**Education Research
& Development, LLC**

SHIFTING DISTRICT CULTURE TO BETTER SUPPORT SCHOOLS:

The Cleveland Principal Supervisor Initiative

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June 2018

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Education Research and Development (EdRD) was founded on the belief that practitioners need to leverage research and evidence in order to implement practices that will ensure each student— regardless of background—is prepared for college, careers, and life. EdRD conducts research and creates tools that enable educators to access research findings and apply lessons from practice. These tools include case studies, books, frameworks, resource databases, decision-making protocols, and professional development sessions.

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SUMMARY

The primary function of the central office is to provide people, resources, and tools that schools can access to implement their school plan. — Eric Gordon, CEO, Cleveland Metropolitan School District

For school districts to substantially improve student learning across all their schools, district leaders will need to dramatically shift the organizational norms and mindsets at their central offices.[1] Historically, central offices have operated as if schools exist to serve them. The Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD), in contrast, is one of a growing number of systems that are attempting to shift central office mindsets toward supporting schools and the students they serve. This report details three strategies CMSD is using to accomplish this:
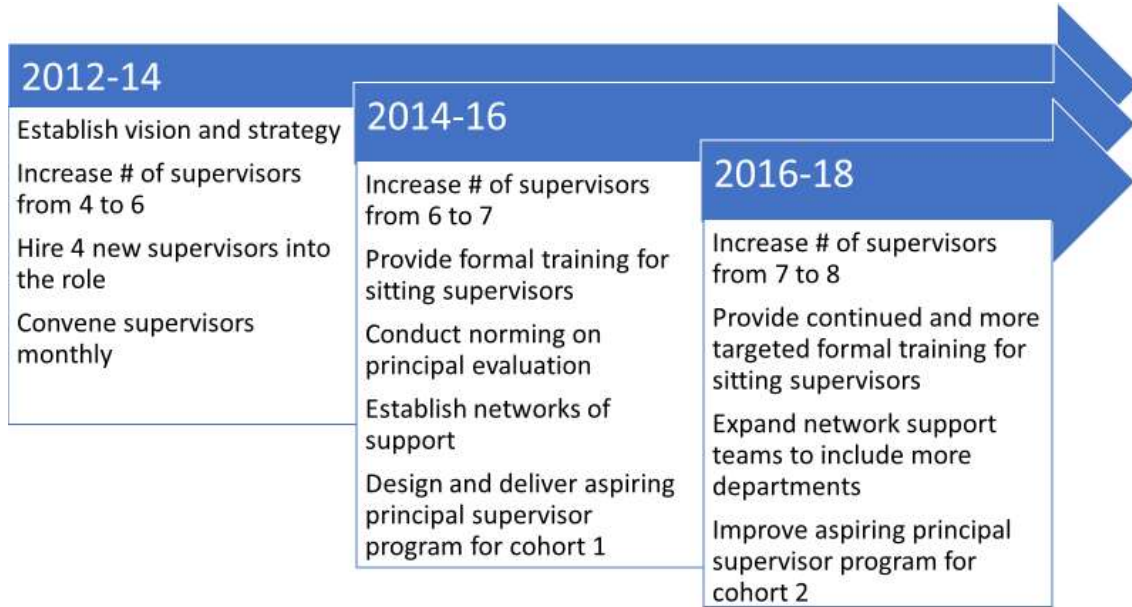
1. redefining the principal supervisor role;

2. creating networks of support; and

3. designing and delivering an aspiring principal supervisor program.

The report describes lessons learned from this work and recommendations for other districts attempting similar changes. The findings are based on interviews of district leaders, central office staff, and principals—as well as three days of observation of district meetings and extensive review of artifacts. The report's purpose is to help other districts consider the challenges they are likely to face and draw on lessons from CMSD to improve their implementation of similar strategies.

Perhaps the most important lesson is that this type of change takes time and should be implemented in phases, with opportunities to continuously adapt the work to meet evolving needs. Figure 1 provides a high-level overview of three phases of the work in Cleveland. Throughout the report, we discuss how CMSD's strategies changed over time and the rationale behind those changes.

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[1] George W. Bush Institute. (2015). *Gwinnett County Public Schools: A systemic approach to scaling effective school leadership*. Dallas, TX: Author; Honig, M. I., Copland, M. A., Rainey, L., Lorton, J. A., & Newton, M. (with Matson, E., Pappas, L., & Rogers, B.). (2010). *Central office transformation for district-wide teaching and learning improvement*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington, Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy; Ikemoto, G., Taliaferro, L., Fenton, B., & Davis, J. (2014). *Great principals at scale: Creating district conditions that enable all principals to be effective*. New York, NY: New Leaders.

Figure 1. Timeline of CMSD's strategies for redefining the role of the central office

2012-14

Establish vision and strategy

Increase # of supervisors from 4 to 6

Hire 4 new supervisors into the role

Convene supervisors monthly

2014-16

Increase # of supervisors from 6 to 7

Provide formal training for sitting supervisors

Conduct norming on principal evaluation

Establish networks of support

Design and deliver aspiring principal supervisor program for cohort 1

2016-18

Increase # of supervisors from 7 to 8

Provide continued and more targeted formal training for sitting supervisors

Expand network support teams to include more departments

Improve aspiring principal supervisor program for cohort 2

BACKGROUND

Many school districts in the United States have pockets of excellence within schools. Principals can be a key lever for scaling excellent teaching schoolwide. These principals provide strong instructional leadership that supports staff as they work to align instructional programs and practices to state standards, and that enables collaborative continuous improvement.

To play an instructional leadership role effectively, principals need more training, particularly on instruction that prepares students for the increasing demands of college, careers, and citizenship. Principals, along with their school leadership teams, need to be able to assess their school's needs and assets and create school plans for improvement—and they need a central office that provides guidance, support, and resources to implement those school plans. Developing this type of culture of support in the central office often requires a major shift in mindset, since many districts (including CMSD) have historically had a top-down orientation, with schools expected to serve and support the central office.

Based on evidence from research and the successes of other school districts, and with financial support from the Wallace Foundation, CMSD leaders decided to redesign the principal supervisor role and create what they termed *networks of support* in order to improve the effectiveness of school leadership and ultimately improve student outcomes. The work began with the Cleveland Plan, which was CMSD's response to political culture that valued family choice and autonomy to address local needs:

> *Our goal is to ensure that every child in Cleveland attends a high-quality school and that every neighborhood has a multitude of great schools from which families can choose. To do this, Cleveland must transition from a traditional, single-source school district to a new system of district and charter schools that are held to the highest standards and work in partnership to create dramatic student achievement gains for every child. The plan is built upon growing the number of excellent schools in Cleveland, regardless of provider, and giving these schools autonomy over staff and budgets in exchange for high accountability for performance. We will create an environment that empowers and values principals and teachers as professionals and makes certain that our students are held to the highest expectations.*[2]

One of the four key strategies outlined in this plan was to "focus [the] district's central office on key support and governance roles and transfer authority and resources to schools."[3] Eric Gordon, the CEO of CMSD, explained the rationale for this strategy: "For too many years, we bet on the idea that the central office had the answers. We have proof that approach doesn't work. We need to empower and support the people in schools to innovate and find the solutions that will help kids learn." To this end, the district

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[2] Jackson, F. G. (2012). *Cleveland's plan for supporting schools: Reinventing publication in our city and serving as a model of innovation for the state of Ohio*. Retrieved from http://www.clevelandmetroschools.org/theclevelandplan.
[3] Ibid.

established a system to monitor schools' progress and gave them significantly more autonomy to make decisions regarding the strategies and approaches they would use to improve their outcomes.

Michelle Pierre-Farid joined CMSD as chief academic officer in August 2012, at the beginning of the Cleveland Plan. One of her first moves was to redefine the principal supervisor role as a "network support leader" role, with each supervisor supporting a network of principals through coaching and feedback. CMSD lowered the span of control for its principal supervisors in 2013–14 and started a training program for aspiring principal supervisors in 2014–15 to begin developing individuals who could be effective in the newly defined role. CMSD also created network support teams in 2014–15 composed of representatives from key central office departments (e.g., human resources and finance). These teams were tasked with supporting schools' needs pertaining to their departments' areas of focus.

The remainder of this report is organized around CMSD's three core strategies for improving support for its schools:

1. redefining the principal supervisor role;
2. creating network support teams; and
3. designing and delivering an aspiring principal supervisor program.

For each strategy, we provide a detailed description with illustrative examples and explain how it evolved over time; we also outline key implementation challenges and recommendations for other districts. The report ends with overall lessons for other districts to consider as they approach similar work.

