

THE SUPERINTENDENT'S ROLE IN SUPERVISION, EVALUATION, AND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING OF PRINCIPALS



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Introduction

Introduction: Leadership as a Continuous Learning Journey

Leadership is not a fixed role but a process of ongoing growth. In schools and districts, principals and superintendents influence teaching, learning, and community trust in profound ways. Yet the complexity of leadership often exceeds the preparation and support leaders receive. This book takes up that challenge. It argues that leadership development is not optional—it is essential—and it must be nurtured through deliberate systems that combine professional development, evaluation, mentoring, and emotional intelligence into a coherent whole.

The importance of this work lies in the fact that effective leadership is the difference between schools that merely function and schools that truly flourish. Leadership influences whether teachers feel supported, whether students have equitable opportunities to learn, and whether districts can sustain improvement over time. If principals are second only to teachers in their impact on student achievement, then the growth and support of leaders must be one of education's most urgent priorities.

Equally important is the use of leadership standards at both the local and national levels. Standards serve as benchmarks that enable leaders and systems to assess their alignment with the spectrum of research-based educational leadership practices. They provide coherence across professional development, evaluation, and mentoring, ensuring that leadership is not defined only by local preference or immediate context, but by principles grounded in scholarship and effective practice. Standards also foster accountability and comparability, helping leaders align their growth with the broader expectations of the profession.

Throughout this book, readers will encounter a holistic and developmental vision of leadership. The discussion highlights how professional learning opportunities can be designed to meet leaders at different stages of their careers, and why equity in access to growth matters just as much as the learning itself. It considers how evaluation, often treated as a bureaucratic hurdle, can be reframed as an instrument for reflection and renewal. It examines the role of mentoring and coaching as ongoing lifelines for leaders, and how emotional intelligence enables school communities to navigate conflict, build trust, and collaborate on shared goals. The text also reflects on the systemic conditions that districts and superintendents must create to recruit, support, and retain leaders over time.

This work is not only about strategies but also about mindset. It invites reflection on leadership as part of a learning ecosystem, a set of interdependent practices and relationships that together make growth possible. Just as teachers and students learn best in supportive environments, so too do leaders thrive when their professional journeys are embedded in systems of care, feedback, and collaboration.

This book aims to provide both a conceptual framework and practical insights for strengthening leadership at every level. Educational leadership is a continuous, collaborative, and committed pursuit of excellence. The following pages present a vision of leadership development that honors individuals, empowers communities, and fosters long-term growth.

1: EXAMINATIONS OF LEADERSHIP STANDARDS

- 1.1: Objectives
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1.1: Objectives



Objectives

Chapter 1 Objectives: Examinations of Leadership Standards

After reading this chapter, readers will be able to:

- Define leadership standards and explain their significance in guiding superintendent practice and principal supervision.
- Trace the historical development of educational leadership standards from ISLLC (1997) through NELP (2018), identifying the roles of NPBEA, CCSSO, and CAEP.
- Compare ISLLC and ELCC standards with PSEL and NELP, noting shifts in emphasis over time.
- Analyze how superintendents apply NELP District Level Standards to supervise, evaluate, and support principals.
- Evaluate the Illinois Principal Evaluation Plan and School Leader Paradigm as state-level applications of national standards.
- Apply knowledge of leadership standards to design or critique a principal supervision and evaluation framework.

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1.2: Narrative



Narrative

Chapter 1 Narrative

"Standards give us a common language and a shared understanding of effective school leadership. Evaluation tells us where a principal stands. Neither is enough unless the superintendent understands their true purpose — standards exist for clarity, not compliance; evaluation exists for perspective, not judgment. Together they answer the only question that matters: How do we help this principal grow?" Dr. Mary Zaharis

Introduction

Leadership standards are more than policy documents. At their best, they provide a shared language. This common set of principles clarifies what educational leaders must know, believe, and do to serve students and communities. For superintendents, this language forms the foundation of effective principal supervision. Whether a superintendent is conducting a goal-setting meeting, observing classroom instruction, or delivering a summative evaluation, standards define what matters. Without this shared framework, supervision becomes subjective, inconsistent, and disconnected from school improvement.

Compelling research grounds the importance of this supervisory work. Two landmark Wallace Foundation studies established what practitioners intuitively knew: leadership is second only to classroom instruction among school-based factors affecting student learning (Leithwood et al., 2004). A subsequent synthesis of two decades of research extended this finding. It demonstrated that a principal at the 75th percentile of effectiveness generates nearly three additional months of student learning in reading and mathematics compared to a below-average principal (Grissom et al., 2021). Unlike a teacher's impact, a principal's influence distributes across an entire school. In short, the principal is the second most powerful school-based lever for improving student outcomes. Consequently, a superintendent's supervision, evaluation, and development of principals represents a high-leverage district action (Learning Forward, 2022; Sergiovanni et al., 2006).

Yet, districts often overlook principals in their professional learning cycles. Districts routinely invest in teacher professional development, curriculum adoption, and instructional coaching. Meanwhile, they treat principal evaluation and growth as an annual compliance requirement rather than an ongoing developmental priority. Research suggests this is a significant missed opportunity. Grissom et al. (2021) found that principal effects extend well beyond student achievement. Effective principals positively influence teacher satisfaction and retention—particularly among high-performing teachers—while improving student attendance and reducing disciplinary incidents. A well-supervised, continuously developing principal creates conditions that benefit everyone in a building. Conversely, a poorly supported principal can erode those conditions over time.

This chapter examines the standards-based framework that structures how superintendents supervise and evaluate principals. Beginning with the founding of the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) in 1989, it traces successive frameworks: ISLLC, ELCC, PSEL, and NELP. The chapter gives particular attention to the NELP District Level Standards (2018). These standards define what aspiring superintendents must know and do upon completing a leadership preparation program.

Finally, the chapter illustrates how national standards operationalize through state evaluation systems, using the Illinois Principal Evaluation Plan (IPEP), the Illinois Performance Standards for School Leaders (IPSSL), and the Illinois Principals Association (IPA) School Leader Paradigm as examples.

As you read, consider three recurring questions:

- How do leadership standards define what a superintendent needs to know and be able to do?
- What does it mean for a superintendent to supervise a principal through the lens of these standards—not just evaluate, but genuinely develop?
- How do standards change over time, and what does that evolution tell us about shifting expectations for school leadership in a diverse and changing society?

A History of Educational Leadership Standards

The development of national educational leadership standards has been a deliberate, iterative process spanning more than three decades. It began not with a policy mandate but with a question: What does an individual need to know and be able to do to lead an effective school? That question, posed by a coalition of professional organizations in 1989, set in motion a sustained effort to define, refine, and institutionalize expectations for school and district leadership across the United States.

The National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) was founded that year as the convening body for this work. NPBEA's membership drew together major national organizations with a stake in educational leadership. These included the School Superintendents Association (AASA), the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), the International Council of Professors of Educational Leadership (ICPEL), the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), and the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA). From the outset, stakeholders understood standards development as a collective enterprise, not a top-down prescription.

Over the next three decades, four major frameworks emerged. Each built upon and departed from its predecessor in important ways. The timeline below traces key milestones, from NPBEA's founding through CAEP's adoption of the NELP standards in 2018. The sections that follow examine each framework in greater depth.

Table 1.1 History of the Development of Educational Leadership Standards, 1989–2018

Year	Development
1989	The National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) is founded as a national consortium of major stakeholder organizations. Its mission is to advance policy and program standards for practitioners, states, professional associations, and leadership preparation programs through collective action.
1997	The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) creates the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards in collaboration with NPBEA—six standards organized around Knowledge, Dispositions, and Performances. Concurrently, the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) is appointed by NPBEA to serve as the Specialized Professional Association (SPA) for accreditation review under NCATE.

Year	Development
2001	ELCC Building Level and District Level Standards are approved by NPBEA to guide planning, implementation, and accreditation of educational leadership preparation programs under NCATE.
2008	ISLLC Standards are revised to reflect advances in research and practice.
2011	ELCC Standards are revised, continuing their emphasis on Content Knowledge and Professional Leadership Skills.
2013	CAEP (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation) is formed when NCATE and TEAC merge, becoming the sole national accrediting body for educator preparation.
2015	PSEL (Professional Standards for Educational Leaders) are approved by NPBEA, replacing the 2008 ISLLC Standards. The ten standards shift the framework toward student well-being, equity, and culturally responsive practice.
2016	NELP (National Educational Leadership Preparation) Program Standards for Building Level and District Level Leaders are approved by NPBEA, replacing the 2011 ELCC Standards.
2018	NELP Standards are approved by CAEP for use in national accreditation program review, establishing them as the current standard for evaluating educational leadership preparation programs.

ISLLC Standards (1997)

The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards, approved by NPBEA in 1997, were the first national leadership standards to emerge from this collaborative effort. Developed by CCSSO in collaboration with NPBEA, the ISLLC standards aimed to strengthen preparation programs and inform professional development for practicing school leaders. For the first time, they provided a nationally recognized framework describing the functions of effective educational leadership. States, districts, and policymakers could adopt or adapt this common model (Van Meter & Murphy, 1997).

The ISLLC framework rested on six standards, each organized around three dimensions of effective practice. *Knowledge* described what an administrator must understand. *Dispositions* identified the values, beliefs, and commitments the administrator should hold. *Performances* articulated the observable actions a skilled administrator would demonstrate. Across the six standards, ISLLC identified 43 knowledge indicators, 43 disposition indicators, and 97 performance indicators. This created a comprehensive, if sometimes unwieldy, portrait of school leadership.

The six standards addressed the full scope of school administration, from developing a shared learning vision to managing community relationships and engaging with broader political and cultural contexts. Table 1.2 summarizes each standard and its central focus. Standards 1 and 2—Vision and School Culture and Instructional Program—were particularly influential. They shaped how subsequent frameworks conceptualized educational leadership, and both persist in updated forms within today's PSEL and NELP standards.

Table 1.2 ISLLC Standards (1997): Six Standards for School Leadership

Standard	Domain	Core Expectation
1	Vision	Promote the success of all students by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a shared vision of learning supported by the school community.
2	School Culture and Instructional Program	Promote student success by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.
3	Management and Organization	Ensure management of the organization, operations, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.
4	Families and Communities	Collaborate with families and community members, respond to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilize community resources.
5	Ethics, Integrity, and Fairness	Act with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner in all aspects of leadership.
6	Political, Social, Economic, and Cultural Context	Understand, respond to, and influence the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context affecting education.

The ISLLC standards represented a significant advance, but they had limitations. Critics noted that the knowledge-dispositions-performances structure was difficult to translate into measurable program outcomes or accreditation criteria. Indicators were numerous, sometimes overlapping, and not always clearly actionable. These limitations set the stage for the next iteration of standards, developed specifically for accreditation and program evaluation.

ELCC Standards (2001, 2008, 2011)

Building directly on the ISLLC framework, stakeholders developed the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) standards to serve a specific institutional purpose. They guided the accreditation of educational leadership preparation programs under the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). Where ISLLC described what effective leaders should know, believe, and do in practice, ELCC translated those expectations into program standards. They specified the content knowledge and professional leadership skills candidates should demonstrate upon completing a preparation program.

The ELCC standards maintained the same six domains as ISLLC but restructured them around two organizing dimensions: Content Knowledge and Professional Leadership Skills. Each of the six standards was further disaggregated into Standard Elements, breaking the standard into specific, assessable sub-indicators. Acceptable Candidate Performance criteria supported each element, describing what programs must provide as evidence. This layered structure made ELCC far more useful as an accreditation tool than ISLLC, even as it preserved the substantive content of its predecessor.

The original 2001 standards were revised in 2008 and again in 2011, incorporating advances in research and practice. By 2011, the ELCC standards existed in both Building Level and District Level versions. This acknowledged that the knowledge and skills required of a principal differ meaningfully from those required of a superintendent. Table 1.3 summarizes the six ELCC Building Level Standards from the 2011 revision.

Table 1.3 ELCC Building Level Standards (2011): Summary

Standard	Domain	Core Expectation (Building Level, 2011)
1	Vision and Mission	Collaboratively develop, articulate, implement, and steward a shared school vision of learning through data use, organizational assessment, and school improvement planning.
2	School Culture	Advocate, nurture, and sustain a school culture and instructional program that supports student learning and staff professional growth.
3	Management and Organization	Manage the organization, operations, and resources in a manner that promotes a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.
4	Families and Communities	Collaborate with families and community members, respond to diverse community interests, and mobilize community resources.
5	Ethics and Professional Responsibility	Act with integrity and fairness in an ethical, legal, and professional manner.

Standard	Domain	Core Expectation (Building Level, 2011)
6	Political, Social, and Cultural Context	Understand, respond to, and influence the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context affecting education.

Taken together, ISLLC and ELCC addressed the same six domains of school leadership from different vantage points. One described effective practice; the other specified what preparation programs must produce. Table 1.4 places the two frameworks side by side to highlight their parallel structure and key distinctions.

Table 1.4 Comparison of ISLLC and ELCC Standards

ISLLC (1997) Knowledge · Dispositions · Performances	ELCC (2001 / 2008 / 2011) Content Knowledge · Professional Leadership Skills	Key Distinction
Vision	Vision and Mission	Both begin with shared vision. ELCC adds explicit data use and school improvement planning as mechanisms.
School Culture and Instructional Program	School Culture	ISLLC explicitly names the instructional program; ELCC centers on culture while treating instruction as embedded.
Management and Organization	Management and Organization	Parallel emphasis on safe, efficient, effective environments. Nearly identical in scope.
Families and Communities	Families and Communities	Both address community collaboration. ELCC adds greater specificity regarding program planning.
Ethics, Integrity, and Fairness	Ethics and Professional Responsibility	ISLLC anchors ethics in integrity and fairness; ELCC broadens to professional responsibility and legal awareness.
Political, Social, Economic, and Cultural Context	Political, Social, and Cultural Context	Near-identical in focus. ELCC updates language to reflect accreditation expectations.

As this comparison suggests, the six domains of leadership identified in 1997 proved remarkably durable. Successive revisions changed the precision with which expectations were articulated, not the fundamental scope of leadership. When CAEP replaced

NCATE as the national accrediting body in 2013, the stage was set for a more fundamental reconceptualization. This shift would introduce new domains, not merely refine existing ones.

Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL, 2015)

The 2015 approval of the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) by NPBEA marked the most significant reconceptualization of educational leadership standards since 1997. PSEL was not simply an update to the ISLLC framework; it was a fundamental reorientation. While ISLLC and ELCC organized leadership primarily around administrative functions and organizational structures, PSEL placed the academic success and personal well-being of every student explicitly at the center of every standard. This shift from a systems focus to a student-centered focus carries direct implications for how superintendents supervise and evaluate principals.

Three additions distinguished PSEL most sharply from its predecessors. First, equity and cultural responsiveness became a standalone standard rather than an embedded value. PSEL Standard 3 requires educational leaders to actively strive for equitable educational opportunity, not merely acknowledge its importance. Second, PSEL introduced a community of care and support for students as a distinct domain (Standard 5). This recognized that academic achievement depends on creating environments where every student feels known, safe, and valued. Third, PSEL articulated leadership as intentional, strategic, and moral work. It framed the educational leader not simply as a skilled manager, but as an ethical steward of a community's most important resources: its children.

PSEL's ten standards describe the knowledge, skills, and attributes that practicing educational leaders need to promote student academic success and well-being. Notably, each standard is framed around the phrase "each student." This signals that aggregate outcomes are insufficient; effective leadership attends to every individual. For superintendents, this framing raises an important evaluative question: Does your observation of a principal reveal a leader who attends to all students, or only to those easiest to serve?

Table 1.5 presents all ten PSEL standards. As you read them, consider which standards will most frequently arise in conversations between a superintendent and a principal about instructional leadership and school improvement.

Table 1.5 Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL, 2015)

#	Standard	Core Expectation
1	Mission, Vision, and Core Values	Develop, advocate, and enact a shared mission, vision, and core values of high-quality education and academic success and well-being of each student.
2	Ethics and Professional Norms	Act ethically and according to professional norms to promote each student's academic success and well-being.
3	Equity and Cultural Responsiveness	Strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each student's academic success and well-being.

#	Standard	Core Expectation
4	Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment	Develop and support intellectually rigorous and coherent systems of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to promote each student's academic success and well-being.
5	Community of Care and Support for Students	Cultivate an inclusive, caring, and supportive school community that promotes the academic success and well-being of each student.
6	Professional Capacity of School Personnel	Develop the professional capacity and practice of school personnel to promote each student's academic success and well-being.
7	Professional Community for Teachers and Staff	Foster a professional community of teachers and other professional staff to promote each student's academic success and well-being.
8	Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community	Engage families and the community in meaningful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial ways to promote each student's academic success and well-being.
9	Operations and Management	Manage school operations and resources to promote each student's academic success and well-being.
10	School Improvement	Act as an agent of continuous improvement to promote each student's academic success and well-being.

Several patterns in the PSEL framework deserve attention. Standards 1 through 3—mission and vision, ethics, and equity—form a moral foundation for leadership that precedes and informs all other work. Standards 4 through 7 address the core technical and relational work of school leadership: curriculum and instruction, community of care, professional capacity, and professional community. Standards 8 through 10 focus outward and forward, encompassing family and community engagement, operational management, and continuous improvement. This architecture reflects a sophisticated understanding of what effective school leadership requires. It also provides superintendents with a useful organizing lens for principal supervision. Superintendents must ask not just whether a school is well-managed, but whether its leader has built the ethical, relational, and instructional foundation that sustains genuine improvement.

When stakeholders developed NELP to replace the ELCC standards, they built it explicitly on the PSEL framework. This aligned

preparation standards with practice standards. Consequently, what aspiring leaders learn in their programs reflects what practicing leaders must do in schools and districts. The following section introduces that alignment and the NELP standards that define preparation expectations today.

National Educational Leadership Preparation Standards (NELP, 2018)

The National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards were approved by NPBEA in 2016 and adopted by CAEP for accreditation use in 2018. They replaced the ELCC standards as the framework governing the review of educational leadership preparation programs nationwide. Like ELCC, the NELP standards specify what program graduates should know and be able to do. However, they do so within a framework explicitly aligned to PSEL, creating a coherent continuum from preparation through practice.

There are two parallel sets of NELP standards: one for candidates preparing to become building-level leaders (principals) and one for candidates preparing to become district-level leaders (superintendents and other district administrators). Both sets share seven of their eight standards. The critical distinction appears in Standard 7. At the building level, Standard 7 addresses building professional capacity—developing teachers and staff within a school. At the district level, Standard 7 addresses policy, governance, and advocacy—navigating board relations, implementing policy, and representing district needs in external arenas. This single difference reflects the substantial shift in scope and responsibility between leading a school and leading a district.

Before examining the district-level standards individually, it is useful to see how the two sets relate. Table 1.6 places them side by side. The bolded row marks where the two frameworks diverge, underscoring the expanded scope of the superintendent's role.

Table 1.6 NELP Standards (2018): Building Level vs. District Level

Building Level Standards (Principal Preparation)	District Level Standards (Superintendent Preparation)
1. Mission, Vision, and Improvement (2 components)	1. Mission, Vision, and Improvement (3 components)
2. Ethics and Professional Norms (3 components)	2. Ethics and Professional Norms (3 components)
3. Equity, Inclusiveness, and Cultural Responsiveness (3 components)	3. Equity, Inclusiveness, and Cultural Responsiveness (3 components)
4. Learning and Instruction (4 components)	4. Learning and Instruction (4 components)
5. Community and External Leadership (3 components)	5. Community and External Leadership (3 components)
6. Operations and Management (3 components)	6. Operations and Management (3 components)
7. Building Professional Capacity (4 components)	7. Policy, Governance, and Advocacy (4 components)
8. Internship (3 components)	8. Internship (3 components)

With this comparison in view, Table 1.7 provides a summary overview of all eight NELP District Level Standards. This is the

framework within which this text is organized. Each standard is listed with its number of components, which specify the particular knowledge and skills programs must develop in candidates. The sections that follow examine each of the seven substantive standards in greater depth, connecting each to the practical realities of superintendent leadership and principal supervision.

Table 1.7 NELP District Level Standards (2018): Overview

#	Standard	Components	Focus
1	Mission, Vision, and Improvement	2	Collaboratively lead, design, and implement a district mission, vision, and process for continuous improvement reflecting core values.
2	Ethics and Professional Norms	3	Advocate for ethical decisions and cultivate professional norms and culture throughout the district.
3	Equity, Inclusiveness, and Cultural Responsiveness	3	Develop and maintain a supportive, equitable, culturally responsive, and inclusive district culture.
4	Learning and Instruction	4	Evaluate, design, cultivate, and implement coherent systems of curriculum, instruction, data, assessment, and instructional leadership.
5	Community and External Leadership	3	Understand, engage, and collaborate with families, communities, and constituents; advocate for district and student needs.
6	Operations and Management	3	Develop, monitor, evaluate, and manage data-informed, equitable district systems for operations, resources, technology, and human capital.

#	Standard	Components	Focus
7	Policy, Governance, and Advocacy	4	Cultivate relationships, lead collaborative governance, and represent and advocate for district needs in broader policy conversations.
8	Internship	3	Engage in coherent, authentic, sustained field and clinical experiences across diverse district settings under qualified mentorship.

The NELP District Level Standards: A Closer Look

Every NELP District Level Standard begins with the same stem: candidates must understand and demonstrate the capacity to promote the current and future success and well-being of each student and adult. This stem makes three commitments explicit. First, it insists on both understanding and the capacity for action. Knowing about leadership is not sufficient; candidates must be able to lead. Second, it attends to both present conditions and future consequences, framing leadership as a responsibility extending beyond the immediate school year. Third, it encompasses adults as well as students. A district leader's work is as much about developing and sustaining professionals as it is about directly serving students.

The following sections examine each of the seven substantive district-level standards. For each, the core expectation is described, the components are summarized, and the implications for superintendent practice are identified. The goal is to build the conceptual fluency that allows an aspiring superintendent to work with these frameworks meaningfully in practice.

Standard 1: Mission, Vision, and Improvement

For Standard 1, capacity focuses on the ability to *collaboratively lead, design, and implement a district mission, vision, and process for continuous improvement that reflects a core set of values and priorities including data use, technology, equity, diversity, digital citizenship, and community*.

A superintendent who has internalized Standard 1 understands that mission and vision are living commitments. Leaders must build them collaboratively, communicate them consistently, and use them as decision-making filters across the district. In principal supervision, this standard raises a recurring question: Does each principal understand the district mission well enough to align their building-level goals with it? Are principals helping faculty see how their daily instructional work contributes to that shared vision? Goal-setting conversations grounded in Standard 1 situate every principal's work within a coherent district direction.

The components that define this standard are summarized in the table below.

Table 1.8 Standard 1 Components and Descriptions

Component	Description
1.1	Collaboratively design, communicate, and evaluate a district mission and vision that reflects core values including data use, technology, equity, diversity, digital citizenship, and community.
1.2	Lead district strategic planning and continuous improvement processes that engage diverse stakeholders in data collection, diagnosis, design, implementation, and evaluation.

Standard 2: Ethics and Professional Norms

For Standard 2, capacity focuses on the ability to *advocate for ethical decisions and cultivate professional norms and culture*.

Ethics is the ongoing practice of a leader's daily choices. Standard 2 places the superintendent in the role of moral steward for the entire district. This responsibility is most visible in small moments: how a principal handles a difficult parent complaint, whether resource allocation reflects equity commitments, or whether a leader's public conduct matches expected professional norms. For a superintendent supervising principals, this standard is a reminder that character is evaluated. The superintendent must model the ethical conduct they ask principals to sustain.

The components that define this standard are summarized in the table below.

Table 1.9 Standard 2 Components and Descriptions

Component	Description
2.1	Reflect on, communicate about, and cultivate professional dispositions and norms—including equity, fairness, integrity, transparency, trust, collaboration, perseverance, and lifelong learning—across district and school cultures.
2.2	Evaluate and advocate for ethical and legal decisions, including stewardship of district resources.
2.3	Model ethical behavior in personal conduct and relationships, and cultivate ethical behavior in others throughout the district.

Standard 3: Equity, Inclusiveness, and Cultural Responsiveness

For Standard 3, capacity focuses on the ability to *develop and maintain a supportive, equitable, culturally responsive, and inclusive district culture*.

Equity is not achieved by declaring it a priority. Standard 3 challenges aspiring superintendents to examine whether district

practices systematically advantage some students over others—and then to act on what they find. This standard also requires cultural responsiveness: an active commitment to creating schools where every student's background is treated as an asset. When supervising principals, Standard 3 asks the superintendent to look beyond aggregate data and ask: Which students are not being reached? What barriers persist? What is this leader doing about them?

The components that define this standard are summarized in the table below.

Table 1.10 Standard 3 Components and Descriptions

Component	Description
3.1	Evaluate, cultivate, and advocate for a supportive and inclusive district culture that is fair, safe, healthy, caring, responsive, and respectful.
3.2	Evaluate, cultivate, and advocate for equitable access to safe and nurturing schools and the resources—instructional materials, technologies, qualified teachers, interventions, and adult relationships—necessary to support the success and well-being of each student.
3.3	Evaluate, advocate for, and cultivate equitable, inclusive, and culturally responsive instructional and behavior support practices among teachers and staff across the district.

Standard 4: Learning and Instruction

For Standard 4, capacity focuses on the ability to *evaluate, design, cultivate, and implement coherent systems of curriculum, instruction, data systems, supports, assessment, and instructional leadership*.

Instructional leadership extends beyond the school building. Standard 4 positions the superintendent as the architect of district-wide learning systems. Superintendents must ensure curriculum is coherent, professional development is useful, and assessment data is organized for principals to improve instruction. Component 4.2 explicitly includes the superintendent among those whose professional development must be supported. In supervising principals, a superintendent informed by Standard 4 evaluates the quality of the instructional systems a principal has built and the professional learning culture they have sustained.

The components that define this standard are summarized in the table below.

Table 1.11 Standard 4 Components and Descriptions

Component	Description
4.1	Evaluate, design, and implement high-quality curricula, technology use, and other services and supports for academic and non-academic student programs.

Component	Description
4.2	Collaboratively evaluate, design, and cultivate coherent systems of support, coaching, and professional development for educators and district leaders—including the superintendent—that promote reflection, digital literacy, distributed leadership, data literacy, equity, improvement, and student success.
4.3	Design, implement, and evaluate a developmentally appropriate, accessible, and culturally responsive system of assessments and data collection, management, and analysis that supports instructional improvement, equity, student learning and well-being, and instructional leadership.
4.4	Design, implement, and evaluate district-wide use of coherent systems of curriculum, instruction, assessment, student services, technology, and instructional resources that support the needs of each student.

Standard 5: Community and External Leadership

For Standard 5, capacity focuses on the ability to *understand and engage families, communities, and other constituents in the work of schools and the district and to advocate for district, student, and community needs*.

A superintendent's relationship with the community is different in kind from a principal's. Superintendents navigate boards of education, civic organizations, municipal governments, media, and state-level policy conversations. Standard 5 reminds aspiring superintendents that community trust is relational and strategic. When supervising principals, the superintendent asks whether each building leader communicates proactively with families, engages diverse community members authentically, and builds public confidence in the district.

The components that define this standard are summarized in the table below.

Table 1.12 Standard 5 Components and Descriptions

Component	Description
5.1	Represent and support district schools in engaging diverse families in strengthening student learning in and out of school.
5.2	Understand, engage, and effectively collaborate and communicate—through oral, written, and digital means—with diverse families, community members, partners, and other constituencies to benefit learners, schools, and the district as a whole.

Component	Description
5.3	Communicate within the larger organizational, community, and political contexts and cultivate relationships with business, civic, and policy community members in support of advocacy for district, school, student, and community needs.

Standard 6: Operations and Management

For Standard 6, capacity focuses on the ability to *develop, monitor, evaluate, and manage data-informed and equitable district systems for operations, resources, technology, and human capital management*.

Operations and management are the infrastructure through which vision becomes practice. Without coherent systems for budgeting, staffing, scheduling, and communication, equity commitments remain aspirational. Component 6.3 is particularly relevant: designing systems for hiring, supervising, and developing school leaders is a core superintendent function. A compliance-driven principal evaluation system undermines the district's capacity to grow. Standard 6 frames the development of a rigorous supervision system as a strategic investment in collective instructional capacity.

The components that define this standard are summarized in the table below.

Table 1.13 Standard 6 Components and Descriptions

Component	Description
6.1	Develop, communicate, implement, and evaluate data-informed and equitable management, communication, technology, governance, and operation systems at the district level to support schools in realizing the district's mission and vision.
6.2	Develop, communicate, implement, and evaluate a data-based district resourcing plan and support schools in developing their school-level resourcing plans.
6.3	Develop, implement, and evaluate coordinated, data-informed systems for hiring, retaining, supervising, and developing school and district staff in order to support the district's collective instructional and leadership capacity.

Standard 7: Policy, Governance, and Advocacy

For Standard 7, capacity focuses on the ability to *cultivate relationships, lead collaborative decision making and governance, and represent and advocate for district needs in broader policy conversations*.

Standard 7 most clearly defines the superintendent as distinct from the principal. District leaders operate at the intersection of governance, policy, and public advocacy. The four components describe a complex set of responsibilities: maintaining productive board relationships, designing participatory governance, navigating policy, and representing district needs externally. For principals, a superintendent who has developed these capacities is a critical resource who translates external policy demands

into manageable expectations.

The components that define this standard are summarized in the table below.

Table 1.14 Standard 7 Components and Descriptions

Component	Description
7.1	Represent the district to the school board and cultivate productive board relationships to support the district's mission and vision. Engage the board and others in shared understandings of educational systems and the district's work.
7.2	Design, implement, and evaluate effective systems for district governance and stakeholder engagement that involve multiple and diverse community stakeholders and support collaborative decision making.
7.3	Evaluate, engage in decision making around, implement, and appropriately communicate about district, state, and national policy, laws, rules, and regulations.
7.4	Evaluate the implications of larger cultural, social, economic, legal, and political interests; represent district needs within broader policy conversations; and advocate for district needs at the local, state, and national levels.

A State-Level Application: Principal Evaluation in Illinois

National standards describe what educational leaders should know and be able to do. However, standards only improve practice when translated into coherent evaluation and development systems at the state and district level. Illinois offers a well-documented example of how national frameworks become operational guidance for superintendents. Three resources illustrate this translation: the Illinois Principal Evaluation Plan (IPEP), the Illinois Performance Standards for School Leaders (IPSSL), and the School Leader Paradigm developed by the Illinois Principals Association (IPA) in 2024.

The Illinois Principal Evaluation Plan (IPEP)

The legislative foundation for principal evaluation in Illinois is the Performance Evaluation Reform Act (PERA), signed in 2010. PERA required Illinois school districts to develop evaluation systems combining multiple measures of professional practice with evidence of student growth. It represented a significant departure from cursory, compliance-driven evaluation processes.

In response, the IPA and the Illinois Association of School Administrators (IASA) jointly developed a *Guide to Implementing Principal Performance Evaluation in Illinois* (Illinois Principals Association & Illinois Association of School Administrators, 2012). The Guide established the Illinois Principal Evaluation Plan (IPEP) as a structured, legally grounded annual timeline for principal evaluation. Districts could develop their own plan, adopt the state model, or work from a plan provided by IPA or IASA.

