

# **Developing Principals as Instructional Leaders**

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The idea that principals should serve as instructional leaders—not just as generic managers—in their schools is widely subscribed to among educators. In practice, though, few principals act as genuine instructional leaders. Their days are filled with activities of management—scheduling, reporting, handling relations with parents and community, dealing with the multiple crises and special situations that are inevitable in schools. Most principals spend relatively little time in classrooms and even less analyzing instruction with teachers. They may arrange time for teachers’ meetings and professional development, but they rarely provide intellectual leadership for growth in teaching skill.

This situation will not surprise anyone familiar with the structure of school districts and the career opportunities available to educators ready to expand their responsibilities beyond the individual classroom. School districts are, typically, bifurcated organizations. There is usually an administrative “line” organization that runs from the superintendent and deputy to principals (perhaps mediated by area or regional superintendents) and thence to teachers. Separate from this line, except that both report to the superintendent, there is typically a “school support” or a “curriculum and professional development” division of the organization. This is where those in charge of the district’s programs of curriculum, assessment, and professional development

reside. Also housed here are special programs of various kinds, ranging from government supported and mandated programs such as Title I, bilingual education, and special education to foundation-supported initiatives and community programs. In large districts, still another branch of the organization is often responsible for operations, including personnel, finance and budgeting, and legal and public information functions.

Relations among the two or three branches of the school district are often strained. Those in the administrative line are, in theory, accountable for student achievement, but various individuals in the school support branch may, at least nominally, control curriculum and programming choices. And the operations branch is likely to limit whom the schools can hire and on what they can spend money. Movements toward site-based management have been designed to put more real control over these matters in the hands of school leaders. But the simultaneous growth of mandated parent and community participation in school governance, along with pressures for teachers' professional autonomy, is often perceived by principals to severely limit the space within which their professional leadership can be exercised.

The bifurcated (or trifurcated) structure of school districts has meant that educators have to make a choice as they seek career opportunities beyond the individual classroom. They can choose either an administrative track (the "line") or a curriculum/ instruction/ professional development ("school support") track, but not both. Those who enter the administrative track, typically by becoming assistant principals in the first instance, become more and more distant from issues of instruction and learning. At the same time, those in the school support track become, or are perceived to become, unfamiliar with the details and demands of day-to-day school practice. The people who choose the administrative track are *de facto* choosing to de-emphasize teaching and learning in their careers. Training programs for principals reinforce this,

focusing primary attention on a myriad of administrative competencies and devoting little time or attention to questions of learning, curriculum, and professional development.

Time on the job as an assistant principal or a principal deepens the gulf. Principals' time is filled by the many demands on them for administrative functions. Like most people, they also tend to gravitate toward doing what they know how to do. Unsure what to look at or how to intervene when they visit classrooms, principals tend to visit rarely, perhaps only to make required formal evaluations. With their knowledge of teaching growing outdated, they delegate questions of instruction and professional development to others. This pattern of distancing from instruction and learning has been further exacerbated by various movements for teacher empowerment. These have seemed to argue that pedagogy is the professional purview of the individual teacher and that intervention of a supervisor or principal is an intrusion on the teacher's professional judgment and prerogatives. Teacher contracts are often written to protect teachers from arbitrary judgments by principals and others. This trend, combined with a traditional view that evaluation and support are two distinct functions, discourages principals from taking a lead role in shaping a focused culture of instruction within their schools.

We are writing about a district that has set its sights in a different direction in order to create and sustain successful schools. Over an eleven-year period, Community School District Two in New York City has amassed a strong record of successful school improvement in a very diverse urban school setting. Not only have test scores risen, but there is also a remarkable professional spirit among the teachers, principals, and central staff members of the district, which has 22,000 students in 45 schools. Wherever one goes in the district, teaching and learning are what everyone talks about. This is true not only of teachers, curriculum specialists, and professional developers but also of principals and senior administrators, and they exhibit an

exceptionally high level of detailed knowledge about the craft of teaching. Even more striking is a culture of learning and mutual dependency among staff at all levels: people expect support in solving problems of instructional practice from their peers and supervisors, and problems in design or implementation of instruction are shared and discussed (even with supervisors) rather than hidden from view<sup>1</sup>. It is assumed that principals, like teachers, need to learn continuously to lead their schools. “She is a learner,” is a phrase used to describe individuals who are thought to be doing well in their roles as school leaders, even if they are new to the job and not yet expert in the many aspects of instructional leadership that District Two expects of its principals. In this paper, we attempt to tell the story of how District Two develops and sustains this culture of learning among its principals, while at the same time maintaining a strong sense of accountability for student achievement.

A word about who we are as authors seems fair to readers, since we are an unusual team and bring very different voices to the task of analyzing and describing District Two’s culture and professional system.

