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# PRIORITIZING PRINCIPALS GUIDEBOOK

## CENTRAL OFFICE PRACTICES THAT SUPPORT SCHOOL LEADERS

*THE SCHOOL LEADERSHIP DISTRICT COHORT*

*MAY 2021*

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## Guidebook Author:
Dr. Gina Ikemoto, Senior Advisor, School Leadership Initiative

## Research and Editing Support:
Anne Wicks, The Ann Kimball Johnson Director, Education Reform, George W. Bush Institute

Dr. Eva Chiang, Director, Evaluation and Research, George W. Bush Institute

Ann Clark, District Advisor, School Leadership Initiative

Dr. Mikel Royal, District Advisor, School Leadership Initiative

Alex Dowdy, Program Manager, Education Reform, George W. Bush Institute

## Expert Review:
Brian Moskowitz, Long Beach Unified School District

Matthew Smith, Des Moines School District

Greg Basham, Hillsborough Public School District

Glenn Pethel, (Retired) Gwinnett County Public Schools

## George W. Bush Institute School Leadership Initiative District Cohort:
Austin Independent School District (TX)

Chesterfield County Public Schools (VA)

Fort Worth Independent School District (TX)

Granite School District (UT)

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# Why Focus on the Central Office?

> *"There are two kinds of people in this district:*
> *those who teach and those who support those who teach."*
>
> —Alvin Wilbanks, Superintendent, Gwinnett County Public Schools

Principals play a critical role in school improvement and student success.[1] Research shows that principals are second only to teachers in school-level factors that affect student achievement.[2] A recent review found that replacing a below-average principal with an above-average principal tended to have larger impacts on student learning than other educational interventions.[3] The principal role is particularly important in low-performing schools, where improvement does not occur without strong leadership.[4]

Strong principals ensure that the school culture, instruction, staffing, and systems are all designed to support the achievement of every student. Principals have a multiplier effect, transforming classroom pockets of excellence into schoolwide systems of effective practice. Principals also play an important role in improving equity by disrupting systems of inequality and fostering culturally responsive classrooms.[5] Strong principals are great bosses.

Principals need the support of their district's central office in order to lead their campuses well. This guidebook addresses how the structure and behavior of central office teams can make or break what happens on campuses. Those who are organized and authentically operate with a students-first mentality support the equitable achievement of all students. Those who are focused on compliance and nonstudent-focused outcomes can distract and disrupt the work of principals.

Not surprisingly, a RAND study of six districts implementing comprehensive strategies to improve principal leadership found that their efforts had widespread positive effects on principals and in turn on students. Students in schools led by the impacted principals markedly outperformed those attending comparison schools in both math and reading, and principal retention improved. What is more, the strategies used by these districts were a feasible and relatively inexpensive approach to improving student achievement.[6] The COVID-19 pandemic has arguably made central office support for principals even more critical as schools were called upon to solve not only a transition to remote learning but also operational issues such as lunch distributions, device and Internet access, and safety protocols.[7] Many principals—especially those serving communities of historically marginalized students—need guidance, resources, and technical assistance from their central offices to address these demands.

1   Bloom, N., Lemos, R., Sadun, R., & Van Reenen, J. (2014). *Does management matter in schools* (NBER Working Paper 20667). National Bureau of Economic Research. https://ideas.repec.org/p/nbr/nberwo/20667.html; Branch, G. F., Hanushek, E. A., & Rivkin, S. G. (2012). *Estimating the effect of leaders on public sector productivity: The case of school principals* (NBER Working Paper 17803). National Bureau of Economic Research. https://www.nber.org/papers/w17803; Fryer, R. G., Jr. (2017). *Management and student achievement: Evidence from a randomized field experiment* (NBER Working Paper 23437). National Bureau of Economic Research. https://www.nber.org/papers/w23437; Grissom, J., Kalogrides, D., & Loeb, S. (2012). *Using student test scores to measure principal performance* (NBER Working Paper 18568). National Bureau of Economic Research. https://doi.org/10.3386/w18568; Leaver, C., Lemos, R., & Scur, D. (2019). *Measuring and explaining management in schools: New approaches using public data* (Policy Research Working Paper 9053). World Bank Group. https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/32662; Louis, K. S., Dretzke, B., & Wahlstrom, K. (2010). How does leadership affect student achievement? Results from a national US survey. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement,* 21(3), 315–336. https://doi.org/10.1080/09243453.2010.486586
2   Leithwood, K., Louis, K. S., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *How leadership influences student learning.* The Wallace Foundation. https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/How-Leadership-Influences-Student-Learning.pdf
3   Grissom, J. A., Egalite, A. J., & Lindsay, C. A. (2021). *How principals affect students and schools: A systematic synthesis of two decades of research.* The Wallace Foundation. https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/How-Principals-Affect-Students-and-Schools.pdf
4   Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin (2012); Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom (2004).
5   Rigby, J. G., & Tredway, L. (2015). Actions matter: How school leaders enact equity principles. In M. Khalifa, C. Grant, & N. W. Arnold (Eds.), *The handbook of urban educational leadership.* Rowman & Littlefield. https://education.uw.edu/sites/default/files/u1461/Actions%20Matter_Final_w%20rubric.pdf
6   Gates, S. M., Baird, M. D., Master, B. K., & Chavez-Herrerias, E. R. (2019). *Principal pipelines: A feasible, affordable, and effective way for districts to improve schools.* RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2666.html
7   Honig, M., & Rainey, L. (2020). *District systems to support equitable and high-quality teaching and learning* (Research Brief No. 10). EdResearch For Recovery. https://annenberg.brown.edu/sites/default/files/EdResearch_for_Recovery_Brief_10.pdf

The George W. Bush Institute's School Leadership Initiative (SLI) District Cohort Research Project is a five-year effort with four school districts to test two frameworks—Principal Talent Management (PTM) (Figure 1) and Effective Implementation. This collaboration is designed to improve how districts prepare, recruit, support, and retain principals.

This guidebook, which focuses on principals' Working Environment, is the fourth in a series. Each guidebook addresses one or more components of the Bush Institute's PTM Framework, including Principal Preparation, Principal Recruitment and Selection, Principal Supervision, Principal Professional Learning, Principal Performance Evaluation, Principal Compensation and Incentives, and the Working Environment for Principals.[8]

Given the importance of context, there is no one right way to address the components for improvement. However, all SLI cohort districts found it helpful to start with establishing leadership standards that define the knowledge and skills expected of principals in that district.[9]

*Figure 1. Principal Talent Management (PTM) Framework*
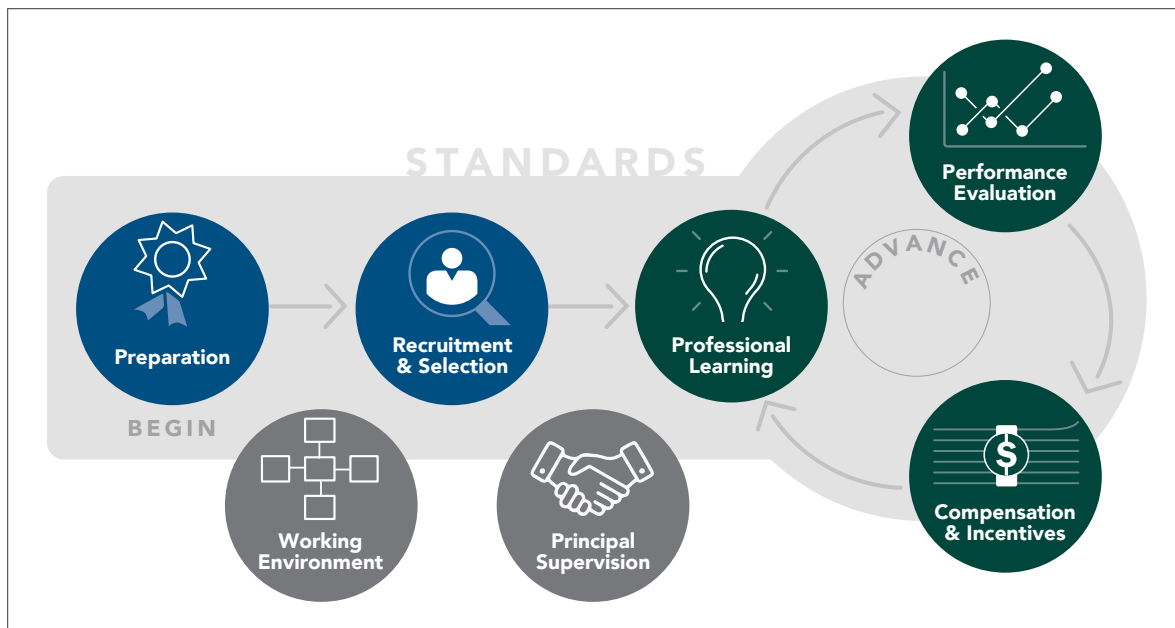


This guidebook focuses on one aspect of the working environment: how central offices can organize themselves to serve schools so that schools can serve all children well.

