

Guiding Improvements in Principal Performance

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Presented by Louisa Cook Moats

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ACSA and WestEd have developed a Community of Practice aimed at finding ways to improve principal guidance, support and evaluation.

It is without question that “Leadership Matters.” Expectations in No Child Left Behind legislation not only require quality teachers, but also require quality principals. Districts and schools are being held accountable for adequate progress. State intervention teams check for quality leadership in the schools they review. At the same time, new options from the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing offer multiple ways to secure an administrator license, ranging from long-term course work to a single-sitting examination.

The accountability for ensuring a quality principal in every school moves squarely to the district leaders who are responsible for selecting, supporting, monitoring and evaluating principal performance.

Even with this context in mind, the press and number of challenges faced by educators frequently pushes leadership development into the background. District leaders recognize that highly accomplished principals are key levers for

district and school improvement and increased student achievement. Breaking research (Waters et al. 2003; Leithwood et al, 2004) and common sense gained from years of work on improving schools demonstrate the importance of high quality principals in reaching teaching and learning goals.

Yet, more often than not, retooling outdated administrator policies and practices falls far down the list of district priorities. Major questions are: How can we find the time to focus on high quality principal support and evaluation? Where do we start to improve our policies and practices?

Developing a community of practice

For years, experts have told us that the way to get things done is to schedule them on our calendars and to find a partner to join with us in the effort. Following this advice, the Association of

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California School Administrators joined the Leadership Initiative at WestEd in inviting superintendents and district teams to think through improving practices related to principal guidance, support and evaluation (*EdCal*, Dec. 20, 2004).

Motivated by interest in better understanding the California Professional Standards for Educational Leaders and the Descriptions of Practice, district teams talked through the standards and questioned how best to apply them in their real work.

They read pertinent research on the relationship between principal quality and student achievement, updated their knowledge about current national and state expectations and requirements for principals, and reviewed examples of principal assessment and evaluation systems being piloted or implemented in states such as Washington, Missouri, Ohio, Indiana, Delaware and Connecticut.

Administrators, in their district teams, discussed current practices related to principal support and evaluation and shared potential approaches for improvement with other district teams for feedback and critique.

This work has built an active Community of Practice around principal support and evaluation. It has served to jump-start district revisions of policies and practices by opening up problem-solving dialogues and exchanging practical solutions. While the effort is still young, initial results in the first year-and-a-half have included districts reviewing outdated district policies, piloting the use of the CPSELs in their goal-setting and conferencing processes, using the Descriptions of Practice for self assessment and peer coaching, and adopting new board policies for principal evaluation.

A few districts are in the process of extending their thinking by adapting the CPSELs for use with all administrators and supervisors, both instructional and also non-instructional staff.

District leaders reported that participating in the Community of Practice enabled them to both set aside time to focus on leader development and also to work with their own district teams in order to

update principal support and assessment activities that had not kept up with standards-based practice.

The teams expressed that they now have a much better understanding of the CPSELs and how to gear real district and school work for leaders toward meeting them. Team members also noted that they don't think that their district work would have moved ahead without the competitive-collaborative spirit of the Community of Practice.

Some members of the Community of Practice will just begin implementing new policies this coming year. Other

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districts are finalizing plans to pilot new timelines and use new formats. Still others are planning briefings with their school boards or are laying out principal retreat agendas. While each district is in a different place in implementing new principal support and evaluation systems, teams have noted five "ah-ha's!" and lessons learned that will guide their continuing work.

Following are the five practical points learned by the Community of Practice

1. Know what you want and make it public

Different philosophies can guide evaluation practices. The emphasis in some systems is developmental or formative. They work from the position of seeing their staff members as capable of making expected progress over time and they are not usually burdened with low performers or high stakes demands for immediate program improvements.

In other districts, evaluation is seen as a way to motivate performance by tight accountability, where the emphasis is

on the summary review. These districts work from a notion that there are some low performers in their district that must be removed in order to demonstrate proper attention to high quality. Some of these districts have schools identified as needing improvement that are on timelines for interventions or require certain district action.

Whatever the district's realities, it is important that district leadership identify a philosophy or theory of action from which they are working. It is equally important to make their perspectives and assumptions known to district staff and community members. A clear understanding of "how we see the world" sets a foundation for policies, practices, timelines, expectations and behaviors that direct the administrator support and evaluation system.

Some questions to ask: What is our district philosophy on the role of evaluation in improvement? Do we have requirements under which we are working that affect evaluation approaches? How might we make our perspectives known to our administrators, other staff and community members? In what ways can our thinking be reflected in our policies and practices?

2. Use it or lose it

In getting started, it's important to know what principal support and evaluation system you currently have in place. A quick audit can determine whether or not current policies are relevant and useful. Many districts in California and elsewhere haven't updated principal evaluation systems since the mid 1980s.

While some of the personnel basics still apply, the focus of the principal's role on improving teaching and learning has changed significantly. Having one set of policies on paper and another set in practice adds confusion to the system. The drift from "what we are supposed to do" and "what we actually do" contributes to a hidden practice and compliance mentality instead of open practice for continuous improvement.