Elaine Fink is the Superintendent of the District, having been named to that post after eight and a half years as Deputy Superintendent and a period as Acting Superintendent of the district. During her tenure as Deputy, Fink collaborated closely with Anthony Alvarado, then the Superintendent, to build the District’s professional system. She came to the Deputy’s post directly from a principalship and brought to the new role a conviction that principals were the key actors in school improvement and that her main job as Deputy was to teach principals how to

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<sup>1</sup>Several papers and videos by members of the High Performance High School project have described the District's overall program, the ways in which it manages variability among schools, the theory and reality of its balanced literacy program, and the effects of the District's sustained focus on professional development and instructional improvement on student achievement (see, for example, Elmore & Burney, 1997, 1998; Maloy 1998ab; Resnick & Harwell, 2000; Stein & D’Amico, 1999)

function as instructional leaders. Even now that she has all the additional duties that come with the Superintendent's position, Fink spends a substantial portion of her time in schools and in direct interaction with principals, primarily on matters of instruction.

*If I expect principals to do the very hard job of leading an instructional community, then I have to have the same expectation for myself. I see myself as the leader of the principals, in just the same way as they are the leaders of their teachers. – EF*

Lauren Resnick is a cognitive psychologist who in recent years has worked primarily on creating and implementing education standards, assessments, and ways of changing fundamentals of teaching practice so students can actually meet the new standards.

We have tried in this paper to combine a relatively dispassionate, even “academic,” description of the District Two professional development system for principals with our personal voices and experience and way of making sense of the system. We have marked our more personal comments by setting them off, putting them in a different typeface and indicating which of us is “speaking.” We hope this works for readers. It has been an adventure for us.

### **Nested Learning Communities and Cognitive Apprenticeship**

At the core of District Two's design is a concept of *nested learning communities* that calls on the school to be a learning organization that, under its principal's leadership, is continuously improving its capacity to teach children. The principal in a District Two school is responsible for establishing a *culture of learning* in the school, one in which questions of teaching and learning pervade the social life and interpersonal relations of those working in the school. Within the context of a district-wide curriculum in the core subjects of literacy and mathematics, District Two has been reorganized to move most resources and decision making to

the schools. Principals are responsible, above all, for selecting and cultivating a teaching staff that is able to teach effectively the district's demanding programs in literacy and mathematics. The principal is expected to be an instructional leader in the strongest possible sense of the term. To do this, the principal must understand the instructional programs that the district has adopted well enough to actively guide teachers in its implementation. He or she must be able to judge the quality of teaching in order to select and maintain good teaching staff.

*The term “nested learning communities” came to us (a combined group of practitioners and researchers from the High Performance Learning Communities project) in an early research design meeting. We were trying to figure out which people in the district should be interviewed and observed in order to understand how the district functioned. Someone started to diagram the way in which teachers were expected to learn from principals and professional developers and each other within their school, while at the same time principals were expected to learn from the Superintendent and Deputy and from each other how to be better at their instructional leadership job. Someone else said, “It’s like those nesting dolls people like to bring back from their travels”—and the name was born. The image seems to work because the dolls are each independent, free-standing “people,” yet they share a common form—and you can’t decide which is the most “important” doll, the tiny one in the middle that establishes the shape for them all or the big one on the outside that encloses them all. Just so, we saw, in District Two there are core instructional commitments and practices that are in some sense “decided” by the District leadership, but every individual teacher and principal shapes the actual form and meaning of these practices. – LBR*

But good knowledge of instruction isn't all there is to the job. If it were, external professional developers or especially skilled teachers within the school could by themselves do most of the work of continuously upgrading teaching within the school. The principal also needs special capabilities for leadership—recruiting loyalty to the common task of teaching a specific group of children, knowing individual teachers well enough to suggest particular ways of improving particular aspects of their teaching performance, creating a culture in which deep knowledge of instruction and learning serves as the foundation for an interdependent professional community.

*When you work with a principal, you have to remember you are focusing on leadership, not just on the specifics of instruction. Principals have to have content knowledge—enough to make them able to judge the teaching they see. But they don’t have to be content specialists. As instructional leaders, principals have to be able to figure out what to do for a teacher, what kind of professional*

*development will be best for that person at that time. But the principal doesn't have to actually deliver the professional development—staff development specialists in the different subjects can do that. The principal has to **lead**—by creating a culture of learning and by providing the right kinds of specialized professional development opportunities when they are needed. –EF*

Few individuals enter the school principalship fully skilled in all the elements of instructional leadership that we have just outlined. And even those who enter with substantial developed capability will need sustained support, much as teachers do within their schools. To develop and maintain the instructional leadership skills of its principals, District Two has put into place an extensive professional development system for school principals. All principals in the district, from newcomers to those with long tenure in the role, are expected to participate in almost all aspects of the program every year.