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8    For more information on the School Leadership Initiative and to access additional resources—including the PTM framework and guidebooks on Principal Recruitment and Selection, Principal Learning and Supervision, and Principal Performance Evaluation—see the initiative's website at https://www.bushcenter.org/explore-our-work
9    For more information on how to create leadership standards, see discussion of school leadership frameworks on pp. 3–9 of the *Principal Performance Evaluation Guidebook* at https://gwbcenter.imgix.net/Publications/Resources/gwbi-principal-performance-guidebook-20190429.pdf

**Park View Elementary School: A Real-Life Example of Central Office Misalignment with Principal Priorities**

*Mrs. Rodriguez, principal of Park View Elementary School, enthusiastically greeted Mr. Peterson. "Happy Monday morning!" Mr. Peterson was a first-year teacher, and Mrs. Rodriguez knew he was nervous about today's classroom observation. The grade-level team leader, Mrs. Clark, had mentioned that Mr. Peterson had been texting her over the weekend with anxious questions about the observation. Mrs. Rodriguez gently asked, "What do you want me to focus my observation on today?" Mr. Peterson responded, "Student talk. I'm trying to get the kids to talk more and me less. We are also working on getting them to use evidence and elaborate their thinking." Mrs. Rodriguez nodded her head knowingly and held up her phone to show that she was powering it down—a powerful symbol she liked to use to convey the importance of these regularly scheduled observations.*

*The students began filing into the room, and Mr. Peterson began the lesson. Before he was 10 minutes into it, a voice from the loudspeaker filled the room to announce, "Mrs. Rodriguez, please contact the office for an important phone call." She apologetically dismissed herself from the classroom and powered up her cell phone as she hustled down the hallway to her office. She decided to use the "Call Back" feature to immediately respond without listening to the voicemail. Sandy, a manager in the superintendent's office, answered the call, "Oh, thank goodness I got ahold of you. I just found out this morning that our progress report to XYZ Foundation is due today! I need to know how many of your students participated in the afterschool program they have been funding. Can you send that to me by noon?" Mrs. Rodriguez suggested that the district request an extension. But Sandy rejected the idea, explaining that the superintendent was keen to please this important funder.*

*Since the assistant principal in charge of the afterschool program was out on medical leave that day, Mrs. Rodriguez felt flustered trying to find a strategy to quickly answer the simple question of how many students were enrolled in their afterschool program. She knew they all rode a specially scheduled bus and decided to call the transportation office to see if they had a list. She searched the intranet for a phone number but could only find an email. Knowing that she needed to contact someone immediately, she texted her friend who was a neighboring principal and married to someone in the transportation office. She called her friend's husband, who explained that he couldn't help her and suggested that she contact another person, William. Armed with William's direct number, she placed the call only to leave a voicemail. Not knowing when her message would be returned, she brainstormed another strategy.*

*Eventually, Mrs. Rodriguez walked room to room to individually ask all of the first-, second-, and third-grade teachers how many of their students attended the program. In each case, the teacher stopped instruction to consult their class list and count the students. Mrs. Rodriguez was able to respond to the central office request by 1 p.m., which was only a little after the deadline. Instead of feeling a sense of accomplishment though, she felt disappointed in herself knowing that she not only failed to provide useful feedback to her first-year teacher that morning, but that she had also interrupted instruction in 12 classrooms. She vowed to herself to be a better instructional leader the next day.*

As the example illustrates, some school districts get in the way of school leader success. Too often, the central office distracts principals and their staff from focusing on student needs. Imagine you were a superintendent and you discovered how this situation had unfolded. What would you identify as some underlying problems in the example? What actions would you want your district to take to prevent similar problems?

Research has documented many similar situations of misaligned priorities and a lack of shared goals. As a result, mistrust often divides central office staff and school-level leaders.[10] This can happen when central office staff see their roles as monitoring compliance rather than as providing tools and support, or when they see the central office priorities as more important than campus priorities. In doing so, they create obstacles that make it more difficult for principals to accomplish their goals.[11] Even when relationships between central offices and schools are positive, interactions between the two can be characterized by bureaucratic formality.

When central offices work in support of schools, students benefit. For example, schools that serve students in poverty have needed the most support to address the pandemic.[12] Their students were less likely to have devices, Internet access, or an adult at home to help navigate the quick pivot to virtual learning.[13] In many cases, parents of the impacted students were more likely to be essential employees who continued to work, facing increased risk and infection rates.[14] These schools have needed quick and innovative solutions to serve their students. For example, they have needed help procuring devices and recruiting new staff to backfill staffing shortages the pandemic created. So, when central office systems were bureaucratic, inefficient, and/or unresponsive to their needs, at-risk students were more likely to suffer the consequences.

Some school districts, however, have successfully contributed to improved school practices and student outcomes by transforming the culture and work of central office employees.[15] These districts are learning organizations that provide strategic direction and departments that work collaboratively to provide cohesive tools, guidance, and support to schools. They develop true partnerships with school principals in order to support schools in ensuring the success of all their students. Central offices can also create conditions that enable principals to provide equity-focused instructional leadership.[16]

This guidebook provides concrete guidance on how to effectively focus central office culture on addressing school needs and supporting principals.[17] The conclusion summarizes how these strategies may be used to address the problems that surfaced in the example above.

10  Daly, A. J., Der-Martirosian, C., Ong-Dean, C., Park, V., & Wishard-Guerra, A. (2011). Leading under sanction: Principals' perceptions of threat rigidity, efficacy, and leadership in underperforming schools. *Leadership and Policy in Schools, 10*(2), 171–206. https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2011.557517
11  Honig, M. I. (2012). District central office leadership as teaching: How central office administrators support principals' development as instructional leaders. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 48*(4), 733–774. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X12443258
12  Dorn, E., Hancock, B., Sarakatsannis, J., & Viruleg, E. (2020). *COVID-19 and student learning in the United States: The hurt could last a lifetime.* McKinsey & Company. https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-student-learning-in-the-united-states-the-hurt-could-last-a-lifetime
13  Esquivel, P., Blume, H., Poston, B., & Barajas, J. (2020, August 13). A generation left behind? Online learning cheats poor students, Times survey finds. *Los Angeles Times.* https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-08-13/online-learning-fails-low-income-students-covid-19-left-behind-project
14  Espinoza-Madrigal, I., & Sampson, L. (2020, September 10). *This school year, low-income students will suffer the most.* WBUR. https://www.wbur.org/cognoscenti/2020/09/10/chelsea-school-lawsuit-covid-students-ivan-espinoza-madrigal-lauren-sampson
15  Bottoms, G., & Fry, B. (2009). *The district leadership challenge: Empowering principals to improve teaching and learning.* Southern Regional Education Board. https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/District-Leadership-Challenge-Empowering-Principals.pdf
16  Honig & Rainey (2020).
17  Since the examples are drawn from districts with student enrollments of 20,000 to 200,000, the recommendations will be the most relevant for districts of similar sizes. For districts of smaller size, some recommendations will be more relevant at regional levels.

**What are strong central office practices for supporting principals?**
The George W. Bush Institute has distilled prior findings from research and practice into two sets of central office practices that enable true partnerships between central office and principals.

**Strong districts use these strong practices:**

**Create a Culture of Customer Service**
1. Set the expectation that schools are the central office's clients
2. Select staff who have a mindset and skills for supporting school needs and priorities
3. Develop and reinforce customer service skills of central office staff

**Effectively Interact with Principals**
4. Structure central office to meet school and student needs
5. Communicate effectively with principals
6. Design administrative systems to be effective and responsive
7. Gather principals' input and perspectives to inform decisions

**What process did the George W. Bush Institute use to identify strong central office practices and make recommendations?**
The practices described in this guidebook are part of principals' working environments, which is one component of the Bush Institute's larger Principal Talent Management (PTM) framework. The first version of the framework was drafted in 2016 based on a rigorous research review conducted in partnership with the American Institutes for Research (AIR).[18] This review used What Works Clearinghouse standards as the criteria for identifying studies with rigorous research designs and evidence of causal relationships with two key outcomes of PTM: principal retention and improved student achievement.

The Bush Institute team then gathered research-based examples from published descriptive studies and collected artifacts from districts who had been the subjects of empirical studies. The team also conducted interviews of experts to gather information about their tools and recommendations for implementation. The Bush Institute used this information, as well as research published after 2016 to update the PTM framework in 2020.[19] The original framework had a component called "working environment" that addressed a central office culture of support and principal supervision. The updated framework identifies principal supervision as a unique and separate component.

Finally, this guidebook incorporates lessons the Bush Institute is learning through its partnership with four districts: Austin Independent School District (AISD), TX; Chesterfield County Public Schools (CCPS), VA; Fort Worth Independent School District (FWISD), TX; and Granite School District (GSD), UT. Expert external reviewers vetted a draft version of this report.

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18  For a detailed description of how the George W. Bush Institute gathered evidence and vetted findings through an iterative review process, see the George W. Bush Institute (2016). *Principal talent management according to the evidence: A review of the literature.* https://gwbcenter.imgix.net/Resources/gwbi-principal-talent-management-lit-review.pdf
19  George W. Bush Institute (2020). *A framework for principal talent management.* https://gwbcenter.imgix.net/Publications/Resources/gwbi-ptm-framework-feb2020.pdf

**How is this guidebook organized?**

1. *Key Components*—The seven strong practice sections each include:
   - Description of problematic practices. Problematic practices are common in districts that are just beginning to improve their central office culture of support (the target audience of this guidebook). Explicitly naming these problematic practices helps beginning districts identify and acknowledge problems they want to address.
   - Further details of the strong practices. Strong practices are defined and illustrated by concrete examples. The examples are typically based on research and/or case studies of districts who have done extensive work in central office alignment.
   - Steps for getting started. Getting started in changing practices can easily overwhelm districts. Where possible, we offer examples of how SLI Cohort districts "got the ball rolling."
2. *District to Watch*—A case study of Cleveland Metropolitan School District that illustrates strong practice in action.
3. *Learn More*—Further resources, including links to appendices, a summary of the strong practices, a table describing how each of the strong practices could have improved the situation at Park View, an annotated bibliography, and example survey items for a client satisfaction survey.

