

DISTRICT SYSTEMS TO SUPPORT EQUITABLE AND HIGH-QUALITY TEACHING AND LEARNING

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This brief is one in a series aimed at providing K-12 education decision makers and advocates with an evidence base to ground discussions about how to best serve students during and following the novel coronavirus pandemic. [Click here](#) to learn more about the EdResearch for Recovery Project and view the set of COVID-19 response-and-recovery topic areas and practitioner-generated questions.

CENTRAL QUESTION

What changes in central office systems are likely to support principals in leading for equitable, high-quality teaching and learning?

KEY INSIGHTS

- **PRINCIPAL SUPERVISORS:** Principal supervisors support principals' instructional leadership growth when they dedicate their time to that work and coach principals from a teaching and learning approach, maintaining their instructional focus even amid operational demands.
- **TEACHING & LEARNING:** Teaching & Learning (T&L) units bolster principals' equity-focused instructional leadership by supporting their use of a common, research-based definition of high-quality, culturally responsive teaching and by helping principals foster true teacher learning communities with the autonomy and resources necessary for teacher success.
- **HUMAN RESOURCES:** Human Resources (HR) staff fuel principals' equity-focused instructional leadership when they recruit and select teachers based mainly on performance, and when they strategically partner with principals to ensure teachers are in the right roles and teams for their success, with an emphasis on recruiting and retaining teachers of color.
- **DATA SYSTEMS:** District data systems support principals' equity-focused instructional leadership by providing principals with ready access to information about their students and staff that helps principals take a strengths-based and antiracist approach.
- **OPERATIONAL STAFF:** Operational staff help principals engage in equity-focused instructional leadership when they provide high-quality services to schools and strategically partner with principals to ensure that facilities, transportation, and food services in particular support each school's instructional program.

Evidence shows that school principals are pivotal to ensuring equitable, high-quality teaching and learning and that realizing that leadership districtwide depends on support that school district central offices historically have not provided. At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, many central offices pivoted resources away from supporting principals and toward the distribution of lunches and laptops, plans for moving adults and students through school buildings, and other operational matters. The disproportionate effect of COVID-19 school closures on Black, Indigenous, Latino/a students, and students in low-income households further fuels the urgency for school district leaders to ensure each of their principals has the supports necessary for leading educational equity.

To inform districts' efforts, this brief identifies:

1. Core central office systems—in principal supervision, professional development, human resources, data, and operations—that typically impede principals' equity-focused instructional leadership; and
2. Specific systems shifts that will enable that leadership.

Our approach reflects three premises that themselves could provide useful guides for district leaders moving forward.

1. Address the foundation. As districts increase their emphasis on culturally responsive and antiracist strategies to combat systemic racism, they would do well to remember that adding such strategies on to current ways of working in many central offices will likely realize limited results. For instance, a district can provide teachers with professional development on culturally responsive teaching, but if the district's system of professional development does not support teacher learning well in the first place, then teacher learning for culturally responsive teaching is likely to come up short. The findings in this brief aim to ensure that central office leaders build their antiracist and other reform strategies on the right foundation.
2. Plan ahead. Consistent with standard [crisis management practice](#) outside education, districts must focus on immediate challenges while also dedicating resources to planning for deeper changes to ensure they emerge from the crisis with better systems in place. This brief identifies evidence-based priorities for longer-term planning.
3. Tackle systems. This brief also recognizes that central office staff who know what to do to support principals' equity-focused instructional leadership often find that central office systems—standard operating procedures and deeply engrained ways of working across the district—get in their way. This brief aims to help districts move beyond general commitments to “systems change” to identify and pursue specific shifts that are especially likely to propel their systemic improvement efforts forward.

BREAKING DOWN THE ISSUE

Principal leadership is essential to equitable, high-quality teaching and learning.

- Principals are **second only to teachers** among school-related influences on student learning and are the **primary on-the-job support for teachers' growth and success**.
 - [Principals support high-quality teaching and learning](#) when they ensure teachers have the time and resources to work together in [professional learning communities \(PLCs\)](#) and otherwise during their regular workday to strengthen the quality of their teaching. Such [teacher teams challenge teachers](#) to [deeply interrogate](#) the quality of their teaching and to notice and address how their biases impede learning opportunities and outcomes for historically marginalized students.
 - Principals support teaching quality when they build a [school culture](#) that validates and values each student's strengths and abilities to meet or exceed ambitious learning standards, with particular attention to [historically marginalized students](#).