REDEFINING THE PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR ROLE

Redefining the principal supervisor role was a key mechanism through which CMSD leaders shifted the district culture from one in which schools serve the central office to one in which the central office serves schools and students. Prior to this culture shift, the principal supervisor role embodied a top-down approach and was focused on overseeing schools and principals and ensuring their compliance with district policies. Principal supervisors were authority figures who issued directives that schools followed. One principal supervisor described the role's traditional focus on compliance:

> *One of the things that the job was at the beginning was compliance. Our role was to ensure budgets are in line; there was order in the schools. Our job was a lot of making sure things are on time and making sure schools were complying with special education requirements.*

District leaders wanted principal supervisors to play a pivotal role in supporting principals as they took on more autonomy for decision-making. CMSD leaders also wanted principal supervisors to provide principals with job-embedded, ongoing professional development to strengthen their instructional leadership skills and keep them current with evolving student standards and best practices for teaching and learning.

To this end, CMSD contracted with New Leaders in 2012–13 to provide principal supervisors with professional development to build their skills for their new roles. The regularly scheduled professional development meetings created an opportunity for principal supervisors to meet and become a collaborative group that could share ideas and learn from one another. District leaders soon discovered that many of the principal supervisors had not been hired into the role with instructional leadership skills in mind. One district leader described the challenge this presented:

> *In the time the original [principal supervisors] were in the role, standards changed; effective schooling changed. A lot of things happened all at once that made them not a good match for the role any longer.*

In 2013–14, the district, with funding from a grant from the Wallace Foundation, decreased principal supervisors' span of control from 25–30 principals to 15–20 and increased the number of principal supervisors from four to six. Two of the original four principal supervisors remained in the role, and the district hired four new principal supervisors (two of whom were brought on midyear). CMSD also used the Wallace grant money to hire an executive director of network leadership development to provide training and support to the principal supervisors.

The training for principal supervisors began in summer 2014 and focused on building a common vision of effective instruction, a common definition of effective leadership, and a consistent approach to leadership coaching. The training started by using evaluation and state standards as a lens for understanding high-quality instruction. The principal supervisors used common protocols to conduct learning walks together and define effective practice. They observed videos of teacher and principal practices and reviewed fictional case studies together. Then, they used a rubric to identify principals' areas for growth and made recommendations for improvement. Conversations about particular cells

within the rubric and how evidence should be interpreted through the lens of the rubric language were particularly powerful for building principal supervisors' understanding of "what good practice looks like." These conversations also enabled interrater reliability among principal supervisors in the interpretation and application of the rubric.

At the midyear of 2015–16, principal supervisors discussed their ratings of principals. They each brought evidence for a principal they were planning to rate at each level of the rubric. They presented each principal's case to the group, including how they planned to rate the principal on each line of the rubric and the evidence they were using to justify the rating. The experience was reportedly very "powerful" because everyone was in the same room, which enabled a detailed conversation to develop shared understandings and application of the rubric. The discussions surfaced how differently principal supervisors were interpreting the same data, which provided motivation to work toward a common understanding. Notably, 20 principals who were rated accomplished going into the meeting were no longer rated accomplished after the conversations. Rather than meaningless ratings that suggested that every principal was accomplished, the final ratings reflected the true variation in principal performance. These norming conversations have since become an ongoing practice that occurs at the middle and end of every year.

Principal supervisors also received training on coaching school leaders and practiced providing feedback to principals. One principal supervisor described the group's growing comfort with giving constructive feedback:

> *Part of the challenge was a Midwestern culture of "nice," in which people did not give each other critical feedback. And there was not trust. So supervisors would say, "You were really good." … By the end of the first year, instead of saying the leader looked "good," we were using descriptive language and using low-inference data to support claims.*

As described by this principal supervisor, the training also helped principal supervisors to understand the value of taking low-inference notes to enable them to ground feedback conversations in non-subjective data.

The training broadened the lens that principal supervisors used when they observed instruction and helped them know what components of effective instruction they should look for in their observations. The group identified indicators of rigor that they would focus on during their instructional observations, such as alignment to state standards. One principal supervisor explained how this practice represented a change from the status quo:

> *In the beginning, there were some people who would go into every classroom, and they would look for lesson plans, and that was their go-to. There were other people who would say, "I am looking for 'I can' statements on the board." What was broken is that … we had people talking about classroom management and pedagogy but not about quality and content of instruction. It could be a great lesson, but if it's not aligned to standards, that's a problem. It was a new focus for us [looking for and discussing] "was that task aligned to the standard?"*

As a result of the conversations around quality instruction, in 2016–17 CMSD decided to further focus on developing principal supervisors' skills in assessing and coaching instruction, so that they could be better equipped to develop these skills in principals. The district was increasing its expectations of principals' knowledge of instruction and their ability to lead instructional improvement. District leaders therefore wanted principal supervisors to have the knowledge and skills to support principals in meeting these increased expectations.

In the 2017–18 school year, principal supervisors in Cleveland each oversaw a group of schools, referred to as a *network*, and they were ultimately responsible for student achievement in that network. Eight principal supervisors oversaw approximately 10–15 schools each. The principal supervisor role consisted of five main responsibilities, each of which is described in detail below:

1. building principals' instructional leadership capacity;
2. managing and evaluating principal performance;
3. facilitating support for schools;
4. informing and implementing district policy; and
5. monitoring compliance.

Building principals' instructional leadership capacity

The most important change in the principal supervisor role has been the increased focus on developing principals as instructional leaders. The new role entails coaching principals to: observe instruction, identify whether certain features of instruction are present or absent, and provide teachers with useful feedback. Through this work, principal supervisors are expected to build a common understanding across schools of the district's vision for rigorous, high-quality instruction.

Principal supervisors have worked to gain principals' trust by demonstrating that their role had changed. Through their words and actions, they have convinced principals that they were not trying to find out what principals or schools were doing wrong; instead, they wanted to support principals in growing more proficient in their practices. They have worked alongside principals, engaging them in reflective conversation and following up with supports from other central office staff as needed or requested. They also have conducted candid and transparent conversations that helped struggling principals understand their areas for growth early on so that they could improve.

As of the 2017–18 school year, principal supervisors have continued to build principals' instructional leadership capacity through monthly network meetings and one-on-one support. During network meetings, they have led principals in examining several elements of instruction, including what the state standards require students to know and be able to do (i.e., what skills are embedded in the standards); what prior knowledge students need to engage in a lesson; how the teacher introduces and teaches a concept; and what tasks students are being asked to perform. The focus of the work was at first on determining whether each of these instructional elements observed in classrooms was sufficient to enable students to achieve the standards, and then on considering how to coach teachers to adapt a

lesson and their practice to address any gaps. Through this collaborative work, principal supervisors enabled principals to arrive at a shared vision of rigorous instruction that aligns with the district's vision.

Managing and evaluating principal performance

Principal supervisors continue to be responsible for evaluating principals and supporting their progress toward their annual goals, which were aligned with their performance evaluations. At the beginning of the school year, principals completed a self-assessment and reviewed school-level data to identify two goals: one focused on student achievement and another focused on their own leadership. Each principal supervisor met with their principals to agree upon the goals and support principals in creating an action plan to achieve them, complete with milestones against which to monitor progress. Principal supervisors provided principals with informal feedback related to their goals on an ongoing basis during their regular school visits. In their redefined roles, principal supervisors also took more responsibility for gathering evidence for formal evaluations, as opposed to formerly, when the burden of proof was on principals to justify their ratings.

While principal supervisors provided a formal rating during a midyear review conference and an end-of-year conference, the overall evaluation experience was more about supporting growth than satisfying bureaucratic requirements. One principal described the change in the evaluation model:

> Before the shift, I had one supervisor … I saw once in five years. And my evaluations were quite perfunctory. Once we shifted over to this model and reduced the number of schools, [I saw my supervisor] monthly at least, and possibly slightly more. We had conversations on a pretty regular basis. It shifted from perfunctory evaluations to actual evaluation conversations around how I can improve my actual needs, and where did I want to get better. It was more of a coaching model instead of check boxes and making sure we are sending information to the state so that we're in compliance. It was a huge shift in terms of personal support.

Facilitating support for schools

In addition to supporting and evaluating principals, CMSD principal supervisors are responsible for coordinating resources in the central office to aid principals in leading their schools. This part of the principal supervisor role reflects the district's larger reorganization of the central office as a service organization in support of schools.

In this function, principal supervisors serve as intermediaries between principals and central office departments. For example, one principal supervisor worked with the executive director of the family and community engagement department to support principals. A member of this department explained:

> Principals typically have to create family engagement plans every month, and that has always been a sore spot. We [the family and community engagement department and the principal supervisor] held an engagement planning [workshop] with vendors and

planned out the whole year for every building … so [principals] can maintain focus on instructional integrity of their building.

