ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF HOW PRINCIPAL SUPERVISORS SUPPORT PRINCIPALS' INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP CAPACITY

Trina L. Hayes, Doctor of Education, 2025

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This study investigated the role of principal supervisors in educational leadership within the K–12 Grand Royal School System (GRSS). It examined what principal supervisors do to build principals' instructional leadership capacity—and to what extent their actions support principals in leading teaching and learning. Using a mixed-methods approach, including surveys, interviews, observations, and document analysis, the study explored the daily practices of principal supervisors and their interactions with principals.

Findings show that GRSS principal supervisors value instructional leadership and often use goal-setting and formal observations to build principals' capacity. However, their daily work is frequently consumed by operational demands,

community concerns, and compliance tasks, which limit their ability to focus on instruction. Although most participants agreed that principal supervisors were accomplished instructional leaders, neither principals nor supervisors cited specific examples of support that led to instructional improvements. This gap was attributed to systemic barriers such as competing district priorities, ambiguous role expectations, and limited time.

In addition to these core findings, interviews revealed several unexpected insights, including supervisors' lack of control over their schedules, inconsistent implementation of site visits, and a shared sense of nostalgia for earlier support structures. Supervisors also described the emotional toll of the role, marked by stress and strain from balancing competing demands without sufficient authority or systemic support. These perspectives provided valuable context for interpreting survey results and underscored the disconnect between the role's intended purpose and its day-to-day realities.

While participants believed in the potential of the supervisor role to enhance leadership and improve learning outcomes, they acknowledged that current conditions often prevent it from functioning as intended. The study concludes with recommendations for restructuring the principal supervisor role and strengthening support for central office leaders who serve in this capacity.

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF HOW PRINCIPAL SUPERVISORS SUPPORT PRINCIPALS' INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP CAPACITY

by

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Preface

The capstone team of Felice DeSouza, Courtni Ball, and Trina Hayes is dedicated to empowering all schools within our district with the methodologies, strategies, tools, and resources essential for enhancing teaching and learning outcomes. In 2019, the Grand Royal School System (GRSS) adopted Improvement Science as its guiding methodology. The aim was to equip the 207 schools across the district's urban, suburban, and rural areas with an approach that accelerates the process of learning and improvement. Improvement Science offers a user-centered and problem-centered approach, precisely what we believe our district needs to enhance teaching and learning practices. Recognizing this, GRSS designated the Office of Monitoring and Accountability, along with the Division of School Support and Leadership, to spearhead this initiative. Initial training sessions were conducted for these areas, laying the foundation for our ongoing efforts.

Within the Office of Monitoring and Accountability, our roles enable us to pursue our passion for fostering improvement in schools. One of our primary objectives is to provide school leaders with the necessary learning opportunities, tools, and coaching to address the challenges faced within their schools. We prioritize leveraging Improvement Science principles and employing Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles to enhance teacher practices and student learning outcomes. Through our collaborative endeavors, we partner with schools to support them with analyzing their challenges and learning from their improvement efforts.

Our journey commenced in the University of Maryland's Education Doctorate in School System Leadership program. Two of the researchers of this capstone were employed in the Office of Monitoring and Accountability within the Grand Royal School System, while the other

member worked in the Office of Curriculum and Instruction, supporting the system's cross-curricular literacy initiative.

Engaging with esteemed organizations such as the University of Maryland Center for Educational Innovation and Improvement (CEii), and the Carnegie Improvement Leadership Education and Development (iLEAD) network, Felice DeSouza's learning was quite impactful for the Office of Monitoring and Accountability. She brought valuable insights, skills, and perspectives that inspired us to learn and improve. Her dedication to supporting schools through Improvement Science to accelerate learning and address practice-related challenges propelled her into her current role as a supervisor in the Division of Monitoring and Accountability within GRSS. Inspired by the transformative learning experiences from the EdD program, our second member, Courtni Ball, who worked in the Office of Curriculum Instruction, transitioned to join the Office of Monitoring and Accountability in November 2022. Trina Hayes shared this passion and decided to translate the learning and teaching she provided to schools and school leaders into practice. During the 2023-2024 school year she assumed the role of middle school principal in the GRSS district. The profound learning experiences garnered through our participation in educational opportunities with Learning Forward, the University of Maryland, and Carnegie have empowered us to extend our reach into various domains within our district, furthering the cause of Improvement Science.

Grounded in the Principles of Improvement Science, our theoretical beliefs drive our work within GRSS. We strive to build capacity and provide ongoing support to school leaders by adhering to the Principles of Improvement Science and utilizing PDSA cycles to enhance teaching and learning one problem at a time. Thus, one of the most appealing aspects of the

University of Maryland Education Doctorate in School System Leadership program was the opportunity it afforded us to evolve as improvers and scholarly practitioners.

As we continue to support schools through the lens of Improvement Science, we have identified several challenges hindering schools' progress in achieving their improvement goals. Principals consistently communicate during our school visits that while the methodology of Improvement Science and the use of PDSA cycles are valuable, they struggle to prioritize these methods amidst the multitude of demands they face. This prompted us to ask critical questions: How do schools prioritize teaching and learning? What systems and structures are in place to support this work? How do central office leaders support principals in leading efforts to improve teaching and learning?

Our pursuit of answers to these questions has led to our group capstone research. We aim to understand the role of principal supervisors and how their support is perceived and enacted in practice. By observing the actions of principal supervisors, listening to principals' experiences, and analyzing the existing data, we seek to identify the gaps between the intended role of principal supervisors and their actual support for principals in improving teaching and learning.

Rationale for Group Capstone

Our group capstone is founded on our shared dedication to enhancing teaching and learning in schools through Improvement Science and PDSA cycles. By delving into the practices of principal supervisors that support principals in this endeavor, we aim to provide valuable recommendations to enhance principal supervisor engagement within GRSS. Our rationale for this capstone project arises from our collective responsibility to support schools in improving teaching and learning through Improvement Science and PDSA cycles. By understanding how principal supervisors assist principals in this effort, we can offer insights and

recommendations to bolster their involvement within GRSS. Ultimately, our research seeks to guide ongoing training and support for principal supervisors, fostering sustained improvement in principals' ability to lead the enhancement of teacher practices and student learning outcomes.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my incredible family, whose unwavering love, encouragement, and support have carried me through this journey.

To my husband, Brian, thank you for stepping up in countless ways, taking on additional responsibilities, and ensuring that I had the time and space to study, write, and persevere. Your support allowed me to embrace the sacrifices required to reach this moment, and I am deeply grateful.

To my beautiful daughters, Brittney, Briana, and Brooke—each of you has been my motivation and my inspiration. I continued my education not only to make you proud of your mother, but also to set an example: to show you that there are no limits to what you can achieve. Believe in yourself, make a plan, and execute it. Always strive for the stars.

To my parents—Mommy and Daddy, thank you both for always believing in me. You never told me I had limitations. Instead, you reminded me that I could do anything I set my mind to. Your encouragement and faith helped turn my dreams into reality.

This accomplishment is as much yours as it is mine.

With all my love and gratitude.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my research partners, Courtni L. Ball and Felice M. DeSouza, whose unwavering commitment and passion for this work made the entire process more manageable and inspiring. Their dedication to excellence and collaboration greatly enriched this journey.

I am deeply thankful to our advisors, whose insightful guidance and thought-provoking, open-ended questions challenged us to reflect more deeply on our work and pushed us toward greater clarity and rigor. Their expertise and support have been invaluable throughout this process.

I would also like to extend my appreciation to my colleagues who participated in this study. Their willingness to share their time, experiences, and perspectives contributed significantly to the depth and validity of this research.

Finally, I acknowledge all those who, in various ways, offered encouragement, support, and constructive feedback. Each contribution has played an essential role in bringing this dissertation to fruition.

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Section 1

Introduction

In educational leadership, the principal supervisor role has gained increasing significance. Principal supervisors serve as a bridge between district-level administration and school principals, tasked with providing guidance, support, and mentorship to enhance the capacity of principals to lead teaching and learning (Honig, 2012; Honig et al., 2010, 2017; Honig & Rainey, 2014, 2020a). However, the effectiveness of principal supervision has been a subject of debate and scrutiny in recent years. Principal supervisors are expected to play a transformative role in enhancing the leadership capacity of school principals, yet they themselves may lack the necessary knowledge, skills, tools, and opportunity to catalyze such improvements (Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2015). This has been our experience in the Grand Royal School System (GRSS), where principals are responsible for data analysis, school improvement, and districtwide instructional initiatives—often with only sporadic support from their supervisors. Despite significant fiscal and human capital investments dating back to a 2012 overhaul of the district's division of leadership development and principal support, we have observed that principal supervisors lack the knowledge, skills, and opportunity to support principals in leading improvements in teaching and learning. Research indicates that these deficits manifest in school systems as stymied professional growth for principals, which affect teacher effectiveness and ultimately, student success (Grissom et al., 2021). We know that the principal supervisors in GRSS engage with principals for a variety of purposes. Our study seeks to clarify how, if at all, this engagement leads to instructional leadership growth for principals. This study centers on a critical question: How does the support offered by principal supervisors in GRSS affect the ability of principals to improve teaching and learning?

The efficacy of principal supervision and its cascading effects on the educational ecosystem are profound. School principals bear the pivotal responsibility of not only managing daily school operations but also shaping the learning experiences of their students (Rogers, 2022). To fulfill this role effectively, principals must continuously develop their instructional leadership skills, adapt to evolving educational contexts, and engage in practice that elevates teacher performance, which, in turn, is intrinsically linked to student learning and achievement (Goldring, Clark, et al., 2020; Honig & Rainey, 2020a; Neumerski, 2012; Rhodes & Brundrett, 2009). Principal supervisors, as the natural providers of support for principals, are a key lever for building instructional leadership capacity.

This study explored this multifaceted issue, delving into the intricacies of principal supervision, its relationship with the capacity development of school principals, and the subsequent implications for structuring and leveraging the principal supervisor role. Our study of GRSS, consisting of surveys, interviews, observations, and document analysis, was designed to capture valuable insights about the day-to-day practices of principal supervisors and whether and how those practices build instructional leadership. As researchers and practitioners, we seek to provide guidance to the school district on ways to structure the principal supervisor role so that it contributes to an environment where principals and teachers can thrive, ultimately benefiting the students we all serve.

