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## **Supervising Principals: How Central Office Administrators Can Improve Teaching and Learning in the Classroom -- The Missing Link for Scaling Up School Improvement**

Jon Saphier & Pia Durkin

Many change agents agree that putting a good principal in every school is the key to improving classroom instruction. Findings by the Wallace Foundation and by McREL echo this view. But “good principals” are not that easy to find, and great ones, even harder. Great principals are not born, they are made; and the key process for growing great principals in place has been missing in action from education reform efforts.

A powerful but underutilized resource for achieving and sustaining district-wide improvement is the supervision of principals. If skilled principals are essential to good schools—which they are—then skillful on-going supervision and development of principals is a critical lever for school improvement. In 30 years of in-depth consultation and training in districts of all sizes across the country, we at RBT<sup>1</sup> have found that this supervision is a missing link in efforts to improve whole districts.

Almost no freshly minted principal can be good enough in as many areas as it takes, no matter how good the preparation. It’s like expecting a second year medical student to enter professional practice at a high level, having skipped two years of medical school, internship and then residency. (We do the exact same thing with novice teachers.) We must therefore surround the new principal with a set of forces and experiences that enable continuous learning and also make the principal accountable for it.

Skillful teachers do not learn their craft in preparation programs; they learn it in the workplace, and learn it quickly and achieve proficiency only when properly supported, only when surrounded by conditions that provide constant learning with good feedback. The same is true for principals. This monograph, between the text and the appendices, is a beginning manual for how to inspire, nurture, and press principals to become skilled at improving teaching and learning in their buildings. But the problem is that no one in school districts has this job, and the few that do are hampered from executing it well.

Large districts with “Community Superintendents” or “Area Superintendents” typically have upwards of 35 schools to supervise. They spend most of their time, however, responding to crises and other problems. They are inevitably firefighters, not supervisors and coaches to their principals.

In rare situations a district reduces the span of control of this position to a reasonable number (12 to 15), but no criteria or training is provided to those who get the job. New York city for two years had a position called Local Instructional Superintendent which was abandoned with no assessment of the position or the factors necessary to make it effective. These key central office administrators may have been successful principals themselves, but that does not mean they were great coaches of principals or able diagnosticians of another principal’s needs. Those of us focused on systemic reform need now to turn our attention and accumulated learning to creating and empowering pivotal players in improving our schools— those who supervise principals – and make that a full time job.

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<sup>1</sup> Research for Better Teaching (RBT) is a consulting and training organization of 23 experienced educators who work in-depth in public schools.



Superintendents cannot directly supervise and coach principals in large districts. They are constantly dealing with problems and with managing the school board. In small districts these same issues dominate superintendents time. But someone needs to have this job of coaching and developing principals because of the leverage principals have on school improvement. This new role in a district needs to have an appropriate span of control (12 – 15 principals) so they can do the job. For the balance of this monograph I will call this role simply “principal supervisor” knowing that superintendents in small districts may only have 4 principals, but be hard pressed to focus on their development.

These new roles require that the people in them know in a very substantive way what successful instructional leaders do, be able to communicate clearly the expectations to make that happen, observe it in action, and coach their principals toward sustained effective practice as instructional leaders. Put more plainly, these central office personnel need to know where and when principals should show up and what they should do in those arenas of school life that have powerful leverage on improving teaching and learning in the classroom. Since one can’t do everything at once, principals and the central office personnel who support them should pick two or three of these venues on which to initially focus.

## What Principal Supervisors Must Understand about the Principal’s Role

*“To lead the work, you need to know the work”*

It is not just *that* the principal shows up in these high impact venues (see Appendix A) (though that would be a good start) but how *skillfully the principal acts* in each. When principal supervisors invest in gathering this information about their principals, they can also use these opportunities to model, demonstrate and provide valuable feedback to principals about their practice as instructional leaders. Principal supervisors can use two powerful venues for developing principals’ skills:

- scheduled school visits every 6 weeks in which they work side-by-side with individual principals co-observing classes and attending school-based meetings, especially Common Planning Team (CPT) meetings and meetings between the principal and the instructional coaches .
- monthly principal meetings which may be convened by level (elementary, middle, or high school) and/or planned as all-inclusive Leadership Team meetings. The principal supervisor thinks about these meetings as a staff developer of principals would. The meetings can be designed to help principals improve teaching and learning in their building through round table sharing of their own case studies, professional development input, and joint problem solving.

These principal meetings should also underscore the “big picture” issues that drive the district’s reform agenda and the connection between the district work as a whole and the work of individual schools. These meetings can help mitigate “turf” issues and unhealthy competition between schools and generate support for the view that “we” are all part of something bigger than our own individual selves. Our sum – as a team of instructional leaders- is greater than our parts.