Principal supervisors coordinate support for schools primarily by managing and leading a "network support team"—a group of central office employees who help schools execute their school plans using central office resources.[4] Each principal supervisor typically has two types of positions that report directly to them: action team coaches and barrier breakers.

The **action team coaches** generally coach and mentor principals, especially new principals. They often provide follow-up on issues raised or actions taken by the principal supervisor. For example, if a principal supervisor visits a school and observes four to five classrooms, an action team coach might subsequently join the principal in observing other classrooms with a similar lens, so that there is schoolwide data to inform the principal's action steps. Some principal supervisors strategically hire action team coaches whose strengths complement their own. For example, if a principal supervisor has limited experience with K-8 schools, that person might hire an action team coach with expertise in that area. Some networks have two action team coaches.

The **barrier breaker** role was created seven years ago, when the district initiated the network of support model. Barrier breakers are an operational resource for principals—go-to people who can navigate district bureaucracy and solve problems in real time. They have a college degree and often have previously held positions within the district as a paraprofessional or secretary. One principal supervisor described the barrier breaker role:

> *The idea was that principals often get frustrated because they need things and don't know where to go. It would be nice [to have quick answers to questions such as:] What happened to this shipment I was supposed to receive? The boiler went out—who should I call? I need a partner in the community for this project but don't know who to go to. [My barrier breaker] has historically focused on operations. If a principal is out, he can cover. [He's] great at answering questions from parents.*

Since roles and responsibilities for network support team members vary from network to network, their structures for communication and coordination also vary. In some networks, each member of the team serves as a point person for a set of schools within the network, with assignments depending on the alignment between the needs of the school and the team member's skills and expertise. In other networks, the three roles (the principal supervisor, action team coach, and barrier breaker) work together to provide coordinated support to schools. For example, one network uses a document called a "MOM" (Method of Monitoring) to collaboratively track visits and supports to schools so that they can be coordinated in their follow-up.

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[4] Additional details about how the networks are organized and managed are presented in the section titled "Creating Networks of Support."

Informing and implementing district policy

Principal supervisors are also members of the senior leadership team for CMSD. As part of their district leadership work, they sit on central office committees, such as school redesign, scheduling, technology, operations, legal, and resources committees. Their assignment to these committees provides the district with a conduit between schools and district policy and practice. In the words of one principal supervisor, "we work with different departments to ensure that if something is changing [such as] in finance, we know about it; people often forget the principal supervisors need to know this sort of information." Principal supervisors bring back relevant information to other principal supervisors. They also help committees make decisions on behalf of schools by sharing school perspectives with them, such as relevant information on the school's context and possible implications of committee decisions for schools. For example, one principal supervisor sits on the legal committee in order to bring a school and principal perspective to legal issues and policies that the district is setting.

Monitoring compliance

While their relative focus has shifted to instructional leadership, principal supervisors are still responsible for procedural, compliance-related, and escalated issues. For example, principal supervisors are involved in special education compliance, teacher discipline, student discipline (such as appeals for claims of physical assault on teachers), regular harassment complaints (not of protected groups), and nonrenewals of teacher licenses. One principal supervisor described an example, noting the conflict between procedural responsibilities and instructional leadership responsibilities:

> *One of the duties we perform, as agreed upon in the collective bargaining agreement, is to hold special transfer hearings, in which teachers or paraprofessionals can request (with no limit to how many or how often) to be transferred to another building. This request can be made at any time in the year and even over the summer. By contract, we must hold the hearing and listen to why they want the transfer, and while the ultimate decision rests with the network leader, the work that goes into preparing, holding the hearing, examining possible locations for the transfer, and subsequent documentation of my decision still takes up valuable time in which I could be focusing on instruction.*

The exact role of principal supervisors in monitoring compliance continues to be an area of tension and disagreement within the district. For example, principal supervisors were asked by the special education department to follow up with schools that had not submitted their students' individualized education plans. Some principal supervisors thought this was an inappropriate use of principal supervisor time and would not be necessary if the special education department communicated the request in a way that aligned with schools' goals. Others thought principal supervisors needed to play a role because, as line managers, they were the only ones who could hold principals accountable for responding to the request.

DETAILED EXAMPLES

While all principal supervisors worked to build principals' instructional leadership capacity through network meetings, school visits, and one-on-one conversations, some of their strategies varied based on schools' and networks' needs. The following examples illustrate some of the variation.

- Valentina Moxon: Tiering and differentiating support for individual principals.

- Paul Hoover: Coaching principals with a consistent protocol across the network.

- Andrew Koonce: Using a coaching stance to support improvements in principal practice.

- Lisa Farmer Cole: Improving principals' instructional leadership through inquiry on a common problem of practice.

Valentina Moxon: Tiering and differentiating support for individual principals

Valentina Moxon has been a principal supervisor for 10 years and an educator in the district for over 30 years. She previously oversaw 34 high schools as an assistant superintendent, and when CMSD restructured the schools, Ms. Moxon became responsible for schools at all levels in the Best Practices/Academics and Culture Network.

Ms. Moxon's approach to supervising principals is to carefully assess school needs and use all available resources from across her network to deliver customized support to schools. Ms. Moxon uses data from multiple sources—including NWEA, Ohio's State Tests, school quality reviews, and teacher evaluations— to determine the level of support schools need and categorize them into three tiers accordingly. She also considers how well principals understand, analyze, and use data to make decisions and are able to communicate a vision for their school. Once schools have been categorized into tiers, Ms. Moxon prioritizes two or three schools for intense support and more frequent school visits. She also collaborates with her action team coaches to identify the appropriate supports for all schools based on the challenges each is facing.

A core part of Ms. Moxon's strategy for supporting network principals is to use a team approach. Ms. Moxon explained, "I really believe in the concept that I don't have all of the answers." Ms. Moxon strategically deploys two action team coaches to support school needs. Each coach is assigned half of the schools to visit regularly. The frequency of their visits depends on the needs of the schools and the extent to which there is an existing relationship with a coach. The coaches provide additional support across the network based on their expertise. One action team coach, who is skilled in data analysis, analyzes data for all schools and presents it to principals in a way that can be easily understood and used to determine instructional strategies for individual students and to guide school decision-making. For example, at one school, this coach identified 5th-grade math as an area of need based on student data and helped a principal prepare professional development for the 5th-grade math teachers. The other action team coach has expertise in instruction and focuses on instructional support for principals and their staff. For example, she works with teachers to support their instructional practice, often working with grade-level teams that a principal has identified as needing support. Ms. Moxon and the

coaches also connect teachers with others in the same content area in the network, including by organizing opportunities for teachers from different schools in the network to come together.

Based on her assessment that "what we need to do is go deeper and do a better diagnosis," Ms. Moxon developed a school-visitation protocol to facilitate the action team coaches' work. She meets with them at least once a week to debrief what has been happening in the schools, and together, they customize supports for schools based on what they observed and trends in student data.

Like other network support leaders in the district, Ms. Moxon has focused network meetings on shifts in math and English language arts standards and principal practice that can ensure the school responds to those shifts. One principal without a background in English language arts described the process of learning to support teachers in addressing the English language arts standards by working with Ms. Moxon and her team. He explained, "At first I would talk about it, [and] I didn't really believe it I could sell [the changes to teachers]. They have made me more comfortable and aware of what I know." The work with the network also provided the principal with prompts and language to use with teachers to help them reflect on their lessons and improve the alignment and rigor of their lessons relative to shifts in the standards.

Ms. Moxon has worked with the action team coaches over several years. Ultimately, the close relationships between Ms. Moxon and her action team coaches, and in turn, their coaching relationships with principals, enable individualized, ongoing support centered on instructional improvement. One principal described the relational nature of the work: "I think that relationship has to be based on trust. You've hired me to do the job. You have to trust me to do the job. If I am not doing the job, you have to help me."

Paul Hoover: Coaching principals with a consistent protocol across the network

Paul Hoover began his first year supervising principals in the 2017–18 school year. He leads 12 schools in the Investment II network, a group of struggling schools in corrective action. As part of the Cleveland Plan to turn around these schools, the CEO has given principals in this network additional autonomy and resources.

In August 2017, Mr. Hoover met with each principal to discuss his or her strengths and areas for growth. He explicitly asked principals to suggest how he could best support them and found that most wanted support related to teacher coaching and feedback. For example, one principal wanted support with the challenge of addressing needs of two types of staff—those who were new, engaged, and eager to work with the instructional coach, and those who were veteran, negative, and unwilling to allow the coach into their rooms. This principal wanted thought partnership and guidance on how to work with the second type of teachers.

