



## How to Form Strong Networks

New principals grow in leadership by connecting with thought leaders nationally and globally

BY M. DIANE McCORMICK

Spend 10 minutes a day surfing the globe and chatting with the world's education innovators, and you become a better principal.

Far-fetched? Not to experienced principals who harness the power of networks to hone their skills as principals and people. Through networks, principals stock their toolboxes with the capabilities and knowledge needed for effectiveness and agility. Women, principals of color, and leaders of diverse schools find communities of empathy. All principals find peers who provide support—and challenges when they are called for.

Networks such as the NAESP Centers for Advancing Leadership link principals to experts in facilitating collaboration and learning communities, among other behaviors essential

to effectiveness. Principals who discover and implement practices in fostering openness and trust grow capable at creating the consensus-building among teachers that cultivates leadership for improved student learning, as revealed in the 2021 Wallace Foundation-supported research synthesis “How Principals Affect Students and Schools.” Effectively instituting PLCs sows trust by instilling teachers with the flexibility and adaptability needed to improve student outcomes, the research finds.

Take a few tips from principals who are experienced in network participation—your fact-finding trip around the world starts now.

**Networks offer ideas for effectiveness from world-class leaders:** Effective leadership delivers impact across a school's multiple dimensions, note the researchers in the Wallace-commissioned report. Academic achievement goes up. Absenteeism and exclusionary discipline go down. Teachers experience improved working conditions and reduced turnover. Veteran principals say that they learn practices for effectiveness by networking and connecting with thought leaders worldwide.

“It's essential for school leaders to be connected nationally, and even globally, to better seek perspective, support, and ideas that they may not receive locally. We often get stuck in our own bubbles, and as strong as those around us may be, seeking outside advice offers unique perspectives.

“Our job as school leaders is spotting emerging trends. If we can see these things coming and observe how others handled them, we get an edge as we lean into the situation. Instead of being overwhelmed, we

can start thinking ahead on how to handle things. By feeling prepared, we lower our stress.

“An effective network is more than just support and positive intentions. If your people really care about you, they hold you accountable and even challenge you to be your best self. If you avoid tough conversations, then you won’t grow.

“Just because you connect via social media does not mean that you have a thriving and supportive network. Try to connect in many ways. It’s all about relationships, and these are built over many moments and over time. Don’t undervalue a five-minute call to catch up. That person may have needed you in that moment more than you know. If they cross your mind, reach out.”

—Andy Jacks, Ed.D., senior fellow, NAESP Centers for Advancing Leadership, and principal, The Nokesville School in Nokesville, Virginia

#### Insight from leadership experts helps principals connect the dots:

Principals who want to “effect positive change” in schools need skills and expertise in instruction, with people, and with organizations, according to the Wallace-supported research.

“One of the paradoxes of being a principal is that you’re in the position because people rely on you to be competent and give direction, support, and empathy. However, we can’t know everything, and we shouldn’t pretend to know everything. One of the aspects of our jobs is connecting dots. The more we can connect dots between schedules, budget, vision, servant leadership, and equity efforts, the more we’re able to do that not with answers, but

with questions. Learning from a global cadre of learners has made me a better dot-connector.

“Work hard to connect not only with people who affirm and celebrate your efforts, but also people who think differently or have different backgrounds from you. Once people start to realize that you’re interested in learning and know you have blind spots, they’re more willing to help.

“I’ve learned to listen better. I’ve learned to ask better and different questions. There’s no doubt that taking conversations deeper enhances instructional leadership, whether you’re in a PLC meeting, a one-to-one meeting, or meeting with a parent.”

—Brad Gustafson, Ed.D., principal, Greenwood Elementary School, Plymouth, Minnesota

#### Networking cultivates an inclusiveness perspective:

Principals who build an equity lens to scrutinize practices for their impact on diverse students and staff can make schools more inclusive and instruction more culturally responsive, say the researchers.

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“The principalship can often be lonely. Principal networks give a leader an umbrella of support and resources. As a woman of color leading a diverse school community, my networks and professional learning communities have given me encouragement through challenges and motivation when the work seems unbearable.

“The signs of an active and productive network are consistent communication among the members and dissemination of current best practices and strategies. A productive network also includes leaders and voices from various backgrounds and communities. The best way to find the right networks to join is to do your research, solicit recommendations, and determine what you are hoping to gain.

“As a new principal, you don’t know what you don’t know! When a new principal is a part of an active and productive professional network, it enables them to strengthen their leadership skills in areas they are still developing. Collaborating with leaders who have had more experience in coaching teachers and impacting climate and culture enables new principals to learn from and gather best practices that they can utilize.”

—*Ryan Daniel, NAESP Center for Diversity Leadership fellow and principal, Fort Foote Elementary School, Fort Washington, Maryland*

**Diverse school leaders find support:** Even as principals are becoming more racially and ethnically diverse, growing representation gaps with students are a concern. Demographic diversity among principals is linked with better outcomes for students of color, including test

score gains, and nonachievement outcomes, such as the likelihood of receiving gifted services, according to the researchers. Outcomes for teachers of color are better, too, with a higher likelihood of being hired and staying.

“The benefits that a new principal can receive from being in active principal networks are practical, common-sense knowledge, a focused direction, and hopefully, a safe place to vent when needed.

“As a second-year African American principal, one of the most enlightening and rewarding experiences of my career thus far has been being part of an affinity group for African American male administrators called BOLD Leadership ([www.boldleadershipconsultants.com](http://www.boldleadershipconsultants.com)). Being able to brainstorm ideas or ask veteran administrators questions about situations that I encounter has been invaluable.

“The men in BOLD Leadership are minorities not just in race but in gender. For me, [it] has been critical to have a safe space to share with other school leaders who look like me in a field where, according to the Stanford Graduate School of Education, only 2 percent of America’s teachers are Black men.

“Choose an area to focus on, and [decide] how you want that area to be impactful. Then incorporate ideas generated from conversations, social media posts, magazine articles, or anywhere else into your best practices. Sticking to one area and then reflecting on how these practices worked or did not work, it will help prevent being overwhelmed with information overload.”

—*Farrell Thomas, principal, Waterloo Elementary School, Greenville, South Carolina* ●

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