



TRANSCRIPT

Beyond Supervision: Partnering for Principals' Success

NARRATOR

On December 11, 2019, Dr. Meredith Honig, the Director of the District Leadership Design Lab at the University of Washington, spoke to a Regional Educational Laboratory West convening of state education leaders on her research on effective principal supervision. This video shares some highlights from her presentation.

MEREDITH HONIG

So, I'm here today to talk about what we have found across our program of research. Our program of research focuses on the school district central office overall and the fundamental mismatch between what central offices have come to do over the last hundred years, and what we now know they need to do.

It's really important that we're dedicating our time to this key role in school district central offices. We know from other people's research that school principals are really vital to ensuring that each and every student has high-quality teaching every day. We are also finding that principal supervisors are key to those results for principals.

And so our goals for today are to deepen our understanding of the research, consider recasting the roles in the settings where we work, and then identify some next steps.

We've studied central offices and principal supervision for some time. I mean, just the part of our work on principal supervision involved almost 770 hours of observations. We have done some interviews, we also review documents. For the findings I'm going to share today, our work is also greatly informed by sessions like this. Consultations we do at districts, we are the curriculum for various district networks, we run research-practice partnerships, and have for some time. We're trying to do research that's relevant to practice.

We have been in districts of all different sizes. We have studied parts of New York City and mid-size districts and mid-sized cities like Oakland, California, and Atlanta. We've also been in districts which are most of the districts in the country that are more like 2,000 kids. So much smaller systems.

And the districts we studied were saying, "If we're serious about high-quality teaching and learning, we have to be serious about principals' instructional leadership." And we're going to work on a definition of that. And for the purposes of this, I use a relatively broad one related to the extent to which principals are spending time, making moves that support teachers' growth in their instructional practice. And that might mean they do that directly, it also may

mean they lead teacher teams, in doing that with each other. And I think that's consistent with where the research is going as well.

But they were saying that "if the job of principal is instructional leadership, shouldn't that be the main focus of the person they should be interacting with most? Their supervisor. And when the principal comes in and most of what they do is evaluate, and most of what they do is help with operational matters, or regulate, aren't we sending the wrong message about what we value as a school district central office?"

You know, part of what's exciting about talking about these ideas right now, is when we used to talk about them, there weren't that many cases of districts who had bit the bullet and redesigned their principal supervisor role. But now we do have examples of this.

We're going to say that the job of helping principals grow as instructional leaders is so important that it needs to be the responsibility of someone in a position of hierarchical power comparable to their supervisor, and basically be their supervisor. So we're not going to demote the role, we're going to keep it at its executive level, and charge the principal supervisors with maximizing their time, day in and day out, on helping principals grow as instructional leaders. And that they need to do that by working with principals one on one, and also by convening principals in principal learning communities.

This is a really important part of what successful principal supervision takes, is that they didn't just redesign the principal supervisor role. They also recast the rest of the central office, because what you're describing around operations or around HR, that's a symptom of other central office functions not operating well. So to get all principals as excellent instructional leaders, we've got to change principal supervision, but also rethink all the other core functions. And a very different role for district-level cabinets as well. So I at least wanted to mention that the success of principal supervisors, and what I'm going to share, really depends on the rest of the central office shifting.

So what did the principal supervisors in the positive cases do? Well for one thing, and this might sound really basic, but they focused on instruction. Right? And principal supervisors in the negative cases would tend to jump over a principal to work with teachers. That's not good support for principals' instructional leadership. They dedicated their time to helping principals focus their work. Working on the quality of teaching and learning, looking at student work, looking at the rigor, looking at best practices, taking a principal who's not spent time in classrooms and getting them to shift their focus takes a lot of intentional work.

And then within that group of principal supervisors who did focus their time, they engaged in particular kind of practices that I organize in two categories.

One of them is, they helped principals lead their own learning. And this is really important. In most models of coaching I know, the focus is on "We're trying to learn something, I'm going to come in and literally be on site and coach you." The better principal supervisors recognized that there are real limitations to their being on site, even if they have a reasonable caseload of ten principals. And it's not consistent with adult learning to have a learner wait for their coach to show up before the learning starts. So a key thing they were doing was helping principals lead their own growth. Again, consistent with research on the importance of agency to

learning, and also just the practical limitations. Principals have to operate as professionals and a key thing that professionals do, is they lead their own learning. They seek out opportunities to get better, they see that as their key responsibility.

And the principal supervisors in the positive cases who did these things helped principals develop learning plans. So, to really conduct rigorous self-assessments, and be very intentional about their learning. They modeled how to do that. They also had learning plans that showed how they were going to lead their own learning. They showed principals how they were working on that. And then they brokered for principals various learning resources to help them execute their plan.