Our investigation into how principal supervisors in GRSS support principals in leading teaching and learning—and the extent to which their actions contribute to principals' instructional leadership—yielded the following insights: (1) principal supervisors spend the bulk of their time supporting principals with non-instructional issues; (2) while supervisors have the potential to influence instructional leadership, they are limited in the support they can provide

because of administrative burdens and lack of training; (3) principal supervisors vary widely in the amount and types of support they offer to school leaders, regardless of those leaders' levels of experience; and (4) at this time, principal supervisors' actions provide limited and inconsistent support for principals' ability to lead teaching and learning. In addition to these key findings, our interviews revealed the often-overlooked emotional toll of the supervisor role—particularly the stress of balancing competing demands without sufficient authority or support—which further complicates their ability to focus on instruction.

In what follows, we begin by presenting background context about GRSS, review the literature on principal supervision and instructional leadership, and share our causal system analysis and driver diagram. We then explain our mixed-methods approach, followed by our findings and conclusions for policy and practice, including recommendations for strengthening the principal supervisor role to better support instructional leadership.

Background

Study Context

GRSS is a large urban/suburban district that serves over 130,000 students in grades pre-kindergarten through 12. GRSS supports over 200 schools including elementary, K-8 academies, middle, and high schools. The study was conducted in the central office of GRSS, specifically within the office of the Division of School Support and Leadership that oversees the schools. Figure 1 shows where the Area Office is situated in GRSS. The Area Offices consist of four groups that are subdivided by grade levels (elementary, middle/K-8 academies, public charter, and high schools). Figure 2 shows the distribution of 15 principal supervisors among the three areas during the 2023-2024 school year. Within each area, each principal supervisor is assigned a cluster of schools (seven elementary, four middle, one charter, and three high school groups).

Each elementary principal supervisor oversees approximately 18 schools while the middle school and high school supervisors oversee between 10 and 15 schools.

Figure 1

Grand Royal School System Organization Chart

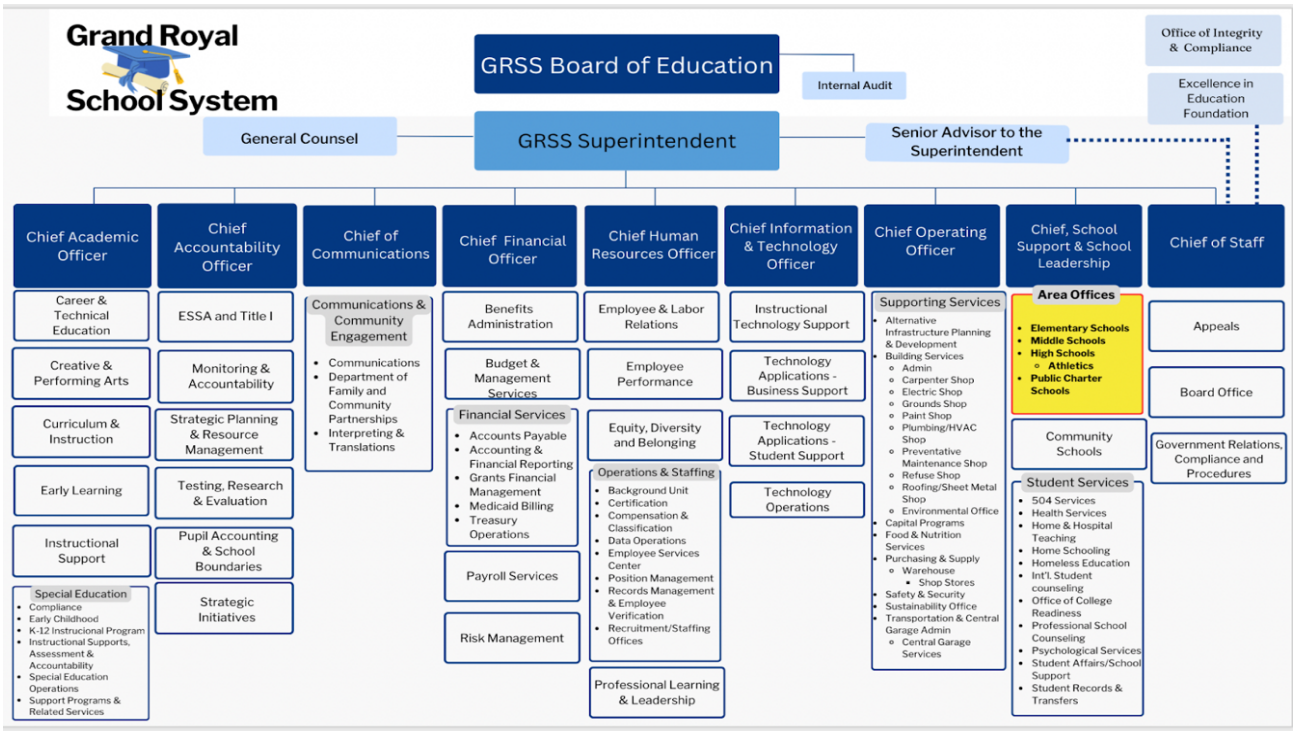
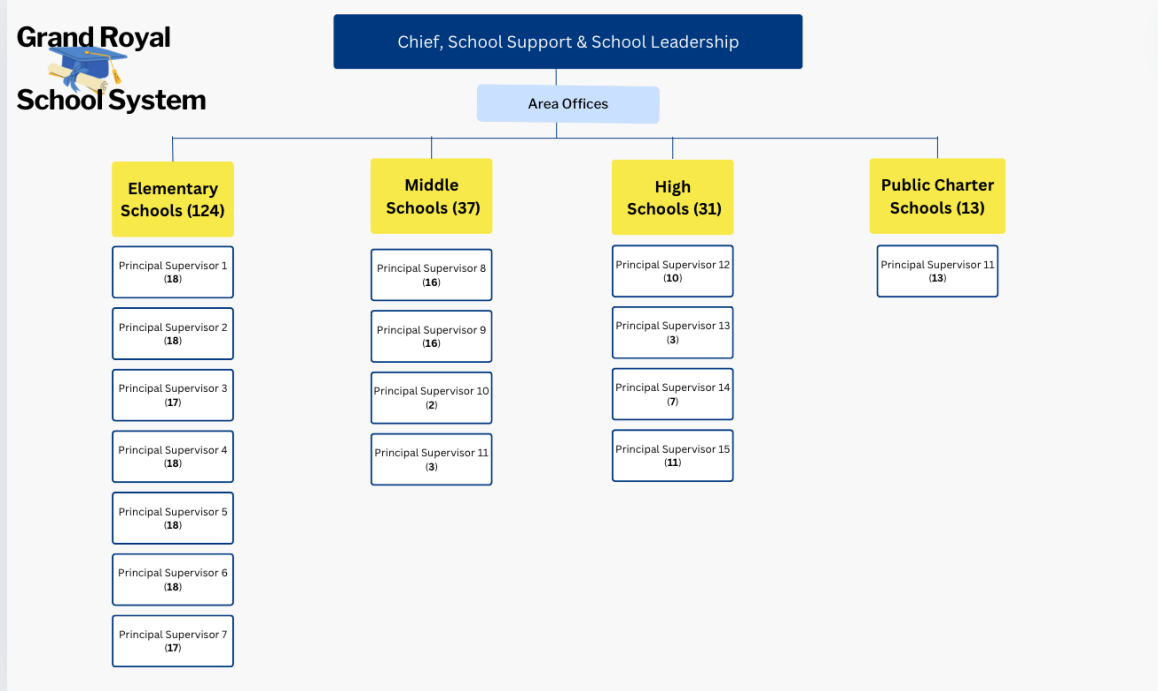


Figure 2

Grand Royal School System Division of School Support and Leadership



As leaders with extensive leadership experience in the district, we have observed that the Grand Royal School System (GRSS) often fails to address variations in performance when implementing programs, which poses a significant obstacle to the district's ability to effectively scale improvement efforts. This is reflected in the creation of the Principal Supervisor role within GRSS. In 2012, the district partnered with leading research institutions to design the role's job description, selection criteria, and professional development program. Although GRSS has participated in multiple studies to strengthen the role's impact, it has struggled to apply the insights gained from engagement in this research. This is partly attributed to frequent changes in central office leadership, principal supervisors, and principals. During the 2023-2024 school year, the district employed 15 principal supervisors. Only one of these supervisors was a member of the original cohort of supervisors from the 2012 role revision. Seven principal supervisors

were within their first or second year in the position. With such turnover occurring regularly, training and coaching new employees has been a persistent challenge.

From our perspectives as longtime employees of GRSS, the principal supervisor is often engaged in reactive practices to support schools and resolve concerns. When an issue arises that involves the safety of students or staff, principals contact their principal supervisor, who then provides guidance on how to solve, contain, and communicate the situation to community partners. This type of support is primarily centered around crisis management.

Opportunities for principals to engage in learning aimed at enhancing their instructional leadership are typically provided in group settings. These include district-wide principal meetings, area-specific meetings (such as those for elementary, middle, or high school principals), and group meetings where principal supervisors support a specific range of schools. While these sessions are generally beneficial for improving instructional practices, they lack a critical element: the opportunity for principal supervisors to monitor principals' learning experiences and assess whether this learning is effectively translated into practice.

Another significant gap is the lack of shared learning experiences between principals and their supervisors during training sessions. When we facilitate professional learning experiences for principals, principal supervisors rarely engage actively in the learning process alongside their principals. While supervisors may be present in the learning environment, they do not typically sit with principals or engage in discussions about the material being presented. This absence of collaborative learning limits the potential for mutual growth.

Despite the district's substantial financial commitment to the principal supervisor role over the past 13 years, there remains a lack of transparency regarding the specific funding allocated for the position, professional development, and related expenses. Although principal

supervisors play a role in shaping school leadership and improving educational outcomes, there is limited public information about the district's specific financial commitments to these roles. A review of the district's publicly available budget documents from the past five years reveals no clear evidence of dedicated funds for principal supervisors, whether for salaries, professional learning, or the resources needed to support their work effectively. The absence of explicit budget items for principal supervisors may suggest that funding is either embedded in larger categories or overlooked altogether, further complicating efforts to evaluate the district's long-term investment in strengthening school leadership. This gap in financial data creates a challenge in measuring whether the investment is achieving the intended goals and supporting the principal supervisors in their efforts to assist the principals effectively.

