



TRENDS IN PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR LEADERSHIP AND SUPPORT

Results from Two Surveys of Principal Supervisors
in America's Great City Schools

Council of the Great City Schools
Spring 2020

Trends in Principal Supervisor Leadership and Support:

Results from Two Surveys of Principal Supervisors in America's Great
City Schools

By

Amanda Cochran

Ray Hart

Michael Casserly

Council of the Great City Schools

Trends in School Leadership and Support

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	3
METHODOLOGY	6
DATA AND TRENDS IN THE PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR ROLE AND CHARACTERISTICS	7
NUMBER AND TENURE OF PRINCIPAL SUPERVISORS.....	7
SPAN OF CONTROL.....	8
PRINCIPAL SUPERVISOR ROLES AND SUPPORT ACTIVITIES.....	9
DISTRICT SUPPORT AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR PRINCIPAL SUPERVISORS	13
CENTRAL OFFICE AND OTHER SUPPORT TO PRINCIPALS AND SCHOOLS.....	18
PRINCIPAL EVALUATION SYSTEMS.....	20
DISCUSSION	22

Executive Summary

This report presents findings from two national surveys of principal supervisors, one conducted in 2012 and one conducted in 2018. The surveys focused on the selection, deployment, function, support, professional development, and evaluation of staff in these roles. While the surveys are not identical, respondents were asked many of the same questions as before, providing a longitudinal look at how the role of principal supervisors—and districts' support for this work—has evolved over the years.

The survey results indicate that substantial progress has been made in the last six years. Districts have continued to redefine their priorities and the day-to-day activities of staff in these roles. They have narrowed the spans of control of principal supervisors, allowing them to provide more hands-on support and guidance to the principals that were assigned to them. Turnover among principal supervisors has dropped, and staff in these roles are now more experienced than they were in 2012. Principal supervisors report engaging with principals around instruction and data more than ever and spending less time on non-instructional (operational) activities such as budget, facilities, or human resource issues than before. Instead, they now spend a significant amount of their time in schools visiting classrooms, providing principals with actionable feedback, and modeling effective coaching.

The data also revealed several areas still in need of improvement—particularly in the areas of professional development and evaluation of principal supervisors—as well as a common need across districts for greater central office communication and coordination in support of schools. Moreover, the survey data revealed a critical lack of investment in leadership pipelines—programs designed to build a bench of staff equipped with the knowledge and leadership skills required to step into the role of principal supervisor or other leadership positions.

In sum, this investigation of the principal supervisory and support structures of large urban school districts shows that, while still a work in progress, school systems are continuing their decades-long efforts to better define and align the instructional role of principal supervisors to improve the academic outcomes of schools and students. These efforts have likely played an important role in the larger reforms being pursued by the nation's urban public-school systems.

Introduction

In the fall of 2012, the Council of the Great City Schools received a grant from The Wallace Foundation to investigate the ways principals were supported and evaluated in large urban school districts across the country. The project was a part of the foundation's endeavor to strengthen school leadership in the nation's public-school systems—the focus of their work in education, and one that is grounded in research demonstrating the importance of school leadership in improving student outcomes.

The Council's specific area of investigation revolved around the special role of principal supervisors in boosting the capacity and instructional focus of school principals. To conduct the study, the Council surveyed principal supervisors in member school districts, asking them to provide data on their backgrounds and tenure in the position, their reporting structures, the roles they played and activities they engaged in at the school and district levels, the professional development provided to them, and the perceived effectiveness of the principal-evaluation system.

The results of this survey were summarized in the report [*Principal Evaluations and the Principal Supervisor: Survey Results from the Great City Schools*](#), released in March of 2013. In general, the data from the survey indicated that principal supervisors were playing an increasingly important role in supporting principals and improving student achievement. Survey results also showed that the roles and responsibilities of principal supervisors had shifted substantially in the two years leading up to the survey, from 2010 to 2012, and were poised to continue this evolution toward instructional leadership in the years to come.

Following the release of this survey, the Wallace Foundation and the Council of the Great City Schools embarked on a follow-up effort, called the Principal Supervisor Initiative (PSI), designed to advance district strategic planning and reform efforts in the area of school leadership. This effort included a multi-year investment in Council-provided technical assistance site visits—along with other Wallace Foundation activities—for a cohort of districts embarking on principal supervisor-focused reforms.

In addition, the Council partnered with Mathematica and Vanderbilt University in 2018 to launch a second, follow-up survey of principal supervisors across Council member districts to examine changes in the principal supervisor role since the Council's original survey in 2012. Respondents were asked many of the same questions as before concerning their background, deployment, types of support they provided, the activities they engaged in on a day-to-day basis, and the in-service support and professional development they received. The survey also touched on an array of new topics, based on what the Council and the Wallace Foundation had learned in the intervening years from the Principal Supervisor Initiative regarding factors that contributed to effective oversight and support for schools and principals.

This new report brings together our observations and findings from both surveys of principal supervisors nationwide on the selection, deployment, function, support, professional development, and evaluation of staff in these roles, and how these features

and functions have changed over the years. Taken together, the data provide a picture of the current landscape and how the roles of principal supervisors have evolved in recent years. In addition, we attempt to put the reforms pursued through this initiative into a broader context of national reform and improvement efforts. Moreover, the findings suggest ways that districts can continue to cultivate instructional leadership in service of stronger schools and improved student achievement.

Methodology

In 2012, the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS) surveyed its then 67-member urban public-school districts along with two non-member districts that were part of a Wallace Foundation initiative to help districts develop pipelines of effective principals. The survey, conducted *via* Survey Monkey, was sent to superintendents in each district, who were asked to forward the survey to staff member(s) who best fit the “principal supervisor” role. The instrument remained in the field between October 10 and November 26, 2012, and multiple reminders were sent by the Council to boost response rates.

Survey responses with usable data were received from 41 of the 67 CGCS member districts and the two other non-member Wallace pipeline districts for a response rate of 62.3 percent (43 of 69). It is important to note that most districts have more than one principal supervisor, so the total number of responses involved 135 individuals in the 43 districts.

In general, the survey asked for information about the characteristics and roles of principal supervisors, the professional development provided to them, and the perceived effectiveness of their principal-evaluation systems. The survey also asked respondents to indicate how these roles and responsibilities had changed between 2010 and 2012. Otherwise, all results applied to the school year ending in June 2012. Apart from selected data on the numbers of principal supervisors, all data were reported in the aggregate rather than by district.

To follow up on this survey, the Council partnered with Mathematica and Vanderbilt University in 2018 to launch a second district survey of principal supervisors across Council member districts and over time. The survey sought to capture changes in the principal supervisor role over the nearly ten-year period since the Council’s original survey. To this end, the 2018 iteration of the principal supervisor survey asked many of the same questions that were asked in 2012 regarding the selection, support, and deployment of principal supervisors, as well as some new questions to expand our understanding of how principal supervisors function in districts. Comparing the results of the two surveys therefore provides us with a compelling picture of how this role has evolved over the intervening years.

The 2018 survey was conducted in approximately the same way as the 2012 survey was administered. An announcement of the new study was sent to superintendents in each of the Council’s now-70 member districts. Superintendents were asked to forward a list of principal supervisors to the Council, and 63 of the districts provided a list of staff member(s) who best fit the “principal supervisor” role. The 2018 survey was then sent to the principal supervisors identified by the superintendents in the 63 districts, and the instrument remained in the field between April and September 2018, with multiple reminders sent by the Council to boost response rates. Surveys were received from 391 principal supervisors out of the 580 names submitted by the superintendents (67.4 percent), representing 59 of the 70 Council member districts (84.3 percent). The Council’s sample differs slightly from a parallel report on the PSI districts conducted by Mathematica and Vanderbilt University. The Council’s report includes responses from all surveys completed between April and September, while the parallel report excludes responses from five

districts participating in other principal pipeline initiatives sponsored by The Wallace Foundation.

Data and Trends in the Principal Supervisor Role and Characteristics

The data in this section compare the results of the 2012 and 2018 surveys on questions that were common to both. Findings are also presented on the results of the most recent survey—without direct comparisons to 2012—when they inform trends across the period or reflect insights that the Wallace Foundation and the Council were gleaning from the work. The reader should remember that the survey was conducted on the full Council membership, not solely on the handful of districts that participated in the larger Wallace principal-supervisor initiative.¹

Number and Tenure of Principal Supervisors

One of the central questions from both the initial survey and its follow-up involved the number of staff members or principal supervisors that urban school systems employed and how long they had been in their current positions. The importance of this question rested on the extent to which urban school systems were deploying principal supervisors and whether was increasing or decreasing. Results showed that the 2012 mean number of principal supervisors per district was eight in 2012 compared to nine in 2018 (Table 1).