Before we go into these two venues for developing principals skills, we want to acknowledge again the reality of life for superintendents in small districts and Zone Superintendents in big

districts: it's crushing responsibilities and constant interruptions, political constraints, not to mention the culture in most districts of leaving principals alone unless all hell breaks loose. Yet what I am calling for is possible. Susan Marks did it as a "Community Superintendent" in Montgomery County, MD in the early years of the millennium. Irwin Blumer did it as a superintendent in two districts in Massachusetts in the 90s, one small and suburban and one large and partly urban. And Pia Durkin, co-author of this article, did it in Attleboro, MA.

Due to space constraints, only three of the places where principals should "show up" will be discussed in detail in this article. These three sites for principal leadership were selected because they provide high leverage for raising student achievement and are therefore particularly important places for the principal supervisor to focus with their principals 1) Short Classroom Visits (not the same as walkthroughs,) 2) Common Planning Time meetings of teachers who share the same content, and 3) Partnership with Building-Based Instructional Coaches.

## Principal Supervisors' School Visits

Short classroom visits of 15 to 20 minutes that are separate from formal teacher evaluation visits<sup>2</sup> can be potent vehicles for improving teaching and learning, and also for strengthening organizational culture. This only happens, however, if the principal uses these visits as a springboard for productive conversations with teachers that provide growth-producing feedback. This requires that the principal 1) make time to get into classes often enough, 2) pose the right questions framed by the purpose for the visit(s) 3) have some well-developed lenses for what good teaching and powerful student learning looks and sounds like, 4) have skills at gathering observational and other kinds of data, 5) ensure follow-up with the teacher after the visit occurs, framed within a productive conversation that will improve practice and 6) schedule the follow-up visit back to the classroom. That's quite a list!

Principal supervisors help principals do this job well in several ways. First, they make crystal clear to principals what their expectations are for classroom presence and data gathering and feedback skills. The questions and requests in Appendix B represent some of these expectations. They should be shared as part of the understanding of district culture and how principal supervisors and principals work together so that there are "no surprises" regarding what the principal should prepare before the visit, and what will take place, during, and after school visits with principals. On an actual visit one would not ask all of these questions, but rather the sub-set most relevant and appropriate for the developmental level of the principal.

In addition to classroom visits, the principal supervisors may also review with the principal other instructional topics. The principal supervisors may ask the principal to:

- Share classroom observation write-ups  
[This is to see if they are evidence-based and focused on student learning.]
- "Describe a current case of supervision and evaluation in which you are engaged with a teacher about whom you have concerns. What have you done so far? What's next? What help do you need?"
- Schedule a specific co-observation of a class together.

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<sup>2</sup> The case is sometimes made that evaluators are always seen as evaluators when they walk into a classroom. It has been our experience that this is true when evaluators visit only once or twice a year. But evaluators who are frequent visitors for non-evaluative purposes and leave a teacher with useful data and questions cease to be seen as the "judge" when they visit. They can become trusted professional colleagues. The road to trust goes through the land of frequency and quality of contact. Yusko and Feiman-Nemser make a similar case in *Teachers College Record* 2008.

[This is to directly coach and improve the principal's skills at observing and gathering evidence on important teaching events and the quality of student learning. See "How to Observe a Class" on Video Library part of the RBT website RTBeach.com.]

- Share a particular set of student work to discuss how the principal will use the information in conversations with a teacher(s).
- Respond to how the principal reviews individual student progress of each student with teachers quarterly? (For elementary and middle school principals) Respond to course passing rates/failure rates? (For high school principals)
- Supply a sample of the improvement agendas/plans for each of the teachers. (These may be self-set by the teachers themselves through goal-setting or set by the principal in cases of teaching that needs improvement and/or unsatisfactory teaching.)
- Provide information as to how principals provide resources for teachers to help them improve teaching and learning
- Share how s/he is using Learning Walks - for example, in Attleboro, principals have set a high bar in communicating with their staff the difference between Walkthroughs and Learning Walks. Walkthroughs are conducted on a regular basis to note the school's readiness for learning whereby the principal may do a quick visit of all classrooms to note engagement at the beginning of the double literacy block or during the afternoon to note the type of learning tasks that student may be performing –cooperative group work, paired research work, test-taking, etc. Learning Walks have a specific purpose and focus. In both cases, it is clearly anticipated that principals and other administrators will be a consistent presence in classrooms
  - How often do you conduct Learning Walks?
  - What do you look for?
  - How do you choose who goes on Learning Walks with you?
  - Have you included teachers on Learning Walks?\*
  - "How do you use the data and information you gather on Learning Walks?"
  - "How do you follow up after the Learning Walk?" (With the entire staff? with individual teachers?)\*

\*When principals engaged teachers to be part of school Learning Walks in Attleboro, it proved to be a powerful professional development tool on both the cultural and pragmatic level. A level of trust and openness grew in the school and a coalition of champions for effective instruction, beyond the principal, became more vocal with their colleagues. Strategies and new techniques were embraced and replicated more quickly on a school-wide basis.

\*\* Routines and procedures for Learning Walks should be discussed and made public to the school staff. In the interest of providing timely and credible feedback, principals in Attleboro, following the debrief from the Learning Walk with those who participated, forward a general informational email to the entire staff by the end of that day framing what "looked good and what we need to continue to work on." Principals also attempt to follow-up with individual teachers within 24-48 hours of the Learning Walk.