# Key Component: Create a Culture of Customer Service

Strong districts have leaders who encourage central office staff to both treat principals as clients and make school priorities their own priorities. This is because school priorities are to serve students and ensure that teachers have what they need to instruct all children well. A district that equitably supports campuses in high-quality ways is a district that is more equitably serving its students.

This proactive attitude begins with the superintendent and is deliberately cultivated until it becomes a way of doing business in the district. Districts create this culture by selecting staff for central office positions who have mindsets and skills for customer service. They also create organizational structures, such as networks or department liaisons, that allow central office staff to build relationships with schools. Finally, district leaders explicitly develop the customer service skills of central office staff and reinforce the importance of mastering these skills through the performance evaluation process.

## Strong Practice #1: Set expectation that schools are the central office's clients

Problematic Practice: Historically, central offices have been accused of being bloated and overly bureaucratic.[20] Central office culture is problematic when traditional command-and-control power dynamics prevail. In these districts, central office staff have a compliance mentality and see their role as telling schools what to do and holding schools accountable for doing it. The central office's needs are primary.

For example, when central office staff call a meeting, they expect principals to adjust their schedules to accommodate central office staff availability. They frequently send emails requesting information, expecting immediate responses from principals. They lack understanding that principals should be focused on engaging with students and teachers during the day. Principals in these districts lack autonomy to decline requests or negotiate deadlines. Superintendents of these districts do nothing to change the dynamic, or worse, they reinforce the problem by expecting principals to drop everything and respond immediately to their requests.

Strong Practice: In districts with strong practice, the superintendent and other top leaders clearly set a vision and expectation for central office to work in service of schools. For example, Gwinnett County Public Schools superintendent Alvin Wilbanks routinely says, "There are two kinds of people in this district: those who teach and those who support those who teach."[21] Another example, shown in Figure 2, is a customer service framework that Chicago Public Schools (CPS) Chief Executive Officer Dr. Janice Jackson utilized with her central office staff to guide interactions with schools and the CPS community. Jackson shared these commitments towards customer service at her first town hall after being named CEO in 2017.

20   Marzano, R. J., & Waters, T. (2009). *District leadership that works: Striking the right balance.* Solution Tree Press.
21   George W. Bush Institute. (2015). *Gwinnett County Public Schools: A systemic approach to scaling effective school leadership.*
      http://bushcenter.imgix.net/legacy/gwbi_gwinnett_county_public_schools_report.pdf

*Figure 2. Chicago Public Schools Serve Priorities*



**ServePriorities**

1. We will provide quality customer service.

2. We will serve students, educators, and schools.

3. We will listen to our customers and be responsive to their needs.

Chicago Public Schools

A customer service orientation means understanding and prioritizing principal needs. It starts with the premise that the customer is raising valid questions and concerns and includes a commitment to addressing them. For example, leaders in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools have encouraged central office staff to "get to the hard yes rather than the easy no." This guidance recognizes that it is often easier for central office staff to say "no" than to listen to a principal and to problem-solve thoughtfully. Customer service orientation gives principals the authority to decline requests or negotiate deadlines when they compete with school priorities. Strong districts have a process through which a principal can escalate a decision to department heads (and all the way up to the superintendent, if needed).

Top leaders in strong districts also set clear expectations that central office staff will be held accountable to meeting their customers' needs with efficiency and quality. For example, leaders establish expectations around expected response times to principal requests. See strong practice #4 for information on how these expectations can be reinforced through performance evaluation systems.

See Figure 3 for examples of how a service culture differs from a benevolent bureaucracy, which only provides lip service to customers.

*Figure 3. Benevolent Bureaucracy Versus Service Culture*

| Benevolent Bureaucracy | Service Culture |
|---|---|
| Thank you for your feedback. | Thank you very much. We appreciate the time you took to providing feedback, and here is how we are using your feedback. |
| Our goal is to improve each year. | Our goal is [insert concrete expectation/goal/ promise]:<br>• Finance: We pay all vendor invoices on time.<br>• Talent: We ensure that staff are paid on time.<br>• Information Technology: We update you on the status of your request, including deadlines by which you can expect resolution. |
| Success is favorable responses from majority of respondents. | Success is favorable responses from over 80% of respondents. |
| We are working on it; please be patient. | We are working on it; our goal is to address X by Y timeframe. |

Getting Started: Fort Worth Independent School District, one of our partner districts, started to shift the culture towards treating schools like clients by assigning each central office member to serve as an ambassador to a specific school all year. District leaders set the expectation that the ambassador would schedule regular check-ins, serve as a test proctor, assist on-site the first day of school, and provide coverage for special school events such as book fairs and school picture days. The system helps to build relationships and ground central office staff in the day-to-day realities of schools. It also sends a message that central office staff serve as support for whatever schools need.

## Strong Practice #2: Select staff who have a mindset and skills for supporting school needs and priorities

Problematic Practice: School districts struggle to address school needs when their selection processes for central office staff only consider technical skills (such as finance and technology) and not people skills (such as collaboration and communication). For example, a principal who was struggling to reallocate funding in his school's budget to support a school initiative felt frustrated when central office staff were not inclined to help him. He described an individual in the accounting department: "[Name] is great with numbers, but he just doesn't know how to talk to people. I don't think he understood why I needed to move that money, and frankly, I don't think he cared." Such attitudes hinder principals from taking actions their students need to be successful.

Sometimes, central office staff are quick to say "no" to principals because it is easier than taking the time to understand the problem and find a solution. This situation is exacerbated when job descriptions and hiring processes focus on process skills and compliance orientations without any focus on communication skills and results orientations. For example, a principal expressed frustration when an emergency required him to hire a teacher immediately. The human resources officer insisted on rigidly following a multistep hiring process that required weeks to obtain approvals, open the position, and finalize an offer.

This bureaucrat saw her role as ensuring compliance rather than as supporting the principal in problem-solving to serve students well.

Strong Practice: The district explicitly names and selects for customer service skills when hiring staff into the central office. Communication with candidates (e.g., recruiting materials, posted job descriptions, etc.) is clear from the beginning of the selection process that the district values candidates who are oriented towards serving schools and students. For example, as shown in Figure 4, the Denver Public Schools' careers webpage makes clear to potential applicants that all jobs fall into one of three categories: 1) teaching, 2) leading, or 3) supporting schools.

*Figure 4. Denver Public Schools' Careers Website [22]*
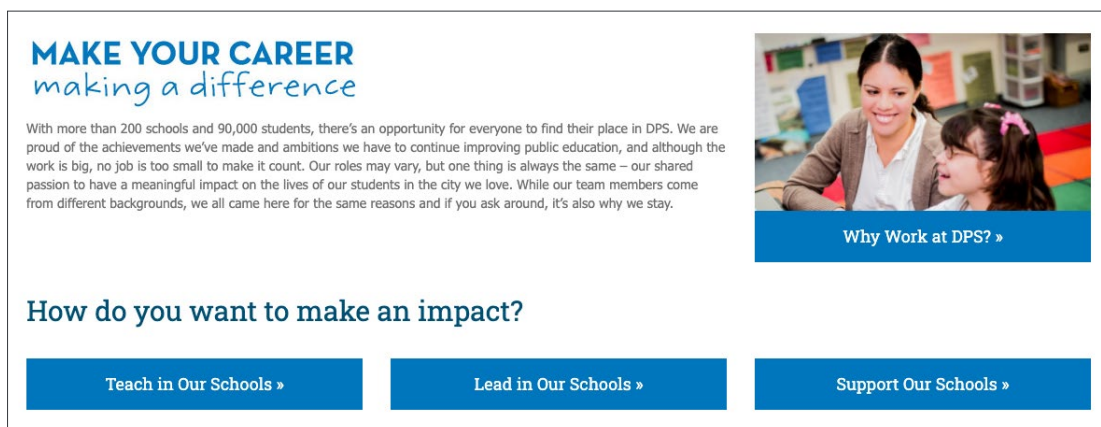


On the Denver Public Schools' Careers website, central office is referred to as "central support" and job descriptions clearly specify expectations for customer service (see Figure 5 for an example). The district also uses its districtwide values to assess candidates during the hiring process. One value is "Students First," which is manifested as a customer service orientation, particularly for many central support roles.

*Figure 5. Denver Public Schools Information Technology Project Manager Position [23]*

> **PROJECT MANAGER, IT PMO (JOB ID: 39650)**
>
> **Essential Functions and Objectives:** Responsible for overall coordination, status reporting, and stability of project oriented work efforts. Establishes and implements project management processes and adheres to DPS and Program Management Office's (PMO) methodology for the district (Business and IT communities) to ensure projects are delivered on time, within budget, comply with high quality standards, and meet customer expectations.

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22   Accessed at https://careers.dpsk12.org/ on November 12, 2020.
23   Accessed at https://careers.dpsk12.org/ on November 12, 2020.

## Strong Practice #3: Develop and reinforce customer service skills of central office staff

Problematic Practice: Districts that lack a customer service orientation often fail to recognize that customer service is a skill set that should be cultivated and reinforced. For example, they do not know there are specific tactics and strategies for good customer service (e.g., all email requests should get a prompt acknowledgment of receipt). As a result, staff are not trained or hired for their customer service experience or skills. This is often compounded when the superintendent and top district leadership declare that the central office should support schools but fail to hold departments and individuals responsible.

Strong Practice: In districts with a strong culture of support, central office staff are trained to provide high-quality customer service. Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools, for example, requires all central office administrative assistants to attend an in-house customer service training.

Strong districts administer customer satisfaction surveys to principals asking them to rate central office departments on responsiveness and helpfulness. Prince William County, for example, administers a principal survey that measures responsiveness, level of customer service, and overall satisfaction across 17 departments. District leadership uses the survey responses to measure whether departments are hitting their goals. Some districts use similar surveys to inform individual performance evaluations for central office staff.

