Effective professional development helps provide the foundation for successful leadership. This Spotlight will empower you with tips for motivating teachers all year long; strategies for improving both verbal and nonverbal communication with school staff; research on effective principal preparatory programs and where they can still be improved; insights for increasing collaboration between school and district leaders; and more.

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Teachers and faculty play a game to get to know one another better during a Welcome Back training at Chicago’s CICS Bucktown in August.
After two years of fits and starts, school leaders and their staff are itching to return to the familiar rhythms of school life.

But if there’s anything they’ve learned over the pandemic years, it’s that well-laid plans can quickly go awry.

With that kind of learned uncertainty looming in the background, how do school and district leaders get their staffs pumped up early in the school year and keep them motivated over the next 10 months?

Here’s the advice we got from school leaders who are making it happen.

Get to know your teachers

Oprah has her ‘Favorite Things.’ Get yours ready, too. Use the first few days of school to learn what brings your staff joy: their favorite drinks (hot and cold), songs, snacks, games, music, colors, T-shirt sizes, and hobbies.

That’s the kind of information you can use to personalize key moments over the next few months—from surprises, to awards, to tokens of appreciation.

“Love is in the details,” said Belicia Reaves, the principal of Capital City Public Charter School in Washington, D.C., who asks her staff to fill out a Google form with their favorite things at the start of each school year.

“I think the instructional coaches literally have candy chests,” Reaves added. “The teachers can go into their office and grab a piece of chocolate.”

Music is one of the things that Cindy Sholtys-Cromwell, the principal of Kelso Virtual Academy and Loowit High School in Kelso, Wash., uses to bring a smile to teachers’ faces during the year. (She asks them to add their “go-to music” and other favorite items to a list.)

Sholtys-Cromwell has used the submissions to create a playlist in her “JammyPack,” and hits the play button on a teacher’s go-to tune when she enters their classroom.

“We all have that music tune that when you hear it, it makes a good day great, and it makes a rough day, like ‘OK, I can get through this,’” she said. “My secretary knows if I am playing ‘Sweet Caroline,’ which I love, that means I am stressed out, and Cindy needs a time out for a minute. Music can be cues for people.”

At CICS Bucktown Chicago, teachers can find their beloved LaCroix sparkling water in the administrators’ offices and teacher’s lounge.

During a long and harried school day, just reaching for something familiar—however small—“goes such a long way,” said Sarah O’Connell, the school’s principal.

“It’s those little things that add up, those small things that add up to really make a difference,” she said. “It’s not necessarily some big thing. It’s the consistency of the small things.”

Ensure teachers have the tools to start off right

White boards, extra paper, stacked bookshelves, new rugs—even working air conditioners. Don’t underestimate just how much of a difference it makes for teachers to walk into their classrooms and have everything they need to do their jobs.

O’Connell and Kristin Eng, one of CICS Bucktown’s two assistant principals, spent a lot of time this summer checking off items from teachers’ classroom wish lists. They were looking to support not just their teachers’ physical learning environments but also to ensure that the staff had important teaching tools, such as access to the online curriculum, ready to go on Day 1.

Walls even got a fresh coat of paint; classrooms were deep-cleaned.

“Kristin and I were both teachers; it’s something we empathize with, and we know it could be hard coming back, with the pandemic,” O’Connell said. “We want to start fresh. We want a brand new year and [we want] to be optimistic about what’s ahead. It is really nice when things look organized, and things are looking really good, and you have the resources that you need.”

Remember October—and February, too

The school year has its peaks and valleys, and principals should be ready to give their staff a jolt when they hit the lows.

Teachers arrive excited and raring to go in August and September, but then classes start, and
All children have the natural desire to learn. It’s up to us—the educators—to help them realize their potential. At Cognia, we partner with schools to build a holistic approach to continuous improvement that supports positive student outcomes. From accreditation and STEM certification to online differentiated professional development and a comprehensive suite of diagnostic tools—we are ready to support you.

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standardized testing rolls around, and pretty soon all that energy starts to fizzle.

October and February—often called the “slump months” —can get pretty tough.

It’s a good time to increase staff check-ins, plan team-building events (a joint workout, yoga or dance class, perhaps), activate your mental health committees, or cut down on a professional development session so teachers have more time to grade or plan lessons.

“We try to be strategic about those things, so it’s not just random,” said O’Connell, who has also invited a chiropractor to the school to give massages to the staff.

“It’s like we know this week is going to be tough, there’s a lot of testing, and reports that are due. We really try to map it out, so [the support] really comes at the right time.”

“Plan ahead and prepare,” said LaDonna Braswell, the principal of North Parkway Middle School in Jackson, Tenn., who organizes outings, including potluck dinners, and additional pick-me-ups for staff during months when teachers are “emotionally tired.”

North Parkway Middle School hosted a tailgating and face-painting event as a bonding exercise for staff in February, followed by karaoke in March. Staff also wrote appreciative shout-outs celebrating their colleagues, which the school’s secretary read over the intercom.

Break the monotony of staff meetings

Staff meetings can be a slog, so Sholtys-Cromwell, the Washington state principal, finds ways to ensure they’re not just another thing teachers have to get through.

She often asks teachers at the start of meetings to pull out their phones, scroll through their pictures, and select a photo—school appropriate, of course—that instantly brings a smile to their faces. She then asks them to share the story behind the photo with someone in the room.

It’s a short exercise that immediately lifts the mood.

“It takes at maximum three minutes to do that activity—four if you have chatty staff—and it instantly re-gounds and builds in that happy hormone again,” Sholtys-Cromwell said.

Reaves, the Capital City Public Charter School principal, does something similar to kick off meetings, which she calls, “silent appreciations.” Staff members write on Post-it notes what they appreciate about their colleagues—which can include thank yous and inside jokes—and then post the notes on their colleagues so they can read them.

“From janitorial staff to head of school, we celebrate each other so that everybody gets recognized for their contributions,” Reaves said.

Still, Sholtys-Cromwell is sure to be respectful of teachers’ time and keep meetings on time.

“I’ve never had a meeting that I didn’t have to,” Sholtys-Cromwell said. “I’ve always tried to bring some laughter at the beginning and end it with my why, my passion, and how we are making a difference in the lives of the students and the families we serve. Always ground back to what we do. I do that throughout the year.”