Research Questions

Our overarching research question is "How does the support offered by principal supervisors affect the ability of principals to improve teaching and learning in the Grand Royal School System (GRSS)?" As we considered how the role has been implemented in the district, we wondered how the execution of the principal supervisor role in the district currently aligns with best practices for principal supervision. Therefore, these research questions guided our study: 1) What do principal supervisors do to build principals' capacity for leading teaching and learning? and 2) To what extent do principal supervisors' actions contribute to principals' ability to lead teaching and learning? We believed that if we gathered data on the daily practices of principal supervisors, we could understand if and how their actions contribute to principals' instructional leadership capacity.

Key Definitions

To ground the study in its proper context, this section defines key terms that will be used throughout. These definitions aim to clarify the study's scope, enhance understanding, and support interpretation of the findings.

1. **Principal supervisor** refers to an individual responsible for overseeing and managing the work and performance of principals in an educational context, such as a school district. They provide guidance, support, mentoring, coaching, resources and evaluations to principals to ensure effective school leadership and the achievement of educational goals. According to the published description of the position in GRSS, the primary job of the principal supervisor is to support and build principals' capacity to improve teaching and learning. (GRSS, 2023)
2. **Capacity-building** is defined as the process of developing and strengthening the skills, instincts, abilities, processes and resources that organizations and communities need to survive, adapt, and thrive in a fast-changing world. An essential ingredient in capacity-building is transformation that is generated and sustained over time from within; transformation of this kind goes beyond performing tasks to changing mindsets and attitudes.
3. **Instructional Leadership** is a form of school leadership primarily focused on enhancing teaching and learning. It involves setting clear teaching and learning objectives, maintaining high expectations for student performance, and supporting teacher development. Instructional leaders actively monitor student progress, protect instructional time, and provide the necessary instructional support to foster an environment conducive to effective learning. Research consistently shows that instructional leadership

significantly impacts student achievement by influencing classroom practices and improving instructional quality (The Education Hub, 2021).

Review of Literature

Inspired by a growing body of research on how school district central offices support school leaders to improve student outcomes, this study focuses on the principal supervisor–the most natural providers of job-embedded professional learning and support for principals (Goldring, et al., 2018; Leithwood et al., 2020). While literature has identified instructional leadership as a priority for principals and their supervisors, researchers have varying ideas about the nature of instructional leadership and the process behind enacting instructional leadership behaviors (Leithwood et al., 2020; Neumerski, 2012). Having observed gaps in principal supervisors' expertise in this area, our team scanned research about the role to learn more about the key responsibilities and intended purpose of principal supervisors in the context of building principal capacity for improving teaching and learning. Our review of literature provided a compelling rationale for learning more about the principal supervisor role and provided insight into ways that the role might be leveraged to its full potential. Research on the role has also yielded insights into why the role may not fulfill its intended purpose within GRSS.

Why Study the Principal Supervisor?

Research has established that principal leadership is second only to classroom instruction as an influence on student learning (Bartanen, 2020; Branch et al., 2012; Chiang et al., 2016; Dhuey & Smith, 2018; Grissom et al., 2015; Grissom et al., 2021; Laing et al., 2016; Leithwood et al., 2020; Louis et al., 2010; Rogers, 2022; Thessin et al., 2020). The need for principal growth in teaching and learning has increased over time with the demands of state, local, and federal accountability for student achievement gains. As the principal's role has shifted from focusing on

managerial tasks to instruction, the role of the principal supervisor–central office administrators that supervise principals–has shifted to focus on increasing the principal's capacity to support and focus on instruction (Casserly et al., 2013; Goldring et al., 2018; Honig & Rainey, 2020a; Rogers, 2022). Alongside the evolving role of the principal, the principal supervisor's role has shifted from merely serving in an evaluative capacity, to also serving as coaches and mentors (Honig & Rainey, 2020b; Rogers, 2022; Smith & Wohlstetter, 2001). Principal supervisors are pivotal to the growth in the instructional leadership capacity of principals (Honig, 2012; Honig et al., 2010, 2017; Honig & Rainey, 2014, 2020a) and are the "natural providers" for principal support (Thessin et al., 2020).

Unfortunately, the shift from compliance officer to coach has left gaps in the ability of the principal supervisor. Principal supervisors often lack the right training and support to help principals build their capacity as instructional leaders (CCSSO, 2015; Honig & Rainey, 2020b). Although many principal supervisors are former principals who understand the complexities of the job, they aren't necessarily prepared to advise and guide principals. Instead of leading a school, these supervisors must now coach and support those who are leading schools. This requires a very different skill set (CCSSO, 2015). With the right training and support, they can appraise principals' current leadership practices, identify professional learning opportunities most likely to support principals' professional growth, and provide coaching that leads to improvements in the quality of teaching, learning and achievement (CCSSO, 2015).

The Evolution of the Principal Role

The enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2002 changed the responsibilities of the school principal. The law required school principals to lead instructional improvement that ensured equitable outcomes for all students. Although school leaders scaled up

their improvement efforts, school results were inconsistent, leading to a need to reconsider the role of the school district in improvement efforts (Finnigan & Daly, 2016). In this current Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) era, principals are called upon to be instructional leaders with a vision for improvement that addresses the unique needs of the communities they serve. More specifically, ESSA holds school leaders accountable for actions that affect positive change in our lowest-performing schools and/or among groups of students that are not making progress (Fisher & Arnett, 2017; Honig & Rainey, 2020a). Now, more than ever, school systems must utilize support structures such as the role of principal supervisor to build principal capacity (Grissom et al., 2021; Orr et al., 2008).

The concept of the principal as instructional leader has evolved. Early iterations of this shift called upon school leaders to monitor, evaluate, and coordinate curriculum implementation. More recent research points to the principal's critical role in instruction on the school level as a coach and modeler, as one who stimulates innovative teaching behaviors, and as a supporter and facilitator of teacher learning (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood & Seashore-Louis, 2011; Neumerski, 2012). Furthermore, as instructional leaders, principals must organize professional learning communities in which collaborative work among teachers leads to improvements in instruction and student achievement (Kruse et al., 1995; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). This has resulted in a merging of the traditional concept of principals as instructional leaders with a deeper consideration of the local values and traditions of schooling that influence leader behavior (Khalifa et al., 2018; Lee & Hallinger, 2012; Truong et al., 2017). When principals operate as able instructional leaders, they empower high-quality, culturally responsive teaching that is essential for ensuring students' school success (Honig & Rainey, 2023). Principals should lead in a way that is responsive, adaptive, and equitable, ensuring that they reflect upon the needs of the

diverse communities that they serve in order to create conditions for teaching and learning that benefit all students.

This is valuable context for understanding the role of the principal supervisor in supporting a principal's school improvement efforts. In their recent publication, *From Tinkering to Transformation: How School District Central Offices Drive Equitable Teaching and Learning*, Honig and Rainey (2023) stated that principals in their sample who intensified their engagement in instructional leadership tended to have principal supervisors who took a teaching-and-learning approach to supporting principals. By contrast, principals with little commitment to instructional leadership typically had principal supervisors whose practices reflected the traditional supervisory stance.

Supporting the Principal

As the principal's role has evolved over time, from that of manager to one connected deeply to teaching and learning, the field has shifted its expectations for school district offices who support school leaders in improving student outcomes (Honig & Rainey, 2023; Thessin & Louis, 2019). The school district central office maintains a critical role in supporting these improvement efforts by selecting, training, placing, and evaluating principals (Honig & Rainey, 2023; Thessin & Louis, 2019). In some ways, the revision of the principal supervisor role was designed to remove systemic barriers to improvement posed by the often siloed and fragmented work of district central offices. As school districts reimagined their support for teaching and learning, they theorized that if principal supervisors concentrated on growing principals as instructional leaders, then principals would value their own development in that area and therefore improve their instructional leadership over time (Honig & Rainey, 2020a). In light of the impact of leadership on school improvement, and the challenges inherent in improving

struggling schools, there has emerged a body of research that seeks to understand how principal supervisors facilitate improvement with principals in high needs schools (Chapman & Harris, 2004; Cosner & Jones, 2016; Honig & Rainey, 2023).

Principals, like the teachers they supervise, benefit from ongoing, intensive, job-embedded, professional learning to facilitate changes in instructional leadership practice and improve student achievement. Honig and Heller (2018) argue that if principals are to grow as instructional leaders, they need coaching and support much more than they need to be monitored or evaluated. Therefore, the central office's direct support of principals' professional development now focuses on coaching, mentoring, and collaboration (Honig & Rainey, 2023; Thessin & Louis, 2019). Principal supervisors should coach principals to be instructional leaders and to execute distributive leadership tasks that build others' capacity in meaningful ways (Goldring et al., 2018). Districts have generally not specified the principal supervisor's role in this larger school improvement effort, but principal supervisors serve as a promising lever for supporting and developing principals' instructional leadership (Goldring et al., 2012; Honig, 2012). Thessin and Reyes (2023) concluded that the goal of building the instructional leadership capacity of the school principal to lead improvement can be achieved by a skilled principal supervisor. As such, principal supervisors have been at the center of major initiatives and improvement efforts by districts across the United States (Honig & Rainey, 2020b; Thessin & Louis, 2019).

Standards for Principal Supervisors

One of the most critical roles of the central office is to provide intensive principal supervision. Whether the principal supervisor is a dedicated staff position or, as is true in many small districts, one of the superintendent's many functions, the supervisor serves as a facilitator

of ongoing professional learning. Central offices in mid-sized and large urban districts are stripping the compliance and management elements from the principal supervisor role (Honig & Rainey, 2014; Thessin & Reyes, 2023). Instead, they are designing the role to allow principal supervisors to provide job-embedded coaching to strengthen principals' instructional leadership and improve student achievement (Corcoran et al., 2013; Honig, 2012; Jerald, 2012). In many districts, supervisors must also partner with principals to facilitate school improvement (Honig & Rainey, 2023; Stein & Coburn, 2008).

