**SUPERINTENDENT AS INSTRUCTIONAL LEADER**

**How Superintendents Improve Teaching and Learning in the Classroom**

**Through Supervision of Principals (2011)**

*The Missing Link for Scaling Up the Improvement of Classroom Teaching and Learning*

*Jon Saphier*

Many change agents agree that putting a good principal in every school is the key to improving classroom instruction.[[1]](#footnote-1) 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 has been missing in actin 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[[2]](#footnote-2) have found that this supervision is a missing link in efforts to improve whole districts.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Almost no freshly minted principal can be good enough in as many years 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.

The key player among these forces is the central office administrator who supervises and evaluates the principals. These key central office administrators may have been successful principals themselves, but that does not mean they are great coaches of principals or able diagnosticians of another principal’s needs. Those of us focused on systemic reform need to turn our attention ad accumulated learning to empowering these neglected yet pivotal players in improving our schools – Superintendents.

Scaling up school improvement requires that Superintendents be able to help all their principals focus effectively on improving instruction. They therefore need to know in a very substantive way what successful instructional leaders do, be articulate about that, observe it in action, and coach for it. Put more plainly, Superintendents need to know where principals should show up and what they should do in twelve 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 superintendents who support them should pick two or three of these places to focus.

**Twelve Arenas**

**Where Principals Influence the Quality of Teaching and Learning in Classrooms**

**Or**

***“Where to Show Up and What to Do”***

(1) Chartering

Leadership Team Meetings

&

Operating Agreements

FOUNDATIONAL ELEMENTS

A) HIRING B) INDUCTION C) WORKPLACE STRUCTURE D) WORKPLACE CULTURE

(3) Having

Student-by-Student Accountability Meetings

(4) Planning and Implementing Building-Based

Professional Development

(2) Ensuring High-Functioning Teams that Share Content

(PLCs & CPT)

(12) Facilitating

the Work of

Instructional Coaches

(11) Planning & Leading

Faculty Meetings

**HOW**

**LEADERS IMPROVE TEACHING**

**AND**

**LEARNING**

(5) Arranging

Public Teaching &

Peer Observation

(8) Doing

Formal Teacher Evaluation Observations & Write-ups

(9) Conducting

Content-Focused Planning Conferences

(10) Doing

Frequent, Short Visits & Conversations with C-E-I-Q

(7) Doing

Walkthroughs

&

Learning Walks

(6) Supporting

Study Groups

Building-based

Professional Development Planning & Implementation

**12 Arenas of Principal Influence**

1. ***Ensuring High Functioning Meetings of Teams 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.
2. ***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.
3. ***Planning and Implementing Building-based Professional Development*** means using data (like that which might be gathered by walkthroughs) to pick targets for joint study across the building.
4. ***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.
5. ***Supporting Study Groups*** means providing time and space and above all, encouragement, for teachers who wish to deepen their knowledge together.
6. ***Doing Walkthroughs and Learning Walks*** means following a protocol for school-based personnel in groups to visit classrooms. 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.
7. ***Doing Formal Teacher Evaluation Observations and Write-Ups*** is a vehicle for feedback to teachers and quality conversations. Given their infrequency, however, and their tendency to invite artificial behavior, hey cannot carry the load on their own for improving teaching and learning.
8. ***Conducting Content-Focused Planning 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 relationship of ideas within the content, prior knowledge students need, which ideas are most important and need to be lifted out and highlighted, and what possible misconceptions and difficulties students may present.
9. ***Doing Frequent Short Visits and Conversations with C, E, I, Q*** means 15 to 20 minute visits that are not part of teacher evaluation for the purpose of having substantive, productive conversations with teachers, CEIQ 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.
10. ***Planning and Leading Faculty Meetings*** refers to the opportunity in faculty meetings for adults to learn some-thing relevant to successful practice rather than using the time for conveying information or doing business.
11. ***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.
12. ***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 they get the support they need.