Illinois law has since changed regarding student outcomes. Public Act 104-0020 (Senate Bill 28), effective July 1, 2025, made the student growth component optional rather than required in principal evaluations (Illinois General Assembly, 2025). Districts may continue to incorporate student growth at their discretion. Aspiring superintendents should review their district's current

evaluation plan to understand how it addresses this change.

The IPEP timeline, which structures the annual evaluation cycle, remains in effect. Table 1.8 summarizes its key dates and required actions.

Table 1.15 Illinois Principal Evaluation Plan (IPEP): Annual Timeline

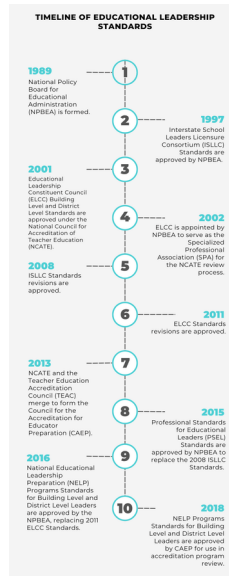
Timeline	Required Action
Day 1 of School	Superintendent issues written notice to each principal that they will be formally evaluated during the current school year.
By October 1	Goal-setting meeting between superintendent and each principal. Goals are established for professional practice and, at the district's discretion, may include student growth indicators.
Throughout the Year	Minimum of two formal observations; informal walk-throughs and artifact reviews as warranted; ongoing coaching and feedback conversations.
By February 1	Principal completes a self-assessment using the Illinois Performance Standards for School Leaders (IPSSL) Rubric.
By March 1	Superintendent completes the written summative evaluation and conducts a summative conference with each principal.
By April 1	Superintendent notifies the principal of any proposed reclassification in employment status.

The School Leader Paradigm and the 2024 School Leader Evaluation Plan

In 2024, the IPA expanded on the IPEP with the School Leader Evaluation Plan. This comprehensive resource is rooted in the School Leader Paradigm, a framework that deepens the IPSSL by identifying essential behaviors across three domains: cultural, systems, and learning.

The School Leader Evaluation Plan helps districts build growth-oriented evaluation systems. It defines the supervisor's role through four interconnected functions: coaching, mentoring, leading, and evaluating. These functions are simultaneous and mutually reinforcing. A superintendent who reduces supervision to the formal evaluation cycle will likely find that principals comply without genuinely growing.

The plan specifies effective district practices to support principal supervisors. These include developing universal norms, creating district-wide protocols for regular meetings, and adopting common tools for coaching and evidence collection. Furthermore, the School Leader Paradigm provides a framework for understanding principal practice that complements the IPSSL rubric. Its three domains offer a way of organizing observation evidence that goes beyond checklist compliance.



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1.3: Summary



Summary

Chapter 1 Summary

This chapter traced the development of educational leadership standards from NPBEA's founding in 1989 through CAEP's adoption of the NELP District Level Standards in 2018. Each successive framework—ISLLC, ELCC, PSEL, NELP—built upon its predecessor, reflecting advances in research and evolving understandings of effective leadership.

ISLLC established a common language organized around knowledge, dispositions, and performances. ELCC translated those expectations into accreditation-ready program standards. PSEL broadened the frame significantly, centering student well-being, equity, and cultural responsiveness. NELP brought these commitments into the preparation arena, defining what aspiring leaders should know and be able to do.

The NELP District Level Standards define the framework for this text. Their seven substantive standards describe the full scope of a superintendent's professional responsibility. Standard 7 is particularly distinctive, reflecting the superintendent's unique obligation to navigate governance and advocate for district needs.

Illinois's IPEP, IPSSL, and the IPA School Leader Paradigm illustrate how national standards become operational guidance at the state level. The recent change making student growth an optional component of principal evaluation reminds us that standards and legal requirements evolve.

The central insight from all these frameworks is consistent: supervision, evaluation, and professional learning are an integrated, continuous cycle oriented toward the growth of every principal and the success of every student.

Chapter 2 builds on this foundation by examining the research on what makes principals effective and the growing crisis of principal burnout that makes sustained investment in the principalship an urgent superintendent responsibility.

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1.4: Discussion Questions and Exercises



Discussion Questions & Exercises

Chapter 1 Discussion Questions & Exercises

Discussion Questions

1. How have educational leadership standards evolved over time, and what factors—shifts in research, demographics, policy, and accountability—have driven those changes? Which shift do you consider most significant, and why?
 2. What does effective supervision of principals look like when it is grounded in current standards? How should a superintendent balance the evaluative and developmental dimensions of that role?
 3. How does the Illinois Principal Evaluation Plan reflect national leadership standards? Where does it align most clearly, and where, if anywhere, do you see potential gaps?
 4. How do PSEL and NELP address equity and cultural responsiveness? What are the practical implications for how a superintendent evaluates and supports principals in a diverse district?
 5. How do the cultural, systems, and learning domains of the IPA School Leader Paradigm connect to the NELP District Level Standards? Where do these frameworks reinforce each other, and where, if anywhere, do they diverge?
-

Exercises

1. Create a visual timeline of the development of educational leadership standards from 1989 to 2018. Annotate at least four key transition points, explaining what drove the change and what it meant for how school leaders are prepared and evaluated.
2. Construct a comparison matrix of ISLLC, ELCC, PSEL, and NELP. Identify at least three themes that persist across all four frameworks and at least two themes that are substantially new or expanded in PSEL or NELP. What does the pattern of persistence and change tell you about the field's evolving understanding of school leadership?
3. Using the Illinois Principal Evaluation Plan timeline as a structure, develop the content of a goal-setting meeting between a superintendent and a principal. Draft two goals: one tied to equity and cultural responsiveness, one tied to instructional leadership. For each, specify what evidence would demonstrate progress and what coaching conversations you would expect to have at mid-year.
4. Reflect on your own current leadership practice using the School Leader Paradigm's three domains—cultural, systems, and learning. Identify one strength and one growth area in each domain. Draft a professional learning plan that addresses your growth areas over the course of one academic year.
5. Draft a one-page position paper advocating for a district-level policy change aligned to NELP District Level Standard 7. Identify a specific policy issue, describe the governance process you would use, name the stakeholders you would engage, and outline the evidence you would present to the school board.

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1.5: Case Study



Case Study

Chapter 1 Case Study: From Compliance to Coherence in Prairie View

Dr. Maya Thompson arrives as the new superintendent of Prairie View School District, a mid-sized Illinois district serving approximately 8,500 students across eleven schools. Prairie View reflects the demographic complexity of the broader region. Nearly half of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch, over twenty languages are spoken at home, and growing populations of multilingual learners and students receiving special education services have put pressure on existing systems.

When Dr. Thompson reviews the district's approach to principal evaluation, she finds significant inconsistency. Some schools operate with language drawn from older frameworks; others use fragments of PSEL without a coherent structure. Timelines vary by building. Feedback to principals ranges from detailed-but-inconsistent to cursory end-of-year summaries. The system meets minimum legal requirements but does not appear to drive growth, and there is no clear evidence that evaluation conversations connect to student learning outcomes.

Dr. Thompson believes the district can do better. She commits to aligning Prairie View's supervision and evaluation system with PSEL, the NELP District Level Standards, the IPSSL rubric, and the IPEP timeline. She convenes an Evaluator Cohort—herself, the assistant superintendent, and two directors—to build a crosswalk between observation evidence and standards, update job descriptions, and establish common protocols for goal-setting, observations, and feedback. She issues day-one evaluation notices to all principals and schedules individual goal-setting meetings by October 1.

By mid-year, the results are uneven. Some principals respond well to the clarified expectations and more structured feedback cycles. Others feel that the new system adds burden without adding meaning. Two evaluators in the cohort give feedback that is technically accurate but fails to push principals toward deeper reflection. Furthermore, several principals raise a concern that surfaces frequently in districts trying to improve their evaluation systems: equity goals are treated as a compliance requirement rather than as genuine instructional work.

Discussion Questions

The questions below are designed to support extended reflection and discussion. There are no single correct answers. They ask you to reason through the tensions and competing demands that characterize real superintendent leadership.

1. How should Dr. Thompson address the inconsistency within her Evaluator Cohort—particularly the gap between technically accurate feedback and genuinely developmental feedback? What would you do in her position?
2. Several principals feel that the new evaluation system adds burden without adding meaning. What conditions or practices might explain that perception, and what might Dr. Thompson do to shift it?
3. How can the district embed equity and cultural responsiveness into the goal-setting and feedback cycle in a way that feels

integral to instructional leadership rather than an additional compliance layer?

4. The IPEP timeline structures the formal evaluation calendar, but principals' growth happens throughout the year. How might a superintendent design a supervision system that honors the timeline while also creating space for ongoing, informal professional conversation?
5. Reflecting on the NELP District Level Standards introduced in this chapter: which two or three standards do you believe are most directly implicated in the challenges Dr. Thompson faces? What evidence from the case supports your reasoning?

1.6: References



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2: THE PRINCIPAL DIFFERENCE- LEADERSHIP QUALITIES OF EFFECTIVE SCHOOL LEADERS

2.1: Objectives

2.2: Narrative

2.3: Summary

2.4: Discussion Questions and Exercises

2.5: Case Study

2.6: References

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2.1: Objectives



Objectives

Chapter 2 Objectives: The Principal Difference: Leadership Qualities of Effective School Leaders

After reading this chapter, readers will be able to:

- Explain the relationship between principal effectiveness and student achievement, citing key research findings.
- Describe how principals influence school climate, teacher quality, and student outcomes through instructional and relational leadership.
- Identify the three core leadership domains of effective principals: interpersonal skills, instructional leadership, and school culture and climate.
- Analyze the components of emotional intelligence and their relevance to principal leadership practice.
- Evaluate the implications of principal turnover for school stability, teacher performance, and student achievement.
- Propose strategies for districts to support principal well-being and retention, including mentoring, coaching, peer networks, and differentiated evaluation.

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2.2: Narrative



Narrative

Chapter 2 Narrative

“An expanding base of knowledge from research and practice shows that educational leaders influence student achievement by creating challenging but also caring and supportive conditions conducive to each student’s learning. They relentlessly develop and support teachers, create positive working conditions, effectively allocate resources, construct appropriate organizational policies and systems, and engage in other deep and meaningful work outside of the classroom that has a powerful impact on what happens inside it.” (NPBEA, 2015)

Introduction

School quality links closely to leadership effectiveness. Strong leaders and strong schools tend to appear together, just as weak leadership and struggling schools reinforce one another (Grissom & Bartanen, 2018). Decades of research establish that among all school-based factors affecting student learning, leadership is second only to teaching. Furthermore, the gap between those two factors is smaller than commonly assumed. A principal at the 75th percentile of effectiveness generates nearly three additional months of student learning in reading and mathematics compared to a below-average principal. Unlike a teacher, whose impact concentrates in a single classroom, a principal's effect distributes across every student in the building (Grissom, Egalite, & Lindsay, 2021).

This finding is consequential for aspiring superintendents because it demands action. If the principal is that important, then how a superintendent recruits, places, supervises, evaluates, and develops principals represents the highest-leverage work a district leader can do. The research is unambiguous: the difference between an average principal and an effective one can account for up to 20 percentage points of academic achievement (Grissom et al., 2021). Effective principals are not born. Districts develop, support, and retain them through deliberate investment.

This chapter examines the leadership qualities that define effective principals. It explores the interpersonal skills, instructional leadership practices, and culture-building behaviors that distinguish leaders who help schools thrive from those who merely manage them. It also confronts an increasingly urgent challenge that superintendents cannot ignore: principal burnout and attrition. Understanding why effective principals leave, what it costs when they do, and what districts can do to keep them are central concerns for a superintendent.

The chapter unfolds in three movements. The first establishes the research on principal impact and the qualities associated with effectiveness. The second examines the growing crisis of principal well-being and retention. The third turns to the superintendent's responsibility: building, supporting, and sustaining a stable, effective principal workforce. Throughout, the chapter connects to the NELP District Level Standards introduced in Chapter 1. It particularly emphasizes Standards 4 and 6, which address the superintendent's obligations for developing school leaders and managing human capital systems.

The Impact of Principal Leadership

Researchers have built the modern understanding of principal impact over several decades of rigorous study. A landmark 2004 study commissioned by the Wallace Foundation, *How Leadership Influences Student Learning* (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004), established the foundational finding. It concluded that school leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors contributing to student learning. That report catalyzed a national shift in attention toward the principalship. It prompted states to adopt leadership standards, districts to invest in principal pipelines, and researchers to study principal effectiveness with the rigor previously reserved for teacher quality.

A 2021 update to that work drew on 219 high-quality studies and six rigorous longitudinal analyses tracking over 22,000 principals across Miami-Dade and Chicago. It found that earlier research likely understated the importance of principals (Grissom et al., 2021). The updated evidence showed that an effective principal generates nearly as much additional student learning as an effective teacher, but across an entire school. The principal's effects also proved broader, extending beyond test scores to include teacher satisfaction and retention, student attendance, and reductions in disciplinary incidents.

Principal effects on student learning are largely indirect. They flow primarily through the principal's influence on three channels: the quality of teachers the school attracts and retains, the professional development those teachers receive, and the conditions for teaching and learning the principal creates (Leithwood et al., 2004; Grissom et al., 2021). Understanding these channels has direct implications for principal supervision. Evaluating a principal solely on student test scores misses the most significant mechanisms of principal influence: teacher quality, professional culture, and organizational conditions.

The principal's importance amplifies in schools serving students with the greatest needs. Multiple studies find that effective principals have their strongest impact in high-poverty, high-need schools. In these settings, strong leadership often becomes the decisive factor in whether a school improves or declines (Chenoweth & Theokas, 2013; Miller, 2023). Conversely, principal ineffectiveness in these settings proves especially costly because students have fewer compensating advantages. For the equity-committed superintendent, the quality of principal placement and support in challenging schools is a moral imperative, not just an operational question.

Today's School Leader

The principal's role has never been simple, but the contemporary principalship is notably more demanding than a generation ago. Earlier principals primarily managed buildings. Today's school leaders must simultaneously serve as instructional visionaries, data analysts, culture builders, family engagement specialists, human capital managers, community liaisons, and policy implementers. They often do this without adequate administrative support and under significant public scrutiny and political pressure (NAESP, 2013).

Table 2.1 illustrates the breadth of the modern principal's responsibilities. As you review it, consider the scope of expectations and the degree to which these domains require distinctly different knowledge bases, skill sets, and modes of engagement. No individual principal excels equally across all of them. This reality underscores why effective superintendent support, coaching, and differentiated evaluation matter so much.

Table 2.1 Domains of Principal Responsibility in Today's Schools

Domain	Principal Responsibilities
Instructional Leadership	Setting academic vision and high standards; overseeing curriculum and assessment; conducting classroom observations; building professional learning communities.
Human Capital Management	Hiring, developing, evaluating, and retaining teachers; fostering a collaborative professional culture; managing succession.

Domain	Principal Responsibilities
Culture and Climate	Building relational trust among staff, students, and families; creating safe, welcoming environments; sustaining a shared sense of mission.
Community and Family Engagement	Communicating proactively with families; building partnerships with community organizations; representing the school in the broader district context.
Operations and Administration	Managing budgets, facilities, scheduling, and compliance; overseeing student discipline; coordinating special programs.
Data and Continuous Improvement	Using assessment data to guide professional development and instructional decisions; monitoring progress toward school improvement goals.
Policy and Advocacy	Implementing district and state mandates; advocating for school needs with district leadership; navigating legal and contractual requirements.

Understanding the full scope of principal duties is essential for effective supervision and evaluation. A principal's job is an integrated set of responsibilities that interact and amplify one another, not a collection of discrete tasks. When instructional leadership suffers, culture suffers. When culture suffers, teacher retention suffers. When teacher retention suffers, student learning suffers. The superintendent who understands these interdependencies can identify where a principal needs support and provide it before a downward spiral begins.

In Illinois, districts draw on the Illinois Performance Standards for School Leaders (IPSSL) and the PSEL (2015) standards to evaluate practicing principals. They use the NELP Standards (2018) to evaluate aspiring school leaders in preparation programs. The growing national interest in school leadership—reflected in 45 states adopting leadership standards by 2015—signals a field-wide recognition. Effective school leadership cannot be left to chance or assumed to develop without deliberate preparation and ongoing support (Miller, 2023).

Core Competencies of the Effective Principal

Research consistently identifies three interconnected domains of competence that distinguish thriving principals from those who merely maintain the status quo: interpersonal skills, instructional leadership, and the cultivation of a positive school culture and climate (Krasnoff, Leong, & Siebersma, 2015; Barkman, 2015). While individual principals bring distinctive styles to each domain, effective leaders develop and deploy all three. This section examines each in turn.

Interpersonal Skills and Emotional Intelligence

Interpersonal skills form the foundation of school leadership. Before leaders implement strategies, launch data cycles, or form professional learning communities, they must establish trust. Principals who build caring, communicative relationships grounded in mutual respect create the relational conditions necessary for school improvement (Barkman, 2015; Fahey, 2013). Effective principals treat every member of the school community with consistent dignity. This is not a leadership technique, but a reflection of genuine conviction about the worth of every person.

Central to interpersonal effectiveness is emotional intelligence (EQ). Research defines EQ as the ability to identify, understand, and manage emotions in oneself and others (Goleman, 1995). Emotional intelligence proves as important as cognitive ability in determining leadership effectiveness. It is especially consequential in schools, where work is inherently relational and emotionally charged. Principals face a constant stream of high-stakes, high-emotion situations: a grieving teacher, an escalating student conflict, a confrontational parent, or a demoralized faculty. How a principal manages their own emotional responses—and how they read the emotional states of others—determines whether trust grows or erodes.

Goleman (1995) identified four dimensions of emotional intelligence particularly relevant to school leadership. Table 2.2 summarizes each dimension and its specific meaning for a principal's work.

Table 2.2 Dimensions of Emotional Intelligence and Their Meaning for School Leadership

Dimension	Meaning for School Leadership
Self-Awareness	Recognizing and understanding one's own emotions, strengths, weaknesses, and values. A self-aware principal knows how their mood and reactions affect the people around them.
Self-Management	Effectively regulating one's emotions and behaviors, especially under pressure. Leaders who manage themselves well model the composure they expect of others.
Social Awareness	Perceiving and empathizing with the emotions of others. Socially aware principals read the room—whether in a staff meeting, a parent conference, or a student discipline situation.
Relationship Management	Using emotional intelligence to build and sustain nurturing, productive relationships. This dimension underlies trust-building, conflict resolution, and collaborative leadership.

Beyond Goleman's foundational framework, educational research highlights the intense emotional labor required of school leaders. Emotional labor refers to the effort required to manage one's own feelings to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display that supports the organization's goals (Hochschild, 1983). Principals constantly engage in emotional labor—projecting calm during a crisis, showing enthusiasm for a new initiative despite personal doubts, or absorbing the anger of a frustrated parent without retaliating. Mahfouz (2018) notes that when principals lack the emotional intelligence to process this constant labor, it leads directly to the burnout and attrition discussed later in this chapter.

Furthermore, a principal's emotional intelligence is highly contagious. Boyatzis and McKee (2005) describe this as resonant leadership. Because staff naturally look to the leader for cues, a principal's mood sets the emotional tone of the entire building. Resonant leaders use their EQ to tune into the feelings of their staff and guide the emotional climate in a positive direction. Conversely, "dissonant" leaders—those who lack self-awareness or empathy—create toxic climates that drain teacher energy and focus.

This emotional resonance directly impacts the instructional core. Tschannen-Moran (2014) demonstrates that a principal's emotional intelligence is the primary driver of relational trust in a school. When principals demonstrate empathy, vulnerability, and emotional consistency, they foster teacher collective efficacy—the shared belief among faculty that they can positively impact student learning. Without the EQ to build that trust, even the most technically sound instructional strategies will fail to take root.

Emotional intelligence is not a fixed trait. Leaders develop it through intentional practice, honest self-reflection, and feedback from trusted colleagues. For superintendents, this implies that EQ development must be a visible component of principal

coaching, not an assumed prerequisite. When supervising principals, observing how a leader handles conflict, manages stress, and builds relationships offers the most revealing evidence of their actual effectiveness. Furthermore, superintendents must monitor their principals for the exhaustion that comes from chronic emotional labor, providing the support necessary to help them process the emotional weight of the job.

Building Teams with EQ

A principal rarely leads a school in isolation. While individual emotional intelligence is essential, effective principals must also cultivate the emotional intelligence of their leadership teams. Bradberry and Greaves (2009) established that while individual EQ drives personal performance, collective EQ dictates organizational success. Building on this foundation, Greaves and Watkins (2022) introduced the concept of Team Emotional Intelligence (Team EQ). They argue that a team's EQ is not merely the average of its members' individual scores. Instead, it represents the shared norms, habits, and emotional culture the group develops to navigate challenges together.

For a principal, this means intentionally developing the Team EQ of their administrative team, instructional coaches, and department chairs. Greaves and Watkins (2022) identify core skills for team EQ, including team emotion awareness and team emotion management. A leadership team with high EQ recognizes its collective stress levels during a crisis. It establishes productive norms for managing conflict during difficult data meetings. Furthermore, it maintains healthy boundaries and supportive relationships, both internally among members and externally with the broader faculty.

For superintendents, this research adds a critical layer to principal supervision. A superintendent must evaluate not only how a principal manages their own emotions, but how they build emotional capacity within their teams. Coaching conversations should prompt principals to reflect on their team's emotional habits. When a principal successfully builds a leadership team with high EQ, they distribute the emotional labor of school leadership. This reduces their own risk of burnout while creating a more resilient school culture.

Instructional Leadership

Effective school leaders engage in instructionally focused interactions with teachers consistently, not episodically. The instructional-focused principal shapes a vision of academic success, sets direction based on high standards, and continually seeks to improve teaching through evidence-based professional development (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2004). Instructional leadership is an orientation toward the work, not a checklist. It requires a persistent focus on whether students are learning and what adults can do to improve those outcomes.

The instructional leader creates a hospitable climate for quality teaching and learning. In this environment, leaders encourage professional risk-taking, provide honest feedback, and model the highest standards of practice. They manage the hiring and retention of quality teachers with the same intentionality they bring to curriculum adoption. They cultivate leadership in others so the school's vision distributes across a professional community sharing responsibility for student success (Krasnoff et al., 2015; Leithwood et al., 2009).

For superintendents, instructional leadership is not simply a checkbox on an evaluation form. It is the domain most directly connected to student outcomes. Supervising principals through NELP District Level Standard 4 requires the superintendent to have a clear picture of instructional practices in each building. The superintendent must coach principals toward deeper, sustained engagement with the instructional core.

School Culture and Climate

Strong principals understand that sustainable academic improvement requires a healthy school culture and a positive climate. Culture refers to the shared values, beliefs, and norms governing behavior. It answers implicit questions: Are teachers trusted? Do students feel safe? Is professional learning taken seriously? Climate is the lived experience of those values: the tone of the hallways, the quality of faculty meetings, and the degree to which families feel welcomed.

Principals contribute to a positive culture and climate through specific behaviors. They empower teachers to make classroom decisions, create a sense of collective responsibility, build structures for professional learning within the school day, and model expected professionalism (Grissom et al., 2021; Habegger, 2008). In high-achieving schools, teachers describe themselves as valued professionals with the latitude to exercise expertise, not as compliant implementers of mandates (Leithwood et al., 2009).

A positive school culture does not emerge from a retreat or a mission statement. Leaders build it through hundreds of daily interactions demonstrating consistency between stated values and observable behavior. Parents feel genuinely welcomed. Teachers receive honest, growth-oriented feedback. Students experience their school as a place of belonging. The superintendent assessing a principal's culture-building effectiveness must look beyond survey scores to these observable patterns of relationship and behavior.

Principals Who Excel in High-Needs Schools

Chenoweth and Theokas (2013) provide highly instructive research on effective principals. They examined 33 principals in high-achieving, high-need schools across 19 states. These schools served predominantly low-income students and students of color yet consistently outperformed district and state averages. The researchers found that these principals shared four common characteristics explaining their schools' exceptional outcomes.

First, instruction remained genuinely at the center of their daily focus. They believed the school—not the student—held the responsibility to ensure high-quality instruction reached every child. They managed time and resources accordingly. Second, all principals in the study had spent at least ten years in the classroom. This experience provided credibility, a grounded understanding of practice, and the ability to distinguish excellent teaching from mediocre performance. Third, they applied a systems-thinking approach. They understood student outcomes as the product of interconnected organizational elements and built collaborative structures to address problems simultaneously. Fourth, evidence drove their professional development decisions. Student learning data guided what professional development was offered, who received it, and how its impact was assessed.

A disciplined orientation toward results and an unwavering belief in student capacity unifies these four characteristics. For the superintendent, this framework offers a useful lens for evaluation and coaching: Are feedback conversations anchored to instructional quality? Does the principal approach improvement as a systems challenge? Is professional development grounded in data? The answers reveal whether a principal operates at the level of effectiveness required for genuine school transformation.

Principal Well-Being and Retention: The Superintendent's Responsibility

The research on principal effectiveness justifies sustained district investment in principal development. However, a second, increasingly urgent reason demands superintendent attention: the profession is under significant strain, and the consequences of losing effective leaders are severe.

Post-pandemic surveys document a troubling convergence of pressures on school leaders. Principal burnout—the exhaustion accumulating when demands chronically exceed capacity—has been called the "invisible crisis" of the K-12 workforce (Better Leaders Better Schools, 2023). Unlike teacher shortages, principal attrition occurs quietly, one building at a time. Yet, its effects ripple through the entire school community.

The Scope of the Problem

The scale of principal turnover is significant. Estimates indicate approximately 16 percent of principals resigned or retired during the 2021-2022 school year. This rate ticks upward, particularly in high-poverty districts (Diliberti et al., 2024; Diliberti & Schwartz, 2023). An earlier MetLife (2012) survey found one-third of principals actively considered leaving their jobs, a figure preceding pandemic stressors. Recently, Illinois Principals Association data suggests 42 percent of principals are considering leaving the profession—a figure that should give every superintendent pause (IPA, 2024).

The School Leaders Network documented that only one in four principals remains in a position for more than five years. Fifty percent of first-year principals do not survive past year three (New Teacher Center, 2018). In Illinois, schools average two principals every six years. This turnover rate makes sustained school improvement extraordinarily difficult. Nationally, principal turnover matches or exceeds pre-pandemic levels, suggesting temporary stabilization has dissipated.

The forces driving this exodus are clear. Principals report working over 60 hours per week. They describe a mounting list of responsibilities—instructional visionary, data analyst, disciplinarian, budget manager, compliance officer, and crisis manager—that no single individual can execute well simultaneously (NAESP, 2013). A recent PDK Poll (2024) reported that 31 percent of principals received threats from the public, primarily from parents and community members. The polarization of public opinion about K-12 education adds political pressure that falls directly on principals (Gallup, 2022).

The consequences of high turnover extend beyond the \$75,000 replacement cost (New Teacher Center, 2018). Table 2.3 summarizes the broader consequences of principal instability for schools, teachers, and students.

Table 2.3 Consequences of Principal Turnover: Research Evidence

Consequence	Research Evidence
Time to Build Trust	Research suggests it takes three to five years for a new principal to build the trust of the faculty and school community needed to provide a stable foundation for learning.
Time to Impact Achievement	It may take an average of five years for a principal to fully establish a vision, mobilize staff, and implement practices that produce measurable gains in student achievement (Grissom et al., 2021; Levin et al., 2019).
Cost of Replacement	Conservative estimates place the cost to develop, hire, and onboard a new principal at approximately \$75,000, not counting the disruption to instructional continuity (New Teacher Center, 2018).
Teacher Performance	High principal turnover creates instability in teacher performance. Teachers who work through multiple principal transitions show lower professional satisfaction and higher attrition rates.
Student Achievement	Schools with higher principal churn consistently show lower student achievement, with the lowest-performing schools typically experiencing the shortest principal tenures.
Disproportionate Impact	High-poverty schools, rural districts, and schools serving high proportions of students of color bear the greatest burden of principal turnover—and therefore its consequences for students.

These findings underscore a crucial point: principal turnover is not a neutral event. Every time a school loses a principal who was building trust and developing teachers, that work must begin again. The new principal inherits a wary community. Aligned teachers may quietly disengage or leave. Students in schools with chronic churn may go their entire enrollment without experiencing the stable leadership essential to achievement.

What Districts Can Do

Principal turnover is not inevitable. Research identifies specific district practices that meaningfully reduce attrition and improve effectiveness (Grissom et al., 2021; Levin et al., 2019; IPA, 2024; New Teacher Center, 2018). These practices share a common orientation: they treat principals as professionals deserving deliberate development, not as replaceable operational assets.

Superintendents must lead efforts providing individualized coaching, establishing differentiated performance expectations, and

delivering formative feedback with genuine growth intent. Creating learning plans based on evaluation findings transforms the evaluation from a compliance event into a continuous professional learning cycle. Table 2.4 summarizes six evidence-based strategies districts can implement to support principal retention.

Table 2.4 District Strategies for Supporting Principal Retention and Well-Being

Strategy	Description and Rationale
Principal Pipeline Programs	Structured pathways that identify, prepare, and place qualified candidates—reducing the disruption of unplanned vacancies and improving the match between leader and school context.
Mentoring and Coaching	One-to-one support from experienced practitioners focused on instructional leadership and problem of practice. Effective for both novice and experienced principals; critical in the first three years.
Peer Networks	Structured groups of principals who meet regularly to share challenges, build accountability, and problem-solve collaboratively. Research indicates that peer networks improve leadership tenacity and retention.
Differentiated Evaluation	Performance rubrics and feedback processes calibrated to career stage—distinguishing between the needs of a first-year principal and a veteran leader in need of stretch goals.
Workload and Capacity Supports	Administrative staff, clerical support, assistant principals, and distributed leadership structures that free principals to focus on instructional and relational leadership rather than operational tasks.
Well-Being and Recognition	Explicit district attention to principal morale, mental health resources, professional recognition, and the conditions that allow leaders to sustain their work over time.

The Illinois Principals Association's report, *Effective and Sustained Principals for Every Illinois Community* (2024), makes the stakes plain: a stable principal workforce is an equity goal. Schools in communities needing sustained leadership experience the highest turnover. Until districts treat principal well-being with the urgency they bring to student achievement, the cycle of churn will continue to undermine desired outcomes.

This connects directly to NELP District Level Standard 6. This standard requires district leaders to develop coordinated, data-informed systems for hiring, retaining, supervising, and developing school staff. Principal retention is a strategic responsibility embedded in the superintendent's core obligations. A district investing in principal pipelines and differentiated support is doing exactly what the standards describe as the foundation of collective instructional capacity.

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2.3: Summary



Summary

Chapter 2 Summary

This chapter established the research foundation for understanding why the principal matters. It demonstrated that principal effectiveness generates nearly as much additional student learning as teacher effectiveness. Furthermore, its impact distributes across an entire school, reaching teacher retention, student attendance, and school climate.

The three core competencies of effective principals—interpersonal skills, instructional leadership, and school culture development—form an integrated repertoire. Interpersonal skills create relational trust. Instructional leadership defines the direction. A healthy culture sustains the conditions under which both can be practiced. The most effective leaders in challenging settings bring all three domains to bear simultaneously, anchoring their work in the belief that every student can learn.