In 2015, the CCSSO issued voluntary standards for principal supervisors that focused on professional learning, coaching, and embracing a culture of continuous improvement (CSSO, 2015). Informed by research conducted by the Wallace Foundation, the standards are guided by this theory of action:

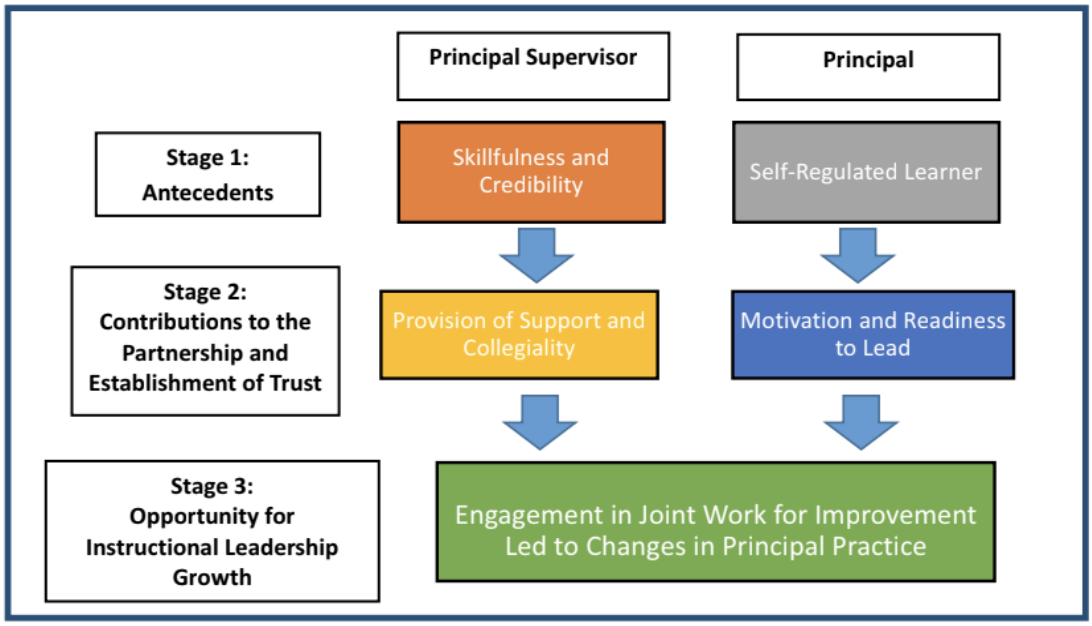
> If principal supervisors shift from focusing on compliance to shaping principals' instructional leadership capabilities, and if they are provided with the right training, support and number of principals to supervise, then the instructional leadership capacity of the principals with whom they work will improve and result in effective instruction and the highest levels of student learning and achievement (CCSSO, 2015, p. 2).

While this theory is complex and requires a significant paradigm shift in the ways that districts design and structure the principal supervisor role, most of the inspiration for the standards comes from the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL). In fact, the dispositions that correlate with transformational leadership according to PSEL are echoed in the Model Principal Supervisor Professional Standards (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). Although a clear delineation between the principal supervisor's role as

evaluator and manager exists within the Model Standards, the standards also illuminate how principal supervisors might serve as brokers who connect school leaders with resources and as mentors who do not solve problems for principals but instead guide them to expand their leadership capacity (CCSSO, 2015). Building principals' instructional leadership capacity begins with the establishment of a solid principal supervisor–principal coaching partnership (Thessin & Reyes, 2023). Thessin and Reyes theorize that meaningful engagement in collaborative work for school improvement cannot occur without this coaching partnership (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Thessin's Conditions for Joint Work



Engagement in Joint Work

Despite efforts to modernize the work of the school principal, a standard definition of the principal supervisor role remains elusive, even for those engaged directly in the work. Principal supervisors have been known to have differing conceptions of their roles and responsibilities with principal supervisors admitting that the rubric by which they were evaluated by the district's

associate superintendents seemed misaligned with the district's current expectations for their roles (Thessin et al., 2020). As principal supervisors gain clarity in the new purpose of their role, research indicates that a few functions are essential elements of their work. Central office administrators help deepen principals' engagement in instructional leadership when they focus on "joint work," or specific activities of value to community members in the present and over time (Honig, 2012). This "joint work" transcends the traditional supervisory relationship wherein principal supervisors might require principals to improve their instructional leadership and mainly monitor and evaluate principals' progress. Taking a joint work approach requires principal supervisors to 1. work alongside principals in efforts to improve instructional leadership and 2. assume responsibility for these improvements as a key function of their role. Coaching and mentoring coexist as central requirements for the revised role.

Principal Supervisors as Coaches. Partnerships between district central offices and school leadership teams support school reform work by providing direction and guidance to underperforming schools (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010). Beyond the structure provided by central office partners, principals require authentic, job-embedded coaching (Ikemoto et al., 2014; Rainey & Honig, 2015). For principal supervisors who are responsible for facilitating improvement with principals at high needs schools, the coaching relationship is even more critical. With clear evidence that wider involvement in instructional leadership is associated with gains in student learning, principals need personalized professional learning that builds their capacity for instructional leadership (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2012; Thessin et al., 2020).

For example, when asked for his perspective on how principals might grow in their capacity for instructional leadership, Perry Township principal Brian Knight declared, "If we want our principals to get better at supporting individual teachers so that our teachers can get

better at supporting individual students, then that has to start at the district level with supporting principals as individuals, not just as a holistic group of people," (National Institute for Excellence in Teaching [NIET], 2021). The expectation is that principals will lead instructional improvement to ensure equitable outcomes for all students. To achieve the transformation from manager to instructional leader, principals need a mentor to model best practices and provide professional growth opportunities and coaching of the expected change. Recent research has gravitated toward a dedicated position that would provide intensive principal supervision with a primary focus on intensive, job-embedded coaching to strengthen principals' instructional leadership and improve student achievement with less focus on business and compliance (Honig & Heller, 2018; Thessin, 2019). Principal supervisors can be catalysts for change when they shift from a focus on compliance to a focus on coaching.

To enhance a principal's growth and performance, as well as promote individual responsibility and accountability, a principal supervisor must use their coaching skills to evaluate and address the developmental needs of principals. By collaborating with principals, principal supervisors should guide the development of a professional learning plan that will aid principals to gain the necessary skills to become better instructional leaders (Honig et al., 2017; Thessin, 2019).

The principal supervisor must work alongside principals to improve teaching and learning by coaching them to build and guide leadership teams, create collaborative professional learning for teachers, observe and provide feedback in classrooms, and create principal learning opportunities, among other activities (NIET, 2021). Many principal supervisors are former principals and are well aware of the job's demands. Still, there exists a tension in the role of principal supervisors who should not fix the problems within a school, but rather coach and

support principals to come up with their own solutions, implement them, and fine-tune them as necessary to improve results.

In a recent article, "The Untapped Potential of the Principal Supervisor," Dr. Roddy Melancon, principal of Gonzales Primary School in Ascension Public Schools, Louisiana, described the importance of his supervisor, Dr. Latatia Johnson, in supporting his growth as a leader (NIET, 2021). Dr. Melancon notes, "Dr. Johnson came in and challenged me to be visible as an instructional leader. She modeled with me, and she pushed me to become more involved in activities like PLCs and conversations around student work." Dr. Johnson modeled the active engagement in teaching and learning that she wanted Principal Melancon to embrace as a school leader, and she did so side-by-side with him in a variety of settings. Her focus on his strengths, and specific actions he could take to improve, helped him to build his confidence as an instructional leader. This type of direct coaching allows principal supervisors to help principals learn and grow as leaders (Honig & Rainey, 2020b; NIET, 2021).

The Need for Visibility and Connectedness. Principal supervisors must be active participants in the schoolhouse to fully understand the needs of the school and the principal. By walking through the school building, they can observe how principals work and lead in different contexts. Joining various learning settings with the principal and their school team members, including collaborative professional learning community (PLC) meetings, teacher planning, and school instructional leadership team meetings allows principal supervisors to collect tangible evidence of how the principal coaches individual teachers, facilitates professional learning, and solves problems (Honig & Rainey, 2023). This participation supports the principal supervisor as they engage in coaching conversations that improve the principal's instructional leadership skills (NIET, 2021).

Most districts are relatively new to the idea of having principal supervisors spend substantial time coaching principals. Consequently, districts lack the necessary structures to support that type of work (CCSSO, 2015). It is the responsibility of principal supervisors to direct the development of principals, so principal supervisors benefit from structures, policies, and training that allow them to develop their knowledge of teaching and learning and facilitate their ability to work as coaches and teachers to principals (Goldring, Clark, et al., 2020; Syed, 2014).

Forging Relationships and Partnerships. In order to coach principals, principal supervisors must establish a trusting relationship (Thessin et al., 2018). If a principal supervisor is expected to serve as a coach or mentor to principals, they must have the knowledge and skill to model and professionally develop in order to enhance learning, growth and performance, as well as the ability to establish a positive rapport between them and their principal. In order for a principal supervisor to build trust and establish a partnership with their principals, they must invest their time to understand the individual principal needs and provide timely, relevant, and actionable feedback (NIET, 2021; Rogers, 2022). Providing a shoulder to cry on and a safe place for principals to share their struggles is an important part of principal supervisors' jobs. Additionally, they must serve as the evaluators of principal performance. Essential to the role of a coach, the principal supervisor must have the ability to build strong relationships that result in trust, candid communication, innovative thinking, and development of leadership practices (Aguilar, 2016; Saltzman, 2016).

As principal supervisors adopt a coaching approach to enhancing the knowledge and skill set of their principals, they must also develop their ability to actively listen, to ask thought provoking questions, to summarize and paraphrase, and to provide a supportive and challenging

environment for principals. Along with possessing the ability to actively listen, principal supervisors must build an environment that encourages their principals to share their experiences and ideas by positioning themselves as thought partners (Honig & Rainey, 2020a). Positioning as a thought partner also allows the principal supervisor to focus on goals and the progress needed to achieve desired outcomes (Goldring, Clark, et al., 2020). This may also lead to leveraging existing resources that support principals' progress towards achieving desired goals and taking a more reflective stance (Aguilar, 2016; English et al., 2019).