■ Principals are pivotal to educational equity.

- [Principals drive educational equity](#) in their schools in the ways noted above and by ensuring that teachers use [culturally responsive pedagogy](#) and social-emotional learning strategies to forge trusting, honest, and [collaborative relationships](#) that recognize [families and communities as learning resources](#).
- [Equity-focused principals](#) continually interrogate how their own race, gender, and other identities influence their leadership, while modeling for staff how to engage in critical self-reflection about identity.

Central offices formed at the turn of the 20th century to handle business and regulatory functions; only in the past 20 years have they been called on and supported to lead for high-quality teaching and learning. Not surprisingly, then, support for principals' equity-focused instructional leadership typically requires fundamental shifts in specific central office systems.

■ In many districts, **principal supervisors** focus on principal evaluation and operational support, rather than on helping principals grow as equity-focused instructional leaders.

- Principal supervisors who focus on operations do not actually improve principals' operational support, and their noninstructional focus can actually [interfere with principals' instructional leadership](#).
- [Districts pioneering shifts in principal supervision](#) from evaluation and operations to principals' instructional leadership have seen growth in the latter but not yet in ways that center equity and antiracist practices.
- Given the shallow roots of principal supervision in principals' equity-focused instructional leadership, the shifts to remote learning prompted some principal supervisors to turn away from instructional matters and instead focus on operational work.

■ Central office **Teaching & Learning (T&L)** units often provide professional development (PD) that does not reinforce principals' equity-focused instructional leadership.

- [District PD](#) in many places continues to rely on delivery methods that [do not have deep or lasting impacts](#) on professional practice. Such PD positions teachers and principals as relatively passive recipients of PD sessions provided by central office staff in workshops on a fixed schedule and on topics that do not necessarily align with schools' priorities.
- [PD with an equity focus](#) tends to [get added onto, not integrated into](#), PD on core instruction in ways that limit its effectiveness.
- When schools rapidly closed in the spring of 2020, this mode of PD meant that many T&L units could not readily pivot their principal and teacher learning resources. Some staff focused their time on distributing instructional materials directly to families through packets and other media such as district TV, with limited ability to refocus principal and teacher learning time on supports for high-quality remote and hybrid learning.

■ **Human resources (HR)** units in districts primarily handle transactions related to staff hiring and professional conduct matters, rather than proactively and strategically supporting principals in using staffing as a lever of equitable, high-quality teaching and learning.

- [HR systems typically help principals fill teacher vacancies as they arise](#) but are often constrained by teachers' union contracts that prioritize a teacher's tenure over demonstrated performance. Substitute teachers similarly get assigned to cover classrooms, but not also to ensure teaching and learning quality.
- Principals often have to review an excessive number of applications for each vacancy, rather than HR supporting them with strategic candidate screening.
- Principals tend to receive little help with [recruiting and retaining teachers of color](#).
- With the onset of the pandemic, principals typically lacked the flexibility to reimagine staffing in order to support the shift to remote learning. Pandemic-related budget strains meant [teacher layoffs](#), which mostly affected [newer teachers](#) who, in some districts, are disproportionately teachers of color.

- **District data systems tend not to support principals' equity-focused instructional leadership and sometimes interfere with it.**
 - Such data systems typically provide limited information mainly about students' performance on standardized tests, despite the tests' well-known race- and class-based biases. “Early warning systems” tend to focus on indicators of students being “at risk” rather than indicators of their strengths, which can reinforce a deficit view of historically marginalized students as a group, a hallmark of systemic racism. When data systems do not include detailed information about students' teachers, schools, and learning supports, they limit educators' ability to analyze root causes of a student's learning challenges and strengths, which are fundamental to addressing systemic racism and other biases that frustrate student success.
 - Principals tend to have limited access to their district's data system and, instead, must request information from central office staff, which can impede their timely and evidence-based decision-making.
 - The interruption of in-school learning revealed principals' lack of access to even basic information such as family phone numbers and their access to the internet and laptops. Without timely information about students' progress toward standards, many districts resorted to “do no harm” grading policies such as automatic A's, which further amplify the information gap about each student's true progress.
- **Central office operations functions such as facilities, transportation, and food services can take principals' time away from instruction and not strategically support it.**
 - Operational systems in many districts do not consistently allow central office operations staff to respond quickly and well to school requests for support. Historically, operations staff have been tangential to, and not strategic partners in, schools' instructional mission.
 - Operations staff have interacted with students in lunchrooms, on school buses, and elsewhere in ways that perpetuate class- and race-based bias and contribute to the further marginalization of low-income students and students of color.
 - With COVID-19 shutdowns, operations staff in many districts rapidly and ably pivoted their work to safely close and secure school sites, and distribute meals and learning materials. Now, they must develop new routines around heightened public health rules, remote and hybrid learning, and antiracist engagement with students and families.