The chapter also confronted the growing crisis of principal burnout and attrition. Principal turnover is costly financially, academically, and relationally. Effective superintendents respond by building district systems that actively support principal well-being, growth, and longevity. Mentoring, coaching, peer networks, differentiated evaluation, and workload supports form the infrastructure of a sustainable principal workforce.

Chapter 3 will turn to the practical architecture of principal supervision and evaluation: the frameworks, tools, and cycles that allow superintendents to hold principals accountable while genuinely supporting their professional growth.

2.4: Discussion Questions and Exercises



Discussion Questions & Exercises

Chapter 2 Discussion Questions and Exercises

Discussion Questions

1. The research identifies principal leadership as second only to teaching in its impact on student learning—yet principal professional development often receives far less systematic attention than teacher professional development. Why do you think this gap exists, and what would it take to close it?
 2. How can emotional intelligence be developed in practicing principals who may not recognize their own deficits? What is the superintendent's role in creating conditions where that development can occur without undermining the principal's authority?
 3. The research on high-needs schools suggests that the most effective principals share four characteristics: instruction at the center, substantial classroom experience, systems thinking, and data-driven decision-making. How would you evaluate a principal against each of these characteristics? What evidence would you look for?
 4. Principal turnover is highest in the schools and communities that most need stable, effective leadership. What does this pattern tell us about the relationship between equity and human capital policy at the district level? What specific actions would you take as a superintendent to address it?
 5. How should a differentiated evaluation system for principals work in practice? What would distinguish the goals, feedback, and growth expectations for a first-year principal from those for a veteran principal in their eighth year at the same school?
-

Exercises

1. Using Goleman's four dimensions of emotional intelligence as a framework, conduct a structured self-assessment of your own EQ as a current or aspiring school leader. For each dimension, identify one specific strength and one growth edge. Draft a personal development plan that includes two or three concrete actions you will take to build your EQ over the next six months.
2. Review your district's or a fictional district's principal evaluation rubric. Analyze how well it captures the three core competencies described in this chapter: interpersonal skills, instructional leadership, and culture and climate. Identify any significant gaps, and draft language for one new rubric indicator that would address the most important gap you found.
3. Design a district-level Principal Support Plan that addresses the six retention strategies described in Table 2.4. For each strategy, specify what the district would do, how it would be resourced, who would be responsible, and how its impact would be evaluated. Present your plan as a proposal to a fictional school board.
4. Using the Chenoweth and Theokas (2013) framework—instruction at the center, classroom experience, systems thinking, and data-driven decision-making—analyze a school you know or have read about. Where does its current principal demonstrate these characteristics? Where are the gaps? What would a targeted growth plan for that principal look like?
5. Research the Illinois Principals Association's report *Effective and Sustained Principals for Every Illinois Community* (2024)

or a comparable state or national report on principal retention. Identify its three most important findings and explain how each one should influence the design of a district's human capital management system for principals.

2.5: Case Study



Case Study

Chapter 2 Case Study: The Weight of the Principalship at Westbrook High School

Dr. Maya Thompson has been superintendent of Prairie View School District for three years. One of her eleven schools, Westbrook High School, has been a persistent concern. It serves approximately 850 students, nearly 70 percent of whom qualify for free or reduced lunch, with significant populations of multilingual learners and students with disabilities. For the past four years, student achievement has remained well below district averages, teacher turnover has been elevated, and the school climate survey scores have been among the lowest in the district.

Two years ago, Dr. Thompson appointed Marcus Rivera as principal of Westbrook, believing his track record of strong instructional leadership at a middle school made him a strong candidate for the turnaround challenge. Rivera arrived with energy and genuine commitment. In his first year, he launched a new professional development structure, restructured the school schedule to increase instructional time, and began making classroom observations a daily priority. Several veteran teachers responded positively; others were guarded.

Midway through Rivera's second year, the signals are more mixed. Student achievement data shows modest improvement in mathematics but no movement in English language arts. Teacher turnover remains high—five teachers left at the end of Year 1 and three more have already submitted resignations for the end of this year. Rivera himself has mentioned in two recent check-ins with Dr. Thompson that he is feeling overwhelmed. He is spending the majority of his time on student discipline, parent complaints, and operational issues, leaving little time for the instructional leadership work he was hired to do. He has not used the district's coaching resource in six months. In their most recent meeting, he said quietly: "I believe in this school. I just don't know how long I can keep doing this at this pace."

Dr. Thompson faces a set of decisions that capture the tension at the heart of principal supervision in high-needs schools: how to hold Rivera accountable for outcomes that are not yet where they need to be, while also recognizing the genuine structural and personal challenges he is navigating. She is aware that replacing him would be costly, disruptive, and likely to repeat the same pattern—Westbrook has had four principals in seven years. She also knows that the students of Westbrook cannot afford another cycle of turnover and restart.

Discussion Questions

The questions below ask you to think as a superintendent, not just as an observer. There are no single right answers—the goal is reasoned, evidence-grounded thinking about genuinely difficult leadership decisions.

1. How should Dr. Thompson structure her support for Rivera in the short term? What specific resources, adjustments, or

conversations would you prioritize in the next 90 days?

2. Rivera's time is being consumed by discipline and operations rather than instructional leadership. What organizational or structural changes could Dr. Thompson make at the district level to free him to focus on instruction? What role does NELP District Level Standard 6 play in your thinking?
3. How should Dr. Thompson approach Rivera's upcoming summative evaluation? What evidence would you want to see collected, and how would you frame feedback that is both honest and growth-oriented?
4. If you were Dr. Thompson, what would you need to see from Rivera over the next twelve months to believe that Westbrook is on a sustainable improvement trajectory? At what point, if any, would you conclude that a leadership change is necessary—and how would you make that decision?
5. Looking at Westbrook's four-principal-in-seven-years history: what district-level factors beyond the individual principals might be contributing to the pattern? What would a systemic response look like?

2.6: References



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3: SUPERVISION AND EVALUATION OF THE PRINCIPAL

- 3.1: Objectives
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- 3.3: Summary
- 3.4: Discussion Questions and Exercises
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3.1: Objectives



Objectives

Chapter 3 Objectives: Supervision and Evaluation of the Principal

After reading this chapter, readers will be able to:

- Explain the multifaceted nature of the principal's role and why traditional evaluation models often fail to capture its complexity.
- Analyze the limitations of compliance-driven evaluation systems and their impact on leadership development and school improvement.
- Evaluate research findings on effective principal evaluation, including the importance of assessing leadership behaviors over outcomes alone.
- Interpret the implications of the Illinois Performance Evaluation Reform Act and the Illinois Performance Standards for School Leaders for principal evaluation practice.
- Compare traditional evaluation approaches with growth-focused models that emphasize coaching, collaboration, and continuous learning.
- Apply the components of a Growth-Focused Principal Evaluation Model, including goal-setting, evidence collection, formative coaching, and end-of-cycle reflection.

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3.2: Narrative



Chapter 3 Narrative

"For evaluations to be meaningful, they must be grounded in trust, relevant to actual leadership responsibilities, and oriented toward professional learning rather than judgment." McKim et al. (2019)

Introduction

Chapters 1 and 2 established the *why* of principal supervision. They explored the standards defining effective leadership and the research demonstrating its consequence for teachers, students, and schools. This chapter turns to the *how*. It examines what principal evaluation actually looks like in practice, why current systems often fall short, and what a genuinely growth-focused approach requires of the superintendent.

The case for rigorous principal evaluation is clear. The principal is among the most powerful in-school levers for student achievement. Because intentional supervision and coaching develop this effectiveness, the quality of principal evaluation represents a strategic priority, not a mere administrative detail. The National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ, 2022) emphasizes that in the wake of pandemic-related learning disruptions, utilizing evaluation systems to genuinely support and develop principals is more urgent than ever. Yet, research consistently finds that principal evaluation in most districts fails to live up to this potential. Principals describe evaluations as disconnected from their daily work, rushed at year's end, and conducted by evaluators lacking the credibility to give meaningful feedback. These systems orient toward compliance ratings rather than genuine professional growth (Goldring et al., 2020; McKim et al., 2019).

This gap between the potential and the practice of principal evaluation is the central problem this chapter addresses. The chapter organizes around three questions: What does the research tell us about how principal evaluation works—and fails to work—in current practice? What does a growth-focused evaluation system look like, and what evidence supports its design? Finally, how does the Illinois context, including PERA, IPSSL, and the IPA's School Leader Evaluation Plan, translate these principles into an operational framework for superintendents?

Why Principal Evaluation So Often Falls Short

The school principal simultaneously serves as a strategic leader, instructional coach, human capital manager, culture builder, community liaison, budget analyst, crisis manager, and policy implementer. No other position in a school district carries such

breadth of responsibility. Given this complexity, it is remarkable—and troubling—that districts frequently treat principal evaluation as an afterthought. It often consists of a brief observation, a checklist of generic tasks, and an end-of-year rating arriving too late to change anything.

Research well documents the structural flaws of traditional evaluation models. They tend to be episodic rather than continuous, measuring a thin slice of the principal's work instead of its full scope. They rely heavily on summative judgment rather than formative feedback, leaving principals with ratings but no guidance. Districts conduct them infrequently, often annually or biennially, making it impossible to track growth across a year. Furthermore, they often fail to assess the behaviors most associated with principal effectiveness—how a principal builds professional community, develops teachers, and creates conditions for instructional improvement. Instead, they favor easier-to-measure outcomes like test score trends or climate survey averages (Goldring et al., 2020; Stronge et al., 2013).

The result is an evaluation system that satisfies compliance requirements without serving its deeper purpose. When principals experience evaluation as something done *to* them rather than *with* them, it loses credibility. Consequently, it loses the motivational and developmental power that effective feedback provides.

The Principal's View: Research on Evaluation Perceptions

The most revealing evidence about why evaluation fails comes from principals themselves. In a qualitative study, McKim et al. (2019) found that many principals viewed their evaluation systems as disconnected from their actual work and ineffective in promoting improvement. Principals described evaluation as a checklist, not a conversation. Several noted that feedback arrived too late and was too generic to offer actionable guidance.

The relational dimension of evaluation emerged as equally significant. Principals expressed particular concern about the credibility of their evaluators. When the evaluator lacked school leadership experience, principals hesitated to trust their feedback, even when technically accurate. This finding echoes research by Goldring et al. (2020) and the Wallace Foundation (2021). They emphasize that effective evaluation depends on both system design and the evaluator's expertise. A well-constructed rubric administered by an evaluator who misunderstands the school's context or instructional demands will not produce meaningful feedback.

Recent empirical work further highlights this disconnect. Alex (2023) found that a significant impediment to principal growth is the perceptual gap between principals and their supervisors regarding evaluation goals. When supervisors fail to utilize formative coaching techniques—such as collaborative SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analyses—novice principals in particular experience the evaluation as a punitive checklist rather than a developmental continuum.

Perhaps most consequentially, principals described a profound sense of professional isolation. In their experience, evaluation was a private event disconnected from any broader professional community. This isolation compounded the evaluative disconnect. Without peers to process feedback, test ideas, or share challenges, principals lacked a context to make evaluation findings actionable. The implication for superintendents is significant: meaningful evaluation requires a district culture of professional learning where evaluation is one component of a continuous developmental conversation.

What the Research Says Evaluation Should Assess

A growing research consensus holds that principal evaluation should prioritize leadership behaviors and processes over narrow outcome measures (Goldring et al., 2020; Stronge et al., 2013). This distinction matters because principals influence student achievement primarily through indirect channels. They develop teachers, build professional culture, and create organizational conditions. Evaluating a principal primarily on standardized test scores is roughly equivalent to evaluating a superintendent on a single school's performance. The measure relates to the leader's work but is too indirect and lagged to be diagnostically useful (Von Frank, 2013).

Stronge et al. (2013) argue that effective principal evaluation depends on three foundational commitments: clear expectations articulated through leadership standards, multiple measures capturing the breadth of work, and formative intent orienting the process toward improvement. Research from the Wallace Foundation (2021) supports this. It highlights the need for systems that assess specific leadership skills associated with teacher development and student achievement—behaviors that supervisors can observe, document, and coach in real time.

This framing directly impacts what counts as evidence. A single formal observation captures a narrow slice of a principal's work.

A richer evidence base offers a far more accurate portrait of leadership effectiveness. This base should include teacher feedback surveys, professional development artifacts, leadership logs, student outcome data reviewed in context, and reflective narratives. Kimball et al. (2015) found that districts using multi-source evidence models reported greater evaluator confidence, stronger principal buy-in, and more substantive feedback conversations.

The Illinois Context: PERA, IPSSL, and the School Leader Evaluation Plan

Illinois has actively rethought principal evaluation for over a decade. The Performance Evaluation Reform Act (PERA), signed in 2010, required districts to develop systems combining multiple measures of leadership practice with evidence of student outcomes. It mandated trained evaluators and timely feedback. PERA represented a genuine advance over episodic, compliance-only models, but implementation across Illinois's 852 districts has been uneven. Some districts thoughtfully redesigned systems around the Illinois Performance Standards for School Leaders (IPSSL) and the NELP framework. Others met PERA's structural requirements without meaningfully changing the evaluation experience (McKim et al., 2019).

As discussed in Chapter 1, Public Act 104-0020 (Senate Bill 28), signed in June 2025, modified PERA. It made the student growth component of principal evaluation optional rather than required. This change reflects a broader shift in how policymakers view student outcome data in principal evaluation. It recognizes that many factors driving student achievement fall outside a principal's direct control. Overweighting outcome measures can distort evaluation and discourage effective leaders from serving in high-need schools.

The Illinois Principals Association's School Leader Evaluation Plan (SLEP) represents the state's most fully developed response to this research. Grounded in the School Leader Paradigm, the SLEP provides a comprehensive framework that accounts for both the "becoming" and "doing" aspects of school leadership. It identifies three critical intelligences—Personal, Social, and Systems—that leaders must develop. Furthermore, it organizes the work of leadership into three actionable domains: Culture, Systems, and Learning. The SLEP builds on four commitments: evaluation must be ongoing and embedded in practice; feedback must be formative and actionable; the evaluator must function as a coach and thought partner; and the process must ground itself in professional standards. These commitments operationalize in the six-phase model described later in this chapter.

A District That Reimagined Evaluation: South Summit School District

Research on growth-focused evaluation is not limited to theoretical frameworks. Halverson and Maughan (2024) documented a compelling real-world example in Utah's South Summit School District. Growing dissatisfaction with the traditional model prompted principals and district leaders to redesign the process from the ground up. Their account illustrates the principles research advocates, alongside the challenges of making the shift.

The problems South Summit principals identified will sound familiar. Evaluation criteria felt generic and insufficiently aligned with instructional leadership. Feedback arrived at the end of the year, too late to influence practice. The process felt isolated—a private, one-directional event rather than a collaborative conversation. Furthermore, evaluation was structurally disconnected from professional development, leaving principals without guidance on how to improve.

South Summit's redesign succeeded through fidelity to three specific shifts. The first shift moved from judgment to coaching. Rather than positioning the evaluator as an external assessor delivering a verdict, the system positioned supervisors as coaches engaged in mutual inquiry. Evaluation conversations became collaborative, anchored in evidence, and explicitly aimed at supporting growth.

The second shift moved from isolation to collaboration. Principals began meeting regularly in facilitated peer groups to plan professional learning, reflect on challenges, and exchange feedback. These sessions created a professional community previously lacking. Research consistently finds professional isolation is a significant contributor to principal burnout (Levin & Bradley, 2019; IPA, 2024). Structured peer collaboration directly addresses this isolation.

The third shift moved from compliance to continuous learning. Rather than collecting evidence once a year, principals maintained ongoing documentation of their practice—logs, artifacts, staff feedback, and reflective narratives. This evidence became the basis for quarterly coaching conversations and mid-year reviews. This approach transformed evaluation from a performance snapshot into a developmental narrative.

Halverson and Maughan's (2024) documentation offers a concrete model for shifting from compliance to growth. These three core shifts—judgment to coaching, isolation to collaboration, and compliance to continuous learning—provide the organizing

framework for the Growth-Focused Principal Evaluation Model introduced next.

A Growth-Focused Principal Evaluation Model

The Growth-Focused Principal Evaluation Model integrates research on effective evaluation with the IPSSL requirements and the IPEP timeline. It draws on the foundational arguments of Stronge et al. (2013), the relational insights of McKim et al. (2019), the implementation lessons from Halverson and Maughan (2024), and the IPA's School Leader Evaluation Plan. It is a design template that superintendents can adapt to their specific district context.

The model organizes around six phases corresponding to a full evaluation year. Each phase has a distinct purpose, key activities, defined participants, and alignment to the IPSSL. Together, these phases replace the episodic, end-of-year event with a continuous developmental cycle. Leadership growth, like student learning, is a process that does not conclude at the end of June.

Table 3.2 presents the six phases. Note the progression from goal-setting through evidence collection, peer learning, formative coaching, mid-year review, and end-of-cycle reflection. This progression mirrors the instructional planning-implementation-assessment cycle effective principals use with teachers. The superintendent who uses this model is modeling the exact evidence-based improvement cycle they expect principals to use.

Table 3.2 Growth-Focused Principal Evaluation Model: Six-Phase Framework

Table 3.1 Growth-Focused Principal Evaluation Model: Six-Phase Framework

Phase	Key Activities	Purpose	Participants	Aligned IPSSL Standards
1. Goal Setting and Planning	Principal self-assessment using IPSSL rubric; collaborative goal-setting conference with supervisor; identification of two to three leadership growth goals.	Align evaluation to authentic leadership work; establish shared expectations and a foundation for the year's professional conversation.	Principal and supervisor (coach/evaluator)	Standard 1: Mission, Vision, and Core Values Standard 6: Professional Capacity of School Personnel
2. Evidence Collection (Ongoing)	Leadership logs, staff surveys, professional development agendas, classroom observation records, and reflective journal entries maintained throughout the year.	Document leadership growth in real time; build an evidence base that reflects the breadth of the principal's work rather than a single snapshot.	Principal, with staff and supervisor input	Standard 3: School Improvement Standard 6: Professional Capacity of School Personnel
3. Collaborative Peer Learning	Monthly or bimonthly principal collaboration sessions; co-planning professional development, peer feedback, and shared problem-solving on leadership challenges.	Reduce professional isolation; promote collective learning; build a district-wide culture of inquiry and continuous improvement.	Principal peer group, facilitated by district leadership	Standard 6: Professional Capacity of School Personnel Standard 8: Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community

Phase	Key Activities	Purpose	Participants	Aligned IPSSL Standards
4. Formative Coaching Conversations	Quarterly feedback meetings between principal and supervisor; review of evidence, discussion of leadership strategies, and collaborative adjustment of goals.	Foster reflection and adaptive problem-solving; keep the evaluation cycle responsive to emerging challenges and changing school conditions.	Principal and supervisor	Standard 2: Ethics and Professional Norms Standard 6: Professional Capacity of School Personnel
5. Mid-Year Review	Structured mid-cycle meeting to review goal progress, revisit evidence, and adjust supports and targets for the second half of the year.	Ensure the evaluation remains current and relevant; make necessary adjustments before the summative cycle closes.	Principal and supervisor	Standard 3: School Improvement Standard 9: Operations and Management
6. End-of-Cycle Reflection	Final coaching conversation; reflective summary of evidence and leadership growth; identification of goals for the next evaluation cycle.	Synthesize learning from the full year; close the developmental loop; set the foundation for the following year's growth planning.	Principal and supervisor	Standard 6: Professional Capacity of School Personnel Standard 8: Meaningful Engagement of Families and Community

Several design features deserve specific attention. First, the evaluator's role shifts across the phases. In goal-setting, the supervisor is a thought partner. In formative coaching, the supervisor is a questioner and reflective listener. In the mid-year review, the supervisor is a progress monitor. In the end-of-cycle reflection, the supervisor helps synthesize the year's evidence. This role flexibility requires supervisors skilled at coaching, which has implications for district-level training.

Second, the evidence base is multi-source and distributed across the year. Single-point evaluation creates a distorted portrait of effectiveness. Leadership is seasonal work; performance in October looks different from March. An evidence base accumulating across multiple phases captures that variability and creates a richer basis for feedback.

Third, collaborative peer learning is a core component, not an optional supplement. Professional isolation drives principal attrition and barriers reflective learning. Building peer collaboration into the evaluation structure ensures it happens consistently and connects directly to individual growth goals.

Evaluator Preparation: The Superintendent's Role

A growth-focused evaluation model is only as strong as the people implementing it. Research consistently identifies evaluator credibility—grounded in leadership experience, relational skill, and content expertise—as a significant predictor of meaningful evaluation (Goldring et al., 2020; McKim et al., 2019; Mendels, 2017). Districts investing in well-designed rubrics without attending to evaluator preparation will not see promised outcomes.

Effective evaluator preparation includes three components. First, evaluators must have substantive knowledge of school leadership practice, ideally firsthand experience as a principal. When district administrators without school leadership experience

evaluate principals, the resulting credibility gap undermines the relationship. Second, evaluators must develop specific coaching skills: asking questions that prompt deep reflection, giving specific feedback without being prescriptive, and holding the tension between accountability and support. Third, evaluators must be calibrated. They must train together to build a shared understanding of evidence at different performance levels, ensuring the system is consistent and fair.

Recent findings from the Wallace Foundation (2023) demonstrate that when districts intentionally redesign the supervisor role from compliance officer to dedicated coach, supervisors can spend up to 63% of their time directly in schools. However, this shift requires dismantling traditional central office silos. Principal supervision is not a "solo act"; it requires a coherent central office team that aligns districtwide strategy and removes operational barriers so the supervisor can focus purely on instructional coaching (Wallace Foundation, 2023).

Saphier and Durkin (2011) describe the superintendent's role in principal supervision as fundamentally a coaching relationship. This requires the same intentional practice that effective instructional coaching requires of principals. This framing elevates evaluator preparation from a training event to an ongoing professional responsibility. The superintendent who models continuous learning in their own supervision practice creates conditions for principals to do the same.

Evaluation, Retention, and the Superintendent's Responsibility

Chapter 2 examined the principal retention crisis and district strategies to address it. This chapter returns to retention by examining its relationship with evaluation practice. Poorly designed, compliance-driven evaluation systems contribute directly to principal dissatisfaction and departure. Principals who feel unsupported and subject to evaluations that ignore the complexity of their work are significantly more likely to leave (Bartanen et al., 2019; Levin & Bradley, 2019; School Leaders Network (2014).

The converse is also true. Principals who experience evaluation as a genuine professional development resource report higher job satisfaction, greater efficacy, and stronger intention to remain (Diliberti et al., 2024; Gates et al., 2019). Investing in a growth-focused evaluation system is an investment in retention. Through retention, it is an investment in the school stability and student learning outcomes that require sustained leadership.

Levin and Bradley (2019) identify five primary drivers of principal turnover: inadequate preparation, poor working conditions, insufficient compensation, lack of decision-making authority, and the stress of high-stakes accountability. Evaluation practice intersects directly with three. When evaluation systems use formative feedback to support ongoing development, they address inadequate preparation by making professional learning continuous. When evaluation includes structured peer collaboration, it improves working conditions by reducing isolation. When evaluation builds efficacy rather than documenting deficiencies, it creates conditions where principals feel confident staying in challenging schools.

The Illinois Principals Association (2024) frames this connection explicitly: the stability of the principal workforce is an equity issue. Recent data from the RAND Corporation indicates that while national principal turnover rates have slightly decreased from their pandemic peak, they remain elevated, particularly in urban and high-poverty districts (Diliberti et al., 2024). The schools most in need of strong leadership experience the highest turnover, creating a cascading effect that disrupts school progress and stalls student achievement (Levin et al., 2020). A superintendent who treats evaluation design as a retention strategy makes a commitment to the schools and students who can least afford another cycle of leadership disruption.

3.3: Summary



Summary

Chapter 3 Summary

This chapter examined the gap between the potential and the practice of principal evaluation and offered a research-grounded framework for closing it. Traditional evaluation models fail in predictable ways: they are episodic, compliance-oriented, conducted by evaluators lacking credibility, and disconnected from professional learning structures. Research converges on a consistent diagnosis: evaluation systems emphasizing accountability without providing meaningful support lose credibility, accelerate attrition, and miss opportunities to strengthen the workforce.

The South Summit School District example illustrated the shift from compliance to growth in operational practice. Its three core design shifts—from judgment to coaching, isolation to collaboration, and compliance to continuous learning—provide a practical framework for redesigning evaluation systems around developmental goals.

The Growth-Focused Principal Evaluation Model operationalizes these principles in a six-phase cycle aligned to the IPSSL. Its design reflects a core argument: the evaluation system a superintendent builds should model the same evidence-based, improvement-oriented approach expected of principals. The superintendent who supervises through coaching, formative feedback, and collaborative inquiry is doing evaluation the way research says it should be done.

The chapter also established the connection between evaluation practice and retention. Principals experiencing meaningful evaluation are more likely to stay, build multi-year trust relationships, and bring strong leadership to schools needing it most. Designed well and enacted with relational skill, principal evaluation is one of the highest-leverage tools a superintendent has for building a stable, effective, and equitable leadership workforce.

Chapter 4 will move from the design of evaluation systems to the practice of principal supervision itself, examining the specific skills that distinguish superintendents who develop their principals from those who merely evaluate them.

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3.4: Discussion Questions and Exercises



Discussion Questions & Exercises

Chapter 3 Discussion Questions and Exercises

Discussion Questions

1. Traditional principal evaluation is often described as compliance-driven and disconnected from leadership practice. What specific structural features of traditional evaluation produce these outcomes, and which of those features would be most important to change first in a district attempting to shift toward a growth-focused model?
2. The research identifies evaluator credibility—grounded in leadership experience, relational skill, and content expertise—as one of the most significant predictors of whether evaluation is experienced as meaningful. What are the implications of this finding for how districts should staff principal evaluation responsibilities? What should a superintendent do when their district does not have enough experienced leaders to staff a high-quality evaluator cohort?
3. Halverson and Maughan (2024) describe three core shifts in South Summit's redesign: judgment to coaching, isolation to collaboration, and compliance to continuous learning. Which of these shifts do you think would be most difficult to implement in a real district, and why? What resistance would you anticipate, and how would you address it?
4. How does the Growth-Focused Evaluation Model's emphasis on multi-source evidence change the burden of documentation for both principals and evaluators? Is that tradeoff worth it? What would you need to put in place to make evidence collection sustainable rather than burdensome?
5. The chapter argues that evaluation practice is directly connected to principal retention. If you were presenting this argument to a school board to justify the investment required to redesign the evaluation system, what evidence would you cite and how would you frame the return on investment?

Exercises

1. Using Table 3.2 as a framework, evaluate a principal evaluation system you are familiar with—real or fictional. Identify where it falls on the compliance-to-growth continuum for each dimension. Then identify the two or three changes that would have the greatest impact on the quality and credibility of the evaluation experience.
2. Design a two-day evaluator training program for a district cohort of five principal supervisors who vary in their school leadership experience. What would the program cover? How would you build in calibration activities? What follow-up support would you provide across the year?
3. Develop a sample Leadership Evidence Portfolio outline for a mid-career principal in her fourth year at a high-needs elementary school. Identify six to eight specific artifact types, explain what each demonstrates about leadership effectiveness, and map each to the relevant IPSSL standard.
4. Role-play a formative coaching conversation between a superintendent and a principal who has set a growth goal around improving instructional feedback to teachers. The principal has collected three months of evidence but is uncertain whether

her approach is working. What questions would you ask? How would you structure the conversation to be both honest and growth-oriented?

5. Research the IPA's School Leader Evaluation Plan or a comparable state evaluation framework. Identify its three most significant design features, explain the research basis for each, and describe how you would adapt it for a small rural district with limited administrative capacity.

3.5: Case Study



Case Study

Chapter 3 Case Study: When the Evaluation System Is the Problem

Dr. Maya Thompson is now in her fourth year as superintendent of Prairie View School District. The district's principal supervision and evaluation system was one of the first things she committed to improving when she arrived. She aligned it to PSEL and the NELP District Level Standards, established the IPEP timeline, and formed an Evaluator Cohort. The system is structurally sound and legally compliant. By most external measures, it is working.

And yet, something is not right.

In confidential exit interviews conducted by the district's HR director, two principals who resigned at the end of last year cited the evaluation process as a significant factor in their decisions to leave. Neither principal had received an unsatisfactory rating. Both had met their goals. But both described the evaluation as "going through the motions"—technically complete, professionally hollow. One wrote: "I felt like I was being checked off a list, not developed as a leader." The other noted that her evaluator, an assistant superintendent from a non-instructional background, "didn't really understand what I was dealing with in my building, and the feedback reflected that."

Dr. Thompson takes these comments seriously. She pulls the evaluation data from the past two years and finds a pattern she had not noticed before. Across the district's eleven schools, summative evaluation ratings cluster tightly at the "proficient" level. Eighty-seven percent of principals received the same rating, regardless of significant variation in school improvement trajectories, observation evidence, and goal attainment. The formative coaching conversations, supposed to happen quarterly, occurred at least twice in only six of eleven schools. Evidence portfolios, introduced eighteen months ago as a multi-source documentation tool, are being completed by four principals and largely ignored by the rest.

The Evaluator Cohort has not met as a group in seven months. When Dr. Thompson reaches out to schedule a calibration session, two members respond that they are not sure what calibration is supposed to accomplish at this stage. A third notes, candidly, that he has been conducting evaluations the same way he did at his previous district and has not meaningfully engaged with the IPSSL rubric since his initial training.

Dr. Thompson is facing a problem both more difficult and more important than the one she thought she had solved. The architecture of the evaluation system is correct, but the implementation has quietly drifted. The principals who most needed genuine developmental support—including the two who left—were receiving a process that looked like growth-focused evaluation but functioned like the compliance-driven model it was supposed to replace.

She has a board presentation in six weeks to report on the district's leadership development initiatives. She is trying to decide what to say, what to do first, and how honest to be about what she has found.

Discussion Questions

The questions below ask you to think as a superintendent navigating a real institutional problem. Reason carefully—there is no single right answer, and the most important tensions are the ones the case does not resolve for you.

1. Dr. Thompson's evaluation system is structurally aligned to research-based principles but has drifted in implementation. What does this pattern tell us about the relationship between system design and system culture? What does it take to sustain fidelity to a growth-focused model after the initial implementation energy dissipates?
2. The rating compression—87 percent of principals at the same level—suggests that evaluators are not differentiating meaningfully. What are the possible causes of this pattern, and what are its consequences for individual principals, for the district's human capital decisions, and for the credibility of the evaluation system?
3. Two of Dr. Thompson's Evaluator Cohort members have effectively been conducting evaluations in isolation, without engaging deeply with the shared framework. How should Dr. Thompson address this without demoralizing evaluators who believe they have been doing their jobs? What would a productive calibration process look like at this stage?
4. The principals who left cited the evaluation as a contributing factor in their departure—yet both received proficient ratings and met their goals. What does this tell us about the relationship between formal evaluation outcomes and the quality of the evaluative experience? What might Dr. Thompson have observed, earlier in the year, that would have signaled this disconnect?
5. What should Dr. Thompson say to the board in six weeks? Should she report the system as working—because it is structurally sound and legally compliant—or should she surface the implementation problems she has found? What are the risks and responsibilities of each choice?