Show—and share—the love

Show your staff that you appreciate them in big and small ways—and at unexpected moments.

Reaves marks staff members’ birthdays with “birthday shout-outs” and an email to the entire staff highlighting what she knows about the staff member and their contributions to the school community. Other staffers chime in in the replies.

“It’s just my personal way of letting them know that they are unique to our Capital City family, and we value them,” Reaves said.

On “Joy Days” she gives gift cards and writes “small notes of love” to staff with reminders of something wonderful they’d done.

She sends personal cards to staff during transitions in the school year—for example, during winter break or at the end of the year. Students joined in during the winter break last year and decorated their teachers’ doors with their own signs of affection.

“Last year, it was tough in terms of shifts and changes, and, I think, coming back, it was just a note of gratitude for both the staff and the students,” Reaves said.

And whenever she goes into a teacher’s classroom or has a one-on-one with a teacher, Reaves makes sure she follows up promptly with a note of appreciation or praise. (The Post-it notes are a holdover from Reaves’ days as an instructional coach.)

The quick, personal feedback validates the effort the teachers put into planning the activity or lesson.

“It’s a quick way to get feedback—I can leave it at the computer or on the desk,” Reaves said. “It’s instantaneous feedback that teachers love and thrive off.”

Each month, Sherelle Barnes, the principal of Edgewood Elementary in Baltimore, shines the spotlight on a staff member. The recognition is complete with a glamour shot of the month’s honoree. Staff can be recognized for both in-school and out-of-school accomplishments. One teacher, for example, recently earned plaudits for work in their master’s program.

“If you don’t celebrate along the way, people are not going to be with you at the end,” Barnes said.

Cromwell also adds some levity to her expressions of gratitude, dropping off unexpected treats for her staff.
On a whim, she’d buy snacks in blue wrappers and leave them on teachers’ desks with a note, saying, “Out of the blue, I just want you to know that I care.” On other occasions, she’d leave a pack of Extra gum, with a sticker, “Thank you for going the extra mile.”

The aim: to ensure teachers know that you see and appreciate them.

“People don’t stick around in jobs they don’t feel appreciated in,” Sholtys-Cromwell said. “And I think that it is so critical that principals show appreciation. ... But I love having fun with my staff. Work hard, play hard. And to be able to do that to build and unite a team—this is great stuff.”

Create a new calendar

Don’t just mark the 100th day of school (please do) or regular holidays. Celebrate other occasions that can inject a bit of fun into the building.

Sholtys-Cromwell created “The School Celebration Newsletter” for school leaders, a subscription newsletter with more than 3,000 on the mailing list, that has alternative days that principals can celebrate.

On National College Colors Day (Sept. 2), everyone on campus can don a college or military T-shirt or sweatshirt. Schools that participate in the AVID college-readiness program can include the celebration as part of their school’s end-of-year report, Sholtys-Cromwell said.

On National Dog Day (Aug. 26), principals can ask staff to take photos of their dogs, which then can be made into a collage and shared on the school’s social media pages.

There’s also a National Tell A Joke Day (Aug. 16).

“I love knock, knock jokes,” said Sholtys-Cromwell, “so, you better believe I bust out my knock, knock joke book that day, and everybody I see—whether I know you or not—gets a knock, knock joke.”

Give teachers time

Time is one of those things teachers can’t get enough of. Finding ways to give some of that back to them will make you a hero.

During the early days of the pandemic, when North Parkway Middle School was still in a hybrid mode, Braswell, the Tennessee principal, ensured that teachers got an hour to take care of whatever they needed to, whether it was to take mental health break or sit quietly for 30-60 minutes in a room or their car.

It allowed them “to move away from the structure of the day,” Braswell said. “That’s why I implemented something to say we care about you, you’re just as important as our kids.”

Freeing up time for teachers during the school day allows them to finish grading at school so they don’t have to take work home with them, said Marcus Belin, the principal of Huntley High School in Huntley, Ill.

That means they can spend more time with their families or on their personal hobbies, Belin said.

Have a temperature check

Principals don’t always have to be the ones responsible for keeping up the mood.

There are others on the team—teachers, assistant principals, instructional coaches—who already have deep connections with the staff and who people in the building already flock to because of their expertise, experience, wisdom, and personalities.

How about asking them to help?

Braswell is trying something new this year by designating a staff member in each department as a kind of “positive temperature gauge.”

“When they feel it’s a bit negative on [the] team or ‘I feel like we’re at our low moments,’ they are responsible for coming up with something for their team or making sure that the team is working [to overcome] the low moments,” she said.

Braswell was inspired to try this approach this year after seeing the staff’s excitement at the start of the school year. She was determined to maintain that vibe.

“Everything was positive,” she said. “The quiet people were excited, talking. It was almost unbelievable ... I looked around and said, ‘We’re going to have to keep this up.’ The administrative team can’t be everywhere at all times, but we can empower teacher-leaders to empower morale.”

Build relationships, show empathy

Teachers bring their entire selves to work—they are parents, sisters, fathers, and mothers. Many are shouldering additional responsibilities on top of their job duties.

Inquire, with genuine concern, about the mother who is sick or a child who just started daycare.

Get to know them so that when something doesn’t seem quite right, you can spot it before it’s too late. When you ask how they’re doing, really mean, ‘How are you doing?’

Shared activities, such as games or a meal, can also strengthen bonds between principals and staff.

“When you break bread with someone, you get to know them on a different level,” Sholtys-Cromwell said. “And providing those opportunities—whether it’s Rice Krispies treats, or Nachos, or we order out breakfast early one morning and we eat before school starts—it just builds that relationship, it builds your culture that ‘We are here, we are here to work, but we’re here to take care of each other.’”

And principals should find ways to build communities within their buildings.

Many teachers collaborate with like groups, whether it’s 9th grade teachers working together or science teachers running collaborative planning sessions. Mixing teams can give a boost to teacher morale, Reaves said.

Keep people in the loop

Uncertainty is one of the things that causes anxiety. So keeping teachers informed about what’s next is extremely important, Reaves said.

