

# Principals as Instructional Leaders

A framework  
for central-office  
support of site  
administrators  
that promises  
better teaching  
and learning

BY STEPHEN FINK AND  
MAX SILVERMAN

**H**ighline Public Schools, spanning several cities south of Seattle, has 39 schools serving some of the poorest students in this multicultural region. In some schools, more than 88 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, and more than half come from homes where English is not the primary language.

Like countless districts nationwide facing increased accountability and scrutiny, Highline has struggled for years to close the achievement gap between its most affluent students and its poorest.

This was certainly the case facing Anne Reece, who took on the principalship of Highline's White Center Heights Elementary in 2012. Reece inherited some of the lowest test scores in the district, with two-thirds of 3rd through 6th graders not reading at grade level.

To remedy that, the district handed Reece something powerful — support from the top levels of the central office to focus her job on instructional improvement. The district empowered Reece to become the instructional leader of the school and created the conditions for her to turn around a demoralized teaching staff.

After a year of Reece's two hands shaping instructional affairs, student test results at White Center Heights soared across all grade levels, most rising by double digits. The school's gains in math were some of the biggest in the state, prompting this question: Is the Highline Public Schools' approach unique, or can districts of any size

and location create the conditions for principals to succeed as instructional leaders?

### Three Challenges

Principals sit at a critical intersection at this time of increased school accountability. While it is widely understood that principals play a pivotal role in the improvement of teaching and learning, many districts have given little attention to creating the necessary conditions for principal success. Even with growing methods and forms of principal accountability, principal job satisfaction and sense of efficacy are at historic lows.

Principals experience three primary conditions that have an impact on their effectiveness as instructional leaders.

First, many work in systems that have not developed a consensus understanding of the day-to-day work that principals should be engaged in to affect teaching practice at scale.

Second, principals do not receive the intensive, coordinated and embedded professional development they need to improve their skills.

Third, districts do not provide principals the time they need on a daily basis to engage with teachers and students focusing on the improvement of teaching and learning.

### Action Avenues

Through the support of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, we have been working with more than 15 school districts and charter management organizations across the country in a knowledge development project. The project targets the central-office role in ensuring that principals have what they need to be successful instructional leaders.

Rather than tackling wholesale central-office reorganization, these districts are working from what teachers and principals need to be effective and designing strategies to meet those needs.

To provide a pathway forward that addresses the three challenges facing principals, faculty at the University of Washington's Center for Educational Leadership, in conjunction with these districts and charter management organizations, have developed a principal support framework. The framework calls for three critical action areas for supporting principals:

► **ACTION AREA 1:** A shared vision of principals as instructional leaders;

► **ACTION AREA 2:** A system of support for developing principals as instructional leaders; and

► **ACTION AREA 3:** Making it possible for principals to be instructional leaders.

These actions, when taken in total and well executed, should create dramatic improvements in a principal's instructional leadership practice.

### A Shared Vision

Action Area 1 calls for a school system to define, clearly and in detail, what it expects principals to do as the instructional leaders of their schools.

For Pittsburgh Public Schools, that meant engaging all of its principals in a process to develop a consensus agreement on the principal practices that would be most emphasized in professional development and evaluation. Together, approximately 60 principals reviewed research, discussed what was working in their schools and engaged in a districtwide conversation on what mattered most in their work. As a result, central-office leaders and principals agreed on a set of leadership "power standards" as the focus of their work together.

Denver Public Schools has taken its consensus understanding of principal leadership and used it to reshape their principal selection and placement process. From the receipt of a letter of interest and resume through the final hiring decision, principal candidates are screened, interviewed and put through performance tasks that specifically call out the extent to which candidates can successfully lead based on what the district considers most important for principal leadership.

Action Area 1 responds to the fact that while most states and districts have adopted new principal evaluation systems and performance rubrics, they still do not provide principals clear direction on the highest-priority activities they should be involved in on a day-to-day basis.

Districts making headway in this area are moving beyond just adopting a new principal-evaluation instrument and are emphasizing a few high-leverage practices they want all principals to engage in. They also are ensuring that a consensus understanding of these practices drives principal recruitment and selection and



**Stephen Fink (left) is executive director of the University of Washington’s Center for Educational Leadership. Max Silverman is the center’s associate director.**

principal-professional development, as well as the principal evaluation process.

### **A System of Support**

At the heart of Action Area 2 is a new role for dedicated central-office leaders, principal supervision, designed to improve the instructional leadership of principals. Districts across the country are revising or creating these roles to ensure that all principals have a supervisor with the time and skill set to help them improve their performance.

The Shelby County, Tenn., School District and Tulsa, Okla., Public Schools created new positions called instructional leadership directors. These positions evaluate principals and help to improve principal performance through teaching and coaching. Both districts require their instructional leadership directors to be in schools, working side by side with principals, 70 percent or more of the time.