A well-thought-out set of policies can guide and support fair and equitable practices that both support and assess

high quality administrator performance. This is symbolic and practical.

Some questions to ask: What are our current district policies related to principal selection, principal placement, administrator professional development, support and evaluation? Do we follow our policies? If we are not using our written policies, why?

3. Focus leadership development on student achievement

There was never a doubt that leaders in the Community of Practice believed increased student achievement was their primary mission. However, it was easy to get lost in the complexities of the ethics, human resource rules, definitions, how-tos and other considerations involved in a new standards-based system. Periodically, we needed to reestablish our link between principal quality and student achievement. We needed to say it aloud:

“Because the main outcome of our education system is student learning,

leadership performance within the system keys off of student learning results. The point of quality leadership is to ensure improved teaching and increased student achievement. While the work of principals may be different in various contexts, their basic work is clear.”

Once more actively in the mix, this focus on linking leader development to student achievement served as a filter for sorting what was really important for us to determine from what was just interesting to think about.

Some questions to ask: How do we think about quality leadership and student achievement? What research base or sources do we use to establish our point of view? How do we ensure that we keep student achievement as a focus of our leader development and assessment activities?

4. Base your system on standards

Professional standards for teachers have laid the foundation for determining

what teachers should know and be able to do to ensure that students reach levels of high performance. California’s rich experiences with teacher standards and support systems have led the nation and prove important to developing a coherent, standards-based system for administrator development.

If a teacher’s work focuses on enabling students to know and be able to do what is laid out in student standards, then a principal’s work is to enable teachers to be successful in accomplishing that. Leadership standards for administrators can guide this work.

Based on the national Interstate School Leadership Licensure Standards, the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing adopted the California Professional Standards for Educational Leaders in 2004. They are a compilation of national research and expert opinion from practitioners in California who participated in extensive development and review activities.

The CPSELs focus on what administrators “need to know and be able to do” in order to guide improvement in student achievement. In addition, these standards are the basis for university and alternative preparation programs and are sound foundations for district support and assessment systems. Districts can customize their policies and practices from established standards.

In a time of scarce resources, piloting and implementing new systems of administrator support and evaluation using a significant base is a better use of resources than engaging in duplicative research on the work of principals. Emerging research can easily be incorporated into the broad footprint of the standards, and new materials and tools developed by a broad national and state community can readily be applied to district work.

Some questions to ask: What is high quality leadership? What does that look like in our district and community? Are components that are important to us found in the CPSELs? Is there anything missing? How might we increase our knowledge about and understanding of the CPSELs?

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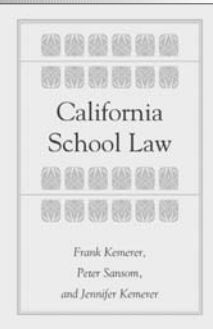
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5. Move standards into real work

The CSPELs articulate a consensus about the broad range of knowledge and skills required for successful school leadership. The Descriptions of Practice provide the next level of detail within the standards. They further identify some of the research-based behaviors that most frequently yield positive student results.

The DOP illustrate practice across a continuum as novice principals and other administrators grow from basic to accomplished practice. The DOP provide a consistent tool that can be used in goal-setting, self-assessment, professional development planning and monitoring progress.

Developed as formative assessment support, some districts in the Community of Practice are extending the DOP by writing additional criteria for unsatisfactory performance. The versatility of the DOP tool provides districts with a way to consistently gauge development over time and to direct resources toward continuous individual and group improvement.

Some questions to ask: What does “meeting standard” look like? What do highly accomplished principals know and do to meet student-learning goals and move schools ahead? What is an acceptable range of principal performance in our district? How might we link goal-setting, professional development plans and year-end evaluation into a consistent, practical system?

A final “ah-ha!”

The Community of Practice was established by ACSA and WestEd for colleagues around the state who are interested in developing support and evaluation systems for principals and district leaders that are standards-based, rigorous, fair and likely to bring coherence to the overall accountability system. This recognized that our capacity to guide, support, monitor and evaluate principal performance affects every other level of the system.

Michael Fullan wrote, “Leaders have a responsibility to invest in the development of organizational members, to take the chance that they will learn, and to

create environments where people will take risks, tackle difficult problems, and be supported in this endeavor. . . . In many ways, accountability is built into the culture. The day-to-day interaction among peers and between peers and others creates a system of checks and balances of learning and accountable performance” (2003).

The work of district teams and the community as a whole resulted in new knowledge, clearer values, revised policies and specific plans. Furthermore, it filled a gap through a deeper understanding of the relationship between standards-based student, teacher and administrator practice. In a very real way, the Community of Practice demonstrated that leadership development and performance affects student achievement and that in the end, leadership matters a lot. ■

For more information about the Community of Practice, upcoming workshops, the California Professional Standards for Educational Leaders or the Descriptions of Practice, contact Karen Kearney at (415) 615-3185, or kkearne@wested.org.

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