How the Job of Supervising Principals Is Changing

By Denisa R. Superville on April 25, 2019 11:30 PM

In the last five years, several school districts started looking at how they could change what the job of administrators who oversee and manage principals looks like.

And it seems like that shift in direction has been paying off for the districts that doubled-down on revamping the role of principal supervisors.

Among the benefits: principal supervisors with redefined roles are overseeing fewer principals, they are staying in the job longer, and they are spending more time working with principals on improving instruction in their schools.

That's according to the Council of the Great City Schools, the national advocacy group for large public school systems which is documenting how its member districts are working to improve how central office administrators support principals.

Researchers conducted surveys and visits to more than 20 of its member districts in 2018 to see how the role of the principal supervisor had evolved and the impacts that change was having.

Council officials presented a snapshot of their findings to an audience of district and school leaders in New York City earlier this month. While some of the districts were formally part of a program by the Wallace Foundation to focus on improving how principal supervisors do their jobs, others had also started paying more attention to and reforming the role of principal supervisors during that time, said Michael Casserly, the executive director of the Council of the Great City Schools.

Among the big takeaways from the council's research:
Principal supervisors were overseeing fewer principals than they did in 2012 when the council conducted a similar survey. Supervisors oversaw an average of 16 principals in 2018, down from 24 in 2012. Most, however, managed 12 principals.

Supervisors were staying on the job longer than they reported in 2012. Tenure had doubled to six years on average, up from three years in 2012.

Districts had started to develop support programs for principal supervisors themselves.

The council's research also found that supervisors were spending more time working on activities tied to principals' instructional leadership role, such as conducting "learning walks" in the schools they oversee, discussing principal and teacher-performance with school leaders, and discussing school and student performance data with principals.

They were also spending less time on the operational aspects of the job. That, at times, proved to be a double-edged sword, Casserly said. As supervisors became more adept at supporting principals on the instructional side, there was a gap in the support they gave principals on the operational aspects of the job, he said.

Principals reported that their evaluations from their supervisors were "clearer, more regular, and more helpful," Casserly said. And the supervisors reported spending more time in schools than before.

**Principal Supervisors Have an 'Extra Hard Job'**

The findings also revealed potential problems down the road if the districts do not address them.

One big one is that many of the districts aren't yet intentionally developing a cadre of future administrators to be principal supervisors. And professional development opportunities—while improving—aren't typically designed with the specific role of principal supervisors in mind. Half of the principal supervisors said some of the professional development training offered by districts were only for principal supervisors; only 8 percent said all of the content in those sessions were geared toward principal supervisors.
How principal supervisors' job performances are evaluated is a work in progress, along with the lack of clarity on "what being an instructional leader actually entailed," Casserly said.

"They are folks who see themselves as betwixt and between, which is one of the reasons why they have an extra hard job and one of the reasons why we were, at least partially, gratified that their longevity seems to have increased," Casserly said.

"The warning sign for me is that they feel that they are in that position," Casserly continued. "And they are frankly in that position on purpose: They're essentially a go-between—a broker, a guide for folks at the school level."

But, coupled with "fact that they don't seem to be getting a whole lot of support, a whole lot of professional development, a whole lot of mentorship, and the like, suggests to me that we could easily burn these people out sooner than we want," he said.

It was the council's research in 2012 and a report the following year that spurred new attention to the job of principal supervisors. At that time, the council found the principal supervisor role lacked clarity, that those managers oversaw too many principals, and they were not spending nearly enough time coaching and mentoring principals.

A year later, the Wallace Foundation launched a four-year program in six urban districts—Broward County, Fla., Baltimore city schools, Cleveland, Des Moines, Long Beach, Calif., and Minneapolis—to focus on revamping the principal supervisor's role.

The council plans to publish an analysis of the new survey data, collected in conjunction with Mathematica Policy Research, and other findings later this spring, Casserly said.