when they are achieved—to celebration.

5. Problem solving orientation

Commitment to problem-solving with a focus on root causes and flexible, sustainable solutions. Creativity in understanding issues, engaging stakeholders in determining solutions, and applying resources for results.

6. Commitment to stakeholder engagement

Commitment to broad and appropriate stakeholder engagement and a demonstrated respect for all members of a school community. Willingness to work with and through others. Comfort with a facilitative model of leadership.

7. Commitment to systemic solutions

Commitment to systems-building, seeking solutions that are sustainable and institutionalized, with an interest in sustainable change over “quick fixes.” Focus on identifying the implications of leadership actions across a wide range of factors and seeking pathways forward that have equitable outcomes for all stakeholders (all schools, all principals, etc.), rather than serving as work-arounds for specific interests. Awareness of the impact of personal leadership voice within a complex organization.

Once in the principal supervisor pipeline, high-potential future leaders can cultivate these dispositions through the learning experiences above, even as they focus on their skills and expertise, by focusing on reflective practice around their leadership growth. For example, principals honing their leadership skills and experience can simultaneously focus on reflective practices and building a “tool-kit” of personal strategies to renew practice and maintain perspective and personal professional equilibrium.