

NEW LEADERS FOR NEW SCHOOLS
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Providing Instructional Leadership

Leadership in Practice

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Principals today wear many hats. They are the CEO's responsible for a business, the spokespeople responsible for a community, the government officials responsible for meeting regulations. But most importantly, they are lead teachers responsible for a staff of professionals. Research has shown that quality of instruction is the most important school factor in student success. The leadership that principals provide to their teaching staff is the most direct way for principals to influence quality of instruction. Without a strong instructional leader—without the right mix of guidance, opportunity, and inspiration—teachers may be working at odds with each other or they may be teaching with neither the rigor nor focus necessary to yield deep and meaningful learning. In discussions with principals of new and successful schools, eight approaches in particular arose again and again that helped them to provide effective instructional leadership. This review of *Leadership in Practice* delves into these eight findings:

1. Combine Small Phrases, the Big Picture, and a Book
2. Create Mechanisms to Bring the Written Descriptions of Your School to Life
3. Ask about Teaching
4. Ask about Learning
5. Observe Frequently and Unevenly
6. Debrief Observations by Moving From Results to Questions to Strategies
7. In Professional Development, Develop Professionals
8. Guide Teacher Development with a Light but Firm Touch

In addition to a discussion of these six findings, this document provides three scenarios that help elucidate real-life application of these ideas. These scenarios, based on actual experiences of principals, are intended to challenge the thinking of those studying to become principals, and reveal some of the nuance that is harder to convey in recommendations alone. They include:

- Structures to develop a professional community;
- Addressing systemic disengagement;
- The teacher with students beyond help.

Leadership in Practice consists of four articles on related topics: building a strong team, providing instructional leadership, using data effectively, and serving all children. These are designed for use by aspiring and new principals and their coaches and mentors, especially those leading—or planning to lead—the opening of a new school.

I. Combine Small Phrases, the Big Picture, and a Book

Great teaching begins with a commanding vision for learning, a philosophy of what education will be at your school. To be an instructional leader means to impart that vision in a way that it becomes part of the lifeblood of the school, the enduring message that forms the immutable backdrop of every classroom, every lesson, every day. A vision is, of course, more than words. But words are a critical beginning.

At most of the schools, a few key phrases that roll off the principal's tongue capture a succinct vision: One high school principal talks repeatedly about "college as an option for every student," while another describes a basic three-point message: "This is important. You can do this. I won't give up on you." An elementary school describes "a warm, welcoming community for everyone." These catch phrases risk feeling like advertisements, but like good advertising they become words that everyone knows by heart, and are invaluable for the principal to be able to state briefly, clearly, and repeatedly.

These small phrases are only the tip of the iceberg. Throughout each day at the school, there are innumerable opportunities to emphasize the way the school's vision appears in practice. If you believe your school will make college an option for every student, then what does this mean when you are reviewing a lesson plan? when you are observing a teacher? when you are discussing a failing student's prospects for graduation? You need to find ways to articulate this. Danika Lacroix puts it this way: "As principal you need to see the big picture all the time and help people see that."

"As principal you need to see the big picture all the time and help people see that. Help draw attention to the people whose ideas are matching that, but do it with a light touch. The teachers are the ones doing the work and making the decisions. You are there to help provide guidance and direction."

Danika Lacroix

Your simple big picture likely ties to a host of smaller pieces that cannot easily be stated in one catch phrase. It can be overwhelming to try to communicate all these different pieces to faculty at once. One effective approach used by many principals to help people dig into the details of the big picture is by turning to one educational theorist. A common approach is by identifying one book—not a series of articles that can become scattered or overwhelming, nor a few quick statements that lack depth—but rather a complete document that puts meat on the bones of an educational philosophy. (For example, some principals turn to *The Skillful Teacher*, by Jon Saphier.) Ask the entire staff to read and discuss some or all of the book as a portion of summer planning, and ensure that the discussion is thoughtful so that people can intellectually dig into the ideas. This gives you the opportunity to build a common language at your school informed by the words that most likely inspired you to open a school in the first place.

[\[back to top\]](#)

II. Create Mechanisms to Bring the Descriptions to Life

If you are opening a new school, you were likely involved in the process of describing the school in a lengthy written proposal. And behind each classroom and subject area, you expect there to be a curriculum map outlining the units to be taught and skills and knowledge to be learned. At many schools, these two documents—the school proposal and curriculum maps—sit on shelves collecting dust. For most of the principals interviewed for this article, that was emphatically not the case.