The District Two professional development system for principals is an example of what cognitive scientists have come to call *cognitive apprenticeship* (Collins, Brown, & Newmann, 1989; Greeno, Collins, & Resnick, 1996). Cognitive apprenticeship theory, in turn, is based on the work of anthropologists and ethnographers who have studied the functioning of traditional craft apprenticeships and explored the potential implications of apprenticeship for learning in modern institutions (e.g., Lave & Wenger, 1991; Greenfield, 1984). In apprenticeship learning, people learn their crafts by engaging in the daily work of a producing “shop.” They practice individual elements of the craft (e.g., sewing or cutting for tailors; painting and glazing for potters), not as isolated skills but as necessary elements in producing a finished product that meets standards of functionality and aesthetic appeal. Master craftsmen and more advanced apprentices serve as models and critics for the apprentice learners, who take on increasingly complex and difficult design and production projects as their skill accumulates. (Liberian tailoring apprentices, for example, progress through a “curriculum” of producing bags, then pants, then hats, and finally jackets as they move from relatively peripheral participation in the

economic life of the tailoring shop to a more central position [Lave, 1988]). As they move through this sequence over a period of years, they acquire not only the specific skills of their trade but also an *identity* as a craftsman and as *a member of a particular organization*.

*Building an effective community of principals is about both things—the craft of teaching and learning and the building of strong interpersonal relationships. I believe no effective learning can go on without very strong personal relationships. But relationships can't substitute for deep knowledge. The challenge is to build those relationships around studying teaching and improving instruction for kids and a belief system about learning. –EF*

The emerging theory of cognitive apprenticeship attempts to take the lessons of apprenticeship structures into modern domains of learning. These differ in two important ways from traditional craft apprenticeships. First, intellect is valued in its own right, not just as a means of learning practical skills and knowledge. Second, variability and invention are valued over simple repetition of the master's way of doing things. The District Two professional development program for principals is shaped by both of these values. Shared intellectual activity is a hallmark. People are reading and thinking together all the time. But the shared theories of learning and instruction (what we later call the “intellectual glue” of the system) are played out in highly individualized learning settings—in small study and support groups, in peer interactions, and in a structured system of coaching and supervision that is individually tailored.

### **Principals' Conferences and Institutes: The Intellectual “Glue” for System-Wide Improvement**

Using an apprenticeship model of continuous learning means that large parts of professional development—indeed, the most fundamental parts—take place in dispersed settings (principally the schools) and are site-specific and site-generated (that is, geared to the specific circumstances of individual schools and the people working in them). Nevertheless, to build a system-wide pattern of

improvement in teaching and learning, a core of common commitments, principles, and, to some extent, practices is needed. This shared set of commitments, principles, and practices—joined with substantial delegation of authority and control to school sites—is one of the distinguishing features of District Two. District Two uses a system of monthly principals’ conferences, along with specialized training institutes to ensure that its school leaders share a common view of the kind of learning environments and opportunities its schools should be providing to their diverse student body.

Monthly principals’ conferences provide the primary vehicle for developing and building allegiance to the shared professional point of view of the District. Every principal in the District attends these day-long conferences (and, usually, a summer retreat of one or two days). The focus of principals’ conferences is, without exception, instruction and learning. Questions of administration and management are left to other occasions or relegated to a short time period at the end of conference days. In this and many other ways, principals’ conferences serve as models for the staff conferences that principals are expected to lead in their schools.

At principals’ conferences, new instructional initiatives may be introduced or older ones revisited for discussion and evaluation. External consultants and speakers with expertise relevant to the district’s instructional directions are often invited to the conferences, but there is always extensive discussion among the participants themselves. New initiatives are sometimes controversial and need to be discussed and considered at length. For example, during the 1998-1999 school year, substantial time at principals’ conferences was devoted to discussing how to increase the effectiveness of instruction in the print-sound code (the Word Study component of the district’s balanced literacy program). Practices in teaching the print-sound code continue to vary, based on differences in student population and professional judgment. But a District Two “point of view” on

this important aspect of literacy instruction is now emerging as a result of the principals' discussions; this will be tested in coming years against measured achievement results.

Results, indeed, are always on the table. Principals' conferences provide an occasion, especially at the beginning of the school year, for consideration of school-by-school test data and discussion of what these data imply about how schools and, therefore, the district as a whole are doing in meeting their overall goal of raising student achievement. There is extensive discussion about what new initiatives or tuning of current programs in light of the achievement results may be needed. This highlighting of achievement results, in the context of collegial discussions about approaches to improving learning, is a key to keeping everyone's attention focused on the district's "bottom line" of student learning. The results focus, however, is balanced against the ongoing attention in principals' conferences and other professional development events for principals on the quality of instructional *practice*. So, the district's message is not one of meeting test score goals but rather of using test scores as a guide to the effectiveness of practice.

