

# Supervising Principals: How Superintendents Can Improve Teaching and Learning in the Classroom

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## The Missing Link for Scaling Up School Improvement

A powerful but underutilized resource for achieving and sustaining district-wide improvement of classroom teaching and learning is the *supervision of principals*. 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 of school-based leaders – principals – is a missing link in efforts to improve whole districts. There are many areas of performance important to the principals’ role; but what is systematically missing is *supervising and evaluating principals on how they improve classroom teaching and learning in their buildings*.



But who supervises the principals? In large districts a person of high rank, sometimes a Zone or Area Superintendent, sometimes a Regional or Community Superintendent, is typically responsible for 12 to 30 principals. In some districts, a designated central office administrator may be responsible for the supervision of principals. These key central office administrators may have been successful principals themselves, but that does not mean they are expert coaches of principals or able diagnosticians of another principal’s needs. Those of us focused on systemic reform need now to turn our attention to empowering these neglected, yet pivotal players, in the improvement of teaching: superintendents.<sup>2</sup>

High-expertise teaching is the most significant variable in student achievement (Sanders & Rivers, 1996; Babu & Mendro, 2003; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005). And the leadership of the principal is the key variable in making sure that high-expertise teaching grows and in determining whether or not the school-as-workplace becomes an engine for constantly improved teaching.

One of the most, if not *the* most, important decision that a superintendent makes is the recruitment and hiring of principals. But scaling up school improvement to result in overall district improvement requires that superintendents build capacity and support and empower *all* their principals to focus effectively on improving instruction. They therefore need to know in a

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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.

<sup>2</sup> For convenience we will use a single term, superintendent, to refer to whoever supervises principals in a given district.

very substantive way what successful principals *do* as instructional leaders, 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, superintendents need to know where and when principals should have an active presence and what they should do in those arenas of school life that have powerful leverage on improving teaching and learning in the classroom. We will focus on three such high-leverage arenas in this article and on what superintendents do to boost principal effectiveness there:

1) principals' classroom visits; 2) supervision of common planning time (CPT); and 3) partnership with instructional coaches. We'll roll out a hypothetical school visit of an hour to three hours, scheduled about every six weeks, in which the superintendent and principal work side-by-side co-observing classes and attending school-based meetings, especially CPT meetings, coaches' meetings, and feedback sessions to teachers.

We recommend the following steps to make this possible:

1. The superintendent focuses on principals as his/her most important leverage for change in the district.
2. The superintendent plans his/her schedule and structures time with principals *first*, keeping in mind that one of the best antidotes for a superintendent's tough day is getting out of the office and going to a school and visiting classrooms.
3. The superintendent schedules school visits and lets others know that these visits are very important and considered "sacred time" by the superintendent. Just as principals need to be in classrooms, superintendents need to be in schools!
4. The superintendent prioritizes how s/he will manage the set of school visits (new principals, underperforming principals, district and school-level data, etc.), remembering to validate high performers as well as to support those who are struggling.
5. The superintendent uses internal district resources as well as external resources to supplement his/her own efforts by coordinating others to help improve the instructional leadership of principals.
6. The superintendent keeps track of this other work so that clear messages and expectations are sent to principals without the confusion of too many voices.

## **What Superintendents Must Understand about the Principal's Role**

*To lead the work, you need to know the work.*

Before we begin analyzing the superintendent's school visit, we want to acknowledge the reality of life for superintendents in small districts and for zone superintendents in big districts: enormous 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 we are calling for is possible. Susan Marks did it as a "community superintendent" in Montgomery County, Maryland, in the early years of the millennium. Irwin Blumer did it as a superintendent in two districts in Massachusetts in the 1990s, one small and suburban and one large and partly urban. And Pia Durkin, co-author of this article, is doing it now in Attleboro, Massachusetts.

## Superintendent School Visits: What to Ask and What to Look For

When principals do productive short classroom visits of 15 to 20 minutes that are separate from formal teacher evaluation visits,<sup>3</sup> they can have a potent influence on improving teaching and learning. 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) have well-developed lenses for what good teaching and powerful student learning look and sound like, (2) have skills at gathering observational and other kinds of data, (3) make time to get into classes often enough, (4) pose the right questions framed by the purpose for the visit(s), (5) ensure that follow-up with the teacher after the visit is framed within a productive conversation that will improve practice, and (6) schedule a follow-up visit back to the classroom that allows the principal to see the fruits of the conversation in practice.