At Young Scholars' Academy, for example, every new hire is given a copy of the school proposal and summer training includes time to discuss and raise questions about what it describes. At El Puente Academy, a three-person Curriculum Committee made up of veteran teachers at the school reviews and gives feedback on sample units and unit assessments from every teacher each summer.

In each case, there are a few simple ingredients that help turn the written word into lived practice: a realistic amount of time for staff to read and mark up existing documents, structured opportunity for some or all staff to share and discuss feedback, and a final write up. The Curriculum Committee at El Puente does this in one way—using the expertise of a group of staff as a method of quality assurance—while the proposal reading at Young Scholars' Academy does it another way—sharing a document developed by the principal but doing so in a way that encourages and incorporates feedback. Each effectively mixes both bottom-up and top-down decision-making, and each helps staff to recognize that what is in writing is important but not immutable: they have a structured and meaningful chance to comment on it and change it each year.

[\[back to top\]](#)

III. Ask the Teachers

While classroom observations and professional development are critical formal structures for supporting teachers (discussed in points V, VI, VII, and VIII below), there is an equally critical, but more informal, form of support that comes before these: the face-to-face conversation.

Have one-on-one conversations with teachers as often as you can, particularly in the first year when each conversation helps define the vision for your school—most principals had such one-on-one conversations with every teacher at least once a week in their first year, though the pace necessarily slackened in ensuing years. These conversations are the key place where you can highlight your view of instruction. (These conversations also help you build a strong team. For more on this, see the *Leadership in Practice* article on “Building a Strong Team.”)

In having these conversations, it is better to avoid criticizing or counseling, unless the conversation directly follows an observation or student conversation (see points IV and VII below). Instead, principals generally suggest three questions, and they emphasize that if you are going to ask the questions, you have to be open to hearing and responding to the answers:

“Teachers are so happy to have someone asking them their opinion that if you do, you will get real valuable results. Often the first question I ask after I see a teacher in their classroom is, ‘What did you think of that lesson? How would you rate yourself?’ They are really honest.”

Li Yan

What do you need? When you have nothing else to ask a teacher, or when you think they may be struggling, ask them how you can help. There's the very general version: “I just wanted to check in

and see if you need anything from me.” Then there’s the more directed version: “What do you need so kids can get their needs met?”

What do you think? You have ideas all the time, but, as Li Yan points out, those ideas can’t take root unless others have had the chance to mull them over. When you have an idea that can affect instruction or curriculum at the school, offer it up to a one-on-one conversations and ask them, “What do you think?”

What do you suggest? The professionals on your staff have many ideas about how instruction can improve at the school. One-on-one conversations are the perfect place to solicit these without someone feeling on the spot and without the ideas becoming immediately public. Ask for suggestions of what can be done in the classroom around instruction, classroom management, rituals and routines, assessments, curriculum, or any number of components.

[\[back to top\]](#)

IV. Know the Students

A vision for teaching is empty without an understanding of learning. Whenever possible, bring data into conversations you have with teachers during observations or professional development. There are many other ways to do this, some of which are discussed in the *Leadership in Practice* article on “Using Data Effectively.” However, one simple approach that principals emphasize is this: Talk to students.

When conducting classroom observations or walking the hallway, ask students about what they are learning, what they aren’t learning, what engages them and what doesn’t engage them in class. These brief conversations are cited by several principals as the most important pieces of information they can bring into conversations with teachers. When possible, write down exact comments from students and make a note of exactly what they were referencing (a specific teacher’s lesson, a ritual in a specific class, etc.), then refer to these in helping the teacher understand what does or does not appear to be working in their teaching.

[\[back to top\]](#)

V. Observe Frequently and Unevenly

Virtually every principal interviewed for this article cited time in the classroom as a significant portion of how they spend each week. In general, most had developed a leadership team—with Assistant Principals, coaches, or lead teachers who also conducted observations—such that no one was responsible for observing more than about eight teachers’ classrooms. Much of what the principals do in these observations follows directly out of the literature on observations—observing both teaching and learning, taking low-inference notes, aligning observations to instructional vision and structures—and need not be elucidated further here. Two additional small but significant points, however, were made by several principals:

First, in the choice between frequency and duration, choose frequency. It was more important to the principals to get into every teacher's classroom on a regular basis, even if that meant visits of just five to ten minutes, than to spend full periods in a single classroom.