Denver Public Schools uses a slightly different approach. The district evaluates central office staff on their demonstration of core values, which includes a value of "Students First." That value is measured by an individual's demonstration of customer service to campuses.

Getting Started: Granite School District, one of our partner districts, conducted a first round of customer satisfaction surveys. All principals were asked to anonymously rate services provided by specific central office departments, such as purchasing and finance. The survey also asked whether departments had helped principals to improve their capacity in the relevant areas. The departments used the results to set goals for improvement. The survey will be readministered next year to measure success.

## Next Steps for Creating a Culture of Customer Service

District leaders can take the following next steps to improve their district's culture of customer service. While these steps are insufficient for strong practice, they can be quick wins that move the district in the right direction.

- Assess your district on the four strong practices listed above by asking:
  - Does the intranet or district website clearly state a commitment to serving schools first?
  - Are organizational charts and directories updated and easy to find?
  - Do job postings reflect a commitment to customer service?
- Administer a customer satisfaction survey to principals to gather their perceptions on each central office department. Have each department use the results to identify an improvement goal.

- Assign a department liaison for each school. Have liaisons visit their assigned schools and review data to become familiar with school contexts and needs.
- Add criteria for strong communication, collaboration, and customer service skills to job postings of any central office position that interacts with principals.

# Key Component: Effectively Interact with Principals

Strong districts communicate and interact with principals in ways that are efficient and fair so that principals can focus their time and energy on school priorities—engaging with teachers and supporting student success. Strong central office teams distribute information in concise and organized formats and send requests for clear and feasible requests for information. Central office departments create systems that are efficient and make good use of principals' limited time. Their responses to principals are timely and useful. Finally, they seek principal perspectives to inform decision-making. This is important because principals understand the needs of their staff, students, and families.

## Strong Practice #4: Structure central office to meet school and student needs

Problematic Practice: There are many different organizational structures for the central office. Some of the more common structures include at least three core branches: one often led by a chief of schools who oversees principal supervisors and principals; a second often led by a chief of academics who oversees curriculum and instruction staff; and a third who oversees nonacademic departments such as finance, technology, facilities, etc. Sometimes, the human resources function is separated out into a fourth branch, and other times, it is folded into one of the other branches.

Regardless of structure, central offices that are siloed struggle to address school needs well. Principals often do not know how the silos are organized and do not know who to contact for specific issues. And many times, those in the central office departments do not understand that their strategic purpose is to ensure that all students get a quality education.

When silos persist, central office staff often lack awareness about the work of other departments and the roles and responsibilities of individuals within those departments. They similarly do not know who to contact. Departments communicate with principals directly, without coordinating with central office colleagues. For example, multiple departments might send principals a survey within the same week without realizing it.

Some central office staff interpret the hierarchical organization to mean they do not have to be accountable to schools. If a payroll officer's manager tasks them with preparing a report and a principal submits a request at the same time, that payroll officer is more likely to prioritize the work assigned by their line manager. Although relationships can help to foster collaboration across silos, relationships can be difficult to build in large systems or in systems with high staff turnover.

Strong Practice: Districts that effectively address school needs and priorities have organizational structures that allow them to be responsive to school needs and priorities. These structures typically provide a smaller number of central office touchpoints so that principals can more easily access the support they need.

One strategy includes providing each school with a liaison for each central office department. The principal can reach out to their department liaison for issues or questions regarding that department. Even if the liaison is not directly responsible for the issue (e.g., the benefits coordinator gets a question about hiring), the liaison should be able to quickly connect the principal to a colleague who can address their needs and priorities.

Liaisons also work directly with a smaller set of schools and can get to know the school, its staff, and its needs. The liaison strategy is fairly simple to implement, but the value to schools can depend on the seniority or capacity of their particular liaison. If a school is assigned the most junior person in the department, that person may not have enough experience to answer questions or serve as an advocate for the school. High rates of vacancies and/or frequent turnover in the central office can make this strategy challenging for principals. Though the liaison strategy sounds good in theory, it does not consistently deliver in reality.

A second strategy is establishing district support teams or networks of support. In this structure (see Figure 6), each principal supervisor supervises a team comprised of a representative from each department. It is similar to the basic liaison strategy except in this structure, the supervisors have more authority to direct the support team members and prioritize their time.

*Figure 6. District Support Team Structure (aka Network Structure)* [24]
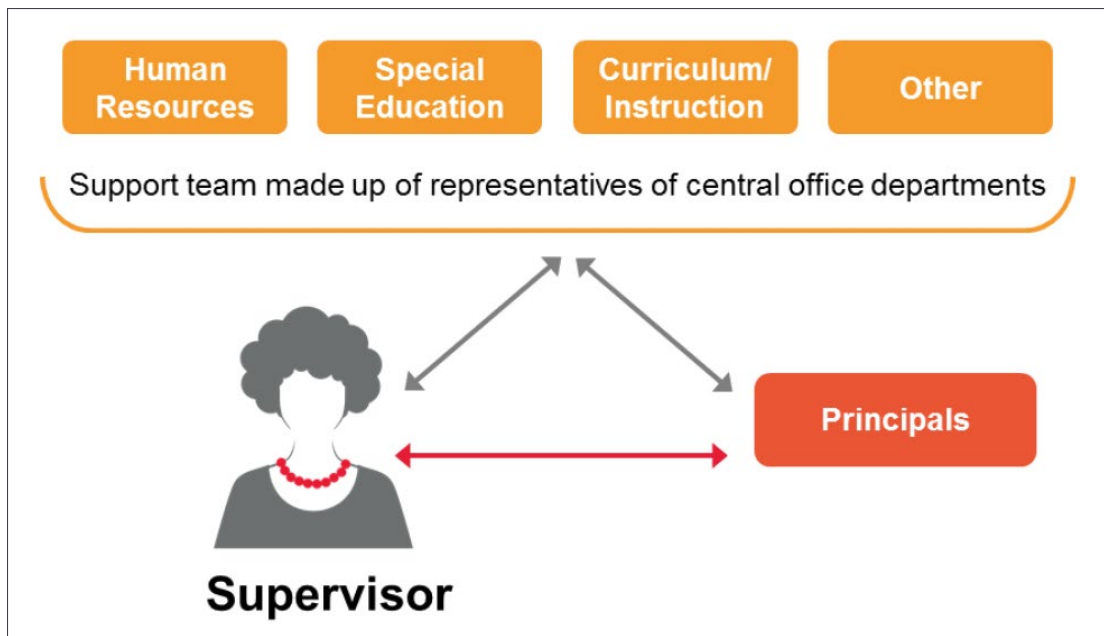


A third strategy used by strong districts is to add a position or department that addresses principals' operational needs. Two examples are described in Figure 7. In both cases, their focus is on minimizing bureaucracy and increasing efficiency. Per the job description, the Barrier Breakers in Cleveland Metropolitan School District are "responsible and accountable for helping create more time for principals to fulfill their roles as instructional leaders by eliminating some of the non-instructional, functional tasks principals have traditionally taken time to manage that distract them from the work of teaching and learning." [25] Barrier Breakers are school-based roles, but they report to the Chief Academic Office in Cleveland's central office.

24    Goldring, E. B., Grissom, J. A., Rubin, M., Rogers, L. K., Neel, M., & Clark, M. A. (2018). *A new role emerges for principal supervisors: Evidence from six districts in the Principal Supervisor Initiative*, p. 53. Reprinted with permission.
      https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/A-New-Role-Emerges-for-Principal-Supervisors.pdf
25    For more information, see the Barrier Breaker job description on the Cleveland Metropolitan School District website at
      http://www.cmsdjobs.com/esjobs/jobpostings.asp?post_num=3665&action=Jobs

The Office of Service Quality in Broward County Public Schools is able to offload parent and community member inquiries from principals and principal supervisors so that they can spend more time focused on instructional leadership and culture building in their schools.

*Figure 7. New Positions/Departments that Support Operational Needs*

**Barrier Breakers** (Cleveland Metropolitan School District): School-based positions responsible and accountable for helping create more time for principals to fulfill their roles as instructional leaders by eliminating some of the noninstructional, functional tasks that principals have traditionally taken time to manage and have distracted them from the work of teaching and learning. Common duties include addressing facility problems, ordering instructional materials and ensuring they arrive in a timeline manner, troubleshooting the purchasing process, securing student records such as Individual Education Plans, and tracking and following up on steps in the hiring process.[26]

**Office of Service Quality** (Broward County Public Schools): A central office department that assists parents and community members in accessing resources and resolving concerns. The office includes a director, three assistant directors, and one coordinator—all trained in customer service and stakeholder communication. By addressing parent questions and concerns, this office frees up principal and principal supervisor time to focus on other aspects of school leadership.[27]

Districts with strong practice also share information often and clearly across the central office. They strategically consider what information needs to be shared more widely to make sure that everyone is operating under the same context. They use weekly email updates, onboarding, icebreakers and standing cross-funtional meetings to share information and build relationships. This way, when a principal calls and needs to be redirected, central office staff are knowledgeable enough to send them in the right direction.

## Strong Practice #5: Communicate effectively with principals

Problematic Practice: Some districts get in the way of their principals, actually making it more difficult for them to focus on enabling student success. Principals often want to be in classrooms and supporting instructional improvement. Yet many districts inundate principals with emails and unnecessary requests that distract them from their priorities. In the words of one principal, "We get obscene numbers of emails from different departments, when nothing's even wrong—for example . . . I will get three emails a day-and-a-half before [timecards are due] saying, 'You have unapproved timecards.'"