Yet while the average number of principal supervisors across the entire Council membership did not change appreciably over the period, the mean tenure of principal supervisors doubled from three years in the position in 2012 to six years in the position in 2018. (Table 2). Interestingly, the mode also increased from one year in the position to three years in the position.

The results of the initial survey also suggested that there was extensive turnover in the principal supervisor position between 2010 and 2012 and that the role was in continuous flux during that period—consistently being revised or reinvented as districts experimented with what worked. The 2018 results suggest, however, that the role had become more stable over time, with principal supervisors guiding and supporting urban school principals much more experienced in 2018 than they were in 2012.

¹ A comparison of PSI districts and non-PSI districts on many of the same questions will be described in a forthcoming report by Mathematica.

Trends in School Leadership and Support

Table 1. Number of Principal Supervisors in Urban Districts, 2012 and 2018

Principal Supervisors	Number in 2012 (n=135) from 41 School Districts	Number in 2018 (N=580) from 63 School Districts
Minimum	2	1
Maximum	41	48
Average	8	9
Median	5	7
Mode	4	5

Table 2. Principal Supervisors Years of Experience in Current Position, 2012 and 2018

Years as a Principal Supervisor	2012 (n=133)	2018 (N=386)
Minimum	1	1
Maximum	11	30
Average	3	6
Median	2	4
Mode	1	3

Span of Control

One of the central tenets of the Wallace project was that if principal supervisors had smaller numbers of schools and principals to oversee, then they could focus more effectively on the instructional mission of their school leaders—if that focus were indeed redefined. Perhaps the most telling change since the 2012 survey was the decline in the span of control of principal supervisors across Council-member districts. Table 3 indicates that the mean number of principals supervised declined from 24 in 2012 to 16 in 2018, with most supervisors reporting that they oversaw 12 principals.

This reduction, combined with the additional average experience of principal supervisors, suggests that the direct support to schools was stronger and more targeted than in past years. The data supports the observation by Council site-visit teams that districts had expanded the capacity of principal supervisors to support principals over the project period.

Table 3. Number of Principals Reporting to Principal Supervisors, 2012 and 2018

Principal Direct Reports	2012 (n=135)	2018 (N=378)
Minimum	3	2
Maximum	100	50
Average	24	16
Median	18	14
Mode	15	12

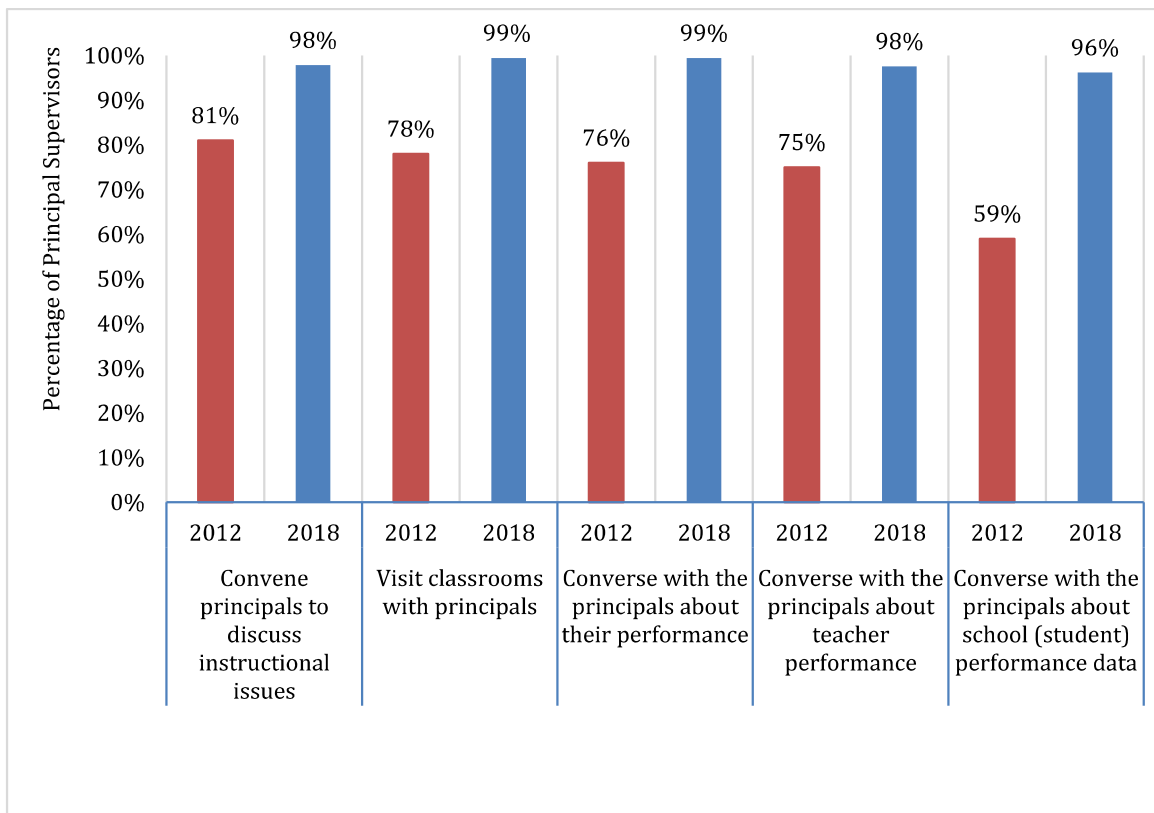
The reader should keep in mind, however, that the survey was conducted across the Council membership—and not solely Wallace PSI districts—and that this period was marked by large numbers of school closings and consolidations that could have contributed to the reduced span of control in these urban school districts. Additional analysis would be needed to tease out these effects. Nonetheless, it was clear that districts were retaining their principal supervisors over the period and their span of control was dropping.

Principal Supervisor Roles and Support Activities

The evolving role of principal supervisors and principals was also of primary interest to both the Wallace Foundation and the Council. The expectation of both organizations was that additional emphasis would be placed on instructional activities if the role of principal supervisors was indeed changing. Between 98 and 99 percent of principal supervisors responding to the 2018 survey reported that they convened principals to discuss instructional issues, visit classrooms, and converse about their performance and the performance of their teachers, compared to between 75 and 81 percent in 2012 (Figure 1).

Similarly, substantially more principal supervisors reported discussing school and student performance data with principals in 2018 compared to 2012, 96 percent vs. 59 percent, respectively (Figure 1).

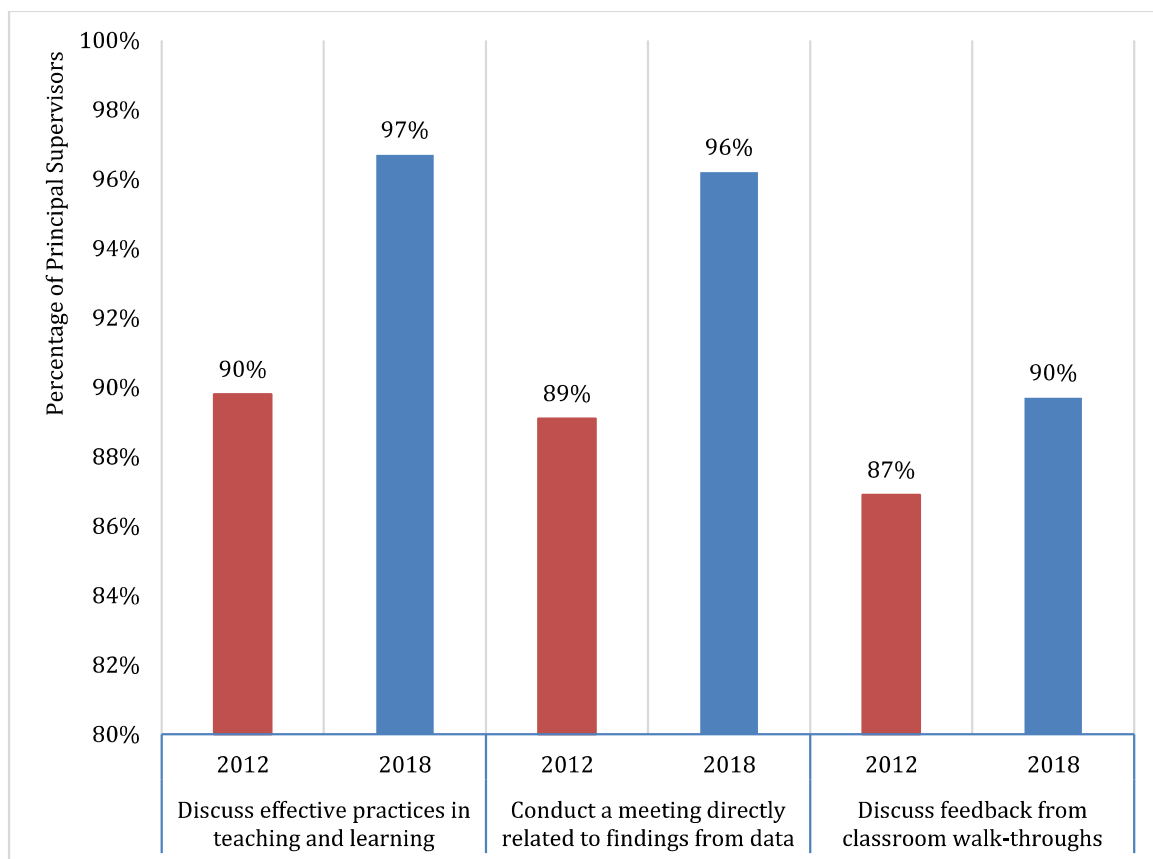
Figure 1. Percentage of Principal Supervisors Conducting Discussions or Activities with Principals on Specified Instructional Areas, 2012 and 2018