Second, identify your top priority teachers—the ones who need the most help—and give them significantly more of your time in observations. Michele Shannon speaks of this as “pouring into” the teachers who need it, and Hector Calderon speaks of working with a teacher endlessly to turn their claims that, “This is impossible for these kids,” into a question of, “How do we make this possible for these kids?” Generally, principals would note somewhere between three and five teachers who they were “pouring into” in a given year. With this high priority group, they would visit classrooms at least once a week, offer feedback and suggestions of specific strategies, and model and co-teach strategies in the classroom.

[\[back to top\]](#)

VI. Move from Results to Questions to Strategies

Debriefing of classroom observations has the potential to be a powerful experience for improving teaching, a negative experience that generates resentment, or a vapid experience that wastes everyone's time. How do you make it most effective?

Start with results. Start from the most important endpoint: student learning. When you were in the classroom, what level of engagement did you see from students? Who didn't appear engaged? If you talked to students, what did they say about what they were learning? Were they able to articulate it clearly and thoughtfully? If you have collected other data, such as assessment results, grades on assignments, or samples of student work, what did you see? Have notes on these results ready ahead of time so that you can clearly articulate a few of the results that are most important to you.

Bridge with questions and facts. From having talked about results (both positive and negative), note a few facts about what specific things you observed and questions these raise for you, being careful to make them questions that are truly seeking meaningful response from the teacher, not veiled criticisms. For example, “I observed that you...?” “I was wondering what you were thinking about when you...?” “Could you give me some insight into why you...?” “How do you see... helping students?”

End with strategies. If you shared the right results and asked the right questions, you should naturally be segueing into discussing one or two specific strategies to improve results. This may be

“There are three things I try to communicate after an observation. First, I don't care about strategy, I care about results. I want to see the strategies that will help us get there. Second, I'm not criticizing you personally, I'm criticizing because of data. Third, the ultimate responsibility lies with us.”

Hector Calderon

something they are already doing, and your suggestions are to improve it, or it may be something new for them to try. Depending on the teacher and your assessment of past observations, you will likely reach this in different ways: asking the teacher for their suggestion, giving them a suggestion yourself, providing them with resources, arranging for them to visit another teacher's classroom, or setting up a time to model or co-teach a lesson with them.

[\[back to top\]](#)

VII. Develop Professionals

All schools have professional development. At the schools reviewed for this article, however, they truly aim to develop professionals. Principals view a major portion of professional development activities through the lens of giving teachers opportunities for meaningful leadership. In the small schools that predominate among new schools today, where there is no “middle management” level between the principal and teachers, this approach of helping teachers to fill that valuable managerial role is critical to the success of the school. Five recommendations stand out in particular:

Form a Leadership Team. As much as some principals shy away from playing favorites with their staff, the reality is that there are certain people whose understanding your vision, ability to generate ideas, and willingness to commit extra energy make them invaluable contributors to decision-making. Virtually every principal interviewed for this article cites a leadership team as a valuable part of their school. These teams generally meet weekly and address issues of yearlong organizational goals, curriculum, and week-by-week administrative planning.

Different principals take different approaches regarding whom they ask to serve on this team. Several aim to have a distribution of teachers, bringing together the team leaders from different grade-level or subject-area teams. Others explicitly avoid having classroom teachers so as to make it easier to look objectively at classroom data, including instead a special education teacher and others who have push-in, pull-out, or coaching assignments.

Structure Both Year-Long Roles and One-Time Projects for Leaders. Every principal interviewed for this article looks to teacher leaders to lead either or both grade-level and subject-area meetings. These leadership roles, hardwired into the school structure, are a valuable place for teachers to give guidance to their colleagues and generate ideas for improvement at the individual, group, and schoolwide level. In addition to these pre-defined roles, they also often turned to individual teachers to take on one-time projects that might last a month or a year—from revising the ELA curriculum from 9th through 12th grade to sharing a practice for classroom management.

“If you were to ask me for the single thing that has had the most impact on our results at this school, I would say it’s distributed leadership.”

Janet Price

Discover Talent. Once you have these spots for teacher leaders, the next challenge is to fill them effectively. The best leaders are well-organized, can keep people on task, and have earned their colleagues' respect. Janet Price, Principal of Brooklyn Preparatory High School, notes that some of the potential for adult leadership can be seen in teaching practices: Teachers who have assembled clear lesson and unit plans and who have good classroom management technique often make good teacher leaders. It is not only great leaders you are seeking, of course, but also great teachers. One time to keep this in mind is during observations. When you see something good, don't think only of the feedback you will give this teacher. Ask them if they will lead a session to share it with colleagues. This combines recognition with an opportunity to develop leadership and communication skills.

