

RETHINKING THE ROLE *of the* PRINCIPAL



How is it that two years into historic educational disruption, students and teachers find themselves in schools that are fundamentally unchanged?

At the same time, young people face record levels of anxiety and depression, unsustainably high income inequality, a painful reckoning with systemic racism, and a declining commitment to democracy. Schools play a key role in addressing these critical issues, as they profoundly influence students and the society young people inhabit today and will build tomorrow. If school systems are to meet the challenge of this historic moment, they must articulate a new, rich vision that imbues students with a sense of responsible citizenship, prepares them for the world of work, and helps them develop a healthy sense of self. This vision for schooling calls for a shift in what we ask of schools, and that shift starts in the principal's office.



Principals must be a focal point because principals have the most profound impact on schools.

Their influence drives student achievement, student attendance, and reductions in exclusionary discipline, as well the satisfaction, retention, and impact of staff in the school setting.¹ American public education is built on the promise that every young person belongs, has the opportunity to thrive, and gets a fair shot at the American Dream. Principals are positioned to create the conditions needed to turn that promise into a reality. However, student outcomes, especially persistent gaps for students of color and those from low-income communities, illustrate that we have not set up principals to succeed.

Principals can best improve outcomes for students and staff when they operate with a focused, expert understanding of organizational leadership, human development, and democratic values. The role encompasses all the dynamics of a profoundly human endeavor. While we understandably continue to ask schools to offer more services as our understanding of child development becomes more sophisticated, principals struggle to keep pace with the increasing complexity of the school as a whole. The role becomes untenable when principals are faced with a litany of disparate responsibilities and when system leaders gloss over the requisite depth and mastery required for the job. Unilateral, expansive responsibility for a principal is neither a sustainable leadership model nor a cogent response to the essential functions of public schools. On the other hand, too often, principals lack specific aspects of authority needed to bring about meaningful changes and must fight institutional inertia to move schools forward. Resolving those twin problems is essential.



Every line of inquiry on the role of the principal tells us that the role needs an overhaul.

Preparing students to thrive in the 21st century requires a more robust definition of learning and success, yet our understanding of what it means to be a principal has not shifted in vital ways over the last century. We don't ask or allow leaders to focus on high-impact priorities that best serve students, including creating healthy school climates,² encouraging educators to grow and learn, and addressing the priorities of school communities. Over the past 40 years, the standards-based education movement³ has shifted the role of the principal to focus on "instructional leadership"—a positive development—yet this leadership is often oriented toward narrow measures of student success such as test scores. It stops short, for example, of tending to the science of learning and development,⁴ which directs us toward both what students need to succeed in school and beyond and what we envision for our society.

Principals must serve as both leaders and managers. A principal's strongest mandate is to serve as the leader of a school community, and a principal's highest accountability is to that community. The school is a microcosm of society, requiring principals to acknowledge the complex interplay between the ideal American future and a history that is too often short of



our aspirations. Principals then must align resources toward a climate of learning in which students and adults—staff and families—feel a sense of connection and know their identities are validated. When system leaders empower principals, they eliminate structures that require principals to focus on the wrong things: compliance tasks or operations that are tangential to achievement. Evaluations focused on compliance and designed to curtail mismanagement are replaced by supervision that emboldens visionary decisions and courageous conversations.

The existing principal role is entangled in debilitating historical constructs of racism and old economic models.

Correcting historical anachronisms means dismantling racist stratification. The student achievement gap, better characterized⁵ as an opportunity gap,⁶ has been by design. Our nation codified it through segregation, desegregation, and in some cases, *de facto* resegregation in cities⁷ and in schools.⁸ Data prepared for school finance cases around the country have shown that on every tangible measure schools serving greater numbers of students of color had fewer resources than schools serving mostly white students.⁹ The impact of systemic racism is reinforced for educators of color as well. After *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, Black educators were supplanted by White educators as schools were desegregated,¹⁰ and they are still obstructed from leadership opportunities.

