



TRANSCRIPT

Video:

A New Role Emerges for Principal Supervisors: Evidence from Six Districts in the Principal Supervisor Initiative

February 2019

NARRATOR

On November 7th, 2018, Dr. Ellen Goldring of Peabody College at Vanderbilt University spoke to a convening of state education leaders on her research on the importance of principal supervisors and improving principal effectiveness. Her presentation, based on a study from the Wallace Foundation's Principal Supervisor Initiative (or PSI), addressed these key questions. Dr. Goldring begins with some background on the initiative.

ELLEN GOLDRING

Colleagues and myself had been researching and evaluating the Wallace Foundation Principal Supervisor Initiative. So the goals of the initiative is to improve the performance of principal supervisors and the principals that they oversee. So the Wallace Foundation has been working with six urban school districts—you can see the districts listed right there. It's very intensive, four years of work and intervention in the districts that the Wallace Foundation has been engaging with, with technical assistance partners.

So the idea here wasn't to take a random set of districts and say, "Can we change the principal supervisor?" The idea here is if we took a set of districts who are really anxious and willing and engaging in the work of changing leadership, can the principal supervisor role be redesigned? What does it take to do it? What are the strengths, weaknesses? And primarily, what can other states and districts learn from? I mean, that's really what these reports for the Wallace Foundation are very much for the field of practice. What can they learn from it, and then how can they adapt the ideas to their own settings?

So why have a principal supervisor initiative? The Principal Supervisor Initiative was motivated by the idea that one way to scale up school improvement efforts is to work through principal supervisors. So we are talking about support, coaching, development—I'm gonna get into all that. We are not talking about principal evaluation.

One part of the role is principal evaluation, but this is much larger and much more complex than "how do I evaluate principals?" So many studies have pointed out that the role of the supervisor in the typical urban district is compliance oriented, focusing on collecting paperwork and bureaucratic reporting, and that supervisors don't have time to work with principals, they don't really know how to do that work because they haven't been specifically trained for a particular set of practices—and I'm gonna use that word a lot. Like, what's the practice of supervision? They haven't been particularly trained. So this was the motivation from the Wallace Foundation to implement a change project. I mean, this is a project of change on the ground in six large, complex urban districts to try to change the role.

That was really the hypothesis; that if principal supervisors... Their role has changed from overseeing administration and operations to providing direct instructional leadership support to principals—can districts improve, can principals improve, and ultimately, of course, student achievement.

The initiative had five core components. I wanna submit...and I know this might not be well received, but I wanna make two points. I do not believe that just training alone, without a broader theory of action or framework, will move the needle. Believe me, I'm at a university, we obviously care deeply and think a lot about and believe in education, training, workshops, all that. If all at the end of the day we did around principal supervision is get people together for workshops and training, I don't think that's enough, point number one.

Point number two. If all we do is adopt standards—and we have that, Wallace had that; revising supervisor job descriptions, which is really adopting standards—we will not make a change. So Wallace collaborated with these six districts to implement five very distinct changes, and this was their theory of action. So what I'm gonna do is go through each one of these, what it is and what we found.

Now, I am not saying that these are the only five. Absolutely not. But I think if we know anything about change and change theory is, you can't just change one part of a system. You have to think holistically and integratively about what are the components that will work against a particular part of a change that, in essence, could create maximum failure rather than success.

When I was interviewed for *EdWeek* and the newspaper for this, I said, "To me, this is a super good news story. It's so hopeful to me." So just to give you a quick preview of the main findings. We can see here from our research in the first three years that all districts reduced the span of control, they all created strong principal networks, they all had dedicated training and apprenticeship programs for supervisors.

This was the first time in many of the districts...and the data are in the report, I think 80% of the supervisors across all districts said it's the first time that they had, and I'm quoting, "unique and dedicated training to their role as a supervisor." Districts have changed the day-to-day practice of supervisors in their work. We interviewed, we have surveys across time, and I'll show you data about that. What they are doing in their school visits, in a number of visits. I mean, what they're spending their time on has totally shifted, and we're gonna talk about walkthroughs and feedback in coaching because those are the practices, and you can ask more about that from leadership academy and central office, change was pretty remarkable.

