

# THE LEARNING Principal

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EVERY EDUCATOR ENGAGES IN EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EVERY DAY SO EVERY STUDENT ACHIEVES

## Strong principal networks influence school culture

By Elizabeth Neale and Mariah Cone

Despite the complex challenges of leading schools in the 21st century, principals work largely in isolation, and receive few opportunities for professional development. Experience with a supportive community of fellow principals is quite rare. Most principals receive training, are certified, and then become full-fledged school leaders, without systems of ongoing learning or support. And, often the original training can be lacking. A 2013 study by the George W. Bush Institute found that only five states require principal preparation programs to include all of the components shown to be critical for effective leadership development (Briggs, Rhines, Cheney, Davis, & Moll, 2013).



practitioners reach their individual and collective goals.

### SCHOOL LEADERS NETWORK

Started with one network in western Massachusetts in 2006, the nonprofit School Leaders Network has now initiated networks serving more than 400 principals in six locations across the country: New York, DC metro area, San Antonio, Los Angeles, Florida's Hillsborough County, and Honolulu. Each network, consisting of 15 to 18 K-12 principals from high-needs urban schools, meets monthly to identify, reflect on, and accelerate critical leadership skills. Guided by a trained facilitator, school leaders use a researched-based learning approach that focuses on student achievement. They share best practices, challenges, and issues that foster or inhibit their individual leadership efforts. The network uses an inquiry-based, collaborative coaching model to discuss and solve challenges

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Learning Forward's Learning Communities standard documents the role of collaborative learning in helping



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from individual campuses. By creating a sense of community, increasing capacity, and implementing action, principal networks show strong trends of changing school cultures and improving student achievement (Intrator & Scribner, 2008; UCLA, 2011).

Strong network culture is critical to successful learning communities. Specifically, School Leaders Network culture is based on trust, collaborative learning, and collective responsibility.

### **BUILDING TRUST**

School Leaders Network's new communities of principals focus on developing the glue of trust and rapport that serves as the foundation for constructive engagement. Facilitators actively foster relationships among diverse groups of principals, creating conditions necessary for participants to share their challenging questions of practice.

Case study findings of principals within the School Leaders Network revealed that participants learned about themselves as leaders and implemented new efforts at school when they believed the network was a safe space. Principals attributed the safety of the group to facilitator skills, group norms, and modeled risk-taking by long-time group members

(Cone, 2010). The emphasis in these collaborative networks is around sharing, listening, learning, and taking steps to increase leadership capacity and student achievement. The facilitator makes these practices transparent while at the same time using a research-based approach to accelerate instructional leadership skills.

### **SUPPORTING COLLABORATIVE LEARNING**

School Leaders Network sessions are designed to harness the knowledge and capacity that individual principals bring with them and build upon their existing strengths. In their networks, principals discuss national leadership research, explore school-based problems, examine possible solutions, and share their experiences with implementation. Principals consistently cite this collaborative dialogue as a

### **The job of principal is becoming more complex and stressful.**

**75%** Three-quarters of principals feel the job has become too complex.

**69%** Seven in 10 principals say the job responsibilities are not very similar to five years ago.

**59%** Job satisfaction among principals has decreased nine percentage points in less than five years, to 59% very satisfied from 68% very satisfied in 2008.

**48%** Half of principals feel under great stress several days a week (MetLife, 2012).

key source of new ideas. One principal said, "For me, having the opportunity to talk to colleagues and our leadership is important because I am able to think about the problems at my school from a different perspective. Going through the consultancy protocol with my colleagues is significant. The problem we discussed was dealing with negativity and toxicity in the school environment. I need to work on building trust and celebrating successes. I also need to work on having individual conversations with staff members that are causing the negativity."

Embedded in the School Leaders Network model is a research-based rubric about the five most essential leadership responsibilities for principals to benchmark their skills and work concretely toward improved leadership practices. Facilitators use this rubric throughout network meetings, which help principals become more facile with thinking through all leadership actions through the lens of these five responsibilities.