Mr. Hoover and his action team coach developed a protocol for school visits to outline a process and track coaching interactions with principals. The protocol outlined common objectives, structures, and norms for the visits. It entailed simultaneously building common understanding of rigor across the network, providing detailed feedback to two teachers per visit, and coaching the principal on how to coach the teachers. The protocol included a teacher feedback form that supported principals in providing effective feedback by: (1) specifically naming a goal for feedback; (2) crafting a conversation starter that creates a welcoming, supportive environment; (3) providing praise based on evidence; (4)

posing a focused, open-ended reflective question for the teacher to help him or her identify the area of practice that needs improvement; (5) scaffolding questions with evidence from the lesson; (6) explicitly labeling the practice to improve with recommendations; (7) guiding the teacher in creating a plan for implementing the recommendations; and (8) establishing a timeline for the plan.

Mr. Hoover used Microsoft Forms to log session notes so that he could review them prior to the next coaching cycle. In the logs, he tracked follow-up questions from the prior visit, the coaching focus for the principal (e.g., working with reluctant teachers), low-inference notes from the visit, feedback given to the principal, and next steps identified for the principal and the action team coach.

The systematic use of school visits focused on rigor across the network has had positive results for teachers and students. For example, the principal referenced above improved relations with reluctant teachers, and students across three grade levels outperformed their projected proficiency levels by 25 percent.

Andrew Koonce: Using a coaching stance to support improvements in principal practice

"The biggest change in my practice is that I have stopped the directive coaching," said Andrew Koonce, who has been a principal supervisor for four years and oversees 11 schools in the Achievement Network. When he began in the role, Mr. Koonce said, he was quick to tell principals not to do something, particularly when he was concerned that they were planning to take actions that would "blow up in their face." For example, he stopped a principal from forcibly reassigning the union representative in his building because doing so would have caused bigger problems than the ones the principal was already facing. This approach helped principals to avoid some management landmines, but it also failed to help principals develop their own skills in anticipating and proactively planning for possible challenges.

More recently, Mr. Koonce has been using strategies from *The Art of Coaching: Effective Strategies for School Transformation*. According to Mr. Koonce, the book offers a plethora of stems that have helped him take a more facilitative stance.

For example, one principal wanted to use her district-granted autonomy to adopt Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI) instead of the district-recommended Accelerated Reader program. She had used LLI for a number of years as the cornerstone of a summer school program and thought it would make a positive difference for her students. Instead of overruling a choice he did not support, Mr. Koonce helped the principal think through implementation by asking a set of framing questions. For example:

> *Mr. Koonce*: Do your teachers have the capacity to do LLI?
>
> *Principal*: Yes.
>
> *Mr. Koonce*: How do you know?
>
> *Principal*: They told me.
>
> *Mr. Koonce*: Let's go see.
>
> *[Observations revealed that teachers were not implementing LLI as intended.]*

Mr. Koonce: How often do you visit classrooms?

Principal: I think I need to visit more often.

Mr. Koonce: What strategies could you implement to ensure teachers have the support they need?

Principal: I can send all teachers to training.

[Mr. Koonce and the principal brainstormed several other strategies.]

In this way, Mr. Koonce let the principal "meander through a problem" without directly telling her what to do. Although the process took longer, Mr. Koonce has found that this type of facilitative approach has a more meaningful and lasting impact on his principals' practice. For example, he was able to confirm through follow-up visits that the principal who championed LLI indeed had provided the intended supports and more regularly observed classrooms. Student proficiency levels more than doubled in these classrooms.

Lisa Farmer Cole: Improving principals' instructional leadership through inquiry on a common problem of practice

Lisa Farmer Cole has supervised principals in CMSD for seven years. She initially supported principals who were opening new schools, offering strategy support (such as identifying programming and student supports) as well as operational support (such as setting up new systems and hiring staff). When CMSD began shifting the principal supervisor role in 2012, Ms. Cole continued to support the same schools—but with an increased focus on instruction and improving student learning.

Ms. Cole's role has evolved over time into one focused on coaching principals to galvanize their staff and community around a vision, identify and improve instructional practices, and review data to be responsive to student needs. Ms. Cole has welcomed the opportunity to take more of a coaching stance (while still being directive when warranted). In her words, "Before, this huge responsibility was placed on us, to be all-knowing and having all the answers. Now, it's sitting with an adult leader and having a conversation around, collectively, how can we put a plan together to grow you as a leader, grow your teachers, and grow your students?"

During the 2017–18 school year, Ms. Cole's network, the Innovation Network, identified a common problem of practice: the need to ensure that instruction supports development of higher-order thinking skills required by the Ohio State Standards and Ohio's State Tests, which had been updated to align with college and career readiness expectations. While there were a few teachers focused on higher-order thinking skills, most teachers were focused primarily on discrete skills. As a result, most students were not well prepared to apply their knowledge in response to open-ended questions or essay prompts.

In response to this problem of practice, Ms. Cole attended a reDesign Institute session with Antonia Rudenstine, and in an effort not to remedy the problem alone, she coordinated a group of principals to attend a subsequent session focused on performance-based assessments. The institute supported principals' understanding of effective instruction and teacher support. Ms. Cole facilitated the principals in developing a common lens—based on core principles from the training—to observe instruction and

provide feedback to teachers. The group decided that each time principals visited a classroom, they would focus on three questions. First, is instruction aligned to the prioritized standards? Second, does the lesson address the depth of knowledge required by the standards? And third, are performance assessments being used to gauge student learning on those standards?

Ms. Cole clears her calendar so that she can prioritize conducting learning walks in all her network schools. She typically spends 2–3 hours at each school, depending on need. The visit begins with a 30-minute overview. Then, using the observation questions, she and the principal visit all the English language arts classrooms and other content classes focused on writing as part of a cross-curricular focus. The visit ends with a debrief, in which Ms. Cole and the principal discuss evidence gathered from the observations and next steps, including how the principal will provide professional development to individuals or groups of teachers who might need it.

Through this process, Ms. Cole supports principals in developing their knowledge of effective instruction and the leadership practices that can promote it. This support includes developing principals' skills in conducting effective instructional rounds, providing useful feedback to teachers, and supporting teachers' professional growth. For example, some principals in her network did not have experience conducting instructional rounds and were concerned about how teachers would react. Ms. Cole led her team of principals in reading two books: *Instructional Rounds in Education: A Network Approach to Improving Teaching and Learning* and *Leverage Leadership: A Practical Guide to Building Exceptional Schools*. She also paired principals new to the practice with experienced principals and provided individual follow-ups. She encouraged principals to start slow, so that teachers would accept the practice. She brought a consultant, Diana Tuggey, into the district to provide strategies for introducing and conducting the instructional rounds.

Principals reported this focus on instructional rounds has improved their practice, which has in turn benefitted the students they serve. One principal described the professional growth that stemmed from working with Ms. Cole and her network: "Prior to joining [Ms. Cole's] network, I didn't really feel like there was a lot of professional growth. [My interaction with my supervisor] was, 'Do you have this form or this data?' [Ms. Cole's] network is more from a balcony perspective. We think about strategies; we do action research. She is able to bring in people who have done this work in other places. As a professional, I have more tools in my toolbox because I have been exposed to more. … I am more knowledgeable about what practices are out there, and that is a better situation for my students."

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES AND LESSONS

The district faced several challenges in redefining the principal supervisor role, many of which have also been experienced by other districts pursuing similar work.[5] This section describes those challenges, lessons learned, and strategies that CMSD is pursuing to address the challenges.

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[5] Kelemen, M. (2016). *Focusing principal supervision on instruction: Lessons from three districts*. New York, NY: New Leaders.

Shifting from a culture of compliance to a culture of support

Some principals were slow to embrace their principal supervisor as a coach. They previously had experienced their principal supervisor solely as their evaluator, so they were understandably standoffish and hesitant to show vulnerability. In order to move away from the compliance-oriented relationship, principal supervisors had to work hard to establish trust with their principals. Some did this by working to build personal relationships. They were careful to present themselves as learners who were willing to reflect and receive feedback. They were also careful to avoid "gotcha" behavior, in which they might be perceived as "pouncing" on practices they saw as ineffective. Instead, they took a more collaborative stance, working with their principals to identify school goals and then offering input, support, and feedback grounded in low-inference data to support principals' efforts to achieve those goals.

Focusing on shared goals related to student outcomes helped principals to understand that principal supervisors were no longer focused on compliance for compliance's sake. One principal supervisor described how she constantly reinforces this message with her principals:

> I tell them … the number one thing at the end of the day is that we are a school, and kids come here to learn. It doesn't matter if the building is beautiful and paper is in the copiers if kids can't read and write.