What happened and what I think is so powerful about this model is this notion of an ongoing relationship and real work happening. And that's the role change. So it's not dropping in, it's not just no agenda, it's not just, "Well, show me around." That's a meet and greet. This is a very different type of relationship. All the districts started with revising the job description. This created the internal vision of change for what and why change. And really, this reoriented the expectation for supervisors' work to focus on instructional leadership in schools, reducing this span of control.

So as I said, the logic here is you cannot effectively supervise people if you cannot actually interact with them and you cannot go to their place of work. I mean, it just cannot be done. Most of the districts reduced their span of control. They had to, to do this work. It was also a requirement of the grant. For some districts, this was a heavy lift. It was a heavy lift to answer the question of politicians and board members and parents who say "all resources have to go into the classroom." And here we have a counter-cultural argument going upstream from that.

Here we have for the first time a national organization, Wallace, and others, CSSO and others, advocating for putting resources back into central office. Now, that's pretty extraordinary when you think about it in this given age, where resources are so scarce, and for so long, people have been talking about the bloated central office.

In the districts that had stable leadership like from the beginning and there's still stable leadership now, I would say that they very clearly communicated and got all their constituents on board. Number one, we have a role in the district that we're not utilizing efficiently and effectively. So these superintendents really projected a vision of how do we meet the needs of all students and leaders through a systemwide, consistent approach to providing the type of support that over time actually will be a more efficient and effective use of resources.

So districts did a few things. Some hired new supervisors to get their span down, and I'll show you the numbers in a minute. Other supervisors had multiple positions, multiple responsibilities—we call them hybrid. So, I'm responsible for technology and I'm a supervisor, right? I'm responsible for student support, or in the office of student support and I'm a supervisor. They did not hire new people, but they focused a person's role only on supervision and reduced hybrid roles. And they also changed out assignments and allocation.

Here you see the reduction in the span. So the Wallace Foundation determined through their literature review of best practices and industries other than education, that what they thought a target number should be 12. Do we know if that's the right number? I don't think anybody really knows. The reason I'm saying that is even in these districts, there's a range. Not every supervisor has the exact same number, right? There's a range. There's an average and then there's a range.

So even within a district, I might have 19 and you might have 11. So we can look at what the variation of that does for principal performance and principal support. Again, whether you're a small district with 10 principals or a large district with 60 principals, everyone needs support and development and coaching. What emerged because the supervisor's span of control was reduced and what I think is so important is conversations about how to develop principal networks. How our principals assigned to and allocated to principals.

So before the initiative, this was also just like a haphazard thing. There was an elementary supervisor, there was a high school supervisor, there was a middle school supervisor, and I had all the high schools. And so, if there were a lot, I had a lot. If there were too many elementary schools, we did quadrants. In Broward, the supervisors were spending half their time in a car. Totally. Dead time. Driving from one school to the other.

So in the report we talk a lot about how the districts came together to really think about what does it mean to be in a principal network, and I know some of you are in turnaround schools, and you can see that some of the districts had networks that were low-performing school networks. This was debated; principals said, "I wanna learn from other schools, not all just like me." And others felt like it's really helpful to have the support of schools that are facing similar circumstances.

Again, I don't have the right and wrong answer. The thing is, is that through the initiative, these were very deliberative conversations, and the reason this is so important is that the networks developed into principal learning communities. So the support of supervisors was one-on-one through school visits, but a lot of the support were in group meetings and subgroup meetings, and so that those meetings of how the

principals were networked and then how supervisors further developed into subgroups is a really important part of how the work got done.