Trends in School Leadership and Support

The survey revealed that principal supervisors' engagement with principals increased in other ways as well. Figure 2 shows that a higher percentage of supervisors discussed effective practices in teaching and learning, conducted meetings directly related to findings from data, and discussed feedback from classroom walk-throughs with principals.

Figure 2. Percentage of Principal Supervisors Conducting Discussions and/or Activities with Principals on Specified Instructional Areas(continued), 2012 and 2018



In addition to questions about the kinds of work and activities principal supervisors were engaged in, the 2018 survey asked principal supervisors to give an overall estimate of the time they spent on various aspects of their role—a datapoint that speaks volumes on the priorities and focus of these leaders.

In response, principal supervisors reported that nearly half (49 percent) of their work time was spent providing instructional leadership to schools (Figure 3), with most of a typical week (50 percent) spent visiting schools directly (Figure 4).

The data shown in Figures 3 and 4 were not collected in the same way in 2012 as in 2018, making direct comparisons difficult, but the findings provide additional detail and color on what principal supervisors were doing with their time. The results strongly suggest that activities related to enhanced instruction were dominating the work of principal supervisors in the most recent survey.

Figure 3. Percent of Principal Supervisor Time Allocation When Working with Their Principals, 2018

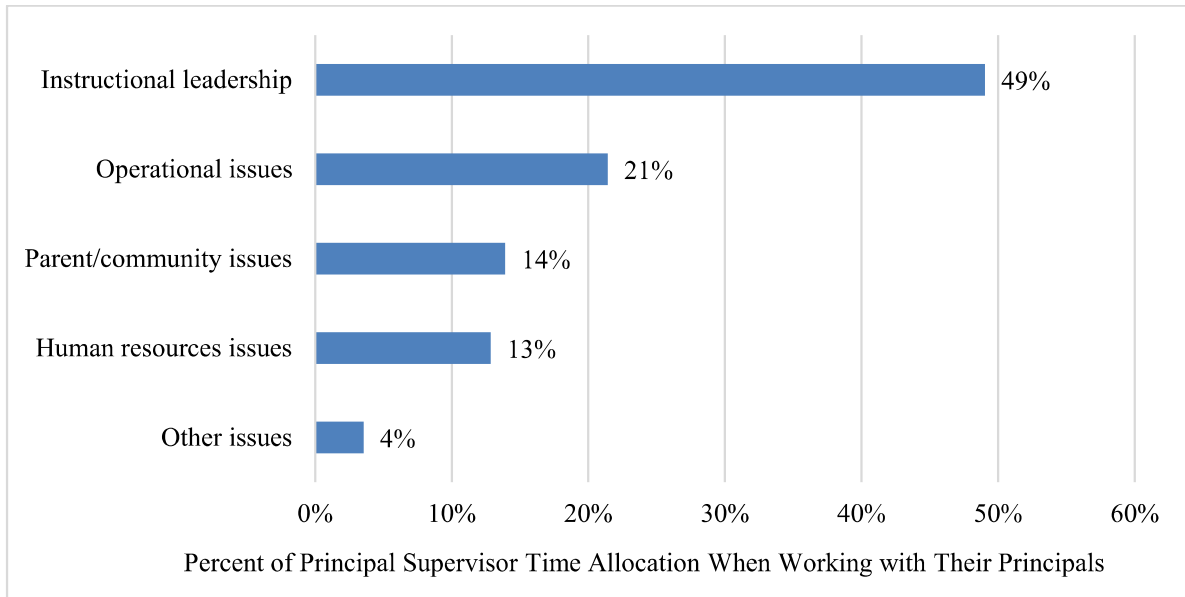
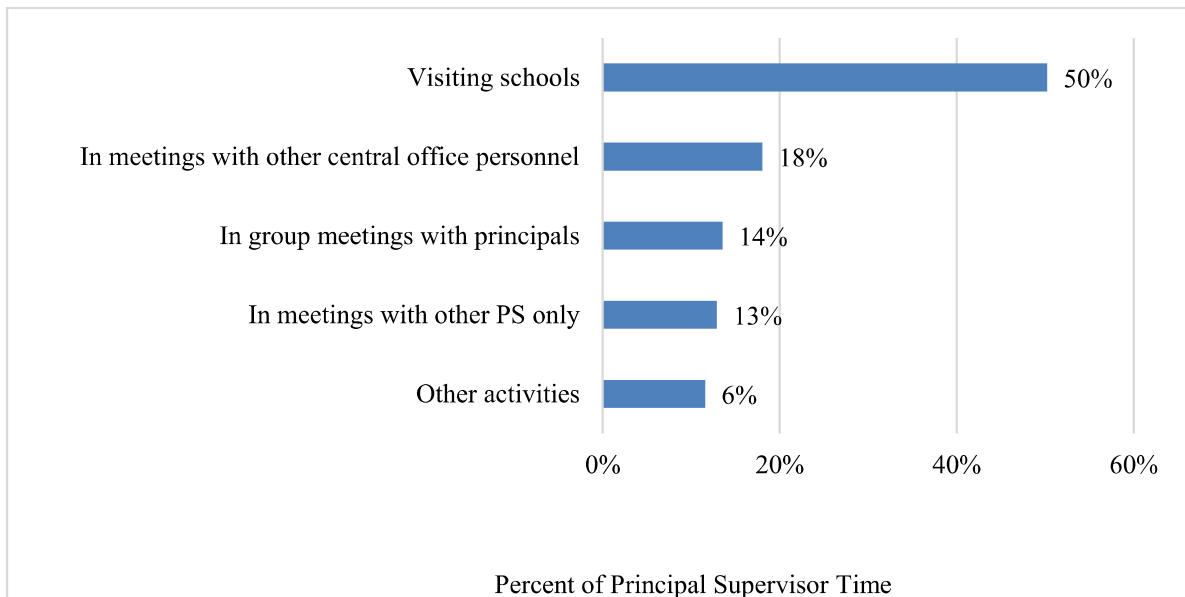


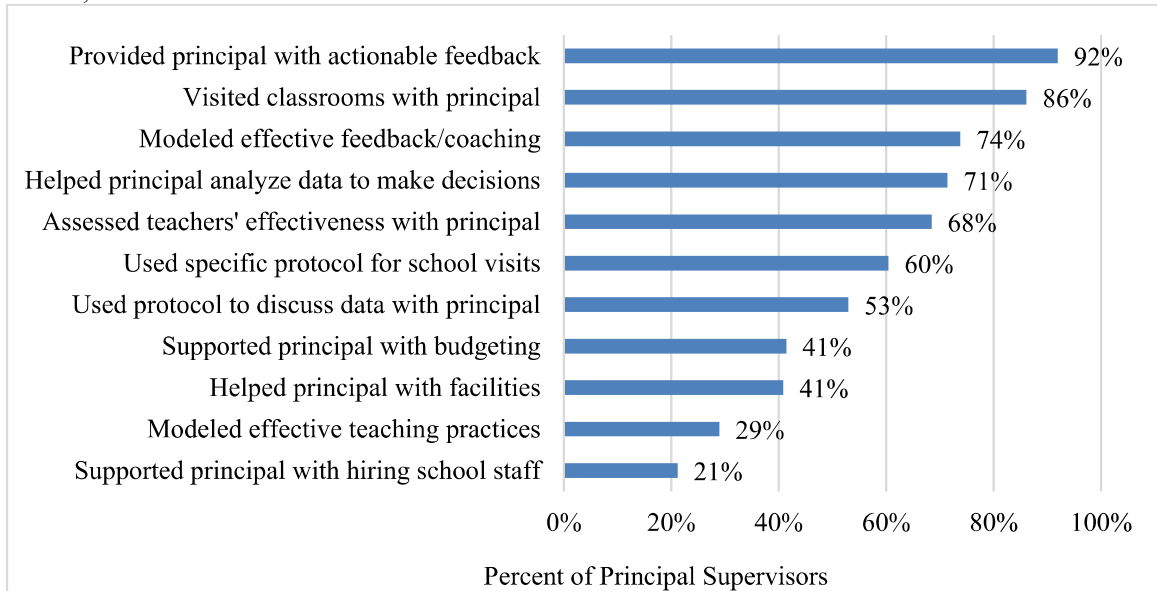
Figure 4. Percent of Principal Supervisor Time in a Typical Week, 2018