Another principal supervisor described working to let principals know they are supported through both words and actions:

> My language to my principals is always "I work for you." … It changed their thinking, which is what you are trying to get them to do. There is no reason to be fearful of me. If I do my job well, you will get what you need. A shift has really occurred in [principals'] thinking because now the expectations for me have ramped up. Today, a principal said, "I need you to come over walk me through this." In my mind, I'm thinking, "Why do you need a building visit? That issue could easily be solved with a phone call. But the principal requested [me to come in person], so let me get over there."

Shifting to a culture of support has also been challenging for principal supervisors, several of whom described an internal struggle to shift their own mindset. Traditionally, promotion to a principal supervisor role bestows status and authority. Most principal supervisors were previously principals who were used to executing line authority to direct their staff. Even humble individuals struggled to refrain from telling their principals what to do, as one principal supervisor reflected:

> For us [principal supervisors], we had a vision and way of [running schools]. And transferring that [vision] without mandating [how principals should run their schools] is challenging. My job is to support them to help them determine how to run their school. … I had to change my mindset. I have a type-A personality; it's hard to not just tell them what to do when I know how to run a school.

The district has tried to support this shift in mindset by providing principal supervisors with training on coaching stances. Principal supervisors were trained in the methods described in *Blended Coaching: Skills and Strategies to Support Principal Development* and *The Art of Coaching: Effective Strategies for School Transformation*. They studied the books, discussed them extensively, and then practiced mock coaching sessions together. They also videotaped coaching sessions with principals, which they brought back to their peers so they could review them and provide feedback.

Even with a mindset shift, principal supervisors had to find ways to balance an orientation toward support with the reality that they were still principals' line managers and therefore responsible for principals' performance evaluations. Their ability to create this balance was enabled by a shared vision of effective school leadership that clarified expectations from the start, as well as feedback that was grounded in low-inference data and delivered with an orientation toward supporting improvement. That said, principal supervisors sometimes had to use their authority more explicitly if principals were consistently not meeting expectations. In these cases, principal supervisors had to be more directive to ensure that principals' practice improved or that they were replaced by a principal who could meet expectations.

Determining how consistent principal supervisors' approaches need to be across networks

To date, principal supervisors have had a lot of autonomy in determining how to staff their teams and how to provide support to their schools. This autonomy includes the authority to choose whether to have two action team coaches instead of one action team coach and a barrier breaker.

On one hand, variation in staffing structures fits with the district's general philosophy of autonomy and allowing individuals to make decisions regarding how to best meet local needs. It also allows principal supervisors to hire staff whose skills complement their own. For example, one principal supervisor with a high school background hired an action coach with K-8 experience "so there's another voice in the room [that represents the K-8 perspective]."

On the other hand, the lack of consistent staffing structures complicates the district's ability to effectively support the network support teams. As one district leader pointed out, "It's difficult to design learning experiences for them because they all have different roles and levels of expertise."

The lack of consistency also complicates the district's ability to define high-quality principal supervision practices. One principal supervisor described the benefits of balancing autonomy with shared practices:

> *The more we understand and share practices, the better. There might be some things that other people do that I don't think are good; and there might be some things I do that others think I should do differently. So, it's good to have conversations and build shared understanding. There should be some things that are common, but it will never be exactly the same … even the support that I provide to schools looks different across schools.*

While the district continues to struggle with this challenge, district leaders have started to address it by providing action team coaches with monthly professional development sessions to foster a common vision of effective instruction and help them develop approaches for supporting schools in realizing that vision.

RECOMMENDATIONS

CMSD leaders recommend that other districts considering redesigning their principal supervisor roles: carefully consider the following design questions, explore multiple options and identify tradeoffs among those options:

- How should the networks be organized? For example, as in the case of CMSD, do certain sets of schools have particular needs, and would it benefit them to have the same supervisor and be part of the same learning community? Or would it make more sense to organize networks another way—for instance, by grade level or feeder pattern?

- How should staffing resources be assigned to principal supervisors? Should every principal supervisor have the same staffing structure (e.g., one action team coach and one barrier breaker), or should each principal supervisor have a budget to create his or her own staffing structure? Or should staffing resources be used to hire more principal supervisors and decrease individual supervisors' span of control?

- How can the district support the professional growth of staff assigned to principal supervisors? Will principal supervisors be responsible for developing those staff members, or will the central office identify and support their common learning needs?

- What structures and processes should the district create to enable principal supervisors to provide input on districtwide decisions? How should principal supervisors' role in contributing to districtwide decisions be balanced with the time-intensive work of supporting principals in schools?

- Do new people need to be hired into the role of principal supervisor? If current principal supervisors are accustomed to a more compliance-oriented role, can they adapt to a role more oriented toward support of principals, or will they need to be replaced with new hires who can foster a culture of support?

CREATING NETWORK SUPPORT TEAMS

Creating support teams to support each network of principals was another strategy that CMSD leaders implemented to enable schools to operate more autonomously, as called for in the Cleveland Plan.

Team structure

Each principal supervisor, or *network support leader*, oversees a network support team that typically consists of an action team coach, a barrier breaker, and individuals (referred to as "partners") from various central office departments. They directly manage the action team coach and barrier breaker, but not the partners who are line managed by their departments. Currently, partners represent the following departments: finance, talent, special education, curriculum and instruction, family and community engagement, Humanware (social and emotional learning), operations, and athletics. Individual partners can be assigned to one or two networks. One attendance partner supports all networks. Four behavior specialists each support two networks. The principal supervisors also share an administrator, who provides administrative assistance across multiple networks.

The makeup of network of support teams has changed over time and is still evolving. Initially, teams consisted of partners from the talent, finance, and special education departments. Talent and finance staff were included to help principals as they were given new autonomy over budget and personnel resources. The district expanded the network support teams to include partners from other departments after realizing that the focus on resource use was overshadowing the need to support principals' instructional leadership. Athletics department partners have been the newest addition to the networks; their inclusion was requested by the head of the department.

Nature of support

Members of the network support teams provide their assigned schools with support aligned with their departments' functions. For example, during fall adjustment, the principal supervisor and partners from the finance and talent departments work together to help the principals revise their projected budgets to match funds based on actual student enrollment. The network support team structure enables cross-functional collaboration in service of a school's plan. One team member described an example in which a network support team supported a school that was facing unique challenges associated with enrollment declines (while most schools were experiencing enrollment increases):

> *We were working with one unlucky school. They needed to figure out how to scale back the funds they were given to align with their decreased enrollment of students. Sometimes there's nothing they can get rid of—like a smaller school might have only one teacher per grade, and there's nothing we can do. In other cases, there are multiple teachers per grade. When we sit down, finance is there, HR is with us, and the principal supervisor—so we come together with the principal to look at what they have and what they need. We all pull together—the finance partner is looking at the money, the HR*

partner is looking at staffing, and the principal supervisor is able to tie everything together, put the bow on it.

As part of this process, the network support team not only addressed resource issues but also collaborated to ensure that quality of instruction and social-emotional learning remained a priority despite shifting resources.

Quarterly convenings of network teams

The director of strategic design and budgets coordinates a quarterly meeting of the network support teams. All team members attend, including the principal supervisors, department partners, action team coaches, barrier breakers, and network administrators. During the meeting, network support teams are given time to work collaboratively and are provided professional development to help build team cohesion and effectiveness. Department partners also have time to work together in role-alike groups.

For example, the main objective for one convening was to increase network support teams' collaboration and the effectiveness of their support to schools. The convening began with an activity to build a shared understanding of the Cleveland Plan's refined theory of action. During the activity, network support teams were presented with stakeholder concerns and responses, and they had to determine whether the responses aligned with the support-oriented mindsets that the district now expects for responding to school needs. Later, network support teams used the Education Development Center's *Quality Measures: Partnership Effectiveness Continuum*, a tool for developing, assessing, and improving partnerships. Each network support team rated its communication practices on the rubric and identified ways to improve in each dimension of communication.

During quarterly convenings, the director of strategic design and budgets invites one principal from each network to attend. She explained, "We have principal voice here because [of a] concerted effort to not do anything in isolation. The purpose of today is to help us help principals—that's why we are here today." Participating principals' attendance also helped them gain insight into the broader picture of how network supports come together.

Including principals also provided an opportunity for them to share their perspectives on how network supports affect schools. For example, during a breakout session, network support team members worked together in departmental groups to identify strategies for supporting a fictional school. In the curriculum and instruction group, staff walked through how they would work with the school's principal and leadership team. A principal sitting in on the session provided feedback on the strategy they proposed, including recommendations on how the network support team could better meet the principal's needs.