Principal Supervisors as Brokers

When they studied the principal supervisor role in 2012, the Wallace Foundation found that while some principal supervisors provide direct technical assistance, others function more as brokers of central office support–connecting principals to instructional or operational resources depending on their needs (Corcoran et al., 2013). This concept is echoed in the Model Standards for Principal Supervision, which notes that for areas that fall outside of their expertise, supervisors should serve as brokers who arrange support from individuals and offices in the central office or other schools (CCSSO, 2015). Principal supervisors are also uniquely positioned to connect schools with similar contexts in order to create formal or informal networks for school improvement (Anderson et al., 2023). Much of their day-to-day work could involve acting as efficient resource brokers between the central office and school in ways that support diverse school needs and interests (Honig & Copland, 2008).

Honig and Rainey (2020a, 2020b) posit that brokering can take two forms–bridging and buffering. Sometimes it is necessary for principal supervisors to connect participants with ideas and tools to support their professional growth. Of equal importance are occasions when supervisors protect principals from unproductive external disruptions to their learning and

development. Both aspects of brokering are essential to ensuring that the principal role does not devolve into its traditional managerial function. In order for principals to grow as instructional leaders, principal supervisors must protect the time that they spend engaging in joint work and professional developments with principals, thus serving as a model for the ways that principals must also prioritize time for these tasks (Honig & Rainey, 2020b; Thessin, 2019).

Supporting and Supervising Principal Supervisors

The principal supervisor role has evolved from monitoring and promoting managerial tasks that include compliance procedures and accountability to focusing on developing the principal's capacity to improve instruction and equity in student achievement outcomes (Cochran et al., 2020; CCSSO, 2015; Goldring, Clark, et al., 2020; Goldring, Rogers, & Clark, 2020; Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2014, 2020a; Meyers et al., 2024; Rogers, 2022; Thessin et al., 2018; Thessin & Louis, 2019). For optimal development in principal supervision, supervisors, just like the principals, need support. Research has outlined structures that would allow the principal supervisor to aid in a principal's leadership development such as minimizing the number of principals that are supervised; reducing the supervisor's duties (Goldring, Clark, et al., 2020; Goldring, Rogers, & Clark, 2020; Honig & Rainey, 2020a); effectively organizing central office to support the supervisor (Honig et al., 2017; Honig & Rainey, 2020a; Rogers, 2022); utilizing the supervisor of the principal supervisor as conduits of learning for the principal supervisor (Honig & Rainey, 2019, 2020b); and providing effective evaluation and professional development (Cochran et al., 2020). Rogers (2022) states that the organizational support for the principal supervisor should also include district communication of the supervisor's work. Just changing the supervisor's role is not enough, there must be district or organizational support that buttress the change. Many districts embark upon a transformation of principal supervision, but

without the creation of aligned shifts in other central office units, principal supervisors tend to regress to traditional versions of their roles (Honig & Rainey, 2023).

When the principal supervisor evolved, there emerged new tools and processes for evaluating their effectiveness. The aforementioned Model Standards for Principal Supervisors have established behaviors that the principal supervisor must exhibit in order to effectively support the development of the principals for which they supervise. However, researchers have not found standardization across districts in the use of an evaluation system for the principal supervisors. In a study of Washington D.C. school's principal supervisors, Cochran et al. (2020), found that evaluation of principal supervisors was still a "work in progress in most places" (p. 3).

In 2012, the Council of Great City Schools (CGCS) reported that the leaders in GRSS took a uniquely collaborative approach to principal supervisor evaluation. Associate superintendents, in concert with the principal supervisors, drafted a rubric of key indicators for each key district leadership domain with performance descriptors at the "developing," "proficient," and "distinguished" levels for each. The principal supervisors used these criteria to rate and reflect on their individual practice. Then, *their* supervisors conducted job-embedded coaching sessions grounded in the work of each principal supervisor (Corcoran et al., 2013).

As cited by Thessin and Louis (2019), the supervisors' professional learning is necessary to support a principal's leadership development which is best facilitated by the principal supervisor (Honig, 2012; Honig et al., 2010, 2017; Honig & Rainey, 2014). Yet oftentimes principal supervisors do not receive the requisite professional learning that allows them to facilitate and engage principals in quality capacity building (Cochran et al., 2020; Corcoran et al., 2013). Site visits conducted by CGCS revealed that much of the professional development principal supervisors received was ad hoc in nature without a focus on expanding principal

supervisors' instructional leadership or expertise (Corcoran et al., 2013). The same study indicated that much of the professional development cited by principal supervisors and central office leaders across districts emphasized leadership development without deepening the principal supervisors' understanding of how to support high quality instruction. Researchers agree that the training should not be arbitrary but should be specific to the principal supervisor's role (CCSSO, 2015; Goldring, Clark, et al., 2020; Goldring, Rogers, & Clark, 2020; Honig & Rainey, 2020b). However, according to Cochran et al. (2020), school districts have inconsistently tailored professional learning to equip the principal supervisors for their role. They further assert that if the principal supervisor improves, then the school-based leader also improves and, in turn, the school improves. Therefore, an investment in the principal supervisor's growth can propel efforts to improve schools. While research suggests role-specific training is necessary for the principal supervisor to succeed in the role, there is limited research on the quality and amount of professional learning that principal supervisors receive (Goldring et al., 2018; Goldring, Clark, et al., 2020). This professional learning has the potential to create the optimal conditions for meaningful principal supervisor development.

Causal System Analysis

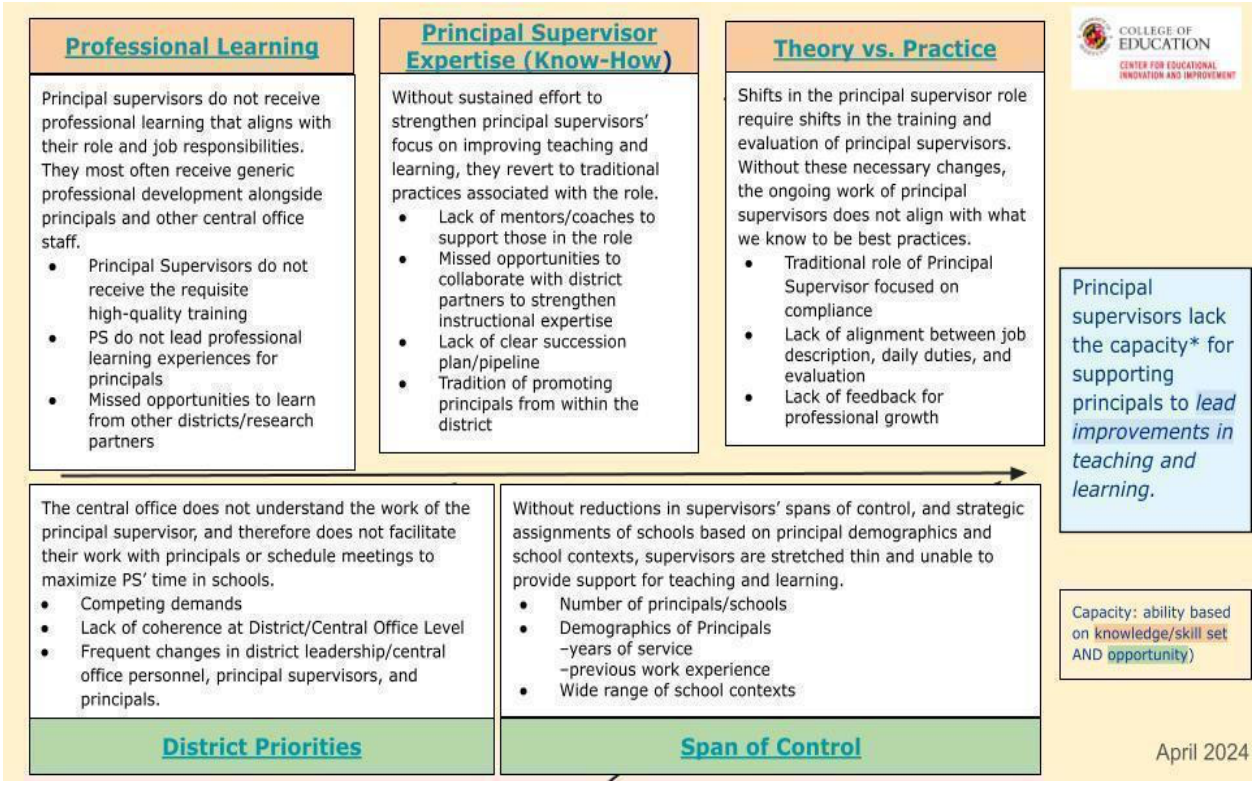
Interrogating the Problem of Practice

Our team centered our literature review on existing research about best practices for principal supervision because supervisors often lack the right training and support to help principals build their capacity as instructional leaders (CCSSO, 2015; Honig & Rainey, 2020b). Our problem of practice is that principal supervisors in GRSS lack the capacity to support principals in leading improvements in teaching and learning. We utilized Hinnant-Crawford's (2020) characterization of *capacity causes* as those connected to lack of expertise or bandwidth

to complete a task or accomplish a mission. In addition to using anecdotal evidence, we derived causal factors from the prevailing literature on principal supervision. The fishbone diagram below reflects this derivation that we hypothesized prior to the start of our study. At the conclusion of the study, we present a revised root cause analysis informed by our findings. To illustrate our more nuanced understanding of the systemic factors contributing to the problem, we include both the original and revised fishbone diagrams. These reflect insights gathered from those closest to the issue—principals and principal supervisors within the district (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Principal Supervisor Capacity Fishbone Diagram



Use of the Five-Why brainstorming protocol helped our team identify five causal categories that contribute to the problem of practice:

- Lack of professional learning for principal supervisors
- District priorities for principal supervision
- Principal supervisor span of control
- Gaps between theory and practice for principal supervisors
- Principal supervisor expertise

We categorized these causal factors based on their connections to principal supervisors' knowledge and/or opportunity, as we view both of these factors as elements of their overall capacity for supporting principals. These categories highlight significant areas of concern that need to be addressed to improve the support and development of principal supervisors. The following summaries provide an overview of each causal category and explain why they were selected for further analysis. We then explain how these causal categories inform our Theory of Improvement.

Lack of Professional Learning for Principal Supervisors. Principal supervisors do not receive professional learning that aligns with their specific roles and responsibilities (Honig & Rainey, 2023; Leithwood et al., 2020; NIET, 2021). Their professional development is often generic and conducted alongside the principals they supervise, which limits the effectiveness of their training. Furthermore, principal supervisors are not leading professional learning experiences for principals, and there are missed opportunities to learn from other districts and research partners. This category highlights the need for tailored, role-specific professional development to enhance the effectiveness of principal supervisors.