Principal supervisors also reported in 2018 that they “Usually” or “Always” spent a great deal of their time in schools providing principals with actionable feedback, visiting classrooms, modeling effective feedback and coaching, and helping principals analyze data (Figure 5). Some principal supervisors (29 percent) even reported modeling effective teaching practices when visiting schools. Moreover, principal supervisors generally reported providing less support for non-instructional (operational) activities such as budget, facilities, or human resource issues than for instructional activities.

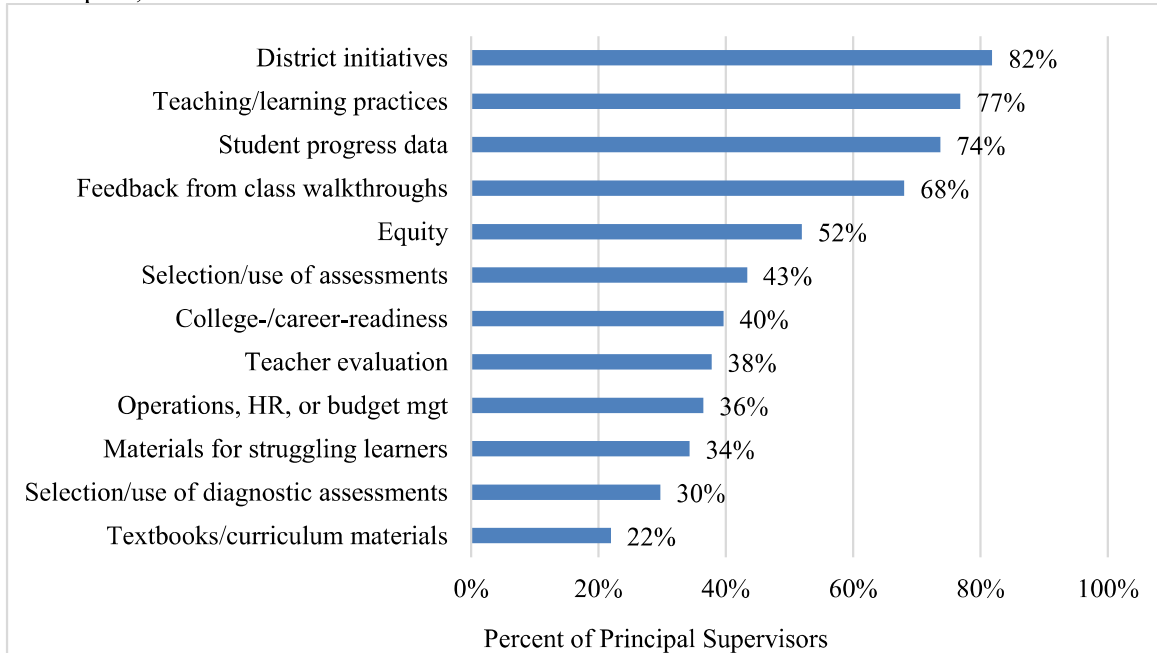
Trends in School Leadership and Support

Figure 5. Percentage of Principal Supervisors Conducting Specific Activities in School Visits, 2018



Finally, in meetings with principals, supervisors reported “Usually” or “Always” spending the majority of their time focused on discussing district initiatives, followed by instructional topics such as reviewing teacher/learning practices, using and understanding student progress data, discussing results from classroom walk-throughs, addressing issues of equity, and other instructional issues (Figure 6). Low on this list of topics again was non-instructional operations, but also the discussion of materials for struggling learners.

Figure 6. Percentage of Principal Supervisors Discussing Specific Topics in Meetings with Principals, 2018



District Support and Professional Development for Principal Supervisors

The Wallace Foundation and the Council of the Great City Schools were particularly interested in the kinds of professional development and support that principal supervisors themselves received. Because of differences in the questions asked and the language used in the 2012 and 2018 surveys, particularly in the areas of professional development, it was difficult to compare directly the results of the two surveys.

However, based on qualitative data gathered from a series of site visits conducted by the Council in 2012 and 2013, it was clear that professional development for principal supervisors across districts at that time was largely *ad hoc* in nature, and was not part of a systematic, sustained program of professional learning focused on growing supervisors' expertise in curriculum and instruction.²

As of 2018, however, more districts appeared to be addressing this gap. Sixty-eight percent of respondents in 2018 reported participating in some form of district-sponsored professional development (Figure 7), although 59 percent of respondents indicated that “None” or only “Some” of the training was tailored solely for principal supervisors (Figure 8).

Similarly, Figure 9 illustrates that about half (45 percent to 56 percent) of principal supervisors “Agreed” or “Strongly Agreed” that they participated in professional development activities that helped them with their problems of practice, were related to their professional growth, or addressed challenges they faced in their work. Most agreed that the professional development they received was focused primarily on implementing district initiatives and programs.

This finding indicated to the Council that ongoing in-service professional development was getting stronger, but it remained an area of need for districts. Fewer than half of survey respondents reported that key aspects of their role as principal supervisors were emphasized in district-sponsored professional development. These included identifying instructional quality in classroom observations (44 percent), improving student growth and achievement (40 percent), using student performance data to improve instruction (37 percent), coaching principals (33 percent), providing actionable/specific feedback to principals (31 percent), etc.

Survey results suggested that despite increases in many of these activities among principal supervisors, district-sponsored professional learning opportunities to improve in these areas were only modestly emphasized in local trainings. Interestingly, while questions relating to professional development for principal supervisors were not asked in the same ways in the 2012 survey as in the 2018 survey, the top two areas of “additional support” that principal supervisors reported that they needed in order to better support principals in the 2012 survey were “more coaching time and strategies” and “less meetings/ more time

² *Rethinking Leadership: The Changing Role of Principal Supervisors*. Council of the Great City Schools, October 2013.

Trends in School Leadership and Support

to work with principals, visit schools, and plan.” Given that six years later principal supervisors reported allocating substantially more time to these exact activities, the data seems to suggest that districts have taken concrete steps to address these concerns and recast the role and priorities of these leaders—despite the need for more such training and support.

Figure 7. Percentage of Principal Supervisors Participating in District-Sponsored Professional Development, 2018