DETAILED EXAMPLES

The following case study from the Investment I Network provides a detailed description of how members of a network support team work together to support principals.

Investment I case study

The Investment I Network was formed in 2013–14. As part of the Cleveland Plan, the district's CEO had the ability to take corrective action in schools performing below standard. This network represents the first phase of investment schools. Trent Mosley has been the principal supervisor overseeing the Investment I Network for five years. There are currently 10 schools in the network.

The team that supports the Investment I Network includes staff from human resources, finance, academics, family and community engagement, community wraparound, attendance, and Humanware.

Over time, the network support team has become more oriented toward serving principals. Mr. Mosley explained the transition as follows, "Originally, in the first three years [of the network structure], the network partners would say, 'Here's what you're able to do,' and the principal would have to figure out how to operationalize a plan around the department plan. Now, the principal says, 'Here's what I need,' and 'here's what I need you to do, partners,' and department partners go back and figure out how to make that happen."

The shift in orientation was enabled by having network support partners attend monthly meetings for principals in the network. At first, their expertise was not being utilized during the meetings according to Mr. Mosley, "They were just sitting in meetings while we were doing [professional development], and they were basically just wallpaper. And that wasn't fair to them." So Mr. Mosley created a new structure in which principals could approach network support partners and discuss their needs. Principals rotated through department "stations," and partners walked principals through questions to identify ways they could address the principals' needs. It was also an opportunity for partners to share updates on work that had occurred since the last meeting with that principal. One principal expressed enthusiasm for this approach: "Now we get to spend quality time with departments, and [they can] show us what we can be doing better."

Network support team members have jointly created protocols for principals to use to address common issues. For example, they helped principals address the challenge of staying focused on instructional issues by creating a protocol for instructional observation rounds and a time-management matrix for principals to track the classroom observation schedule across school administrators.

Communication with network support partners is organized primarily through the monthly principal meetings, now called "network meetings". Mr. Mosley explains how the meetings have enabled communication, "As we sit in our network meetings, they can see how departments are working with them. ... [Who often] gets jammed in the middle are the building principals. We don't have [that] disconnect because everyone at the table going through the protocols [is] hearing the same things."

Protocols for communication also facilitate the network support partners' side of the work. One network support partner uses the protocols to guide notetaking and tracking of next steps. The protocol has also enabled the curriculum and instruction department to identify common needs across schools and provide professional development accordingly.

While principals report that the network support team structure has already shifted the central office toward a support orientation, Mr. Mosley describes the shift as a "work in progress" and intends for the team to continuously improve how they support schools.

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES AND LESSONS

Creating balanced autonomy

The district's CEO, Eric Gordon, has clearly communicated that he wants schools to have more autonomy. The district's theory of action calls for schools to have common measures of success and for the district to approve school goals, but beyond that, principals have autonomy to decide how they will achieve those goals. Mr. Gordon stated:

> As central office teams, we all have common measures of success. We have also clearly articulated a vision of instruction … that ends the top-down piece of it. After that, the central office's primary function is to have people, resources, and tools that [principals and schools] can access to the level they need to implement their school plan.

At the same time, there are legal constraints on the autonomy the district can devolve to schools. Laws and contracts govern some issues regarding what schools can and cannot do, and the district's central office is required to enforce any legal requirements. For example, the union contract puts legal constraints on whether and under what circumstances a teacher can be transferred out of a school.

There are also economies of scale to consider. The district can get products and services at a reduced rate when purchasing them at scale; therefore, costs can dramatically increase if schools make individual choices. The district has decided to navigate this tension by offering a catalogue of options—all vetted for quality and within costs negotiated by the district. For example, the Department of Information Technology frequently negotiates pricing for tablets, laptops, desktop computers, printers, and software, saving schools time and money when they order through the catalogue. Principals may request something outside of the catalogue, but they have to take on the burden of verifying that it has a minimum level of rigor, and they need to negotiate a solution that satisfies both the principal and the central office leader.

At first, the district did not have a clear process for negotiating balanced autonomy. On the one hand, principals—especially those newly hired to the district—had been promised autonomy. On the other hand, the central office sometimes had good reason to override that autonomy (e.g., for legal reasons, or to achieve economies of scale). For example, the district was in a better position than schools to negotiate prices for school supplies. Defaulting to historical organizational norms, the central office staff member would typically "win" any disagreement. For example, a school wanted to buy frozen turkeys with its instructional funds, and the request kept getting denied until the school explained that the turkeys were needed to teach a culinary lesson.

Now, a process has been put in place by which a principal can escalate a decision to a department chief and all the way up to the CEO to make the final call. According to CEO Gordon:

> *We intended to, but we never had an autonomy tiebreaker. If a school wants it and the district says no, the default was always that the district wins. We didn't have an arbiter. We need to make sure those conversations get to the leadership level instead of staying at the line level.*

In addition, the network support teams have worked to surface and understand autonomy-related tensions, and team members work together to brainstorm solutions so that issues do not frequently need to be escalated. Expanding the network support teams to include additional departments has helped to address some of these issues.

Balanced autonomy also requires central office staff to shift their orientation toward supporting schools. For example, according to one district leader, the district's communications department would "love" to tell principals that they have to run the communications materials for their "Donuts-for-Dads" event through the communications department so the department can apply district branding. Instead, schools have been given the autonomy to design their flyers with clip art. While there are benefits to having professionally designed and organizationally branded materials, principals may not want to use them if the materials are not easily accessible when they are needed or if they do not match the school's needs. This puts the burden on central office staff to demonstrate their value so that schools will want to use their resources because they are easy, cost-effective, and high-quality.

Creating a shared understanding of partner roles

When the network support teams were first introduced, several individuals were assigned to their partner roles without a clear understanding of what the roles entailed and why they were created. In retrospect, the CEO wishes that he and his senior leaders had spent more time early on explaining the rationale behind providing schools with more autonomy and shifting the central office's orientation toward serving school needs.

There is also a lack of clarity among principals about the roles and responsibilities of network support team members, including what functional support is provided by whom. For instance, finance partners are sometimes asked to perform tasks that are the responsibility of other departments, such as processing invoices (a responsibility handled by Accounts Payable). One finance partner said, "They come to us with anything with a dollar sign." In another example, principals sometimes direct teachers to talent partners with questions about benefits, which are handled by a different department. One network support partner described the reason for this: "We're the person at the schools they all see." Principals often grab the nearest network support team member—either one who is visible (sometimes literally, when a partner is at a school site and is pulled aside) or one with whom they have a rapport.

Partners often address misguided requests by completing the task and pointing out the correct resource for the future. There is a sense among network support team members and leaders that you "don't leave a principal hanging," and oftentimes the partners genuinely want to help. They find that doing the

legwork themselves is better than having the principal call downtown and perhaps not get an answer. Relationships built as a result of the network support teams' presence have started to shift the culture from one of "pass it around" to one of "owning a problem until it is fixed." Finance partners were especially sympathetic to how busy principals are and aware of the importance their work.

Valuing partners' soft skills

When CMSD created the network support team structure, existing staff from relevant departments were assigned to networks. Often, these individuals were hired for their technical skills (e.g., skills related to finance or information technology) and may not have had school-level experience. The network model provided them with an opportunity to build relationships with schools and learn more about their context and needs. However, the new network support structure required soft skills—such as relationship building, communication, collaboration, and client services—without providing central office staff support to develop those skills. The new roles also required a deeper understanding of educational strategies and jargon, so that network support partners could follow cross-functional conversations and truly understand school needs.

Attracting the right candidates for these roles continues to be a challenge. The talent and finance departments, in particular, have experienced significant turnover. District leaders are looking at these vacancies as an opportunity to staff the positions with individuals who have the optimal mix of skills, but they are also finding that strong applicants have higher salary expectations due to the broader skill requirements. District leaders are trying to determine the right salary band and qualifications for the roles.

Creating common expectations for network support success

Even as network support team staff and principals are building a common understanding of the network support model and its rationale, several district leaders expressed worry that not all stakeholders share a common vision of success for the work. For example, stakeholders do not have the same expectations for what it means for network support teams to be responsive. One district leader explained, "We are not as responsive as we would like to be. We don't have a common definition of what 'responsive' looks like as an organization." The district's goal is for schools and central office staff to establish expectations for whether particular tasks necessitate a 24-hour, 48-hour, one-week, or longer response time.

The district lacks clear metrics for success. For example, in reviewing principals' perceptions of their departments during a principal meeting, the department chiefs communicated different expectations for the level of principal satisfaction that their departments should be expected to achieve.