*LBR: Not everyone likes the idea of sharing data so publicly. I've heard some complaints about it from District Two principals.*

*EF: There is no question that when we do it, it makes principals uncomfortable—except for the schools that do well.*

*LBR: Why? Why not do it more privately?*

*EF: Because it's part of our mutual dependency. It's not just a school that isn't doing well; it's the district. Just like in a school, when certain teachers aren't reaching all their at-risk kids, it's the principal's and the whole school's job to figure out how to fix it. Also the comparison to other similar schools in the district is important. For example I think it was very beneficial for [principal] to see his scores today next to [other principals']. Because he's got the same kids. [Principal] himself saw it today. That's the first time he's seen that.*

*LBR: Still, don't people feel "exposed" or "threatened"?*

*EF: They can, but we deal with it by focusing on the core message. For example today when I gave out state test results in my Focus Literacy Support Group, I had highlighted some schools in which 50% or more of kids were in the two bottom score groups. [Principal A] looked at it and said, "I have an asterisk. Does that mean I'm fired?" I said that's not an asterisk; it's a star, and you're starred because look where you were and look how much improvement you've made.*

*LBR: So you turned the "alert" into a public celebration. Then what?*

*EF: Then we went on to the real point of it. I said that what I want for all of you, if you're over the 50% mark, is to figure out who those kids are by name, which classrooms they're in with which teachers, the practice that the teacher is engaged in and which staff development they're involved in. And you need to meet with those teachers regularly to talk about the movement of those kids—and keep your hands on it.*

The centrality of excellent teaching practice as the District's primary intellectual commitment is underscored by the habit of holding principals' conferences in schools several times each year. The principal of the school being visited hosts the meeting and visits to classrooms, with discussion of observed student work and teaching practice included on the agenda. Agendas for the principals' conferences are developed by a Planning Committee. Approximately ten principals out of a total of 45, along with some professional developers from the district and the superintendent and deputy, comprise this planning committee.

Despite their centrality in District Two's culture of learning, ten or eleven principals' conferences per year are not sufficient to convey all of the information that principals will need to serve as instructional leaders in schools implementing the often complex instructional programs that the District espouses. To build deeper knowledge of the content of District Two instructional programs, the District also expects principals to attend a number of specialized institutes focused on particular instructional programs or practices. The District itself sometimes organizes these institutes, hiring appropriate outside consultants to run them. More frequently, it recommends enrollment in institutes and seminars sponsored by other organizations. In these cases, the District pays tuition fees for its principals. Principals typically attend these institutes along with teachers from their schools, a practice that highlights the interdependency and continuous learning values that the District expects principals to establish in their schools. All principals are expected to enroll in at least one institute each year. Most go to several each year.

### **Focus on Leadership for Instruction: Support Groups and Study Groups**

Principals' conferences and institutes are an effective way to provide knowledge about instruction and to build intellectual and attitudinal commitment to the District's programs and

priorities. But to implement these programs in their schools, principals also need to develop an array of leadership strategies. For a principal to change instructional practice in a school, he or she needs to build in the staff both an interdependent culture of learning and increasing levels of skill in specific instructional practices. District Two principals have an extensive array of professional development resources to call on. But the job of culture building and of guiding individual teachers in which of these professional development opportunities to use belongs to the principal.

New principals especially, but also established principals who are leading schools with particularly heavy demands for program implementation and teacher development, need opportunities for intensive work on problems of practice and leadership. To meet this need, District Two's Superintendent and Deputies run support groups for small groups of principals. Each focuses on some specific need identified either by the Superintendent and Deputies or by groups of principals.

**Support Groups for New Principals.** Primary among the small group learning opportunities are monthly meetings of groups of 12-15 principals with the Deputy Superintendent of the District. These are relatively unstructured meetings with groups of new and untenured principals to discuss leadership initiatives. The members of the group raise particular issues for discussion, but the Deputy, as leader of the group, ensures that discussions focus on issues of instructional leadership and do not become complaint sessions (a common outcome when principals are invited to air their concerns). Topics for discussion include effective teaching strategies; techniques for assessing student learning; evaluating teacher instructional performance and techniques for moving teachers to the next level of teaching performance; how to design and run in-school teacher conferences; and how to use and manage in-school professional developers. In contrast to principals' conferences and institutes, which develop the intellectual grounding for the district's instructional

approaches, support group discussions tend to focus more on principals' *behavior*—what they actually do in their schools—and how their behavior makes a focus clear to the school staff.