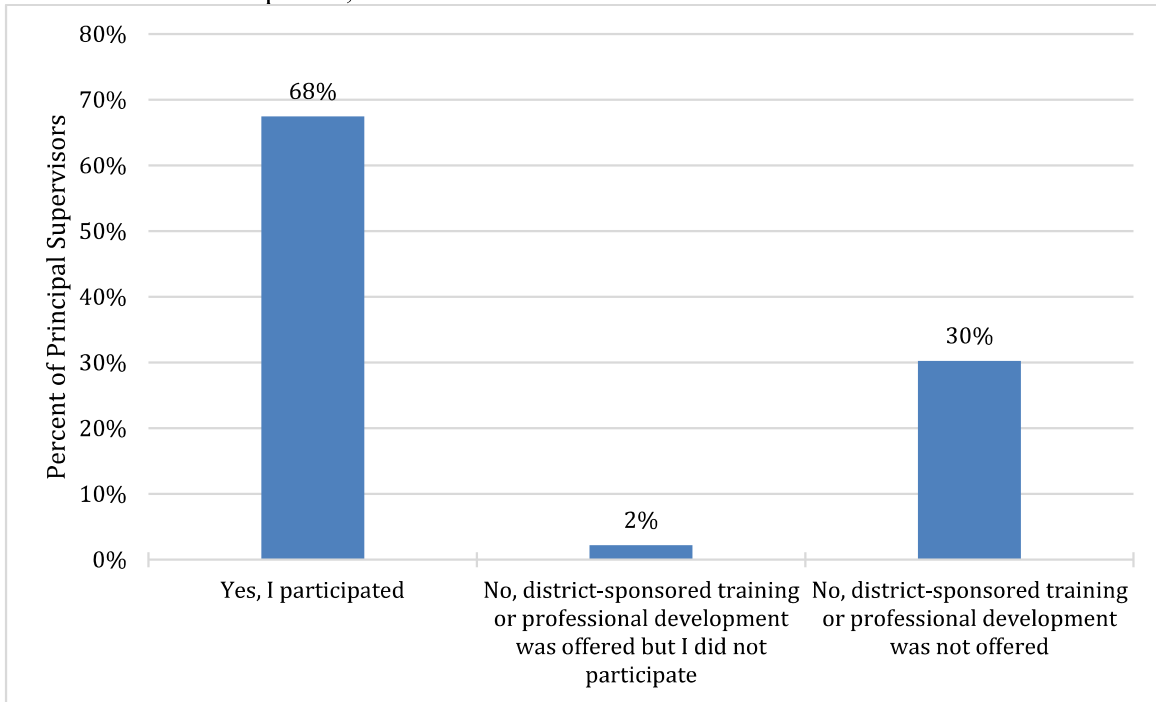


Figure 8. Perception of the Portion of Training or Professional Development Designed Specifically for Principal Supervisors, 2018

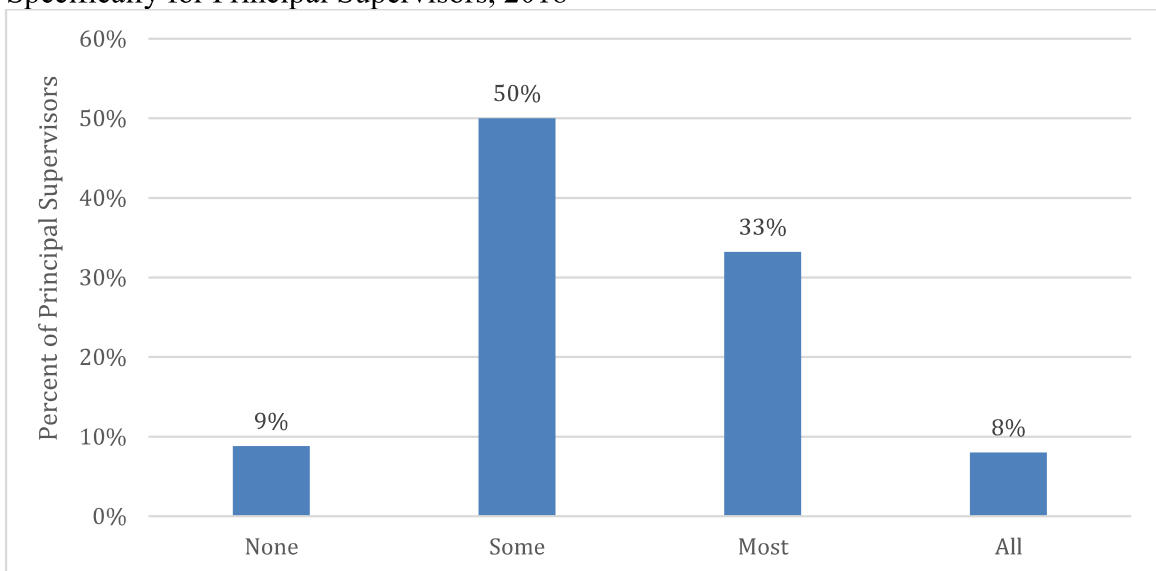
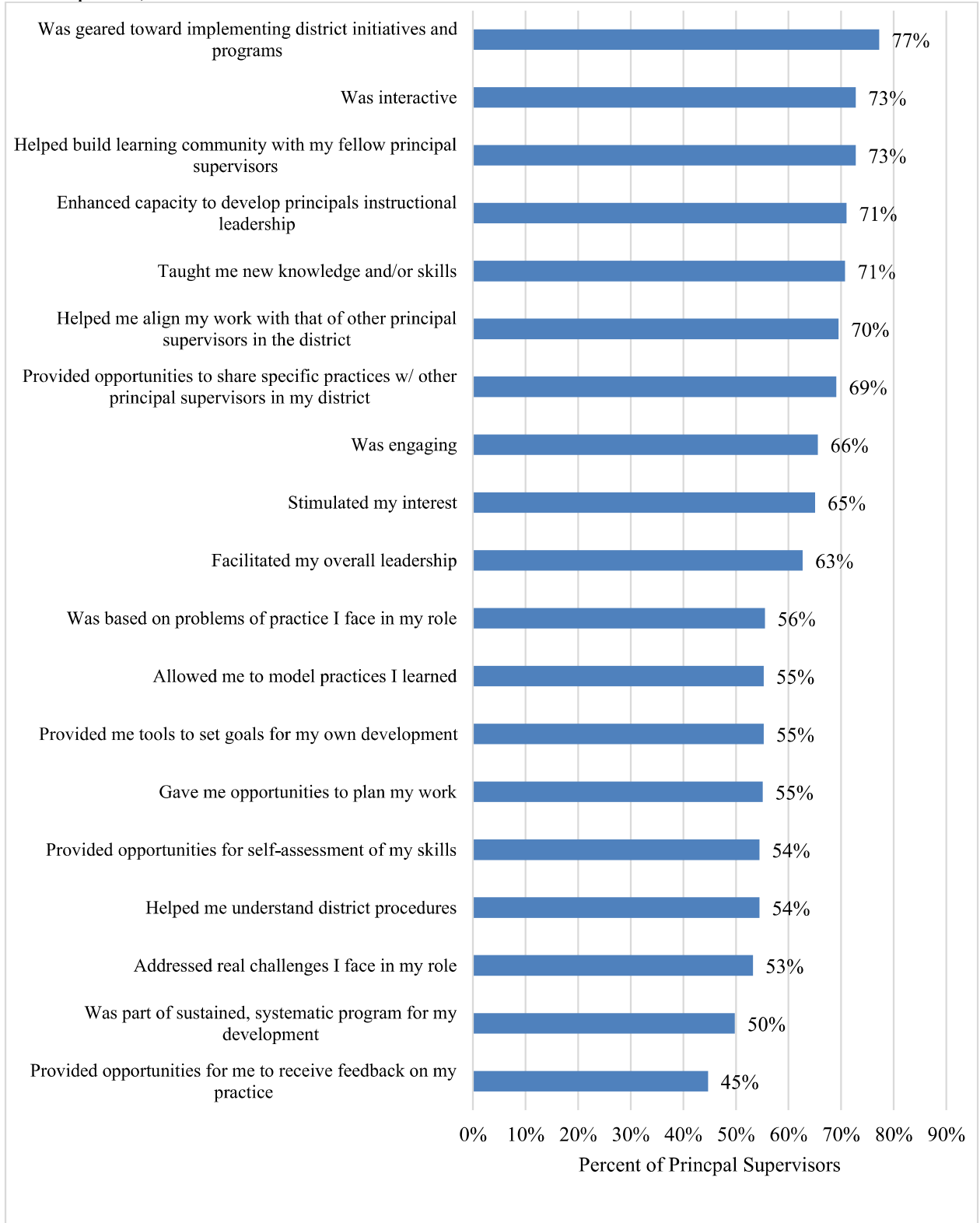
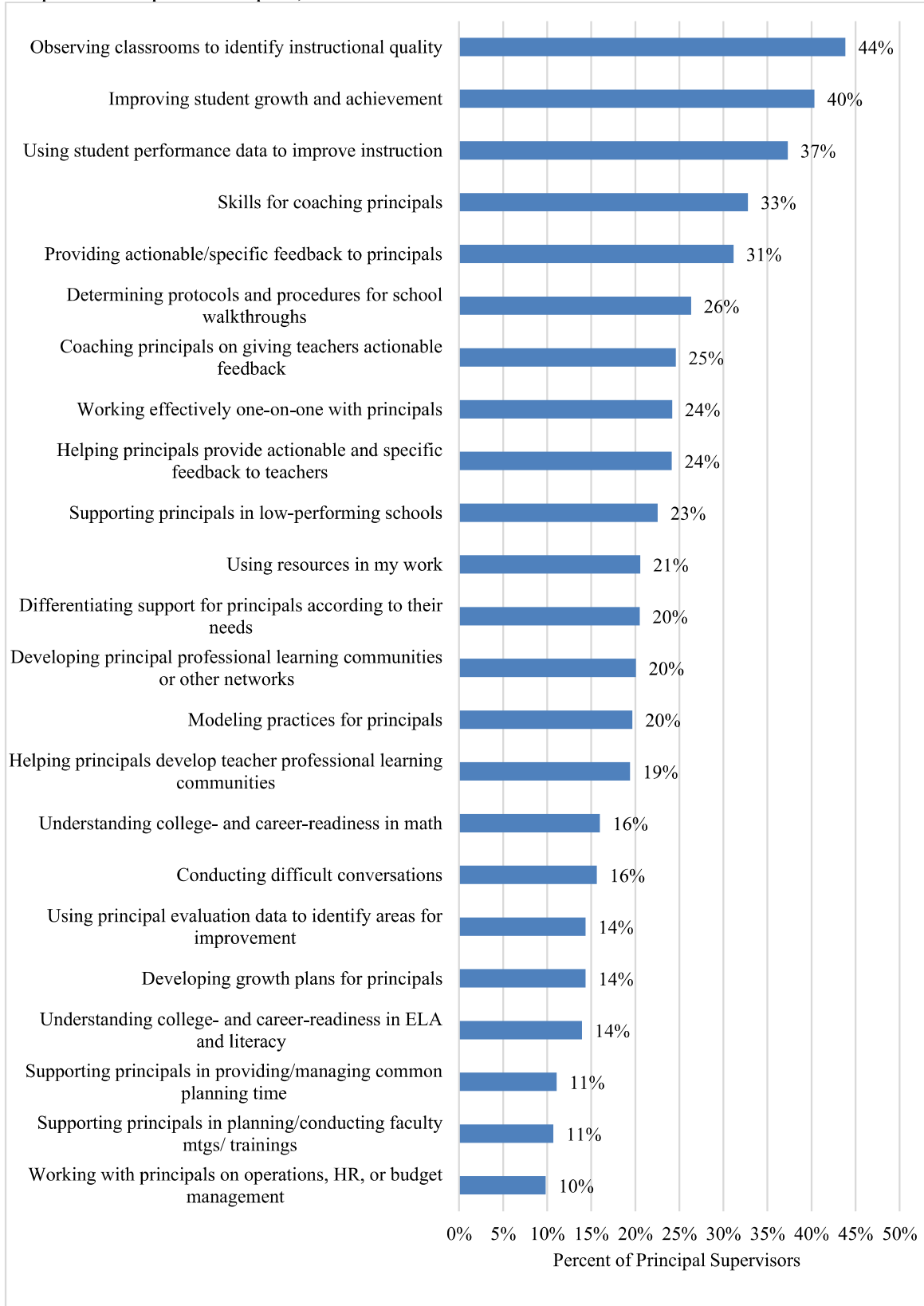