## **Principal Supervisors' Monthly Convening of Principals for Half-Day or Full-Day Meetings:**

### **Monthly Meetings of Principals**

Principals' meetings are a venue for continuous and collegial learning about instructional leadership. High-skill principal supervisors think about investing time in the planning of these meetings to enhance district-wide reform efforts. Consciously designing these meetings as professional learning experiences allows for consistency and focus promoting effective instruction across schools and across levels. See Appendix C for what effective principal supervisors do at such meetings, both to plan them, conduct them, and follow-up after them.

### **Ensuring High-Functioning Meetings of School-Level Teams:**

Now let's take another arena where principal supervisors can press and support principals to have a potent influence on teacher learning: team meetings at the school level. This section will focus on Common Planning Time (CPT) for teachers who teach the same content. The questions in Appendix D about CPT may be addressed during the regularly scheduled school visit or at the monthly principals meeting.

At elementary schools CPT meetings are almost always the grade level meeting. But in middle schools it would be the three 7<sup>th</sup> grade teachers who teach 7<sup>th</sup> grade social studies, or the four 8<sup>th</sup> grade math teachers, etc. In high school it is not the math department, it is the three math teachers who teach 10<sup>th</sup> grade geometry, etc.<sup>3</sup>

Literature of the past decade on Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), spearheaded by Rick and Becky DuFour, has created common images of how CPT teams use their time well. (See "Content Teams and Error Analysis" on the RBT website under "free downloads" for a developmental continuum from beginning to advanced on the levels of sophistication one would see in CPTs.) Particularly important is error analysis of recent work, and the design of re-teaching for the students who didn't "get it" yet.

It is the principal's responsibility to see to it that all the CPTs are focused on the "right things" and that those "right things" are constantly getting better, that is, advancing up the ladder of sophistication. A CPT meeting is a prime site for teacher learning. If we (the members of a CPT) are looking at student work and identify something our students are struggling with, we will figure out why they are struggling and consider a different approach for those who don't get it yet. These creative types of discussions among teachers need to result in the improvement of teaching practice and in documented student results. Both teacher and student indicators – what to "look for" as a result of the changed or new practice - should be discussed at CPT meetings. So CPTs are a not-to-be-missed arena for principals and other building-based leaders to show up and act to get the CPT groups to a high level of functioning. Principal supervisors have to press and to coach principals on how to do so!

### **Coaches Meetings: Coach-Principal Relationships**

Elsewhere Saphier and West<sup>4</sup> have made the case that an instructional coach working in a crafted partnership with the principal can be a game-changer in school improvement. This is because the principal and the coach form a deliberate partnership to build an adult culture of honesty, non-defensive examination of teaching practice in relation to student results, and continuous improvement. They "build from strength" and develop "collaborative classroom sites" for lesson study around the strongest teachers in the school. This model was a major factor in the breakthrough results in the 90s of New York City's District 2. In Attleboro, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) stressed in their "Review of District Systems: Practices Addressing the Differentiated Needs of Low-Income Students" (September 2011) that "coaches are critical to meeting the needs of teachers and students quickly and effectively in order to enhance student achievement and promote continuous improvement." Principals told the review team that "coaches were the best thing to have happened in the Attleboro Public Schools." The report cited as its #1 recommendation that "maintaining the current model and

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<sup>3</sup> In schools too small to have more than one teacher for a course at a grade level, the recommendations that follow would be altered to structure turn-taking across a department of what would otherwise be teams of teachers planning together for content they share in common.

<sup>4</sup> See Saphier and West, "How Coaches Can Maximize Student Learning." Kappan, Dec. 2009.

staffing level of coaches, the district will be able to continue to improve curriculum, instruction, and student performance.” (p. 39) Just having coaches, however, doesn’t mean the role is properly framed or that the coaches are skillful. Principal supervisors must make sure principals understand the coaching model and are acting to support it and implement it skillfully.

In supporting principals to utilize coaches effectively, the principal supervisor needs to clarify expectations as to what s/he believes is the appropriate role of the coaches in schools and his/her partnership relationship with the principal in strengthening adult professional culture. APPENDIX E describes how the principal supervisor could accomplish this goal.

## **Superintendents’ readiness to do this kind of supervision.**

### Vulnerability and Constant Learning

The steps above that we have recommended that principal supervisors take during school visits and at principals meetings put the principal supervisors in the role of coach. But many central office personnel, though skilled in many areas, never attained high expertise at such things as classroom observation themselves. That fact cannot prevent central office personnel from stepping up to this crucial coaching and supervision role with principals. If not them, then who will?