The really best ones, they positioned themselves as the coach of last resort. They said, "Okay, if principals are really leading their own learning, and maximizing the learning they're doing on the job, it's...most of it's going to happen without me. But there will still be some gaps. So I'm going to come in and strategically fill those gaps with some coaching, but it's not going to be the main thing that they rely on for their learning." And the best learning plans reflect research on adult learning, that says your most powerful experiences for learning are on the job. They're not in workshops, they're not at conferences, they're not in the PD that the central office provides. So, really, a learning plan that reflects learning on the job, and then the principals execute it and continuously self-monitor with the principal supervisor strategically supplementing that work.

It's really hard for principals to think about themselves, I find, as the investment they're making in learning. Even if you look at a lot of their goals, they're often goals for teachers or goals for students. They're not goals for their own growth. So it's a process.

And so, when principal supervisors are supplementing those learning plans with some direct work, one-on-one and in learning communities, we saw some pretty consistent moves. And I'll just be really brief—a key thing to take away from this is not like a checklist, like, "Oh, okay, I do modeling, I use talk moves, too." But that this is the level at which we need to be paying attention to how principal supervision plays out.

So modeling. Understand that modeling is not a single event. It's not just somebody demonstrating something. It starts long before that. With a principal really understanding, "Oh, there's something I need to see a model of." So they work with their principals to figure out, "Okay, it might actually help my learning in how to have challenging conversations with teachers about their observations, if I could see somebody doing that." And then the principal supervisor would observe the principal doing it, they would talk about how it went, some of the pros and cons, what they wished they had done, what a better model would do. Then the principal supervisor would have a conversation with that principal's teacher as part of their regular work. The principal supervisor would just go in and do it, as an example of what really job-embedded learning looks like. And then the principal would observe the supervisor—didn't have to be perfect—they'd debrief it, and then the principal would kind of engage in progressively more ambitious demonstrations for themselves toward getting better at how to do that task. So modeling was really key. A lot of the negative examples are missed opportunities for modeling.

They also made talk moves. Principal supervisors who are really coaching well sound different than those who are not using talk in challenging ways. And there's a lot of really good research on this, mostly about teacher learning communities and talk among teachers that actually moves practice.

Traditionally, supervisors would come in, maybe they'd look at classrooms with the principal, ask some really weak questions, like "What did you see? Yeah, that sounds good." But more powerful talk is, "Huh, let's really look at the evidence for what you're saying." "Oh, that's one piece of evidence, let's see if we can find another piece of evidence." Pushing for evidence, juxtaposing evidence that we associated with helping principals actually grow.

Certain kinds of talk moves and certain kinds of modeling worked for some principals and not for others. Principal supervisors were really differentiating how they work with their principals. They were not differentiating their work with principals based on schools' test scores. They were differentiating their work with principals based on principals' readiness for instructional leadership. Also with the assumption that every single principal could get better. So this is also not a model where the weaker principals get all the time. Everybody's got a learning plan, everybody's leading their own learning, everyone should see their supervisor do great coaching at some point, because we all can get continuously better.

They also bring resources in, and they really protect principals' time. And I love the quotes about buffering. Because they'll say, "I'm a buffer and a translator. I take mandates, expectations, and reframe them so they're meaningful and relevant and manageable for principals. That's my job. And to break it down for them and to simplify and to tell them stuff that, especially for my new principals, everything is not equally important, but don't drop the ball on this. It's on me. I'm going to use my executive authority to say you don't have to do that and I will take it on."

We actually translated a lot of this into performance standards. You'll see a lot of what we've been talking about here. That principal supervisors are dedicating their time to help principals grow as instructional leaders. They're working intensively with principals to help them lead their own growth. The third and the fourth one are about using those teaching and learning moves.

And then we found it really important to call out, "Well, what about evaluation?" Even though that relates to the professional growth planning process. Because the positive examples of principal supervision, some of them took the principal evaluation process and recast it so it was more of a professional growth process. So we wanted to amplify that for districts who found this helpful to call out that a strong principal supervisor engages principals in the formal district evaluation process in ways that support principals' growth as instructional leaders. And that also recognizes the principal supervisors can't not talk to the rest of the central office. In fact, especially if they're doing the right work and knowing their schools really well, and knowing their principals really well, everyone in the central office wants to talk to them. But they have to be really strategic about how they engage with that. So we called that out in that standard.



So I encourage you to think about principal supervision and the importance of that in helping districts really kind of go deep with that. And also, as you do that, to become curious about what is the...how can the rest of the central office support those key shifts?

NARRATOR

For more information about Dr. Honig's work in this area, please see her book written with her colleague, Lydia Rainey. Other research on this topic can be found in these articles. For more resources available on this topic, please go to the District Leadership Design Lab website.

If you have questions or need more information on this topic, please contact REL West at RELWest@wested.org.