Four foundational elements (in the box at the bottom):

1. ***Hiring***: identify skillful teachers in observation of demonstration lessons and interviews
2. ***Induction***: use school structures and personnel to accelerate learning of beginning teachers
3. ***Workplace Structure***: schedules and adult meeting structures that enable interdependent work
4. ***Workplace Culture***: 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

**What Superintendents Must Understand about the Principal’s Role**

It is not just *that* the principal shows up in these 12 places (though that would be a good start) but how *skillfully the principal acts* in each. When Superintendents have this knowledge, they can use their two most powerful venues for developing principals’ skills: 1) scheduled school visits every six weeks, and 2) monthly principals meetings.

Before I go into these two venues for growing and supervising principals, I want to acknowledge the reality of life for superintendents in small districts and zone superintendents in big districts: crushing responsibilities and constant interruptions, political constraints, not to mention the culture in most districts of leaving principals aloe 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 and Irwin Blumer did it as a superintendent in two Massachusetts districts, one small and suburban and one large and partly urban.

Only three of these “places to show up” will be discussed in detail in this article because of considerations of space, and also because they are particularly important places to focus:

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.

**1) Short Classroom Visits**

1. **Superintendents’ School Visits: What to ask and what to look for re. Principals’ Classroom Visits**

Short classroom visits of 15 to 20 minutes that are separate from formal teacher evaluation[[4]](#footnote-4) can be potent vehicles for improving teaching and learning, and also for strengthening organizational culture if the principal has a productive conversation with the teacher afterwards. This requires that the principal:

1. Get into classes often enough
2. Have some well-developed lenses for what good teaching looks and sounds like
3. Have skills at gathering observational and other minds of data; and,
4. Know how to have productive conversations with the teacher afterward.

Superintendents help principals do this job well in several ways. First, they make crystal clear to principals what their expectations are for their behavior. The following questions and requests represent expectations. These expectations should be shared with principals in advance of a visit. On an actual visit one wouldn’t ask ALL of these questions, but rather the sub-set most relevant and appropriate for the developmental level of the principal.

**REQUESTS**

**To make for assessing and coaching principals on observation and feedback skills**

1. “Show me some classroom observation write-ups.”

*This is to see if they are evidence-based and focused on student learning.*

1. “Let’s do a 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” on the free downloads part of the RBT website at RBTeach.com*

**QUESTIONS**

**For getting the principal into class often and having productive conversations with teachers**

1. “How often do you visit classes and how long do you stay?”

*We want about 10 times a week or 15-20 minutes each. That’s do-able, and they can start to do it with a little push from the boss!*

1. “What is your purpose?”

*Many valid purposes could be mentioned A main one is to get data on how well the student learning is proceeding during that visit, and to set up a short but productive conversation with the teacher afterward.*

1. “How do you get ready for your conversation with the teacher afterward?”

*What we’re looking for here is a productive experience for the teacher where evidence from the class leads to credible validation but also to thoughtful questions to improve practice. Thus, we want the principal to now how to collect useful evidence, and to take time to analyze his/her notes, select the most salient data to talk about, and have the conversation with the teacher soon afterwards.*

1. “How do you pick the teachers you visit?”

*There should be a variety, not just teacher of concern. The reason is that a “visit” fro, the principal should not be construed as “You’re in trouble.” It is an opportunity for every teacher in the school to have a reflective dialog with an informed observer.*

1. “Are there teachers you’re worried about?
2. “Are there teachers who deserve special commendation and a wider role?”
3. How do you ensure you can keep a schedule that gets you to classes often enough?

*There are many time-management strategies to use, e.g., having one’s secretary block in certain class periods months in advance and fill the teachers’ names during the current week.*

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**QUESTIONS**

**For assessing and coaching principals on learning walkthroughs that get useful data for the school and involve multiple teachers in the process**

1. “Do you do walkthroughs?” “Why?”
2. “Who goes on them?”
3. “What makes them successful?”
4. “What do you look for?”
5. “How do you use the data?”

*The agenda is to get below superficiality with walkthroughs to meaningful data and follow-up action.*

**QUESTIONS**

**For coaching the principal on how to diagnose and improve individual teacher’s teaching, and to make sure principals are taking on teaching that is problematic**

1. “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?”
2. “What is the improvement agenda for each of your teachers? Show me some.”

*These may be self-set by the teachers themselves through goal setting or set by the principal in cases of unsatisfactory teaching.*

1. “Do you review individual student progress of each student with each teacher quarterly?”