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4: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE PRINCIPAL

- 4.1: Objectives
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- 4.4: Discussion Questions and Exercises
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4.1: Objectives



Objectives

Chapter 4 Objectives: Professional Development of the Principal

After reading this chapter, readers will be able to:

- Explain the evolving complexity of the principalship and its relationship to student achievement, teacher retention, and school culture.
- Analyze findings from the NAESP 10-Year Study regarding the conditions of practice and professional development needs of PreK–8 school leaders.
- Evaluate the features of high-quality principal professional development, drawing on Darling-Hammond et al. (2022), the Learning Forward Standards (2022), and the Aspen Institute (2023).
- Interpret how federal policy, particularly ESSA, has reshaped principal evaluation and the superintendent's responsibility for reframing it as a growth tool.
- Compare models of principal professional development, including job-embedded learning, leadership academies, peer networks, and district-university partnerships.
- Design a superintendent-led system for principal development that integrates mentoring, coaching, differentiated feedback, and equitable access across career stages.

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4.2: Narrative



Narrative

Chapter 4 Narrative

"The question is not whether principals need professional learning—it is whether districts will build the systems to make that learning possible." Aspen Institute (2023)

Introduction

Chapters 1 through 3 established the architecture of principal supervision and evaluation. They covered the standards, the research on leadership effectiveness, and the design of growth-focused evaluation systems. This chapter turns to a question that follows directly from that architecture. Once a superintendent builds an evaluation system oriented toward development, what does the professional learning actually look like? What structures, habits, and investments does it require? Furthermore, what does current research tell us about which approaches actually work?

The principalship has become one of the most complex roles in education. Today's principals serve simultaneously as instructional coaches, data analysts, and community liaisons. They also act as cultural stewards and accountability managers. They do this work amid inadequate resources, high staff turnover, and relentless policy change (Aspen Institute, 2023; Guilfoyle, 2013). Research consistently affirms that principals are second only to teachers in their influence on student learning. Effective principals accelerate achievement by several months within a single year (Branch et al., 2013; Grissom et al., 2021). Yet, despite this documented impact, district professional learning systems frequently fail to match the role's demands.

For aspiring superintendents, this mismatch is a strategic problem, not just a structural one. Principals lacking access to sustained, meaningful professional development are more likely to struggle with instructional leadership. They are more likely to burn out and leave the districts that most need their stability. Understanding how to build systems that actually develop principal capacity is central to the superintendent's core work. This chapter examines what that work requires. It explores the evidence base for effective professional development, successful models, common barriers, and the superintendent's role in overcoming them.

Why Principal Professional Development Matters

The case for investing in principal professional development begins with evidence of principal impact. Branch et al. (2013) established that moving from an average principal to a highly effective one produces learning gains equivalent to three to four additional months of schooling annually. Grissom et al. (2021) synthesized two decades of research confirming this impact. They found that principal leadership shapes teacher effectiveness, school culture, and student achievement in significant and durable ways.

More recently, Darling-Hammond et al. (2022) documented that sustained investment in principal professional learning directly improves teacher retention and instructional cultures. It also yields higher student outcomes, particularly in high-poverty schools where principal quality is most consequential and unevenly distributed. Furthermore, recent findings from the Wallace Foundation's Equity-Centered Pipeline Initiative (2023) demonstrate that professional development must explicitly train leaders to dismantle systemic barriers. Programs lacking this explicit equity focus fail to prepare principals for the realities of modern school leadership.

Yet, a wide gap remains between this evidence and the professional learning principals actually receive. The Aspen Institute (2023) reports that administrative duties routinely crowd out instructional leadership. Surveys consistently document inequities in access to high-quality professional development, especially for leaders in under-resourced communities. Levin et al. (2020) found that fewer than one in four elementary principals had access to structured coaching or mentoring. In high-poverty schools, that figure dropped to approximately ten percent. For superintendents, this evidence is a call to action.

The NAESP 10-Year Study

The National Association of Elementary School Principals' *Pre-K–8 School Leader in 2018: A 10-Year Study* provides a comprehensive longitudinal portrait of the principalship. Drawing on survey data from thousands of principals over a decade, the study documents the shifting realities of school leadership at scale. It examines how principals spend their time, the challenges they face, and where their learning needs are greatest (NAESP, 2018).

Several findings directly inform how superintendents should design professional development systems. Principals identified their most pressing learning needs as improving student performance, enhancing staff effectiveness, integrating technology, and developing stronger time management skills. The study also found that principals at different career stages require meaningfully different forms of support. This finding has direct implications for structuring mentoring, coaching, and professional learning. Perhaps most significantly, NAESP documented that professional learning too often remains fragmented, episodic, and untailored to specific leaders and schools. The study calls explicitly for authentic, relevant, and career-stage-responsive professional development (NAESP, 2018).

The Case for Continuous Professional Learning

Preparation programs and licensure requirements are only the beginning. Like teachers, principals require continuous professional learning to adapt to evolving standards, shifting demographics, and new policy demands (Mizell, 2010). Sustained professional development enables principals to deepen instructional leadership and build school cultures that retain teachers. It develops the adaptive capacity to lead through complexity.

Crucially, continuous learning fosters resilience and reduces burnout. The National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP, 2023) recently reported that over half of school leaders are considering leaving the profession due to stress and working conditions. This data underscores that professional development must now integrate wellness, resilience training, and trauma-informed leadership practices (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Professional development is not a supplemental offering; it is a structural feature of a well-designed leadership system that the superintendent must build and sustain.

Policy, Accountability, and the Reframing of Evaluation

Federal policy reforms, particularly the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), reshaped principal evaluation systems nationwide. These reforms often tied leadership effectiveness to measures of student growth and school performance (Jacques et al., 2012). While accountability frameworks provide data to inform improvement, scholars caution against compliance-driven systems. These systems risk reducing evaluation to managerial oversight rather than professional development (Micheaux & Parvin, 2018). Principals subject to checklist evaluations describe the process as professionally hollow—technically complete but developmentally meaningless.

Superintendents are well-positioned to reframe this dynamic. Evaluation systems can function as genuine catalysts for growth when they include reflective feedback, collaborative goal-setting, and direct links to professional learning. Structures integrating evidence-based feedback and coaching help principals reflect on their leadership and develop improvement strategies (Condon & Clifford, 2012; von Frank, 2013). Superintendents must treat evaluation not as a final judgment, but as the opening of an improvement cycle. This cycle identifies developmental needs, establishes goals, and connects directly to sustained professional learning.

What High-Quality Principal Professional Development Looks Like

Darling-Hammond et al. (2022) conducted a comprehensive review of research on principal professional development. They identified a consistent set of features associated with improved leadership outcomes. Their analysis draws on studies of preparation programs, district-led initiatives, and state policy frameworks to identify what actually works.

High-quality principal professional development features selective recruitment into cohort-based learning communities and strong district-university partnerships. It provides authentic, contextually relevant preparation and applied learning experiences, such as internships, problem-based cases, and action research. These features are most effective when paired with sustained coaching and mentoring relationships that extend over time.

Darling-Hammond et al. (2022) also identify five domains of leadership knowledge and skill that effective professional development should address: leading instruction, managing change, developing people, shaping school culture, and addressing the needs of diverse learners. Programs attending to all five domains associate with higher teacher retention, stronger school climates, and significant gains in student achievement. Equity runs as a throughline across all five. Principals need structured opportunities to examine their assumptions, engage with equity-centered practices, and develop skills to lead inclusive schools. Yet, access to such programs remains deeply uneven, particularly for leaders in high-poverty communities (Levin et al., 2020).

The Learning Forward Standards (2022)

The Learning Forward Standards for Professional Learning (2022) provide a comprehensive framework describing the content, processes, and conditions that lead to meaningful adult learning. Organized into three frames—Rigorous Content for Each Learner, Transformational Processes, and Conditions for Success—the eleven standards articulate what high-quality professional development entails.

Rigorous Content for Each Learner: This frame emphasizes that professional learning must address the knowledge and skills most critical for student success. The Equity Practices standard calls for professional development equipping leaders to dismantle systemic barriers. Research affirms that equity-focused development allows principals to build inclusive school cultures (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Levin et al., 2020). The Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction standard stresses that principals must be deeply knowledgeable about instructional systems. The Professional Expertise standard underscores that continuous growth in leadership theory and evidence-based practice is necessary for principals to remain effective (Grissom et al., 2021; Mizell, 2010).

Transformational Processes: The second frame addresses how principals learn. The Equity Drivers standard reinforces that equity must be embedded throughout professional learning processes, not treated as a single topic (Aspen Institute, 2023). The Learning Designs standard prioritizes active, job-embedded approaches like action research and sustained coaching. The Implementation standard holds that short-term workshops are insufficient; principals need iterative, long-term learning cycles reinforced with feedback (Herrmann et al., 2019). The Evidence and Data standard calls for growth guided by multiple forms of evidence, reframing evaluation as a formative tool (Micheaux & Parvin, 2018).

Conditions for Success: The third frame addresses the organizational systems required for professional learning to take root. The Culture of Collaborative Inquiry standard points to the importance of principal networks and peer mentoring (DuFour & Mattos, 2013; New Leaders, 2022). The Leadership standard highlights the superintendent's role in modeling continuous learning and functioning as an instructional coach (Honig & Rainey, 2020). The Resources standard underscores that adequate funding, time, and personnel are prerequisites. Finally, the Sustainability standard emphasizes embedding principal professional development into long-term improvement plans (Aspen Institute, 2023; Levin et al., 2020).

Implications for Superintendents

The Learning Forward Standards (2022) make a clear argument: principal professional development must be intentional, equity-centered, collaborative, and sustained. For superintendents, the standards are a design framework and a call to action. Implemented with fidelity, they transform professional development from an isolated activity into a driver of whole-district improvement.

Models of Principal Professional Development

Districts employ a range of models to support principal growth. Understanding the research basis for each model is essential for

superintendents making strategic investment decisions.

Job-embedded learning situates professional development within daily leadership work. It enables principals to apply new skills in real time and reflect on results within their own schools (Mizell, 2010). Leadership academies provide intensive, cohort-based experiences pairing structured mentoring with applied learning. Peer networks and professional learning communities create ongoing collaborative structures for reflection and shared problem-solving (DuFour & Mattos, 2013). District-university partnerships scale these approaches by combining practical experience with research-grounded coaching.

Recently, research highlights the emergence of micro-credentials and personalized learning pathways as effective tools for addressing career-stage specific needs (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Micro-credentials allow principals to demonstrate competency in highly specific leadership skills (e.g., trauma-informed discipline, data-driven PLC facilitation) at their own pace. The most effective districts use these models in combination, creating layered professional learning systems that support principals across career stages (Aspen Institute, 2023).

Table 4.1 Comparison of Principal Professional Development Models

Model	Core Features	Benefits	Challenges
Job-Embedded Learning	Tied to daily leadership practice; problem-based; contextually relevant	Immediate application; aligned to real school challenges	Requires time protection and role redesign
Leadership Academies	Cohort-based; intensive mentoring; applied learning cycles	Structured growth for novice and mid-career principals; builds community	Resource-intensive; difficult to sustain at scale
Peer Networks and PLCs	Collaborative inquiry; shared problem-solving; peer accountability	Reduces isolation; fosters collective learning; low cost	Quality varies; facilitation skills required
District–University Partnerships	Internships; action research; expert coaching	Research-grounded; bridges theory and practice	Requires sustained coordination and partnership investment
Micro-credentials	Competency-based; personalized pacing; highly specific skill focus	Allows for career-stage differentiation; flexible	Requires rigorous assessment rubrics to ensure quality

Peer Networks

Among available models, peer networks deserve particular attention. Their value is well-documented, costs are modest, and their impact on principal retention is direct. Professional isolation is a significant contributor to principal burnout (Levin & Bradley, 2019). Peer networks address this isolation structurally. They create relational infrastructure allowing principals to share challenges, test strategies, and develop professional trust.

Darling-Hammond et al. (2022) found that cohort-based preparation and leadership academies were highly effective because they provided authentic learning within communities of practice. The Aspen Institute (2023) describes peer networks as learning laboratories where principals align individual growth with district goals. Despite their value, access remains uneven. Levin et al. (2020) found that fewer than one in four elementary principals had access to coaching or mentoring. Investing in peer networks represents a research-grounded response to documented learning needs and a direct contribution to equity.

What Principals Report Needing

A growing literature documents what principals themselves identify as most valuable. Principals consistently report benefiting most from continuous, job-embedded development connected to real building challenges. They value psychologically safe mentoring, peer communities offering mutual accountability, and social-emotional learning opportunities that build resilience (New Leaders, 2022).

Post-pandemic surveys reveal an acute shift in these needs. The NASSP (2023) survey indicates that principals urgently need professional development focused on crisis management, staff mental health, and community polarization. Principals also emphasize the importance of explicitly equity-focused and actionable development. The Aspen Institute (2023) underscores that principals want sustained, authentic development designed to reduce administrative overload so they can concentrate on teaching, learning, and equity.

Challenges and Barriers to Effective Professional Development

The evidence on what works is clear. The evidence on why high-quality development remains difficult to sustain is equally instructive. Principals dedicate only a small fraction of their working hours to their own development—often less than two percent (DeNisco, 2015). Funding remains inadequate. Furthermore, evaluation practices in most districts continue to lean toward compliance rather than growth (Condon & Clifford, 2012).

Access inequities compound these structural barriers. Levin et al. (2020) document persistent gaps where principals in high-poverty schools are systematically less likely to access coaching or authentic professional development. Herrmann et al. (2019) found that even intensive instructional leadership programs failed to shift practice when principals remained constrained by administrative overload. The lesson for superintendents is clear: professional development investment and role redesign must proceed together. Learning without protected time and reduced administrative burden will not produce practice changes.

The Superintendent's Role in Elevating Principal Development

Superintendents are uniquely positioned to reshape principal professional development into a systemic organizational priority. This repositioning requires attention to several dimensions simultaneously.

Drawing on Honig and Rainey (2020), the most effective superintendents adopt a teaching-and-learning approach. They function as instructional coaches who model, guide, and offer differentiated feedback rather than compliance overseers. This stance requires a different set of skills and a different understanding of the superintendent-principal relationship.

Differentiated professional development is a second strategic priority. Systems providing uniform professional development across all principals—regardless of experience, context, or goals—are unlikely to produce tailored growth. The NAESP 10-Year Study (2018) and Darling-Hammond et al. (2022) emphasize career-stage responsiveness. Novice principals require intensive mentoring; experienced principals benefit more from peer networks and opportunities to mentor others.

Equitable resource allocation is a third dimension. Given that principals in high-poverty schools have the least access to high-quality professional learning, strategic investment must deliberately target those contexts. This includes directing financial resources, assigning the most skilled coaches to buildings with the greatest need, and protecting time for professional development in the schedules of the most burdened principals.

Table 4.2 Superintendent Toolkit: Priorities for Principal Professional Development

Superintendent Priority	What the Research Shows	Implication for Practice
Job-Embedded PD	Principals learn most effectively when PD is tied to daily leadership practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Mizell, 2010).	Replace one-off workshops with mentoring, coaching, PLCs, and applied learning.

Superintendent Priority	What the Research Shows	Implication for Practice
Center Equity	Principals in high-poverty schools are least likely to access mentoring, coaching, or authentic PD (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Levin et al., 2020).	Allocate resources to ensure equitable access across all schools.
Redefine the Role	Even intensive PD fails when principals remain burdened with administrative tasks (Aspen Institute, 2023; Herrmann et al., 2019).	Reconfigure roles and offload managerial duties so principals can focus on instruction.
Evaluation for Growth	Evaluation aligned to coaching and feedback supports learning; compliance-driven systems hinder growth (Micheaux & Parvin, 2018; von Frank, 2013).	Treat evaluations as springboards for reflection, goal-setting, and targeted PD.
Teaching-and-Learning Approach	Supervisors who act as instructional coaches—modeling, guiding, differentiating—enhance principal leadership (Honig & Rainey, 2020).	Approach principal interactions as opportunities for coaching, not compliance.
Build Pipelines	Sustainable systems prepare assistant principals and teacher leaders for principalship (Wallace Foundation, 2023).	Invest in succession planning through equity-centered leadership academies and structured pipelines.

4.3: Summary



Summary

Chapter 4 Summary

This chapter examined the research base for principal professional development and the superintendent's role in designing systems that make meaningful learning possible. The evidence is consistent: principals are among the most powerful levers for school improvement, yet district professional learning systems fall far short. Fragmented, episodic, compliance-oriented development fails principals and the schools they lead because the investment is poorly designed.

High-quality principal professional development is characterized by job-embedded learning, cohort-based structures, sustained mentoring, equity-centered design, and career-stage responsiveness (Aspen Institute, 2023; Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Learning Forward, 2022). The relational and collaborative dimensions of professional learning are central. Principals who learn in communities of practice report higher professional satisfaction, stronger adaptive capacity, and significantly lower rates of burnout.

The barriers to effective professional development are real: inadequate time, inequitable resource distribution, administrative overload, and compliance-heavy evaluation systems. However, superintendents who adopt a teaching-and-learning approach, differentiate professional development, invest strategically where need is greatest, and build growth-focused evaluation systems create the organizational conditions in which principal learning thrives.

Chapter 5 turns from the design of professional learning systems to the relational and emotional dimensions of the superintendent's work with principals. Building structures is necessary but not sufficient; superintendents must also develop the self-awareness, empathy, and relational courage to engage in difficult conversations. The next chapter examines emotional intelligence, team dynamics, and frameworks for skillful dialogue.

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4.4: Discussion Questions and Exercises



Discussion Questions & Exercises

Chapter 4 Discussion Questions and Exercises

Discussion Questions

1. The research consistently finds that principals in high-poverty schools have the least access to high-quality professional development. What structural and systemic factors produce this inequity, and what specific steps can a superintendent take to reverse it within the constraints of a typical district budget?
2. Darling-Hammond et al. (2022) identify five domains of effective principal professional development: leading instruction, managing change, developing people, shaping school culture, and addressing diverse learner needs. Which of these domains do you think is most underserved by current district professional development systems, and why? How would you design a learning experience to address that gap?
3. The Learning Forward Standards (2022) argue that equity must be a throughline in professional learning processes—not just a topic covered in one session. What does this distinction mean in practice? What would an equity-throughline look like in a year-long principal professional development calendar?
4. Herrmann et al. (2019) found that even intensive professional development programs failed to shift principal practice when principals remained burdened by administrative overload. What does this finding imply for the relationship between role design and professional learning? If you were a superintendent designing a principal development system, where would you begin?
5. The Aspen Institute (2023) frames the question of principal professional development as a question of systemic redesign rather than individual program improvement. What is the difference between those two frames, and why does it matter for how a superintendent approaches the problem?

Exercises

1. Using Table 4.1 as a starting framework, audit the principal professional development system of a district you know—real or fictional. Map each current offering to one of the models described. Then identify the model most underrepresented in the current system and design one new initiative, grounded in at least two research sources from this chapter, to address that gap.
2. Draft a one-page professional development plan for a principal in her second year at a high-needs elementary school. Identify two specific learning goals aligned to the Darling-Hammond et al. (2022) domains, describe the PD structures that will support those goals, and specify how the superintendent will monitor progress across the year.
3. Design a three-session peer network for a cohort of five principals at different career stages in a mid-sized district. Specify the facilitation structure, the norms that would make the sessions psychologically safe, the problem-of-practice protocol you would use, and how you would connect the network to each principal's individual evaluation goals.

4. Review the Learning Forward Standards (2022) and identify the three standards that you believe are most difficult for districts to implement with fidelity. For each, describe a specific barrier you would anticipate and a superintendent-level strategy for addressing it.
5. Using Table 4.2 as a planning scaffold, design a two-year principal professional development initiative for Prairie View School District. Specify how you would address each of the six superintendent priorities, which research sources would anchor each priority, and how you would evaluate the initiative's impact at the end of Year 2.

4.5: Case Study



Case Study

Chapter 4 Case Study: Building a System That Actually Develops Principals

Dr. Maya Thompson entered her fifth year as superintendent of Prairie View School District with a clearer sense of the territory than she had at the start. The evaluation system redesign of her first three years had been structurally successful. Principals were participating in quarterly coaching conversations. Evidence portfolios were being collected. The Evaluator Cohort had been trained, calibrated, and was meeting regularly. By the metrics available to the board, the system was functioning as designed.

But Dr. Thompson had learned to be suspicious of structural success not accompanied by visible change in practice. As she began her fifth year, she saw enough evidence of the gap between evaluation design and real principal development to know the work was not finished.

The first signal came in a district climate survey conducted the previous spring. When asked whether professional development opportunities had directly strengthened their instructional leadership, fewer than half of the principals responded affirmatively. The professional development calendar—a patchwork of purchased programs, state conferences, and district-led workshops—looked busy. But principals described it in confidential interviews as disconnected from their daily work, generic in content, and insufficiently sustained to produce any change in how they actually led their buildings.

The second signal came from data. Prairie View's eleven principals included three in their first or second year; four mid-career principals; and four veteran leaders. When Dr. Thompson reviewed the professional development calendar, she found every principal attending the same sessions. Career stage, school context, and individual development goals played no role in how professional learning was designed or delivered. A first-year principal navigating her first budget cycle and a veteran principal preparing to mentor assistant principals were given the same content on the same day.

The third signal was equity-related. Prairie View included three schools serving predominantly low-income communities. These schools showed the highest rates of teacher turnover and the most uneven student achievement trends. Dr. Thompson reviewed coaching records and found that the two least experienced principals in the district were leading two of those three schools. Both had received fewer than half of their scheduled coaching sessions due to competing demands on evaluator time.

Taken together, these signals pointed to a professional development system that was well-intentioned, modestly resourced, and structurally inadequate. The evaluation architecture was sound. The professional learning itself was not.

Dr. Thompson brought the evidence to her cabinet and posed an uncomfortable question: if the goal of evaluation is to develop principals, and the goal of professional development is to develop principals, why were those two systems operating in almost complete isolation? Coaching conversations in the evaluation cycle were not connected to what principals were learning in professional development. Professional development content was not connected to goals principals had set in their evaluation

plans. The peer network Dr. Thompson had launched two years earlier had quietly atrophied.

She is now designing a systemic response. She has asked each cabinet member to identify one structural change within their area of authority that would reduce the administrative burden on principals at the three highest-need schools. She has commissioned a needs assessment disaggregating professional development participation by career stage, school context, and individual goals. She has scheduled a half-day retreat with her Evaluator Cohort to examine the connection between evaluation goals and professional development offerings. Finally, she has reached out to a regional university to explore a partnership providing mentoring resources for novice principals at her highest-need schools.

Dr. Thompson knows from experience that changing a system requires more than changing a calendar. It requires changing the culture and the structural logic that produced the calendar in the first place.

Discussion Questions

1. Dr. Thompson finds that her evaluation system and her professional development system are operating in isolation from each other. What structural and cultural factors typically produce this kind of siloing, and what specific changes would be required to integrate the two systems? What resistance would you anticipate, and how would you address it?
2. The data reveal that every principal in Prairie View is receiving the same professional development regardless of career stage, school context, or individual goals. What does the research on effective professional development suggest about the consequences of this approach? How would you design a differentiated system within the resource constraints of a typical mid-sized district?
3. Dr. Thompson's two least-experienced principals are leading the district's highest-need schools and receiving the fewest coaching sessions. How should she address this inequity? What are the competing demands and organizational interests that make this problem difficult to solve, and what superintendent-level authority can she bring to bear?
4. The peer network Dr. Thompson launched two years ago has atrophied due to scheduling pressures. What does the research suggest about why peer networks fail to sustain themselves without structural support? What would you put in place to protect the time and accountability necessary to maintain a functioning network?
5. At the end of the case, Dr. Thompson reflects that changing a system requires changing the culture and structural logic that produced it. Drawing on the research in this chapter, what would a two-year plan for systemic professional development redesign in Prairie View look like? What would you measure to know if it was working?

4.6: References



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5: COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS AND EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

- 5.1: Objectives
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5.1: Objectives



Objectives

Chapter 5 Objectives: Courageous Conversations and Emotional Intelligence in School Leadership

After reading this chapter, readers will be able to:

- Define the components of emotional intelligence (EI)—self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management—and explain their relevance to school leadership.
- Analyze the relationship between emotional intelligence and leadership effectiveness, including its impact on school climate, teacher morale, and student outcomes.
- Evaluate the concept of Team Emotional Intelligence and identify the four essential skills that underpin collective team performance.
- Explain how emotional intelligence supports leaders in preparing for and engaging in difficult conversations.
- Apply the four-part framework for difficult conversations—Inquiry, Acknowledgment, Advocacy, and Problem-Solving—to real and simulated leadership scenarios.
- Design a personal approach to courageous conversations that promotes clarity, collaboration, and transformation in educational leadership.

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5.2: Narrative



Narrative

Chapter 5 Narrative

"Educational leaders, like leaders in all fields of endeavor, experience varying degrees of success. This fact leads one to ask what characteristics does the successful educational leader possess or develop through focused training that will enhance his or her potential for success. The problem is to determine if factors considered more nontraditional as leadership characteristics (such as emotional intelligence and resilience) have a positive relationship with successful leadership." Maulding et al., 2012, p. 21

Introduction

Chapters 1 through 4 established the structural architecture of principal supervision and professional development. They covered standards, leadership effectiveness research, growth-focused evaluation systems, and professional learning models. This chapter turns to a dimension of the superintendent's work that no framework can fully substitute for. Leaders need relational and emotional capacity to guide people through complexity, conflict, and change.

Building systems is necessary but not sufficient. Superintendents who design growth-focused evaluation cycles still encounter moments demanding a personal touch. They face difficult conversations with struggling principals. They manage teams whose collaboration has broken down. They navigate cultures where tension has displaced trust. These moments test a leader's emotional intelligence, not just their structural competence. Leaders must understand and manage their own emotions while skillfully responding to the emotions of others.

This chapter examines emotional intelligence as a foundational leadership competency. It begins with the broader category of soft skills and their growing importance. It then explores emotional intelligence at both the individual and team levels. The second half focuses on application. It details how superintendents and principals can use emotional intelligence to navigate difficult conversations. The chapter closes with a framework for skillful dialogue that translates emotional awareness into structured action.

Understanding Soft Skills

Effective school leadership has always required more than technical expertise. Today's principalship demands more. Leaders must navigate complex interpersonal dynamics and manage conflict with composure. They must build trust across diverse communities and sustain collaborative cultures under pressure. These demands belong to the domain of soft skills. These interpersonal, behavioral, and intrapersonal competencies shape how leaders communicate, collaborate, and adapt.

Soft skills differ from the hard skills acquired through formal preparation programs. Leaders develop them through experience,

self-reflection, and ongoing practice. In the workplace, soft skills determine whether a leader can build the relationships and cultures necessary to realize their role's potential.

Among the soft skills most consequential for educational leaders are:

- **Communication:** Conveying ideas clearly, listening actively, and tailoring messages to diverse audiences.
- **Teamwork:** Collaborating effectively, appreciating diverse perspectives, and contributing to shared goals.
- **Problem-solving:** Identifying challenges, analyzing options, and implementing solutions with rigor and flexibility.
- **Adaptability:** Adjusting quickly to changing circumstances and embracing new approaches without losing organizational coherence.
- **Leadership:** Inspiring, motivating, and guiding teams toward shared goals while sustaining a positive culture.

As automation and artificial intelligence reshape the professional landscape, human-centered competencies become more essential. Employees who manage conflict well and think adaptively are the foundation of high-functioning organizations. Employers consistently report that soft skills are harder to teach and more predictive of success than technical credentials alone. One soft skill stands above the rest in school leadership: emotional intelligence.

What Is Emotional Intelligence?

Emotional Intelligence (EI) formally emerged through the research of Salovey and Mayer (1990). They defined it as the capacity to perceive, appraise, and manage emotions to inform effective thought and action. Daniel Goleman (1995) later expanded and popularized the concept. He argued that EI is a core prerequisite for effective leadership at every organizational level.

Unlike IQ, which remains relatively fixed, emotional intelligence is a dynamic competency. Leaders can develop it through intentional practice and self-reflection. Research indicates that EI predicts leadership success more strongly than cognitive intelligence. By 2028, it is projected to rank among the ten most sought-after workplace skills (World Economic Forum, 2023). For school leaders, this evidence is structural, not merely aspirational. The daily work of a superintendent or principal is inherently relational. It involves motivating teachers, managing conflict, and navigating institutional change in emotionally charged environments.

Mahfouz (2018) highlights the intense "emotional labor" principals perform daily. They must constantly regulate their own emotions to project calm and confidence, often absorbing the anxieties of staff and parents. Without systemic support to develop EI, this constant emotional regulation leads directly to burnout.

Goleman's (1995) foundational model organizes emotional intelligence into four interconnected domains:

- **Self-Awareness:** Recognizing one's own emotions as they arise and understanding their influence on behavior. Self-aware leaders notice their emotional states without being controlled by them.
- **Self-Management:** Regulating emotional responses, particularly under pressure. This domain includes impulse control, adaptability, and sustaining focus on long-term goals.
- **Social Awareness (Empathy):** Perceiving and understanding the emotional states of others. It involves reading organizational dynamics accurately and responding with sensitivity.
- **Relationship Management:** Building and sustaining productive relationships. This includes influencing others with integrity, managing conflict constructively, and fostering collaborative environments.

These four domains are mutually reinforcing. Self-awareness enables self-management. Both enable more accurate empathy. All three are prerequisites for skillful relationship management. For superintendents, this progression has direct implications. The capacity to lead principals through difficult conversations depends on developing all four domains.

Emotional Intelligence in School Leadership

Research consistently affirms the relationship between EI and leadership effectiveness in educational settings. Libby et al. (2012) found that principals with higher EI scores led schools with measurably improved academic outcomes. Stone et al. (2005) analyzed 464 school administrators. They found that highly effective leaders demonstrated exceptional emotional intelligence, particularly in self-awareness, empathy, and impulse control.

Maudling et al. (2012) found that emotional intelligence accounted for nearly 38 percent of the variance in perceived leadership effectiveness among school administrators. This underscores EI as a constitutive element of leadership. Hanlin (2014) documented a strong positive correlation between EI and the ability to fulfill core leadership responsibilities, such as setting clear goals and sustaining staff morale.

Recent empirical work by Brackett (2019) at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence demonstrates that a leader's emotion regulation skills directly dictate the school's emotional climate. This climate, in turn, drives teacher retention and student well-being. Pellitteri (2021) similarly found that school leaders with elevated EI contributed to improved school climates, increased teacher job satisfaction, and reduced burnout rates.

The implication for superintendents is clear. Emotional intelligence is a professional competency that districts can develop, support, and model. When superintendents engage with principals through the lens of EI, they create conditions where principals are more likely to do the same with their staff.

Developing Teams with Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence is also a collective characteristic. Districts can cultivate it at the team level. Team EI profoundly shapes how teams function under pressure, navigate conflict, and sustain high performance.

Greaves and Watkins (2021) researched the emotional dynamics of high-performing teams. They found that highly productive teams were not necessarily composed of individuals with high personal EI scores. Rather, the collective team's shared capacity to navigate emotional complexity facilitated high collaboration. Their research articulates four essential skills that underpin Team EI.