An important strategy used by the Deputy Superintendent in guiding support group discussions is to treat problem sharing as a positive process of professional engagement. Problems become the intellectual “currency” of the meetings. Principals are expected to share with the group their difficulties in meeting agreed-on instructional goals or in moving their teachers to higher standards of instructional practice. Those who resist such sharing are assumed to be resisting the continuous improvement ethic of the District. In these support groups, as throughout the professional environment of the District, problem sharing is treated not as evidence of poor performance but as the creation of an opportunity for figuring out improvements in practice. To model problem sharing, the Deputy Superintendent often begins support group sessions by talking about her own instruction-related problems and asking for advice from the group on how to help principals learn.

*For example I remember one instance, when I was still Deputy, when I asked for the group's advice on how to work with a principal (not a member of the support group and not named during the discussion) who **thought** she was focusing on instruction in her school, but who was actually communicating, through her behavior that issues of management were more important. My problem was how to help change that focus while still being encouraging to the principal. By putting my teaching problem (how to help a principal change) out for the group to deal with, I modeled a strategy principals could use in their own schools. –EF*

The problem-centered strategy of the support groups is aimed at creating a culture of mutual dependency, one in which other principals and also the Superintendent and Deputies are viewed as supportive colleagues. This strategy of group discussion of problems in instructional practice contrasts markedly with the normal culture of schools and districts, in which teachers are isolated in their classrooms and principals in their buildings. In most districts, visits of supervisors (principals in the case of teachers; the deputy or area superintendent in the case of principals) are feared as

occasions for negative judgments. As a result, open airing of difficulties in instructional practice would be viewed as dangerous to one's status in the school or the district. In District Two support group meetings, silence about problems is interpreted not as the absence of problems in a school but as the unwillingness of a principal to enter into the District's culture of mutual dependency and trust.

**Focus literacy support groups.** Another support group, this one led by the Superintendent herself, convenes the heads of 13 elementary schools with the most at-risk students. These principals meet to plan for implementation of a rigorous reading instructional program that the District has designed. The principals of Focus Literacy schools are faced with particularly demanding problems of instructional leadership. They not only have large numbers of students who need intensive instruction if they are to succeed in acquiring adequate levels of literacy, but they also often have a greater proportion of new and less skilled teachers than do schools serving higher income students. As in the support group for new principals, the strategy used is a focus on specific problems and successes of implementation and practice, with emphasis on the particular needs of those schools and their children. Principals bring their success and difficulty stories to the table, and the Superintendent adds observations based on her very frequent visits to this particular set of schools. The implementation issues likely to be addressed range from scheduling to recruiting teachers and from strategies of school-based professional development for teachers to frequent (at least monthly) monitoring of the progress of students at risk.

**Principals' study groups.** A further opportunity for professional interaction with peers is provided in a series of small study groups for principals. These may be led by the Deputy Superintendent or may be peer-led. Either way, principals pre-select a content area or problem of practice and implementation to study, based on their schools' current goals and objectives. Choice of study groups is often guided by the Superintendent, as part of the individualized coaching of

principals to be described later in this paper. The group with its leader selects readings for joint study and may invite outside experts to some sessions. In discussions, there is usually a focus on how to provide leadership in implementation of instructional content. Topics vary from year to year and from group to group. For example, last year there was a middle school study group, a study group on standards and principles of learning, and a study group on implementation of the District's new mathematics program.

### **Peer Learning: Communities of Practice**

District Two's strategy for system-wide improvement of instruction and achievement calls for blanketing the district with professional engagement in questions of instructional practice. Centrally led principals' conferences and support groups can provide only a small portion of that engagement. And so the District leadership has instituted and encouraged an array of peer interactions among school heads. These include a system of school intervisitation among school heads and active encouragement of principal "buddying."

**Intervisitation.** Intervisitation is in many ways the "heart and soul" of District Two's expectation that principals will continuously learn from one other. Visits by one principal to another's school may be initiated by the individuals involved or promoted by the Superintendent or Deputy as specific needs of a principal are identified. Either way, intervisitations are built around a specific practice that the visiting principal wants to learn by observing and analyzing activity in another school. A school may be known for excellent practice in guided reading or shared reading (both components of District Two's balanced literacy program); it may have instituted particularly effective teacher study groups on mathematics teaching, or its principal may have been successful at overcoming teacher resistance to the extra work involved in shared study of student writing.

Whatever its particular “expertise,” a school will attract as visitors principals who want to learn or improve a particular leadership practice. During a typical intervisitation, the two principals will walk through classrooms together, sit in on staff meetings, and discuss and analyze the specific issues of practice and implementation that are the reason that a particular visit has been scheduled.

Sometimes the visiting principal will invite the host to visit her school to comment on early attempts at initiating a new leadership practice or improving an ongoing one. In such cases, planned intervisitations can lead to the more informal “buddying” that is also a striking feature of the District Two landscape.