Historically racist selection¹¹ still determines who gets to lead,¹² despite little correlation to student outcomes. Research finds that principal licensure exams have no predictive value on student achievement but do disproportionately screen out Black and Brown leaders. An equitable pipeline would prioritize authentic experiences and eliminate biases in current credential measures.¹³

At the onset of the 20th century, classroom structures were meant to prepare students to enter the workforce of a newly industrialized society. This led to a principal role that prioritized technical management and discipline. In the last 40 years, we have shifted our attention to academic outcomes as measured by test scores. The subsequent move toward “principal as instructional leader” recommitted the role to a core function of schools—academic outcomes. However, not all students have the same academic experiences. Notably, research suggests that schools serving an upper middle class and wealthy student body are more likely to prioritize critical thinking, agency, and deep knowledge building over the kind of rote memorization and skills-only learning more commonly seen in high-poverty schools.¹⁴

The shift to teacher supervision by principals stemmed from a laser focus on student achievement that yielded initial gains. Unfortunately, initial gains have flatlined. “Success” has been reduced to a handful of metrics as proxies for preparedness, as systems failed to invest in crucial indicators¹⁵ and skills¹⁶ for long-term well-being and success. The path toward strong instructional leadership requires an investment in student achievement that emphasizes a more robust understanding of rigorous expectations and agency for students and adults in the community.




PRINCIPALS MATTER IN EVERY CONTEXT, AND CONTEXT MATTERS.



All Americans share responsibility for correcting injustice, thus all schools have a role to play in creating a more just world. Principals who shift the focus of their leadership to high-impact strategies in supportive school systems can create schools where students are agents of racial and economic justice. This is true in any demographic or geographic context, for all students and educators. Acknowledging each person's unique identity, culture, and history—for adults and students—is part of creating a welcoming climate where students thrive.

While there are universal truths related to school leadership, there are specific lessons we can draw from the experiences of principals serving in different parts of the country. Rural principals have historically engaged closely with their communities to secure resources, and their district offices are quite lean. What can we learn from those experiences? Today, many rural principals are seeing a growing non-English speaking/immigrant population arrive at their schools. What can they learn from urban principals when it comes to welcoming newcomers and serving them effectively? While every principal is leading in a different context, smart leaders find promising approaches to adapt and emulate. The guiding principles in this paper apply in every setting and local contexts to varying degrees.

Whether students live in a demographically homogeneous or diverse region, they will leave school and enter a more pluralistic and complex society. School serves society by being a place where students encounter, explore, and appreciate differences and develop a sense of their membership in the local and global community. There are increased demands on leaders in schools that are under-resourced, or that serve students of color and those from low-income communities, or whose stories and identities have been systematically invalidated. While circumstances may vary from place to place, enacting a rich vision for public schooling requires having leaders who understand the historical context of our country and the implications for the communities they serve. There is no version of a just society where any local community can ignore our interdependence. This translates into a call for leadership toward a rich vision from every school, in any setting.



District demands often hinder principal leadership and generate incoherence and misalignment.

There is a lack of alignment between what principals are required to do, what research suggests principals do, and what principals are evaluated for doing. District investments in school leaders are undercut by compliance demands from state and district policy. Meanwhile, district superintendents are often far too removed from principals and their work, often leaving them to their own means or the preferences of a principal supervisor. The result: a patchwork of incoherent systems, varying priorities, and inefficiency for schools and districts.

The pandemic, racial reckoning, and politicized debates only exacerbate these issues and compound a workload that's already too taxing for school principals. The cost is clear: based on *pre-pandemic data* nearly one-fifth of principals depart annually,¹⁷ particularly¹⁸ in schools serving communities of color. COVID has further accelerated principal exit plans.¹⁹ Turnover carries real financial cost. Replacing a leader was priced at an average of \$24,000 and as high as \$52,000 in a study of districts in South Carolina.²⁰ Another study²¹ offers an estimate of \$75,000 to develop, hire, and onboard each principal. Absent assurances of quality, the churn interrupts progress for school communities, and creates a missed opportunity for individual leaders to grow in their leadership and impact.