One of us ran into this situation recently in the Superintendents’ Induction Program being conducted as a joint project of the Massachusetts Association of School Superintendents and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Twenty-five new superintendents were in the program, ably supported by three expert facilitators<sup>5</sup>, the Deputy Commissioner<sup>6</sup>, and fifteen coaches who were all successful former or sitting superintendents<sup>7</sup>. The coaches of the new superintendents were committed to pressing them to carry out the recommendations outlined in this paper for school visits, most particularly, getting in classes and co-observing with principals. Not only was this a stretch for the new superintendents they coach, it was a stretch for the coaches too. Hats off to these coaches for acknowledging their position as learners about how to observe deeply and identify most useful feedback for teachers. They pledged to plunge in with their coachee superintendents to make sure they emphasize the importance of modeling (and learning) good observation and feedback skills for their principals. They committed to becoming co-learners with these new superintendents about how to move the practice of classroom teaching and learning forward, because the person who supervises the principals must be a prime agent for doing so *with* those principals.

We recommend the following steps to optimize principals’ effectiveness:

1. The superintendent focuses on principals as his/her most important leverage for change in the district. (Superintendents in small districts are at most disadvantage here.)
2. The principal supervisors plan their schedule and structure their time with principals **first** and keep in mind that one of the best antidotes for a central office personnel’s tough day is getting out of the office and getting into a school and visiting classrooms.
3. The principal supervisor schedules school visits and lets others know that these school visits are very important and considered “sacred time” by the superintendent as well as the principal supervisor. Just as principals need to be in classrooms, superintendents and principal supervisors need to be in schools!

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<sup>5</sup> Joan Connolly, Rachel Curtis, and Elizabeth City.

<sup>6</sup> Karla Baehr

<sup>7</sup> Jack Ahearn, Tony Bent, Joe Buckley, Irwin Blumer, Joan Connolly, Kevin Courtney, Perry Davis, John D’Auria, Rose Di’Tullio, Tom Kingston, Claire Sheff Kohn, Jimmy Marini, Patty Martin, Chris McGrath, David Roach

4. The principal supervisor prioritizes how s/he will manage the set of school visits (new principals, underperforming principals, etc.) remembering to validate high performers as well as support those who are struggling.
5. The principal supervisor uses district and external resources to supplement efforts in coordinating others to help improve the instructional leadership of principals, keeping track of this work so that clear messages are sent to principals without the confusion of too many priorities.

## Conclusion

Improving our schools to get all our students to proficiency calls for formidable mobilization of collective effort. Individual schools succeed again and again, beyond all demographic predictions, at least for a time (see Education Trust website.) But unfortunately we see this only for individual schools, rarely whole districts. And even high-performing schools often fall back when leaders depart because the district does not act as a holding tank for successful practices and develop local leadership. We can do better.

Great principals have proven the consistent factor in great schools because they enable all their teachers to continuously improve their teaching practice. They build a culture of non-defensive examination of practice in relation to student results, and they mobilize faculty-wide collective action that has persistence and focus on using data to improve instruction. They may be good at other things too, like family involvement and community relations, but their primary focus is instructional leadership for better teaching and learning in every classroom. Unfortunately, not enough principals know how to do this. Who can help them do this and succeed as principals? Principal supervisors can! No person or program has the same powerful leverage that a principal supervisor can have on a principal's learning.

Perceiving the importance of effective principals, city-based programs and independent programs like New Leaders for New Schools have sought to train and certify carefully chosen candidates who would achieve remarkable results in schools. Some have; but many more haven't. This is not the fault of the training; the issue is that more than basic training is needed.

Principal supervisors are frequently spending their time dealing with crises and putting out fires. During the course of any given week there are a million things a superintendent is called upon to do. A well-known cartoon depicting a school board deliberating about hiring a superintendent has the caption "*But can she walk on water?*" This bit of humor reflects the enormous and broad expectations placed on the superintendent's shoulders. This is a mistake. Somebody does have to handle the crises, but if crisis management consumes superintendent's time they have little availability to develop instructional leaders. If the superintendent is preoccupied with constant interruptions and requests for information from others, then priorities have to be re-set and mutual understanding about the most important part of the superintendent's job needs to be discussed, recalibrated, and acknowledged. A position needs to be present in every district to assist the superintendent in coaching and developing principals—the principal supervisor. The most important work of the superintendent is to promote the instructional leadership capacity of their principals. We have to figure out how to change the message to superintendents and the forces that surround them which serve as distracters from this important work. It's time to make instructional leadership a priority in the superintendent's work expectations, and build their capacity to do so effectively.

We do not make these recommendations lightly or without mindfulness of the attendant changes implied.

- The preparation programs for superintendents and certification requirements need major adjustments to create a corps of principal supervisors with the instructional orientation that is needed and the skills to properly supervise and coach principals.