Reporting structure

Network support partners are hired by their departments and report to senior managers in their departments. Principal supervisors coordinate the network support partners' work by providing direction on how to prioritize support to the schools, but the partners do not report directly to the principal supervisors, and the latter did not play a role in hiring or choosing the individuals that each department assigned to their network.

While this reporting structure enables departmental coordination and expertise, it has created communication and collaboration challenges for network support teams. For example, various department managers have given their reports different guidelines for interacting with networks, which presents challenges for principal supervisors as they work to coordinate their teams.

The reporting structure also creates challenges when department managers and principal supervisors have different priorities. For example, principal supervisors have requested that team members attend meetings, but department managers sometimes have other priorities for them. The district leadership recognizes these challenges and has made addressing them a priority for the 2017–18 school year, but this work is still in progress.

RECOMMENDATIONS

CMSD leaders recommend that other districts intending to establish network support teams take the following actions:

- Create a vision for high-functioning support.

- Start with a "landscape analysis" to determine what structures and supports are already in place and identify gaps between the current state and the desired state.

- Communicate the rationale behind the network support team structure, including an explicit explanation of how a "culture of support" will enable the district to achieve is goals of improved student outcomes.

- Build a common vision of how to effectively balance support and accountability. Beyond messaging that there should be balance, provide details and examples that help all stakeholders understand district leaders' vision for the *right* balance. Establish processes and norms for schools and the central office to manage competing priorities and negotiate balanced autonomy.

- Consider both soft and technical skills when hiring new staff into network support team positions. Hold staff and department leaders accountable for supporting schools.

DESIGNING AND DELIVERING
AN ASPIRING PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR PROGRAM

The Aspiring Network Support Leader Program is a yearlong classroom and field-based program designed to build a pipeline of talent for the redesigned principal supervisor role. CMSD has provided the program to two cohorts during the 2015–16 and 2016–17 school years. The program included three participants in the first year and two participants in the second year. District leaders made this strategy a priority because they were struggling to find candidates with the skills needed to hit the ground running in the redesigned role. In particular, CMSD found that new principal supervisors experienced three major difficulties: "(1) they tried to be the principal for all of their buildings; (2) they struggled to build a positive coaching relationship with struggling principals; and (3) they struggled with how they use their time (particularly balancing the central office requests for time with time in schools)."[6] Additionally, retention of principal supervisors hired from outside the district was on average two years, leading to instability and variability in the supports principals were receiving. In order for the redesign of the principal supervisor role to be successful, the district needed to strengthen the pipeline of candidates for the role.

Program content

In both years it was offered, the program focused on the following objectives for participant learning:

- Understand the purpose of school walk-throughs and instructional observations to improve principal performance.

- Utilize a range of effective coaching strategies to meet the unique needs of principals.

- Differentiate support based on individual needs.

- Design, lead, and facilitate communities of practice.

- Remain resilient in the face of challenges.

- Assess formative and summative impact of professional learning on the growth and achievement of adults.

- Provide specific, time-bound, and instructionally focused feedback.[7]

Program participants particularly appreciated opportunities to establish norms for effective instruction and focus on the unique aspects of coaching principals compared with coaching teachers. In the words of one program completer:

> *What was most helpful for me was the K-3 literacy work ... teaching someone how to read versus teaching students how to comprehend. ... It was really helpful to norm on what we expect of pedagogical practices aligned to the district's definition of what*

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[6] Cleveland Metropolitan School District (n.d.). *Aspiring network support leader cohort 1 program report*. Author: Cleveland, OH.
[7] Cleveland Metropolitan School District (n.d.). *Aspiring network support leader curriculum overview C2*. Author: Cleveland, OH.

"rigor" looks like. ... We also really focused on how you give a leader feedback [as opposed to] giving a teacher feedback. ... We worked on building our understanding of what it means to coach.

Program structure

During the program, participants keep their current roles in the district and meet bimonthly for after-school professional development and full-day site visits to schools. The program components for both the 2015–16 and 2016–17 school years were as follows:

- **Bimonthly community-of-practice sessions.** The program facilitator ran community-of-practice sessions once or twice a month from 3:00–6:00 p.m. Sessions included one or more of the following components: skill-building, problems of practice, "hot topics" (ideas, topics or challenges currently relevant to sitting network support leaders), learning walks, coach role-playing, and analysis of student work. Each session started with discussion of a hot topic involving a problem of practice a principal supervisor would need to solve, such as redesigning professional development for principals. Participants also learned how to coach a principal to give teachers effective feedback using videos and role-playing. Participants received observations and coaching from the program facilitator throughout the program.

- **Network participation and mentoring.** Program participants were paired with a network and given assignments focused on providing professional development and coaching for the network's principals. Participants were mentored by the network support leader and learned through activities with the network, including conducting data dives for the network support leader, proposing and leading two network professional development sessions, and providing additional support to a principal to whom they were assigned.

- **Principal coaching**. Participants developed an eight- to ten-week coaching plan for their assigned principal, coached their principal, and received feedback from the principal and principal supervisor. This assignment provided participants with an opportunity to wrestle with the question of how to provide support to each principal depending on his or her willingness to be coached, skill level, and reflectiveness.

- **Field visits.** Participants engaged in multiple site visits to both high schools and K-8 schools within and outside of the district. Visits generally consisted of an examination of school data and context, walk-throughs in multiple classrooms, and role-playing activities in which program participants practiced providing feedback to the principal based on their observations. During the field visits, program participants built a common understanding of district expectations for pedagogical practice and what rigor looks like. They also developed skills observing and assessing principal practice. Visits outside of the district were intended to expose participants to different systems and approaches. Since the first cohort of participants was composed entirely of high school principals, the school visits were particularly valuable in exposing participants to different types of schools and different grade levels.

- **Summer intensive**. In the first year the program was offered, participants attended a five-day summer intensive held in July 2015, at the start of the program. The purpose of this intensive was "to build a clear understanding of the Aspiring Network Support Leader programmatic expectations and components, begin to develop a set of critical skills essential to the role, build the mentor/mentee relationship, and develop individual learning goals." [citation] The summer intensive was not offered during the second year of the program because, according to one interviewee, it was "hard to schedule."

Being exposed to various aspects of the principal supervisor role through the program allowed participants hired into the role to be successful in the first year by helping them know what to expect in the role and how to hit the ground running. Program participants particularly appreciated the learning activities that they were asked to engage in. One participant explained:

> We did role-playing, videos of teachers teaching. ... We practiced how you would coach a
> principal to give good feedback to that teacher. … The role-playing really helped reframe
> my thinking about how to provide support to principals.

Candidate assessment

Originally, district leaders intended to create a program for anyone who wanted to move to the central office, but they later decided to narrow the focus on candidates for the principal supervisor role because their needs are unique. In selecting program participants, district leaders assessed applicants against the following criteria: builds instructional leadership capacity; balances high expectations with high support; leads communities of practice toward instructional improvement; differentiates support based on multiple forms of evidence; leverages resources, personnel, and stakeholders; and pursues personal leadership growth.

District leaders assessed them against these criteria in a two-phase interview process. During the first phase, the talent team screened candidates on relevant leadership experience and the quality of their application essay. Individuals who passed this screening were presented to the selection committee, which determined who would be invited for an in-person interview. During the in-person interview, candidates were asked to complete an on-demand essay, participate in a "fishbowl" data review, and then participate in an individual interview. Three aspiring network support leaders were selected for the first cohort, and two were selected for the second.

Throughout the program, the program facilitator assessed participants on assignment completion and quality, their self-assessments of their progress on the leadership standards, and their progress on the goals they set during the summer. The facilitator and a mentor also used authentic assignments to assess each participant's progress on the standards. Two graduates of the first cohort have already moved into principal supervisor roles; one immediately at the end of the program and the other a year later.

DETAILED EXAMPLES

Aspiring Network Support Leader Program abbreviated scope and sequence

The Aspiring Network Support Leader (ANSL) Program is a yearlong classroom and field-based program designed to build a pipeline of talent for the redesigned principal supervisor role. This abbreviated version of the ANSL Program scope and sequence illustrates the content and structure for six of the community-of-practice sessions during the 2015–16 school year to provide a sense of what the program covered and how.

Program participants attended bimonthly cohort sessions from September through May. The sessions, which covered topics such as "coaching" and "facilitating learning communities," are designed to build skills needed to be an effective leader at the network level. Approximately 20 "KBADs," or objectives for what participants would know and be able to do, were covered, some over multiple sessions. Most of the sessions were held in the evening, but four were held during the day to allow for field visits at various school or district sites, allowing participants to analyze strategies at the intersection of systems and schools that support instructional improvement.