Some principals report receiving hundreds of emails from the central office every day. The emails not only take time to read, but also often contain requests for information that are redundant with information previously submitted or cause principals to drop other work to respond within the required timeframe. In the words of another principal, "There is a lot of redundant paperwork requirements . . . Everybody has the same access to these systems that we have access to, but when you are asked to fill out your staffing chart ten times, it's a little bit annoying."

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26   For more information, see the Barrier Breaker job description on the Cleveland Metropolitan School District website at http://www.cmsdjobs.com/esjobs/jobpostings.asp?post_num=3665&action=Jobs
27   For more information, see the Office of Service Quality (OSQ) website at https://web01.browardschools.com/ospa/service_quality.asp

Strong Practice: Districts with strong practice have tactical strategies to streamline requests and communicate efficiently with principals. Several districts (Broward County, District of Columbia, Des Moines, Charlotte, Denver, Green Dot, and Gwinnett County, to name a few) have consolidated their communication with principals into a weekly newsletter. Some, such as Charlotte, set policies that all emails to principals must be vetted by the Chief of Schools. Some districts explicitly forbid central office employees from giving principals a deadline for an information request that is less than a certain timeframe (e.g., 48 hours or a week).

As shown in Figure 8, the Management Center has compiled a set of concrete tactics to use when writing emails to busy managers (like principals). These strategies not only improve the clarity of communication to principals, but they also make it easier and more efficient for principals to be able to provide responses.

*Figure 8. The One-Minute Response Email* [28]

> **Imagine the person you're emailing going from one meeting to the next and walking while holding her phone. Could she reply to your email while typing with one hand?** Or will she glance at the email, see that it requires a longer reply than she has time to type, and set it aside for later (a later that may or may not ever come)? Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to write as many emails as possible that pass the One Hand Test. Here's how to do it:
> - Ask a yes/no or multiple choice question. Find a way to structure your email so that the person can answer with "yes" or "no" or "C." For instance, you might say, "I believe we should spend the money – do you (A) agree with that; (B) think we should tell them thanks but no thanks; or (C) want me to find us 10 minutes so we can discuss more before deciding?"
> - Make a recommendation (i.e., give people something they can easily say yes to). "What should I do about X?" puts the problem on your recipient. You'll make it easier for both of you if you say, "Here's the deal with X. I've thought about A, B, and C, and I think we should do C because . . . Does that sound okay to you?"
> - Put the reply options right up front at the top. You'll often get a faster response if you open with what you're looking for. For example:
>   - "I need to get your quick sign-off on the plan below."
>   - "Just need a quick yes or no on the client request below."
>   - "Three options below – I propose the first – sound okay to you?"
> - Suggest a default plan. For example: "If I don't hear from you by Tuesday, I'll plan to go with B." Of course, when taking this route, make sure to give the person a reasonable amount of time to respond (not, say, two hours in a non-urgent situation).
> - Provide background as needed. Instead of expecting the person you're emailing to retain all the details you've talked about previously, include a simple (and yes, brief!) reminder of context or past decisions. For example, you might say something like, "As a reminder, we decided last month to skip the X campaign and just focus this piece on Y and Z. We wanted to get this out by mid-June, which means we should finalize this by next week."

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28    The Management Center. (n.d.). *The secret to getting replies to your emails: The one hand test.* Reprinted with permission.
      https://www.managementcenter.org/article/the-secret-to-getting-replies-to-your-emails-the-one-hand-test/

If principals do not respond to central office requests, strong districts do not immediately jump to blaming the principals and asking their supervisors to intervene to ensure compliance. Instead, they presume good intentions of principals and begin assessing if the request was clear and feasible. They often provide feedback to the sender on how to make the request clearer (by using some of the strategies in Figure 8), more doable (by providing more time or improving the ease of response), or more compelling (by explaining why the information is needed and how it helps address school goals).

## Strong Practice #6: Design administrative systems to be effective and responsive

Problematic Practice: In districts with problematic practices, principals feel their time is wasted by inefficient systems. In the words of one principal, "It literally can take four hours to order a light bulb. I gotta figure out what form to fill out and who needs to sign off. If I don't do it right, it just gets kicked back to me." It is also problematic when districts unnecessarily create redundancies, such as asking principals to submit the same information in a variety of formats or requiring multiple site visits from various departments (each of whom have their own site visit protocol). Principals also get frustrated when central office lacks responsiveness. In the words of another principal, "They expect me to respond to emails within a couple of hours, but then it takes a week to get a response when I email HR [human resources] about posting a new position, . . . and that's only after I bugged them."

Strong Practice: Districts with strong practice have efficient, principal-friendly administrative systems. They create forms and processes for information collection that are simple, easy, and fast. Staff communicate across departments to share information already collected. Teams only reach out to principals when they have exhausted other ways of collecting needed information.

Strong central office departments are communicative and responsive. They keep their websites, intranets, and directories up to date. They let principals know when to expect a response to avoid unnecessary and continuous follow-up. For example, Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools instituted a "warm transfer" policy. If a central office staffer received a call that needed to be addressed by someone else, they were responsible for putting the principal on hold, contacting the correct person and sharing background quickly, and then connecting the principal to that person. If the request came from a priority school, the central office member receiving the call was expected to own the follow-up to ensure the loop was closed.

Districts with strong practice make expectations for efficient processes known and hold themselves accountable to those expectations. Figure 9 contains a "Principal's Human Resources Bill of Rights" created by the Urban Schools Human Capital Academy and used by several districts to set expectations and drive accountability for efficient and responsive systems.

*Figure 9. USHCA Principal's Human Resources Bill of Rights* [29]

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**Principals have a right to expect the following from Human Resources/Human Capital departments:**

1. "One Stop Shopping" - a dedicated Human Resources Partner/Staffing Specialist assigned to designated schools who should navigate the system for the principal so they don't have to call multiple central offices or multiple people (maximum ratio - 1:25 Elementary Schools and 1:15 Secondary Schools - fewer if possible)
2. Data that is timely, accessible, and accurate on their school staff profiles by school - data on teacher performance, teacher attendance, teacher leave, teacher turnover, etc. compared to city-wide averages and national data where available
3. Regularly scheduled school visits, face-to-face interactions, and phone calls by dedicated HR Partners/Staffing Specialists who get to know the unique human capital needs of the schools they serve
4. Collaboration between the HR Partner/Staffing Specialist and the school's Principal Supervisor as to the Human Capital needs of their principals
5. A robust central pool of teacher candidates and 24/7 online access to those candidates, in addition to those who may apply directly to their school
6. No forced placements - not just for teaching positions but for ALL positions in the school
7. Close to 100% filled vacancies at the opening of school each year and early hires in critical shortage fields that are available after the opening of school for unanticipated vacancies
8. Significantly streamlined processes and eliminated steps in processes such as requisitions and on-boarding (maximum 72 hours) that do not add value (such as multiple central office approval steps)
9. Additional support in dealing with underperforming staff and misconduct issues
10. Participation in annual satisfaction surveys that provide the HR department with approval ratings

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## Strong Practice #7: Gather principals' input and perspectives to inform decisions

Problematic Practice: In districts with problematic practice, central office leaders and staff make decisions without seeking the perspectives of the principals. This gap is compounded when central office staff have little to no experience working on a campus. In the words of one principal, "I don't feel like there is an understanding . . . of my daily job and the work that I have to do to keep my campus going." For example, some staff picture a principal sitting at their desk in an office all day, not realizing that the principal intends to spend 80 percent of their time in classrooms or walking the halls. As a result, they have unrealistic expectations for how quickly a principal might see and be able to respond to an email.

Strong Practice: Districts with strong practice use multiple strategies to regularly gather principals' input and perspectives. They involve principals in the cabinet and key cross-functional teams where decisions are being made that will affect principals. The superintendent establishes regular processes through which they can hear principal perspectives, such as through school visits, skip-level meetings, or focus groups. Figure 10 lists multiple strategies used in Charlotte-Mecklenburg to understand and use principal perspectives.

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29    Urban Schools Human Capital Academy (n.d.) *Principal's human resources bill of rights*. Reprinted with permission.
      https://www.humanresourcesineducation.org/resource/principals-human-resources-bill-rights/

*Figure 10. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Strategies for Principal Input*

- Superintendent Principal Advisory
- Principal in Residence position on cabinet
- Principal assigned to each Chief to attend their staff meetings and provide a principal perspective on their decisions
- Monthly meetings of principals and district office leaders, known as "Team CMS" that provide another opportunity to understand principal perspectives

Strong districts also seek principal input and feedback at various stages of initiatives. They might administer a survey at the front end to gather information about the current state or input about changes principals want to see. Once new policies or processes are drafted, strong districts might conduct focus groups to gather principal feedback before finalizing them. They might also have principal supervisors systematically gather principal perceptions through one-on-one check-ins and then compile that information to understand patterns and adjust accordingly.

Getting Started: Fort Worth Independent School District, one of our partner districts, has a superintendent's principal advisory council that meets on a quarterly basis. Perspectives gathered through this council led to a reorganization of the principal supervision structure from separate elementary and secondary teams to a K-12 pyramid structure in response to principals' concerns about feeder pattern alignment.

Fort Worth also created a Principal Pyramid Lead position to empower principal voices and improve communication across schools within a feeder pattern, also known as a pyramid. The Principal Pyramid Leads are sitting principals with at least three years of experience who take on additional responsibilities and are compensated with a stipend. Their duties include monthly communication with principals and hosting pyramid community events. Leads bring the perspectives of their teams to the central office.