**Buddying.** Informal professional sharing, initiated and sustained by principals themselves, is encouraged but not directly overseen by District administration. Principals buddy with one or two other principals, with whom they meet informally but frequently, to share problems and strategies of professional development and leadership in their schools. Sometimes professional buddies become long-term friends; other times they have short-term relationships in which one principal asks another for help on some current problem. The District’s active encouragement of buddying is an integral part of its effort to establish a culture of professional sharing and trust. Buddying and intervisitation, like support groups, also create pressure on principals for improvement in their schools because the conventional barriers of professional privacy fall. With regular visits to each other’s schools and frequent requests for help, there is more knowledge among principals of practices in schools throughout the district than is typical elsewhere, where principals are often discouraged from leaving their buildings during school time and in which difficulties are hidden or masked.

## **Individualized Coaching: Making Sure It Really Happens**

As rich as the group and peer professional development system is in District Two, it would not produce a skillful corps of principals as instructional leaders were it not for the intensive individualized coaching that every principal receives as an integral part of her or his service in the role. This individualized coaching system—linked as it is to the district’s two-way accountability system—is one of District Two’s most distinctive inventions. Several features distinguish District Two’s individualized coaching program from principal development programs used elsewhere.

One feature is that responsibility for coaching is lodged at the highest level of district administration: with the Superintendent and the Deputy Superintendent. The message of this organizational decision is clear: Instruction and learning are the district’s fundamental business; all other functions are secondary. The Superintendent’s and the Deputy’s direct engagement in instructional leadership models for principals the role that they are expected to play with respect to their teaching staffs. A second important feature of the coaching program—one that flows from the active roles of the Superintendent and the Deputy in its implementation—is that coaching and evaluation are not artificially separated and that evaluation is a continuous process rather than an intermittent one. Finally, a third feature worth noting is that the coaching program follows the principles of apprenticeship learning. That is, coaching is embedded in the regular processes of running the school and the district—establishing goals and objectives, budgeting, examining instructional processes in classrooms, and analyzing data on individual student performance. A recent addition to the coaching process in District Two has established a system of mentor principals in which successful, currently serving principals mentor one or more principals who need support beyond what the Superintendent and Deputies can provide directly.

**Goals and objectives process.** An important part of coaching revolves around the process of establishing goals and objectives for the school each year. The District asks each principal to develop a yearly goals -and- objectives statement in which detailed plans for specific instructional initiatives and professional activities are laid out. Principals must specify their goals and objectives in categories specified by the New York City Schools Chancellor and supplemented by the District Two Superintendent. The Goals and Objectives form for the year is first introduced at one of the monthly principals' conferences. Some general discussion there is followed by individual meetings between the Deputy and those principals judged to need help in setting objectives. Principals develop their goals and objectives in multiple iterations, conferring with the Deputy herself as well as their mentor principals and other peers in the process. This consultative work continues until the school's goals and objectives are approved by the Superintendent, based in large measure on an acceptable plan for the school's instructional focus.

**Budget meetings.** Principals who need it also receive substantial individualized coaching in the process of establishing their school budgets. In District Two, schools have substantial control over how they spend money. However, funds are not handed over to the principals in a block. Instead, principals are expected to develop and defend a plan for spending (e.g., on staff positions, on professional developers, on payments to teachers for participation in institutes and training programs, on instructional materials) that is based on their instructional and professional development objectives. In the district's "green dollar budgeting" process, funds are allocated to schools from different funding streams (e.g., Title I, professional development funds, special literacy funds) depending on how the funds will be spent. Principals have to defend their budget plans in a meeting with the Superintendent and Deputies and the Director of Operations for the district. Many principals—especially individuals new to the district—need substantial coaching in the process of arriving at a budget that is well matched to defensible instructional

and professional development plans. This coaching, like that for goals -and- objectives statements is provided by the Superintendent and Deputies themselves, as well as by mentor principals.

**Supervisory WalkThrough.** The supervisory WalkThrough of the school is, perhaps, the focal event of the individual coaching process. It is the occasion on which all elements of a principal's activity are considered in the context of an on-the-ground review of instruction, learning, and achievement in every classroom in the school.

The supervisory WalkThrough occurs at least once per year in each District school and occurs more frequently (as much as every month) for schools that need additional assistance. It is conducted by the Superintendent and the Deputy Superintendents. The WalkThrough takes most of a morning and includes visits to every classroom in the school. It begins with a meeting with the principal (and, at the option of the principal, the assistant principal) in the principal's office.

Although every principal views the WalkThrough visit as an important, even "high stakes" event, it is striking to the visitor that there is an effort on the part of both the principal and the visitors to begin the meeting with some sharing of personal news and concerns. The sense of personal support that is expressed in these opening sessions of the WalkThrough is an important aspect of the overall District Two learning culture.