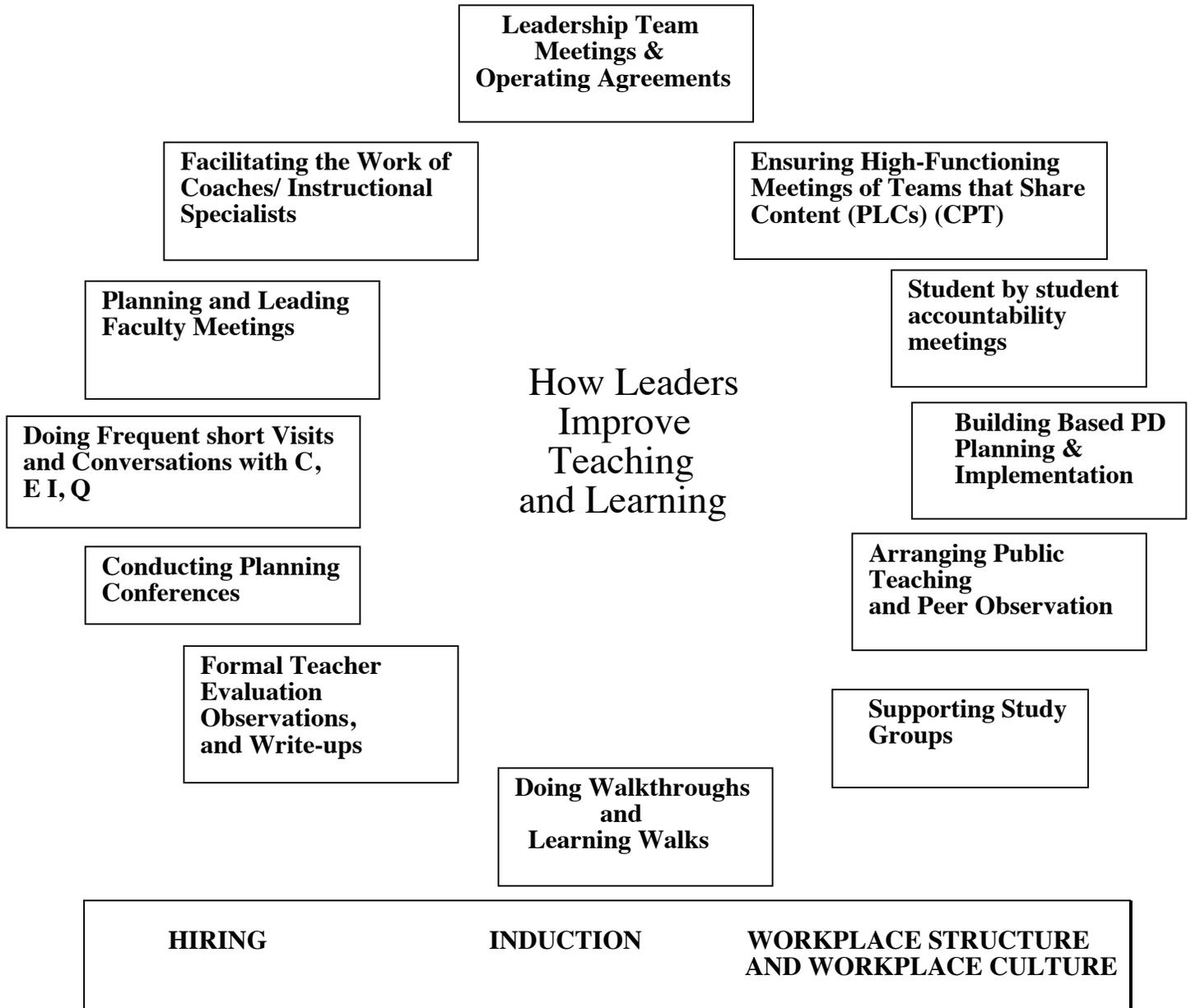
- In large districts our recommendations are more easily applied right now; the job description of “Area Superintendent” can be altered to be congruent with the role of supervising and coaching principals. This would restructure the relationship of Chief Academic Officers to Area Superintendents, but not affect the superintendent’s role that much.
- In smaller districts, the changes we urge call for many superintendents to seek professional development beyond what they have had, and challenge their time management skills when their own slim central offices may have no one to whom they can pass off other responsibilities.
- School Boards and the head-hunting firms they hire need serious reorientation so they seek district leaders with quite different credentials than they have been used to searching for.

Examination of the principal’s role in past decades has often surfaced proposals for dual principalships – one to run the building and one to lead instruction. One could transfer that idea into the context of this article and call for two superintendents, one traditional superintendent and a CAO who carries out the role we’ve described here. However one approaches the problem, this void needs to be filled.

Those who supervise principals are major players in the game of accelerating student achievement. They must ensure that they have the time, space, and support to model effective instructional leadership and, more importantly, to empower the principals they lead to effectively do the same. By doing so, these leaders can create the conditions for achievement results not just in some schools but in all schools – not just lasting during their tenure of leadership in the district, but leaving a lasting legacy after they leave the school system to the children and families they once served. Effective preparation and deployment of principal supervisors will go a long way toward this goal.

APPENDIX A

Influencing the Quality of Teaching and Learning:  
**OR**  
Where to show up and what to do



- “Ensuring High Functioning Meetings of Team that Share Content” means doing whatever it takes as a leader to make these team meetings productive. This may mean providing guidelines for the groups, protocols, training, and directly participating in them. But above all it means making sure they use their time to focus concretely on

student work and improving their instruction. High functioning teams do error analysis of recent student work and together design re-teaching for students who need it.