A primary function of a district is to create efficiency for the local school community. Tighter systems alleviate technical demands on principals and allow school leaders to focus on an ambitious vision for their school. Assigning operational functions to the central office or school-based designees—building maintenance, budgeting, state accountability reporting, and the supervision of *subsets of* school personnel—sometimes presents a tradeoff for principals. Taking some decisions off their plate may at first feel like a loss. But it's not. The real opportunity cost for districts would be ceding indiscriminate autonomy to school leaders, choosing breadth of influence over depth of expertise, and obscuring the more impactful work that only principals can do.

The imperative is clear: what society needs from schools has changed, and the role of the principal must evolve to answer that demand. They are the leaders who most influence whether students are prepared to enter a complex global community and build a just society.





Shifts in Principal Practice

Rethinking the role of the principal places them at the nexus of creating coherence and repairing systemic inequities.

We view these shifts in the role of the principal as lenses through which to refocus a vision for school leadership. The shifts outlined here are interdependent, each providing supportive value to the others. They are not prescriptive tactics, because some of the actions needed will take on unique forms in local contexts. And as any principal will attest, leading a school and leading change, is also a personal journey. This shouldn't be mistaken for agnosticism—the data are clear that racism continues to impact student and professional experiences. This must be named and corrected. Similarly, the research is clear that students thrive in school and beyond when schools address their social, emotional, and academic development (SEAD). The combination of community engagement, school climate, and SEAD generate a collective commitment to improvement, making leadership more powerful and more sustainable.

ONE

Lead learning, and lead as a learner.

Student outcomes matter. Knowledge, wellness, and skill are essential to students having the opportunity to thrive in life. Principals must organize resources toward developmentally appropriate practices and must promote learning and wellness in instructional design. Instructional leadership should center on SEAD, not solely test scores, as the core instructional ambition. Students need rigorous content, masterful instruction, and human connections that facilitate learning.²² Correcting unacceptable racialized outcomes requires explicit attention by principals, potentially by promoting the use of high-quality culturally responsive instructional materials²³ and by developing a representative faculty.²⁴ In this environment, educators can guide all students toward the competency and agency that will carry them beyond their school years.



TWO

Lead through attention to school climate.

Principals should create a climate that positively influences student outcomes²⁵ by emphasizing belonging and agency, where students have responsibility for shouldering real cognitive challenges²⁶ and play an active role in constructing their experiences.²⁷ A climate that is safe, goal-oriented, and informed by high expectations is a climate in which students can flourish.

Similarly, it is important for principals to create a positive and healthy climate for school staff. Constructive conditions among faculty are positively correlated²⁸ to student achievement and teacher retention.²⁹ A school with a purposeful climate enables the principal to distribute essential and complementary functions, such as operations and reporting, to staff and to the central office. This optimizes the principal's energy around a rich vision of student success and related priorities.


THREE

Lead with a community orientation.

Culturally responsive³⁰ school leadership is a commitment to equity, especially where the principal stands with and for communities that have been historically underserved. These leaders validate the community's values and experiences, listen to the stories of students and parents before making decisions, elevate students as agents of their own learning, and distribute authentic authority to the faculty and community.

Principals should embrace the voices of the community to gain the capacity and capital to encourage action and navigate difficult conversations. The community-facing principal is the central office's conduit to parents, students, and teachers, and conversely represents the community's interests to the district.





Shifts in the System

School system leaders have a responsibility to create the conditions for principals to learn and lead.

Strong, equitable school systems set principals up to act as primary agents of the system. Such districts stand in service to principals and the school communities they serve. They provide them with meaningful professional learning experiences that deepen their knowledge of important areas of youth development, leadership, and talent development. Evaluation must reinforce this commitment to continuous improvement and professional growth. Metrics for success should include academic and non-academic measures, setting aside compliance and operations as essential to the school, but not to the principal. When the principal role changes direction, the system must re-align so leaders do not expend valuable energy working at cross purposes.