The meeting proper begins with a review of the school's goals and objectives for the year and of the particular expectations for activity by the principal that were agreed on at the preceding WalkThrough visit. Typically, the principal takes the lead, laying out the instructional and professional development improvements he or she has been trying to implement in the school and identifying problems and successes since the last visit. If these topics are not raised by the principal, the Superintendent or Deputy will question the principal on key issues. Like the principal, the visitors will have reviewed written materials on the school, including the letter outlining agreements

reached at the last WalkThrough. As a result, there is rarely recourse to the paper record during the discussion. This feature, too, helps to maintain a supportive, learning-oriented atmosphere rather than a bureaucratic, judgmental one.

Next, the visitors and principal together review the school's student achievement data, with a special focus on at-risk students. The focus of the discussion, guided by the Superintendent or Deputy, is on the principal's listing of individual at-risk children and where they stand in learning—classroom by classroom. This segment of the visit concludes with a review of each teacher in the school, with a focus on those for whom specific professional development and instructional improvement expectations were articulated at the last visit. Approximately an hour will typically have elapsed since the arrival of the WalkThrough visitors.

In the next segment of the WalkThrough, the visitors and the principal visit every classroom in the school. There the visitors examine children's work, talk with children about their work, observe teacher performance, and observe student reactions and engagement. The visitors also examine the physical environment with an eye to how classroom design supports learning.

*When I first accompanied you on walkthroughs, I was very impressed with how much you were able to detect after just a few minutes in a classroom. I knew it was due to your enormous knowledge about literacy instruction and what kinds of work could be expected of children—of all social backgrounds—who were well taught. In fact, I compared the way you could quickly form detailed impressions about instruction and learning with the way chess Masters are able to almost instantaneously recognize the “state of play” in a chess game and generate a very small list of appropriate next moves (this has been one of skills that cognitive scientists have studied in detail). Only much later did I realize that there is a “story line” being followed in the walkthroughs, that you are looking for particular aspects of classroom work that have been discussed with the principal in the past. This story line—working with individuals on particular issues of practice over time—is, I now think, a good part of why coaching, rather than planned programs for groups, has to be at the heart of District Two's system. –LBR*

With classroom visits completed, the visitors and principal return to the principal's office for an evaluation and planning session that can last an hour or more. During this final session, both the principal and the visitors offer overall judgments of classroom observations. These judgments

evaluate the quality of observed teaching and student work. They are used to focus the principal's attention on specific steps she can take to help teachers improve targeted aspects of their instruction. In guiding this discussion, the Superintendent usually looks for a common thread in the observations (e.g., the level of questioning observed or the quality of the word study component of the balanced literacy program). Observations of strengths and weaknesses that characterize the school as a whole or a cluster of teachers form a basis for suggesting what might be done in staff conferences or grade level meetings. Judgments of specific teachers often lead to suggestions for intervisitations and specific professional development programs for those teachers. When necessary, decisions on granting tenure to particular teachers will be made, along with strategies for separating from the school any teachers who have—despite extended professional development opportunities—not successfully improved their teaching or their students' achievement levels. Personnel decisions of this kind are difficult for many principals to make and execute. For this reason, they call for coaching attention, although little WalkThrough time is actually spent on them.

*In the WalkThrough, I always try to find a thread that characterizes many teachers in the school and focus on leadership strategies for dealing with that. For example, if I see that half of the teachers in the school are not understanding questioning—that they are asking very basic, literal questions and they are not really stretching kids' minds—I will talk to that principal about how to work on questioning with her staff. I might suggest books to read with the staff, and how to use staff conferences specifically to work on questioning. I might also suggest that the principal visit another school where questioning is at a higher level. To smooth the process, I would probably call the principal of the other school to say what I hope she will be able to show the visitor. In this way, the principal gets the specific help she or he needs. –EF*

Following the WalkThrough visit, a letter is sent to the principal summarizing the results of the visit and the agreements reached about next efforts in developing the school's teaching and professional development program. This letter may include commitments concerning time, personnel, or money resources that the District administration will make available to the school. This letter also defines a kind of informal "contract" between the Superintendent or Deputy and the

principal concerning continued improvement efforts that the principal will make in the coming weeks and months. In the period before the next supervisory WalkThrough, there will be many informal discussions between the Deputy or Superintendent and the principal. These discussions, in person (perhaps before or after a conference or study group meeting) or via telephone, occur with a frequency that allows principals to count on at least weekly advice and support from the Deputy or Superintendent concerning instructional issues. The goal throughout is to help the principal maintain focus on the instructional and professional development changes he or she is working on in his or her school.

**Mentor principals.** The principal mentoring program, established recently by District Two, extends coaching beyond what central office people themselves can provide. In the mentoring program, principals who are judged to need help are guided by principals who are judged to be more expert. Mentoring relationships are established by district leadership, with careful attention to matching individuals in terms of personal compatibility and similarity of school needs. Principals chosen as mentors are sometimes the most experienced in the district, but demonstrated expertise in instructional leadership rather than time-in-role determines who will be chosen as a mentor. Principal mentors—who retain responsibility for their own schools—often work with two or more principals, visiting their schools regularly and receiving visits, advising on how to refine goals, objectives, and budgets, and helping to develop plans for work with specific teachers. Mentor principals meet once per month with the Superintendent in a special support group in which they discuss the strengths and weaknesses of their coaching and the general problems of mentoring. Principal mentoring is another important layer in District Two’s complex system of nested learning communities.