*For elementary and middle school principals.*

1. “What support resources do you use with teachers to help them improve teaching and learning?”
2. **Principals’ Meetings – what activities to do re. Principals’ Classroom Visits & Supervision**

Principals’ meetings are a venue for continuous and collegial learning about instructional leadership. High-skill superintendents think about these meetings and consciously design them as professional learning experiences. Here are some things such superintendents do:

1. Send information in advance to principals from the Superintendent saying, in effect:
   1. Let’s do some round table reviews of supervisory cases we’re working on. Please 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 us.”
2. Protocols such as those in The Power of Protocols may be used to structure these round-table discussions.
   1. “Let’s view a video-clip 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.”
   2. “Let’s take this time to develop or 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.*

* 1. “Let’s discuss how Learning Walkthrough data was used to pick a school-specific topic to work on. What was the vehicle for working on it: study groups? Workshops? Peer observation?”

**2) Ensuring High-Functioning Meetings of Teams that Share Content (CPT)**

Now let’s take a second arena where superintendents can press and support principals to have a potent influence on teacher learning: Common Planning Time (CPT) for teachers who teach the same content. At elementary schools this is almost always the grade level meeting. But in middle schools it would be the three 7th grade teachers who teach 7th grade social studies, or the four 8th grade math teachers, etc. In high school it is not the math department; it is the three math teachers who teach 10th grade geometry, etc.[[5]](#footnote-5)

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 levels of sophistication one would see in CPTs.) Particularly important are 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 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 invent a new approach for those who don’t get it yet. That creative act and the interchange and sharing among us to do that invention will improve all our teaching, and certainly will improve our students’ learning as a result. 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. Superintendents have to press and to coach principals in how to do so!

**QUESTIONS TO ASK & REQUESTS TO MAKE**

**On a school visit to improve CPTs**

1. “Have you provided for common planning time for those who teach the same content? Do they use it? What’s the schedule?”

*This is the baseline: making sure there are CPT meetings.*

1. “Tell me the level of functioning of each of our CPT teams. What’s your evidence?”

*This is to get principals to visit CPTs and take responsibility for knowing how they’re functioning.*

1. “Show me the products/minutes of CPT meetings.”

*This is to get principals to hold CPTs accountable.*

1. “What do you do to improve functioning of low-performing teams?”

*This is to get the principal thinking about intervention strategies where required.*

1. “Let’s visit a common planning time meeting.”

*This is to assess and coach the principal’s diagnostic skills about high functioning CPTs.*

1. “Show me how 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.*

1. “How do you deploy your instructional coaches and other members of your leadership team during CPT 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.*

1. “How do you help your teams learn how to do error analysis?”

*This is to focus the principal on one of the most powerful activities a CPT can do.*

1. “What happens in CPTs when interim assessment 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.*

1. **Superintendents’ School Visits: What to ask and what to look for re. High-Functioning CPTs**
2. **Principals Meetings – What Activities to Do re. High-Functioning CPTs**

Send information in advance to principals from the Superintendent saying, in effect:

1. “Let’s invite a teacher to come with student work and do an error analysis session with her ourselves.”

*This is to get the principals in at the “dirt-under-the-fingernail level” with knowing what error analysis really entails.*

1. “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.*

1. “Rate your teams according to the developmental continuum in the Saphier article.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

*This is to give principals practice exploring the meaning of the levels of sophistication*.

1. “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.*

1. **Facilitating the Work of Coaches/Instructional Specialists: Coach-Principal Relationships**
2. **Superintendents on a School Visit – what to ask and what to look for re. Coaches**

Elsewhere Lucy West and I have made the case that an instructional coach working in a crafted partnership with the principal can be a game changer in school improvement.[[7]](#footnote-7) 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. Cognizant of this model, superintendents make sure principals understand the model and are acting to support it and implement it skillfully. Here are examples of what they do.

**QUESTIONS**

**To help principals understand and support an effective model for instructional coaching**

1. “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.*

1. “Do you meet with the coaches weekly? What agenda items do you discuss?

*This is to get the principal thinking about what the important foci for the coach are.*

1. “Can you show me the coach’s schedule? What choices went into this distribution of time?

*This is to get a check on the coach being dedicated to instructional improvement rather than other duties.*

1. “When have you and the coach picked to move toward hosting Collaborative Site Classrooms?”