The Four Essential Skills of Team Emotional Intelligence

1. Emotional Awareness is the foundational element. It enables teams to discern and navigate the emotional patterns at work in their collective interactions. This skill allows team members to reflect on how emotions influence collaborative work and sustain trust.
2. Emotional Management involves making deliberate decisions about how the group communicates and addresses emotions. Central to this skill is a "we" mindset. Team members support one another, address emerging tensions promptly, and make decisions that enhance overall team functioning.
3. Internal Relationships encompass the quality of interactions among team members. Effective internal relationships require understanding how individual members respond to challenge and disagreement. Teams that proactively invest in positive working relationships create a resilient environment.
4. External Relationships address the team's capacity to build productive connections outside the immediate group. Teams neglecting external relationship-building risk operating in professional isolation. Robust external relationships enhance the team's visibility and contribute to an emotionally intelligent organizational culture.

The Advantages of Team EI Development

Four decades of research on Team EI documents its influence on factors critical to school success. These include innovation, problem-solving, stress management, trust-building, and organizational resilience (Bradberry & Greaves, 2009; Druskat & Wolff, 2001; Greaves & Watkins, 2021). For superintendents, cultivating team EI within principal cohorts and cabinet teams is a strategic investment in collective capacity.

Teams that manage emotions well create environments conducive to high performance. Conversely, ineffective emotional management quietly erodes both individual morale and team productivity. The goal of Team EI development is not to eliminate emotional complexity, but to build the shared capacity to navigate it skillfully.

Navigating Difficult Conversations in Educational Leadership

Difficult conversations are a defining feature of educational leadership. Interpersonal tensions, unmet expectations, and misaligned priorities are ordinary features of any serious organization. Effective leaders do not avoid conflict; they engage with it thoughtfully.

Ringer (2013) frames a difficult conversation as any exchange where diverging perspectives generate discomfort or defensiveness. These emotional undercurrents make it challenging to address the root issue. Yet, doing so is essential for maintaining trust. Left unresolved, interpersonal tensions compound over time, eroding professional relationships.

The stakes are particularly high in district leadership. Unresolved tensions in senior leadership teams affect school climate, teacher morale, and student experience. Ringer (2013) notes, "The majority of the work in any conflicting conversation is the work you do on yourself." A leader who enters a difficult conversation with clarity about their own emotional state is fundamentally better positioned than one who enters reactively.

Complementing Ringer's approach, Stone et al. (2010) from the Harvard Negotiation Project identify that every difficult conversation actually comprises three hidden conversations: the "What Happened" conversation, the "Feelings" conversation, and the "Identity" conversation. Leaders who understand these layers can untangle facts from emotions and protect their core sense of self when challenged.

Knowing Whether to Engage

Not every interpersonal tension requires a direct conversation. The discipline of discernment is itself an EI competency. Ringer (2013) offers diagnostic questions for leaders assessing whether to engage:

- Is this situation consuming significant attention or affecting the ability to concentrate?
- Is the stress of the unresolved tension draining energy or affecting work quality?
- Is this a long-term connection worth investing in?
- Is there an emerging pattern of avoidance or dread regarding the interaction?

When the answer is yes, the case for direct dialogue becomes clear. Yet, avoidance remains a common response. Avoidance deepens the divide, delays resolution, and causes manageable tensions to escalate into structural problems. Superintendents who model the willingness to engage in difficult conversations build organizations where problems are addressed early.

The Role of Work Style Awareness

One underappreciated source of interpersonal tension is differences in work style. Understanding one's own preferences—and those of colleagues—can preempt significant friction. Table 5.1 describes common work style dimensions relevant to school leadership teams from HBR (2026).

Table 5.1 Work Style Dimensions in School Leadership Teams

Category	Work Style	Description
Pace & Planning	Fast-Paced	Works quickly; thrives under deadlines and pressure
	Steady/Deliberate	Prefers a measured pace with time to think and plan

Category	Work Style	Description
Structure	Structured	Values routines, clear expectations, and defined processes
	Flexible	Adapts easily; comfortable with change and ambiguity
Focus	Detail-Oriented	Notifies and prioritizes precision and small components
	Big-Picture	Focuses on overarching goals, vision, and long-term strategy
Collaboration	Independent	Prefers autonomy and self-direction
	Team-Oriented	Energized by collaboration, communication, and shared decision-making
Decision Style	Analytical	Bases decisions on data, logic, and thorough evaluation
	Intuitive	Makes decisions quickly based on instincts and experience
Motivation	Achievement-Driven	Motivated by goals, recognition, and measurable results
	Purpose-Driven	Motivated by mission, values, and relational connection

Recognizing that a colleague's resistance may reflect a deliberate work style rather than opposition can substantially reduce friction. It redirects the conversation from personalities to structures. A leader with well-developed social awareness asks what working conditions bring out that colleague's best.

Beginning with Yourself: The Internal Work of Difficult Conversations

Before any difficult conversation can be productive, the leader must do internal work. Ringer (2013) states that the most consequential preparation is understanding what you feel, why you feel it, and how those feelings shape your behavior.

This internal work begins with identifying the emotional state driving the tension. Do you feel threatened? Disrespected?

Frustrated? Writing these feelings down can reveal invisible assumptions and judgments. Self-awareness enables response rather than reaction.

Ringer (2013) offers a preparation checklist mapping the internal landscape:

- What is my purpose for having this conversation?
- What assumptions am I making about the other person's intent?
- What emotional "buttons" of mine are being activated, and why?
- How is my current attitude shaping my expectations?
- How might the other person perceive this situation?
- How have both of us contributed to the problem?

These questions transform discomfort into information. They reveal what matters most in the relationship and where alignment is missing. Superintendents who practice this internal preparation enter difficult conversations with more clarity and genuine curiosity.

The Four-Part Framework for Difficult Conversations

Ringer (2013) offers a practical framework integrating emotional intelligence with structured communication. The four components—Inquiry, Acknowledgment, Advocacy, and Problem-Solving—transform confrontational exchanges into productive dialogue.

1. Inquiry: The conversation begins with genuine curiosity about the other person's perspective. The leader asks open questions and listens with full attention to understand, not to rebut. This operationalizes Covey's (2020) habit: "Seek first to understand, then to be understood." Inquiry creates space for the other person's perspective. In practice, this means asking, "Help me understand how this situation looks from your perspective."

2. Acknowledgment: After listening, the leader acknowledges what they heard. This is not agreement, but evidence that the other person's experience was received. Acknowledgment communicates respect. It signals that the conversation is a dialogue, not a verdict. Acknowledgment may involve naming the emotional tenor: "I can see that this has been frustrating, and I want to understand why." Naming the emotional energy without judgment defuses defensiveness.

3. Advocacy: With the other person's perspective received, the leader shares their own. This is the moment for honest, direct communication grounded in the leader's actual experience. Using "I" statements keeps the conversation in the register of shared reality rather than accusation. Advocacy is not a lecture or an ultimatum. It is the leader's contribution to a dialogue where both perspectives matter.

4. Problem-Solving: The final component moves the conversation to action. With both perspectives on the table, the leader invites collaborative problem-solving: "What would success look like for both of us?" The shift from "who is right?" to "what do we do together?" transforms tension into shared ownership. Solutions reached collaboratively are more durable because both parties are invested.

Applying Emotional Intelligence Across the Conversation

The four-part framework is most effective when animated by EI competencies. In the Inquiry stage, social awareness enables the leader to read nonverbal cues and understand the emotional texture of the other person's perspective. In the Acknowledgment stage, empathy does the essential work of validating another person's experience.

Self-management becomes critical in the Advocacy stage. The temptation to defend or minimize can undermine honesty. A leader who knows their emotional triggers can advocate without becoming reactive. In the Problem-Solving stage, relationship management takes the lead, moving the conversation toward collaborative action.

Ringer (2013) notes, "You have more power than you think." The source of that power is emotional intelligence, not positional

authority. Leaders who enter difficult conversations with self-awareness and curiosity consistently find that tension becomes an opening for deeper trust.

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5.3: Summary



Summary

Chapter 5 Summary

This chapter examined emotional intelligence as a foundational competency for school leaders. The evidence is substantial: leaders with developed EI lead schools with stronger climates, higher teacher satisfaction, and better student outcomes (Brackett, 2019; Goleman, 1995; Pellitteri, 2021). Unlike cognitive intelligence, emotional intelligence is dynamic and can be cultivated through intentional practice.

The chapter traced EI across three levels. At the individual level, Goleman's (1995) four-domain model provides a developmental roadmap. At the team level, Greaves and Watkins' (2021) research demonstrates that collective EI strongly predicts team performance. At the level of practice, Ringer's (2013) four-part framework gives leaders a structured approach to difficult conversations.

Relational courage is a professional practice, not a personality trait. Leaders who prepare intentionally, engage with curiosity, acknowledge emotional realities, advocate honestly, and collaborate toward solutions transform conflict. In doing so, they build the trust and psychological safety that growth-focused schools require.

The research on emotional intelligence also points to an equity dimension. Schools where relational capital is depleted by historical inequity and chronic stress are precisely where emotionally intelligent leadership is most consequential. Superintendents who model EI and equip their community with frameworks for skillful dialogue create conditions where every school can build a culture of trust.

Chapter 6 will extend this collaborative dimension into the structures of professional practice. Just as emotional intelligence enables individual leaders to work more skillfully with others, Professional Learning Communities provide the organizational architecture to sustain that collaboration at scale.

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5.4: Discussion Questions and Exercises



Discussion Questions & Exercises

Chapter 5 Discussion Questions and Exercises

Discussion Questions

1. Why is emotional intelligence increasingly important in post-pandemic school leadership? *Consider how the emotional needs of staff, students, and families have shifted in recent years. What specific demands does this place on the EI of school leaders, and how should superintendents respond?*
2. How can school leaders balance empathy with accountability when implementing new initiatives? *What are the risks of leaning too far in either direction? How does Ringer's framework help leaders hold both empathy and accountability simultaneously?*
3. What does emotionally intelligent leadership look like during a crisis or significant organizational conflict? *Share examples from your own experience or observations in schools. What EI competencies were most visible in the most effective leaders you observed?*
4. How can superintendents foster Team EI within their principal cohorts? *What structures, norms, or facilitation practices help build collective emotional intelligence across a district leadership team? What would a two-year plan for Team EI development look like?*
5. In what ways does emotional intelligence support equity and inclusion in school leadership? *How might EI help leaders navigate culturally responsive conversations and decision-making in communities historically underserved by district institutions?*

Exercises

1. Create a visual map of your emotional intelligence strengths and growth areas using Goleman's four domains. Include specific examples from your leadership experience. Identify one concrete developmental step you will take to strengthen each domain over the next six months.
2. Imagine you are leading a team resistant to a significant district-wide change. Write a script or structured outline for opening a team meeting using Ringer's (2013) four-part framework. Identify how each step would function in your specific scenario.
3. Over the next week, keep a daily journal of emotionally charged moments in your leadership role. For each entry, identify: What triggered the emotion? How did you respond? What would you do differently using the EI competencies described in this chapter?
4. Draft a 30-minute professional development session for your school leadership team focused on building Team EI. Include learning objectives aligned to Greaves and Watkins' (2021) four skills, key talking points, and one interactive activity.
5. With a peer or small group, role-play a difficult conversation between a superintendent and a principal navigating a significant professional challenge. Use Ringer's four-part framework throughout. Debrief afterward: Which EI skills were most

visible? Which were most difficult to sustain?

5.5: Case Study



Case Study

Chapter 5 Case Study: When the System Cannot Speak for Itself

Dr. Maya Thompson entered her sixth year as superintendent of Prairie View School District with a clearer sense of the territory. The evaluation system redesign of her early years was holding. The professional development system was significantly more differentiated and connected to individual principal goals. Her Evaluator Cohort was calibrated and meeting regularly. By most measurable indicators, Prairie View was functioning as a growth-oriented leadership system.

Yet, Dr. Thompson had learned to be attentive to what metrics did not capture. As her sixth year unfolded, she noticed something in the district's leadership culture that no evaluation cycle could address: the conversations that were *not* happening.

The first sign came during a fall principals' cabinet meeting. Dr. Thompson introduced a proposal to pilot artificial intelligence tools in instructional planning at three volunteer schools. The presentation was met with polite nodding. No one asked a substantive question. No one pushed back. The meeting ended in twenty minutes.

What followed told a different story. In the weeks after the meeting, Dr. Thompson began hearing that there was significant concern among the cabinet about the AI initiative. Teachers were already anxious. Some principals felt the rollout was too fast. One principal, Marcus Webb, had apparently been telling his staff that the initiative was "not going to survive the spring."

She pulled Marcus's evaluation record. His ratings were consistently proficient. His coaching conversations were collegial. On paper, there was nothing to address. But the gap between what was said in the cabinet meeting and what was said outside of it was widening. Dr. Thompson recognized a culture where difficult conversations were happening everywhere except in the room where they needed to happen.

The Challenge

Dr. Thompson scheduled a one-on-one with Marcus. She arrived with a different intention than she usually brought to these meetings. She had spent the previous evening reviewing Ringer's (2013) preparation checklist. She wrote down her own emotional response: a sense of being undermined. She examined that feeling carefully. Was she certain the third-hand account was accurate? No. Had she given Marcus a genuine opportunity to raise his concerns directly? She wasn't sure.

She began with inquiry. She asked Marcus how his staff was experiencing the beginning of the year and listened carefully. When she asked specifically what he was hearing about the AI pilot, the room shifted. Marcus was quiet, then said what he had been carrying for weeks: his teachers were exhausted. They had absorbed three years of post-pandemic recovery initiatives, a new literacy curriculum, and a revised teacher evaluation framework. The AI tools felt like one more thing. He had not known how to say that in the cabinet meeting without appearing resistant.

Dr. Thompson acknowledged what she heard without minimizing her commitment to the initiative or Marcus's legitimate concern. She named the emotional dynamic directly: "I think we've built a cabinet culture where people are more comfortable disagreeing with me in the hallway than in the meeting, and I want to understand why that is." Marcus did not immediately have a full answer, but the conversation opened a space that previous formal meetings had not.

What Changed

Over the next month, Dr. Thompson made two structural changes and one relational one. Structurally, she revised the AI pilot timeline to allow schools to determine their own entry points. She also added a standing agenda item to cabinet meetings: fifteen minutes for "unfinished business," explicitly protected time for concerns not raised earlier.

The relational change was more fundamental. Dr. Thompson began her next cabinet meeting by sharing what she had learned from her conversation with Marcus—not its contents, but its shape. She told her principals she had discovered a gap between conversations happening inside and outside the room. She took responsibility for her role in creating that gap. She named the dynamic Ringer (2013) calls the "culture of avoidance": the tendency to route difficult truths away from the people who most need to hear them.

The response was not immediate. But in subsequent months, the quality of cabinet conversations shifted. People began raising concerns in the meeting rather than after it. Marcus became one of the more candid voices in the room.

Prairie View's evaluation systems and professional development structures remained intact. But Dr. Thompson understood the limits of well-designed systems: they create the conditions in which courageous conversations are possible. They do not *have* courageous conversations. That work belongs to leaders who do the internal preparation, enter the room with genuine curiosity, and stay present long enough for the truth to be said.

Discussion Questions

1. Dr. Thompson identifies a gap between what is said in formal meetings and what circulates informally. What organizational and relational conditions produce this kind of culture of avoidance, and what is a superintendent's responsibility for shaping it?
2. How did Dr. Thompson's internal preparation before meeting with Marcus reflect the EI principles described in this chapter? What might the conversation have looked like if she had entered reactively rather than reflectively?
3. Dr. Thompson chooses to share what she learned from her conversation with Marcus at the next cabinet meeting—not its contents, but its shape. What are the risks and benefits of a superintendent modeling this kind of public self-reflection with their principals?
4. The case distinguishes between structural changes (revised timeline, new agenda item) and a relational change (naming the culture of avoidance). Which do you think mattered more, and why?
5. The case ends with the observation that well-designed systems create conditions for courageous conversations but do not have them. How does this frame the relationship between the structural work of the superintendent and the relational work?

5.6: References



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6: COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE- LEADING AND SUSTAINING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

- 6.1: Objectives
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6.1: Objectives



Objectives

Chapter 6 Objectives: Communities of Practice: Leading and Sustaining Professional Learning Communities

After reading this chapter, readers will be able to:

- Trace the historical development of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) from their origins in the 1960s through their formalization by DuFour and Eaker, and explain the rationale for PLCs as a response to teacher isolation.
- Describe the foundational elements of a PLC—shared mission, vision, values, and goals—and analyze the three big ideas that drive PLC work: a focus on learning, a collaborative culture, and a results orientation.
- Apply the four critical questions of a PLC to guide instructional planning, common assessment design, and the development of systematic interventions and extensions.
- Evaluate the principal's role in creating, implementing, and sustaining a PLC culture, including the shift from command-and-control leadership to a learning-and-leading approach.
- Explain the need for principal PLCs as a response to professional isolation, and summarize the benefits of administrator professional learning communities for reflective practice and emotional support.
- Design strategies for establishing principal PLCs within and across districts, drawing on evidence from research and practice.

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6.2: Narrative



Narrative

Chapter 6 Narrative

“The fundamental purpose of the school is to ensure that all students learn at high levels. To have the greatest impact, principals must define their job as helping to create a professional learning community in which teachers can continually collaborate and learn how to become more effective.” DuFour et al. (2024)

Introduction

Chapter 5 examined the relational and emotional dimensions of school leadership—the self-awareness, empathy, and courage required to lead people through complexity and conflict. This chapter extends that relational foundation into the organizational structures through which collaborative learning becomes a sustained, systemic feature of school life. Emotional intelligence equips leaders to navigate difficult conversations and build trust at the individual level. Professional Learning Communities provide the institutional architecture through which that trust and collaborative capacity can be organized into something durable: a culture of collective inquiry, shared accountability, and continuous improvement.

The concept of the Professional Learning Community (PLC) has become one of the most widely recognized frameworks in contemporary education. Yet, recognition and implementation are not the same thing. In many districts, the term has been applied to meeting structures that look collaborative on the surface but lack the disciplined focus, shared purpose, and evidence-based inquiry that make PLCs transformative. For superintendents and principals, the task is not simply to establish PLCs but to build the conditions under which they do what the research shows they can do: reduce teacher isolation, strengthen instructional coherence, and produce measurable gains in student learning.

This chapter examines PLCs in three registers. The first is historical and conceptual—tracing the development of the PLC model and establishing the research basis for why PLCs matter. The second is operational—examining the structures, principles, and leadership practices that distinguish high-functioning PLCs from nominal ones. The third is relational—addressing the growing recognition that principals themselves need professional learning communities, and that the isolation of school leaders is a structural problem requiring a structural response.

The History and Development of Professional Learning Communities

The conditions that PLCs were designed to address are as old as American schooling itself. For most of the twentieth century, schools were organized around a model of professional isolation. Teachers worked independently in self-contained classrooms, with limited knowledge of—and limited collaboration with—what their colleagues were doing in adjacent rooms. The factory-model school, with its emphasis on individual accountability and standardized inputs, offered little structural support for the kind of collective professional learning that instructional improvement requires.

The first serious challenge to this model emerged in the 1960s, when researchers began documenting the organizational costs of teacher isolation. The concept of the professional learning community entered education discourse as an alternative—a framework in which teachers might work together rather than independently, share responsibility for student outcomes, and develop their practice through structured collaboration rather than private trial and error (All Things PLC, 2023).

The research base for PLCs developed significantly in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Rosenholtz's (1989) landmark study of 78 schools found that schools characterized by teacher collaboration—what she called learning-enriched environments—consistently outperformed those organized around individual, isolated practice. In these schools, teaching was treated as a collective enterprise: teachers analyzed student data together, experimented with instructional strategies, and shared responsibility for outcomes across classrooms. Newmann and Wehlage (1995) extended this finding through a study of more than 1,200 schools, concluding that the most consistently successful schools were those that had restructured themselves to function as professional learning communities.

Despite this accumulating evidence, PLCs lacked a formalized operational model until 1998, when Superintendent Richard DuFour and Education Dean Robert Eaker published *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement*. Drawing on both research and the practical knowledge of practitioners, DuFour and Eaker provided the field with a concrete, implementable framework. Their work transformed PLCs from a theoretical ideal into an operational reality, positioning them as the most powerful available strategy for simultaneously improving teaching, developing professional capacity, and raising student achievement.

The DuFour and Eaker framework has continued to evolve. The most current iteration, *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work* (DuFour et al., 2024), now in its fourth edition, reflects four decades of research, implementation experience, and ongoing refinement. It remains the most widely used and comprehensively researched model of PLCs in K-12 education, and it forms the conceptual foundation for the principles and practices described in this chapter.

What Is a Professional Learning Community?

Many educators are familiar with the term PLC, but familiarity with the label is not the same as understanding its substance. A PLC is not a program that can be purchased, a meeting format that can be mandated, or an initiative that runs on a two-year cycle before being replaced by the next reform. DuFour et al. (2024) describe a PLC as “an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (p. 14). This definition has several implications that are worth making explicit.

First, a PLC is a process, not an event. It does not conclude when the initial training is complete or when the first round of data has been reviewed. It is an ongoing, recurring cycle of inquiry that, when embedded in the culture of a school, becomes the way educators do their work rather than something they do in addition to their work.

Second, a PLC requires collaboration. The isolation model—in which each teacher independently determines what students need to know, how they will be assessed, and what will be done when they do not learn—is structurally incompatible with PLC practice. PLCs replace individual professional autonomy over curriculum, assessment, and intervention with collective responsibility for those decisions.

Third, a PLC is oriented toward results. The measure of a PLC is not whether teachers are meeting together but whether students are learning more as a result of those meetings. This results orientation requires that PLCs maintain a disciplined focus on evidence of student learning and that they use that evidence to adjust practice, not simply to document outcomes.

The Four Pillars: Mission, Vision, Values, and Goals

DuFour et al. (2024) argue that the foundation of a high-functioning PLC rests on four pillars that must be established collaboratively before the substantive work of data inquiry and instructional improvement can begin. These pillars are mission, vision, values, and goals.

1. **Mission** addresses the fundamental purpose of the school: why it exists and what it is committed to accomplishing. In a PLC, the mission is grounded in the proposition that the fundamental purpose of school is to ensure that all students learn at high levels—not that all students are taught, but that all students learn. This distinction is not semantic. It shifts accountability from the teacher's effort to the student's outcome, and it creates the moral foundation on which collective responsibility rests.

2. **Vision** describes what the school will look like when the mission is being realized—the specific organizational conditions, instructional practices, and cultural norms that the community is working to create.
3. **Values** articulate the behaviors and commitments that members of the community will demonstrate as they pursue the mission and vision.
4. **Goals** provide the measurable benchmarks by which the community will know whether it is making progress. Taken together, these four pillars create a shared framework of purpose and accountability that gives PLC work its coherence and its direction.

The Three Big Ideas

DuFour et al. (2024) identify three foundational ideas that should drive the work of every PLC team. These ideas are not merely philosophical orientations—they have direct implications for how PLC teams structure their time, what they discuss, and how they use the evidence they gather.

The first big idea is a **focus on learning**. DuFour's central claim is unambiguous: "The fundamental purpose of the school is to ensure all students learn at high levels" (DuFour et al., 2024, p. 18). The operative question in a PLC is not "Was it taught?" but "Was it learned?" This shift—from a teaching orientation to a learning orientation—requires that educators examine evidence of student learning on a regular basis and accept collective responsibility for what that evidence reveals.

The second big idea is a **collaborative culture and collective responsibility**. Educators cannot fulfill the purpose of learning for all if they work in isolation. This means that the decisions most consequential for student learning—what is taught, how it is assessed, and what is done when students do not demonstrate mastery—must be made collectively rather than individually. Collective responsibility does not erase individual professional judgment; it contextualizes it within a shared commitment to common outcomes.

The third big idea is a **results orientation**. PLCs generate evidence of learning through ongoing formative assessment, and they use that evidence to identify which students need additional support, which instructional approaches are most effective, and where the team's collective practice needs to develop. Without this results orientation, PLC meetings may be collegial without being consequential.

The Four Critical Questions

DuFour et al. (2024) organize PLC team inquiry around four critical questions that should guide every planning cycle and every review of student learning data:

1. What do we want all students to know and be able to do?
2. How will we know if they have learned it?
3. How will we respond when some students do not learn?
4. How will we extend the learning for students who are already proficient?

These four questions are deceptively simple. The first requires teams to establish a guaranteed and viable curriculum—agreeing on the essential learning outcomes that all students will have the opportunity to master, regardless of which teacher they are assigned. The second requires teams to develop common formative assessments that produce comparable evidence of learning across classrooms. The third requires teams to design systematic interventions—not optional enrichment programs or informal supports, but structured, timely, directive responses to identified learning needs. The fourth requires teams to extend the learning of students who demonstrate mastery rather than simply moving them to the next unit.

Taken together, the four critical questions replace ad hoc instructional decision-making with a collaborative, evidence-based cycle of planning, assessment, response, and extension. For principals, the most important implication of this framework is that PLC work produces both accountability and learning: it holds teams responsible for student outcomes while simultaneously building the collective professional knowledge required to improve them. As Tomal et al. (2015) observe, "Increased student performance levels occur within professional learning communities that are committed to continual improvement, collective responsibility, and goal alignment."

Table 6.1 Characteristics of Effective Professional Learning Communities

Characteristic	Description
Shared Mission, Vision, Values, and Goals	Educators collaboratively establish and regularly revisit the foundational purpose, aspirational direction, guiding commitments, and measurable targets that anchor PLC work.
Collective Inquiry	Teams engage in ongoing, structured examination of best instructional practices and current evidence of student achievement, using data to drive decision-making.
Collaborative Teams	Educators work interdependently in teams that share responsibility for student learning outcomes, rather than operating as independent professionals.
Action Orientation and Experimentation	Teams implement changes to practice based on evidence, monitor results, and adjust—creating a cycle of continuous improvement rather than static compliance.
Systematic Processes for Continuous Improvement	Schools establish structures and routines—common planning time, shared protocols, regular data reviews—that embed PLC practices into the daily life of the school.
Results Focus	PLC work is evaluated by evidence of student learning, not by the quality of the process or the effort expended. Teams use outcomes data to assess their collective effectiveness.

Source: DuFour & Eaker (1998); DuFour et al. (2024).

The Principal's Role in Leading Professional Learning Communities

The research on PLCs is consistent on one point: the quality of PLC implementation in a school is directly related to the quality of principal leadership. PLCs do not establish themselves. They require a leader who understands the model deeply enough to build it, sustains it through the inevitable early resistance, and provides the ongoing support, structure, and accountability that keeps collaborative teams focused on their most important work.

Danielson (2018) argues that even rigorous teacher evaluation—however thoughtfully conducted—is insufficient as a primary strategy for professional learning. The conditions that most effectively stimulate teachers' professional development are organizational, not evaluative: schools structured as communities of adult learning, in which collaboration is embedded in the daily work rather than added on at the margins. The principal is uniquely positioned to build those conditions.

DuFour and Mattos (2013) are direct about the implications for the principalship: "Principals must recognize that this task demands less command and control and more learning and leading, less dictating and more orchestrating." This framing captures a genuine leadership challenge. The traditional model of the principal as manager—the person responsible for maintaining order, monitoring compliance, and directing operations—is structurally at odds with the PLC model, which requires the principal to position teachers as the primary agents of instructional improvement. The shift is not from strength to passivity; it is from unilateral control to collaborative accountability.

Lunenburg (2010) frames this responsibility at the systems level: “School leaders foster a school’s improvement, enhance its overall effectiveness, and promote student learning and success by developing the capacity of staff to function as a professional learning community. School leaders play a vital role in the creation of professional learning communities” (p. 2). The principal who builds this capacity is not simply supporting a professional development initiative—they are creating the organizational conditions under which sustained school improvement becomes possible.

Five Steps for Principals Leading PLCs

DuFour and Mattos (2013) identify five concrete steps that principals can take to build and sustain effective PLCs. These steps are not a sequential checklist but an interconnected set of commitments that, taken together, create the structural and cultural conditions for PLC success.

1. Establish and communicate the fundamental purpose. The principal begins by articulating—and enlisting staff in examining—the proposition that the school’s fundamental purpose is to ensure that all students learn at high levels. This requires engaging staff in a review of every existing practice, program, and procedure to assess its alignment with that purpose. Practices that do not serve learning are legitimate candidates for discontinuation or redesign.
2. Organize staff into meaningful collaborative teams. Effective PLCs require teams organized around common instructional responsibilities—not superficial affinities or administrative convenience. Teams take collective responsibility for student learning and work interdependently toward shared goals for which all members hold themselves mutually accountable.
3. Establish a guaranteed and viable curriculum. Teams must agree on the essential learning outcomes for each instructional unit: what all students will have the opportunity to learn, at what level of proficiency, and on what timeline. They must then develop and administer common formative assessments that allow them to compare evidence of learning across classrooms and identify where students need additional support.
4. Use evidence of student learning to drive decisions. The principal ensures that PLC teams analyze assessment data systematically and use it to identify students who need additional support to reach proficiency, students who are already proficient and need extension, teachers whose students are achieving at high levels so their practices can be examined and shared, and teachers whose students are struggling so the team can provide targeted assistance.
5. Create a coordinated intervention system. The school must have in place a systematic, school-wide intervention plan that ensures students who struggle receive additional time and support in a way that is timely, directive, diagnostic, and precisely targeted to identified learning needs. This system is a product of PLC work, not a prerequisite for it.

The thread running through all five steps is the word systematic. High-functioning PLCs are not characterized by the goodwill of individual teachers or the inspirational leadership of a charismatic principal. They are characterized by structures—common planning time, shared protocols, aligned assessments, coordinated interventions—that make collaborative inquiry a predictable, protected, and recurring feature of the school’s work. The principal’s primary task is to build, protect, and continuously improve those structures.

Table 6.2 Superintendent Toolkit: Supporting Principal Leadership of PLCs

Superintendent Priority	What the Research Shows	Implication for Practice
Protect Collaborative Time	PLCs require dedicated, protected, and recurring time that is structurally embedded in the school day (DuFour et al., 2024).	Work with principals to redesign schedules that create genuine common planning time for all collaborative teams.
Align Mission and Vision	PLCs without shared foundational pillars drift toward compliance meetings rather than inquiry-driven collaboration (DuFour et al., 2024).	Facilitate district-wide conversations that anchor PLC work to a common, clearly articulated mission focused on learning for all students.

Superintendent Priority	What the Research Shows	Implication for Practice
Build Data Literacy	PLC effectiveness depends on teams' ability to interpret and act on evidence of student learning (Pirtle & Tobia, 2014).	Invest in professional development that builds principals' and teachers' capacity to design common assessments and analyze results productively.
Model Learning-and-Leading	The principal's approach to leadership directly shapes whether teachers experience PLCs as genuine collaboration or top-down compliance (DuFour & Mattos, 2013).	Coach principals explicitly on the shift from command-and-control to orchestrating—and model that shift in the superintendent's own work with principals.
Establish Principal PLCs	Principals who participate in structured peer collaboration report reduced isolation, stronger reflective practice, and enhanced leadership development (Rittenour, 2017).	Create formal principal PLCs within and across districts, providing protected time, facilitation support, and accountability structures that sustain them beyond initial enthusiasm.

The Case for Principal Professional Learning Communities

The literature on PLCs has focused primarily on teacher collaboration—and for good reason. The evidence that collaborative teacher teams improve student outcomes is robust and well-established. But the research also documents a parallel problem that receives far less attention: the professional isolation of school principals.