STRATEGIES TO CONSIDER

Principal supervisors support principals' instructional leadership growth when they dedicate their time to that work and coach principals from a teaching and learning approach, maintaining their instructional focus even amid operational demands.

- **In a comprehensive cross-district investigation, principals who increased their time on and engagement in instructional leadership were those whose principal supervisors supported them in doing so. These findings held true in larger districts with dedicated principal supervisors and in smaller systems where the superintendent served as supervisor.**
 - Supervisors supported principals' growth by helping them develop and implement personalized learning plans that focus them on leading their own learning.
 - Supervisors also did so by coaching principals one-on-one and in learning communities using a teaching and learning approach. That approach included helping principals exercise their autonomy to make culturally responsive instructional decisions even when those decisions conflicted with policy mandates.
 - As districts engage in remote and hybrid learning, principal supervisors are in a key position to help principals maintain and deepen their equity-focused instructional leadership. For example, they can ensure principals' learning plans address their leadership of remote and hybrid teaching from an antiracist stance.

Teaching & Learning (T&L) units bolster principals' equity-focused instructional leadership by supporting their use of a common, research-based definition of high-quality, culturally responsive teaching and by helping principals foster true teacher learning communities with the autonomy and resources necessary for teacher success.

■ **Research underscores the importance of districts not just adopting definitions of high-quality culturally responsive teaching, but also helping principals actively use those definitions to support teacher growth.**

- Principals who support teacher growth have used the definitions as the basis for providing teachers with challenging evidence-based feedback and for making strategic decisions about other support for teacher learning.
- The current context increases the urgency for T&L units to adapt those definitions to address quality remote, hybrid, and culturally responsive teaching as well as students' social-emotional wellness and leadership of their own learning.

■ **T&L units have supported principals by dedicating T&L staff time and tools to help school principals build true teacher learning communities and by differentiating their support to schools based on school priorities and capacity.**

- In districts that made the switch, T&L staff pivoted from positioning themselves as the main provider of PD to supporting teachers in leading their own learning with their colleagues on the job. These staff did so by redirecting their resources to helping principals and teachers build true communities of practice that foster teachers' continuous improvement. They also curated a menu of PD opportunities that principals and teachers could opt into, depending on their adult learning priorities.
- Such PD systems align well with the current context in which capacity for remote and hybrid learning varies by school and in which uncertainty about instructional delivery across the year requires significant teacher collaboration and agency.

Human Resources (HR) staff fuel principals' equity-focused instructional leadership when they recruit and select teachers based mainly on performance, and when they strategically partner with principals to ensure teachers are in the right roles and teams for their success, with an emphasis on recruiting and retaining teachers of color.

■ **Descriptive case studies show that HR units help improve the quality of teaching when they engage in performance-based hiring. Such hiring involves recruiting and selecting teachers based on the quality of their demonstrated practice, not mainly on formal credentials like clock hours or other status markers that are limited proxies for teaching quality and that risk race-based biases.**

- Performance-based hiring in these districts included candidates' participation in teaching demonstrations and other authentic activities and the redesign of recruitment and selection processes to identify and address race- and gender-based biases.
- Pandemic-related teacher turnover and negotiations with teachers' unions provide opportunities for districts to redesign hiring processes with an emphasis on teacher performance and diversity.

■ **HR units have partnered with each principal to strategically staff their schools in ways that are important to teacher and student success.**

- Strategic staffing involves principals not just seeking to fill vacancies as they arise but also proactively identifying which skills and competencies they need on their teacher teams to support teacher growth in service of student learning. HR then works to recruit and place teachers according to those plans.

- Strategic staffing is race explicit, and avoids predictable outcomes like limited retention of teachers of color when all of their immediate colleagues are white.
- Strategic staffing systems can help principals manage pandemic-related budget and staffing reductions by ensuring principals have identified and prioritized the expertise they need on each of their teacher teams for teacher and student success and then recruiting to meet those priorities.