Superintendents help principals do this job well in several ways. First, they make crystal clear to principals what their expectations are for classroom presence and how to best collect data and give feedback. Second, they provide and participate themselves in long-term staff development for principals in the complex work of creating common images of what good teaching and looks and sounds like and the skills of observing for these items and collecting data on student performance.

The following questions and requests represent some of these expectations. They should be shared as part of the expectations of district professional culture about how superintendents and principals work together so that there are no surprises regarding how the principal should prepare for a visit and what will take place during and after school visits with principals. On an actual visit the superintendent wouldn't ask all of these questions, but rather the sub-set most relevant and appropriate for the developmental level of the principal.

To focus the principals on getting into classes often and having productive conversations with teachers, superintendents may ask certain questions. Framing the right questions provides the right focus for the visit with the principal.

### Questions Before the Classroom Visit(s)

- How much time per week do you actually spend 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 recommend about 10 visits a week for 15-20 minutes each. That's doable, and they can start to do it with a little push from the boss!)

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<sup>3</sup> The case is sometimes made that evaluators are always seen as judges 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.

- What is your purpose? What are the question(s) you are seeking to answer as a result of your visits? For example, what information do you use to frame the purpose of your visits (e.g., school-wide improvement goals and action steps 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.)?

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

#### Questions During the Classroom Visit(s)

During the classroom visit(s), both the superintendent 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 learning,” noting appropriateness and rigor of student tasks, differentiation of instruction, etc.

#### Questions Following the Classroom Visit(s)

There are three essential parts to the debrief between the superintendent and the principal following the classroom visit(s). The first part probes common perceptions and common understanding between the superintendent 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 superintendent 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?
- What was working in the classroom? What was not working?

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

- What are the 2-3 things that you want to highlight in the conference?
- How will you frame the recommendations that you are making?
- 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 superintendent follows up with the principal after the school visit. 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 with the principal. This can include a brief email to the principal or a phone call. This follow-up information then becomes the starting point for the next school visit between the superintendent and the principal.

In addition to classroom visits, the superintendent may review other instructional supervisory information with the principal. The superintendent may ask the principal to:

- Share classroom observation write-ups. (This helps identify if the information is evidence-based and focused on student learning.)
- Schedule a specific co-observation of a class together. (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” under Free Downloads on the RBT website, RBTeach.com.)
- Describe a current case of supervision and evaluation in which the principal is engaged with a teacher about whom s/he has concerns. What has been done so far? What’s next? What help is needed?
- Share a particular set of student work or student data to probe how the principal will use the information in conversations with a teacher(s).
- For elementary and middle school principals, respond quarterly to how the principal reviews individual student progress of each student with teachers. For high school principals, respond to course passing rates/failure rates quarterly.
- Provide a sample of the improvement agendas/plans for each of the teachers on “improvement plans.” (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. Some questions for eliciting this information are:
  - 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?)

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.



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

Now let’s take a second arena where superintendents can press and support principals to have a potent influence on teacher learning: team meetings at the school level. This section will focus on two types of instructional meetings: common planning time (CPT) for teachers who teach the

same content and coaches' meetings that take place between the principal and the coaches as well as between the coaches and the teachers.

In looking at CPT groups and professional learning communities, the superintendent 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 groups 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 team or on information from others? How can you check your assumptions? (This is to get the principal 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 the principal to hold CPT teams accountable.)
- What are the areas you want to improve in the functioning of CPT teams? Are there teams that are working well? What makes them work well? What teams are struggling? Why are they struggling? Let's visit together a CPT team 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 CPT teams.)
- Rate your teams according to the developmental continuum in "Content Teams and Error Analysis"  
[http://www.rbteach.com/rbteach2/downloads\\_control\\_panel.html?email=jonathon1%40aol.com&Submit=Submit](http://www.rbteach.com/rbteach2/downloads_control_panel.html?email=jonathon1%40aol.com&Submit=Submit)  
This is to give the principal practice exploring the meaning of the levels of sophistication.
- Rate your teams according to the skills outlined in Platt et al.'s *The Skillful Leader II* (2009) (pp. 77-165).
- 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 CPT teams on using data well.)
- How do you help your teams learn how to do error analysis of student work?
- 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 district team to be allies in improving the functioning of CPT teams.)
- What happens in CPT teams when interim assessment results come in? (This is to focus the principal on what CPT teams should do quickly with the results of common interim assessments administered across grade levels or courses.)