Make It Easier to Dig into Problems than Complain about Them. If you view your staff as professionals engaging in expert work, then you should expect those professionals to share expertise. Yet, often in schools staff feel more like labor, following orders to get the job done. Among the schools reviewed in this article, one common way to emphasize the former and avoid the latter is to give—almost force—teachers to have the experience of trying to solve the problems that irk them. (Some of this is discussed in the accompanying article, “Leadership in Practice: Building a Strong Team.”) One way of doing this is responsive: When a teacher voices a complaint and you feel it is legitimate, ask them to help you address it. Another way is more proactive: At El Puente Academy, responsibility for facilitation of grade-level discussions of students rotates through every teacher, and the week before a teacher facilitates, they take notes. This brings every teacher deeply into the discussion of challenges at the school in a way that they are forced—through both facilitation and writing—to think about them deeply.

If You Look Outside, Make It Special. It is notable that principals did not discuss outside professional development very much in highlighting important practices at their schools. When they did, however, it was with particular emphasis on it being an exceptional experience for their staff. Again, this reflected their view of staff as professionals: If you are going to ask professionals to take several hours or days of their time for something, it must be valuable. For instance, Li Yan sends his staff to national conferences at cities across the country and asks them to bring back lessons learned. Derek Jones highlights the four-day retreats his staff goes on with an outside organization as an opportunity for them to think deeply about instruction while building a strong team.

[\[back to top\]](#)

VIII. Guide Teacher Development with a Light but Firm Touch

The professional development structures in which teachers are expected to collaborate and discuss teaching and learning need some structure if they are not to become wasted time. Principals provide that structure with a light but firm touch.

At most of the schools the leaders for these teams are teachers who opt to be in the role, either through nomination by their peers or by expressing interest to the principal. If and when the principal or other administrators attend the meetings, they do so as participants actively avoiding being proffered

any special status and holding back from influencing the conversation. This is the “light” part of the touch that allows teachers to step up and take responsibility for their work.

However, just because they avoid dominating conversation does not mean they are not involved. Empowering teachers means both stepping aside and stepping in. As a general rule, the principals (or an assistant principal as the school grows) meet with each of their team leaders anywhere from once a month to once a week. Some do this in a group, and some one-on-one. There are three simple yet critical things the principal does in relation to these conversations. First, read and review agendas for upcoming meetings and discuss the topics to be discussed, raising questions or suggestions. Second, troubleshoot recent meetings and offer guidance on leadership and facilitation. Third, document the discussion and provide notes back.

[\[back to top\]](#)

A. Structures to Develop a School Vision and a Professional Community

At El Puente Academy for Social Justice, a school founded on the notions of individual empowerment through community support, the school has created uniquely named structures that simultaneously reinforce the vision for the school and provide various opportunities for teachers to be involved as leaders:

- **Academic Leadership Circle** is a group of the school's most veteran staff along with lead teachers from each department. ALC meets weekly to discuss administrative and curricular issues.
- **Curriculum Committee** is a three-person committee of the ALC that reviews a sample of every teacher's units and goals for student learning each summer.
- **Academic Departments** are led by a teacher from the Academic Leadership Circle and work on one project for each department selected at the beginning of each year.
- **Sankofa**, which means "community," consists of all 9th and 10th grade teachers and meets weekly to focus on matters related to student learning and the guiding question of student identity. It is facilitated by a different teacher each week.
- **Liberation** is similar to Sankofa, but consists of all 11th and 12th grade teachers, and focuses on the guiding question of how to turn ideas into action.
- **HIP (Holistic Individualized Process) Team** is a group of teachers formed voluntarily to focus on issues of school culture.
- **IAP (Integrated Arts Project)** is a group of teachers formed voluntarily to focus on one social justice theme identified each year (the year this was written, it was *immigration*) and help other teachers integrate that theme across disciplines.
- **Full Staff Meetings** are held once a week and focus largely on administrative matters (so as not to focus on these matters in other meetings).

How will the structures in your school help to make your vision more than just words? How will they help develop teachers as professionals?