- “Having student-by-student accountability meetings” is a practice where principals or department chairs have teachers review the progress of each student with them several times a year, one by one, with records on the table. The purpose of these meetings is to focus teachers on students who are struggling and make specific plans for improving their performance.
- “Planning and Implementing Building Based PD” means using data (like that which might be gathered by walkthroughs) to pick targets for joint study across the whole building.
- “Arranging Public Teaching and Peer Observation” means putting in place structures, resources, training, and above all the expectations that teachers be in one another’s rooms, share the “good stuff” and problem solve with one another in high caliber professional talk.
- “Supporting Study Groups” means providing time and space and above all, encouragement, for teachers who wish to deepen their knowledge together.
- “Doing Walkthroughs and Learning Walks” means following various protocols for school-based personnel in groups to visit classrooms. These Learning Walks involve more and more teachers in visits, produce useful data for framing school PD, but also are intended to foster openness and quality conversations about teaching and learning.
- “Doing Formal Evaluations and Write-Ups” are a vehicle for feedback to teachers and quality conversations. Given their infrequency, however, and their tendency to invite artificial teaching performances, they cannot carry the load on their own for improving teaching and learning.
- “Conducting Content-Focused Conferences” means an in-depth conversation with a teacher about the content they will be teaching before any discussion of activities, student grouping, or the usual topics of “pre-conferences.” The purpose is to examine the relationships of ideas within the content, prior knowledge about student needs, which ideas are most important and need to be lifted out and highlighted, and what possible misconceptions and difficulties may be lurking.
- “Doing Frequent Short Visits with C, E, I, Q” means 15 to 20 minute visits that are not part of teacher evaluation. They are for the purpose of having substantive, productive conversations with teachers. C, E, I, Q is shorthand for evidence based conversations in which claims are backed up with specific evidence and comments about the impact of teacher choices on student learning.

- “Planning and Leading Faculty Meetings” refers to the opportunity within faculty meetings for learning for adults about something relevant to successful practice rather than using the time for conveying information or doing business.
- “Facilitating the Work of Instructional Coaches” refers to the principal’s role and daily behavior to be in explicit partnership with the instructional coach to build an adult culture of openness, use of data, constant improvement and continuous adult learning.
- “Chartering Leadership Team Meetings and Operating Agreements” means the principal has a building-based leadership team that functions as a group of allies to improve teaching and learning in every classroom. That means they divide up responsibilities, for example, for visiting common planning time meetings to ensure these teams get the support they need.
- The four foundational elements in the box at the bottom of the diagram:
- “Hiring” skills include the capacity to identify skillful teachers in observation of demonstration lessons and interviews. They also include probing candidates beliefs about malleable ability, a skill honed by Martin Haberman’s interview training. (<http://www.habermanfoundation.org>)
- “Induction” skills means knowing how to use school structures and personnel to accelerate the learning of beginning teachers.
- “Workplace structure” means having schedules and adult meeting structures that enable interdependent work.
- “Workplace Culture” means knowing how to build a working environment of non-defensive self-examination of practice in relation to student results, married to a sense of joint responsibility and urgency to improve student achievement.

## APPENDIX B

To focus the principals on getting into classes often and having productive conversations with teachers, principal supervisors may ask:

### **Before a Classroom Co-observation**

- How much time per week are you actually spending in classrooms?
- How do you schedule time in classrooms and how do you ensure it really happens? (for example, clear communication to other administrators or secretaries regarding interruptions so that it is considered as “sacred time”).
- “How often do you visit classes and how long do you stay?” [We want about 10 times a week for 15-20 minutes each. That’s do-able, and they can start to do it with a little push from the boss!]
- “What information do you use to frame the purpose of your visits?” (school-wide improvement goals from the whole school improvement plan, information from coaches, concerns about specific grade levels/departments, concerns about individual teachers, concerns about differentiation of instruction, analyzing and using student assessment data to modify instruction, etc.)
- “What is your purpose? What are the question(s) you are seeking to answer as a result of your visits?”

Framing the right questions provides the right focus for the visit with the principal.

In working initially with the principal, the principal supervisor may frame the key question(s) for the co-observations. Eventually, the principal will take the lead in forming the purpose/question and provide the rationale and background for such. These choices and dialogue provide a lens for the principal supervisor to analyze the depth that the principal is using to supervise teachers in their school.

Note the challenge here: this agenda calls for a principal supervisor who is good enough at these skills to coach the principal effectively. More on this later.

