



The Convers

Effective Dialogue Between Principals and



How an ongoing coaching and mentorship model is building strong principals

By Susan McLester

Traditionally, conversation as more than an afterthought to a principal's evaluation has been fairly uncommon. In situations where summative mid- and end-of-year evaluations were the norm, principals most often learned they were doing either a good job or a not-so-good-job. And best of luck with that.

But as principal assessment has begun moving away from that wooden model and into the nurturing realm of ongoing coaching and mentorship, conversations have become central to fostering principal leadership and, by extension, student achievement.

Important and revealing examples of this new approach have been developed by 12 large districts that received support from The Wallace Foundation's Principal Pipeline Initiative (PPI), and then refined these ideas in the Principal Supervisors Initiative (PSI). Contributing to the initiatives have been ongoing Principal Perception surveys documenting the most and least helpful practices in building leadership. Among the findings: Compliance-heavy professional development and evaluations are ineffective, but mentor and supervisor guidance on data analysis, instructional leadership, and other pressing school issues are encouraging and key to professional growth.

Here, we speak with administrators in three of the 12 urban districts involved in Wallace's PPI and PSI. We look at how they are developing and honing the processes and procedures of coaching-based principal evaluation, and how conversations are helping to create and optimize the circumstances for success.

Conversations Behind the Conversations

At the heart of the ongoing and more informal conversational approach to principal evaluation is the conviction that connection, rather than isolation, is key to the success of principals. Jill Baker, deputy superintendent of schools at Long Beach Unified School District in California,

ation: Their Evaluators

Takeaways for Practicing Principals

Here is a sampling of what supervisors look for in a principal:

- Provides teachers with resources for the successful implementation of effective instructional strategies.
- Monitors and evaluates the use of diagnostic, formative, and summative assessment to provide timely and accurate feedback to students and parents, and to inform instructional practices.
- Possesses knowledge of research-based instructional best practices in the classroom.
- Analyzes current academic achievement data and instructional strategies to make appropriate educational decisions to improve classroom instruction, increase student achievement, and improve overall school effectiveness.
- Works collaboratively with staff to identify student needs and to design, revise, and monitor instruction to ensure effective delivery of the required curriculum.
- Participates in professional development alongside teachers when instructional strategies are being taught for future implementation.

From the Long Beach School District “Teaching and Learning” section of the *Principal Evaluation Handbook*.

has designed principal supervisor professional development around the kinds of conversations that need to take place before evaluators ever sit down with principals.

With 80 principals and eight principal supervisors (each responsible for 10 schools), Baker is a stickler for teamwork and systems that bring expertise, consistency, and efficiency to conversations around practical problems, observations, data analysis, and other areas in which principal supervisors must excel. “We have a very collaborative staff. Nothing is in its own silo,” she says.

In addition to a *Principal Evaluation Handbook* that specifically defines qualities, procedures, goal setting, and clear communication expectations for evaluators, Wallace Foundation support enabled the district to scale up professional development conversations for principal supervisors within different contexts.

Long Beach’s three-part learning structure includes five yearly Learning Lab Days in which a host principal supervisor shares a problem of practice with other principal supervisors, who then provide input on how to help that principal resolve the issue. For instance, a principal

may be struggling with how to create a shared vision around instruction and how to set up systems to support that vision.

A second context for these conversations is monthly collaboration and planning meetings that cover topics from differentiated principal supervision, best practices for principal supervisors, strengths-based leadership, and more. Also offered is one-to-one coaching for principal supervisors.

A third focus is a quarterly retreat at which supervisors spend four to five hours together looking at and discussing data from across all K–12 schools, rather than doing it individually, as they had in the past.

The district also maintains a list of desired principal behaviors, including maintaining a high degree of visibility and accessibility to students and staff, and providing verbal and written feedback that helps teachers improve performance.

Effective Principal-Supervisor Conversations

Supervisor visitations typically feature a classroom walkthrough and observations by the principal and supervisor, followed by a conversation.

The nature of these conversations can include what Baker terms both “intentional” and “organic” discussions. Intentional conversations focus on goals a principal has set with the help of the supervisor. These conversations may include a review of the principal’s strengths and weaknesses, progress on student outcomes, resources needed, and similar topics. Organic conversations may be about other concerns, such as family stress or issues that arise on the spot.