A case study of School Leaders Network principals in San Antonio found that 60% of the members in the group adopted new leadership tools and facilitation techniques they learned from their network. Additionally, nearly three out of four principals said they became stronger, more confident leaders as a result of learning with other principals. They also found that these changes influenced the frequency and manner in which they engaged in tough conversations about performance with staff (Cone, 2010).

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### **Learning Forward BELIEF**

Improving student learning and professional practice requires ongoing systemic and organizational change.

### **Principal job satisfaction declining**

**Higher job satisfaction is associated with principals feeling well prepared for their responsibilities and participating in a professional learning community (PLC) with other principals.** Principals who are very satisfied with their job are more likely than less

satisfied principals to agree that their training prepared them well for their responsibilities as school principal (82% vs. 70%) and that they participate in a PLC with principals of other schools (93% vs. 79%). In addition, participating in a PLC is more common among principals who say they are not likely to leave the profession than among those who say they are likely to leave (89% vs. 82%) (MetLife, 2012).

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### FOSTERING COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

Successful learning communities maintain a sense of mutual accountability for all of their members. Principals with School Leaders Network commit to hold each other responsible for applying what they learn in their schools. The network analyzes leader actions at each meeting. This mutual responsibility reassures and inspires principals, as they know that they are working with the encouragement and push of their network of colleagues.

In internal surveys, School Leaders Network leaders also frequently implement learning communities within their own school settings, further creating alignment between network and school goals. Participants may visit each other's campuses and share resources, which develops the sense of collective ownership within the learning community.

### MAKING AN IMPACT

The University of California Los Angeles Educational Evaluation Group conducted a study of School Leader Network principals across the county. Their findings revealed the extensive benefits of learning communities for school leaders. According to the study, the network's principals felt more confident in their ability to make cultural changes, change classroom practices, and ultimately improve student outcomes (UCLA Educational Evaluation Group, 2011).

Even beyond school leader testimony, it is plain that collaborative principal networks have an impact on student achievement. An analysis of 2009-10 student achievement data for principals in 13 networks in the New York, Massachusetts, and San Antonio geographic clusters shows that School Leader Network-led schools outperformed peer schools (Marland, 2010). In Massachusetts, high schools led by network principals outperformed the state graduation rate, with an average of 83%. In San Antonio, 74% of network-led schools increased proficiency rates in math, compared to 65% of non-network schools, a difference of 9 percentage points. Additionally, New York City network principals, on average, led schools to higher than the city average scores across all culture indicators, including expectations, communication, engagement, and safety.

Principals require myriad tools, practices, and beliefs to lay the groundwork for highly effective schools. All too often, school leaders are only trained in the technical aspects of their work — develop a schedule, put together a budget, host a parent meeting, etc. These issues are persistent and do not have easy answers. However, by working with networks of like-minded peers, principals can coach each other to solve these problems and become 21st-century educational leaders who can meet the learning needs of all students.

Professional learning networks serve as a powerful experiential model that network principals can replicate by

building leadership teams and professional learning communities of teachers at their schools. In this way, the direct connection between collaboration, leadership, and student achievement can be realized.

### Learn more

#### 2012 MetLife Teacher Survey

The current report along with reports in the entire series are available online.

[www.metlife.com/teachersurvey](http://www.metlife.com/teachersurvey)

#### 2012 MetLife Teacher Survey webinar

The Alliance for Excellent Education and panelists discuss the findings for policymakers and education leaders to note as they work to enable school leaders to meet increased expectations for educational outcomes. Panelists include John Jenkins, regional director for School Leaders Network in New York City, and Laurie Barron, the MetLife/NASSP National Middle Level Principal of the Year.

<http://media.all4ed.org/webinar-mar-4-2013>

#### School Leaders Network

The mission of School Leaders Network is to expand educational opportunity for all students by transforming leadership practices.

<http://connectleadsucceed.org>

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