District Priorities for Principal Supervision. Central office staff often lack a full understanding of the principal supervisor role, leading to competing demands and a lack of coherence at the district level (Goldring, Clark, et al., 2020; Honig & Rainey, 2020a). Frequent changes in district leadership and central office personnel also impede the work of principal supervisors. This category underscores the need for better alignment and stability in district priorities and leadership to support the work of principal supervisors effectively.

Gaps Between Theory and Practice for Principal Supervisors. We have observed a disconnect between the theoretical best practices for principal supervision and the actual training, job descriptions, daily duties, and evaluations of principal supervisors. Without appropriate shifts in training and evaluation, principal supervisors tend to revert to traditional roles focused on compliance rather than building principals' leadership capacities (Goldring, Clark, et al., 2020; Honig & Rainey, 2020b). This category points to the necessity of aligning principal supervisor roles with best practices and providing constructive feedback for their professional growth.

Principal Supervisor Span of Control. Principal supervisors are often stretched too thin due to the high number of principals or schools they oversee, the wide range of school contexts, and varying principal demographics. This extensive span of control hinders their ability to provide effective support for teaching and learning (Honig & Rainey, 2020a; Wallace Foundation, 2018, 2020). This category emphasizes the importance of reducing the workload or caseload of principal supervisors and making strategic school assignments to ensure they can adequately support their principals.

Principal Supervisor Expertise. Without a sustained focus on improving teaching and learning, principal supervisors may revert to traditional practices (Honig & Rainey, 2020b). There is a lack of mentors or coaches for principal supervisors, missed opportunities for

collaboration with district partners to enhance instructional expertise, and an absence of a clear succession plan or pipeline that ensures the prioritization of instructional expertise. Additionally, the district often promotes principals from within, which may not always provide the necessary expertise for the principal supervisor role (Honig & Rainey, 2019). This category highlights the need for ongoing efforts to strengthen the instructional expertise and support systems for principal supervisors.

Defining Capacity: Opportunity versus Knowledge

We concluded that the school district's priorities and the supervisors' span of control were two causal factors that contribute to principal supervisors' *lack of opportunity* to support principals. Studies indicate that if central offices do not mitigate the competing demands of the role, and reduce principal supervisors' span of control, it becomes very difficult for principal supervisors to support teaching and learning (Farrell & Coburn, 2016; Goldring et al., 2018; Goldring, Clark, et al., 2020; Honig, 2009; Honig & Rainey, 2018, 2020a; Reyes, 2021). In its comparison of districts that participated in the Principal Supervisor Initiative (PSI) with non-participating districts, the Wallace Foundation asserted that deep changes to the principal supervisor role require clearly articulated expectations for the focus of the supervisor role, including alignment with central office culture and capacity (Goldring, Clark, et al., 2020). Honig and Rainey (2023) agree with this finding and state that many districts start with transformation of principal supervision, but if they do not then move to create aligned shifts in other central office units, districts lack the requisite conditions for strengthening principals' instructional leadership practices.

Likewise, principal supervisors lack opportunity to support principals with teaching and learning when their spans of control are too numerous and/or disparate. Most studies of the

principal supervisor role indicate that without reductions in supervisors' spans of control, and strategic assignments of schools based on principal demographics and school contexts, supervisors are stretched thin and unable to provide support for teaching and learning. In 2020, Goldring, Clark, et al. and Goldring, Rogers, and Clark found that supervisors with smaller spans of control spent more time meeting with their principals. They also increased their emphasis on instructional leadership practices during school visits, including practices to support data use, teacher feedback, and classroom visits. Furthermore, homogeneous grouping within a smaller span of control has also been proven useful. Same-grade-level groups provide the advantage of allowing supervisors to focus on a narrower set of standards, curricula, and data. By contrast, supervisors who must support larger groups of principals across a wide range of years of experience, grade bands, and even geographical areas often lack the time and resources necessary to support teaching and learning in a meaningful way (Goldring, Clark, et al., 2020; Goldring, Rogers, & Clark, 2020).

In GRSS, frequent changes in district leadership, central office personnel, and school leadership also create gaps in principal supervisors' opportunities to support teaching and learning. As each superintendent establishes his or her own priorities, they redirect the training, support, and coaching that are offered to newly appointed school and central office leaders– including those who become principal supervisors. Although the principal supervisors in GRSS received extensive training when the role was revised in 2012, appointees in recent years have not engaged in role-specific professional learning to learn how to support principals' instructional leadership capacity.

These missed opportunities for professional learning, combined with a lack of principal supervisor know-how and expertise in merging leadership development theory with their daily

practice all contribute to what we categorize as principal supervisors' *lack of knowledge/skills* for supporting principal growth. Shifts in the principal supervisor role require shifts in the training and evaluation of principal supervisors. Without these necessary changes, the ongoing work of principal supervisors does not align with what we know to be best practices. Furthermore, if principal supervisor attrition outpaces the availability of professional learning experiences and resources, supervisors' practices will lag behind the revised expectations for the role.

Studies indicate that more often than not, principal supervisors do not receive professional learning that aligns with their role and job responsibilities (Honig & Rainey, 2019; Reyes, 2021; Thessin & Reyes, 2023). Some receive generic professional development alongside principals and other central office staff, while others are forced to learn the role while they perform it. As the supervisor role shifted from a focus on management and compliance toward developing principals' instructional leadership, supervisors were expected to adopt the mindsets and practices necessary to support principals. These practices include visiting schools, coaching and providing feedback to principals, conducting structured classroom walkthroughs and observations with principals, modeling and role-playing leadership behaviors, and facilitating analysis of and reflection on a school's program of teaching and learning (Rogers, 2022). Principal supervisors need specific training in order to fulfill these requirements of the role. When not protected as a priority, in-house training for principal supervisors is often overtaken by district administrative items and information sharing (Honig & Rainey, 2023).

One intriguing study we encountered during our investigation of root causes concluded that principal supervisors' and principals' engagement in joint work–defined as engagement in the work of instructional leadership by both the principal supervisor and the principal—provided the opportunity for principals' learning and practice development (Thessin & Reyes, 2023). We

interpreted this to mean that when principal supervisors joined a school's leadership team in goal-setting, decision-making and instructional monitoring, principals improved their instructional leadership practices. However, this study noted that without concerted effort to sustain principal supervisors' focus on instructional leadership, these supervisors revert to practices in the areas of management and compliance that have traditionally been the cornerstone of their role. According to Goldring, Clark, et al. (2020) in their work with the PSI, system administrators, practitioners, and researchers should endeavor to identify how and under what circumstances districts can provide supports and create environments that strengthen principal supervisors' knowledge and practices.

Theory of Improvement

In accordance with the research that undergirds the Model Standards for Principal Supervisors, we hypothesize that if principal supervisors use best practices in coaching and leadership development focused on making improvements within the instructional core, then principals will be better able to serve as instructional leaders that facilitate and support educator and student success. This theory is informed by current research on how the principal supervisor role should be implemented and supported within the larger structure of a district's central office. According to Honig and Rainey (2023), scholars of educational equity have tended to focus on schools or shifts in individual behaviors and policies, and many have not seen core central office work as an important main area of study.

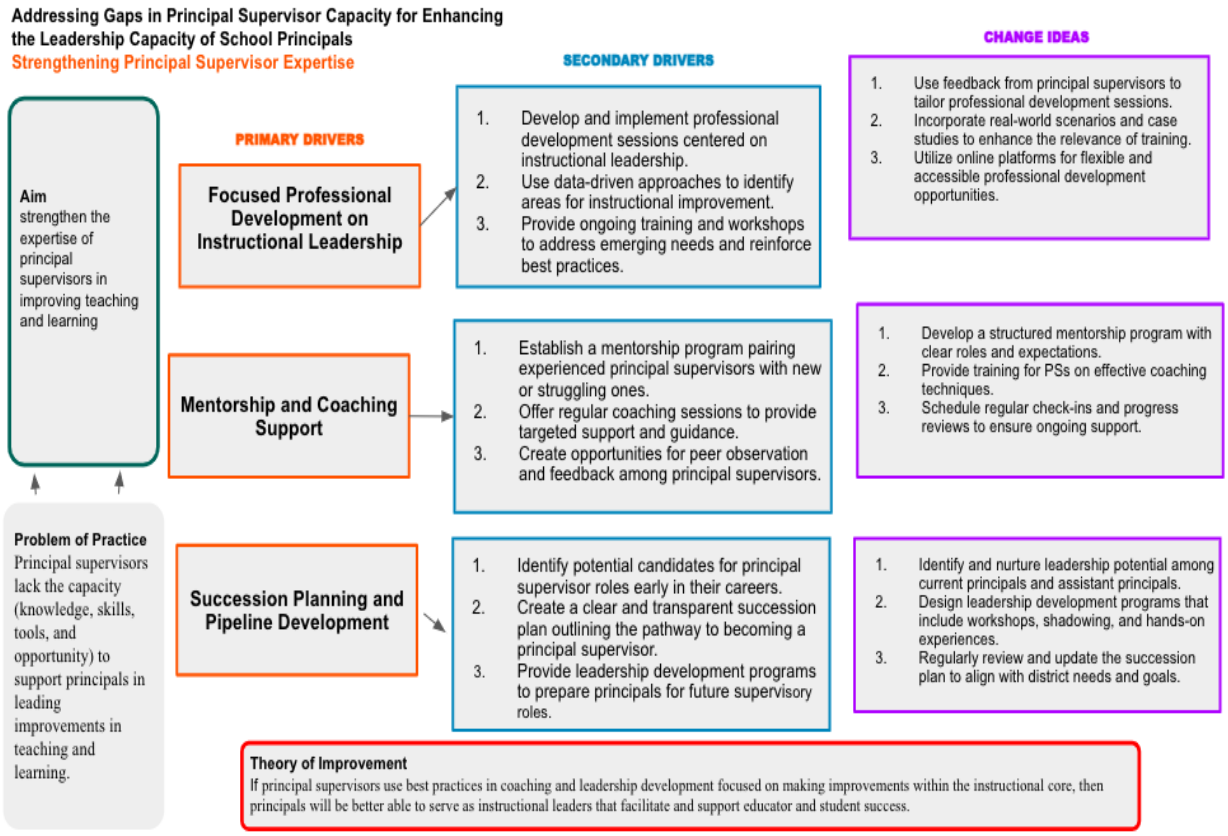
Driver Diagram

To operationalize our Theory of Improvement and systematically address the identified challenges, we have developed a Driver Diagram (Figure 5). This diagram emerged from shared observations and conversations with principal supervisors, principals, and central office

employees, as well as a review of literature related to the roles and responsibilities of principal supervisors. It highlights the need for changes in the principal supervisors' job descriptions to better support principals as instructional leaders. The diagram outlines the aim, primary and secondary drivers, and specific change ideas that could support this work. It serves as a strategic framework for implementing targeted interventions and evaluating their impact on the effectiveness of principal supervisors and, ultimately, on school and district success.