In Albany, N.Y., the city school district created a job description and subsequently hired two instructional leadership directors to serve as principal coaches and supervisors. The primary responsibility of these directors is to

improve principals’ instructional leadership performance as defined by the district’s high-priority instructional leadership standards. The instructional leadership directors also organize and support principal networks where principals have opportunities to share challenges and work together to find solutions.

The Bellingham, Wash., Public Schools provides a good example of a district that is remaking central-office leadership practices without necessarily creating a new principal supervisor role or job title. The deputy and assistant superintendents and a matrixed team of directors work closely to coordinate and distribute principal supervision and support responsibilities in an effort to provide greater direction and coherence. Each principal develops individual problems of practice and receives support from multiple central-office leaders.

A foundational idea behind these new and revised roles is the concept of reciprocal accountability.

Reciprocal accountability means if school district leaders are going to hold principals accountable for high-quality teaching and learn-

ing, they must ensure principals have the knowledge and skills to deliver on that expectation. In other words, principals cannot be held accountable for something they don't know how to do.

### Making It Possible

Imagine a school system that provides principals full clarity on what they should be doing along with robust professional development to improve their performance but does nothing to change the actual overall administrative responsibilities and commitments required of principals.

Action Area 3 addresses this situation by focusing central-office action on the overwhelming demands placed on principals. Districts engaged in this action area take seriously that principals do not have enough time in their day to be effective instructional leaders. These districts require principals to attend fewer district meetings, lessen principals' span of control, provide more efficient and strategic support from the central office, and invest in teacher leaders who can share instructional leadership responsibilities.

The Hillsborough County, Fla., Public Schools has created area leadership teams to ensure principals receive integrated and coordinated

support from central-office departments. These teams meet regularly with area leadership directors (Hillsborough's principal supervisors) to share what they are learning about what schools need and to plan for well-coordinated responses. While still in the early stages, principals already are reporting time savings from these efforts.

Two school districts in Wyoming have been successful at enabling principals to maximize their instructional leadership time and attention. Uinta County School District 1 and Teton County School District 1 provide instructional coaches and/or teacher leaders for each of their schools.

While providing critical instructional leadership support to school principals and district leadership, these coaches and teacher leaders do not operate as school-site free agents. They are part of a larger, systemic effort to develop teacher capacity across the districts, and as such, the additional staffing enables principals to focus time and attention on overall professional learning needs of teachers versus the more time-intensive, side-by-side coaching that teachers need to improve and refine instructional practice.

### Getting Started

Without an effective principal leading every school, we cannot imagine a time when every student is afforded a quality education. The responsibility lies with central-office leaders to ensure they have created the expectations, supports and conditions necessary for principal effectiveness.

The principal support framework is a powerful tool to aid in this pursuit. For superintendents and central-office administrators, the principal support framework provides a starting point and guide by clarifying the role of principal as instructional leader, by fundamentally remaking the job of the principal supervisor and by reducing the demands placed on principals.

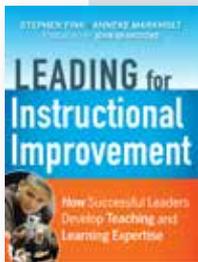
As school districts embark on this journey, we encourage district leaders to share their successes and challenges with us. We hope this kind of collective effort will further improve principal effectiveness nationwide. ■

**STEPHEN FINK** is executive director of the University of Washington's Center for Educational Leadership. E-mail: [finks@uw.edu](mailto:finks@uw.edu). Twitter: @StephenFinkAtUW  
**MAX SILVERMAN** is the center's associate director.

## Additional Resources

Authors Stephen Fink and Max Silverman recommend these informational resources relating to their article. Several are products of the University of Washington's Center for Educational Leadership, where they work.

"Central Office Transformation for District-Wide Teaching and Learning Improvement," Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy and The Wallace Foundation, <http://bit.ly/CentralOfficeTransformation>



*Leading for Instructional Improvement: How Successful Leaders Develop Teaching and Learning Expertise* by Stephen Fink and Anneke Markholt (Jossey-Bass, 2011)

Leading for Effective Teaching project, a white paper and a toolkit, [www.k-12leadership.org/leading-for-effective-teaching](http://www.k-12leadership.org/leading-for-effective-teaching)

Principal Support Framework, a district self-assessment and planning template, [www.k-12leadership.org/principal-support-framework](http://www.k-12leadership.org/principal-support-framework)

"Rethinking Leadership: The Changing Role of Principal Supervisors," Council of the Great City Schools and The Wallace Foundation, <http://bit.ly/RethinkingLeadership>