



# INFORMATION CAPSULE

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### HOW PRINCIPALS ARE SUPERVISED IN SCHOOL DISTRICTS ACROSS THE U.S.

#### At a Glance

This report summarizes the structures and practices related to the principal supervisor position in several U.S. school districts. Topics reviewed include selection of school principal supervisors, how principal supervisors fit into school districts' organizational structure, principal supervisor roles and responsibilities, staff support provided to principal supervisors, professional development offered to principal supervisors, and procedures used to evaluate principal supervisors. Finally, the Council of the Great City Schools' recommendations for building more effective principal support and supervision systems are summarized.

Principal supervisors are individuals responsible for overseeing, supporting, and evaluating school leaders. School districts across the country have begun to revise their principal supervisory systems to better support, monitor, and assess principal performance. However, there appears to be little consistency regarding principal supervisor positions – researchers have found that job titles and definitions, hiring criteria, and training vary widely across school districts (Superville, 2015; Canole & Richardson, 2014; The Wallace Foundation, 2014; Casserly et al., 2013; Corcoran et al., 2013).

In an effort to standardize the qualifications and job duties of principal supervisors, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) released a draft of national standards, outlining what principals supervisors should know and be able to do (Canole & Richardson, 2014). The *Model Principal Supervisor Instructional (Draft) Standards* are:

1. Principal supervisors dedicate their time to helping principals grow as instructional leaders.
2. Principal supervisors engage in teaching practices in their one-on-one work with principals to help principals grow as instructional leaders.
3. Principal supervisors engage in teaching practices while leading principal communities of practice (e.g., professional learning communities and networks) to help principals grow as instructional leaders.
4. Principal supervisors systematically use multiple forms of evidence of each principal's capacity for instructional leadership to differentiate or tailor their approach to working with principals to helping principals grow as instructional leaders.
5. Principal supervisors engage principals in the formal district principal evaluation process in ways that help principals grow as instructional leaders.

6. Principal supervisors selectively and strategically participate in other central office work processes to maximize the extent to which they and principals focus on principals' growth as instructional leaders.
7. Principal supervisors engage in their own development and continuous improvement as a leader to help principals grow as instructional leaders.

A full description of the CCSSO principal supervisor draft standards and the functions related to each of the seven standards is available at [https://www.naesp.org/sites/default/files/Principal Supervisor Instructional Standards.pdf](https://www.naesp.org/sites/default/files/Principal_Supervisor_Instructional_Standards.pdf).

The Wallace Foundation has been working with school districts across the U.S. for over a decade in an effort to develop more effective ways to train, hire, support, and evaluate principals and principal supervisors. In June 2014, The Wallace Foundation announced grants totaling \$30 million over five years to strengthen principal supervision in 14 urban school districts. Launched in February 2015, the *Principal Supervision Initiative* provides funds that allow districts to change the focus of principal supervisors from compliance to support, reduce the number of principals that supervisors oversee, and redesign central offices to better support principal supervisors. The Wallace Foundation has awarded grants as follows:

- School districts in Broward County (FL), Cleveland (OH), DeKalb County (GA), Des Moines (IA), Long Beach (CA), and Minneapolis (MN) were awarded grants averaging \$3 million each over four years to underwrite training and support for principal supervisors.
- School districts in Tulsa (OK) and Washington, D.C. – which have already taken steps to strengthen the principal supervisor position – were awarded grants of \$800,000 and \$700,000, respectively, to develop succession plans and create new support positions to ease principal supervisors' workloads.
- Additional funding totaling \$4 million was provided to six districts that are participating in The Wallace Foundation's *Principal Pipeline Initiative*, a \$75 million effort implemented in 2011 to develop training and support for principals. Districts in Charlotte-Mecklenburg (NC), Denver (CO), Gwinnett County (GA), Hillsborough County (FL), New York City, and Prince George's County (MD) received grants ranging from \$430,000 to \$1 million to provide additional support to their principals.
- Funding was also provided to the following organizations:
  - Council of Chief State School Officers to lead the process of developing voluntary standards for principal supervisors;
  - University of Washington to develop a valid and reliable 360-degree evaluation tool for principal supervisors;
  - New York City Leadership Academy to organize a professional learning community for participating school districts;
  - The Council of the Great City Schools to help districts plan initiative work;

- Several organizations – Bank Street College, New Leaders, and the American Association of School Administrators with assistance from Learning Forward – to help participating districts; and
- Discovery Education to provide a principal assessment tool to school districts (The Wallace Foundation, 2014).