Spillane and Lee (2013) describe the experience of many school leaders with precision: “School principals often struggle with feelings of professional isolation and loneliness that carries ultimate responsibility and decision-making powers” (p. 3). The principal's role is structurally isolating in ways that the teacher's role is not. Where teachers, however isolated in their classrooms, share a professional community with dozens of colleagues in the same building, principals are singular. There is one of them. The decisions they face—about personnel, culture, resources, and the relentless stream of organizational crises that define a school leader's daily reality—are theirs alone to make. The evaluation structures examined in Chapter 3, and the professional development systems examined in Chapter 4, can provide significant support. But they cannot fully substitute for the kind of peer accountability and shared reflection that PLCs provide teachers.

The case for principal PLCs is both structural and developmental. Structurally, principals who participate in organized peer learning communities gain access to the collective expertise of colleagues navigating similar challenges—expertise that no single mentor or evaluator can replicate. Developmentally, the reflective practice that peer communities require—the disciplines of describing a problem, receiving feedback, examining assumptions, and trying a different approach—is precisely the kind of learning that produces the adaptive capacity that effective school leadership demands.

Fowler (2022) synthesizes the case for administrator PLCs plainly: “For administrators, a PLC with colleagues can similarly promote collaboration and problem solving, including for increased teacher retention; provide a safe place to de-stress and get much needed emotional support; and help the people what we're all this for: our students” (p. 1). The benefits Fowler identifies map directly to the EI competencies examined in Chapter 5: the relational safety of a peer community supports the self-awareness and vulnerability that genuine reflective practice requires. A principal who cannot be honest about professional struggles with a trusted peer network is unlikely to model that honesty in the PLCs they are trying to build for their own staff.

Evidence from Practice: Principal PLCs in Action

The Minnesota Department of Education's identification of Principal Professional Learning Communities as a Promising Practice (2015) provides one of the most concrete documented examples of what these structures look like in operation. The Minnesota

examples included both a formal book club—in which principals read and discussed current leadership research together—and a Google-based collaboration platform that allowed principals to share resources, reflect on practice, and maintain peer accountability across geographic distance.

The benefits documented in both formats were consistent: principals reported greater ability to reflect on their individual practices, a strengthened culture of professional learning, improved skills in coaching and evaluating teachers, and enhanced capacity to model leadership behaviors for their own staff. Critically, the book club and digital collaboration formats both produced something that professional development workshops typically cannot: sustained, relationship-based accountability over time.

Rittenour's (2017) study of secondary principals in Minnesota who participated in structured principal PLCs reinforced these findings at scale. A large majority of participants described their PLC experience as valuable or very valuable, and 92 percent indicated they would continue their participation. The benefits they reported clustered around three themes: the opportunity to share ideas and reflect in a psychologically safe environment, a reduced sense of professional isolation, and measurable growth in leadership—including enhanced capacity to transform school culture and lead learning as a principal.

These findings mirror the evidence from teacher PLCs in an important way: the value of the peer learning community is not only in the content that is discussed but in the relational infrastructure that sustains it. The trust that makes honest professional reflection possible is built through repeated, structured interaction over time. This is why principal PLCs that are genuinely effective are organized around sustained membership, protected time, and the kind of facilitated protocols that the PLC model itself prescribes for teacher teams.

Designing Principal PLCs: Structures and Strategies

Superintendents who want to build effective principal PLCs face the same design challenges that principals face in building teacher PLCs: they must create the time, the structure, the psychological safety, and the accountability that make collaborative professional learning possible. Several design principles are supported by both the research and the practice literature.

First, membership matters. Principal PLCs are most effective when composed of principals with enough shared context to make the conversation relevant—similar school levels, similar community contexts, similar career stages—but enough diversity of experience to generate genuine learning. Homogeneous groups risk becoming echo chambers; heterogeneous groups risk losing the contextual specificity that makes shared reflection actionable.

Second, structure matters. The research on teacher PLCs consistently finds that the quality of PLC work depends on the use of structured protocols that move conversations from surface-level sharing to deep inquiry. The same is true for principal PLCs. Problem-of-practice protocols, consultancy structures, and facilitated data reviews all provide the kind of disciplined scaffolding that transforms collegial conversation into genuine professional learning.

Third, time matters. Principal PLCs that are treated as optional add-ons to already overscheduled administrative calendars do not last. Rittenour's (2017) study found that sustained participation was directly related to whether the district had structurally protected time for principal collaboration—not simply encouraged it. Superintendents who treat principal PLCs as a strategic priority embed them in the district calendar, fund them as a line item in the professional development budget, and hold principals accountable for participating in the same way they hold teachers accountable for PLC participation.

6.3: Summary



Summary

Chapter 6 Summary

This chapter examined Professional Learning Communities as the organizational architecture through which the collaborative, evidence-based culture that effective schools require can be built and sustained. The historical record is clear: the shift from teacher isolation to teacher collaboration—from individual professional autonomy over instruction to collective responsibility for student learning—produces measurable improvements in both teacher practice and student outcomes (Rosenholtz, 1989; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; DuFour et al., 2024). But that shift does not happen through goodwill or the passage of time. It happens through structure: shared mission and vision, organized collaborative teams, common formative assessments, systematic interventions, and the ongoing, recurring cycle of inquiry that defines PLC work at its best.

The principal's role in this work is irreplaceable. DuFour and Mattos (2013) are right that the most powerful strategy for improving both teaching and learning is to create the collaborative culture and collective responsibility of a PLC—and they are equally right that doing so requires a fundamental shift in how principals define their job. The principal who orchestrates rather than dictates, who positions teachers as the primary agents of instructional improvement while providing the structures and accountability that make improvement possible, is doing the work that the research consistently associates with the highest-functioning schools.

The second half of the chapter addressed the less-discussed problem of principal isolation—and the evidence that PLCs designed specifically for school leaders can address it. Spillane and Lee (2013), Fowler (2022), and Rittenour (2017) converge on a consistent finding: principals who participate in structured peer learning communities report reduced isolation, stronger reflective practice, and enhanced leadership capacity. For superintendents, building principal PLCs is not a supplemental courtesy—it is a strategic investment in the leadership infrastructure that school improvement requires.

Across Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6, a coherent argument has been developing: the most effective school districts are not those with the most sophisticated evaluation rubrics or the most comprehensive professional development catalogs. They are those in which evaluation, professional learning, emotional intelligence, and collaborative practice are mutually reinforcing—a system in which the superintendent's work with principals mirrors the work that principals are expected to do with their teachers, and in which the culture of inquiry, trust, and continuous improvement extends from the classroom to the cabinet room.

Yet even the most well-designed PLC system operates at the collective level—and collective structures, however strong, cannot substitute for the individualized, relational learning through which a specific teacher deepens a specific skill or a particular principal develops the adaptive capacity their school requires; Chapter 7 turns to coaching and mentoring as the complementary dimension of professional learning that makes the PLC architecture complete.

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6.4: Discussion Questions and Exercises



Discussion Questions & Exercises

Chapter 6 Discussion Questions and Exercises

Discussion Questions

1. The DuFour model distinguishes between PLCs that are collaborative in name and those that are collaborative in substance. What organizational and cultural conditions most reliably produce the gap between nominal and genuine PLC practice, and what is the principal's most important lever for closing it? *Consider Danielson's (2018) argument that teacher evaluation alone is insufficient to stimulate professional learning. What does this imply about the relationship between evaluation systems and PLC structures in a well-designed school?*
2. The three big ideas of PLC work—a focus on learning, a collaborative culture, and a results orientation—are mutually reinforcing. What happens when one is present without the others? Use a real or hypothetical school example to illustrate the consequences of imbalance among the three. *Which of the three big ideas do you believe is most difficult to sustain in practice, and why? What specific leadership behaviors maintain it?*
3. DuFour and Mattos (2013) argue that effective principal leadership of PLCs requires a shift from command-and-control to learning-and-leading. What specific behaviors define each end of that spectrum, and what makes the shift difficult for principals who were trained and evaluated in command-and-control cultures? *How does the EI framework from Chapter 5 relate to this leadership shift? What emotional competencies does learning-and-leading require?*
4. Spillane and Lee (2013) document the professional isolation of school principals as a significant structural problem. In what ways does principal isolation undermine the PLC work a principal is trying to build in their own school? *How does the experience of participating in a principal PLC prepare a school leader to build and sustain teacher PLCs with greater skill and credibility?*
5. If you were a superintendent designing a district-wide PLC initiative, what would you put in place to distinguish it from the “initiative fatigue” that PLCs often encounter? What structural commitments would signal to principals and teachers that this is different from previous reform efforts? *Draw on at least two research sources from this chapter to anchor your design choices.*

Exercises

1. Working in small groups, develop a plan for launching PLCs in a school that currently operates with minimal staff collaboration. Outline how you would build shared mission and goals, organize collaborative teams, protect common planning time, and establish accountability structures for monitoring student learning data. Ground your plan in at least three specific recommendations from DuFour et al. (2024).
2. Using a sample set of student achievement data provided by the instructor, work as a PLC team to address the four critical questions: What should students know and be able to do? How will we know if they learned it? How will we respond when

some students do not learn? How will we extend learning for those already proficient? Document your team's decisions and the evidence that drove them.

3. Complete a self-assessment of PLC practices in a school or district you know—real or fictional. For each characteristic in Table 6.1, rate current practice on a scale from one (absent) to four (fully embedded) and provide a brief rationale. Identify the two characteristics most in need of development and design one concrete action step for each.
4. Design a support framework for new principals in your district focused on developing their PLC leadership capacity. Include mentorship structures, specific professional development topics aligned to DuFour and Mattos' (2013) five steps, and a principal PLC model with a proposed schedule, membership criteria, and facilitation approach.
5. Write a journal entry from the perspective of a principal completing the first semester of PLC implementation. Describe two moments—one in which the shift toward collective responsibility produced visible progress, and one in which it generated resistance or confusion. For each moment, apply Ringer's (2013) framework from Chapter 5 to analyze what the leader did and what might have been done differently.

6.5: Case Study



Case Study

Chapter 6 Case Study: What a PLC Actually Requires

Dr. Maya Thompson entered her seventh year as superintendent of Prairie View School District having built something she was genuinely proud of: an evaluation system grounded in the Illinois Performance Standards for School Leaders, a differentiated professional development calendar aligned to career stage and school context, and a cabinet culture in which difficult conversations were increasingly happening in the room rather than around it. By the structural measures she most trusted, Prairie View was functioning as a learning organization.

It was therefore disorienting when the district's latest climate survey returned a finding she had not anticipated. When teachers across Prairie View's eleven schools were asked whether their PLC time was producing meaningful changes in their instructional practice, fewer than thirty-five percent responded affirmatively. When principals were asked the same question about their own collaborative learning structures, the number was only marginally better.

Dr. Thompson had not ignored PLCs. Professional Learning Community had been in Prairie View's strategic plan since before her arrival. Every school had a PLC meeting schedule. Most principals could recite DuFour's three big ideas without hesitation. And yet the survey was telling her that something essential was missing—that what was happening in those meetings, for the majority of teachers in the district, did not feel like the kind of collaborative inquiry that changes practice.

What She Found

Dr. Thompson spent two months doing what she called listening visits—attending PLC meetings in each of Prairie View's eleven schools without announcing what she was looking for. What she found was a pattern consistent enough to constitute a diagnosis.

In seven of the eleven schools, PLC meetings were being used primarily as logistics sessions: sharing upcoming events, reviewing schedule changes, discussing behavioral incidents, and occasionally touching on student data in ways that were descriptive rather than analytical. Teachers were present. Conversations were collegial. But the four critical questions that should anchor every PLC cycle—what students need to know, how teams will know if they learned it, what teams will do when they don't, and how teams will extend learning for those who do—were rarely, if ever, the explicit organizing structure of the conversation.

In three of the eleven schools, something closer to genuine PLC practice was visible. Teams were reviewing common formative assessment data, identifying students for intervention and extension, and adjusting their instructional plans in response to what the data showed. Two of these three schools were led by principals who had participated in a cross-district principal PLC organized by the regional educational service agency—a structure Dr. Thompson had encouraged but not formally required. The third was led by a veteran principal who had been through a DuFour training seven years earlier and had never stopped applying what she learned.

The eleventh school was more complicated. Roosevelt Elementary, led by a second-year principal named Darnell Watkins, had the most energetic PLC culture in the district in terms of teacher engagement and meeting attendance. But when Dr. Thompson reviewed the actual meeting protocols and data artifacts, she found that the teams were discussing student work and sharing strategies without the structural backbone of common assessments, agreed-upon essential learning outcomes, or a systematic intervention plan. The culture was warm and collaborative. The machinery of PLC work was largely absent.

The Challenge

Dr. Thompson brought her findings to a half-day principal cabinet meeting—framed, as her cabinet conversations always were, around shared inquiry rather than evaluation. She presented the data from the listening visits without naming individual schools or leaders and asked a single question: What would need to be true for a PLC meeting to produce the kind of instructional change we are hoping for?

The conversation that followed was the most substantive the cabinet had had in months. Principals named several structural problems they had not previously surfaced in a group setting: common planning time was inconsistent across schools, with some teams meeting forty-five minutes weekly and others meeting two hours biweekly with no shared agenda structure. Common formative assessments existed in some buildings but not others. Intervention systems were informal at most schools—dependent on individual teachers’ initiative rather than coordinated team response. And the professional development the district had provided on PLCs had been delivered primarily through a two-day summer institute that introduced the model but provided no ongoing support for implementation.

Darnell Watkins, the principal of Roosevelt Elementary, was quiet for most of the meeting. Near the end, he said something that reframed the entire conversation: “I think I have been building the relational conditions for a PLC without building the structural ones. My teachers trust each other and they want to collaborate. But I have never actually taught them what to do with student data in a way that drives their next lesson.”

It was, Dr. Thompson reflected later, one of the most honest things she had heard in a cabinet meeting in seven years.

What Changed

Over the following semester, Dr. Thompson made three interconnected investments. First, she contracted with a regional PLC coach to work alongside each principal in designing a building-level PLC framework aligned to DuFour and Mattos’ (2013) five steps—adapted to each school’s context, student population, and current state of practice. The coach’s role was not to deliver training but to model the facilitation of authentic PLC inquiry within each school’s existing teams.

Second, she formalized the cross-district principal PLC that had been operating informally for two of Prairie View’s highest-performing schools. All eleven principals were now required to participate in monthly sessions facilitated by the regional service agency, organized around a problem-of-practice protocol that moved from individual challenges to collective analysis to shared strategies. Attendance was protected in the district calendar and treated as a professional accountability expectation, not a voluntary offering.

Third, she asked each principal to submit a building-level PLC audit at the end of the semester—using a diagnostic tool adapted from Pirtle and Tobia’s (2014) framework—that assessed the presence and quality of each of the six PLC characteristics in Table 6.1. The audit would not be used as an evaluation instrument; it would be the basis for each principal’s next professional development planning cycle.

By the end of the year, the results were uneven but directionally clear. Three additional schools had moved to what the PLC coach described as genuine data-driven inquiry. Four others were in transition—the structural pieces were in place but not yet embedded in team culture. The four remaining schools, including Roosevelt Elementary, had done the most foundational work: mission and vision development, essential learning outcome mapping, and the design of their first common formative assessments. Darnell Watkins described it as “building the scaffold before we put anyone on it.”

Dr. Thompson understood that the work was far from finished. PLC implementation at the district level, she had come to believe, was not a two-year initiative or a training event. It was a multi-year organizational change effort that required sustained leadership attention, structural investment, and the kind of honest, ongoing assessment of current reality that the PLC model itself prescribed. The district had the relational conditions. It was now building the structural ones.

Discussion Questions

1. Dr. Thompson finds that most PLC meetings in Prairie View are logistical rather than inquiry-driven, even though principals can articulate the three big ideas and the four critical questions. What does this pattern suggest about the relationship between conceptual knowledge of PLCs and the structural conditions required to implement them? *What does DuFour et al. (2024) say about why PLCs often stall at the level of congenial collaboration rather than advancing to genuine collective inquiry?*
2. Principal Darnell Watkins' self-diagnosis—"I have been building the relational conditions without building the structural ones"—captures a tension that appears throughout this chapter and this book. Is relational trust a prerequisite for structural implementation, or are they mutually interdependent? *Drawing on Chapters 5 and 6, what is the relationship between the EI work of Chapter 5 and the structural PLC work of Chapter 6? Which comes first, and does the order matter?*
3. Dr. Thompson uses a listening-visit strategy to diagnose PLC quality without triggering the defensiveness that formal evaluation often produces. What does this approach reflect about the relationship between evaluation and professional learning in a growth-focused district? *How does her framing of the cabinet conversation—"shared inquiry rather than evaluation"—reflect the emotional intelligence principles from Chapter 5?*
4. The two schools with the strongest PLC practice are both led by principals who participated in a cross-district principal PLC. What does this correlation suggest about the relationship between principal professional learning and the quality of teacher PLCs? *What structural features would you put in place to ensure that the cross-district principal PLC Dr. Thompson formalizes actually produces the reflective practice and leadership development that the research suggests it can?*
5. At the end of the case, Dr. Thompson reflects that PLC implementation is a multi-year organizational change effort, not a training event. Drawing on the research in this chapter and the case narrative, what are the three most important things a superintendent must sustain—year over year—to keep PLC work from drifting back toward nominal compliance? *How does your answer connect to the argument made in the Chapter Summary about evaluation, professional learning, emotional intelligence, and collaborative practice as a mutually reinforcing system?*

6.6: References



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7: COACHING AND MENTORING THE PRINCIPAL

7.1: Objectives

7.2: Narrative

7.3: Summary

7.4: Discussion Questions and Exercises

7.5: Case Study

7.6: References

7.1: Objectives



Objectives

Chapter 7 Objectives: Coaching and Mentoring the Principal

After reading this chapter, readers will be able to:

- Trace the historical shift from episodic professional development to sustained coaching and mentoring, and differentiate the two in terms of purpose, structure, and target audience.
- Analyze the research base supporting coaching and mentoring as strategies for improving instructional quality, teacher retention, and student achievement.
- Evaluate the principal's role in fostering a school culture that supports coaching and mentoring, applying Weinberg's five keys for principal support of new teacher mentor programs.
- Explain the importance of leadership coaching and mentoring for principals, and describe the components of effective principal coaching programs, including inquiry-based dialogue, goal setting, and reflective practice.
- Evaluate the district's role in sustaining coaching and mentoring through infrastructure, funding, and alignment with leadership standards.

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7.2: Narrative



Narrative

Chapter 7 Narrative

“With principal support, coaches can lead change. Without it, they struggle to make an impact.” Knight, J. (2024)

Introduction

Chapter 6 examined Professional Learning Communities as the organizational architecture through which collaborative inquiry and collective responsibility can be embedded in the daily life of a school. This chapter addresses a parallel and complementary dimension of professional learning: the one-on-one and small-group relationships through which individual educators—both teachers and principals—develop the specific skills, habits, and adaptive capacity that group structures alone cannot produce. Where PLCs build collective culture, coaching and mentoring build individual capacity. The two are most powerful when they operate together.

The emergence of sustained coaching and mentoring as central features of the educational landscape is relatively recent. For most of the twentieth century, teacher professional development consisted primarily of episodic workshops—the one-shot session that Knight (2009) describes as not only ineffective but actively counterproductive to the professional learning culture schools need. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, by imposing accountability structures that required demonstrable improvement in student outcomes, made the inadequacy of this model impossible to ignore. Districts that had relied on annual professional development days found themselves unable to produce the instructional changes that sustained improvement requires, and the field began a serious reorientation toward coaching and mentoring as the primary vehicles for ongoing professional learning.

This chapter traces that reorientation, examines what the research shows about why coaching and mentoring work, and focuses specific attention on two dimensions of the work that are most consequential for superintendents: the principal's role in building a school culture that supports coaching and mentoring for teachers, and the case for extending those same structures to the principals themselves. The evidence on principal coaching and mentoring is compelling and underutilized: it points to sustained reductions in principal turnover, meaningful improvements in instructional leadership, and significant gains in the professional capacity of school leaders at every career stage.

The Historical Development of Coaching and Mentoring in Education

The accountability demands of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 created a new urgency around teacher professional learning. For the first time, federal policy required not simply that teachers be certified but that instruction be demonstrably research-based and that student outcomes improve measurably over time. The traditional professional development model—district-wide training days, outside speakers, and workshop formats disconnected from teachers' daily practice—proved structurally unequal to this challenge.

Knight's (2009) analysis of the research on traditional professional development is direct: one-shot sessions are not only ineffective at fostering professional learning but can actively damage the professional culture of schools, signaling to teachers that development is something done to them rather than with them. The research consensus that emerged from the early 2000s pointed consistently toward sustained, job-embedded, and personalized professional learning as the conditions under which instructional change actually occurs. Coaching and mentoring provided the structural forms through which those conditions could be created.

The past two decades have seen a substantial expansion in both the research base and the practical infrastructure for coaching and mentoring in schools. Coaching has evolved from an informal practice to a structured professional role, with established models, trained practitioners, and a growing body of evidence on what makes it effective. Mentoring has similarly matured from informal induction into a recognized program type, with distinct design principles, implementation frameworks, and documented outcomes. Both have become common features of district professional learning systems—though the quality and coherence of implementation vary considerably.

Coaching and Mentoring: Definitions, Distinctions, and Evidence

Coaching and mentoring are often used interchangeably in educational settings, but the distinction between them matters for design, implementation, and evaluation. Aguilar (2017) articulates the key difference with precision: coaching is more formal than mentoring and has a more expansive end goal. Coaching is professional development with a purpose—a structured, ongoing engagement designed to help an educator improve specific aspects of their practice through inquiry, observation, feedback, and reflection. Mentoring, by contrast, is a relationship in which an experienced educator passes on knowledge, experience, and professional connections to a colleague who is new to a role or context.

The target audience differs accordingly. Coaching is a resource for all educators at all career stages—a vehicle for differentiated, personalized professional learning that supports both novice and veteran practitioners in developing their craft. Mentoring is typically focused on new educators navigating the unfamiliar demands of a first role, providing the emotional support, practical guidance, and professional socialization that the early years of teaching or administration require. Both offer ongoing, differentiated support. But they do so through different relational structures, toward different immediate ends.

Instructional Coaching

The goal of an instructional coach in a school is to improve student achievement by building teachers' capacity and understanding of effective instructional practices (Cornett & Knight, 2009). Hattie's (2017) synthesis of more than 50,000 research studies identified expert, passionate teachers working in collaboration with skilled school leaders as the single greatest influence on student learning. Coaching is the professional learning structure most directly designed to develop and sustain that expertise across a career.

The instructional coaching model developed at the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning provides one of the most widely used frameworks for this work. Knight's partnership approach positions the coach not as an evaluator or expert dispensing prescriptions but as a collaborative partner who works with teachers to establish a clear picture of current practice, identify specific improvement goals, select and implement targeted instructional strategies, monitor progress against those goals, and problem-solve when progress stalls (Knight, n.d.). This approach reflects a fundamental principle shared by the most effective coaching models: teachers improve their practice most reliably when they are treated as autonomous professionals engaged in inquiry rather than as recipients of corrective feedback.

The research on instructional coaching outcomes supports this model. Coaching has been found to increase teachers' use of research-based instructional strategies, improve the quality of classroom instruction, and produce gains in student achievement that exceed what is typically produced by more episodic professional development approaches (K20, 2018). Darling-Hammond (2012) defines teaching quality as "instruction that enables a wide range of students to learn"—and the evidence is consistent that coaching is among the most effective available tools for developing that quality at scale.

New Teacher Mentoring

The retention crisis in teaching is both well-documented and consequential. Ingersoll's (2018) research at the University of Pennsylvania found that between 30 and 50 percent of new teachers leave the profession within their first five years. The causes are familiar: professional isolation, inadequate support for the complex demands of the beginning years, and the gap between preparation-program expectations and classroom reality. The costs—in teacher talent, district resources, and student

continuity—are substantial.

Comprehensive mentoring programs represent the most consistently effective response to this problem. Ingersoll’s (2018) research identifies several components of induction programs that meaningfully improve retention: on-the-job training with an experienced mentor, common planning time with colleagues, regular and substantive professional development, and ongoing contact with school leaders. Helmke (2022) frames the outcome in direct terms: “A strong mentoring program establishes the foundation for new teachers to progress rapidly, improving student outcomes and their practice at the same time.”

The distinction between mentoring and evaluation is critical and frequently misunderstood in practice. A mentoring relationship derives its effectiveness from psychological safety—the new teacher’s confidence that they can be honest about struggles, ask questions that reveal uncertainty, and receive guidance without fear of professional consequences. When mentoring relationships are compromised by evaluative functions—when the mentor is also a supervisor, or when mentoring records are shared with administrators—the trust that makes mentoring effective is undermined. Design clarity about the non-evaluative nature of mentoring is not a bureaucratic nicety; it is a prerequisite for the relationship to function as intended.

Table 7.1 Coaching and Mentoring: A Comparative Overview

Dimension	Coaching	Mentoring
Purpose	Improve instructional practice and professional effectiveness for educators at all career stages.	Support new teachers or leaders in navigating the demands of a new role; provide emotional and professional guidance.
Structure	Formal, structured, goal-driven; typically involves observation, feedback cycles, and data review.	Relational, less formal; driven by the mentee’s needs and questions rather than an external improvement agenda.
Target Audience	All educators; differentiated by career stage and context.	New teachers or administrators in the early stages of a role.
Primary Role	Collaborative partner in professional inquiry; not an evaluator.	Experienced guide who shares knowledge, experience, and professional connection.
Relationship to Evaluation	Explicitly separate from evaluation; effectiveness depends on trust and psychological safety.	Non-evaluative by design; compromised when mentors have supervisory authority over mentees.
Evidence of Impact	Increased use of research-based strategies; improved instructional quality; student achievement gains (Knight, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2012).	Improved teacher retention; stronger professional socialization; enhanced confidence and competence in early career (Ingersoll, 2018; Helmke, 2022).

The Principal’s Role in Supporting Coaching and Mentoring

The research on instructional coaching is unambiguous on one point: the quality of coaching in a school is directly shaped by the quality of principal support for it. Knight (2024) states the relationship without qualification: with principal support, coaches can

lead change; without it, they struggle to make an impact. This is not primarily a matter of resource allocation, though resources matter. It is a matter of culture—the building-wide orientation toward professional learning that the principal either creates or fails to create.

Bean and Ippolito (2016) describe what that culture looks like in schools where coaching thrives: principals intentionally establish and maintain an atmosphere in which all educators are expected to think and work as leaders, facilitators, designers, and advocates for learning. In these schools, coaching is not a remedial intervention for struggling teachers; it is a professional norm that applies to everyone, including the principal. The signal that matters most to teachers is not what the principal says about coaching but what the principal does—whether they engage with the coach as a genuine thought partner, whether they visibly support coaching conversations, and whether they create the time and structural conditions that make coaching sustainable.

Weinberg's Five Keys for Principal Support of Mentor Programs

While coaching programs depend primarily on the relationship between coach and teacher, mentoring programs require active, visible principal involvement to function effectively. Weinberg (2022), drawing on nine years of experience training mentors and coordinating programs serving more than 450 mentors annually, identifies five practices through which principals can ensure the success of new teacher mentoring programs.

- 1. Establish and communicate role clarity.** Principals must ensure that everyone in the building—mentors, new teachers, and colleagues—understands the distinct and non-evaluative nature of the mentoring relationship. When the mentor's role is ambiguous or perceived as connected to evaluation, new teachers become guarded, and the psychological safety that effective mentoring requires disappears.
- 2. Provide structured time for mentoring.** Mentoring relationships that depend on finding time in the margins of an already overloaded schedule do not produce meaningful professional learning. Principals must build protected time for mentor-mentee meetings into the weekly schedule—treating it as a non-negotiable professional commitment rather than an optional supplement.
- 3. Model a culture of professional learning.** When principals visibly engage in their own professional learning—seeking feedback, acknowledging growth edges, and treating development as an ongoing rather than completed project—they establish the norms under which mentoring can flourish. A principal who positions themselves as already fully formed sends an implicit message that professional growth is a deficit condition rather than a professional norm.
- 4. Involve the whole school.** Mentoring works best when it is embedded in a broader professional community rather than isolated as a private relationship between two individuals. Principals can support this by connecting mentors and new teachers to relevant colleagues, facilitating introductions to the school's informal knowledge networks, and including mentoring as a visible component of the school's professional learning culture.
- 5. Monitor and support the mentoring relationship.** Principals should maintain awareness of how mentoring relationships are developing—not by inserting themselves into the mentoring conversations, but by checking in with both mentors and new teachers, addressing logistical barriers that arise, and ensuring that mentors themselves have access to the training and support they need to be effective in the role.

These five practices share a common logic: they position the principal as the architect of the conditions in which mentoring can succeed rather than as a passive observer of a relationship between two other people. The mentoring program lives or fails at the building level, and the building level is the principal's domain.

Coaching and Mentoring for Principals

The argument for coaching and mentoring teachers rests on a straightforward premise: even skilled professionals benefit from structured, sustained support for the development of their practice. That premise applies with equal force to school principals—and the evidence suggests that principals have received far less of this kind of support than the demands of their role require.

Grossman and Nagler (2019) describe the structural problem with clarity: without sustained support, principals report feeling isolated, and that isolation negatively affects job performance while accelerating turnover. Principal turnover is not an incidental human resources problem; it is an instructional leadership problem. Research consistently finds that school improvement is a multi-year process that requires stable, sustained leadership, and that schools cycling through principals every two to three years cannot build the organizational coherence and trust that improvement requires. The national average tenure for a school principal

is approximately 3.5 years—a figure that suggests the support structures most principals receive are inadequate to the demands of the role.

Leadership coaching and mentoring directly address this problem. A study documented by the NYC Leadership Academy and cited by Grossman et al. (2019) found that principals who received coaching for at least five years remained in their positions more than twice the national average tenure. They also demonstrated improved supervisory skills, stronger distributed leadership practices, and greater professional resilience. These outcomes are not incidental to the coaching relationship—they are products of it. Coaching that is sustained, inquiry-based, and grounded in the specific challenges of a principal's school and leadership context produces the adaptive capacity and renewed purpose that keep effective leaders in the profession.

Mentoring for New Principals

The parallel case for principal mentoring is similarly well-supported. Bertrand et al. (2018) identify the formative years of school leadership as a period of high uncertainty—a time when new administrators face unfamiliar demands with limited relevant experience, when the gap between preparation program learning and the daily reality of the principalship is most acute, and when the absence of structured support is most likely to produce discouragement, poor decisions, and early departure.

Intentional mentoring provides new principals with a psychologically safe space to process challenges, solicit feedback, and learn from experienced colleagues without the professional risk that evaluation-adjacent conversations carry. Augustine-Shaw and Reilly (2017) describe effective principal mentors as collaborative partners who use reflective questioning and authentic dialogue to help emerging leaders identify their strengths and develop their leadership identities. The emphasis is not on providing answers but on cultivating the capacity to ask better questions—the foundational skill of adaptive leadership.