### **Coach-Principal Relationships: Regular Meetings between Principals and Coaches**

Elsewhere (Saphier & West, 2009) we 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 honest and non-defensive examination of teaching practice in relation to student results, and continuous improvement of teaching expertise. 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 1990s of New York City’s District 2. In Attleboro, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) stressed in their report, *Review of District Systems and 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.” Attleboro 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 “by maintaining the current model and staffing level of coaches, the district will be able to continue to improve curriculum, instruction, and student performance” (p. 39). Cognizant of this model, superintendents should thus make sure principals share a common vision of a coaching model and are acting to support it and implement the model skillfully.

In supporting principals to utilize coaches effectively, the superintendent needs to clarify expectations as to what s/he believes is the appropriate role of coaches in schools and the coach’s partnership relationship with the principal in strengthening adult professional culture.

On school visits, the superintendent 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 to align the faculty’s expectations with the need to give the coach access to *all* classrooms at any time and to play an active role in CPT teams.)
- How often do you meet with the coaches? Weekly? What are the agenda items that you discuss? (This is to get the principal 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 dedication of the coach’s time to instructional improvement.)
- Who have you and the coach selected to move toward hosting Collaborative Site/Best Practice Classrooms?<sup>4</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 superintendent 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?

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<sup>4</sup> See Saphier and West, 2009.

- 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 superintendent needs to assess how effective the principal's relationship with the coach is, 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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## Monthly Meetings of Principals

Principals' meetings are a venue for continuous and collegial learning about instructional leadership. Highly skilled 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 consistent discussion of the high-leverage tools that promote 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 as to 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 they have with the teacher, what they have done so far, what results they have gotten, and what their questions are for the team. Protocols such as those in McDonald et al.'s *The Power of Protocols* (2005) may be used to structure these round-table discussions.

### During the Principals' Meeting: Options

- View a video of a class 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 the group's knowledge of and ability to spot the presence, absence, or missed opportunities for using specific teaching skill skills. (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 serve as the cornerstone of what effective instruction looks like. It is the basis for principal discussions with teachers and is based on Saphier et al.'s *The Skillful Teacher* (2008).
- Discuss how Learning Walks are/were planned and used, what topics for the walk have been/were chosen, and how the list of those on the walk (which might include central office staff and school staff) is/was determined.
- 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.



- Share the documentation that they ask CPT teams to give them after each meeting. Why do they ask for that particular information? (This is to allow principals to share and learn from one another.)
- Share the interventions they are using to help a low-performing team, how the interventions are working, what input they would like, and what they think their next steps should be. (This is to build the principals into a support and learning group focused on how to move CPT teams forward.)

#### At the Conclusion of the Principals' Meeting

- Agree on next steps that all who are present can and will take.
- Agree on next steps that some members will take.
- Agree on the items needing further work for the next meeting agenda.
- Agree on the work/next steps that will be done 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 or that principals will have by themselves in clusters.
- Determine the “dipsticking” the superintendent will do to check on the progress of next steps that have been agreed to.

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#### **Superintendents' Willingness to Model Strength and Constant Learning**

The steps above that we have recommended that superintendents take during school visits place the superintendent in the role of *coach* to the principal. But many superintendents, though skilled in many areas, have not attained high expertise in such areas as classroom observation. That fact, however, cannot prevent them from stepping up to this crucial coaching and supervision role with principals. If not them, then who will? What this will take from the superintendent is the humility and strength to be relentless in pushing for constant learning of one's principals while acknowledging being a learner oneself.

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 the 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.

Superintendents are frequently spending their time dealing with crises and putting out brushfires. 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 committee 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 the superintendent's time, s/he has 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 reset and mutual understanding about the most important part of the superintendent's job needs to be discussed, recalibrated, and acknowledged. The most important work of the superintendent is to promote the instructional leadership capacity of his/her principals. We have to figure out how to change the message to superintendents and the forces that surround them that serve as distracters from this important work, to make instructional leadership a priority of superintendents, and to build their capacity to do so effectively. When we link levels of authority and levels of influence with each other up and down the chain of command and focus everyone on improving classroom instruction, we will start to realize the promise of education in this democracy: a fair chance at a good life.

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