### **Cross-District Observations Regarding the Principal Supervisor Position**

The Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS) conducted a study using grant funds from The Wallace Foundation. The Council investigated the ways principal supervisors are selected, supported, and evaluated in school districts across the country. The study was conducted in two parts: (1) a survey administered to principal supervisors at the CGCS' 67 member urban public school districts, with responses received from 136 principal supervisors in 41 districts, for a response rate of close to 60%; and (2) site visits to the six school districts participating in the Wallace Foundation's *Principal Pipeline Initiative* (Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, Denver Public Schools, Gwinnett County Public Schools in Georgia, Hillsborough County Public Schools in Florida, the New York City Department of Education, and Prince George's County Public Schools in Maryland). All data were collected during the 2012-2013 school year. The majority of research findings cited in this report are based on the CGCS study (Casserly et al., 2013; Corcoran et al., 2013).

- **Selection of principal supervisors.** A large majority of principal supervisors in the CGCS study reported that they had formerly held the positions of principal and teacher. According to the CGCS survey, 97% of principal supervisors said they had at least two years of experience as a principal and 95% said they had over two years of experience as a teacher. Forty-two percent of respondents reported that they had over two years of experience as a principal coach or mentor (Corcoran et al., 2013).

CGCS researchers found that school districts usually selected principal supervisors based on district staffs' perceptions of their leadership skills, such as the ability to build relationships and collaborate effectively with both peers and central office staff. Site visit interviews with principals and other school site staff revealed a widespread perception of uneven quality and expertise of principal supervisors within school districts. Interviewees reported that some principal supervisors brought strong instructional backgrounds and skills with them to the position. However, others were believed to lack the background and expertise needed to support all of the schools they supervised (for example, principal supervisors with experience at the high school level who were assigned to elementary schools, and principal supervisors who were not prepared to oversee struggling schools or schools with large English language learner populations) (Corcoran et al., 2013).

- **Organizational structures.** According to the CGCS' survey of its member urban school districts, the average number of principals supervised by each principal supervisor was 24, with the number of principals supervised ranging from three to 100. Researchers have not found one optimal number of principals each principal supervisor should oversee, but in general, 10 principals is often cited as the recommended assignment. Although many experts believe more personalized supervision of principals will lead to

better student and school outcomes, such a link has not yet been demonstrated (Superville, 2015; Gill, 2013).

Examples of the number of principals overseen by principal supervisors include:

- Charlotte-Mecklenburg – Zone superintendents supervised anywhere from 16 to almost 40 schools each.
- Denver – Instructional superintendents/executive directors oversaw eight or nine principals. In the city's lowest-performing schools that were undergoing major improvement efforts, the ratio of supervisor to principal was one-to-four. The decision to decrease the number of schools that principal supervisors oversee to no more than 10 led to the creation of a new position, deputy instructional superintendent/executive director.
- Duval County (Jacksonville, FL) – In 2014, the district cut the supervisor-to-principal ratio to 1-to-20, from 1-to-40, and plans to reduce it even further.
- Gwinnett County – Area superintendents oversaw about 25 schools each.
- Hillsborough County – Area leadership directors oversaw about 30 schools each.
- New York City – The New York City Department of Education had a system that separated the functions of principal supervision (handled by superintendents) and support (handled by networks). Superintendents supervised between 20 and 67 schools each. In order to obtain resources and individualized support, principals self-selected into one of 56 networks. Each network supported 25-35 schools. Networks, in turn, were grouped into five clusters of about 11 networks each.
- Omaha – Executive directors oversaw between 21 and 26 principals.
- Prince George's County – Instructional directors supervised no more than 15 principals each (Superville, 2015; Corcoran et al., 2013).

The CGCS site visits determined that schools were grouped and assigned to principal supervisors based on either geographic location or grade level:

- Charlotte-Mecklenburg – Zone superintendents oversaw six geographically determined areas.
- Denver – Schools were grouped and assigned to one of 13 instructional superintendents by grade level (elementary, middle, or high school). Given the large number of elementary schools, these schools were then grouped geographically and by school type. Turnaround schools were grouped together into two separate geographic clusters.
- Gwinnett County – Schools were grouped into five geographic areas.
- Hillsborough County – Schools were grouped into eight geographic areas.
- New York City – Community superintendents supervised the principals of elementary and middle schools in each school district. There were 32 community superintendents, one for each community school district. Ten high school superintendents supervised the principals of high schools and

secondary schools in their districts. Fifty-six network leaders provided principals with support and resources. Principals self-selected into networks.