## Conclusion

The development program for principals that we have been describing here is aimed at creating a corps of very strong instructional leaders who share a common set of commitments to teaching and learning along with a sense of belonging to an effective and demanding professional community. More than just a collection of effective professional development practices, the program embodies a core set of beliefs about the nature of school and district instructional leadership, the centrality of professional development in educational administration, and the ways in which accountability for results and professional support systems should interact. In conclusion, we briefly discuss each of these core beliefs, showing how the elements of the program we have described reflect them.

**Instructional leadership.** The program we have described aims to develop and support over time school leaders—principals—who are able to create schools in which student learning is continuously on the rise because the faculty of the schools are continuously learning. To create such schools requires a great deal of knowledge about the details of good curriculum and teaching, far more than most current principals possess. At the same time, it calls for skills of leadership. Some of the leadership skills that such principals need are generic—creating the kind of trust that is needed if teaching is to become a public act, stimulating energy for continuous study and improvement of teaching practice. Effective instructional leaders must, in other words, create both *intellectual capital* and *social capital* within their organizations.

A principal who knew little about instruction herself might do much to establish the broad features of a professional learning environment in a school. She can, that is, create an

organization that is continuously developing the social capital that allows people to trust, depend on, and learn from each other. But an effective instructional leader also needs to build intellectual capital—by playing a substantive role in curriculum choices, in establishing expectations for the quality of student work, in analyzing the form and quality of teaching and in organizing targeted opportunities for teachers in the school to learn the specifics of teaching their subject matters well. For this reason, we do not think of leadership skills and instructional knowledge as skills to be developed independently. Instead, they must be intimately woven together, in professional development as in practice. Part of the reason for an apprenticeship model of professional development is that “on the ground,” practice-embedded work seems to be the only way to achieve this blending.

**Professional development and educational administration.** Many people who practice or study educational administration are likely to wonder how senior administrators of school districts can possibly spend as much time on professional development as the program described here calls for. They may even question the need for such extensive engagement of the Superintendent and Deputy, preferring to rely on stronger preparation programs for school administrators rather than in-service professional development. In District Two, however, there is no line drawn between administration and professional development. Its leadership believes, in fact, that professional development is not something separate from administrative responsibilities or added on to them. Instead, *professional development is the centerpiece of administering a district committed to continuous improvement in student learning.*

The centrality accorded professional development in District Two comes from the assumption that increased student achievement can only be accomplished through continuous improvement of practice *at every level in the system*. This means that not only teachers, but principals and senior administrators themselves, need to be continuously upgrading their knowledge and practice. The logic of District Two's nested learning communities design calls for the Superintendent to lead the professional development of principals in the same hands-on way that principals are expected to lead the continuing development of teachers in their schools. This detailed way of working with principals is the heart of being an effective central administrator in a nested learning community design. It enables the Superintendent to know and understand each school in depth. Although the central focus of interactions with principals is instruction and learning, even when a traditional "administrative issue" is in question, its resolution is more thoughtful because of the deep first-hand knowledge of the school. In a district substantially larger than District Two some delegation would be required; for example, area superintendents might function as the Superintendent and Deputy have in District Two. In such a design, an additional layer in the "nest" would be added, and the Superintendent/Deputy's job would be to support the professional learning of the area superintendents.

**Accountability and professional support.** One of the distinguishing features of the District Two system of professional development is that accountability and professional support are much more intimately joined than American educators are used to. The Superintendent both evaluates principals and provides intensive professional development. Although there are specific occasions of formal evaluation (the Supervisory Walkthrough, for example), the Superintendent observes and consults with principals at many other times. She knows about

problems as well as successes of each individual. All of this information, not just the formal observations, plays a role in evaluation of principals' work. The same is true of the relationship between teachers and principals in District Two; principals are in teachers' classrooms every day and it is difficult to draw the line between observations that have an evaluative intent and those that are part of the professional support system. Principals view the evaluations as fair, because they are based on evidence that is discussed with them, and because they are supported in developing their skills as leaders. This enables District Two to escape the pressure experienced in many other districts for separating evaluation and professional support functions in order to protect principals from arbitrary judgments by supervisors. What makes the system work is the District's sense of reciprocal accountability and the commitment to learning at every level of the organization.

*If central administrators hold principals accountable for providing instructional leadership for their teachers, they have to be prepared to provide the same kind of leadership for their principals. --EF*

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