Illinois has taken a legislative step toward formalizing this support: Public Act 102-0521 requires an annual appropriation by the Illinois General Assembly to establish a new principal mentoring program. The practical implementation of this mandate has been uneven, constrained by budget realities in many districts, but the legislative recognition of principal mentoring as a structural necessity reflects the broader consensus in the research literature. As Sheward (2021) documents, principal mentoring programs support novice administrators in developing as instructional leaders, increase retention in the critical early years, and contribute to the kind of stable school leadership that sustains improvement efforts over time.

Coaching Principals: Inquiry-Based Practice

Psencik (2022) frames leadership coaching not as a remedial intervention for struggling principals but as a transformative process available to leaders at every stage of their careers. Novice principals need coaching to navigate an unfamiliar organizational environment; veteran principals need it to reconnect with their core values and long-term vision after years of operational demands have obscured them. Coaching, in this framing, is a space not merely for goal setting but for realignment with professional identity—a regular opportunity to ask what kind of leader one is becoming and whether that trajectory matches the leader one intended to be (Psencik, 2019).

Patrick et al. (2021) move the conversation from the rationale for coaching to its mechanics, analyzing actual coaching conversations to identify which specific behaviors produce meaningful learning. Their research reveals that only approximately one-third of observed coaching behaviors promote the kind of reflective thinking associated with genuine professional growth. The most effective coaching moves are inquiry-based: open-ended questions that invite the principal to analyze their own practice, clarifying prompts that deepen reflection, and strategic assertions that introduce new perspectives without foreclosing the principal's own reasoning. Assertion-based coaching—in which the coach leads with their own interpretations and recommendations—produces less rich dialogue and less durable learning.

This finding has direct implications for how superintendents structure their supervisory relationships with principals. The superintendent who approaches principal evaluation and coaching primarily through assertion—identifying problems and prescribing solutions—is operating in a mode that the research suggests is less effective than an inquiry-based approach. Chapter 3's discussion of the growth-focused evaluation model, and Chapter 5's examination of emotional intelligence and courageous conversations, both point toward the same conclusion: the most effective superintendent-principal relationships are characterized by genuine inquiry, psychological safety, and the kind of sustained dialogue that produces reflection rather than compliance.

Table 7.2 Components of Effective Principal Coaching Programs

Component	Description	Research Basis
Sustained Engagement	Coaching is most effective when it extends over multiple years rather than a single semester or cycle, allowing trust and depth to develop.	NYC Leadership Academy study: principals coached for 5+ years stayed more than twice the national average tenure (Grossman et al., 2019).
Inquiry-Based Dialogue	Coaches use open-ended questions, clarifying prompts, and strategic assertions to promote reflective thinking rather than prescriptive advice.	Patrick et al. (2021): inquiry-based moves produce significantly richer professional dialogue than assertion-based approaches.
Goal Setting and Alignment	Coaching goals are co-constructed with the principal, grounded in the principal's specific school context and aligned to leadership standards.	Wang et al. (2024): coaching aligned to clear instructional goals produces meaningful improvement in instructional leadership practices.
Reflective Practice	Structured reflection—through journaling, observation debriefs, or peer consultation—is embedded in the coaching cycle to build adaptive capacity.	Psencik (2022): reflective coaching reconnects leaders with their professional identity and restores clarity of purpose.
Psychological Safety	The coaching relationship is explicitly non-evaluative; confidentiality and trust are foundational to the principal's willingness to engage honestly.	Bertrand et al. (2018): psychologically safe mentoring and coaching relationships enhance skill development and professional retention.
Whole-Leader Focus	Effective coaching attends to the relational, emotional, and organizational dimensions of leadership, not only instructional metrics.	Psencik (2022): coaching that considers the “whole” leader builds the resilience and relational capacity that sustained leadership requires.

The District's Role in Sustaining Coaching and Mentoring

Individual coaching and mentoring relationships—however skilled the coach and however motivated the principal—cannot sustain themselves without organizational infrastructure. The research is consistent on this point: the effectiveness and durability of coaching and mentoring programs depends substantially on whether the district has created the structural conditions that allow them to function.

McClay (2024) identifies five strategies through which central office leaders can reinforce instructional leadership and continuous learning at the school level: setting clear expectations for professional learning across the district, aligning fiscal and human resources to support those expectations, modeling collaborative inquiry in district-level leadership practice, ensuring coherence across professional development investments, and maintaining sustained attention to the development of site-level leaders over time. These strategies share a common logic: they treat coaching and mentoring not as supplemental offerings but as core features of the district's leadership development infrastructure.

Darling-Hammond et al. (2023) make the systemic argument most directly. Their policy analysis demonstrates that districts investing in leadership pipelines—featuring mentoring, coaching, and standards-based support embedded across a principal's career—see meaningful improvements in teacher retention, school culture, and instructional quality. Critically, these gains are not primarily products of any single coaching relationship or mentoring program; they are products of coherence: the alignment of preparation, certification, induction, ongoing coaching, and evaluation into a system in which support for principal development is continuous rather than episodic.

Wang et al.'s (2024) large-scale RAND study adds an important qualification to the case for principal coaching. Principals who received intensive coaching and professional development demonstrated significant improvement in instructional leadership practices. However, gains in school-wide student achievement were modest and took time to materialize. The study's conclusion reinforces rather than undermines the investment in coaching, but it clarifies the nature of that investment: principal coaching is a long-term commitment, and districts that evaluate its effectiveness on a one-or two-year timeline are likely to underestimate its impact and discontinue support prematurely.

For superintendents, the district-level responsibilities implied by this research are both structural and relational. Structurally, they include funding coaching positions and mentoring programs as non-discretionary budget items, protecting time for coaching and mentoring within the calendars of both coaches and principals, and aligning professional learning systems so that coaching goals connect to evaluation frameworks and PLC work rather than operating in isolation from them. Relationally, they include modeling the coaching stance that the research endorses: approaching supervisory relationships with principals through inquiry rather than prescription, treating principal development as an ongoing commitment rather than a fixed intervention, and creating the psychological safety at the district level that allows principals to seek support without fear of professional consequence.

7.3: Summary



Summary

Chapter 7 Summary

This chapter examined coaching and mentoring as complementary and indispensable components of a comprehensive professional learning system for educators at every level. The historical record—from the accountability pressures of No Child Left Behind through the accumulating research on what sustained professional learning actually requires—points consistently toward the same conclusion: episodic, one-size-fits-all professional development is inadequate to produce the instructional and leadership changes that school improvement requires. Coaching and mentoring provide the sustained, personalized, and relationship-based learning conditions that the research consistently associates with meaningful growth.

The distinction between coaching and mentoring matters for design. Coaching is formal, goal-driven, and appropriate for educators at all career stages; its effectiveness depends on the partnership approach, inquiry-based dialogue, and the clear separation of the coaching role from evaluation. Mentoring is relational, experience-based, and focused on new educators navigating unfamiliar demands; its effectiveness depends on psychological safety, structured time, and principals who actively create the conditions for mentoring relationships to develop.

Principals are the architects of the school culture that makes both programs possible. Knight's (2024) observation that principal support is the single most important element for coaching success is not simply an argument for administrator endorsement of coaching programs; it is an argument for a particular kind of principal leadership—one that positions all educators, including the principal, as learners engaged in the ongoing development of their practice. Weinberg's (2022) five keys for principal support of mentoring programs operationalize this stance in concrete, implementable terms.

The chapter's second half shifted the lens from principals as supporters of others' professional learning to principals as recipients of it. The evidence on leadership coaching and mentoring is compelling: sustained coaching reduces turnover, improves instructional leadership, and builds the professional resilience that the principalship demands. The inquiry-based coaching approaches documented by Patrick et al. (2021) and Psencik (2022) produce more meaningful and durable growth than assertion-based alternatives—a finding with direct implications for how superintendents approach their supervisory relationships with principals. And the district-level analysis of McClay (2024), Darling-Hammond et al. (2023), and Wang et al. (2024) establishes the organizational conditions under which individual coaching and mentoring relationships can sustain themselves and compound their effects over time.

Across Chapters 3 through 7, the book's central argument has been taking shape: the most effective school districts are not simply those with the most sophisticated individual programs. They are those in which evaluation, professional learning, emotional intelligence, collaborative practice, and coaching and mentoring are mutually reinforcing—a coherent system in which every level of the organization is simultaneously supported in its development and held accountable for its growth.

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7.4: Discussion Questions and Exercises



Discussion Questions & Exercises

Chapter 7 Discussion Questions and Exercises

Discussion Questions

1. Knight (2009) argues that traditional one-shot professional development not only fails to produce learning but can actively damage the professional culture of schools. What specific features of episodic PD produce this cultural damage, and how do coaching and mentoring address those features structurally? *Draw on the research in this chapter to support your argument. What would a superintendent need to change—structurally and culturally—to make the transition from episodic PD to sustained coaching and mentoring credible to a skeptical staff?*
2. Aguilar (2017) draws a clear distinction between coaching and mentoring. In practice, the two are frequently conflated—a confusion that undermines the effectiveness of both. What are the most significant consequences of treating coaching and mentoring as interchangeable, and how can superintendents clarify the distinction through design rather than just definition? *Consider what happens to psychological safety in a mentoring relationship when role boundaries are unclear. What structural safeguards would you put in place?*
3. Knight (2024) asserts that principal support is the single most important element for coaching success. What specific principal behaviors—beyond verbal endorsement—communicate genuine support for a coaching program? What behaviors, however unintentional, undermine it? *Using Weinberg's (2022) five keys as a framework, design a self-assessment tool that a principal could use to evaluate their own support of the school's mentoring and coaching programs.*
4. Patrick et al. (2021) find that only approximately one-third of observed coaching behaviors promote reflective thinking. What does this finding suggest about the training and preparation that coaches and principal supervisors need? How would you design a professional development experience that shifts a coach or supervisor from assertion-based to inquiry-based practice? *Connect your answer to the emotional intelligence framework from Chapter 5 and the growth-focused evaluation model from Chapter 3. What do these chapters share with Patrick et al.'s findings?*
5. Wang et al. (2024) find that intensive principal coaching produces meaningful improvements in instructional leadership but only modest and delayed gains in student achievement. How should a superintendent interpret and communicate this finding to a school board considering a significant investment in principal coaching infrastructure? *What is the appropriate timeline for evaluating the impact of coaching, and what intermediate measures—short of student achievement data—would allow you to assess whether the investment is working?*

Exercises

1. Using Table 7.1 as a framework, audit the professional learning programs in a district you know—real or fictional. For each program, identify whether it is functioning as coaching, mentoring, or something else, and assess whether the design matches the intended purpose. Identify the single most consequential design flaw you find and propose a specific structural

correction grounded in at least two sources from this chapter.

2. Design a one-page action plan for initiating or strengthening a principal leadership coaching program at the district level. Include specific goals aligned to the components in Table 7.2, potential funding sources (e.g., Title II, state leadership development grants), a realistic two-year implementation timeline, and at least two measures you would use to evaluate impact before student achievement data is available.
3. In triads, role-play a coaching conversation between a superintendent and a principal who is struggling to move their PLC teams from logistical to inquiry-driven meetings (connecting to the Prairie View context in Chapter 6). One person plays the superintendent using inquiry-based coaching moves as described by Patrick et al. (2021); one plays the principal; one observes and takes notes. After each round, switch roles. Debrief as a group: Which coaching moves produced the most reflective responses? Which assertion-based moves, if any, shut down dialogue?
4. Create a visual comparison of at least three coaching or mentoring models referenced in this chapter—for example, Knight's partnership model, Psencik's principal coaching framework, and the NYC Leadership Academy approach. For each, identify the target audience, the theoretical basis, the primary coaching or mentoring moves, and the evidence of impact. Identify which model or combination of models you would recommend for a mid-sized district and explain your reasoning.
5. Write a 500–700-word reflective journal entry as a newly appointed superintendent designing your district's approach to coaching and mentoring. Address the following: How will you prioritize these programs in a constrained budget environment? What values will guide your decisions about who receives coaching and mentoring first? How will you ensure that your own supervisory practice with principals reflects the inquiry-based approach that the research endorses? Use at least three sources from this chapter to ground your reflection.

7.5: Case Study



Case Study

Chapter 7 Case Study: When Support Is Not Enough

By her eighth year as superintendent of Prairie View School District, Dr. Maya Thompson had built something she genuinely believed in. The evaluation system was rigorous and growth-oriented. The professional development calendar was differentiated by career stage and school context. PLCs were moving, in most schools, from nominal to genuine collaborative inquiry. The cabinet culture had shifted toward honest conversation. And Dr. Thompson had been deliberate, since her fifth year, about ensuring that Prairie View's principals had access to a cross-district principal PLC that provided the kind of peer reflection and relational accountability she had come to regard as indispensable.

What she had not built—and what she began to recognize as the missing structural layer—was a coherent coaching and mentoring system. Prairie View had coaching in various forms: two instructional coaches at the elementary level, a district literacy coach who split time across three buildings, and informal mentoring arrangements for new teachers that depended almost entirely on the goodwill and initiative of individual principals. What it did not have was a coordinated framework, aligned roles, protected time, or a system of support for principals themselves that was distinct from their evaluation cycle.

The absence became visible in two ways within the same semester.

The First Signal

Priya Nair had been a teacher at Westfield Elementary for eleven years before being appointed principal of Northgate K–8 School eighteen months earlier. She was thoughtful, deeply respected by her staff, and intellectually well-prepared for the instructional leadership dimensions of the role. What she was not prepared for was the organizational and relational complexity of the principalship's non-instructional demands: the budget cycle, the personnel management decisions, the parent communication required after a difficult staff incident, and the particular loneliness of being the only administrator in a building of seventy adults.

In a coaching conversation with Dr. Thompson—one of the quarterly check-ins that the evaluation model prescribed—Priya said something that stayed with Dr. Thompson for weeks afterward: “I feel like I am learning by making mistakes in real time, in front of people whose trust I cannot afford to lose.” She was not struggling with instructional leadership. She was struggling with everything around it, in the absence of any structured support that was not also connected to her evaluation.

Dr. Thompson realized, in that moment, that the growth-focused evaluation system she had built was doing its job—but that it was not a coaching relationship. Evaluation, however developmental, is shaped by accountability. A principal in an evaluation conversation is never fully free of the awareness that what they say may affect how they are perceived. What Priya needed was a structured mentoring relationship with an experienced principal who had no evaluative function—a space where she could be honest about what she did not yet know without professional consequence.

The Second Signal

Three weeks later, Dr. Thompson received a resignation letter from Marcus Webb, the principal of Ridgecrest Elementary, whose candor in the previous year's cabinet meeting about teacher resistance to the AI initiative had contributed to one of Prairie View's most productive leadership conversations. Marcus was completing his sixth year. He was, by every available measure, one of the district's strongest principals. His letter cited no single cause. It described accumulating fatigue, a sense that the personal costs of the role had begun to outweigh the professional rewards, and—in a sentence that Dr. Thompson read three times—"a feeling that I have been giving a great deal to this school and this district, and that I have not had a clear place to go to refuel."

Dr. Thompson had not seen it coming. That was itself diagnostic. She had known Marcus was carrying a heavy load; Ridgecrest was a high-need school with significant teacher turnover and a student population that brought complex challenges into the building every day. She had thought the cross-district principal PLC was enough. She had not thought to ask whether Marcus had access to a coaching relationship—someone whose specific role was to support his professional and personal development over time, not simply to facilitate peer reflection once a month.

What She Built

Dr. Thompson convened a small working group in January—two principals, her assistant superintendent for curriculum, and the regional educational service agency's director of professional learning—and charged them with designing a coaching and mentoring framework for Prairie View that addressed both problems simultaneously.

The framework they produced over the following three months had four components. New principals in their first two years would be matched with trained mentor principals from outside the district—experienced leaders with no evaluative relationship to the mentee, explicitly trained in Augustine-Shaw and Reilly's (2017) inquiry-driven mentorship approach. Mentoring meetings would be protected in the district calendar at twice monthly, and mentors would receive a structured training and ongoing support from the regional service agency.

All eleven principals would have access to an assigned external leadership coach—not a district administrator, not a peer, but a trained coaching professional—for a minimum of six sessions per year. Coach assignments would be made by the regional service agency using a matching process that considered school context, career stage, and the principal's self-identified development priorities. The coaching relationship would be explicitly confidential and non-evaluative; coaches would not communicate with district leadership about the content of coaching conversations.

The district's two instructional coaches would be restructured into a coaching model aligned to Knight's (n.d.) partnership approach—with explicit role clarity, building-wide involvement, and a formal coaching cycle that included observation, data review, and strategy implementation. Each principal would receive training in Weinberg's (2022) five keys for supporting the new teacher mentoring program that the district was formalizing at the same time.

Finally, Dr. Thompson redesigned her own quarterly conversations with principals. Drawing on Patrick et al.'s (2021) research on inquiry-based coaching moves, she worked with a coach of her own—engaged through the regional service agency—to shift her default supervisory mode from assessment and advice toward open questioning and reflection. It was, she acknowledged to her coach in their first session, more difficult than she had expected. Assertion was faster. Inquiry required patience, tolerance for uncertainty, and the willingness to let a principal arrive at their own conclusion even when the superintendent could see the answer already.

Marcus Webb accepted a lateral move to a district leadership position rather than leaving the field entirely. Priya Nair completed her second year at Northgate with a mentor she described, in her year-end reflection, as "the professional relationship I did not know I was missing." Neither outcome was guaranteed by the framework Dr. Thompson built. But both were made possible by it—and that, she had come to believe, was the most honest case for any professional learning investment: not that it guarantees outcomes, but that it creates the conditions under which good outcomes become more likely.

Discussion Questions

1. Dr. Thompson realizes that her growth-focused evaluation system, however developmental, is not the same thing as a coaching relationship. What is the essential distinction between evaluation—even growth-focused evaluation—and coaching? What does each structure make possible that the other cannot? *Draw on Patrick et al. (2021), Psencik (2022), and the*

evaluation framework from Chapter 3 to articulate the difference. What does this distinction imply for how superintendents should design the relationship between evaluation and coaching in their districts?

2. Marcus Webb's resignation letter describes a feeling of having no place to "refuel." How does this language connect to the research on principal isolation, burnout, and turnover? What structural conditions produced this outcome despite Prairie View's otherwise strong professional learning infrastructure? *What does this case suggest about the limits of peer PLCs and evaluation systems as substitutes for individualized coaching relationships?*
3. Dr. Thompson's working group designs a framework with four interconnected components rather than a single program. What is the rationale for this layered approach, and how does each component address a distinct gap in the district's previous support structure? *Using Table 7.2 and the research on district-level coaching infrastructure, evaluate the coherence of the framework. What would you add, modify, or sequence differently?*
4. Dr. Thompson finds that shifting her own supervisory conversations from assertion to inquiry is harder than she expected. What does this difficulty reveal about the habits of leadership that formal authority tends to reinforce, and what does it suggest about how superintendent preparation programs should develop these skills? *How does this personal challenge connect to the emotional intelligence framework of Chapter 5 and the coaching research of this chapter?*
5. The case ends with a deliberately qualified claim: the framework does not guarantee outcomes, but it creates conditions under which good outcomes become more likely. How does this framing reflect the research on coaching effectiveness—particularly Wang et al.'s (2024) finding that gains in student achievement are modest and take time to materialize? *What is the appropriate standard of evidence for a superintendent defending a significant investment in coaching and mentoring infrastructure to a school board focused on short-term achievement data?*

7.6: References



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8: BUILDING PRINCIPAL CAPACITY WITHIN THE SCHOOL ECOSYSTEM- THE SUPERINTENDENT'S ROLE IN SUPERVISION, EVALUATION, AND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

- 8.1: Objectives
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Contributors and Attributions

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8.1: Objectives



Objectives

Chapter 8 Objectives: Building Principal Capacity Within the School Ecosystem: The Superintendent's Role in Supervision, Evaluation, and Professional Learning

After reading this chapter, readers will be able to:

- Explain why building principal capacity is a core superintendent responsibility, and articulate the consequences of fragmented support structures for principal effectiveness and student learning.
- Distinguish compliance-oriented from developmental models of principal supervision, and analyze the superintendent behaviors that define each.
- Apply the seven-element evaluation cycle to design a principal growth process that integrates supervision, feedback, professional learning, and follow-up.
- Evaluate coherence as the superintendent's central leadership challenge, and identify strategies for aligning supervision, evaluation, and professional learning into a unified system of principal support.

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8.2: Narrative



Narrative

Chapter 8 Narrative

“Superintendents cannot simply mandate improvement; they must create the district conditions that allow principals to lead teaching and learning. Research suggests that principals influence student outcomes largely through their work to hire, retain, develop, and encourage teachers and to create appropriate conditions for teaching and learning.”
Grissom et al. (2021)

Introduction

Chapter 7 examined coaching and mentoring as individualized structures through which educators develop skills that group learning alone cannot produce. This chapter addresses the broader question: What is the superintendent’s responsibility for building the system in which that development can occur? Drawing on the Aspen Institute’s ecosystem framework, it argues that supervision, evaluation, and professional learning are most powerful when designed to work together as a coherent support system. Building that system, not merely holding principals accountable within it, is the superintendent’s central leadership work.

The Superintendent’s Capacity-Building Responsibility

Superintendents often ask principals to lead complex school improvement work, including instruction, teacher development, culture building, family engagement, operations, crisis response, data interpretation, and maintaining trust across the community. Yet, principal support systems are often fragmented: supervision focuses on immediate issues, evaluations occur annually, and professional development is isolated from growth plans. This chapter argues that for principals to foster flourishing schools, superintendents must do more than hold them accountable; they must intentionally unify these supports into an adult learning ecosystem that builds principal capacity.

This final chapter contends that principal capacity grows most when supervision, evaluation, and professional development are combined as a unified system of adult learning. Superintendents must build the conditions for principal growth, acting as architects of the support system rather than just evaluators or managers. This unified approach enables principals to thrive as instructional leaders, culture builders, teacher supervisors, and school improvement stewards.

Research supports this shift. Strong principal leadership shapes learning environments, aids teachers, and affects student outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022). Principal learning matters. The Learning Policy Institute links strong preparation and professional development to outcomes such as preparedness, better leadership, school climate, teacher retention, and student achievement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022). These results urge superintendents to ask about both principal performance and the system that supports them.

The principalship has become highly complex. Principals must interpret data, support teachers, respond to students, communicate with families, build partnerships, implement district priorities, and lead through disruptions. These demands require flexible leadership, emotional intelligence, instructional skill, and the ability to develop others. Superintendents must intentionally design support systems that cultivate these skills.

Seeing the School as an Ecosystem

The Aspen Institute's National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development (2018) provides a clear conceptual framework. In *A Practice Agenda in Support of How Learning Happens*, the Commission states that student learning is always social, emotional, and academic—dimensions inseparable from one another. The report urges educational stakeholders to create a cohesive PreK-12 ecosystem that supports the whole learner. This perspective shifts the focus from isolated programs to the relationships, structures, and conditions that shape learning.

The ecosystem metaphor helps leaders avoid mechanical views of schooling. Anderson and Johnson (2012) argue that schools are not factories producing test scores, but active settings formed by context, climate, relationships, and opportunities. Elias (2016) notes that interdependence, a key ecosystem principle, means that changes in one area affect others. In school, policies, relationships, routines, climate, and adult interactions are vital to student learning, forming the environment in which it occurs.

The metaphor of school as a system reveals that schools function within wider networks—including students, families, educators, principals, district leaders, community organizations, policy contexts, and professional associations—where each part influences the rest. Strong relationships, clear expectations, and aligned resources create a supportive ecosystem. Conversely, fragmented supports and weak links create confusion and hinder learning for both students and adults.

Although Aspen's work centers on the whole learner, it also underscores the importance of a coherent support ecosystem for principals. Principals shape the environment for teachers and students, but their effectiveness relies on district priorities, supervisory relationships, evaluation systems, professional development, and the trust and support they receive.

Your role as superintendent is essential. You can shape the adult ecosystem around principals through intentional supervision, evaluation, and professional learning. In doing so, you establish priorities, support principal growth, and shape accountability. When your systems are aligned, you foster effective focus and support. When they are fragmented, you create compliance pressure and uncertainty instead.

Seeing the school as an ecosystem changes the nature of principal supervision. As superintendent, recognize that principal development is your system-wide responsibility, not solely reliant on individual effort, personality, or yearly evaluation. While principals should own their leadership, you are responsible for providing the conditions essential for their success.

Building Adult Capacity as a Superintendent Function

A key contribution of the Aspen Institute's agenda is its focus on building adult capacity. Adults must be supported to model, teach, and sustain the social, emotional, and academic learning students require. A whole-child approach calls for an adult-learning commitment, as students' experiences are shaped by adults' beliefs, skills, relationships, and practice.

For superintendents, this insight shapes principal leadership. Principals cannot build teachers' capacity if their own capacity is neglected, create order amid incoherence, provide feedback without receiving it, or lead complex changes without support for their own learning.

Building adult capacity is not optional—it is a core leadership responsibility for you as superintendent. Support your students by supporting principals, who in turn support teachers, creating strong conditions for teaching and learning. This cascading structure ensures feedback can flow upwards: student experiences inform teacher growth, teachers' needs shape principal leadership, and principals' needs guide your decisions.

Your work as superintendent begins with a clear premise: adults in your system need ongoing support to help students succeed. If principals are overwhelmed, isolated, or unsupportive, they cannot create the conditions teachers require. Likewise, teachers without clear direction, feedback, and professional learning cannot provide what students need. Building adult capacity is not an administrative luxury—consider it your leadership infrastructure for student learning.

Supervision as Developmental Leadership

In many districts, principal supervision has historically focused on compliance, operations, and the resolution of immediate problems. As superintendent, you or your team checks for completed tasks, addresses concerns from parents or staff, monitors implementation, and intervenes to resolve issues. These responsibilities matter, but when supervision is mostly about compliance, you miss the greatest potential for principal growth.

By adopting a developmental approach to supervision, you transform your relationship with principals into an ongoing, evidence-based, and coaching-oriented partnership. Supervision centers on the principal's growth toward school improvement, instructional leadership, teacher development, culture, family engagement, and the principal's own professional practices. You identify patterns, guide reflection, review evidence, affirm strengths, pinpoint growth needs, and connect principals to the right support.

The Wallace Foundation's work on principal supervisors supports this shift. The Principal Supervisor Initiative attempted to redesign the principal supervisor role away from administration, operations, and compliance toward supporting and developing principals as instructional leaders (Goldring et al., 2020). Similarly, the Model Principal Supervisor Professional Standards, developed by the Council of Chief State School Officers with support from The Wallace Foundation, identify the principal supervisor's primary role as supporting and improving principals' capacity for instructional leadership (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2015). The standards are especially useful because they describe principal supervision as a professional practice that requires its own knowledge, skills, and developmental orientation, not merely an administrative assignment.

This research matters for you as a superintendent because it clarifies that principal supervision is not just oversight—it is your tool for leadership development. Developmental supervision does not lessen accountability; it makes it meaningful, providing principals with regular opportunities to understand expectations, reflect on evidence, receive feedback, try new approaches, and consider their impact.

Traditional supervision is often episodic, reactive, and task-focused. Developmental supervision is ongoing, proactive, and focused on leadership practice. Traditional supervision can position the superintendent primarily as an evaluator. Developmental supervision positions the superintendent as an evaluator, coach, thought partner, and capacity builder. Traditional supervision often responds after problems have appeared. Developmental supervision seeks to observe patterns early enough to strengthen practice before problems become established.

The quality of the supervisory relationship matters. Principals are more likely to grow when they experience supervision as honest, consistent, and useful. This does not mean supervision should avoid difficult conversations. In fact, growth-oriented supervision requires the superintendent to clearly name concerns. However, concerns are named within a relationship that also provides support, direction, and follow-up. The principal should understand not only what needs improvement, but also which resources, coaching, or learning opportunities will support that improvement.

Evaluation as a Growth Cycle

When supervision is developmental, evaluation can also become more than just a rating. Principal evaluation is often weakened when it is treated as an annual judgment rather than part of a continuous growth process. In some systems, evaluation becomes a compliance event: goals are submitted, evidence is reviewed, forms are completed, ratings are assigned, and the process ends. This approach may satisfy administrative requirements, but it does little to build principal capacity.

A capacity-building approach treats evaluation as part of a larger cycle of adult learning. It starts with clear leadership standards and shared expectations. It gathers evidence from multiple sources, including school improvement goals, instructional leadership practices, teacher development efforts, school climate indicators, family engagement, and student outcomes. Most importantly, it turns this evidence into conversation. The evaluation conference becomes a moment of reflection and planning, not just a moment of rating.

The Wallace Foundation report *Evaluating and Supporting Principals* makes this point directly relevant. In its study of six districts, the report notes that principal evaluation can do more than assess current performance; it can also help nurture better future performance when results serve as a starting point for focused support (Anderson & Turnbull, 2016). The report further suggests that evaluation systems are strongest when they are linked to clear expectations, meaningful evidence, and support for improvement (Anderson & Turnbull, 2016).

This is a critical distinction. In a capacity-building system, evaluation does not simply document performance; it directs support. The central question is not only, "How did the principal perform?" but also, "What support will help this principal grow next?" The

answer to that question should shape coaching, professional development, mentoring, and follow-up supervision.

A useful evaluation cycle includes seven linked elements: clear expectations, evidence collection, reflective conversation, feedback, professional learning, implementation, and follow-up. When any of these parts are missing, the cycle weakens. Expectations without evidence are abstract. Evidence without conversation becomes judgment. Feedback without professional learning is advice without support. Professional learning without follow-up becomes an event rather than a route to better practice.

The superintendent's responsibility is to ensure that principal evaluation is coherent with the district's broader leadership development system. If principals are evaluated on instructional leadership, then supervision and professional learning should help them strengthen instructional leadership. If principals are evaluated on school culture, they should receive support in building trust, fostering belonging, encouraging adult collaboration, and supporting student voice. If principals are evaluated on teacher development, then they should receive coaching on observation, feedback, post-conference conversations, and the use of evidence to improve instruction.

Evaluation should also be fair and well-developed. Principals need to know what counts as evidence of impactful leadership, how evidence will be interpreted, and how ratings or judgments will be connected to support. Ambiguity in the evaluation can weaken trust. Clarity can strengthen it. When principals understand the standards, see evidence and experience as part of a coherent growth process, evaluation is more likely to build capacity rather than simply produce compliance.

Table 8.1 The Seven-Element Evaluation Cycle for Principal Capacity Building

Element	Description	What Breaks When It Is Missing
Clear Expectations	Leadership standards and performance indicators are shared and understood before the evaluation cycle begins.	Expectations without evidence are abstract; principals cannot be evaluated fairly on standards they did not understand.
Evidence Collection	Multiple sources of evidence—school improvement progress, instructional leadership, teacher development, climate indicators, family engagement—are gathered throughout the year.	Without evidence, evaluation becomes impression-based; principals have no opportunity to demonstrate growth through documented practice.
Reflective Conversation	The evaluation conference is a genuine dialogue—examining evidence, naming patterns, and planning next steps—not a one-way delivery of ratings.	Evidence without conversation becomes judgment; principals receive a verdict rather than an opportunity to examine their own practice.
Feedback	Specific, evidence-based feedback names both strengths and growth areas and connects directly to next steps for improvement.	Feedback without professional learning is advice without support; principals know what to improve but not how.
Professional Learning	Coaching, mentoring, peer learning, and targeted development are aligned to the evaluation feedback and the principal's specific growth priorities.	Professional learning disconnected from evaluation feedback becomes an event rather than a development pathway.