Figure 9. Principal Supervisor Perceptions of District-Sponsored Training or Professional Development, 2018



Trends in School Leadership and Support

Figure 10. Percent of Principal Supervisors Reporting that Professional Development Emphasized Specific Topics, 2018



The 2018 survey data also revealed a critical lack of investment in leadership pipeline programs. Figures 11 and 12 show that, among the surveyed districts, very few principal supervisors reported that their districts have programs to support aspiring principal supervisors. Only one in four principal supervisors indicated that their district had a principal supervisor pipeline program (25 percent) or a mentoring/induction program for principal supervisors (25 percent).

In a parallel survey of assistant principals, the Council found that only thirty two percent (32 percent) of member districts had formal mentoring or coaching systems for assistant principals (Figure 13). However, most, seventy percent (70 percent), reported having formal aspiring principal programs.

Figure 11. Principal Supervisors Reporting a District Aspiring Principal Supervisors Program, 2018

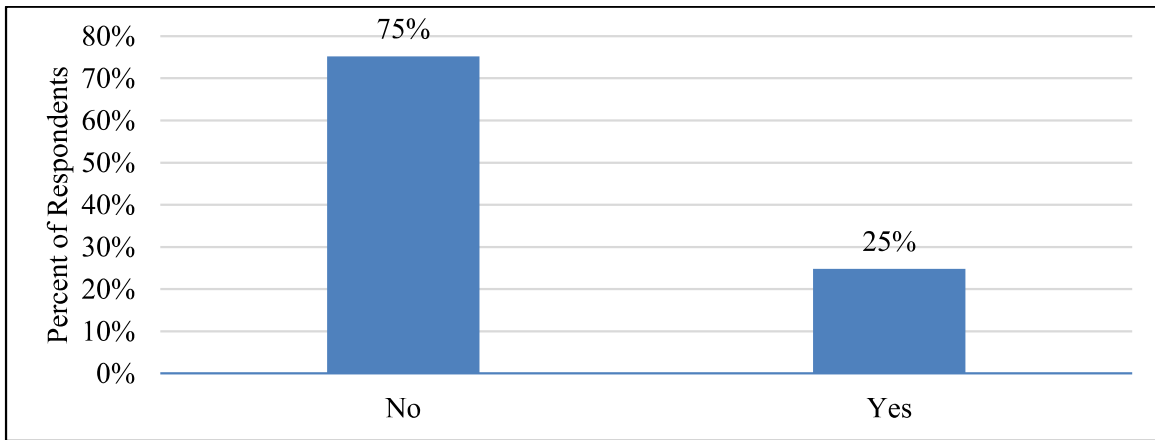
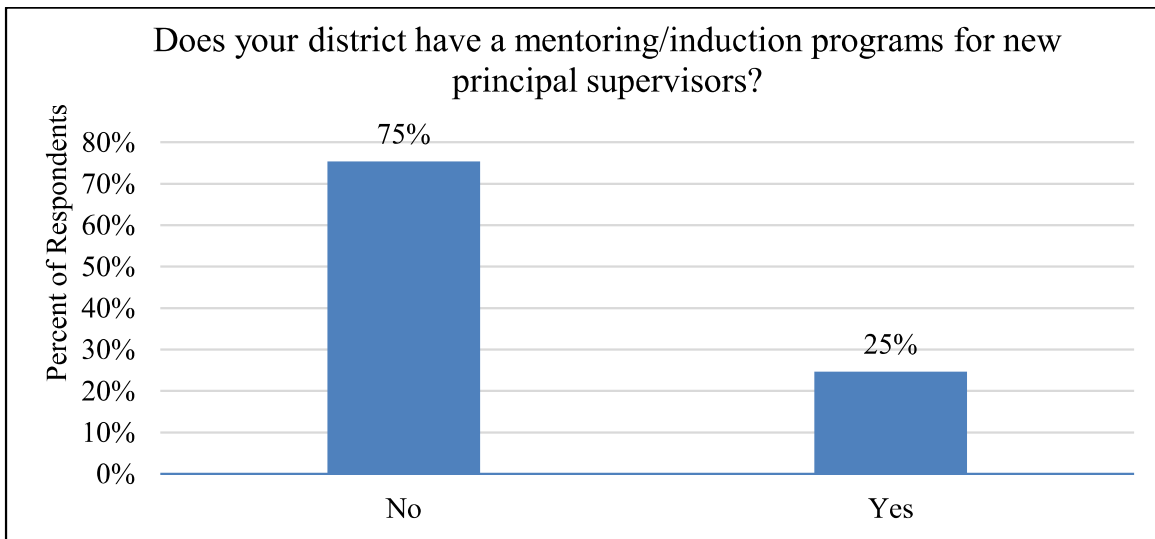
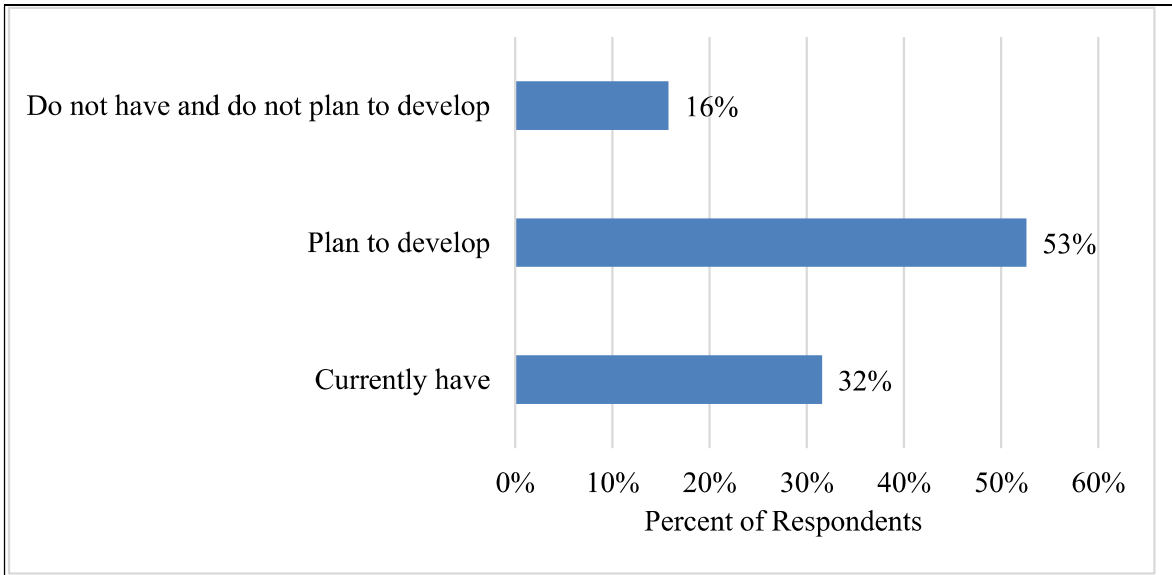