In order for these conversations to be effective coaching experiences for principals, however, it’s crucial that evaluators possess the skills, temperament, and knowledge that make the relationship work, says Tricia McManus. McManus, assistant superintendent of educational leadership and professional development for Florida’s Hillsborough County Public Schools, oversees a layered approach to evaluating the district’s 244 principals and eight area supervisors. To meet the challenge of evaluating 25 to 35 principals with at least one monthly school visitation, each supervisor relies on the assistance of five to seven coaches with different areas of expertise, such as special needs, curriculum, or data analysis.

“It takes a leader of leaders to be successful in the job of principal supervisor,” says McManus.

Beyond such skills as time management, curriculum knowledge, and data savviness, she says, the job also requires the less tangible skills of political navigation, an executive presence, and the ability to motivate and sell your vision to others.

“Principal supervisors must have the mindset of a professional developer and the ability to move beyond the role of principal,” says McManus. Recognizing and understanding the difference between the granular, hands-on problem-solving work of a principal and the stepped-back coaching role of a supervisor can be a difficult adjustment for administrators who have been chosen to supervise precisely because they were highly effective principals, say both McManus and Baker.

Steve Flynt, associate superintendent for school improvement and operations for Gwinnett County Public Schools in Georgia, agrees. Flynt, whose district has 139 principals supervised by nine assistant superintendents, says the most important function of a principal supervisor is to be an excellent facilitator. “They need to learn about all the support roles in the district so they know where the resources are and can direct the principal to those,” he says. “If the assistant superintendent is playing the part of ‘super principal’ and doing the principal’s job, then either I don’t need a principal or I don’t need an assistant superintendent.”

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Flynt also notes that transitioning to a district office role can add another level of adjustment. “Supervisors need to get down to specific areas with principals, but also be able to convey how things fit together from the broader perspective of district goals.”

McManus says another challenge for principal supervisors is keeping up with the evolving curriculum standards in order to have effective conversations with principals. Last year, Hillsborough County placed an emphasis on instructional leadership, and then found that some principal supervisors did not know how to

give clear instruction or feedback to principals when it came to accountability and enforcing curricular goals. “We made all eight area supervisors reapply for their jobs, and only four were rehired,” says McManus.

Fair and Trusting Conversations

As each of these Wallace-led districts hones its evaluation processes and the layers of conversations at their core, they are learning from each other. Gwinnett County has added paired supervisor walkthroughs and better evaluation lab protocols. Hillsborough is placing a new emphasis on evidence and artifacts to ensure greater equity in principal evaluations. And Long Beach is extending its leadership program by offering job shadowing, mentorships, and other opportunities for aspiring supervisors.

Fairness and consistency continue to be addressed across the board. All agree that while there must be a set of common expectations for all principals, evaluations should be differently weighted for different circumstances. For instance, there should be adjustments for novice administrators and those leading turnaround schools; veteran principals with long tenures in high-performing schools won’t need those adjustments. Differentiated weighting is a work in progress for all three districts.

In the final analysis, the success of the conversational approach to evaluation relies on mutual trust. Principals can help forge this trust if they are willing to be straightforward about the hard issues they are facing, say administrators. “It’s not about gotcha! moments, and the last thing a principal needs is someone coming in and telling them what to do,” says Flynt. “It’s got to be a joint effort, a two-way conversation.”

Ideally, trust grows organically from the ongoing mentorship and discussion model. Baker says that ripple effects of the conversational approach to evaluations include principals developing more positive views of the district office and fewer defensive responses. “At first veteran principals would ask, ‘What am I going to do when the supervisor comes to my school?’ But now, in year three, I don’t hear that question anymore.”

Susan McLester is a freelance education writer in Berkeley, California.

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REFLECT ON THIS

The Wallace Foundation identifies five key practices for effective principal leadership:

- Shape a vision of academic success for all students.
- Create a climate hospitable to education.
- Cultivate leadership in others.
- Improve classroom instruction.
- Manage people, data, and processes with the goal of school improvement.