



# Plant the Seeds of Leadership

An assistant principal's checklist to distributed and instructional leadership

Whether or not today's assistant principals aspire to become principals, they crave personal and professional growth. Assistant principals can progress to the next phase of their careers with the confidence and expertise needed to make an impact on student achievement and school performance if they can build effective leadership skills early on.

## **Distributed Leadership**

To make a difference in school performance, assistant principals must share leadership throughout their buildings—encouraging innovation, welcoming ideas, and even bringing dissent to the table—while reaffirming their schools' shared goals. They create team cultures and encourage collaborative action.

### **1. BUILD TEAMS**

The power of distributed leadership starts with strong teams and “a firm belief in collective advocacy,” says one principal.

- In addition to assistant principals and lead teachers, teams should include instructional coaches, resource teachers, ESL specialists, guidance counselors, school psychologists, and social workers.
- Take leadership assignments that align with your interests.
- Be a team player: Reciprocate district assistance by helping principals, superintendents, and assistant superintendents with their priorities.

## 2. CULTIVATE STRONG PLCs

A professional learning community (PLC) helps peers reflect on challenges and successes, perhaps even inspiring one another to aim higher.

- Ensure that PLCs collaborate, have the resources needed, and communicate clearly so that systems are aligned.
- Designate grade-level peer coaches to support teammates in specific subjects.
- Recruit teachers with leadership potential to serve as grade-level instructional facilitators who liaise between classroom teachers and instructional coaches.
- Make sure PLC members share an understanding of the standards for consistency in instructional delivery.
- Adopt protocols to keep meetings on topic.

## 3. KNOW YOUR PEOPLE

“As a principal, it’s great to know curriculum,” says one principal, “but you have to know your people.” Assistant principals must also keep their fingers on the pulse.

- Hire a diverse staff to mirror the student population and

broaden the range of ideas available.

- Build community by matching people of complementary strengths and weaknesses.
- Capitalize upon the staff’s desire to achieve success.
- Model effective leadership by being present and engaged.

## 4. PUT THE VISION FIRST

Effective assistant principals keep every discussion and action grounded in common goals and shared understanding.

- Keep the school’s mission or vision at the front of the decision-making process.
- When team members have conflicting opinions, drive consensus by keeping discussion focused on school goals, culture, and pillars.
- Once a year, collect feedback from every staff member and submit the

findings to leadership for review and adjustment. One principal gets suggestions on “everything from the color of the walls to how we do spelling.”

## 5. TAKE ADVANTAGE OF AUTONOMY

Autonomy is something that instills confidence in aspiring leaders. But one’s independent initiative must support the larger vision.

- Innovate within a framework of clearly defined expectations.
- Ensure your ideas can withstand scrutiny based on data.
- Take action knowing that you will be responsible for justifying actions through regular meetings, updates, and adjustments.
- Be honest about new directions and strategies, but refrain from expressing negative opinions that don’t also propose solutions.

## NOTES

Brainstorm ways the leadership team can spend less time on student discipline.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....



## NOTES

List three instructional leadership opportunities that leadership may have overlooked.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

### 6. SOLVE PROBLEMS

We teach students to analyze situations and devise solutions. Assistant principals should apply the same approach.

- Take on specific problems with the goal of solving them with your team.
- Run with an idea. One leadership team wanted a “data den,” for example, and worked with teachers to build it.
- Be open to all ideas while understanding that not all can be executed.

### 7. READY TEAMS FOR ACTION

Buy-in is the key to distributed leadership. If ideas are allowed to trickle down and bubble up, action plans will be infused with input from everyone.

- Push for strong, universally understood systems that give teams the confidence to address tasks swiftly and efficiently.

- Know when you’ve earned the team’s trust and use it.
- Welcome initiative. When one school focused on literacy, a teacher spearheaded a complete revamp of spelling instruction.
- Avoid delays that dampen enthusiasm, abandoning approaches that don’t work swiftly.

### 8. SHARE AND SHARE ALIKE

Under distributed leadership, assistant principals can show off their natural leadership instincts and encourage others to do the same.

- Share findings from your own professional development to open a window to the assistant principal’s role.
- Listen and contribute feedback while allowing others to also drive discussions.
- Empower teacher leaders to devise improvement strategies.
- Encourage cross-curricular problem-solving by housing instructional coaches and other leaders in shared offices.
- Encourage a culture of information-sharing.