Figure 12. Principal Supervisors Reporting a District Mentoring/Induction Program for Principal Supervisors, 2018



Trends in School Leadership and Support

Figure 13. Districts Reporting a Formal Mentoring or Coaching Program for Assistant Principals, 2018



Central Office and Other Support to Principals and Schools

Central office support to schools was also a critical element of principal and school success. And principal supervisors played a critical role in managing the deployment of central office and other staff to support school improvements in academic achievement and school operations. The development and management of district structures to support schools, including collaboration between central office departments and school staff, was an important function of principal supervisors.

Figure 14 shows principal supervisor responses to questions related to the central office support for their role in improving instructional practices in schools. Most principal supervisors (70 percent) “Strongly Agreed” or “Agreed” that the district focus (as of 2018) was on teaching and learning, and the organization of the central office did not appear to interfere with their ability to work with other principal supervisors.

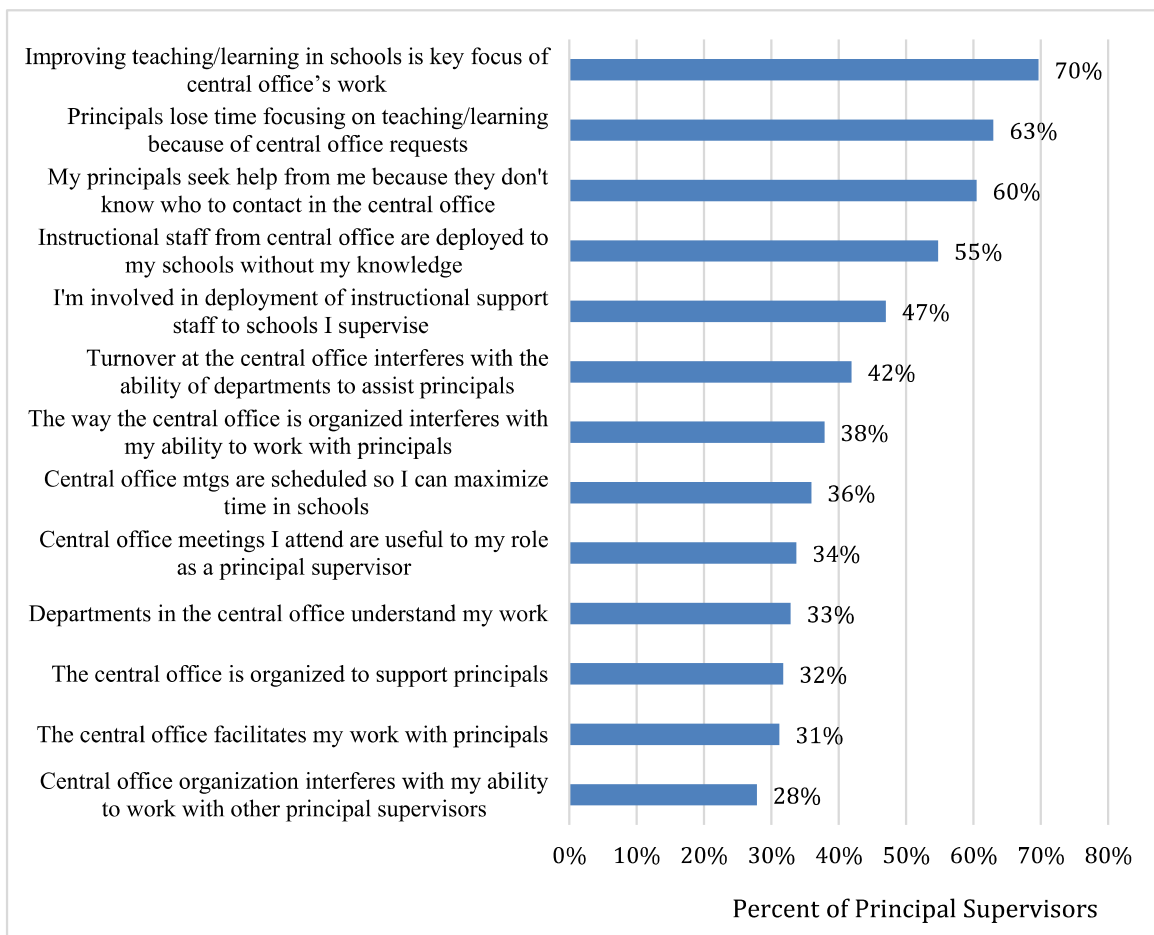
However, the central office burden on principals was clearly a concern across member districts. Sixty-three percent of responding principal supervisors reported that principals lost time focusing on instruction because of central office requests, and 60 percent reported that their principals sought their help because they didn’t know whom to contact in the central office to solve various school-level problems.

Moreover, survey data revealed a lack of coordination and communication across instructional staff and resources provided to schools. Less than half of survey respondents (47 percent) reported in 2018 that they were directly involved in the deployment of instructional staff to the schools they supervised, and just over half (55 percent) indicated that central office staff were deployed to schools that they supervised without their knowledge.

More concerning, only about a third of respondents reported that departments in the central office understood their work, that the central office was organized to support principals, and that the central office facilitated their work with principals. (Figure 14). Clearly, additional work was needed to ensure that central office structures and staffing were adequately defined and organized to support principals and improve their ability to focus on teaching and learning.

Finally, some districts attempted to solve the problem of weak coordination by having more staff reporting directly to the central office and fewer reporting to principal supervisors. In fact, just over half of responding principal supervisors (51 percent) indicated that they had staff reporting directly to them. In addition, the vast majority (72 percent) of principal supervisors reported that they had between one and five direct reports who were not principals. Table 4 shows that the average number of direct reports had declined between 2012 and 2018 from five staff members to three.³

Figure 14. Principal Supervisors’ Perceptions of Central Office Support, 2018



³ There is a difference on this point between the Council report and the Vanderbilt report in that the Vanderbilt report *did not* include principal supervisors with no direct reports; the Council report *did* include circumstances where principal supervisors had no direct reports.

Trends in School Leadership and Support

Table 4. Number of non-principal staff directly reporting to principal supervisors.

Other Support Staff	Other Support in 2012 (n=133)	Other Support in 2018 (N=361)
Minimum	0	0
Maximum	48	50
Average	5	3
Median	3	1
Mode	1	0

Principal Evaluation Systems

Finally, in 2012, formal principal evaluation systems were relatively new in many school districts across the country. Principal supervisors reported at the time having principal-evaluation systems in place in their districts for an average of seven years, including some 13 districts that reported that their principal-evaluation systems had only been in place for a single year.

Nonetheless, the vision and purpose of the new principal-evaluation systems appeared to have been effectively communicated to principal supervisors. Approximately 96 percent of principal supervisors said that the purposes of their district's principal-evaluation systems was to improve principal effectiveness; 79 percent said that the purpose was to identify areas for on-going principal professional growth for *individual* principals; 74 percent said the purpose was to make decisions about principal retention; and 65 percent indicated that the purpose was to identify items for on-going professional growth for *all* principals.

This indicated that supervisors generally understood that the purpose of evaluations was to improve principal practice and to hold principals accountable, rather than merely being a compliance exercise.

However, as of the first survey in 2012, only fifty-eight percent of principal supervisors graded their principal-evaluation systems as excellent or good (A or B); 31 percent graded them as average (C); and 11 percent graded them as poor (D) or very poor (F).

Moreover, about 35 percent of principal supervisors reported that a substantial proportion of their principal-evaluation systems was based on student assessment results; and 16 percent stated that student assessment data carried little weight in principal evaluations.

