



PRINCIPAL SUPPORT FRAMEWORK

RESEARCH SUMMARY

District central office leaders play a key role in students' and teachers' school success through their work with principals. As school systems increasingly focus on creating equitable experiences and outcomes for students who have been marginalized in schools, central office leaders' support for principals is similarly evolving. Version 3.0 of CEL's **Principal Support Framework** (PSF) builds on previous versions to outline how central office leaders promote justice through their leadership and support for principals to create equitable teaching and learning communities.

The newest version of the PSF incorporates knowledge from emerging literature in the educational leadership field. This summary reviews current research studies about central office leadership in support of principals and organizes studies into three broad categories: centering equity, taking a teaching and learning approach, and creating organizational conditions for equitable principal leadership. Since there are many questions that existing research has yet to answer about how central office leaders model and foster equity-focused principal leadership, the PSF also integrates insights gained through CEL's partnership and research efforts. This summary also outlines these findings.

Center equity within principal support.

The PSF presents a vision of educational leadership grounded in the pursuit of just schooling. An emerging body of research examines how central office leaders bring issues of equity and racial justice to the forefront in their support for principals. A key leadership strategy highlighted by these studies involves refocusing leaders on

inequities within the educational system rather than viewing students through a deficit lens. For instance, research shows that central office leaders can use data to focus school leaders on inequitable learning opportunities and help them investigate root causes for disparities in student outcomes. Central office leaders partner with principals to implement solutions that increase learning opportunities for students furthest from justice, craft narratives to



explain these decisions, and take pressure off school leaders by engaging with political resistance. Within this joint work, central office leaders model justice-focused leadership by reflecting on their own biases and power relationships and using race-specific language to discuss inequitable outcomes. Based on their 2018 study of 12 district leaders, scholars Sharon Kruse, Katherine Rodela, and Kristin Huggins found that superintendents promote social justice by making equity goals explicit in their public and private conversations. The authors suggest that superintendents reinforce these equity messages by acting as advocates for equitable policies in public settings and through interpersonal interactions that communicate care and

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responsiveness to students and community-members. Among other areas, this research is evident throughout the PSF’s Action Area 1: *Foster an inclusive leadership culture focused on creating equitable experiences and outcomes*, which describes how central office leaders model courageous leadership by naming issues of inequity, race, dominant culture and structural racism both inside and outside the organization.

Interested in learning more about how central office leaders partner with principals to focus on issues of justice?

We suggest the following resources:

Cheatham, J.; Baker-Jones, T; Jordan-Thonas, E. (2020). *Note on Racial Equity in School Systems*. Public Education Leadership Project. Harvard Business Publishing.
<https://pelp.fas.harvard.edu/files/pelp/files/pel096p2.pdf>

Kruse, S. D., Rodela, K. C., & Huggins, K. S. (2018). A Regional Network of Superintendents Confronting Equity. *Journal of School Leadership*, 28(1), 82–109.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/105268461802800104>

Radd, S. I., Generett, G. G., Gooden, M. A., & Theoharis, G. (2021). *Five Practices for Equity-Focused School Leadership*. United States: ASCD.

Rigby, J., et. al. (2019). A view from the field: the process of improving equitable systems leadership. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 57(5), 484–500. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-09-2018-0181>

Teaching and learning approach.

Recent research highlights the shift in central office leaders' roles away from enforcing compliance toward supporting principals to learn and grow into effective instructional leaders. A 2020 report from the Learning Policy Institute found that many principals want opportunities to develop knowledge and practices to lead toward more equitable schools, but few receive authentic, job-embedded professional learning aimed at developing this type of leadership. After reviewing current principal development literature, Ford and his colleagues (2020) suggested that district leaders must recognize principals' needs as learners, consider how to support individual principals, and coordinate those supports across school systems. Existing studies document how district leaders approach principal support through teaching and learning by:

- Focusing discussion with principals on instruction, rather than supervision
- Engaging with principals in problem-solving at their schools
- Facilitating learning experiences that aim to transfer knowledge into practice
- Providing coaching and mentoring tailored to an individual principal's skills, identity, and school context
- Creating networks for principals to learn together

While existing studies largely focus on principal supervisors, the PSF describes leadership practices in support of principal development that can be taken up by central office leaders regardless of their

Interested in learning more about a teaching and learning approach to principal support?

We suggest the following resources:

Ford, T. G., Lavigne, A. L., Fiegenger, A. M., & Si, S. (2020). Understanding District Support for Leader Development and Success in the Accountability Era: A Review of the Literature Using Social-Cognitive Theories of Motivation. *Review of Educational Research*, 90(2), 264–307.

Goldring, E., Grissom, J., Rubin, M., Rogers, L., Neel, M. and Clark, M. (2018), A New Role Emerges for Principal Supervisors: Evidence from Six Districtsin The Principal Supervisor Initiative, The Wallace Foundation.