## Next Steps for Effectively Interacting with Principals

Districts can take the following next steps to identify some quick wins to improve how central office interacts with principals:

- Assess your district's current practices on each of the strong practices for interacting with principals. Examine the following evidence:
  - o Examples of email requests sent to principals to assess clarity, tone, and reasonableness of requests
  - o Memberships of committees and cross-functional teams to determine whether principal perspectives are represented
- Conduct an analysis of a principal's email inbox to determine how many requests they receive from the central office per week. Avoid making this task burdensome for the principal. Create criteria for prioritizing those requests and identify strategies to lessen lower-priority requests.

- Consolidate communication to principals into a weekly newsletter that is organized and concise. Avoid the tendency to let the newsletter become too unwieldy. Hold departments accountable for using it so that principals do not still receive numerous follow-ups because departments forgot to include all of their information in the newsletter.
- Enroll at least one central office staff member into a customer service training program. Have that person identify strategies that should be shared across the central office.
- Create and use principal perception surveys as metrics for assessing effectiveness of communication.

# District to Watch

The Cleveland Metropolitan School District is one of a growing number of systems that has attempted to shift central office mindsets toward supporting schools and the students they serve.[30] According to the district's Chief Executive Officer Eric Gordon, "For too many years, we bet on the idea that the central office had the answers. We have proof that approach doesn't work. We need to empower and support the people in schools to innovate and find the solutions that will help kids learn." Beginning in 2012, the district implemented a series of strategies to redefine the central office role to match the CEO's vision. In his words, "The primary function of the central office is to provide people, resources, and tools that schools can access to implement their school plan." One of the core strategies to realize this vision was establishing network support teams.

## Team Structure

The district increased the number of principal supervisors to lower the ratio of schools each supervisor led. They were retitled "Network Support Leader" and tasked with overseeing a network support team that typically consisted of an action team coach, a barrier breaker, and individuals (referred to as "partners") from various central office departments. The action team coach generally coached and mentored principals, especially new principals. The barrier breaker was an operational resource for principals—a go-to person who can navigate district bureaucracy and solve problems in real time. The supervisor directly managed the action team coach and barrier breaker but not the partners, who were line-managed by their central office departments. The departments assigned to networks changed over time but tended to include finance, talent, special education, curriculum and instruction, family and community engagement, Humanware (social and emotional learning), operations, and athletics. Individual partners were sometimes assigned to one or two networks. The principal supervisors also shared an administrator, who provided administrative assistance across multiple networks.

## Nature of Support

Members of the network support teams provided their assigned schools with support aligned with their departments' functions. For example, during fall budget-adjustment season, the principal supervisor and partners from the finance and talent departments worked together to help the principals revise their projected budgets to match funds based on actual student enrollment. The network support team structure enabled cross-functional collaboration in service of a school's plan. One team member described an example in which a network support team supported a school that was facing unique challenges associated with enrollment declines (while most schools were experiencing enrollment increases):

> We were working with one unlucky school. They needed to figure out how to scale back the funds they were given to align with their decreased enrollment of students. Sometimes there's nothing they can get rid of—like a smaller school might have only one teacher per grade,

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[30] For more details about this case, see Ikemoto, G., & Waite, A. (2018). *Shifting district culture to better support schools: The Cleveland Principal Supervisor Initiative.* Education Research & Development. https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/746c5096-b2d6-48e5-b29c-c70f3322c7c4/downloads/1ch6fmve8_725641.pdf?ver=1601055452210

*and there's nothing we can do. In other cases, there are multiple teachers per grade. When we sit down, finance is there, HR is with us, and the principal supervisor—so we come together with the principal to look at what they have and what they need. We all pull together—the finance partner is looking at the money, the HR partner is looking at staffing, and the principal supervisor is able to tie everything together, put the bow on it.*

As part of this process, the network support team not only addressed resource issues but also collaborated to ensure that quality of instruction and social-emotional learning remained a priority despite shifting resources.

## Capacity Building for Network Support Teams

The district convened quarterly meetings of the network support teams. All team members attended, including the principal supervisors, department partners, action team coaches, barrier breakers, and network administrators. During the meetings, network support teams were given time to work collaboratively and were provided professional development to help build team cohesion and effectiveness. Department partners also had time to work together in role-alike groups.

For example, the main objective for one convening was to increase network support teams' collaboration and the effectiveness of their support to schools. The convening began with an activity to build a shared understanding of the Cleveland Plan's refined theory of action. During the activity, network support teams were presented with stakeholder concerns and responses, and they had to determine whether the responses aligned with the support-oriented mindsets that the district now expects for responding to school needs. Later, network support teams used the Education Development Center's Quality Measures: Partnership Effectiveness Continuum, a tool for developing, assessing, and improving partnerships.[31] Each network support team rated its communication practices on the rubric and identified ways to improve in each dimension of communication.

One principal from each network was invited to attend the quarterly meetings to share their perspectives on how network support teams affected schools. For example, during a breakout session, network support team members worked together in departmental groups to identify strategies for supporting a fictional school. In the curriculum and instruction group, staff walked through how they would work with the school's principal and leadership team. A principal sitting in on the session provided feedback on the strategy they proposed, including recommendations on how the network support team could better meet the principal's needs.

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31    King, C. (2018). *Quality measures: Principal preparation program self-study toolkit,* (10th ed.). Education Development Center. https://www.edc.org/quality-measures-principal-preparation-program-self-study-toolkit-10th-edition

## Lessons Learned

District leaders reflected on actions they might have undertaken differently and made the following recommendations to other districts attempting to improve their central office support for principals.

- *Explain new roles and rationale up front.* When the network support teams were first introduced, several individuals were assigned to their partner roles without a clear understanding of what the roles entailed and why they were created. In retrospect, the CEO wishes that he and his senior leaders had spent more time early on explaining the rationale behind providing schools with more autonomy and shifting the central office's orientation toward serving school needs. Occasionally, there is also a lack of clarity among principals about the roles and responsibilities of network support team members, including what functional support should be provided by whom. For instance, finance partners are sometimes asked to perform tasks that are the responsibility of other departments, such as processing invoices (a responsibility handled by accounts payable). One finance partner said, "They come to us with anything with a dollar sign." In another example, principals sometimes direct teachers to talent partners with questions about benefits, which are handled by a different department. One network support partner described the reason for this: "We're the person at the schools they all see." Principals often grab the nearest network support team member—either one who is visible (sometimes literally, when a partner is at a school site and is pulled aside) or one with whom they have a rapport.

- *Establish a process for negotiating disagreements.* At first, the district did not have a clear process for negotiating disagreements between principals and the central office. On the one hand, principals—especially those newly hired to the district—had been promised autonomy. On the other hand, the central office sometimes had good reason to override that autonomy (e.g., for legal reasons, or to achieve economies of scale). For example, the district was in a better position than schools to negotiate prices for school supplies. Defaulting to historical organizational norms, the central office staff member would typically "win" any disagreement. But to ensure a customer service orientation, a process was put in place by which a principal could escalate a decision to a department chief and all the way up to the CEO to make the final call. According to CEO Gordon, "We intended to, but we never had an autonomy tiebreaker. If a school wants it and the district says no, the default was always that the district wins. We didn't have an arbiter. We need to make sure those conversations get to the leadership level instead of staying at the line level."

- *Hire for soft skills.* When Cleveland created the network support team structure, existing staff from relevant departments were assigned to networks. Often, these individuals were hired for their technical skills (e.g., skills related to finance or information technology) and may not have had school-level experience. The network model provided them with an opportunity to build relationships with schools and learn more about their context, needs, and priorities. However, the new network support structure required soft skills—such as relationship building, communication, collaboration, and client services. The new roles also required a deeper understanding of educational strategies and jargon, so that network support partners could follow cross-functional conversations and truly understand school needs and priorities. District leaders realized that as positions turned over, they needed to fill vacancies with individuals possessing the optimal mix of skills, which sometimes meant offering a higher salary to entice applicants with broader skill sets.

## Learn More

This guidebook is designed to be a resource for district leaders who want to improve how their central office supports principals in addressing school needs and priorities to ensure all students are successful. It suggests that districts should focus on two sets of central office practices that enable true partnerships between the central office and district principals. The first area is creating a culture of customer service. The second area is creating a set of strategies for effectively interacting with principals.

These interrelated components must be addressed coherently to maximize the impact of improvements in any one area. In addition, development on the preparation pathway should be guided by the district's school leadership framework and be linked to other Principal Talent Management areas, such as: Principal Preparation, Recruitment and Selection, Professional Learning, Supervision, Evaluation, Compensation and Incentives, and Working Environment.

In addition to what we have highlighted in this guidebook, we have also included several appendices for your reference. These include:

- **Appendix A: Summary of Strong Central Office Practices that Support Principals**—one-page summary of the seven strong practices described in this guidebook.
- **Appendix B: Strong Practices Applied to Park View Example**—how strong practices could have improved the Park View Elementary School situation described in the introduction.
- **Appendix C: Additional Resources for Principal Preparation**—recommended resources designed specifically to support district leaders working to improve central office support of principals, as well as an annotated bibliography.
- **Appendix D: Customer Service Survey Items**—questions that could be asked to gather principal perspectives on central office support.