■ **HR units can grow a cadre of high-quality substitute teachers and dramatically improve their district's substitute fill rate.**

- Research suggests that doing so involved shifting the substitute teacher system from one that mainly processed requests for classroom coverage to one that built a pipeline of high-quality substitute teachers who could ensure continuous student learning at particular schools. HR also helped principals work with data to understand and address root causes of teacher absenteeism, limiting the demand for substitute teachers.
- Districts with a strategic substitute teacher system are especially well-positioned to provide continuity of instruction in the face of potentially frequent health- and safety-related absences.

District data systems support principals' equity-focused instructional leadership by providing principals with ready access to information about their students and staff that helps principals take a strengths-based and antiracist approach.

■ **Critical analyses of data use in education underscore the importance of districts building their data systems with an antiracist, culturally responsive lens and ensuring that the system promotes the use of rich information about each student's strengths and areas for growth along clear, ambitious, research-based learning standards.**

- Such data move well beyond test scores to include samples of student work, teacher observations, and information that students and teachers choose to include to help them monitor their own progress. These data are in nested systems—allowing educators to link data about students, teachers, principals, schools, and other conditions to help educators identify and address systemic root causes of student learning.
- In the context of remote and hybrid learning, these data systems can help schools, students, and families work together to support student learning by ensuring access to up-to-date and family-friendly information about relevant learning standards, the status of student work toward those standards, and next steps for the student, family and school to ensure student success.

■ **Research shows principals and teachers are especially likely to use data systems to support student and teacher learning when they participate in the development of the systems and the systems are designed with teachers and principals as the main users.**

- Such systems grow in content and complexity in tandem with users' ability to use data and house the data that teachers and principals have identified they need to support student learning.
- Principals that have access to such systems can quickly assess which students lack resources for remote learning and adjust accordingly. As they learn more about students and families through surveys and other approaches during the pandemic, they can capture that information in the district data system to further guide student and teacher support.

Operational staff help principals engage in equity-focused instructional leadership when they provide high-quality services to schools and strategically partner with principals to ensure that facilities, transportation, and food services in particular support each school's instructional program.

- **In a multidistrict study, operational staff developed and used performance measures to track their work in ways that helped principals minimize their time on operational matters.**
 - In one district, facilities staff translated those efficiencies into funding redirected to instructional support by calculating the recovered hours in terms of principal salary.
 - Operational staff who work in these ways have ready capacity to pivot their work with schools to address new circumstances such as pandemic-related health and safety requirements and extended school building closures.
- **Operational staff in these districts eliminated redundant or nonessential work processes and refocused those resources on partnerships with principals to strategically support their schools' instructional program with an emphasis on their own antiracist interactions with students.**
 - In some schools, facilities staff participated on school leadership teams to help ensure that the school's physical environment supported its instructional program. Bus drivers received training on how to interact with students in antiracist and otherwise positive ways and on how to connect with parents to strengthen home-school connections. Nutrition services staff supported student learning in health and wellness and receive antibias training to positively engage with students around their financial challenges.
 - Operations staff positioned as such strategic partners can help principals return to in-person schooling with substantial time to focus on instructional improvement and with a broader team of adults supporting antiracist practices. They can also help ensure the equitable distribution of operational supports across schools with special attention to income- and race-based disparities.

STRATEGIES TO AVOID

Districts will miss a major opportunity if they do not heed the call of the current racial and social justice movement and plan now for a return to in-person schooling with fundamentally new, equity-focused systems in place.

- **Doing so means following best practices in crisis management in other sectors and focusing some staff on the kinds of deeper equity-focused systems changes identified above.**

Given the importance of principal leadership, districts must support rather than supervise principals in their efforts to realize equitable teaching and learning.

- **Principals and central office staff have been essential partners in handling pandemic-related school interruptions and, as the discussion above indicates, are also central to ensuring central office systems focus on supporting equity-focused instructional leadership.**

Maintaining traditional central office siloes will undermine districts' efforts to build systems that support principals' equity-focused instructional leadership.

- **When central office leaders and staff redesign systems within single siloes, they inevitably run into old ways of working in other parts of the central office that impede their progress and sometimes realize success in the target areas at the expense of other areas.**

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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Briefs in this series will address a broad range of COVID-19 challenges across five categories:

- Student Learning
- School Climate
- Supporting All Students
- Teachers
- Finances and Operations

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