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Spotlight on Research by The Wallace Foundation: A New Role Emerges for Principal Supervisors

The principal supervisor role is intended to support principals in their challenging jobs, and ultimately, improve instruction. But in many large school districts, supervisors are faced with an array of demanding administrative, compliance and operational responsibilities that interfere with their ability to provide meaningful support for the principals they oversee.

In 2014, The Wallace Foundation launched the four-year, \$24 million Principal Supervisor Initiative (PSI) to determine whether it was possible to redefine principal supervision in six urban school districts. A new study of the initiative shows promising results.

[*A New Role Emerges for Principal Supervisors*](#), a joint research study between Vanderbilt University's Peabody College and Mathematica Policy Research, documents the implementation of the first three years of PSI and finds that all six districts made meaningful changes to the supervisor role. Subsequent reports will investigate the final year of implementation and explore the effects of the initiative on principal performance. Researchers will also compare the principal supervisor role in PSI districts with a national sample of urban districts.

Participating districts are:

Baltimore City Public Schools, Maryland
Broward County Public Schools, Florida
Cleveland Metropolitan School District, Ohio
Des Moines Public Schools, Iowa
Long Beach Unified School District, California
Minneapolis Public Schools, Minnesota

The report describes principal supervisors as a “potential point of leverage for supporting and developing principals,” and documents how PSI districts embraced the pivotal role principal supervisors can play in supporting instructional leadership. The study provides insight into how the role of principal supervisors changed during the initial implementation phase and the ways in which these changes had an impact on supervisors’ ongoing interactions with principals.

The five PSI components support the central goal of improving principal effectiveness.

1) Revising the Principal Supervisors’ Job Description to focus on instructional leadership

Revising the role of principal supervisors was the first component of districts' work, and a broad range of stakeholders were engaged in the process as well as resources such as the 2015 draft *Model Principal Supervisor Professional Standards* developed by the Council of Chief State School Officers. Ultimately, revising the role description for principal supervisors required redistributing responsibilities to other personnel in order to balance principal supervisors' time spent on central office activities while prioritizing more time spent in schools supporting principals. Following the redistribution of duties, support of principals shifted from reactively responding to needs to proactively supporting principals to improve schools. In 2017, principal supervisors reported spending an average of 63% of their time either in schools or working directly with principals. While principal supervisors reported an increase in time spent on school visits, they also reported an increased focus on spending time during school visits in partnership with principals on instructional leadership activities, such as conducting classroom observations and walkthroughs with principals.

2) Reducing principal supervisors' span of control (the number of principals they oversee) and changing how supervisors are assigned to principals

Districts reduced the number of principals working with each principal supervisor, and doing so allowed districts to more closely align principal supervisor expertise with individual principal and school needs. There was great variation between assignment methods (e.g., academic needs, school level, etc.). While this was a "quick win" early in the initiative for several districts, most districts struggled with ensuring continuity of supervisor assignments from the 2015-2016 to 2016-2017 school years due to supervisor and principal turnover, changes to assignment policies, and hiring additional supervisors to reduce average span of control. Yet, while there was variation between and within districts, the span of control in the PSI's third year averaged 12 principals to one principal supervisor, a decrease from the average of 17 before the PSI began.

3) Training supervisors and developing their capacity to support principals

For the first time, principal supervisors received ongoing, dedicated training for their specific role. Training provided to principal supervisors during PSI focused on developing instructional leadership and high-quality instruction, though identifying shared, district-wide understandings of high-quality instruction remains a challenge in districts for a variety of reasons. Through non-job-embedded approaches and job-embedded opportunities (which increased over time), principal supervisors were generally positive regarding their training but noted that classroom-based instruction reduced their time in schools. Principals and principal supervisors reported the benefits of engaging in the job-embedded learning opportunities together, a through observing each other in their work with principals through collaborative peer feedback, and work with technical assistance providers.

4) Developing systems to identify and train new supervisors

Succession planning for principal supervisors was a key component of PSI, and three districts created apprenticeship programs to facilitate training principal supervisors. The training yielded a number of benefits, including establishing a pool of candidates well positioned for principal supervisor vacancies. This also posed some challenges due to a general surplus of apprenticeship program completers compared to open positions. Districts sought opportunities to keep program completers engaged in system-wide leadership work in other ways, such as through special projects.

5) Strengthening central office structures to support and sustain changes in the principal supervisor's role

A key component of the PSI was the restructuring and reculturing of the central office to support and sustain the changes in the principal supervisor role. PSI required districts to create detailed plans for sustainability to “independently support the systems put in place.” The report details the structural adjustments districts have explored to redistribute operational responsibilities to allow for continued expansion of principal supports.

Conclusions

As the report previews, “the six PSI districts demonstrated the feasibility of making substantial changes to the principal supervisor role, across all components of the initiative. The districts revised the job descriptions for principal supervisors, reduced the span of control, implemented new training programs, and restructured roles and responsibilities in the central office to support changes to the principal supervisor role” (p. xii).

By the third year of the initiative, the daily work of principal supervisors changed and principals reported more productive relationships with supervisors. Indeed, principals reported having deepened trust with their principal supervisor, a role that serves as both coach and evaluator.

While undertaking PSI has also ultimately led to rethinking school supports more broadly, the districts face ongoing challenges developing shared definitions of instructional leadership within their complex, multifaceted contexts. The report provides priority areas for continued support of PSI, and subsequent reports will explore how ongoing challenges are addressed, adjustments made during the latter phase of the initiative, and how principals' performance changed in light of the redefined principal supervisor role.

This report explores how districts with varying local realities are navigating tradeoffs between operational needs and increasing their focus on instructional leadership and school supports and provides powerful context for preparation programs focused on administrator effectiveness and instructional leadership.

The work of school and district leadership requires administrators to wear many hats effectively, and the report shares the wisdom gained through the Principal Supervisor

Initiative's promising, but difficult challenge, of rearticulating the relationship between central offices and schools and deepening the supports districts can provide school leaders.

To learn more, please attend the special session at the UCEA 2018 convention, sponsored by The Wallace Foundation, featuring the authors of the recent report: *A New Role Emerges for Principal Supervisors: Evidence from Six Urban Districts in the Principal Supervisor Initiative*.

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References:

Council of Chief State School Officers. "Model Principal Supervisor Professional Standards 2015." Washington, DC: CCSSO, 2015.

Goldring, Ellen B., Jason A. Grissom, Mollie Rubin, Laura K. Rogers, Michael Neel, and Melissa A. Clark. *A New Role Emerges for Principal Supervisors: Evidence from Six Districts in the Principal Supervisor Initiative*. New York: The Wallace Foundation, 2018. Available at www.wallacefoundation.org/principalsupervisors