A big part of the initiative is, now we have our supervisors, we have more of them, what is the work, as well as their internal selves meeting, as well as their central office appropriate departments, to address a particular set of practices that all supervisors would engage. The practices that were both learned and implemented are coaching, mentoring, providing professional development for principals, managing learning communities; and the practices that all principal supervisors were implementing were coaching walkthroughs and providing feedback to principals.

But I think what is most remarkable is that principal supervisors would have what we would call lab days, where supervisors would go with each other to a principal's school where that supervisor was conducting a visit, and they would co-observe him or her engaging with the principal, coaching, providing feedback and then they would debrief how that went and what happened and then the principal would also reflect on what he or she gathered.

Here are some of the examples of the trainings that they received. The most powerful, of course, were the job embedded. Supervisors were coached on how to coach. They were observed giving feedback, etc., much aligned with clinical supervision kind of approach. The supervisor visits are not, as I said, meet and greet; there's a lot of in and out of classrooms, there's a lot of calibrating with principals around what is the district's definition rubric around high-quality instruction, and how do principals use their observations and their data to provide feedback to teachers.

Supervisors look at that, they look at school data, they could go and help a principal plan an agenda for a data meeting. They could watch and observe a principal holding teachers' meetings. I mean, it's in the work. It's really in the work. Early on in the initiative, and about year one, especially, the district swung the pendulum way too far. And it was like, "Oh, we should 90-100% be in schools and only focus on instructional leadership."

And then, of course, what happened is, obviously if your building's burning down, you can't talk about instructional leadership, right? And there are real needs that principals need to talk to their supervisors about. Things that happen, a parent complained, that's not instructionally related, about sports, there are just a lot of other things. So the districts really kind of recalibrated, and I think our message is, yes, we want them to work on instructional leadership but don't forget the rest of the world, because it's a context and all of these things are happening in schools.

As I said before, their main impact and work with principals is through walkthroughs, feedback, and coaching. These are the things that they were trained on. And these are the things that districts have developed, sets of tools and resources. So what's the coaching model that we're using in a district? What's our approach to providing feedback to principals? And, of course, what happens when we do a walkthrough? Can't just be a show and tell.

So these questions really guided the districts to ask: What is the practice of supervision in the district? What do we mean when we say support and development to principals? And then, of course, cutting through this, are the indicators of the principal evaluation that I'll mention in a few minutes. I am going to talk about central office because I think it's really important.

The districts realized quite early on that they couldn't change one part of the system without changing the other parts. And it was really crucial to change central office culture and structures at the same time.

So they had to start embarking on a process of really asking, where could some of the roles and responsibilities that supervisors used to do sit within the district? So who could absorb those things, and the districts came up with incredibly creative and different solutions.

They started really looking and said, “Well, wait a minute. Why does this person have five people reporting to them, and what do those five people really need to do anyway?” And “Can we better align expertise and departments in rethinking if central offices organized to support schools rather than organize in the departments that they’ve always been organized in?”

One of the things that Broward County did right away in the first year is they had the current supervisors fill out a circle about what they were spending their time on. Everyone got a blank piece of paper with a circle and they said, “Reflect on last year, how you spent your time.” The thing that was taking most time from all the principal supervisors in Broward was parent complaints.

Everything from the bus to the teacher—I’m not talking about, I mean, we know a lot of parent issues are very serious and important and I’m not belittling that in any way. But when they probed about it, they weren’t really even principal related. So what Broward did, is they have a new office of service quality, and all parent complaints or questions or issues go directly to the office of service quality.

Full disclosure, I don’t think they hired new staff to do this. I think they reallocated roles and responsibilities within Broward to man this office. Cleveland, for example, had this idea of barrier breakers who principals contacted directly for logistical issues in the district. So, for example, a box of textbooks didn’t arrive on time. Usually in an urban district, you’d call your supervisor. So again, this started clearing the plate of supervisors.