For each session, the scope and sequence outlines the topic, lists the session's learning objectives or KBADS (as shown in Table 1), provides pre-work, and presents an agenda, along with a link to the corresponding facilitator guide (which outlines minute-by-minute details for each agenda item). A field visit protocol was followed during the field visits.

In addition to a welcome and closing, each session's agenda typically included discussion of a "hot topic," or a district-specific problem of practice, whose purpose was to expose participants to current and relevant system-level district issues. A mini-teach activity introduced new material, and participants often had opportunities for role-playing to practice newly learned skills with members of their community of practice. Participants were frequently asked to read articles or other media in advance of the sessions.

Table 1. Program objectives by month[8]

Month	Objectives for What Participants Would Know and Be Able to Do (KBADs)
October	• Understand the network support leader role and responsibilities. • Understand the intended and unintended consequences of the network support leader structure. • Understand CMSD's vision and "rally cry" to support instructional improvement. • Self-assess and develop goals against CMSD's ANSL standards. • Articulate CMSD's vision and his/her role in supporting the vision.
November	• Move from the principal stance to a network support leader stance. • Understand the purpose of school walk-throughs and instructional observations to improve principal performance. • Establish a safe learning environment by building meaningful relationships with stakeholders. • Identify quantitative and qualitative ways to assess progress.
December	• Utilize a range of effective coaching strategies to meet the unique needs of principals. • Maintain instructional focus while managing district-required systems and mandated processes to meet the needs of principals and school communities. • Leverage resources, personnel, and stakeholders to improve instructional outcomes. • Differentiate support based on individual needs.
January	• Gather, analyze, and interpret data across schools. • Design, lead, and facilitate communities of practice. • Remain resilient in the face of challenges.
February	• Utilize a range of effective coaching strategies to meet the unique needs of principals. • Differentiate support based on individual needs. • Assess formative and summative impact of professional learning on the growth and achievement of adults. • Demonstrate language and behaviors that are responsive to differences across lines of race, religion, class, ability, and sexual orientation. • Build a clear understanding of the key performance indicators that drive CMSD's principal evaluation system.
March	• Balance the needs of the individual versus the needs of the school. • Solicit multiple perspectives to engage school, district, and community stakeholders in problem-solving. • Utilize a range of effective coaching strategies to meet the unique needs of principals. • Provide specific, time-bound, and instructionally focused feedback.
April	• Provide specific, time-bound, and instructionally focused feedback. • Design, lead, and facilitate communities of practice. • Utilize a range of effective coaching strategies to meet the unique needs of principals. • Maintain instructional focus while managing district-required systems and mandated processes to meet the needs of principals and school communities.
May	• Assess formative and summative impact of professional learning on the growth and achievement of adults. • Demonstrate language and behaviors that are responsive to differences across lines of race, religion, class, ability, and sexual orientation. • Demonstrate a clear understanding of the key performance indicators that drive CMSD's principal evaluation system.
June	• Assess formative and summative impact of professional learning on the growth and achievement of adults. • Self-assess and reflect on goals against CMSD's ANSL standards.

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[8] Ibid.

IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES AND LESSONS

Recruiting strong candidates

The district has struggled to entice principals to apply to the aspiring principal supervisor program. And of those who applied, many did not meet the standards for admission—particularly with regard to their instructional knowledge.

Despite an applicant pool that was disproportionately white, male, and/or from high school backgrounds, the district was ultimately able to select five participants that included three women and two people of color. The district continues to struggle with insufficient numbers of elementary and high-quality applicants. District leaders believe there are many qualified potential candidates within the system, but they are not inclined to apply. The district is currently looking into root causes of the low numbers of qualified applicants and trying to identify recruitment strategies that would yield a more diverse and qualified applicant pool.

Determining the focus and scope of the program

The district has struggled with several design decisions over time. Program leaders have documented lessons learned and design decisions, but they also continue to seek feedback that supports reflection and continuous improvement. Some of these design questions and lessons learned include the following:

- Which skills should be addressed through selection versus training? Program leaders had to make some big bets with regard to "what is coachable versus what [candidates] need to come into the program with."

    o The district learned that two important skills to select on are learning orientation and resiliency. The participants who have been the most successful are those who are reflective, open to identifying growth areas, and committed to soliciting and incorporating feedback.

- How much time should participants be expected to commit to the program? Given that program participants are typically sitting principals with demanding full-time roles, program leaders have explored different meeting schedules to find the optimal balance between principal and program responsibilities.

    o Program participants found that they were comfortable with a time commitment of an afternoon or two per month during the school year, plus practice coaching principals as time allowed.

- How much focus should be given to each of the program's objectives?

    o Over time, the curriculum became more focused on the needs of principal supervisors—as opposed to central office leaders more generally. In particular, the curriculum for the second cohort had a greater focus on developing participants' coaching skills, ability to provide actionable feedback, and resiliency in the face of challenges. While the overall

objectives of the program remained the same, the relative depth and time spent on particular objectives was increased to better address participants' needs.

- How many principals should participants be assigned to work with? Although working with one principal provided rich opportunities to practice coaching, doing so did not provide participants with opportunities to practice coaching multiple types of personalities or balancing support across multiple principals with different needs.
    - The coaching caseload was increased for the second cohort in order to provide participants with exposure to more principals.

Providing ongoing learning opportunities beyond the program

At the conclusion of the program's first year, the assessment team (composed of the chief academic officer and the two program facilitators) determined that one participant was ready to move into a network support leader role (if one opened) and that the other two needed some additional support to improve their coaching of principals and to increase their perseverance in the face of challenges.

To continue their professional growth, the district created leadership opportunities for program completers. For example, two program completers were asked to lead professional development sessions for principals either at the network level or at chief academic officer roundtables. The assignments gave participants additional time and ways to engage with the leadership practices they had learned in the specific context of the district. One ANSL participant explained:

> *My project was to develop [a] leader tracking system ... a digital tool to capture principal data to inform decision for selection [and] frame for Wallace how it aligned to their specifications. It was useful for my learning because one of the primary responsibilities was to be a liaison. It helped me get to know people downtown and build relationships with them. It also helped me to understand strategic shifts the district is taking. Hearing from Wallace and their research—it helped me understand the larger vision for the district, which helps me articulate that vision to principals.*

Measuring success

The theory of action behind the Aspiring Network Support Leader Program is that it would help the district develop highly skilled principal supervisors who could improve principals' effectiveness and thereby enable them to improve student outcomes. The pathway of influence on student outcomes is indirect and expected to occur over several years. For example, the timeline might typically involve a year of principal supervisor training, another year before placement, and then a year to influence principal practice. If improvements in principal practice take two to three years to measurably impact student outcomes, then overall it might take five or six years to begin to see the impact of the investment in aspiring principal supervisor training on student outcomes.

Meanwhile, the program has been funded by soft money via a grant from the Wallace Foundation. Costs include staffing dollars for a part-time program director as well as the opportunity costs of redirecting

program participants' and mentors' time from their schools toward participant learning. The district leadership wanted to ensure that there would be a strong return on this investment before redirecting core budget dollars toward sustainment of the program. But without a clear way to measure and track program impact (including interim measures of impact), it is difficult to know what (if any) payoff the investment has had to date.

RECOMMENDATIONS

CMSD leaders suggest that districts planning to create an aspiring principal supervisor program consider the following recommendations:

- Proactively recruit candidates, as opposed to announcing the program and waiting for candidates to apply. The best candidates do not always step forward on their own, so districts should consider a systematic strategy for identifying talent and motivating promising candidates to apply.

- Focus the program on building aspiring principal supervisors' instructional leadership skills.

- Define measures of success for the program and use them to gauge the value of continuing to invest in costly principal supervisor preparation. Defining measures of success can also help clarify district leaders' expectations for the program.

CONCLUSION

CMSD's work to shift district culture to be more supportive of schools has required a sustained effort over the past six years, and the work is not yet complete. The district has learned that each of the three strategies described in this report—shifting the principal supervisor role, establishing network support teams, and training aspiring principal supervisors—have been important contributions to shifting the district culture to be more supportive of schools.

Perhaps the most important lesson is that this work takes time and should be implemented in phases, with opportunities to continuously adapt the work to meet evolving needs. CMSD continues to seek the right balance between attending to all the moving pieces and trying not to do everything at once. The district has found this balance by constantly moving forward while also expecting the strategies will need constant improvement within and across school years.

The work is paying off, as principal supervisors have changed the way they work with schools as a result of their decreased caseloads and the training they have received. Similarly, central office departments have become more responsive and accommodating of schools' needs. As a result, principals are spending more time on leadership practices that enable student success, and they are implementing those practices more effectively. Further time and research is needed to determine how widespread the impacts on principal practice have been and whether they translate into improved student outcomes.