Element	Description	What Breaks When It Is Missing
Implementation	Principals apply new strategies in their buildings, with structural support for trying approaches that may feel uncertain or difficult.	Without implementation support, learning stays conceptual; principals cannot transfer knowledge to practice without space to try and adjust.
Follow-Up	Supervisory visits, coaching check-ins, and data reviews close the loop—affirming progress, adjusting support, and sustaining accountability for growth.	Professional learning without follow-up becomes an isolated event; growth is rarely sustained without ongoing accountability and adjustment.

Source: Anderson & Turnbull (2016); Darling-Hammond et al. (2022).

Professional Learning: The Bridge Between Evaluation and Growth

Professional development is often treated as a separate district function. Principals attend workshops, conferences, leadership meetings, or training sessions, sometimes with limited connection to their evaluation goals or supervisory feedback. This separation weakens the potential for professional learning. In a capacity-building ecosystem, professional learning is not a disconnected event. It is the integrating thread that binds supervision, evaluation, and school improvement together.

The Learning Policy Institute's research synthesis on effective principals identifies features of high-quality principal learning. Effective learning opportunities for principals include content focused on key levers of practice, authentic and applied learning, coaching and mentoring, and collegial networks in which principals share and solve problems of practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022). A related Wallace Foundation summary of this research identifies five important content areas for principal learning: leading instruction, managing change, developing people, shaping a positive school culture, and meeting the needs of diverse learners (Learning Policy Institute, 2022).

These findings correspond closely with the superintendent's capacity-building responsibility. Professional learning should grow from the real-world principles by which principals seek to lead. If several principals are struggling with teacher feedback, professional learning should focus on instructional coaching, classroom observation, evidence collection, and post-conference conversations. If principals are struggling with school culture, professional learning should focus on trust, belonging, student voice, adult collaboration, and relational leadership. If principals are struggling with initiative overload, professional learning should focus on coherence, prioritization, and change leadership.

Professional learning is most powerful when it is sustained, job-embedded, evidence-based, problem-centered, collaborative, coached, and aligned. It should not be limited to isolated workshops or one-day events. It should be linked to actual problems of practice and reinforced through feedback, reflection, and implementation. Principal meetings can become learning laboratories rather than information delivery sessions. Supervisory visits can become opportunities for joint inquiry. Evaluation conferences can become planning conversations that identify professional learning focus. Principal cohorts can become communities of practice in which leaders examine dilemmas, test strategies, and learn from each other.

This approach requires intentional design. Superintendents must resist the temptation to equate professional development with activity. More meetings, more initiatives, and more training sessions do not automatically produce more capacity. Capacity increases when learning is coherent, focused, and connected to practice. The question is not, "What professional development did we provide?" The better question is, "How did this professional learning help principals lead more effectively in their schools?"

Coherence as the Superintendent's Leadership Challenge

Coherence may be the superintendent's most important contribution to principal capacity. Principals can work hard and feel ineffective when district systems send mixed signals. A principal can be evaluated on instructional leadership while spending

most of the week responding to administrative demands. A principal may be asked to support teacher advancement while receiving little feedback on his or her own leadership practice. A principal may attend professional development that has little relation to evaluation goals or school improvement priorities. In each case, the problem is not simply the principal's capacity. The problem is the system's coherence around the principal.

The ecosystem frame is useful here because ecosystems depend on relationships, interdependence, adaptation, and alignment. Aspen's practice agenda emphasizes the need for a cohesive PreK-12 education ecosystem to support the whole learner (Berger et al., 2018). Elias (2016) similarly argues that because every element of a school affects other parts, leaders must attend to the full range of interactions and interdependencies within the school and district. For superintendents, this means coherence is not only a matter of efficient management. It is a condition for the flourishing of adults and students.

When supervision, evaluation, and professional learning operate separately, principals may experience the district as a collection of unrelated demands. When these functions are aligned, principals are more likely to experience the district as a coherent support system. The superintendent's work is not simply to add more training, more feedback, or more accountability. The superintendent's work is to align supervision, evaluation, professional learning, authority, and resources so that principals know what matters, receive support for what matters, and are evaluated on what matters. This is the essence of capacity building.

Coherence also requires subtraction. Districts often respond to problems by adding new initiatives, meetings, forms, protocols, or expectations. While some additions are necessary, accumulation can create fragmentation. Principals may become overwhelmed not because they lack commitment, but because the system has failed to distinguish what is essential from what is merely additional. Superintendents build capacity not only by adding support, but also by removing confusion, duplication, low-value tasks, unnecessary meetings, and competing priorities that prevent principals from focusing on the work that matters most.

This kind of coherence is both relational and technical. It needs systems, calendars, evaluation tools, professional learning plans, and clear expectations. It also demands trust, communication, listening, and responsiveness. Principals must believe that the district understands the realities of their work. They need opportunities to give feedback on what is helping and blocking their leadership. They need a superintendent who can hold high expectations while also attending to the conditions needed to meet them. Principal capacity increases when the district system is coherent enough for principals to know what matters, receive support for it, and be evaluated on it.

Supporting Principals So They Can Support Others

The ultimate goal of principal capacity building is not the principal alone. It is the health of the school ecosystem. When superintendents support principals through developmental supervision, growth-oriented evaluation, and sustained professional learning, they strengthen the conditions in which teachers work and students learn. Principals who have experienced clarity are more likely to deliver clarity. Principals who receive useful feedback are more likely to provide useful feedback. Principals who are supported through complex change are more likely to support teachers through complex change.

This is why the superintendent's role in principal development is so consequential. The superintendent shapes the district's adult learning infrastructure. That infrastructure influences principal practice. Principal practice influences teacher practice. Teacher practice influences the student experience. The effects of superintendent leadership, therefore, go beyond central office decisions into the daily lives of classrooms.

A superintendent who builds principal capacity does more than evaluate performance. The superintendent cultivates the conditions for growth. Through developmental supervision, growth-oriented evaluation, and sustained professional learning, the superintendent creates an ecosystem in which principals are not left alone to carry the work of school improvement. They are surrounded by the clarity, feedback, resources, relationships, and trust necessary to lead well.

When principals are supported as learners, they are better prepared to support teachers as learners. When teachers are supported as learners, students experience schools as places of belonging, challenge, growth, and possibility. In this sense, supervision, evaluation, and professional development are not separate administrative functions. They are the adult-learning infrastructure through which superintendents build principals' capacity and, ultimately, strengthen the schools students deserve.

8.3: Summary



Summary

Chapter 8 Summary

This chapter argued that the superintendent's most consequential leadership responsibility is not the management of district operations but the deliberate construction of the conditions in which principals can lead well. Drawing on the Aspen Institute's ecosystem framework, the chapter established that schools are not mechanical systems but interdependent communities in which every relationship, structure, and condition shapes what learning is possible—for students and for adults alike. Principals who operate in fragmented, incoherent systems cannot build coherent environments for teachers. Teachers who work in unsupported, reactive schools cannot build the conditions students need. The cascade runs in both directions, and the superintendent stands at its source.

The chapter examined three integrated functions through which superintendents build principal capacity. Developmental supervision shifts the relationship between superintendent and principal from compliance monitoring to an ongoing, coaching-oriented partnership—one that identifies patterns, guides reflection, and connects principals to targeted support before problems become entrenched. The Wallace Foundation's Principal Supervisor Initiative and the CCSSO's Model Principal Supervisor Professional Standards both confirm that this shift requires a fundamental reconceptualization of what supervisory work is for (Goldring et al., 2020; Council of Chief State School Officers, 2015).

Growth-oriented evaluation extends that reconceptualization into the formal appraisal process: rather than serving as an annual verdict, evaluation becomes the seventh-element cycle described in Table 8.1—a structured sequence through which expectations, evidence, conversation, feedback, professional learning, implementation, and follow-up form a continuous growth loop rather than a compliance ritual (Anderson & Turnbull, 2016). And sustained professional learning, aligned to real problems of principal practice and reinforced through supervisory follow-up, serves as the integrating thread that makes both supervision and evaluation consequential rather than episodic.

Across these three functions, the chapter identified coherence as the superintendent's most essential and most difficult contribution. When supervision, evaluation, and professional learning operate in parallel but not in concert—when principals are evaluated on instructional leadership while being consumed by operational demands, or when professional development bears no relationship to evaluation feedback—the system produces compliance rather than capacity. Coherence requires not only alignment among district functions but also the discipline of subtraction: removing the low-value demands, duplicative meetings, and competing initiatives that prevent principals from focusing on the work that most directly improves teaching and learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022).

Taken together, Chapters 1 through 8 have built a unified argument: the most effective school districts are those in which the superintendent's leadership of principals mirrors the leadership that principals are asked to provide for teachers, and that teachers are asked to provide for students. Supervision, evaluation, professional learning, emotional intelligence, collaborative practice, and coaching are not separate administrative functions. They are the adult-learning infrastructure of a high-performing district—and the superintendent is its architect.

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8.4: Discussion Questions and Exercises



Discussion Questions & Exercises

Chapter 8: Discussion Questions and Exercises

Discussion Questions

1. This chapter argues that principal capacity building is a system-wide superintendent responsibility, not a matter of individual principal effort or personality. In your own district context, what structural barriers most commonly prevent superintendents from fulfilling this responsibility, and which of those barriers is most within the superintendent's control to address? *How does the cascading logic of adult capacity building described in this chapter relate to the research on student learning outcomes cited by Darling-Hammond et al. (2022)? What would it look like to evaluate a superintendent's effectiveness using that cascade as the framework?*
2. The chapter distinguishes between compliance-oriented and developmental models of supervision. What specific superintendent behaviors—in a typical supervisory visit, a cabinet meeting, or a follow-up conversation after a difficult event—signal to principals that they are being supervised developmentally rather than evaluated for compliance? *Connect the Wallace Foundation's Principal Supervisor Initiative findings (Goldring et al., 2020) to this shift. How would you build the political will within a school board and community to justify investing in principal professional learning as a student achievement strategy? What evidence from this chapter and from prior chapters would anchor your case?*
3. Across this book, the argument has been that evaluation, professional learning, emotional intelligence, collaborative practice, coaching, and mentoring are most powerful as a mutually reinforcing system rather than separate functions. Looking back at the full arc of Chapters 1 through 8, what is the single most important insight you will carry into your own practice as a superintendent or aspiring superintendent? *Reflect on a leader you have worked with or observed who embodied the superintendent role described in this chapter—or who represented its opposite. What specific behaviors, decisions, or structural choices most clearly defined their approach, and what were the consequences for principals, teachers, and students?*

Exercises

1. Using a district you know or can construct, map the current state of superintendent-to-principal support across three dimensions: supervision (frequency, format, and focus), evaluation (what evidence is collected, how it is discussed, and how it connects to support), and professional learning (what is provided, how it is selected, and how it connects to evaluation feedback). For each dimension, identify one specific misalignment and propose a concrete structural change—grounded in at least two sources from this chapter—that would increase coherence. Present your audit to the class in a ten-minute structured discussion.
2. Design a one-year principal support plan for a mid-career principal in a mid-sized elementary school whose evaluation has identified a growth area in instructional leadership—specifically, the quality of post-observation feedback conversations

with teachers. Your plan should include: (a) a supervisory structure with specific visit types and frequency; (b) an evaluation component with the evidence sources you would prioritize and a description of the mid-year evaluation conference; (c) a professional learning pathway that includes at least two specific resources or activities aligned to the growth area; and (d) a follow-up protocol for the second semester. Ground your plan in the seven-element cycle from Table 8.1 and at least three sources from this chapter.

3. In triads, role-play a supervisory conversation between a superintendent and a principal who has just come through a difficult semester: teacher morale is low, a union grievance was filed over a scheduling decision, and the principal is visibly exhausted. One person plays the superintendent using a developmental supervision frame—guided by the relational and technical dimensions described in this chapter; one plays the principal; one observes and takes notes on which superintendent moves opened reflection and which closed it down. Debrief as a group: Where did the conversation shift from compliance-monitoring to growth-oriented inquiry, and what made that shift possible? Connect your observations to both Chapter 5's emotional intelligence framework and this chapter's argument about supervisory relationship quality.

8.5: Case Study



Case Study

Chapter 8 Case Study: The System Dr. Thompson Built

Dr. Maya Thompson had been superintendent of Prairie View School District for eight years when the school board asked her to present a five-year leadership development strategy at its annual retreat. The request was not unusual; the board had always been interested in principal quality. What was unusual was the framing. A new board member, a retired corporate executive named Gerald Crane, had spent two months reviewing the district's principal evaluation records and had come to the retreat with a pointed question: "We spend a significant amount of money evaluating principals every year. What does that investment actually produce?"

Dr. Thompson had spent years building what she believed was a strong support system for her eleven principals. Supervisory visits were scheduled quarterly. Evaluation forms were aligned to the Illinois Performance Standards for School Leaders. Professional development was offered through a regional service agency and a growing menu of workshops. Principals could request coaching, though few did. The system was coherent in form. Gerald Crane's question forced her to ask whether it was coherent in function.

What She Found

Dr. Thompson spent two weeks reviewing five years of principal evaluation records, supervisory visit notes, and professional development participation logs. What she found was a system that was thorough in its documentation and thin in its impact. Evaluation conferences had been held faithfully each spring. Ratings had been assigned. Goals had been written and filed. Professional development had been offered and attended. But the connection among these elements—between the evidence gathered in supervisory visits and the focus of evaluation conferences, between evaluation feedback and the professional learning that followed, between coaching requests and supervisory follow-up—was almost entirely absent. The functions existed in parallel. They did not form a system.

She also found something she had not expected: principals' own accounts of their supervisory experience were strikingly different from what the records suggested. In confidential interviews conducted with seven of the eleven principals, she asked them to describe what happened after a supervisory visit. Five of the seven said the visit was followed by an email summary but rarely by a substantive conversation. Three said their evaluation goals, once written in October, were not revisited until the spring conference. All seven said that professional development was chosen from a catalog, not assigned in response to anything they had been told about their practice. Two principals used the same phrase independently: they said that evaluation "felt like a ritual."

What She Changed

Dr. Thompson brought her findings to the board not as a failure but as a diagnosis. Gerald Crane's question, she told the board, was exactly the right one, and the answer was that the current system was producing compliance rather than capacity. She

proposed three structural changes, each grounded in the research she had been reviewing since the retreat was announced.

First, she redesigned the supervisory visit protocol to include a thirty-minute debrief conversation—scheduled the same day as the visit—in which she and the principal reviewed what she had observed and identified one specific leadership practice to examine in the next visit. The visit was no longer an observation followed by a written summary. It was the opening move in an ongoing inquiry.

Second, she introduced a mid-year evaluation conference—held in January for all eleven principals—in which evaluation goals were reviewed against evidence accumulated since October, adjusted if necessary, and connected explicitly to a professional learning focus for the second semester. The spring conference became a culminating conversation, not an annual judgment.

Third, she worked with the regional service agency to redesign the professional development menu so that principals could select from pathways aligned to four leadership growth areas—instructional leadership, school culture, teacher development, and change leadership—rather than from an undifferentiated catalog of workshops. Each principal's pathway was discussed and documented in the mid-year conference.

The changes were not dramatic. No new positions were created. No new budget lines were opened. What changed was the connective tissue: the way supervisory visits, evaluation conversations, and professional learning were linked to one another, and the way each function was explicitly positioned as part of a continuous growth process rather than a discrete administrative requirement. By the end of the following year, six of the eleven principals had voluntarily requested coaching—a significant increase from the two who had done so in any prior year. In her next board report, Dr. Thompson noted that the number was less important than what it signaled: principals were beginning to experience the district's support system as something worth engaging with.

Discussion Questions

1. Dr. Thompson's original system was formally coherent—it had the right components—but functionally incoherent because those components were not connected. Using the seven-element cycle from Table 8.1, identify which specific elements were weakest in Prairie View's original system, and explain what made the absence of each consequential. *Two principals independently used the phrase “felt like a ritual” to describe evaluation. What does this characterization reveal about the relationship between process compliance and genuine growth, and how does Anderson and Turnbull's (2016) research help explain why the ritual feeling develops?*
 2. Dr. Thompson's three structural changes involved no new positions and no new budget lines. She changed the connective tissue rather than adding new components. What does this suggest about where the greatest leverage for system improvement typically lies, and what does it imply for how aspiring superintendents should prioritize their reform energy? *The case ends with six of eleven principals voluntarily requesting coaching—a significant increase that Dr. Thompson reads as a signal about principal trust in the system rather than simply a program utilization metric. What conditions in a superintendent's support system make principals willing to be visible learners, and how do those conditions relate to the ecosystem principles described in the chapter?*
 3. Gerald Crane's original question—“What does this investment actually produce?”—is one that every superintendent should be able to answer about every major district system. If you were Dr. Thompson preparing for the board retreat, what specific evidence would you collect to demonstrate that the redesigned principal support system is producing measurable improvements in principal leadership and, ultimately, in teacher and student outcomes? *Connect this case to the full arc of Prairie View's story across Chapters 3 through 8. What consistent features of Dr. Thompson's leadership approach—as a supervisor, evaluator, and capacity builder—appear across all the chapters? What does that consistency suggest about the relationship between leadership identity and system design?*
-

The beginning for Dr. Thompson, not the end.

Dr. Thompson's story does not end with a triumphant turnaround. It ends with a shift in direction—a superintendent who examined her own system honestly, named what was missing, and made three structural changes that cost nothing except attention and intention. That is, in many ways, the more instructive ending. Grand redesigns are rare. The work described in this book is not. It is the daily, unglamorous discipline of asking whether the system you have built is actually serving the people inside it—and being willing to change it when the honest answer is no.

Across eight chapters, this book has argued for a particular vision of the superintendent's role—one organized not around authority but around conditions, not around compliance but around capacity. The superintendent who leads through this lens does not ask only “Are my principals meeting expectations?” but also “Have I built the expectations clearly enough, the support generously enough, and the feedback loop reliably enough that meeting them is actually possible?” That question, asked honestly and acted on consistently, is what separates districts where principals survive the work from districts where principals grow through it. It is what separates schools where teachers comply from schools where teachers learn. And it is, ultimately, what separates systems where students receive education from systems where students experience it.

The invitation of this book is not to become a different kind of superintendent overnight. It is to begin with one honest question—the same one Gerald Crane asked at a school board retreat, the same one every principal quietly carries into every supervisory visit: Is this system actually helping me grow? If you can build a district where principals answer that question with an unambiguous yes, you will have built something worth far more than a well-documented evaluation cycle. You will have built a place where the work of leading schools is understood as the most serious form of professional learning there is—and where the people doing that work are surrounded by the clarity, the trust, and the sustained support they need to do it well. That is the kind of superintendent this profession needs. That is the kind of system every school needs and every child deserves.

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9: Conclusion

Leadership as a Continuous Learning Journey

Leadership as Ongoing Development

The collective lessons across this book affirm that leadership is not a static role but a continuous process of growth, reflection, and renewal. Principals, superintendents, and other district leaders hold positions that profoundly influence teaching, learning, and community trust. Research and practice alike underscore that principals are second only to teachers in their impact on student outcomes, yet the complexity of leadership often exceeds the preparation and support leaders receive once in the role. Leadership is less about mastering a fixed set of competencies and more about sustaining a disposition of learning. Leaders must remain flexible, adaptable, and resilient in the face of rapid change, while holding firmly to a moral compass that anchors their decisions.

This orientation toward growth requires deliberate structures. Professional development, evaluation systems, mentoring networks, and emotional intelligence capacities do not operate in isolation; together, they form an ecosystem that shapes the leadership journey. The key task of districts and superintendents is to build and sustain that ecosystem so leaders can flourish across their careers rather than struggle in isolation.

Professional Development: Equitable, Embedded, and Responsive

One of the strongest themes throughout this work is the centrality of professional development for school leaders. Principals and district administrators must have opportunities for job-embedded learning that are closely tied to the realities of instructional leadership. Professional development should not be episodic or compliance-driven; it must be sustained, coherent, and responsive to leaders' individual needs and career stages.

For early-career principals, professional development might emphasize time management, instructional supervision, and strategies for building credibility with faculty. Mid-career leaders often need deeper learning around organizational change, building leadership pipelines, and advancing equity. Veteran leaders require opportunities to refine strategic vision, coach emerging leaders, and integrate community partnerships. Without career-stage responsive PD, leaders experience professional plateaus or burnout, and districts risk losing valuable institutional knowledge.

Equity also matters. Access to meaningful professional learning opportunities should not be determined by the wealth of a district or the size of its professional development budget. Superintendents bear responsibility for ensuring that all principals—urban, suburban, and rural—have access to comparable opportunities for growth. In this way, professional development becomes not only a leadership issue but also a matter of justice for the students and communities principals serve.

Evaluation as a Mechanism for Growth

Another consistent theme is the need to reframe principal evaluation. Too often, evaluation is treated as a bureaucratic requirement, producing reports but little professional growth. A more scholarly and sustainable approach treats evaluation as an instrument for learning and reflection, aligned with professional standards and embedded in cycles of continuous improvement.

When evaluation highlights a leader's strengths, identifies targeted areas for growth, and connects the principal to mentoring or professional learning, it becomes transformative. Evaluation must be dialogic and collaborative rather than punitive, fostering courageous conversations between supervisors and principals. Through such conversations, leaders can identify blind spots, confront challenges, and plan actionable next steps. Evaluation, then, becomes not the end of a process but the beginning of renewed growth.

In this way, evaluation serves both accountability and development. It assures the community that leaders meet professional expectations while simultaneously equipping those leaders with pathways to improve. This dual purpose strengthens both individual capacity and system-level coherence.

Mentoring, Coaching, and Emotional Intelligence

No leader thrives alone. Throughout this work, mentoring and coaching surfaced as essential strategies for leadership preparation and sustainability. Mentoring provides guidance, context, and wisdom to emerging leaders, while coaching extends support to experienced leaders who continue to refine their practice. These relational supports bridge the gap between theory and practice, offering space for reflection, problem-solving, and growth.

Equally critical is the cultivation of emotional intelligence (EI). Leadership is a human endeavor, requiring self-awareness, empathy, and relational trust. Leaders who understand their own emotions and those of others are better equipped to navigate conflict, foster collaboration, and model resilience. Team emotional intelligence multiplies this effect, enabling faculty and administrative teams to function as cohesive units that can face challenges together.

Courageous conversations exemplify the application of emotional intelligence in leadership. Leaders must be willing to address conflict openly and respectfully, confronting hard truths without eroding trust. These conversations, though often difficult, sustain cultures of transparency, accountability, and growth.

Systemic Leadership and Retention

Leadership effectiveness cannot be considered apart from the structures that sustain or undermine it. Many principals experience short tenures, high turnover, and burnout due to unrealistic demands and insufficient support. Districts must take responsibility for building leadership pipelines that recruit, prepare, and retain leaders over time.

Systemic leadership development involves more than isolated programs; it requires intentional design. Professional development, evaluation, mentoring, and coaching must be aligned with one another, forming a coherent system that reinforces growth rather than scattering efforts. When such systems are in place, leaders are more likely to remain in their roles long enough to make sustained improvements in teaching and learning. Retention, then, becomes not only a matter of keeping leaders in positions but of keeping them effective, inspired, and equipped to serve.

Toward a Learning Ecosystem

The most comprehensive vision that emerges from this work is the idea of a learning ecosystem for leadership. Professional development, evaluation, mentoring, and emotional intelligence are not stand-alone initiatives; they are interconnected elements that together create the conditions for sustained excellence. A learning ecosystem is collaborative, continuous, and adaptive. It ensures that leaders at every level have the resources, relationships, and reflection needed to improve their practice.

Such an ecosystem also advances equity. When systems prioritize access, representation, and culturally responsive leadership development, they honor the diverse communities schools serve. Equity in leadership development translates directly into equity for students, as leaders are better prepared to understand and respond to the needs of all learners.

A Forward-Looking Call to Superintendents

Superintendents stand at the nexus of vision and practice. The responsibility of sustaining a leadership learning ecosystem ultimately rests at the district level, where decisions about policy, resources, and culture shape the opportunities available to principals and teacher leaders.

The call to superintendents is clear:

- Build leadership pipelines that identify and nurture emerging leaders early
- Shape district cultures where professional learning is embedded and celebrated, not relegated to the margins
- Champion equity by ensuring all leaders, regardless of context, have access to growth opportunities
- Model integrity and reflective practice, demonstrating that learning is never complete, even at the highest levels of leadership

The legacy of the superintendent will not be measured solely by the programs launched or budgets balanced, but by the leaders they cultivate and the communities they transform. By investing in professional development, reframing evaluation as growth, sustaining mentoring networks, and committing to systemic equity, superintendents create a foundation where leadership thrives and students flourish.

Closing Reflection

Leadership is developmental, contextual, and deeply relational. It requires courage, humility, and an unrelenting commitment to growth. As this book has demonstrated, professional development, evaluation, mentoring, emotional intelligence, and systemic coherence are not isolated priorities but interwoven strands of an enduring fabric. When leaders commit to nurturing these strands, they not only strengthen their own practice but also weave a future where schools become vibrant places of learning for all. This is the enduring work of educational leadership: continuous, collaborative, and committed to excellence.

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Appendix

Appendix Standards Alignment Crosswalk

Purpose. This crosswalk helps superintendent evaluators and principals align evidence and feedback across the **Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL)**, the **Illinois Performance Standards for School Leaders (IPSSL)**, and the **National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP)** standards (Building- and District-level). Use it to plan goals, collect artifacts, conduct observations, and frame coaching aligned to Illinois timelines (IPEP). [\[2.02_Narrative | PDF\]](#)

How to use

1. **Set 2–3 leadership goals** that name the relevant **PSEL** standard(s); identify the **IPSSL** indicator(s) you will observe; then note the **NELP** anchor (Building or District) that frames capacity/knowledge.
2. **Collect artifacts** (plans, PLC agendas, stakeholder evidence) and **observation notes** tagged to these standards.
3. **Calibrate** with your evaluator team using the same tags, ensuring feedback and ratings reference the same standards and evidence categories. [\[2.02_Narrative | PDF\]](#)

Note: IPSSL indicators and rubrics vary by district implementation. Keep references general (to avoid document replication) while ensuring fidelity to Illinois expectations and local board-adopted instruments. [\[2.02_Narrative | PDF\]](#)

Crosswalk Table (Condensed)

Appendix Table Crosswalk Condensed Version

PSEL (2015)	IPSSL (Illinois)—Related Areas	NELP (Building) — Relevant Standards	NELP (District) — Relevant Standards	Typical Evidence & Artifacts (Examples)
1. Mission, Vision, Core Values	Mission/vision development; stakeholder communication; results focus	BL-1 Mission, Vision & Improvement	DL-1 Mission, Vision & Improvement	Board-approved vision/mission; SIP goals; communication plan; progress dashboards
2. Ethics & Professional Norms	Ethical practice; professional norms; fairness & integrity	BL-2 Ethics & Professional Norms	DL-2 Ethics & Professional Norms	Codes of conduct; decision memos reflecting fairness; privacy/protection protocols
3. Equity & Cultural Responsiveness	Equity strategies; culturally responsive leadership/instruction	BL-3 Equity, Inclusiveness & Cultural Responsiveness	DL-3 Equity, Inclusiveness & Cultural Responsiveness	Disaggregated outcome data; equity goals; family language access; culturally responsive PD artifacts
4. Curriculum, Instruction, Assessment	Instructional coherence; assessment systems; standards alignment	BL-4 Learning & Instruction	DL-4 Learning & Instruction	PLC agendas; curriculum maps; formative assessment cycles; observation notes tied to instructional rubrics
5. Community of Care & Support for Students	Student well-being; inclusive climate; responsive supports	BL-4/5 (Learning & Instruction; Community & External Leadership)	DL-4/5 (Learning & Instruction; Community & External Leadership)	MTSS artifacts; SEL plans; student voice surveys; attendance/behavior supports

PSEL (2015)	IPSSL (Illinois)—Related Areas	NELP (Building) — Relevant Standards	NELP (District) — Relevant Standards	Typical Evidence & Artifacts (Examples)
6. Professional Capacity of School Personnel	Teacher growth systems; coaching; talent development	BL-7 Building Professional Capacity	DL-4/6 Learning & Instruction; Operations & Management	PD plans; coaching cycles; induction/mentoring structures; teacher evaluation calibration notes
7. Professional Community for Teachers & Staff	Collaborative culture; trust; collective efficacy	BL-7 Building Professional Capacity	DL-4/6 Learning & Instruction; Operations & Management	PLC norms; collaboration schedules; staff climate data; peer observation protocols
8. Meaningful Engagement of Families & Community	Family partnerships; community engagement; reciprocal communication	BL-5 Community & External Leadership	DL-5 Community & External Leadership	Family engagement logs; community advisory notes; multilingual communications; partnership MOUs
9. Operations & Management	Resource stewardship; safety; schedules; compliance	BL-6 Operations & Management	DL-6 Operations & Management	Budget artifacts; safety drills; staffing models; facilities plans; transportation/meal service metrics
10. School Improvement	Continuous improvement cycle; evidence use; change management	BL-1/4 Mission, Vision & Improvement; Learning & Instruction	DL-1 Mission, Vision & Improvement	SIP cycle artifacts; midyear goal reviews; formative data analyses; implementation retrospectives

Why these mappings?

- **PSEL** articulates what practicing leaders should know/do (student learning + well-being; equity; coherent systems).
- **NELP** operationalizes core knowledge/skills for **beginning leaders** at building and district levels—mirroring PSEL while specifying preparation outcomes.
- **IPSSL** provides Illinois-specific **evaluation indicators/rubrics**, used for self-assessment and summative evaluation under the **IPEP** timeline. Aligning artifacts and feedback to these three helps move evaluation from compliance to **coherent, growth-oriented practice**. [\[2.02_Narrative | PDF\]](#)

Mini-Guide: Evidence Tagging & Feedback Phrases

Use these sample tags/phrases in observation notes and post-conference summaries to anchor feedback to standards:

- **PSEL 3 / IPSSL (Equity) / NELP BL-3:** “Your disaggregated course-enrollment analysis identified multilingual learner under-representation; next cycle, co-design a family outreach protocol and monitor week-by-week participation.”
- **PSEL 4 / IPSSL (Instruction) / NELP BL-4:** “PLC agendas show tighter alignment between formative tasks and grade-level standards; plan a peer-walkthrough series to calibrate feedback on language-rich scaffolds.”
- **PSEL 1 / IPSSL (Mission/Vision) / NELP DL-1:** “Your SIP update clearly ties mission to measurable equity goals; recommend adding a quarterly board briefing that tracks progress with student voice artifacts.” [\[2.02_Narrative | PDF\]](#)

Implementation Notes for Illinois (IPEP-Aligned)

- **Day-one notice:** Reference the district's crosswalk in kickoff memos and coaching calendars.
- **By Oct. 1 goal-setting:** Require each goal to list **PSEL**, **IPSSL**, and **NELP** codes plus 2–3 planned artifacts.
- **Formative observations:** Tag notes to the crosswalk and request aligned artifacts before feedback conferences.
- **February IPSSL self-assessment:** Principals submit a brief reflection organized by PSEL domains, citing crosswalk-aligned evidence.
- **Summative conferences:** Ratings reference standards codes and artifacts; use consistent phrasing across evaluators to enhance inter-rater reliability. [\[2.02_Narrative | PDF\]](#)

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