

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A New Role Emerges for Principal Supervisors

Evidence from Six Districts in the Principal Supervisor Initiative



Ellen B. Goldring, Jason A. Grissom, Mollie Rubin, Laura K. Rogers, Michael Neel
Vanderbilt University, Peabody College

Melissa A. Clark
Mathematica Policy Research

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This is an executive summary of A New Role Emerges for Principal Supervisors: Evidence from Six Districts in the Principal Supervisor Initiative. To read the full report, please visit www.mathematica-mpr.com or www.wallacefoundation.org.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2014, The Wallace Foundation launched the Principal Supervisor Initiative (PSI), a four-year, \$24 million-dollar effort to redefine principal supervision in six urban school districts. The initiative sought to help districts transform a position traditionally focused on administration, operations, and compliance to one dedicated to developing and supporting principals to improve instruction in schools.

Six urban school districts participated in the Principal Supervisor Initiative:

- Broward County Public Schools, Florida
- Baltimore City Public Schools, Maryland
- Cleveland Metropolitan School District, Ohio
- Des Moines Public Schools, Iowa
- Long Beach Unified School District, California
- Minneapolis Public Schools, Minnesota

The initiative was motivated by an effort to increase student learning and achievement by improving principal effectiveness. Research has shown that strong principals are integral to strong schools and to raising the quality of teaching. Numerous studies have pointed to the importance of effective leaders for teacher satisfaction, teacher retention, school climate, parent engagement, and student achievement. Principal supervisors are a potential point of leverage for supporting and developing principals, but relatively few districts have invested in such efforts. The motivating hypothesis of the PSI is that changing the role of principal supervisors from overseeing administration and operations to providing instructional leadership can drive improvement in principal effectiveness.



The PSI includes five core components:

1. Revising the principal supervisors' job description to focus on instructional leadership
2. Reducing principal supervisors' span of control (the number of principals they oversee) and changing how supervisors are assigned to principals
3. Training supervisors and developing their capacity to support principals
4. Developing systems to identify and train new supervisors (succession planning)
5. Strengthening central office structures to support and sustain changes in the principal supervisor's role

The study of the PSI, conducted by researchers from Mathematica Policy Research and Vanderbilt University, will document districts' experiences implementing the initiative and examine the effects of the initiative on principals' performance. This first study report describes the emergence of a new role for principal supervisors in the six PSI districts, documenting districts' experiences with and lessons learned from the PSI from its inception in the 2014–2015 school year through spring 2017. A second report will describe the final year of implementation and examine the effects of the initiative on principals' performance. A third report will compare the principal supervisors' role in the six PSI districts with that in a national sample of urban districts, to learn how principal supervision in PSI districts differs from that in similar districts that were not part of the initiative.

In this report, we present analyses of data from semistructured interviews with central office personnel, principal supervisors, and principals, as well as data from surveys of supervisors and principals in each of the six PSI districts.

A. Overview of study findings: A new role for principal supervisors emerges

The six PSI districts demonstrated the feasibility of making substantial changes to the principal supervisor role, across all components of the initiative. The districts revised the job descriptions for principal supervisors, reduced the span of control, implemented new training programs, and restructured roles and responsibilities in the central office to support changes to the principal supervisor role.

These changes in the principal supervisor role laid the groundwork for changes in principal supervisors' day-to-day work with principals. Most principal supervisors now spend the largest share of their time in schools engaging in newly developed routines and practices, such as participating in classroom walk-throughs, coaching principals, and providing ongoing feedback. In some districts, they also work with assistant principals or school leadership teams. They focus less on administration and building operations than in the past. They also focus less on compliance activities, such as monitoring supplies and ensuring district and state forms are completed correctly and submitted on time. Principal supervisors also consistently meet with groups of principals to provide opportunities for collaborative learning.

1 Revising the principal supervisors' job description to focus on instructional leadership

Districts revised the job description of principal supervisors to focus heavily on developing instructional leadership and supporting principals.

Through their revisions to the principal supervisors' job description, districts articulated a new vision for the principal supervisor role. To inform the revised job descriptions, most districts relied heavily on the draft *Model Principal Supervisor Standards* (Council of Chief State School Officers 2015) and sought input from a mix of central office departments, senior-level district officials, current principal supervisors and principals, and external technical assistance providers.¹

Changing the job description required shifting some responsibilities previously held by principal supervisors to other central office staff. As of the third year of the initiative, districts continued to wrestle with the redistribution of responsibilities formerly held by principal supervisors. This highlights a challenge other districts may face as they seek to make similar changes to the principal supervisor role.

¹ The Wallace Foundation supported the development of the *Model Principal Supervisor Standards*.

2 Reducing principal supervisors' span of control and changing how supervisors are assigned to principals

PSI districts reduced the number of principals each supervisor oversaw and created networks of principals to facilitate collaboration and small-group learning communities.

Districts reduced the number of principals assigned to each supervisor, which provided supervisors time to focus on developing and supporting principals as instructional leaders. Before the PSI, across the six districts, supervisors oversaw an average of 17 principals. Within the first three years of the initiative, the average span of control across all six districts decreased to 12 principals. The number of supervisors who reported that they oversaw too many principals declined in every district from 2016 to 2017.