Honig, M. I., & Honsa, A. (2020). Systems-Focused Equity Leadership Learning: Shifting Practice Through Practice. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 15(3), 192–209. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1942775120936303>

Levin, S., Leung, M., Edgerton, A. K., & Scott, C. (2020). *Elementary School Principals' Professional Learning: Current Status and Future Needs*. Learning Policy Institute.

Rainey, L. R & Honig, M. (2020). A teaching-and-learning approach to principal supervision. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 102(2), 54–57. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0031721720963234>

“Central office leaders encourage and enable principal’s school-level equity work by aligning institutional structures, processes, and norms.”

role. Within the PSF, Action Area 3: *Create a system of support for principals to grow as leaders of equitable schools* translates these recommendations into leadership actions aimed at considering principals’ learning needs. The influence of this literature is also clear in Action Area 2, in the charge for central office leaders to provide high quality professional learning for principals, and manifests in Action Area 4 in calls to both tailor support to the needs of individual principals and leverage learning networks.

Create organizational conditions for equitable principal leadership.

Another set of research studies illustrates how leaders can leverage their district-level positions to create organizational conditions that foster equitable principal leadership. Scholars Jeffery Brooks and Terri Watson (2019) suggest that leaders take an “ecological approach” by building overlapping mechanisms that identify and disrupt racial bias at both the individual and organizational levels. Studies show that central office leaders encourage and enable principal’s school-level equity work by aligning institutional structures, processes, and norms. For instance, human resource leaders can audit their recruitment, hiring, and retention practices and bring them in

line with racial justice goals by increasing hiring teachers and leaders of color and tailoring support for them. Studies suggest that district leaders, including superintendents and school board members, can also take advantage of their policy-making power to enact policies aimed at increasing equity, such as initiatives aimed at detracking, adopting restorative justice rather than punitive discipline approaches, and developing just student assignment plans. In addition to making policies, studies show that central office leaders create supportive conditions for justice-focused principals when they interpret state and federal policies through an equity lens and provide resources for implementing them accordingly. This research can be seen throughout the PSF. In Action Area 1, for example, the PSF calls for leaders to “Demonstrate a clear commitment to the system’s vision for equitable student experiences and outcomes by ensuring sponsorship throughout the system”, and in Action Area 2, the PSF suggest that leaders “Cultivate, hire, place and retain a diverse school leadership corps using anti-bias criteria and inclusive processes.”

In addition, the PSF also applies insights gained from working side by side and with central office leaders in the field. CEL faculty generated this knowledge through rigorous data collection and analysis. Through this work, the CEL team learned that:

- Superintendents and cabinet level leaders play a key role in promoting

Interested in learning more about how central office leaders can support principals by creating organizational conditions?

We suggest the following resources:

Brooks, J. S., & Watson, T. N. (2019). School Leadership and Racism: An Ecological Perspective. *Urban Education*, 54(5), 631–655. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085918783821>

De Matthews, David, & Izquierdo, Elena, & Knight, David S. (2017). Righting Past Wrongs: A Superintendent's Social Justice Leadership for Dual Language Education Along the U.S.-Mexico Border. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 25,1-32. <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.25.2436>

Ishimaru, A. M., & Galloway, M. K. (2014). Beyond Individual Effectiveness: Conceptualizing Organizational Leadership for Equity. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 13(1), 93–146. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15700763.2014.890733>

Ishimaru, A. M., & Galloway, M. K. (2021). Hearts and Minds First: Institutional Logics in Pursuit of Educational Equity. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 57(3), 470–502. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X20947459>

Salisbury, J. D. (2020). Moving a School toward Cultural Relevance: Leveraging Organizational Structures, Routines, and Artifacts to Shape Social Interactions. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 25(2), 126–145. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10824669.2019.1705161>

Welton, A. D., Owens, D. R., & Zamani-Gallaher, E. M. (2018). Anti-racist change: A conceptual framework for educational institutions to take systemic action. *Teachers College Record*, 120(14)

equity-focused principal leadership by sponsoring professional learning, setting equity as a priority across the organization, and centering justice within their leadership.

- Central office leaders support principals by formally defining principals' roles and communicating these roles across the organization. They enable principals to succeed in their roles by providing high quality data, tools and professional learning opportunities.
- Central office leaders also support principals by taking a proactive stance in building strategic partnerships with school leaders centered on each school's unique assets and challenges. Effective principal support should be the shared work of all central office leaders, regardless of their role. Leaders across departments can meaningfully contribute to principals' ability to focus their work around creating more equitable school communities.

The findings contributed to a vision of central office leadership that nurtures principal leadership focused on equitable school experiences and informs each Action Area within the PSF.