The school’s instructional coaches ensure teachers are apprised of what’s ahead through a weekly Sunday bulletin. That heads-up gives the staff a chance to get ready, Reaves said.

“Our school loves to know what’s coming so they can prepare—in the same way that we want teachers to prepare for kids,” Reaves said. “It doesn’t have to be a gotcha moment.”

That goes both ways. As the principal, you also have to get staff input and constantly check what’s working, what’s not, and how and where you can improve.

You can get input through formal surveys or simply asking staff to write their reflections after a meeting or professional development session. Eng, the Chicago assistant principal, said. Eng and O’Connell host quarterly coffee klatches with staff.

“It’s a part of the check-in, but we also just let them know, ‘Hey this is what’s happening in the school for this quarter or what’s coming down the pipeline,’” Eng said.

Don’t forget to pay some extra attention to the new teachers, who will be adjusting all year long.

Openness and honesty are key—especially when things are not rosy, O’Connell said.

“It’s important that we are constantly talking about it, and we are open about the frustrations, because [they’re] going to happen,” O’Connell said. “I feel like sometimes leaders will try to be like ‘No, everything is perfect,’ or ‘There aren’t going to be tough times.’ We know there are going to be; so we have to be prepared for it and be OK talking about things that are going on, and be open, and honest about it.”
Educators are in the business of communicating. Teachers need to master it, and so do principals, central office staff, and superintendents.

If you work in a school district, you know that one wrong word at the wrong moment can spell disaster—and sending mixed signals can have real consequences.

Here are some tips to increase the odds that your message gets across and has the intended impact.

Try a once-a-week newsletter

Building-level educators are busy. Don’t blast them all day with emails from every central office department. Yes, the information is important. But consider this: If they’re constantly getting updates, they are going to start tuning them out.

How about a weekly newsletter? A once-a-week bulletin, with a corner for department updates; what building-level educators need to know for the week ahead; a summary of state and district mandates and changes that affect them; and what’s on the horizon, including upcoming meeting dates, and deadlines.

(Of course, communicate urgent issues right away.)

“I need the meat and potatoes,” said Cindy Sholtys-Cromwell, the principal of Kelso Virtual Academy and Loowit High School in Kelso, Wash. “Summarize it, and tell me what I need to do.”

The upshot? Building-level educators know when to expect the newsletter. And if they miss it—or forget the date of the next curriculum meeting—it’s just one search away in their mailbox.

There is more than one way to say something

Think about what you’re trying to communicate—and what you’re hoping to accomplish.

Depending on your goal, an email might do the trick. But there are times when a short video clip would suffice, or a text message—or even a phone call. The old-fashioned bulletin board in a place where everyone gathers works, too—if only to reinforce a message you’ve already communicated.

The important questions to ask yourself: What are you trying to say? Who is your audience? And what’s the best way to get that message through to them?

Sherelle Barnes, the principal of Edgewood Elementary School in Baltimore, knows her staff is made up of people with different personalities, so she uses emails, group texts, and other ways to reach them.

Teachers at her school get a text message—a more urgent, but still familiar form of communication—when important dates are approaching.

“We’re doing progress monitoring this week. Don’t forget,” a text message might read, Barnes said.

“Having that variety is huge for my teachers,” Barnes said.

In keeping with the quick and simple approach, Marcus Belin, the principal of Huntley High School in Huntley, Ill., says try something new, like a newscast or short videos, depending on the message. Just give the highlights.

That approach worked well for Belin at the start of the pandemic, when information changed quickly and he needed to get timely news to the school community.

Short, recorded clips posted on social media cut through the information overload.

“People got tired of reading and sitting behind the screens,” he said.

Follow up with a conversation

Sometimes, you just need to talk.

While emails and other written communication appear easier in the moment, the tone—whether it’s urgency or levity—doesn’t always translate when written down.

A face-to-face conversation can reinforce the importance of a message already communicated through another medium, clear up any confusion, and even ease anxieties.

“How you say what you say matters,” said Belicia Reaves, the principal of Capital City Public Charter School in Washington, D.C.

“If [something] matters to you enough, then email to ask for a conversation, and then have a conversation.”
Leaders should understand nonverbal communication and be able to control it.

That’s according to Ruby Nadler, a leadership coach and mindfulness program director at SIGMA Assessment Systems, who spoke with Education Week about the messages we send without words, through body language, facial expressions, and more.

“It helps you to convey whether you’re trustworthy, your sincerity, and even whether you’re lying,” said Nadler, who has a Ph.D in cognition and perception. “We’re really gauging all of that in our interactions with others, largely unconsciously.”

Here’s a few ways she suggests school leaders can use nonverbal communication to improve interactions and get their message across:

1. Ensure your body language reflects what you’re saying

Make sure what you’re saying out loud is aligned with what your body language is conveying.

“Get your nonverbal communication to the purpose of why you’re speaking or what you’re trying to do, whether it’s persuasion, motivation, things like that,” Nadler said.

[Pay] attention to things like: what is the tone of voice? How quickly do you talk? Where do you put an emphasis on words?.”

RUBY NADLER
Leadership coach, SIGMA Assessment Systems

She suggests school leaders keep an open posture when communicating with coworkers, and make consistent eye contact. They should make sure their hand gestures and facial expressions are aligned with what they are saying.

According to her, since nonverbal communication is largely unconscious, many people have never practiced being mindful of it.

“That’s why there’s a lot of advice around it, because our nonverbal communication is handled by our unconscious mind,” Nadler said.

2. Pay attention to your daily communication habits

Nadler suggests taking note of how you communicate nonverbally in your day-to-day routine. For example:

- What’s your tone of voice? How do you sound?
- Is your posture open or closed? Are you facing the person you are speaking to, with your hands apart? Or are you angled away, with arms crossed? Are you leaning in or away when talking to someone? (That can convey interest in a conversation or a lack thereof.)
- What is your eye contact like? Too little or too much eye contact can make the person you’re interacting with uncomfortable, according to Nadler. A steady gaze can help put the person at ease.
- What emotion are you conveying with your facial expression?

3. Get input on how you communicate

Ask the people around you for feedback on how you communicate in the workplace, since they are in close proximity and can notice things you may not have otherwise picked up on, according to Nadler.