### **Possibilities During the Classroom Co-observation**

During the classroom visit(s), both the principal supervisor and the principal should gather information by taking notes\*, reviewing posted student work, evaluating the instructional rigor within the classroom, asking students at appropriate times, “*What are you working on,*” noting appropriateness and rigor of student tasks, differentiation of instruction, etc.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> \*As a practice principal supervisors may choose not to take notes while in classrooms. For the past six years in Attleboro, the superintendent has clearly communicated to teachers that she does not evaluate nor directly supervise teachers. Her purpose, as she conducts these co-visits with principals, is to provide direct feedback to principals so that they can provide feedback and support to teachers. Therefore, she elects not to take notes in classrooms so that any possible anxiety from the teacher is mitigated. Because of the frequency that she is in schools working with principals, teachers are comfortable with her presence in their classrooms. Teaching and learning in Attleboro classrooms continues without interruption despite visitors. New teachers are told by their more experienced colleagues that they can expect to see the superintendent in their classrooms often. Depending on the district culture, superintendents may want to consider this pre-work in the form of guidelines with principals and staff regarding their ongoing presence in classrooms. The superintendent must still, however, have the ability to evaluate the principal’s notes.

### **Possibilities Following the Classroom Co-observation**

There are three essential parts to the debrief between the principal supervisor and the principal following the classroom visit(s). The first part ensures common perceptions and common understanding between the principal supervisor and the principal about what happened that was important. The second part helps the principal get ready for the follow-up conversation with the teacher(s). The third part sets the parameters and expectations as to how the principal supervisor will follow up with the principal after the visit concludes.

Part 1: must include a discussion about what the Superintendent and the principal actually saw and heard in the classroom:

- What were the students doing?
- What was the teacher doing?
- Was the objective worthwhile?
- Did the students understand it?
- Was the task aligned with the objective?

Part 2: involves helping the principal get ready for the follow-up conversation with the teacher. The Superintendent may ask the principal:

- What approach will you take along the directive to non-directive continuum?
- What are the 2-3 things that you want to highlight in the conference?
- How will you frame the recommendations that you may make?
- What resources, if needed, will be provided to the teacher? (coaching support, peer assistance, observation opportunity in another classroom, readings, etc)
- What will you be looking for in your follow-up visit to the classroom(s)?

Part 3: involves how the principal supervisor will follow-up with the principal after the school visit has concluded. Just as the principal needs to ensure that s/he will conduct the follow-up with the teacher, the Superintendent must work toward that same level of assurance of follow-up from the principal. This can include a brief email from the principal or a phone call. This follow-up information then becomes the starting point for the next school visit between the principal supervisor and the principal.

## APPENDIX C

**Monthly Meetings of Principals**

Principals' meetings are a venue for continuous and collegial learning about instructional leadership. High-skill superintendents think about investing time in the planning of these meetings to enhance district-wide reform efforts. Consciously designing these meetings as professional learning experiences allows for consistency and focus promoting effective instruction across schools and across levels. Here are some things such superintendents do:

Before the principals' Meeting:

- Plan the agenda with a few representative principals to surface areas that have “bubbled up” as instructional/supervisory concerns and/or celebrations
- Ask principals to be prepared to discuss one area that is going well, one that worries them, one that has changed for the better (and how) and one that is still “stuck.”
- Provide brief readings that set the context for the leadership discussion

Ask individual principals to come prepared to discuss a current case, the issues you have with the teacher, what you've done so far, what results you've gotten, and what your questions are for the Team.” Protocols such as those in *The Power of Protocols* may be used to structure these round-table discussions

Possibilities During the Principals Meeting:

- View a video-tape together and identify the strengths and areas of concern for the lesson. “We'll compare notes and see how evidence-based we can be in support of our analysis of strengths and concerns.”
- Take this time to develop our own knowledge of and ability to spot the presence, absence, or missed opportunities for using teaching skill ‘X.’” [This requires a framework for teaching skills and a prioritizing of which of them are most worth studying this month together.] Attleboro developed a Lesson Protocol over several months and meetings that serves as the cornerstone of what effective instruction looks like – it is the basis for principal discussions with teachers and is based on *The Skillful Teacher*
- Discuss how Learning Walks are/were planned and used, what topics for the Walk were determined, and how the composition of those on the Learning Walk was derived (including central office staff and school staff).
- Discuss how school-specific study topics were decided upon as well as the vehicles for working on those topics such as study groups, book clubs, workshops, peer observation opportunities, etc.

Possibilities at the Conclusion of the Principals' Meeting:

- Agree on next steps that all members of the Leadership Team can will take
- Agree on next steps that some members of the Leadership Team with take
- Agree on the items needing further work for the next meeting agenda
- Agree on the work/next steps that will take place by principals and central office staff before the next meeting
- Determine the individual/small group follow-up meetings that the superintendent needs to convene before the next meeting

- Determine the “dip sticking” that the superintendent will do to check on the progress of next steps that have been agreed to

## APPENDIX D

In looking at CPT groups and professional learning communities, the principal supervisor may ask:

- “Have you provided for common planning time for those who teach the same content? Do they use it? What’s the schedule?” Are all the members meeting during the scheduled times?  
[This is the baseline: making sure there *are* CPT meetings.]
- “What is your assessment of the level of functioning of each of your CPT teams? What’s your evidence?” Is your assessment based on your own review of the CPT or information from others? How can you check your assumptions? [This is to get principals to visit CPT meetings and take responsibility for knowing how well they are functioning.]
- “How do you collect agendas, products and/or minutes of CPT meetings?”  
[This is to get principals to hold CPTs accountable.]
- “Let’s share the documentation we ask CPT teams to give us after each meeting. Why do you ask for that particular information?” [This is to allow principals to share and learn from one another.]
- “What are the areas you want to improve in the functioning of CPTs?” Are there CPTs which are working well? What makes them work well? What CPTs are struggling? Why are they struggling? Let’s visit together a CPT that is working well and one that needs improvement. [This is to get the principal thinking about intervention strategies where required. It is also to assess and coach the principal’s diagnostic skills about high-functioning CPTs.]
- “Rate your teams according to the developmental continuum in the Saphier article.”<sup>9</sup>  
[This is to give principals practice exploring the meaning of the levels of sophistication]
- Rate your teams according to the skills outlined in *The Skillful Leader II*.<sup>10</sup>
- “Come prepared to share the interventions you are attempting for a low-performing team, how it’s working, what input you’d like, and what you think you’ll do next.” [This is to build the principals into a support group and learning group with one another about how to move CPTs forward.]
- “How are data meetings run? How do your teachers use data about student learning?” (to group kids? to plan re-teaching? to do prevention or interventions? to do error analysis?)  
“Are you looking periodically at grade-level or course-team data with the teachers and formulating questions? If not you, who does?”  
[This is to get the principal to focus CPTs on using data well.]
- How do you help your teams learn how to do error analysis of student work?

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<sup>9</sup> See “Free Downloads” on the RBTeach.com website for “Levels of Sophistication of Common Planning Time (CPT) Activities for teachers who teach the same content.”

<sup>10</sup> Platt, Alexander D., Caroline E. Tripp, Robert G. Fraser, James R. Warnock, Rachel E. Curtis. *The Skillful Leader II: Confronting Conditions That Undermine Learning*. Acton: MA. Research for Better Teaching, 2009.

- “How do you deploy your instructional coaches and other members of your leadership team during common planning time for teachers?”  
[This is to get the principal to use other members of the Leadership Team to be allies in improving the functioning of CPTs.]
- “What happens in CPTs when interim assessments results come in?”  
[This is to focus the principal on what CPTs should do quickly with the results of interim assessments administered in common across a grade level or course.]

## APPENDIX E

On school visits, the principal supervisor may ask:

- “What have you said to the faculty and staff about the coach’s role in the school?” [This is to get the principal to frame the coach’s role clearly, if this has not already happened, and align the faculty’s expectations with the need to have the coach have access to *all* classrooms at any time and to play an active role in CPTs.]
- “How often do you meet with the coaches? Weekly? What are the agenda items that you discuss?” [This is to get the principal’s thinking about what the important foci for the coach are.]
- “How is the schedule for the work of the coaches determined? By the principal? By the coaches? By the teachers self-selecting work with the coaches? By a combination of all the above? How do you support the efforts of the coaches and follow-up on the work that they are doing in classrooms? [This is to get a check on the coach being dedicated to instructional improvement.]
- “Who have you and the coach selected to move toward hosting Collaborative Site/Best Practice Classrooms?”<sup>11</sup> [This is to focus the principal on the strategy of “building from strength,” that is, the coach developing relationships with strong teachers first, and using the planning and coaching of these people as a foundation for forming groups that do deep collaborative work together.]

At Principals Meetings, during discussion of the coaches’ work in schools, the principal supervisor may have round-table sharing and ask:

- “What steps have you and your coaches taken so far to advance the notion of Collaborative Site Classrooms?”
- “What steps have you and your coaches taken so far to advance the levels of performance of groups in CPT meetings?”

In addition to the above, the principal supervisor needs to assess how effective is the principal’s relationship with the coach, and how the coach is supervised and evaluated as well as what evidence needs to be gathered about the coach’s performance.

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid*

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Jon Saphier is the founder of Research for Better Teaching, a consulting firm that partners with districts all over the country for systemic school improvement work on Skillful Teaching, Skillful Leadership, and Skillful Data Use. He is also the Co-chair of the Working Group on Educator Excellence. This group, consisting of leading Mass. State Legislators, both teachers' unions (MEA and MFT), the Superintendents' Association, and a dozen other leading educational and business organizations has developed legislation for the professionalization of teaching. He can be reached at [Jonsaphier@comcast.net](mailto:Jonsaphier@comcast.net)

Pia Durkin is currently Superintendent of the New Bedford, MA public schools. She has served in senior leadership roles in Boston, MA, Providence, RI, and New York City and has worked with the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. In 2011, Attleboro was recognized as a Massachusetts school district whose systemic efforts are successfully narrowing the achievement gap for low-income students. Pia can be reached at [Pdurkin@newbedfordschools.org](mailto:Pdurkin@newbedfordschools.org)