Figure 5

Principal Supervisor Driver Diagram



Section 2

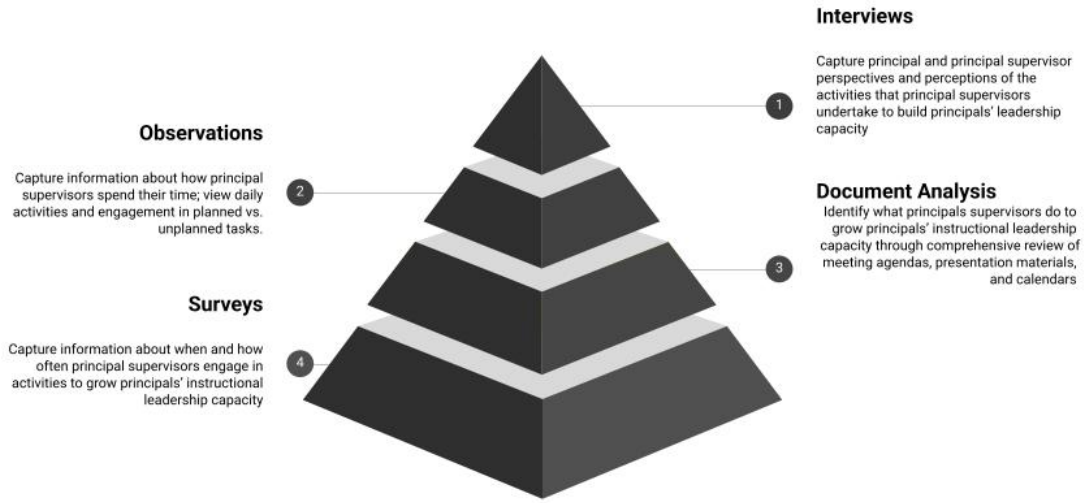
Methods

This exploratory study employed a multimethod approach (Figure 6), incorporating surveys, interviews, observations, and document analysis to examine the activities of principal supervisors and how these activities might serve to build principals' instructional leadership capacity. We aimed to gain a fuller understanding of the day-to-day practices of principal supervisors to inform our recommendations to district leaders within GRSS, as well as to create guidance for other school districts that might seek to adopt this model of principal supervision.

Our team utilized a 'complex' form of triangulation that involves the use of multiple triangulation techniques (Natow, 2020; Thurmond, 2001). We made use of *multiple data sources* (interviews with different categories of respondents) as well as *multiple methodologies* (interviews, observations, surveys, and document analysis). We also capitalized on our three-person group by utilizing the *multiple researcher* form of triangulation. This involved multiple researchers collecting data during our observations and all three researchers analyzing data from all sources (Natow, 2020). We used all four methods (Figure 6) to investigate our research questions: What do principal supervisors do to build principals' capacity for leading teaching and learning? To what extent do principal supervisors' actions contribute to principals' ability to lead teaching and learning?

Figure 6

Ball, DeSouza, Hayes, Study Design



Note. The surveys served as a foundation for our study. We triangulated survey data with insights from interviews, document analysis, and observations to provide a richer, more nuanced understanding of how principal supervisors spend their time and the ways their efforts may influence principals' capacity for instructional leadership.

Timeline

We secured institutional approval for our study in November 2024, and we launched surveys for principal supervisors and principals at the end of that month. Over the next eight weeks, we conducted interviews, gathered documents, and observed principals and supervisors at the December and January systemic school leader meetings. We concluded our data capture on January 31, 2025.

Surveys

We started our study with a survey of principals and principal supervisors to determine the extent to which these groups align in their perceptions of the support that principal supervisors provide. The aim of the survey was to gather information about the frequency and

regularity of engagement in instructional leadership activities by both the principal and the principal supervisor. Below we describe our sample, survey protocol, and analysis methodology.

Survey Participation. We sent recruitment emails to the 15 principal supervisors and 207 principals who served in the district during the 2023-2024 school year. Our goal was to get full participation from both groups, so we sent three follow up emails on a biweekly basis over the course of the study interval.

Ultimately, nine principal supervisors and 101 principals successfully completed the survey. As shown in Table 1, we categorized survey respondents into three experience levels: new participants with 1–3 years of experience (26 principals, four supervisors), intermediate participants with 4–7 years of experience (33 principals, two supervisors), and the veteran group, serving eight or more years in their current role (42 principals, three supervisors).

Table 1

Survey Participation by Experience Level

Experience level	Principals surveyed	Principals completed	Supervisors surveyed	Supervisors completed
New (1-3 years)	26	26	4	4
Intermediate (4-7 years)	33	33	2	2
Veteran (8 or more years)	42	42	3	3
Total	207	101	15	9

Survey Instrument. The goal of the survey was to provide data from a wide population of district leaders in order to present a fair and balanced view of principals and principal supervisors to triangulate with input from observations, document analysis, and interviews. The survey questions helped us to answer our research questions by gathering principals and

supervisors' perceptions of the district's implementation of the principal supervisor role. We also asked principals about frequency with which principal supervisors engage in modeling practices to build principals' instructional leadership skills.

Survey items were sourced from the "Tools You Can Use" appendix of Honig and Rainey's 2020 book *Supervising Principals for Instructional Leadership: A Teaching and Learning Approach* (See Appendices B and C). The authors suggested posing these questions to the two groups who should be most knowledgeable about principal supervisors' work (Honig & Rainey, 2020b). We asked similar questions of principals and supervisors in an effort to identify potential gaps in these groups' perceptions of the support provided by principal supervisors. For example, we asked principal supervisors to rate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the following statement: "My principals and I spent almost all of our time together on their growth as instructional leaders." The corresponding item for principals was: "My principal supervisor and I spent almost all of our time together on my growth as an instructional leader." The surveys offered insight into the specific ways principal supervisors support instructional leadership by asking principals to reflect on how their supervisors allocate time to joint work focused on instruction. Although we kept responses anonymous and are not able to align principals' responses with those of their supervisors, survey responses provided data about the overall perceptions of the frequency and effect of principal supervisors' engagement in tasks that literature presents as key to building principals' capacity for leading teaching and learning in their schools.

Survey Analysis. We analyzed the survey data to identify alignments and gaps in the perceptions of principals and their supervisors regarding how the supervisors support their principals. Specifically, we examined whether a connection exists between a principal's years of

service and the frequency of their interactions with their supervisor. Additionally, we analyzed how many principals agreed that their supervisor sets goals with them and how well this aligns with supervisors' reports of their engagement in goal-setting. We also explored principals' perceptions of their supervisors' commitment to their growth as instructional leaders, the extent to which supervisors engaged in learning alongside them, and whether principals and supervisors shared similar definitions of instructional leadership. We also compared responses from principals and supervisors about how often principal supervisors model engagement in specific instructional leadership activities, including observing the quality of teaching in classrooms, providing feedback to teachers to improve their teaching, leading teacher professional development, leading school improvement planning processes, analyzing data and evidence for school improvement, and developing teacher leadership. These questions helped us assess the consistency of perceptions regarding supervisory support, professional development, and leadership priorities. See Appendix B for the principal supervisor survey and Appendix C for the principal survey.

We examined these survey responses for instances where principals and supervisors agreed and looked closely at areas where their perceptions diverged. In concert with additional contributions from our interviews and observations, these items were some of the most illuminating of our study, because they demonstrated the differences in how supervisors perceive their work and how their support is received by the principals they serve. According to Honig and Rainey (2020b), these survey items are designed to foster deep understanding and ownership of complex change processes involved in growing principals' instructional leadership capacity, and in transforming the ways that central office personnel, including principal supervisors, can support this work.

Interviews

Conducted virtually via Zoom over a six-week period, our semi-structured interviews delved into the actions of principal supervisors and helped us to elaborate on supervisors' and principals' survey responses. In alignment with Hurst's (2023) approach, these interviews incorporated open-ended questions, positioning themselves between structured and unstructured formats. This involved posing a set of standard questions with room for follow-up inquiries as needed.

Interview Participants. To ensure a comprehensive understanding of their perspectives, we made an effort to interview each of the current principal supervisors in GRSS who also served during the 2023-2024 school year. We emailed and called each principal supervisor to recruit their participation in the interviews (Appendix A).

To ensure fair representation across the various demographics within the population of principals in GRSS, our team selected a subset of principals who served during the 2023-2024 school year through a simple random sampling method. This approach ensured an equitable selection process for every principal, leading to a subset accurately reflecting the entire population (Fowler, 2014; Nardi, 2003). We selected three principals from each grade level span (elementary, middle/K-8, and high). As with the principal supervisors, we emailed the selected principals to recruit their participation in the interviews (Appendix A). We selected at least one principal to represent each of the following categories:

- years of experience (three years or fewer, between four and seven years, eight or more years)
- school level (elementary, middle/K-8, high)

- the size of the student population in their current school placement (between 200 and 800, 801-1500, greater than 1500)

We invited 11 current principal supervisors to participate in the semi-structured interviews. Nine supervisors agreed to participate. These supervisors provide support to principals at the elementary (6), middle school/K-8 (2), and high school (1) clusters throughout the district. We were also fortunate to interview 12 sitting principals–three elementary school leaders, five middle school/K-8 principals, and four high school principals (Table 2).