So how do we then shift the support so that central office kind of gets to know what supervisors know about the needs of the schools? And so we saw kind of two general structures emerge. One we call the support team structure. And here we see that supervisors are assigned dedicated representatives from other departments who meet regularly with them to learn about the needs of their schools and their principals. Supervisors meet with a dedicated representative from human resources, special ed, curriculum instruction, ELL, the other departments. They meet together to learn about what are the needs that the 13 or so schools that the supervisor is overseeing.

So the supervisor becomes the link between the schools and the central office. And the central office doesn’t have the same person necessarily in the department be the link to the same supervisor, right, so that work is also distributed. So it’s not like my job is working with 13 supervisors, I may be liaising with two because I’ve got my other work, you may be liaising with another two, but now I have particular individuals who meet with me regularly, attend my principals’ networks meeting. They come to me.

So when I’m doing a PLC meeting and after visiting 13 principals, we see that we still have an issue with RTI. Then special ed can come and work with all my principals in my network, and I have a relationship with that person. So, the central office is to respond to the needs of the principals as articulated through the supervisors. And then the resources can be deployed directly to the principals because that relationship has been established, and it’s a stable relationship. I’m not calling someone different in central office each time.

The other one we called liaisons. So here it’s a little different. Each supervisor is assigned to be a liaison to a particular department. So I may be liaison for human resources, you may be the liaison for special education, and then I work with the other supervisors because the supervisors also have their regular

meetings, and that's how we then discuss and help each other deploy the resources that we need to the principals. So it's, again, the supervisor has a very important liaison communication role with central office, to deploy resources directly to schools.

So, takeaway. Number one, think creatively about what supervision is; it's a craft. They need to be developed, honed, and applied just like any other craft in education. In small districts, I would submit that there needs to be a supervisor role. It may be one person if you have 10 schools in your district, but to expect that principals will develop and learn on their own from people who are really busy doing the rest of their job, I think is unrealistic.

Two, it's a system. You cannot just train a person to do a role and not just change anything else in the system, including the superintendents' views of this role, how they interact with other people. Like in many of these districts—I didn't even talk about it because I don't have time—there are coaches, there are principal coaches, and there are principal mentors. I mean, these are large urban districts, right? So there's Title I funds and there's one district that has started a turnaround project with the University of Virginia—there is a lot of people. So how all of this gets coordinated is super, really, really important.

I think it's really a lesson in how to think about urban district change that's coherent theory of action, but focused. If we change everything, we've changed nothing. And here is an example of changing one thing, one role that most, especially urban districts, but that most districts have. In every district, there is someone that is, on paper, responsible for supervising and evaluating their principals. The question is, what are they doing? So it's not easy. But I think it's a positive set of examples about the power of the supervisor role.

I do think it is what we call the coalition of the willing. I think it is about districts who are calling you up and saying, "We want help in improving our leaders." And then I would come and begin working with them and develop a set of commitments about what we are a group going to do together. We're gonna follow the same five key steps, whatever they are; we're gonna put together a timeline about them and go through a very systematic change process. And take an inventory first of what the roles of the supervisors currently are. So it's change to what? That's always the question I ask that has to be data-based. Where are we now? Change to what?

And then really begin a step-by-step process, thinking through the components—they don't have to be these five. It's more about commitment. I don't think this is an expense, I mean I could be totally wrong. Other than the technical assistance providing, but I think that's where your Title II ESSA money comes in, totally. It's a lot more about internal capacity to say, "We are committed to making this change and leading through the difficulties in a very collegial, supportive way."

NARRATOR

Dr. Goldring frames several guiding questions for state and district leaders to consider.

ELLEN GOLDRING

It would be really helpful to really wrestle with the two big questions about what's the state role in thinking about principal supervision as an important lever for continuing to support and develop effective leaders? And I wanna make a really strong case that this is a resource that exists and that we should be thinking differently about it. And also, how do we think about principal supervision in large, small,



multiple types of context? And then, what's the relationship obviously between states and districts to get this work done?

NARRATOR

Thank you for viewing this presentation by Dr. Goldring. For more information on this topic, please contact RELWest@wested.org.