For example, after giving an interview, your colleague can let you know if you could have done more to make a good impression.

4. Control your posture and facial expression

“I’m sure you’ve been in situations where someone’s giving a speech to someone and you can tell that they’re not sincere, or that they’re not very enthusiastic,” Nadler said.

By recognizing how you’re feeling and how it affects your facial expressions and posture, you can begin to deliberately practice having a mastery over those things, she said.

5. Modulate your tone of voice

Leaders can practice speaking in a tone of voice that is comfortable to use but still conveys authority, Nadler suggests.

“Paying attention to things like: what is the tone of voice? How quickly do you talk? Where do you put an emphasis on words?” she
said. “Practicing those things can be helpful for conveying appropriate authority and just the meaning of what you’re trying to say.”

6. Be mindful of challenging situations

Educators are reeling from the repercussions of the pandemic. Teacher job satisfaction hit an all-time low this year. And school leaders are facing a staffing crisis. Those stressors make it even more crucial for school leaders to be mindful of how they communicate with staff.

“Okay, I’m talking to a group of teachers who have been through a lot in the last two years. How do I want to show up?” Questions like these can help leaders harness their power more effectively,” said Nadler.

7. Signal empathy and authenticity

According to Nadler, when people in a position of power want to show that they care, they should avoid appearing closed off.

Keep an open posture, said Nadler, and make more eye contact when communicating with staff.

At the end of the day, Nadler says, “there’s no getting around being passionate and empathetic towards others.”

Little changes to incorporate supportive nonverbal communication could be key to making valuable connections.

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**6 Nonverbal Communication Tips for School Leaders**

1. **Facial expression**
   - Recognize how you’re feeling and how those feelings affect your facial expressions.

2. **Posture**
   - Having an open posture can convey interest and readiness to listen. Face the person you are speaking to, keep your hands apart, and lean in instead of away.

3. **Hands**
   - Keeping your hands apart can contribute to an open posture. Crossed arms can contribute to a closed posture, which can imply a lack of comfort, a lack of interest, or disagreement or defensiveness.

4. **Eye contact**
   - Too little or too much eye contact can make the person you’re interacting with uncomfortable. A steady gaze can help put the person at ease.

5. **Tone of voice**
   - Keep your voice at an even level. Pay attention to how quickly you talk and where you put an emphasis on words. These things can be helpful for conveying appropriate authority.

6. **Distance**
   - How far apart you stand from somebody should reflect the level of your relationship. Standing too close can make a person uncomfortable, especially if you don’t know them very well.

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**Sources**: Ruby Nadler, Ph.D., leadership consultant, SIGMA Assessment Systems Inc.; Education Week reporting

Image: Getty
Research on the types of training and support effective principals need has become clearer over the last two decades, but a new, in-depth report also shows that the application of those lessons varies from state to state.

The report, Developing Effective Principals What Kind of Learning Matters?, digs deep into the research on principal preparation and professional development and what principals think of it.

And the work isn’t done.

“This is still a young body of research on three things ... whether principals make a difference, how they make a difference, and how do you prepare principals to make a difference,” said Steve Tozer, a professor emeritus at the University of Illinois Chicago College of Education and one of the report’s authors.

Here are some key takeaways from the report from the Learning Policy Institute, done with the support of the Wallace Foundation.


We already know the ingredients of high-quality principal prep

Some of the main ingredients of these programs include:

- A rigorous selection process for candidates;
- Cohorts or networks for aspiring principal-candidates;
- Curriculum that reflects real-world practices;
- Clinical experiences longer than 20 weeks;
- Mentors and coaches for the candidates; and
- Learning opportunities that give candidates a chance to address actual school-based challenges—for example, through role-playing or projects.

High-quality preparation programs also, of course, are grounded in teaching would-be principals instructional-leadership practices and about managing and leading people and change. And they include close partnerships between the provider (whether a university or a private organization) and the districts in which graduates will work.

High-quality professional development, on the other hand, should also include small-group support for school leaders, such as one-on-one mentoring, professional learning communities, and opportunities for principals to practice what they’re learning.

Over the last decade, a higher percentage of principals who’ve exited their preparation programs are saying they’ve had exposure to the key parts of high-quality principal-prep, according to the report. Of course, the depth of that exposure varies from program to program, district to district, and state to state.

For example, 87 percent of principals who got their certification in the last 10 years said they had access to content on leading instruction that focused on higher-order thinking, compared with 80 percent of those certified more than 10 years ago.
Overall, however, about 70 percent of principals said they had minimal access to almost all the areas considered key to high-quality principal prep, the report says.

A higher percentage of principals from California, which changed its licensure and approval process, were more likely than their peers nationally to say they’ve been exposed to key program content.

While 83 percent of principals nationally, for example, said they got training on leading schoolwide change to boost student outcomes, 97 percent of California principals said the same.

**Training on equity remains a challenge**

The new report, led by Linda Darling-Hammond, the president and CEO of the Learning Policy Institute, cited research showing that exposing principals to just one course on “meeting the needs of diverse learners” can help them work with students from diverse backgrounds.

But research in this area is still scarce, with most of the scholarship focused on students of color, according to the authors, who found only one study among those that fit the criteria centered on working with LGBTQ students.

About 82 percent of principals nationally said they were prepared to lead schools and support students from diverse cultural, linguistic, and racial backgrounds. But among recent graduates—those who were certified over the last 10 years—that number is 86 percent. And in California, 99 percent of principals said they were prepared to respond to the needs of students coming from diverse backgrounds.

And the ease of access to those programs varies, according to the report.

School leaders heading schools with large numbers of students experiencing poverty reported having fewer opportunities in their programs with exposure to some of the key content areas in their prep programs, such as the cohort-based model and real-world, problem-solving aspects of the job than their peers in schools with fewer students experiencing poverty. They were also less likely to have coaches and mentors.

The authors noted, however, that that was not the case in California, where nearly all principals—99 percent in the survey of California principals used in the report—said their program provided opportunities to work in a collaborative learning environment with various stakeholders and students from diverse linguistic, ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds.

**State policy can make a big difference**

While states wield huge influence over principal-preparation and professional-development programs, not all are using that power, the report says.