# Appendix A: Summary of Strong Practices for Central Office Support of Principals

The George W. Bush Institute has distilled prior findings from research and practice into seven strong practices of central offices that effectively support school leaders:

## Strong Practice #1: Set expectation that schools are central office's clients

In districts with strong practice, the superintendent and other top leaders clearly set a vision and expectation for the central office to work in service of schools. A customer service orientation means understanding and prioritizing principal needs and priorities. It starts with the premise that the customer is raising valid questions and concerns and includes a commitment to addressing them. A customer service orientation also gives principals the authority to decline requests or negotiate deadlines when they compete with school needs and priorities. Strong districts have a process through which a principal can escalate a decision to department heads and all the way up to the superintendent, if needed. Top leaders in strong districts also set expectations that central office staff will be held accountable to meeting their customers' needs and priorities with efficiency and quality. Expectations are clearly defined. A service culture also sets clear goals and holds its members accountable for achieving those goals.

## Strong Practice #2: Select staff who have a mindset and skills for supporting school needs and priorities

The district explicitly names and selects for customer service skills when hiring staff into the central office. Communication with candidates (e.g., recruiting materials, posted job descriptions, etc.) is clear from the beginning of the selection process that the district values candidates who are oriented towards serving schools and their students as they pursue their needs and priorities.

## Strong Practice #3: Develop and reinforce customer service skills of central office staff

In districts with a strong culture of support, central office staff are trained on strategies for providing high-quality customer service. Strong districts administer customer satisfaction surveys to principals that ask them to rate various central office departments on their responsiveness and the extent to which they addressed principal needs and priorities.

## Strong Practice #4: Structure central office to meet school and student needs

Districts that effectively address school needs and priorities have organizational structures that enable them to build true relationships with principals and across departments, allowing them to be responsive to school needs and priorities. Districts have used several strategies to improve collaboration between

central office and schools, such as: 1) designating liaisons, 2) establishing networks of support, and 3) creating new positions or departments.

## Strong Practice #5: Communicate effectively with principals

Districts with strong practice have tactical strategies to streamline requests and communicate efficiently with principals. Several districts have consolidated their communication with principals into a weekly newsletter. Some set policies that all emails to principals must be vetted by the Chief of Schools. Some districts explicitly forbid central office employees from giving principals a deadline for an information request that is less than a certain time frame (e.g., 48 hours or a week). If principals do not respond to central office requests, strong districts do not immediately blame the principals or ask their supervisors to intervene to ensure compliance. Instead, they presume that principals have good intentions and begin by critiquing the clarity and reasonableness of the request.

## Strong Practice #6: Design administrative systems to be effective and responsive

Districts with strong practice have efficient administrative systems that require minimal time on the part of principals. They work hard to create forms and processes for information collection that are simple, easy, and fast. Staff communicate with each other across departments to share access to information already collected and only reach out to principals when they have exhausted other ways of collecting the information. Central office departments with strong practice are communicative and responsive. They make it easy to identify the appropriate contact person by keeping their websites, intranets, and directories up to date. Even if they cannot respond right away, they let the principal know when to expect a response so that the principal does not have to continuously follow up.

## Strong Practice #7: Gather principals' input and perspectives to inform decisions

Districts with strong practice use multiple strategies to continuously gather principals' input and perspectives. They involve principal perspectives at relevant venues, such as meetings of the cabinet, committees, or cross-functional teams where decisions are being made that will affect principals. The superintendent, in particular, establishes regular processes through which they can hear principal perspectives, such as school visits, skip-level meetings, or focus groups.

# Appendix B: Strong Practices Applied to Park View Example

The introduction to this guidebook described Park View Elementary School as an example of central office misalignment with principal needs and priorities. The following figure describes how each of the strong practices could have improved the situation.

*Figure B-1. How Strong Practices Could Have Improved the Situation at Park View Elementary School*

| Strong Practice | Example of how strong practices could have benefited Park View Elementary School |
|---|---|
| Set expectation that schools are the central office's clients | If the superintendent had declared an expectation to prioritize school needs during an "all-hands" staff meeting, then the principal (Mrs. Rodriguez) could have referenced it when requesting an extension. |
| Select staff with mindset and skills for supporting school needs and priorities | If when the central office manager (Sandy) was hired, she had been asked an interview question such as "Can you provide an example of how someone in your role could help protect principal's time?" then the expectation to do so would have been set through the interview process. Sandy would have considered other ways to collect the information she needed (or Sandy potentially would not have been hired if she struggled with the question). |
| Develop and reinforce customer service skills of central office staff | If all central office and school administrators had been trained in customer service (including an expectation not to interrupt principals during classroom observations, except in the case of an emergency), then the Park View receptionist would have explained to Sandy that Mrs. Rodriguez could not be interrupted.<br><br>If Sandy knew her performance evaluation would reference survey perception data from principals about her, then she would have thought twice before contacting Mrs. Rodriguez. |
| Structure central office to meet school needs and priorities | If Mrs. Rodriguez had been assigned a liaison from each department, then she would have known who to contact in the transportation department. |
| Communicate efficiently with principals | If the district required central office staff to give principals one week to respond to any information requests, then Sandy would have been forced to plan ahead, request an extension, or find another way to gather the data she needed without making a request to a principal. |
| Design administrative systems to be efficient and responsive | If the district had efficient systems for tracking funder data reporting requirements, then Sandy would not have found out a funder report was due on the due date.<br><br>If departments kept their websites up-to-date with contact information, then Mrs. Rodriguez would have quickly found a phone number to contact the transportation office. |
| Gather principals' input and perspectives to inform decisions | If the superintendent held regular focus groups with principals, she would have become aware of this situation (including how a request from her own office was getting in the way of instructional leadership), which would have allowed her to make sure the situation was not repeated. |

# Appendix C: Additional Resources for Central Office Support of Principals

This appendix contains resources that provide additional explanations, examples, and tools that your district may find useful as it works to improve how it supports principals and school priorities. Documents listed under Key Resources are recommended reading for everyone doing this work. The Annotated Bibliography offers additional resources, many of which greatly informed the ideas presented in the guidebook.

## Key Resources for Central Office Support of Principals

**Title: District systems to support equitable and high-quality teaching and learning**
**Authors:** Meredith Honig & Lydia Rainey
**Date:** September 2020
**Retrieved from:** https://annenberg.brown.edu/sites/default/files/EdResearch_for_Recovery_Brief_10.pdf
**Description:** This brief addresses the central question, "What changes in central office systems are likely to support principals in leading for equitable, high-quality teaching and learning?" To inform districts' efforts, this brief identifies: (1) core central office systems—in principal supervision, professional development, human resources, data, and operations—that typically impede principals' equity-focused instructional leadership; and (2) specific system shifts that will enable that leadership.

**Title: Shifting district culture to better support schools: The Cleveland Principal Supervisor Initiative**
**Authors:** Gina Ikemoto & Anisah Waite
**Date:** June 2018
**Retrieved from:** https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/746c5096-b2d6-48e5-b29c-c70f3322c7c4/downloads/1ch6fmve8_725641.pdf?ver=1601055452210
**Description:** For school districts to substantially improve student learning across all their schools, district leaders will need to dramatically shift the organizational norms and mindsets at their central offices. Historically, central offices have operated as if schools exist to serve them. The Cleveland Metropolitan School District, in contrast, is one of a growing number of systems that are attempting to shift central office mindsets toward supporting schools and the students they serve. This report details three strategies Cleveland is using to accomplish this: (1) redefining the principal supervisor role, (2) creating networks of support, and (3) designing and delivering an aspiring principal supervisor program. The report describes lessons learned from this work and recommendations for other districts attempting similar changes. The findings are based on interviews of district leaders, central office staff, and principals—as well as three days of observation of district meetings and extensive review of artifacts. The report's purpose is to help other districts consider the challenges they are likely to face and draw on lessons from Cleveland to improve their implementation of similar strategies.

**Title: From procedures to partnerships: Redesigning principal supervision to help principals lead for high-quality teaching and learning**
**Author:** Lydia R. Rainey & Meredith I. Honig
**Date:** 2015
**Retrieved from:** http://dl2.education.uw.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/From-Procedures-to-Partnership-UWCEL-DL2.pdf
**Description:** As part of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's Leading for Effective Teaching (LET) project, 11 school systems applied lessons from emerging research and practice to transform their principal supervisor positions as part of broader strategies to realize significant improvements in teaching and learning districtwide. This paper describes the initial efforts of these school systems to change how their principal supervisors support principals—how they redesigned their principal supervisor positions and how they have tackled early implementation challenges. Their experiences demonstrate that redesigning principal supervision to support principals' growth as instructional leaders is possible, but such work takes time, communication, and people with the right orientation to the work. Principal supervisors realized positive results for principals when they engaged in certain practices in the context of a central office transforming to improve its performance.

**Title: A new role emerges for principal supervisors: Evidence from six districts in the Principal Supervisor Initiative**
**Authors:** Ellen B. Goldring, Jason A. Grissom, Mollie Rubin, Laura K. Rogers, Michael Neel, & Melissa A. Clark
**Date:** July 2018
**Retrieved from:** https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/A-New-Role-Emerges-for-Principal-Supervisors.pdf
**Description:** In many large school districts, principal supervisors face sprawling jobs, overseeing an average of two dozen schools and assuming numerous administrative, compliance, and operational responsibilities. The result is that they often can't provide their principals with the type of meaningful support that could boost principal effectiveness, especially in leading schools to higher-quality instruction. In 2014, six large school districts embarked on a four-year Wallace-funded effort to see whether they could change that and refashion the supervisor job so it focused squarely on principals. This study of the implementation of the first three years of the Principal Supervisor Initiative suggests the work is possible, concluding that the six districts "demonstrated the feasibility of making substantial changes to the principal supervisor role" across the five areas the effort focused on: redefining the job, reducing the average number of principals supervisors oversaw, training supervisors for their responsibilities, developing systems to identify and train aspiring supervisors, and modifying the central office to buttress the new role.