Interestingly, 29 percent of principal supervisors reported in 2012 that how principals evaluated teachers was not a major factor in principal-evaluation systems, suggesting a mismatch between one of the primary responsibilities of principals and what is addressed in their evaluation. In addition, the 2012 results indicated that community and parent engagement counted for less than 30 percent of principal evaluations.

On the other hand, the 2018 survey data indicated that the tools and processes employed for evaluations across districts had generally improved over the past few years—but that

additional work was still needed to incorporate indicators of a principal’s impact on student performance. Most principal supervisors reported that their principal evaluation systems were useful (67 percent), that the intended use of the evaluation data was clear (63 percent), and that the evaluation system was not too cumbersome (62 percent).

Moreover, sixty five percent (65 percent) “Strongly Agreed” or “Agreed” that principal evaluation tools aligned with their ongoing work with principals and provided actionable feedback (58 percent) (Table 5).

However, less than half (49 percent) of principal supervisors felt the evaluation tool used by the district held principals accountable for improving student achievement, and about one in three “Strongly Agreed” or “Agreed” that the tools held principals accountable for the achievement outcomes of English learners and special needs students, student attendance, or retaining high performing teachers. With seventy percent (70 percent) of principal supervisors reporting that improving teaching and learning was a key focus of the district, their responses about the evaluation system do not seem to fully match district objectives.

Similarly, the 2018 survey data indicated that the evaluation of *principal supervisors* was still a work in progress in most places. Barely half of principal supervisors had a clear sense of the basis for their own evaluations (54 percent) or that their evaluations held them accountable for improving student achievement (53 percent). Only twenty seven percent (27 percent) reported that the principals they served provided input into their evaluations. Only forty one percent (41 percent) of principal supervisors reported that their evaluations aligned with their work, and just over one in three reported that their evaluations held them explicitly accountable for retaining high performing principals (36 percent) or improving English learner (36 percent) or special needs (39 percent) student achievement.

Table 5. Principal Supervisors’ Perceptions of their Principal and Principal Supervisor Evaluations, 2018

Survey Question	2018 Percent of Principal Supervisors (N=369)
Principal Evaluations	
Too many indicators in district's principal evaluation system to be useful	33%
It's unclear how principal evaluation data are used in this district	37%
The district's principal evaluation system:	
is too cumbersome	38%
provides principals actionable feedback to improve leadership	58%
aligns with the ongoing work I do with my principals	65%
holds principals accountable for improving student achievement	49%
holds principals accountable for retaining high performing teachers	29%
holds principals accountable for achievement outcomes of English learners	34%
holds principals accountable for achievement of special needs students	34%
holds principals accountable for student attendance	31%
is aligned with the teacher evaluation system	47%

Trends in School Leadership and Support

Principal Supervisor Evaluation	
I have a clear sense of what my evaluation is based on	54%
Principals provide formal input into my evaluation	27%
I receive actionable/useful feedback from my supervisor's eval of my performance	43%
The district's principal supervisor evaluation system:	
is very general	44%
aligns with my role and the work I do	41%
holds me accountable for improving student achievement	53%
holds me accountable for retaining high performing principals	36%
holds me accountable for improving achievement of ELLs	36%
holds me accountable for achievement of special ed students	39%

Discussion

In 2012, school districts were beginning to recognize—and rethink—the role that strong, instructionally-focused school leaders and their supervisors could play in district improvement efforts. The Wallace Foundation was an early champion of such reform efforts, investing in research and technical assistance for districts to help them reimagine and build the instructional leadership capacity of their school leaders. With support from the Wallace Foundation, the survey conducted by the Council of the Great City Schools in 2012 showed that urban school districts were beginning to rethink how to accomplish this and were experimenting with differing ways to implement new leadership models.

The results of our latest 2018 survey of principal supervisors across districts reveals that substantial progress has been made over the years. Districts have continued to redefine their priorities and the day-to-day activities of staff in these roles. They have narrowed the spans of control of principal supervisors, allowing them to provide more hands-on support and guidance to the principals that were assigned to them. Turnover among principal supervisors has dropped, and staff in these roles are now more experienced than they were in 2012. Principal supervisors increasingly report engaging with principals around instruction and data more than ever and spending less time on non-instructional (operational) activities such as budget, facilities, or human resource issues than before. Instead, they now spend a significant amount of their time in schools visiting classrooms, providing principals with actionable feedback, and modeling effective coaching.

Of course, the survey also revealed areas still in need of improvement. Specifically, progress was more uneven in the areas of professional development and evaluation of principal supervisors than in other areas. These two functions are critical to ensuring that principal supervisors are being supported—and held accountable—for the instructional leadership roles districts have carved out for them. While districts have effectively redefined principal supervisors as instructional leaders, they haven't always developed systematic and tailored instruction- and content-oriented professional learning to sufficiently equip them for these roles. And the fact that principal supervisors—and principals—aren't consistently being evaluated on their contribution to student

achievement at the school sites they oversee means that they are not always being held accountable for their effectiveness in these roles.

We also found a common need for greater central office communication and coordination in support of schools. According to the 2018 survey data, principal supervisors are often not aware of the various resources and instructional staff being deployed to their schools, and don't always feel that the central office sufficiently facilitates their work with principals. This is a notable gap and a missed opportunity to build greater coherence and oversight into a district's instructional programming.

The 2018 survey data also revealed a critical lack of investment in leadership pipeline programs. As noted earlier, very few principal supervisors reported that their districts have programs to support aspiring principal supervisors or assistant principals, although they often have principal pipeline initiatives. As the Council has observed in our work with districts, the quality and consistency of staff in each of these positions is critical to districts' efforts to redefine their school support structures. It follows that districts should be actively identifying and preparing a deep bench of future leaders in order to ensure the sustainability of these structures that have been built in the name of better, more instructionally focused support for schools and students.

The initial 2012 survey by the Council—which covered 2010 to 2012—clearly picked up on major changes in how principal supervisors were being defined and deployed. Historically, this position was a regional superintendent with a full cadre of staff and an organizational structure that typically mirrored the central office. In many cases, these regional offices were independent bureaucracies every bit as complex as the district central office. They often had line authority for curriculum, hiring, budgeting, personnel placement, purchasing, business services and non-instructional operations, student field trips, and myriad other functions and activities.

It is not entirely clear when or why this rethinking and down-sizing of regional offices began, but relentless budget cutting in urban school districts over the years no doubt contributed to the need to reconceive this part of the organization. There was also a clear need in these districts to better connect the work of principals to district leadership as pressure mounted on these districts to improve academically. The Wallace Foundation also spurred such reforms in districts across the country as part of the group's initiative to strengthen school-based leadership and boost student outcomes.

It is interesting to note that the 2012 survey found that there were five staff members assigned to principal supervisors on average, while the 2018 surveys found only three staff members directly assigned. This pattern suggested to us that not only had the old regional offices been largely dismantled but that school districts had resisted the temptation to rebuild them when financial resources became more plentiful.

At this point, principal supervisor positions in most large urban school systems are more streamlined and nimbler than in years past, with a greater focus on the instructional mission of the districts. It is also clear that the positions are much less autonomous than when the regional offices operated as their own quasi-independent school systems. Connecting the

Trends in School Leadership and Support

work of principal supervisors more closely and consistently to the districts' academic goals has no doubt contributed to the cohesion and effectiveness of the instructional programs in these school systems.

Efforts to better define and align the instructional role of principal supervisors over the last several years, then, have been important elements of the larger reforms being pursued by the nation's urban public-school systems. Big city school systems have actively put into place reforms to their governance systems that better align them with the academic goals of their districts; have aggressively implemented college- and career-ready standards; have overhauled curriculum and materials to better link their standards with what is taught in classrooms; and have focused increasing efforts and resources on turning around chronically low-performing schools.

The joint efforts by Wallace, the Council, and other partners around school leadership are meant to complement these reform strategies in a way that aligns the organizational structure of large urban school systems and their personnel with the instructional reforms inside the organization. The combined reforms have enormous promise for the improvement of these school districts.

In fact, evidence from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and other indicators suggest that large urban school systems are showing substantial headway in their efforts to boost student reading and math performance. Analyses of NAEP data by both the National Center on Educational Statistics and the Council of the Great City Schools show that the differences between reading and math scores of the national public school sample and the large cities in both fourth and eighth grades have been cut in half from 2003 to 2019, because the cities have improved on NAEP at about twice the rate as the nation at large.⁴

Ultimately, it may be difficult to parse which reforms are producing what effects, but it is important that there is now an emerging suite of governance, organizational, and instructional strategies that appear to be producing results where they are needed most.

⁴ SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2019 Reading and Mathematics Assessment, retrieved November 1, 2019, from the Main NAEP Data Explorer (<https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/naepdata/>).