- Prince George's County – Schools were grouped and assigned to one of 14 instructional directors by grade level, either K-8 or high school (New York City Department of Education, 2015a; New York City Department of Education, 2015b; Corcoran et al., 2013).

Superville (2015) stated, "Grouping supervisors by grade levels fosters deeper collaboration, learning, and problem-solving among principals in similar environments who face similar challenges. It also makes it easier to coordinate meaningful professional development."

Reporting structures and the organizational placement of principal supervisors varied from district to district. Principal supervisors' responses to the CGCS survey indicated:

- 20% reported directly to the school district's superintendent;
- 15% reported to the deputy superintendent;
- 13% reported to the chief academic officer;
- 12% reported to a deputy superintendent of instruction;
- 12% reported to the chief of schools;
- 8% reported to an associate superintendent;
- 6% reported to an assistant superintendent;
- 5% reported to the chief operations officer;
- 5% reported to a deputy for operations; and
- 4% reported to "other" (Casserly et al., 2013).

Previous CGCS research suggests that organizational structure may not be a determining factor in improving school district performance. Corcoran and colleagues (2013) concluded, "Regardless of the specific structure, what appears most important in ensuring that principal supervisors have access to the resources they need to function effectively are *collaboration* and clear lines of communication with various central office divisions."

- **Principal supervisor roles and responsibilities.** According to responses received to the CGCS survey, the top five tasks principal supervisors reported performing were visiting schools (93%), convening principals to discuss instructional issues (81%), evaluating principals (74%), coaching principals (73%), and conducting professional development with principals (48%) (Casserly et al., 2013; Corcoran et al., 2013).

To provide principals with direct support, principal supervisors reported being involved in the following top five activities: conversing with principals about student performance data (89%), visiting classrooms with principals (78%), conversing with principals about their performance (76%), conversing with principals about teacher performance (75%), and assisting principals in responding to issues raised by parents or community members (46%) (Casserly et al., 2013; Corcoran et al., 2013).

The CGCS surveys and site visit interviews revealed that many principal supervisors felt they were under enormous time constraints because of the competing demands between their instructional and operational responsibilities. Principal supervisors were required to visit schools regularly, provide instructional leadership, and be responsive to principal needs and issues. At the same time, they were expected to participate in district planning and policy meetings and handle responsibilities related to school administration and operations. Eighty percent of CGCS survey respondents reported that their job as principal supervisor required them to address district administrative issues and 62% said they were required to address district compliance issues (Corcoran et al., 2013).

Some districts have made an effort to rectify this issue. For example, Denver Public Schools limited district-level meetings to Mondays and Fridays so principal supervisors could spend most of their time visiting schools and staying in touch with principals. In Duval County Public Schools in Jacksonville, FL, no district-wide meetings were scheduled before 2 p.m. to ensure that principal supervisors were able to spend 80% of their time in schools (Superville, 2015; Gill, 2013).

- **Staff support provided to principal supervisors.** One of the critical differences in how districts structure their principal supervisory systems is the level of staff support provided to principal supervisors. The CGCS survey found that principal supervisors reported that on average their offices were staffed with approximately two clerical personnel, one principal coach/mentor, and one exceptional student education specialist (Casserly et al., 2013).

Gill (2013) reported that in Denver Public Schools, every principal supervisor had a team of 10 partners in key departments of the central office - such as human resources, finance and budget, exceptional student education, and curriculum and instruction - who directed resources and support to the group of schools overseen by the principal supervisor. CGCS site visits found that some districts, such as Charlotte-Mecklenburg and New York City, expected principals' needs to be handled at the regional level. In these districts, offices were staffed with a relatively large number of instructional and operational specialists who were available to principals as issues arose. In other districts, such as Gwinnett County, the role of the principal supervisor was to connect principals to central office resources. These principal supervisors were therefore not provided with either the staff or the budget to directly handle principals' issues (Corcoran et al., 2013).