One big area is adopting standards for school leaders, which all states and the District of Columbia have done, according to a 2015 report by the University Council on Educational Administration, a group of higher education institutions that offer leadership-preparation programs.

State policies were inconsistent in other important areas where they can make a big difference. Those buckets include the quality of the internship experience that aspiring principals get, the ability to promote and support strong partnerships between school districts and universities, and the power to increase the rigor of candidate selection and recruitment. The oversight of preparation programs is also another area where states have enormous leverage, according to the report.

Fewer than half the states had rigorous selection processes and district partnerships, and only Illinois and Tennessee met all the requirements laid out by the university council. Eleven states met none of the requirements, according to the UCEA report.

There are examples where principal prep and support changed drastically after robust state action. Since California changed its licensure and approval process, principals have reported they’ve felt better prepared to lead schools in a variety of areas, according to surveys.

In Pennsylvania, all new principals are required to participate in the Pennsylvania Inspired Leadership Program within their first five years on the job. The program is tied to the state’s school leadership standards. Results have been positive, including an 18 percent drop in principal turnover compared with turnover in the years before the program came along.

And North Carolina’s Principal Fellows Program, which started in 1993, provides scholarships to aspiring principals. The program covers a master’s degree in school administration as well as a salary in the second year to allow principal-candidates to work as an assistant principal under the supervision of a veteran principal.

Are things changing? Possibly. All 50 states and the District of Columbia said they planned to invest in school leadership when they submitted their Every Student Succeeds plans to the U.S. Department of Education, according to a 2018 analysis by New Leaders, the New York City-based school leadership development program.
It’s all for the students

Like you, we are passionate about education. This passion drives our work each day as we look to create opportunities for students to thrive. As the largest school accreditation organization in the world, Cognia™ is a leader in educational improvement. We acknowledge that school improvement is complicated and nuanced work. It can be difficult to know where to start. We believe starting with leaders creates the most impact.

Start with leaders

In schools, we know that the number one factor in the success of students is the teacher. While teacher quality helps a school community reach its potential, leadership has immense influence. Education leaders and decision makers, whose actions affect hundreds or thousands of students, deserve an innovating, responsive, and collaborative support structure. It’s naïve to think that models and actions of the past will be sufficient to navigate the challenges and opportunities in the future. Our world simply moves too fast and is too complex for leaders to rely on recycled strategies.

If we care about students, let’s worry about leaders. Leaders have isolated positions, often with unrealistic demands and pressures. Their rate of turnover is higher than in any other positions in education. Cognia has created online and in-person communities to support school principals, district superintendents, and executive teams in addressing their unique challenges. These communities bring leaders together to tap into the collective expertise

Cognia’s leadership communities offer a

“...great balance of pragmatism and peer consulting and feedback.”

Superintendent, Cherokee County Schools (GA)
1 in 6 principals leave their school each year. Source: NASSP, 2018

and wisdom of their peers. Our structures of support align to our belief that “circles are better than rows.” In other words, collaboration and knowledge sharing is more effective than traditional conference-style professional learning.

Support the system and culture

Roland Barth may have said it best when he defined culture as, “the way we do things around here.” Schools and districts have systems and policies tied to the culture that have been cultivated over time. Successful school systems have aligned themselves based on the teaching and learning outcomes they desire, from the boardroom to the classroom. They are unwavering in their missions and match their resources, including human capital, to the needs of the students they serve.

We know that to partner with educators, we need to help schools embrace their strengths and address their blind spots. This process of improvement is easier said than done, but Cognia has crafted a series of action steps and services that we know — as we have witnessed — improves the systems and culture of schools.

Great leaders, whether they have the title of superintendent, principal, or teacher, don’t do anything alone. System improvement requires an all-hands-on-deck approach and clear information to make intentional steps forward. Fortunately, Cognia can help. We are proud to offer supports, systems, and tools to help our schools focus on what they are designed to do — teach and guide students.

Continous Improvement System

Cognia’s continuous improvement model is used by schools, districts, and state agencies across the country. The process engages all stakeholders in a community.
Provide for the teacher

In schools, teachers have more of an impact on students than any other adult. Teachers give students their all, while their jobs are becoming harder and more demanding. If ever there was a time for concern and action to provide for our teachers, it is now. We believe that teachers need to feel part of a team, while at the same time, need autonomy and support on an individual level.

Teachers are as invested in their own learning as they are committed to the learning needs of their students. If we listen to teachers, we find they want to contribute to the mission of their schools. They also want deeply to learn and grow as professionals. A healthy school focused on continuous improvement provides these opportunities. Yet, we can't expect schools or districts to have the capacity to do everything on their own. Their leaders turn to Cognia as an extension of their own teams to enrich their staff through offerings such as customized, online professional learning and a teacher feedback platform. And ultimately, by supporting the professional needs of teachers, we support students and culture.

Like leaders in all industries, education leaders affect others in a trickle-down approach: Innovative and responsive leaders support growing teachers who, in turn, nurture students to build bright futures. Invest in yourselves, invest in your teachers, and your students will reap the rewards.

A global network of enthusiastic educators, Cognia partners with schools and districts to provide information, guidance, and support. Our holistic approach to continuous improvement encompasses accreditation and certification, assessment, and professional services.

cognia.org/SupportEducators
Teaming Up School and District Leaders: A Win-Win Approach to PD

By Denisa R. Superville

n the professional development world, principals head off to sessions tailored to their on-campus needs, while superintendents and others in the central office often take a different track.

But what if those two paths aligned? What if school-level leaders and those who create the overarching vision for the school system and hold the purse strings were on the same page, getting steeped in the same leadership, management, and school improvement strategies, philosophies, and practices?

While that kind of coordination makes sense, it’s not always the case, meaning that principals returning from professional development sessions can find their enthusiasm for new initiatives thwarted by the central office. The inverse can also be true: Central office plans can hit the skids in school buildings because principals weren’t in on the planning.

But some programs aim to break down the silos between central office and schools, acknowledging that both school and district leaders must have a shared vocabulary and understanding of their district’s plans to fully support principals and transform their school systems.