Scenario B. Addressing Systemic Disengagement

Schools have different themes and approaches that make their educational philosophy unique. At Li Yan's High School for Dual Language and Asian Studies (check this name), every student takes Chinese class. Put yourself in Li Yan's shoes when he came back from a round of observing classes and talking to students and realized that Chinese instruction looked too much like it did back in China. Teachers were using texts from China that bore little or no connection to the current experiences and expectations of students in the United States. He saw students disengaging in the class and heard them complain about it being irrelevant.

There are many ways you could handle such a, in which you see a shortcoming in your school that goes beyond a single teacher. What would you do? How would you raise the issue? What follow up would you request?

When faced with a similar situation, Li Yan did five things. Each of these reflect his belief in showing respect to teachers, providing guidance while simultaneously empowering them to take matters into their hands, and his confidence in the ability of the teachers he hired to be reflective and take responsibility for matters:

1. **Initiate with a one-on-one conversation.** Rather than raising the issue publicly, he raised it in a one-on-one conversation with the ESL team leader so that she could be the one to tackle the issue.
2. **Give one team a specific charge to look into the matter.** He then asked the team leader to work with her team to answer two questions: "Why are we teaching Chinese in the first place—how will it benefit our students? If we better know the reasons it will benefit our students, how can we use this to motivate them?"
3. **Provide feedback to the team and encourage them to start small.** The next week, the team leader told him that her department felt that Chinese instruction should help students learn the content required in other classes. To do this, they suggested integrating class content into Chinese instruction school-wide.
4. **Suggest focus in high-need areas.** Rather than starting school-wide, he asked them to start smaller, focusing on one class in ninth grade. Since students generally struggle most in biology, he suggested starting by integrating biology content into the Chinese class.
5. **Participate in team meetings to learn from the effort.** He then sat in as an observer at some of the ESL department meetings where they discussed how to do this, lending some weight to the discussion.
6. **Help the small effort to be shared through other teams and one-on-one conversations.** Later, he encouraged other team leaders to learn from the science and ESL teams about what they were doing, counting on the initial conversation between two departments at one grade level to spawn more one-on-one conversations and expand school-wide through discussions in subject-area and grade-level teams.

C. The Teacher with Students beyond Help

Principals tend to have a small number of teachers—typically three to six—for whom they know significant intervention is needed over the course of the year. You already know Mr. G in math class may be such a teacher. In your his first observation of the year, you see four disengaged to the point of distraction for the entire lesson. In the debriefing, you raise this and ask Mr. G for his thoughts about what to do. His reply: “We should see how to get those kids out of this school. They’re beyond help.” Some teachers have the right beliefs and just need to develop the right skills. This teacher didn’t have the right beliefs. What do you do? What is your first attempt, and what are your backups?

Hector Calderon faced a situation like this. Here’s what he did:

- **Gather data together.** For three weeks, he visited the classroom twice a week. In these visits, he jotted down observations of the four students and took a moment after each class to briefly discuss what the teacher saw these students doing. He used these conversations to get a shared set of data about the four students.
- **Ask the teacher how to help.** He then reminded the teacher of the school’s core message—“This is important. You can do this. I won’t give up on you.”—and asked how they could help the four students have the confidence and put in the effort necessary to succeed. The teacher agreed with the message in theory, but continued to insist that nothing could be done to help the students.
- **Change perceptions before changing strategies.** The teacher agreed that Hector would come in and teach one or two of his class periods. Rather than use this time to model a specific strategy, Hector used it to bring discussion of student out in public. In the first class, he asked the students to reflect on the same question he had asked the teacher: How do confidence and effort lead to success? At first, students had trouble engaging, but with some encouragement, they offered examples of times they had succeeded through effort. The next day, he asked the students who was smart in the class. When he then asked what those students did that makes them smart, he was able to highlight various examples of confidence and effort leading to success.
- **With perceptions changed, suggest specific strategies.** When he next met with the teacher, Mr. G was now prepared to believe that helping the students was a possible. It had taken four weeks, but they were ready to discuss specific strategies the teacher could try to engage those four students.
- **Observe and support strategies.** For the next three weeks, Hector continued to visit the classroom one to two times every week, now focusing on implementation of the strategies and lauding the teacher’s effort for each small development.
- **Review student data in light following use of strategies.** At the next marking period, Hector again collected observations of those four specific students and looked at samples of their work with the teacher. There was noticeable improvement—it was nothing dramatic, but it was a beginning. Together, they discussed what they saw and Hector used questions to emphasize what strategies the teacher had used to achieve those results, thereby ensuring that he felt responsibility for the change.