- **Principal coaches.** Principal supervisors were only one layer of support provided to principals. The CGCS researchers found that all of the *Principal Pipeline Initiative* school districts provided their principals with coaches. Most districts used experienced, sitting principals and/or retired principals as coaches. Principal coaches were not involved in the principal evaluation process and were responsible only for providing principals with support. Coaches were typically assigned only to novice principals or to principals who were struggling. Few districts had created a coaching corps to support principals throughout their careers. In New York City, for example, all first year principals received a coach funded by the district. Principals in their second year and beyond had the option of retaining these coaches by paying for them out of their own school budgets. Charlotte-

Mecklenburg Schools, however, made coaches available to principals during their first five years (Corcoran et al., 2013).

- **Professional development and support offered to principal supervisors.** Over 95% of principal supervisors who responded to the CGCS survey reported receiving professional development from their school districts. Half of respondents reported that they also received professional development from professional organizations, 39% from contractors or publishers, and 26% from their state or state's regional service center (Casserly et al, 2013).

Principal supervisors reported that they received professional development in the following areas to improve principal effectiveness and student achievement:

- Reviewing school and student performance data (79%);
- Observing classrooms with a focus on student learning and student work (71%);
- Understanding the shift in reading and writing expectations and instruction due to new academic standards (69%);
- Using student performance data to improve classroom instruction (67%);
- Understanding the shift in mathematics expectations and instruction due to the new standards (64%); and
- Conducting principal evaluations (41%) (Casserly et al., 2013).

The CGCS researchers concluded that professional development efforts that provided the most meaningful support to principal supervisors and principals were:

- Focused on the instructional needs and goals of principal supervisors and principals;
- Sustained over time;
- Differentiated according to the skills and experience of personnel and the unique needs of their schools; and
- Evaluated on their effectiveness in supporting principal supervisors (Corcoran et al., 2013).

The CGCS site visits revealed, however, that much of the professional development provided to principal supervisors was ad hoc in nature. According to the CGCS researchers, professional development “is generally not part of a systematic, sustained program of professional learning and is not always focused enough on expanding principal supervisors’ knowledge of curriculum and instruction” (Corcoran et al., 2013).

The CGCS’ analysis of survey data found that principal supervisors who said they received professional development on observing classrooms with a focus on student work and student learning were more likely to engage in tasks involving visiting schools, coaching principals, convening principals to discuss instructional issues, and evaluating principals (Casserly et al., 2013).

The results of the CGCS survey indicated that the top six types of additional support principal supervisors said they needed to improve principal effectiveness and student

achievement were:

- More coaching time and strategies for providing support to principals (18%);
  - Less meetings/more time (to work with principals, visit schools, and plan) (15%);
  - Professional development (i.e., leadership training, clarity on role, time management) (14%);
  - Support with Common Core State Standards (10%);
  - Training on effective teaching strategies and curriculum development (6%); and
  - Evaluation tools and observation strategies (6%) (Casserly et al., 2013).
- **Procedures used to evaluate principal supervisors.** As school districts across the country are implementing evaluation systems to hold teachers and principals responsible for the achievement of students, they are also moving in the direction of more rigorous evaluations for principal supervisors. However, evaluations of principal supervisors are generally not as well developed as evaluations for principals and teachers.

Based on site visits to *Principal Pipeline Initiative* school districts, the CGCS found:

- Charlotte-Mecklenburg – Zone superintendents were evaluated using an instrument that included multiple student achievement measures, such as graduation rates, growth and proficiency on state tests, student attendance, and suspension rates. These measures were based on each school’s performance goals and aligned with the district’s strategic plan.
- Denver – Evaluations of instructional superintendents/executive directors were conducted through the district’s performance management system and used an individual goal-setting process based partly on the progress of schools under their supervision.
- Gwinnett County – Area superintendents were evaluated using the same weighted school assessments that were used to evaluate principals. Specifically, area superintendents were evaluated on the progress of their five lowest-performing schools, along with one to three additional schools selected in collaboration with the associate superintendent. The results of the weighted school assessment were aggregated to produce an overall measure of progress in specific achievement categories.
- Hillsborough County – Area leadership directors were assessed on their progress toward meeting instructional and operational goals they set themselves, as well as on their ability to work with principals and perform principal evaluations. More formal evaluation procedures were under development at the time of the CGCS site visit.
- New York City – At the time of the site visit, superintendents were not directly assessed on measures of school performance. On the other hand, network



leaders were evaluated on both qualitative and quantitative measures of effectiveness, including the performance of the schools they supported. Principal surveys were also a small part of the evaluation process. Once a final score was calculated, networks were then ranked based on effectiveness, with the expectation that the lowest-scoring networks would be disbanded.