“When there’s a gap or a disconnect between the PD and the district’s strategic plan ... there’s not a place to implement because there are other conflicting initiatives, or just the day-to-dayness of the work,” said Mikel Royal, the former director of school leader preparation and development at Denver Public Schools. She now works as a district advisor for the George W. Bush Institute’s School Leadership Initiative.

That initiative’s Talent Management Framework, which was piloted in four districts in Texas, Utah and Virginia, recognizes that principals are important levers of change in school districts, but that equally important is the evolution of the central office into one that creates the conditions and supports for principals to succeed. That involves changing district policies, compensation, and professional development for school leaders and those who work closely with them.

The program, which is offered at no cost to the participating districts, takes a team approach, with key players such as the districts’ chief academic officers, principal supervisors and—importantly—principals working on areas such as revamping evaluation systems and compensation structures for principals.

The districts trying out this method to support and strengthen school leadership are the Austin and Fort Worth school districts in Texas; Chesterfield County Public Schools in Virginia; and Granite School District in South Salt Lake City, Utah.

Increasing leadership capacity

This type of cross-functional approach to professional development does not happen often enough in education, Royal said. But it increases the chances that what principals and central office staffers are learning will be successful and gets baked into the system.

Karen Molinar, an assistant superintendent in Fort Worth, said a key goal was getting departments in the central office to put principals at the center of their work.

That has meant including principals’ voices in the district’s effort to strengthen supports for school leaders.

The district-and school-level partnership has resulted in subtle and not-so-subtle shifts, including restructuring district meetings to ensure that teaching and learning are at the forefront. The school system has also developed incentives and stipends to keep principals on the job by creating mentor and peer-leadership opportunities.

“Ultimately, we work for the principals,” Molinar said. “That’s the hardest part—getting everyone to have that kind of buy-in, that campus leaders are the most important employees in our district.”

Increasing leadership capacity

The leadership development program for district and school leaders at the Austin-based Holdsworth Center also takes a systemwide approach to professional development. Its goal is to help leaders and central office staff alike grow their personal leadership, cultivate leadership in others, craft their own definition of leadership for their school systems, and develop pathways for employees to move up the ladder. Twenty school districts have signed up to participate since the program launched in 2017, with 43 districts applying for six spots to start this year’s five-year partnership, said Lindsay Whorton, president of the Holdsworth Center.

Funded by the H-E-B grocery store magnate, Charles Butt, the Holdsworth program also is free to districts and aims to help them create a pool of trained leaders who are ready to step in when vacancies arise, and ultimately, improve outcomes for students.

To lay the groundwork, the program starts with a five-member team from the central office—the superintendent and key central office staffers—who spend two years on personal leadership, talent development, and strategic planning.

The first of two groups of principals join two years after the central office cohort, and they’re also accompanied by a school-level team, which can include assistant principals,
teacher-leaders, and instructional directors.

Over separate two-year periods, school-level and district-level participants visit schools and businesses to see management and talent-development practices and innovation inside and outside of K-12.

Both the superintendents and principals are assigned executive coaches to aid their leadership-development journey, and Holdsworth provides technical assistance to help districts along the way. The School Leaders Initiative also provides coaches to the district teams, who connect educators with resources and help troubleshoot challenges that pop up.

“We start with district leadership because we know how important it is that the superintendent and key members of his or her team are building an environment in which principals can thrive, and that there is alignment, there is coaching, and there’s support for principals,” Whorton said.

The program also seeks to equip principals with the skills to surmount the “big on-the-job challenges that principals face,” she said, an especially critical task right now as school and district leaders address the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The 60,000-student Arlington Independent School District, located about 20 miles east of Fort Worth, Texas, was among the first to participate in the Holdsworth Center’s program.

Marcelo Cavazos, Arlington’s superintendent, was looking to shore up gaps in the district’s leadership development and pipeline strategy. For one, the district didn’t have clear leadership pathways—employees didn’t know how to get from one level to the next—and when school leadership vacancies arose, the district often had to resort to using interim principals because it lacked a bench of ready leaders.

“Many times, leadership development is something that is kind of ... another task ... , and if it’s not structured or well thought out, it doesn’t yield the results,” Cavazos said.

The central office team members went through a 360-degree leadership assessment to understand their own leadership styles and how those approaches affect others with whom they work. That process was significant for A. Tracie Brown, Arlington’s chief schools officer, who oversees principal supervisors and school leaders.

A visit to General Electric Co.’s corporate offices in New York to learn about the company’s talent development system was pivotal to the district’s focus in that area and the pathways to leadership it created as a result.

Arlington’s central office staff learned how GE spots, grooms, and retains talent, its culture that emphasizes developing talent, and the system it uses to evaluate employee performance and differentiate support, Brown said.

The visits to the business world helped district leaders gain insights into how the corporate world leverages its systems to bring out the best in employees, said Brown, who also traveled to Singapore to learn about that country’s world-famous school system.

Arlington has since created a talent-management system and descriptions of the attributes it would like the person in the job to have.

It’s started leadership pathways, which include teacher-leadership positions at the building level and a path to get from the school into the central office, Brown said.

As a result, the district now has three internal principal-candidates for every vacancy that pops up, she said.

“We are finding that we are able to fill positions because we have a bench, and we’ve poured into that bench,” she said.

The staff, Brown said, now feels more engaged and involved. “They feel like they have a seat at the table,” she said.

Brown has also seen an evolution in the way principals approach their jobs. School leaders are more aware of how they communicate and work with staff. And there’s a common language around leadership between the central office and school sites.

“They see themselves as CEOs of their buildings,” Brown said of principals. “They carry the weight of that. They are also developing talent in a way they were not doing before.”

Even a longtime educator like Cavazos appreciated the assistance of a leadership coach, who helped him address his blind spots, one of which was improving how he gave feedback.

“If you are not providing effective feedback, you are not growing others as effectively as you could,” he said.

Looking for signs of progress

While all professional development is geared toward improving student outcomes, it’s been difficult to measure the impact of Arlington’s district and school-level changes on students because of the disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic.

But Natasha Harris, the principal of Lynn Hale Elementary School in Arlington, points to progress before the pandemic as evidence that this approach to professional development is yielding results.

Harris had expected to work as an assistant principal for four to five years before becoming a principal. But that timeline accelerated when Harris’s boss got a middle school job; Harris got the job after serving as an AP for two years.