## Annotated Bibliography

Bottoms, G., & Fry, B. (2009). *The district leadership challenge: Empowering principals to improve teaching and learning.* Southern Regional Education Board (SREB). https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/District-Leadership-Challenge-Empowering-Principals.pdf
Principals can profoundly influence student achievement by leading school change, but they cannot turn schools around by themselves. District leaders need to create working conditions that support

and encourage change for improved achievement, rather than hindering principals' abilities to lead change. This report includes principals' perceptions of the working conditions their districts create and outlines key actions districts need to take to empower principals to improve teaching and learning. The report proposes seven specific strategies: establishing a clear focus and strategic plan for improving student achievement; organizing and engaging the district office in support of each school; providing instructional coherence and support; investing heavily in instruction-related professional learning for principals; providing high-quality data that link student achievement to school and classroom practices; optimizing the use of resources to support learning improvement; and using open, credible processes to involve school and community leaders in school improvement. Appendices: (1) The High Schools That Work School Reform Framework; (2) About the SREB Study of High School Principals' Working Conditions; (3) Principal Interview Protocol; and (4) Resources for an Evidence-Based Educational Approach in High Schools.

**Burkhauser, S., Gates, S. M., Hamilton, L. S., & Ikemoto, G. S. (2012).** *First-year principals in urban school districts: How actions and working conditions relate to outcomes.* **RAND Corporation.** https://www.rand.org/pubs/technical_reports/TR1191.html
Principals new to their schools face a variety of challenges that can influence their likelihood of improving their schools' performance and their likelihood of remaining the principal. Understanding the actions that principals take and the working conditions they face in the first year can inform efforts to promote school improvement and principal retention, but the research on first-year principals' experiences is limited. This report examines the actions and perceived working conditions of first-year principals, relating information on those factors to subsequent school achievement and principal retention. The study is based on multiple sources of data that were collected to support the RAND Corporation's seven-year formative and summative evaluation of New Leaders. New Leaders is an organization that recruits, selects, prepares, and supports school leaders to serve in urban schools. The authors found that: (1) over one-fifth of new principals leave within two years, and those placed in schools that failed to meet adequate yearly progress targets were more likely to leave; (2) there were no strong relationships among principals' time allocation, student achievement, and retention; (3) teacher capacity and cohesiveness were the school and district conditions most strongly related to student outcomes; and (4) principals' reported future plans were not strongly related to retention. Individual chapters contain footnotes.

**Ikemoto, G., Taliaferro, L., Fenton, B., & Davis, J. (2014).** *Great principals at scale: Creating district conditions that enable all principals to be effective.* **George W. Bush Institute.** https://gwbcenter.imgix.net/Resources/gwbi-greatprincipalsatscale.pdf
School leaders are critical in the lives of students and to the development of their teachers. Unfortunately, in too many instances, principals are effective in spite of—rather than because of—district conditions. To truly improve student achievement for all students across the country, well-prepared principals need the tools, support, and culture that enable them to be their best. New Leaders and the Bush Institute's Alliance to Reform Educational Leadership (AREL) launched the Conditions for Effective Leadership Project and partnered with leading researchers and practitioners to generate a comprehensive and research-based framework outlining the conditions necessary for transformational school leaders to succeed. The project used a combination of literature review, empirical data collection, and expert convening to build consensus and bundle the disparate ideas into a single framework that is accessible to school system leaders. This report describes the set of conditions that effective school systems have in place that enable principals to be successful. The conditions include four strands

developed as follows: Strand 1: alignment among goals, strategies, structures, and resources; Strand 2: culture of collective responsibility, balanced autonomy, and continuous learning and improvement; Strand 3: effective management and support for principals; and Strand 4: systems and policies to effectively manage talent at the school level.

**Honig, M. I., Copland, M. A., Rainey, L., Lorton, J. A., & Newton, M. (2010).** *Central office transformation for district-wide teaching and learning improvement.* **The Wallace Foundation.** https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Central-Office-Transformation-District-Wide-Teaching-and-Learning.pdf
This report from a team of researchers at the University of Washington examines the daily work of central office staff members in three urban districts that shifted their focus from basic services and compliance to improving classroom instruction. The three districts—Atlanta, New York City, and Oakland, Calif.—posted student achievement gains that they attributed in part to radically transforming the work of their central office employees. Some of the changes were structural, such as organizing teams of individuals from different departments to serve groups of schools. But researchers found that the districts went beyond formal structures to alter the way that central office staff members interacted with each other and school staff members day to day. Among other changes, central office employees were guided to become experts in the goals of each school's instructional program and to look for innovative ways to work together on meeting each school's specific needs. The report also examines the strategies that each district pursued to transform the work and culture of its central office.

**Honig, M. I., & Rainey, L. R. (2015).** *How school districts can support deeper learning: The need for performance alignment.* **Students at the Center: Jobs for the Future.** http://dl2.education.uw.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/How-District-Central-Offices-can-Support-DL-at-Scale-092515.pdf
The authors identify several challenges that district central offices often face when they try to support the improvement of teaching and learning districtwide. They describe how pioneering districts are pursing performance alignment and recommend specific strategies that can help school districts to realize deeper learning at scale. Claims are based on intensive research in nine districts—which vary in size, demographics, and other characteristics—and on the authors' experience as partners and advisors to another 17 central offices that have been engaged in implementing reforms consistent with performance alignment. Findings and observations point to the need for a fundamental redesign of most central office functions, as well as some major departures from business-as-usual for most if not all central office staff, especially those in human resources, curriculum and instruction, and principal supervision. The authors argue that reforms can be challenging, but they are likely to be necessary for school systems to realize deeper learning in all schools and for all students.

**Leithwood, K. (2011).** *Characteristics of high performing school systems in Ontario.* **Ontario's Institute for Education Leadership.** https://www.education-leadership-ontario.ca/application/files/1314/9434/8681/Part_1_-_Final_Report_-_Characteristics_of_High_Performing_School_Systems_in_Ontario.pdf
This mixed-methods study inquired about characteristics of districts that influence changes in student achievement and how those characteristics were developed. Staff in 49 Ontario districts were surveyed to estimate the effect of nine district characteristics on changes in test scores on provincial tests of math and language achievement over five years. A cross-case analysis of interview data collected in three high-performing districts provided in-depth descriptions of each of the nine district characteristics.

Results indicated that most of the nine district characteristics had significant effects on student achievement. Implications for policy and practice are suggested.

**School Leaders Network. (2014).** *Churn: The high cost of principal turnover.* https://www.issuelab.org/resources/20544/20544.pdf
The turnover rate for school principals is among the worst of any industry in the country—coming in fourth behind mining and logging, retail, and leisure and hospitality. This problem, known as "churn," is costing schools a great deal of money spent bringing new principals onboard—at least $75,000 per hire—and is having a negative impact on academic achievement among students, especially in the lowest performing schools, where the turnover is greatest. These are among the findings of a new study conducted by the nonprofit School Leaders Network (SLN).

# Appendix D: Customer Service Survey Items

Customer service surveys can be a powerful tool to signal that the district expects its central office to have a client orientation. Survey results can also provide useful data to celebrate strengths and identify areas of improvement.

Many districts administer climate surveys to gather perspectives of principals, teachers, and other stakeholders. We recommend reviewing these surveys to determine whether the district already has data about the quality of customer service schools receive from their central offices.

To gather additional information, districts may consider adding a few items to existing surveys or administering a separate survey. One benefit of a separate survey is having the space to ask about each central office department separately, which provides opportunities to compare results and identify areas that deserve further inquiry. A separate survey also helps to highlight and signal the importance of a customer service orientation. A separate survey may not be feasible if it creates survey fatigue for principals and other stakeholders who are responding to multiple surveys.

## General Items

The following items, included in Figure D-1, which ask for general perceptions of the central office, could be added to existing surveys:

*Figure D-1. Survey Items for General Perceptions*

> **To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your district's central office? [Strongly disagree; disagree; agree; strongly agree; not applicable]**
> - I receive timely responses from central office staff.
> - Central office staff support me in addressing my school's needs and priorities.
> - Central office staff follow through to ensure that my school's needs and priorities are addressed.
> - Communication from the central office is clear, concise, and efficient.
> - I know who to contact when I need to communicate with central office staff.
> - Central office processes are efficient and fair.
> - Central office uses input from my school to inform decisions.
> - I am satisfied with the support that I receive from the central office.
> - Central office unnecessarily distracts me from critical work in my school.
> - Central office requests are duplicative or unnecessarily cumbersome.

# Department-Specific Items

The general items could be asked in reference to each specific department by replacing the word "central office" with the department name. See below for an example of how to ask the questions regarding the human resources office. Districts may want to consider comparing department results with each other and/or benchmarking them to results for the central office overall.

*Figure D-2. Survey Items for Department-Specific Perceptions*

**To what extent do you agree with the following statements about your district's human resources office? [Strongly disagree; disagree; agree; strongly agree; not applicable]**
- I receive timely responses from human resources staff.
- Human resources staff support me in addressing my school's needs and priorities.
- Human resources staff follow through to ensure that my school's needs and priorities are addressed.
- Communication from the human resources staff is clear, concise, and efficient.
- I know who to contact when I need to communicate with human resources staff.
- Human resources processes are efficient and fair.
- Human resources uses input from my school to inform decisions.
- I am satisfied with the support that I receive from human resources.
- Human resources unnecessarily distracts me from critical work in my school.
- Human resources requests are duplicative or unnecessarily cumbersome.

GEORGE W. BUSH
INSTITUTE

2943 SMU Boulevard
Dallas, Texas 75205
214.200.4300

BUSHCENTER.ORG
educationreform@bushcenter.org