

## CHAPTER 4

# From Principal Supervision to Support

PRINCIPAL CHRISTINA BELL hung up the phone after talking to a parent and asked her office manager to do her best to handle all other calls for the remainder of the morning. She laughed to herself, remembering how only last year she felt like she walked around with a sign around her neck that read: “Complain to me. The principal is always in!” Last year, she spent only a small fraction of her time in classrooms and otherwise working on teacher development. With the help of her principal supervisor, Jan Jackson, she turned her calendar upside down. Now she spends 60 percent of her time each week on activities such as observing the quality of classroom teaching, talking with teachers one-on-one and in small groups about the observation data and next steps, and supporting her team of teacher leaders in their leadership of teacher professional learning communities (PLCs). She said that she hopes to increase her time on these tasks to 75 percent within the next year, adding:

For years I have been putting out fires—responding to parents, finding out where is that facilities request I put in months ago. . . . And other things like, why was I spending ninety minutes a day or more on cafeteria and recess? Jackson asked me some hard questions in my

one-on-ones like, “Why are you doing that? Who else can be on the yard to free you up for other things you need to do to move instruction in this school?” Which really bothered me. That’s not why I became a principal. I always thought I’d be the principal who was all about my teachers. But then the phones ring and the fires start. One thing leads to another, and you are in your office dealing with this one student all day or whatever else.

When we asked her to describe her relationship with her supervisor, Principal Bell said:

The old supervisors were more like bosses. You escalated things to them. They made sure you were checking all the right boxes. If I couldn’t get something done in central office, sometimes they could help. And they did their observations for the evaluation, but the less they were in your building, the better. With Jackson, it’s exactly *not* that. It’s more of a partnership. She understands our students. She keeps us focused on instruction, instruction, and instruction. She keeps me focused on the classrooms and the kids, which is her focus too. I look forward to her visits. We are in it together.

To support her instructional focus, Principal Bell and Principal Supervisor Jackson kicked off the year with a self-assessment of Bell’s capacity to lead for improved instruction. As part of that assessment, they reviewed various evidence, which Bell had assembled herself, that she thought indicated her instructional leadership abilities. The evidence included her teacher professional development plans, teacher evaluation ratings, student assessments, and Jackson’s observations of Bell’s leadership practice. When discussing the data, Jackson pointed out that Bell had rated 90 percent of her teachers at the top of the teacher rating scale. But student performance data revealed that only half of her students were reading at grade level and that student achievement in mathematics was below the statewide average and not keeping pace with growth across the state. Observations of Bell’s leadership practice suggested limited knowledge of strong mathematics instruction and that teacher professional development (PD) tended not to focus there. Jackson’s observations of mathematics teaching suggested students were generally compliant but not learning at deep levels and, of particular concern to Jackson, Bell

had not picked up on those dynamics in her own observations or discussions with teachers about student work.

Bell then developed a learning plan for herself that focused on sharpening her skills at supporting mathematics instruction as well as two other priority areas for the year. The plan emphasized steps that Bell would take on her own during her regular day, including inviting another principal and a teacher leader to observe mathematics instruction with her. She also added a conference on ambitious mathematics instruction where she could attend sessions on principal leadership. Principal Supervisor Jackson then suggested ways she could support Bell's learning plan by checking in periodically on her evidence of progress and attending the conference with her, since leadership of math instruction was a growth area for her as well.

Principal Bell was also able to add several monthly principal meetings to her learning plan thanks to Jackson's early intentional planning. Jackson anticipated that a common focus for her principals this year would be their improved leadership of mathematics instruction, and her review of her principals' learning plans so far that year confirmed that trend. In response, she planned to dedicate a series of twice monthly principals' meetings to their leadership growth in that area. She was already working with staff members from the central office Teaching and Learning (T&L) unit to develop those sessions around specific leadership growth targets.

We asked Principal Supervisor Jackson how she managed such intensive focus on her principals' growth as instructional leaders. Jackson explained that she sometimes has to "discipline the system," adding:

The rest of the system is in the process of their own change, but we aren't there yet. So I have to be able to say "Sorry, can't come to that meeting, be on that task force, because I'm focused on my principals," or, "No, you can't come to my principals' meetings to talk about that one program—if its informational, put it in the weekly principals' admin packet." And then, when I'm working with principals, I always remember that my job is to support them. Support doesn't look like me letting other demands get in the way of the work. It's not coming in here and giving orders and then checking back next month. It's also not me doing their work for them. My job is to help principals learn

what they need to be great instructional leaders and create conditions for their success as instructional leaders. That's it.

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