Harris and a school team of three teachers—she added the dean of instruction in the second year of the program—formed the school-level team from Hale Elementary that participated in the Holdsworth program.

She admits to being initially skeptical of how applicable some of the lessons were to education, especially those delivered by some experts whose forte was not K-12.

“OK, I love it, I love what I’m hearing,” she recalled thinking. “However, you are not in education. How do you know what we go through?”
But she soon saw the value in a perspective from outside of K-12.

“Yes, we have to be strong instructional leaders,” she said. “But we also have to know how to navigate teams and understand who they are. That goes across all contexts—whether it’s in education, whether it’s in business, whether it’s in other industries.”

Over a two-year period, Harris and her team attended 12 in-person sessions throughout the state and also visited high-performing schools, including the High Tech High system in San Diego, to learn firsthand the ingredients that propelled those schools.

An important part of having the central office and principals participating in the program was that Harris could count on the district to ensure that her campus was staffed when the team was out of town.

That’s often a roadblock for principals, especially those leading elementary schools, who sometimes pass up professional development opportunities because of inadequate staffing.

Forty-three percent of elementary school principals listed “insufficient coverage” of their buildings as one of the hurdles to accessing professional development, according to a 2020 survey of school leaders by the California-based Learning Policy Institute and the National Association of Elementary School Principals.

A central part of the Holdsworth program is helping principals work on a problem of practice with which they’d been struggling.

Harris and her staff chose an area of deep concern: writing. Only 39 percent of students at Hale Elementary had passed the state’s writing exam in the 2017-18 school year.

Beginning in December of 2018, Harris and her team took some of the tools from Holdsworth and conducted a root cause analysis. They pored over data and shared, grade by grade, why students were not meeting state standards.

“By the time we got through 4th grade, the 4th grade teacher was in tears,” Harris said. “She said, ‘We’ve done this to ourselves. We have not made writing a priority for our students. We are not giving them opportunities to write in math, science, and other areas.’”

They then identified specific strategies and practices to boost the passing rate. They devoted an entire PD day to preparing a plan of action to address the problem of coming up with common writing strategies from pre-K through 6. Harris divided teachers into teams, with one team looking at writing prompts that could be tied into the holidays, another crafting a rubric that could be scaffolded, and still another analyzing data.

At the end, they ensured that every teacher had a rubric to assess student writing, showing what students had to do to demonstrate proficiency and what they needed to know if they were not proficient. They ensured that students had writing exercises in all content areas, including in math and science. Students’ writing samples were posted on bulletin boards throughout the school and sent home to parents.

By the end of the 2018-19 school year, after months of putting the plan into gear, the passing rate had increased to 61 percent, Harris said.

Harris said she had learned about the root cause analysis method at Holdsworth and in her current doctoral program, but not in her principal-preparation program. She thinks that approach has been key to getting students to improve their writing before the pandemic interrupted schooling.

And there are also other key takeaways from Holdsworth participation that she’s infused into the school, including improving school climate, providing leadership opportunities for others, and coaching and mentoring staff.

Several teachers have since left the campus to take district leadership roles. Four teaching assistants are working on their bachelor’s degrees to become teachers. “It’s a ripple effect,” she said.

Such intensive professional development can be expensive. Very few districts could afford such a long-term financial commitment if they had to foot the bill or spare several central office staff for four to five days every five weeks.

One challenge: keeping the momentum going forward

Cavazos thinks the district’s robust response during the COVID-19 pandemic was an outgrowth of the teamwork and collaboration between the central office and school-level teams built over the years.

“Our school district was really well-prepared, without realizing what we were preparing for,” Cavazos said.

Now comes the tough part: keeping the momentum going after the five-year commitment from Holdsworth ends.

Cavazos is confident that many of the leadership lessons district and school leaders learned over the years are now embedded in the system.

The district plans to use some of the federal relief dollars that school systems received to blunt the financial impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic to continue investing in the leadership systems it built over the last few years.

The Dallas school system is one of the six districts to join the Holdsworth program this year, and Michael Hinojosa, the superintendent, is hoping that the initiative will help the district develop a robust pipeline of leaders, especially for its secondary schools, where the district struggles to fill vacancies.

Hinojosa is taking the chief of staff, the deputy superintendent, chief academic officer, and chief of school leadership—all of whom are intimately involved in the district’s long-term strategic vision—as part of the team.

“That’s very important to me,” Hinojosa said. “Those are the people we need right now to get us ready.”

Dallas already has initiatives to steer employees into leadership roles, including one that taps high-potential candidates, who spend half-days learning from a central office staffer. About 15 of the highest-performing principals also get additional support. But those in the highest levels of district management also must also be open to the benefits of professional development and carve out the time to take advantage of it, Hinojosa said. He recalls once suggesting that a finance officer get additional training, and the response was that the individual was too busy.

“That’s the mindset that a lot of people have,” he said.

But those at the top should set a tone that they place a premium on continued professional growth and development, he said.

“You have to have someone who is committed as a leader to show the long-term benefit of this,” he said. “The longer the superintendent can stay in the chair, the better chance [you have] to put together a program like this.”
Want Successful Professional Development? Try Promoting Curiosity

By Larry Ferlazzo

What is the best professional-development session you ever participated in, and what made it so good?

‘Collective Efficacy’

Tonia Gibson, a former teacher and school leader in Australia, is a senior managing consultant at McREL International and a co-author of Learning That Sticks:

The best PD I experienced as a primary school teacher in Australia was peer coaching with a particular twist: when I was matched with a colleague from a different grade level. Then we weren’t obsessed with critiquing the quality of the content; rather, we could observe each other’s classrooms based purely on what we’d discussed in our preobservation. It also prevented us from comparing one another’s kids, which of course isn’t the point.

Pairing teachers separated by at least one grade level, such as kindergarten and 2nd grade, was even better. That also removed another potential distraction, the temptation to judge one another for promoting underprepared students. With that definitive break in content between us, we could concentrate on observing teacher use of effective practices and positive student learning behaviors.