Although most districts successfully reduced the average number of principals overseen by their supervisors, spans of control varied substantially among supervisors within districts. Districts discovered that the appropriate span might not be the same for all supervisors, depending on the characteristics of schools and principals in their networks. For instance, new principals might require more or differing supports relative to veteran principals.

Each supervisor oversaw a network of principals. Districts grouped principals into networks based on a combination of grade level, geography, school theme or focus, and, at times, by performance level. Districts typically matched supervisors strategically to networks according to their relevant experience and expertise. The networks facilitated collaboration among principals, enabling them to share practices and participate in professional development together.

Principals were able to spend more time interacting with supervisors because of the reduced spans of control and changes in network groupings. As a consequence, they reported developing more productive relationships with their supervisors than in the past. This change in the nature of the relationships between principals and supervisors was due not only to the quantity of time spent together, but also to the qualitative shift in the nature of their interactions, toward a greater focus on instructional leadership.

In the first years of the PSI, shifting supervisor assignments and hiring new supervisors led to instability in relationships between supervisors and principals. As districts finalize their supervisor rosters, we might expect more stable principal groupings and reduced supervisor turnover.

3 Training supervisors and developing their capacity to support principals

PSI districts developed systematic training programs to develop supervisors' skills.

Before the PSI, supervisors did not receive training specifically aimed at improving their capacity to support and develop principals as instructional leaders. By 2017, however, districts had demonstrated the benefits of targeted supervisor training to develop supervisors' capacity to support and coach principals. The supervisor training focused heavily on understanding and identifying high quality instruction and developing principals as instructional leaders, although

the primary focus varied by district. Supervisors especially valued job-embedded training approaches, such as one-on-one coaching and in-school peer observations with other supervisors.

Districts grappled with finding a balance for supervisors between spending time on training and spending time in schools. Although supervisor training ensures supervisors have the needed skills to support and develop principals, it takes away from time working directly with principals in schools. Districts must determine an appropriate balance between these two objectives.

Technical assistance providers played key roles in planning and facilitating principal supervisor trainings. Supervisors often reported that trainings drifted from their intended purpose, or were limited in quality when technical assistance providers were not present. This suggests that technical assistance from external providers may be an important component of effective training.

4 Developing systems to identify and train new supervisors (succession planning)

Some districts implemented apprenticeship programs to prepare promising candidates to become principal supervisors.

To prepare candidates to step into the redesigned supervisor position, three districts developed apprenticeship programs. These programs offered a mix of mentorship and formal training opportunities for prospective supervisors. The programs provided participants with job-embedded experiences to develop skills required of principal supervisors, such as planning professional development for principal networks, co-planning and co-leading principal support meetings, and coaching a small number of principals.

Program participants reported feeling prepared for the principal supervisor role. Districts also benefited as the apprenticeship programs facilitated succession planning for principal supervisors, offering district leaders opportunities to observe participants in action.

5 Strengthening central offices to support and sustain changes in the principal supervisor role

Central office departments began to coordinate more with one another, creating a cultural shift and leading to structural reorganization to support the new principal supervisor role.

Districts worked to create new central office structures to facilitate the work between schools and central offices as the principal supervisors' roles changed. Specifically, districts reallocated supervisors' noninstructional responsibilities to help them focus on supporting principals' instructional leadership; implemented new structures to foster collaboration and coordination across departments; and improved systems of communication among the central office, supervisors, and schools.

B. Looking ahead: Areas for continued focus

The experiences of the six PSI districts demonstrate that it is possible for districts to make substantial, meaningful changes to the principal supervisor role. But this work is ongoing. Moving into the final year of the initiative and beyond, districts may focus on the following areas as they continue to refine the principal supervisor role and work to sustain their initial accomplishments.

- **Developing a common definition of instructional leadership.** Some supervisors reported ambiguity about what it means to support and develop principals' instructional leadership. In addition, the principal supervisor role in some districts has become heavily focused on developing high quality instruction. This can be considered a requisite element of strong instructional leadership, but it is only part of a multifaceted set of instructional leadership skills, such as developing a strong school culture and providing job-embedded professional development to teachers. Districts should continue to clarify the focus of the supervisor role to help articulate the priorities and practices for supervisors.
- **Identifying a balance between supervisors' central office involvement and time spent in schools.** When supervisors had to spend too much time on central office matters, they found they had insufficient time to visit their schools and provide the intended support for principals. However, too little time in the central office left supervisors out of the loop and disconnected from central office departments and personnel; these connections are needed to ensure that principals are supported.
- **Developing internal capacity to provide high quality, job-embedded training and support for supervisors.** District leaders continue to determine how to sustain support and training of both new and veteran supervisors as the PSI concludes and fewer resources are available for technical assistance.
- **Developing and refining approaches to identify and train new supervisors.** Districts that have developed supervisor apprenticeship programs can consider how to make time for participants to engage in apprenticeship programs at a high level and how to provide other opportunities for participants who complete the program but are not placed immediately into a supervisor role.
- **Continuing to shift central office departments toward a school-centered culture.** This shift is a significant cultural change for districts. Districts will continue to work on consistency across departments to support principal supervisors in their new roles.
- **Maintaining existing momentum in the changes to the principal supervisor role.** Moving forward, districts will need to work to ensure that progress continues along the same trajectory in the coming years, through the end of the initiative and beyond.

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