ONE

Invest in authentic principal preparation and learning experiences.

System leaders should develop a systemwide cohort model for preparing principals through apprenticeship and in-service opportunities. Principals, their supervisors, and central office staff co-construct ongoing learning experiences that enhance their leadership and knowledge of the science of learning and development—an undervalued area in preparation programs—that is essential to impactful leadership.

System leaders should also establish principal peer groups for collective reflection and mentoring. Summer academies and principal-in-residence programs provide opportunities for leaders to step away, refresh their perspectives, and refine their strategies. Renewal and personal sustenance are essential to sustainable leadership.



TWO

Design for efficiency, support, alignment, and outcomes.

System leaders should centralize systems to provide customer service³¹ for school leaders and their communities so principals do not have to be accountable for, and an expert in, everything. When possible, they should also support school staffing models that empower principals to delegate operational functions; when it is not possible, they should centralize those functions. At a minimum, they should set an expectation for principals to prioritize leadership for learning, school climate, and community over operations.

The superintendent and principal supervisors can bolster a principal's leadership with public messaging that says "Yes, we expect our leaders to pursue improved student achievement and create welcoming communities." And, "No, principals are not responsible for every tactical decision." And finally, "Yes, the principal has our support." Superintendents should get to know principal needs and listen to school leaders, by developing a rotating principals' cabinet. The upshot is common goals and schools that embrace the system's intent.

THREE

Set the right expectations, then evaluate and support.

System leaders can provide effective support and supervision for schools by restructuring the role of a principal and aligning evaluations. System leaders must be clear about their expectations, align school accountability and formal evaluation, and provide deep, ongoing support to principals focused on fewer, high-leverage indicators. Districts can enable this kind of leadership stance by taking steps such as providing data dashboards with robust and diverse compilations in service to schools. These should provide disaggregated data and serve as a visualization aid for communities. Local accountability structures and school improvement planning can be rooted in the same research that elevates a rich vision through SEAD and climate as priorities for the principal, protecting space for school-specific goals that are determined in partnership with the community.

Systems catalyze effective school leadership by turning principal supervisors' attention to key domains³²—learning, climate, and community. These supervisory relationships differentiate by the principal's stage of development and school context, rather than focus on compliance and employment decisions. In this framing of supervision, system leaders provide opportunities to correct systemic biases, provide political cover for principals who are developing new skills, and increase retention of valued leaders. Principals will thrive when supervisors encourage principal agency, expertise, and community connections.





Conclusion

Establishing a rich vision for students and schools demands rethinking of the role of the principal.

The role as currently constructed leaves principals without focus and dissipates their energy and expertise.

Leading towards a rich vision means homing in on the science of learning, and understanding the school as a social, societal institution. It means combating racism and historical factors that inhibit opportunities for students and the community as a whole. It means understanding that a leader stands with, in, and for a community.

There are system leaders who have begun this journey, policymakers who promote these investments, and educational support organizations with the same goals. Our ongoing rethinking of the role of the principal will include follow-on engagements and publications that explore promising work in the field. The Aspen Institute Education & Society Program (Ed & Society) will collaborate with education leaders to further articulate opportunities, strategic priorities, recommendations for system leaders and policymakers by:

Highlighting practical approaches to supporting principals through recruitment and retention strategies including pipelines, professional learning, and evaluation.

Identifying policies, guidance, and rules about the principal in resource allocation, accountability, and human capital incentives.

Engaging national Ed & Society partner organizations to elevate the role of the principal as a key player in any theory of change for schools and systems.

This will require more than a retrofit or a few new lines in the job description. School systems must reorient system structures so they better serve schools and create strong school leadership, guided by research and authentic development and support.

There is no profession in education with more untapped potential to prepare students to inherit and create a most just world than the principal. It's time we treated it that way.



ENDNOTES

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