Ultimately, the question we wanted to know focused on our students and their perception of what they were learning through classroom activities—not, “What are you doing?” but “What are you learning?” We visited each other’s rooms four times per quarter and focused on giving feedback on the learning behaviors of the students. I came to realize that the way my students would answer three simple questions told me more about what was happening in my classroom than any formal evaluation or teacher-focused observation: “What are you learning?” “Why is this learning important to you?” and, “How will you know when you’ve been successful?”

I should add that teacher quality is not assessed through high-stakes formal observations in Australia. When I was promoted to leadership, I was encouraged to continue to be visible in classrooms via the peer-observation model. If you’re wondering how we managed to assess teachers without high-pressure formal observations, it was based on the effectiveness of their planning, knowledge about particular students/cohorts, and their depth of knowledge about teaching and learning, along with support-focused discussions about what we saw and heard through these more frequent, informal observations.

Now that I’m with an organization that produces in-person and online PD, I put a lot of thought into what makes such sessions valuable. Many districts in the U.S. and worldwide are still using the “sit and get” model that rarely translates into improved practices at a school or classroom level. Reflecting on my own experiences as well as the research of Linda Darling-Hammond and others, here are the qualities I like to see:

• Job-embedded and collaborative—like those peer-coaching sessions I experienced earlier in my career.

• Supportive of professional curiosity. Curiosity is essential for effective learning to occur, yet traditional PD models skip it entirely. Just like students, teachers need opportunities to ask such questions of each other as: What do we need to improve? Why is this important? What evidence do we have that supports this need? Involving teachers in identifying their PD needs makes them partners in the process.

• Focused on collective efficacy. When we approach our work with the belief that together we can address and be successful in tackling our identified challenges as a school staff, then we are more likely to develop a culture of support and collaboration.

• Followed up with sustained support from school leaders. “One and done” professional learning needs to be a thing of the past. Most teachers will tell you that when they participate merely for compliance, they don’t learn much.

Professional development for teachers is a wonderful concept that must have seemed shockingly progressive at first, but it needs to keep up with the times. I hope we’ll move away from a compliance mindset and instead help each other grow curious and continuously learn, just like we strive to do with our students.

Student Panels

Becky Corr is an English-language-development team leader for the Douglas County school district in Colorado. In her role with DCSD as well as the owner of EdSpark Consulting, she provides coaching, professional development, and family-engagement opportunities:

Several years ago, my team and I facilitated a professional-development session centered on teaching multilingual learners that teachers have said was one of the best sessions they have participated in. The concept was simple, it elevated student voices, and was ultimately quite powerful.

The professional-development session began with an introduction to our multilingual learners. We provided some school and district demographics, including the top languages spoken by our students. We shared data that illustrated the growth of our multilingual learners specific to the school. The heart of the session was a student panel where students responded to teacher-generated questions.
About a week prior to the session, we had provided an anonymous opportunity for teachers to submit questions, which provided a safe space to ask about what they wanted to know.

Preparing students and teachers for the student panel was the key to success. Our teaching team screened the questions and then selected the top questions in partnership with the students. An integral step in the process was partnering with students to select the questions. This provided students with a platform to share their stories and elevate their authentic voices.

For the next week, we supported students in writing responses to the teacher-generated questions. Some students wrote full responses while others jotted down some notes or bullet points. Students practiced responding to the questions to become comfortable with the format and speaking in front of an audience. The questions ranged from, “What can teachers do to help you?” to “What do you wish that your teachers knew?” Another teacher also asked, “What can we do to help you feel welcome?”

During the professional-development session, we introduced the student panel and communicated the norms. Delineating the format of the session was especially important. Then, our team took turns asking students the questions, and students responded. To wrap up the session, teachers shared with each other in small groups about what they learned and what they would like to implement.

Teachers continue to comment that the professional-development student-panel session was impactful for them.

**Topic Self-Selection**

Luiza Mureseanu is a secondary school teacher currently working as instructional resource teacher, K-12, for ESL/ELD programs, in Peel DSB, Ontario:

The most rewarding professional learning happens when given the possibility to select or self-register a topic of interest.

Recently, I participated in a few professional learning sessions about MCT (multicultural teaching) that I found equally interesting and rewarding. The value of these sessions got enhanced by a few specific factors.

First, the content was relevant and applicable to my teaching setting as I work with a large population of multilingual learners. These professional-development sessions provided me with instructional strategies and resources applicable to my daily teaching and learning.

Second, the sessions provided a good balance between theory and practice in using MCT. The reference list was extremely helpful and rich but also very practical.

Finally, the participants demonstrated a lot of enthusiasm and passion in addressing the topic, so the learning process was really enhanced by the desire to do the learning together. Teachers learn best when they are invested in the professional learning and share a plethora of resources with each other. These professional learning experiences eventually generated a strong PLN (professional learning network) among educators from various geographical areas and boards.

**‘Lightning Round PD’**

Helen Vassiliou has been working with ELs for the Lakota Local school district in West Chester, Ohio:

The best professional development I have participated in was called “Lightning Round PD” held by teachers for teachers. Professional development should be taught by active teachers in 30 minutes or less, contain no fluff, be easy to implement, classroom-tested, and doable to implement the next day.

In the lightning-round session held via Zoom, each teacher was asked to prepare either an idea, tech tool, or strategy they use in the classroom and share it in no more than two minutes. This kind of low-stress, less-prep professional development is energetic, quick-paced, and lively keeping everyone engaged. There is a genuine element of competition and creativity that gets showcased, and the zero down time between each share-out pulls people in to learn more from a colleague without distraction. Each staff member leaves with a menu of ideas to try that piques their interest and warrants them to learn more from each other.

I implemented this style of PD this year, and two weeks later, teachers are coming to me and others with a newfound curiosity to try something in their instruction for the benefit of their students. The best teachers are still learning and igniting fires into their instruction, which brings about a contagious spirit that keeps students at the heart. When thinking about the “knowledge loop,” teachers are learning, creating and sharing strategies and tools with each other, strengthening our practice, and not being stagnant.

As an educator, I expect to grow every time I come to a learning community. Learning from each other elevates our voice and our niche in the world. There is something imperative about teacher trust and the richness of our experiences that impacts us.

Larry Ferlazzo is an English and social studies teacher at Luther Burbank High School in Sacramento, Calif.
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