- Prince George's County – Instructional leaders were evaluated on a framework consisting of five domains – principal management, teacher effectiveness, school improvement, professional development, and systems operations. Each domain included approximately eight indicators with performance descriptors at the “developing,” “proficient,” and “distinguished” levels for each (Corcoran et al., 2013).

### **Recommendations for Building Effective Principal Supervisory Systems**

Studies indicate that districts have taken very different approaches to the principal supervisor position. The CGCS stated, “It is impossible to identify with certainty which approaches are most effective, as there are currently no available data linking specific features of principal supervisory systems to student achievement gains” (Corcoran et al., 2013). An independent \$2.5 million evaluation that will help determine whether and how strengthening the role of principal supervisors leads to more effective principals will be undertaken as part of The Wallace Foundation's *Principal Supervisor Initiative*, which began in 2015 and is scheduled to run for five years (The Wallace Foundation, 2014).

Based on the CGCS' site visits to the six *Principal Pipeline Initiative* school districts, the CGCS' survey of its member urban public school districts, and the CGCS' experience working with large school districts across the country, the Council's researchers developed nine recommendations for building more effective principal support and supervision systems:

1. Define and clearly communicate throughout the organization the role and required competencies of principal supervisors.
2. Narrow principal supervisor responsibilities and span of control (the number of principals overseen by each principal supervisor).
3. Strategically select and deploy principal supervisors, matching skills and expertise to the needs of schools.
4. Provide principal supervisors with the professional development and training they need to assume new instructional leadership roles.
5. Establish information-sharing policies or procedures to ensure clear lines of communication and collaboration between principal supervisors and central office staff.
6. Provide early and sustained support to new principals in the form of coaches.
7. Hold principal supervisors accountable for the progress of schools, and ensure alignment in the processes and measures used to assess teacher, principal, and principal supervisor performance.
8. Provide clear, timely, and actionable evaluation data to principals, ensuring that principal supervisors are able to explain performance measures and the process by which principal performance is assessed.

9. Commit district resources and engage external partners in the process of developing future school and district leaders (Corcoran et al., 2013).

A full description of each recommendation is available at [www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/district-policy-and-practice/Documents/Rethinking-Leadership-The-Changing-Role-of-Principal-Supervisors.pdf](http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/district-policy-and-practice/Documents/Rethinking-Leadership-The-Changing-Role-of-Principal-Supervisors.pdf).

### Summary

This report summarized the findings of the Council of the Great City Schools' study investigating the ways principal supervisors are selected, supported, and evaluated in school districts across the county. Cross-district observations regarding the principal supervisor position indicated:

- School districts usually selected principal supervisors based on a broad assessment of their effectiveness as school leaders.
- The average number of principals supervised by each principal supervisor was 24, with the number of principals supervised ranging from three to 100.
- Schools were grouped and assigned to principal supervisors based on either geographic location or grade level.
- The top tasks principal supervisors reported performing were visiting schools, convening principals to discuss instructional issues, evaluating principals, coaching principals, and conducting professional development with principals.
- Principal supervisors reported feeling under enormous time constraints because of competing demands between their instructional and operational responsibilities.
- School districts varied on the number of staff they provided to principal supervisors. Some districts expected issues to be handled at a more local, or regional, level, while others expected central office staff to handle any difficulties. On average, principal supervisors reported that their offices were staffed with approximately two clerical personnel, one principal coach/mentor, and one exceptional student education specialist.
- School districts employed principal coaches as an extra layer of support for their new and struggling principals. Few districts, however, created a coaching corps to support principals throughout their careers.
- Although the vast majority of principal supervisors reported receiving professional development, much of the professional development was found to be ad hoc in nature and not sufficient to improve principal effectiveness and student achievement.
- School districts are moving toward more rigorous evaluations for principal supervisors, but their evaluations are generally not yet as well developed as those used for principals and teachers.

This Information Capsule also summarized the Council of the Great City Schools' recommendations for building more effective principal support and supervision systems.

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