### 9. HELP OTHERS EXPLORE NEW LEADERSHIP ROLES.

Distributed leadership will help assistant principals explore their leadership styles and map their career paths while helping others grow.

- Access leadership training such as university programs or academies offered by the school district and share it with others.
- Learn the basics of running a

school, including budgeting, scheduling, and ordering.

- Give teachers responsibilities that reveal the world of administration.
- Position coaching as a strength-based model, not a punishment.

## Instructional Leadership

“It’s never too late for principals and assistant principals to learn how to be instructional leaders and work collaboratively,” says collaborative leadership consultant Peter DeWitt. “Quite honestly, we don’t have a choice anymore.”

### 1. ACTIVATE YOUR SKILLS

Sharing instructional wisdom demands a structured, strategic approach that minimizes time spent on logistics and maximizes classroom connections.

- Help create a “funnel” that brings situations to the principal and assistant principals only when necessary.
- Conquer daily tasks and yearly goals by utilizing the strengths of each person.
- Run your own meetings and build your own teams.
- Request the resources you need to get results.

### 2. MAKE INSTRUCTIONAL CONNECTIONS

Dive into the instructional “deep end” with other staff.

- Monitor coaches’ fidelity to overall school goals.
- Reserve time to provide instructional support.
- Liaise with educational partners and programs.

- Communicate constantly and transparently with families to instill confidence in your school.

### 3. LINK TO TEACHERS

To stay on top of classroom trends, create direct lines to teachers.

- Go to the same professional development sessions as teachers, who must see leaders “walking the walk,” says one principal.
- Immerse yourself in the classroom atmosphere by using “modeling moments” as opportunities to work alongside teachers.
- Normalize the criteria used in classroom observations so teachers know the expectations they face.

### 4. CULTIVATE A LEADERSHIP MINDSET

As you develop your own career, keep an eye out for leadership abilities among all staff.

- Watch for those who express interest in assuming leadership roles, and convince others to cultivate hidden capabilities.

- Participate in big projects.
- Request the time needed for you, your coaches, and your teachers to activate lessons learned through professional development.
- Take the initiative to make rapid-response instructional changes.

### 5. PLAN, IMPLEMENT, ADJUST, REPEAT

Even high-achieving schools don’t settle for the status quo. Every action step triggers review and reflection to address changing needs.

- Follow a circular pattern for effective implementation: Discuss, articulate, reflect, and evaluate what works. Repeat.
- Leverage classroom experience to create distinctive look-fors that measure progress toward goals.
- Use instructional learning walks to gauge progress toward goals.

### 6. RECAST PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Many resources are at your fingertips.

- Make time in the day for teachers to observe teammates who excel.

- Align peer classroom visits with lesson plans in areas where the observing teacher needs assistance.
- Schedule data analysis, mini-assessments, and coaching daily.
- Ask teams and teachers to share PD that addresses the areas of improvement being explored.
- Tap NAESP and state administrators’ associations for leadership training, assistance, research, and grant-writing support. 🌱



### Reflection Questions:

- Do my school’s processes recognize the different learning styles of administrators, coaches, and teachers?
- Am I keeping teacher leaders at the forefront, remembering that classrooms change more and more each year?
- Am I tapping into all available active instructional leadership opportunities?
- Can I better capture professional development opportunities within my own school?

**Content for this section was contributed by:** Gwinnett County Public Schools, Georgia: Dion Jones, Principal, Roberts Elementary School; Kassia Sutton, Principal, Norcross Elementary School; Angie Wright, Principal, Craig Elementary School.

Hillsborough County Public Schools, Florida: Amber Cronin, Principal, Pizzo Elementary School; Krystal Laffon, Principal, Folsom Elementary School; Rachael O’Dea, Principal, Forest Hills Elementary School.

New York City Department of Education: Robert Bender, Principal, William T. Harris School, PS 11; Victoria Hunt, Principal, Dos Puentes Elementary, PS 103; Josephine Sportella-Giusto, Principal, The Academy of Talented Scholars (TAOTS).

Bethel School District, Oregon: Shelley Ramirez, Assistant Principal, Thompson Elementary School.

Clark County School District, Nevada: T. Lee Douglass, Principal, and Deborah Young Yock, Assistant Principal, Kitty McDonough Ward Elementary School.

Gracie Branch, Associate Executive Director, Professional Learning, National Association of Elementary School Principals.

Peter DeWitt, school leadership coach and author of *Instructional Leadership: Creating Practice From Theory* (Corwin Press, 2020).