*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.*

1. **Principals Meetings – What Activities to Do re. Coaches**

Round-table Sharing:

* 1. “What steps have you and your coaches taken so far to advance the notion of Collaborative Site Classrooms?”[[8]](#footnote-8)
  2. “What steps have you and your coaches taken so far to advance the levels of performance of groups in CPT meetings?”

**A word about Superintendents’ readiness to do this kind of supervision**

Vulnerability and Constant Learning

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

I ran into this situation most 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 are in the program, ably supported by three expert facilitators,[[9]](#footnote-9) the Deputy Commissioner,[[10]](#footnote-10) and fifteen coaches who are all successful former or sitting superintendents[[11]](#footnote-11). The coaches of the new superintendents are committed to pressing them to carry out the recommendations for school visits, most particularly, getting in classes and co-observing with principals. Not only will this be a stretch for the new superintendents they coach, it will be a stretch for the coaches, too. Hats off to these coaches for acknowledging their position as learning about how to observe deeply and identify most useful feedback for teachers. They are going 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 are going to become 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.

**Conclusion**

Improving our schools to get all our students to proficiency calls for formidable mobilization o collective effort. Individual schools succeed again and again, beyond all demographic predictions, at least for a time.[[12]](#footnote-12) But unfortunately we see this only for individual schools, rarely whole districts. And those 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 to be 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 has persistence and focus on using data to improve instruction. They may be good at other things, too, like parent 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? No person or program has the same powerful leverage that a Superintendent does on a principal’s effectiveness and learning about instructional leadership.

Perceiving the importance of great 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. Some have; but many haven’t. This is not the fault of the training: the issue is that more than basic training is needed.

Superintendents are frequently deployed by their superintendents to put out brushfires and oversee crises. This is a mistake. Somebody does have to handle the crises, but if crisis management consumes the superintendent’s time, they have little availability to develop instructional leaders. We have to figure out how to change the message to superintendents about making instructional leadership a priority, ad build their capacity to do so effectively.

Effective preparation and re-deployment of Superintendents will go a long way toward this goal. When we link levels of authority and levels of influence with each other up and down the system, 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 for all our children. So let’s get the Superintendents in the game and given them the space and the support to do the instructional leadership they can do.

**About Jon Saphier**

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He is also the co-chair of the Working Group on Educator Excellence. This group, consisting of leading Massachusetts state legislators, the Massachusetts Business Roundtable, Associated Industries of Massachusetts, 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).

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4. Seashore Louis, Karen, Kenneth Leithwood, Kyla Wahlstrom, Steven Anderson, Michael ichlin, Molly Gordon, Emanda Thomas, Blair Mascall, Tiiu Strauss, and Shawn Moore, Investigating the Links to Improved Student Learning. Wallace Foundation, 2010.
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1. Annual conference of the National Staff Development Council, now called Learning Forward, Monday December 6, 2010, Atlanta, GA [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Research for Better Teaching (RBT) is a consulting and training organization of 23 experienced educators who work in-depth in public schools. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This supervision may be the responsibility of a superintendent or assistant superintendent in small districts. In large districts the responsibility is typically divided among several individuals who are responsible for all the schools in a geographic area. They may be called Area Superintendents, Zone Superintendents, Community Superintendents, Regional Superintendents, etc. For convenience we will use a single term, Superintendent, to refer to whoever supervises principals in a given district. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The case is sometimes made that evaluators are always seen as evaluators when they walk into a classroom. It has been my 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 though the land of frequency and quality of contact. Yusko and Feiman-Nemser make a similar case in Teachers College Record 2008. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 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”*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Saphier and West, *“How Coaches Can Maximize Student Learning”*, Kappan, December 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Joan Connolly, Rachel Curtis, and Elizabeth City [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Karla Baehr [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Jack Ahearn, Tony Bent, Joe Buckley, Irwin Blumer, Joan Connolly, Kevin Courtney, Perry Davis, John D’Auria, Rose DiTullio, Tom Kingston, Claire Sheff-Kohn, Jim Marini, Patty Martin, Chris McGrath, David Roach [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See the website for Education Trust for examples [↑](#footnote-ref-12)