Table 2

Profiles of Principals Interviewed in GRSS

Years as principal in GRSS	School level in 2023-2024 school year	Student population
<3	Elementary	200 – 800
8+	Elementary	200 – 800
8+	Elementary	200 – 800
8+	Middle/K-8	200 – 800
4-7	Middle/K-8	801–1500
4-7	Middle/K-8	200 – 800
<3	Middle/K-8	801– 1500
4-7	High	801 –1500
4-7	High	200 – 800
4-7	High	1501+
<3	High	200 – 800

We expanded our original pool of principal participants because we wanted to select principals from diverse backgrounds. We aimed to include both new and veteran principals to

enhance the study's validity and capture a broad range of variations (Maxwell, 2013; Miles et al., 2014).

Interview Protocol. During these 30- to 60-minute recorded interviews we used active listening techniques to guide the conversation toward topics relevant to the support provided by principal supervisors to enhance principals' capacity for improving teaching and learning. Our intention was to create an environment that allowed for unexpected insights and revelations. By balancing a structured guide with flexibility, we aimed to capture surprising perspectives and contributions from both principal supervisors and principals related to the enhancement of principals' capacity (Kvale, 2007). We followed the guidelines developed by Annette Lareau, especially as it pertains to being mindful of power inequalities (Hurst, 2023).

Interview questions for principals and supervisors provided participants with opportunities to provide more details about the topics covered by the survey items (Appendix B). While the survey asked global questions about how principal supervisors support principals, the interview questions required more specific responses from principals and supervisors. For example, we asked principals for specific examples of feedback or guidance that led to improvements in teaching and learning. We prompted them to share what happens when they meet with their supervisors, and how often these meetings occur. We asked supervisors parallel questions to ascertain how they spend their time supporting principals. We closed each interview by asking participants to share anything else about the role of the principal supervisor that had not been discussed.

Interview Analysis. As with the survey questions, we did not link principals' interview data with their corresponding supervisor. Rather we reviewed responses from both groups and identified powerful narrative responses that illustrate important aspects of their experiences and

contributed to our overall understanding of the work of principal supervisors in GRSS. Conducting interviews via Zoom allowed us to record each session in order to generate accurate transcripts of each interview and review them for nuances of speech and non-verbal expression.

We engaged in an inductive process to identify trends in the data by categorizing the data based on the actual content of the data set (Vears & Gillam, 2022). In the same way that we used an affinity protocol to group ideas when we created our fishbone diagram, we iteratively developed the categories for our interview data over the course of the study interval. As similar themes emerged, we grouped them together. Our objective was to label each transcript several times in more refined iterations each time. This is how we checked that trends that might have been dismissed as inconsequential in the earlier rounds received their due attention as we gathered more information.

Observations

Our team used observations to supplement the interviews. In addition to the perspectives shared via surveys and interviews, observations were key to providing valuable insights into the behaviors and actions of the participants (Hurst 2023; Pascale 2021). To understand the alignment or contradiction between participant beliefs and actions, we adopted a "flies on the wall" approach (Hurst, 2023). Although these observations were designed to capture the subtleties of the practices that principal supervisors use to support principals in enhancing teaching and learning conditions, we took general descriptive and reflective field notes, scripting when possible, and organized them with our interview trend data where applicable.

Due to privacy concerns, we observed principal supervisors in public settings during two full day systemic leadership meetings, one of the common examples of interactions between principals and their supervisors. In GRSS, systemic leadership meetings are held monthly.

During these meetings, principals receive updates on district policies and initiatives and engage in professional learning aligned with the district's strategic plan. Throughout these observations, our team collected notes, and artifacts showcasing the interactions between supervisors and principals. We used a protocol to capture interactions between principal supervisors and principals in real-time (Appendix C). Our goal was to capture specific behaviors and communication patterns during their interactions.

Hurst (2023) underscores the importance of observing actions and conduct to complement the insights gained from interviews. While interviews uncover how individuals make sense of their worlds, participant observations reveal authentic actions and behaviors that may not align with verbal expressions of beliefs, values, and practices. We used the observations to check the validity of the responses provided during the interviews, and identify potential gaps that might exist between when and how often participants engage in the actions identified in the interviews as activities that might build principals' instructional leadership capacity. We analyzed our observation data to identify any barriers to engagement in the joint work that may contribute to our problem of practice. We did not end up relying on the coding from the interviews to analyze the observations because interactions between supervisors and principals were so limited during the meetings. We did, however, use a similar inductive approach to identify trends in our observation field notes, and then compared those trends to the ones that emerged from the interviews.

Observation Analysis. We viewed the observations as our best opportunity to check the patterns and relationships that emerged from our survey. Because we observed principal supervisors during systemic meetings, we were positioned to witness whether supervisors learn

alongside principals, whether they prioritize tasks associated with instructional leadership, and the extent to which supervisors model their expectations for principals.

As noted in our protocol, we worked in pairs to observe systemic meetings. We then organized our individual field notes and came together to list trends observed in the principals' interactions with their supervisors. While we used the list of practices from Honig and Rainey's (2020b) framework, specifically the modeling activities, to inform our thinking, we used an inductive approach to analyzing our observation data, thus ensuring that we did not miss opportunities to highlight actions that are not listed in the framework. Our observations provided us with an unbiased view of principals' and supervisors' interactions because they did not rely on these individuals' accounts of their work. Along with the document analysis, our observations served as a key method that we utilized to answer our research questions–What, if anything, are principal supervisors in GRSS doing to build principals' capacity for leading teaching and learning? To what extent do principal supervisors' actions contribute to principals' ability to lead teaching and learning?

Document Analysis

We conducted a qualitative review of official documents used by principal supervisors. These included systemic, cluster, and area meeting agendas; presentation materials such as slide decks and capture forms; images of supervisors' calendars; and one sample of a supervisor's evaluation document, completed by their own supervisor. We requested documents associated with the interactions we observed during meetings and any activities that supervisors discussed in our interviews (Appendix A).

We used an Affinity Protocol to analyze these documents (Appendix D). The document analysis provided an additional layer of data on when and how often principal supervisors

engage in practices that enhance principals' instructional leadership. It also validated responses provided by interview and survey participants. Our team remained keenly aware that participants' responses in interviews and surveys might be limited by what they remember or feel comfortable sharing (Natow, 2020). We cross-checked this data against our on-site observations and document analyses.

Document Analysis Affinity Protocol. Our team used an analysis protocol (Appendix F) adapted from the *Systemic Improvement Leads' Affinity Protocol* and the *Center for Educational Equity Affinity Mapping Protocol.* We wanted to use a process that supports organization and synthesis of information into coherent themes without imposing a particular set of criteria on the data set. Our team felt that this approach reduced bias while facilitating a deeper understanding and interpretation of our findings. We reviewed documents—agendas, presentation slide decks, and calendars—to understand how principal supervisors spend their time, without the influence of a checklist of best practices that might distract us from gaining authentic insight into our problem of practice (Bingham, 2023).

Our protocol consisted of two phases: meaning-making and categorization. In the initial phase, we analyzed the data through the lens of our research questions, identifying the specific work that principal supervisors engaged in with principals as documented in various sources. After compiling a comprehensive list of actions—ranging from complex tasks, such as planning and facilitating a PLC session with principals, to routine activities, like reading emails during a cluster breakout session—we grouped similar actions together and assigned appropriate labels.

As a group, we reflected on and discussed the emerging themes, unexpected findings, potential gaps, and whether/how this information enhanced our understanding of the relationship between the principal supervisor's work and principals' instructional leadership capacity.

Overall Analysis Plan

Once we compiled the data from the interviews, surveys, observations, and document analyses, we revisited our research questions: What do principal supervisors do to build principals' capacity for leading teaching and learning? To what extent do principal supervisors' actions contribute to principals' ability to lead teaching and learning? We also tried to identify trends in how the role is currently being implemented. We went back to the existing research on principal supervision to examine whether the execution of the principal supervisor role in the district aligns with best practices in instructional coaching. We also probed what barriers prevent principal supervisors from prioritizing instructional coaching in their interactions with principals. We used the surveys and the interviews to identify supervisors' perceptions about how they are providing principals with the support they need. We then compared these perceptions with principals' beliefs about the support provided by principal supervisors.

The survey data served as the foundation of our research, while input from observations, interviews, and document analysis provided additional support to triangulate our findings. These sources helped us explore what principal supervisors were doing (or not doing) to build principals' capacity for leading teaching and learning, ensuring a more comprehensive and validated analysis. We worked with a statistician who conducted a bivariate regression analysis to determine any statistical relationship between factors like frequency of supervisory visits and principals' perceptions of support. We also used T-tests to try to connect the frequency of supervisors' visits with new principals, and whether variation existed in the support offered to principals based on years of experience.

As improvers in the education space, we adhered to the practice of using multiple sources to gain a full and accurate view of a problem area. We acknowledged that we were asking our

district colleagues to provide information about themselves and their supervisors that might prove unflattering or unfavorable. We triangulated multiple methodological resources to address these issues by confirming or challenging our initial assumptions about the principal supervisor role while also integrating additional insights beyond our limited perspectives (Natow, 2020).

Ethical Considerations

We secured all necessary permissions from the University of Maryland Internal Review Board. It was important to note that, while conducting this research study, we were employed by GRSS. However, we affirmed that our roles did not exert influence on the study's outcomes or participants' involvement. We also protected interview respondents' confidentiality by password-protecting all video recordings and transcript files.

We explicitly communicated, both verbally and in writing, to the principal supervisors and principals that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they retained the option to withdraw at any point during the research. The study's purpose was clearly conveyed through written communication. We were committed to fostering a supportive environment that encouraged principal supervisors and principals to participate willingly, driven by a shared pursuit of knowledge, a commitment to district success, and a desire to contribute to the educational research literature.

Positionality

As researchers and improvement specialists, our theoretical beliefs are grounded in the Principles of Improvement Science (Bryk et al., 2015). Collectively, we have over a decade of experience facilitating organizational learning using improvement science. This extensive training informed how we approached the capstone process—from the initial planning through data collection, analysis, and writing. In this study, we served as lead researchers and coaches of

the improvement cycle for school teams in the GRSS district.

During the development of this capstone, one of our team members transitioned from her role as an improvement specialist to that of a school principal. This change brought a unique perspective to our work. By applying her knowledge of improvement to her new role, she provided additional context about the dynamics between the principal supervisor's central office role and the principal's role in the schoolhouse. We used this information to set the criteria for participant selection and to identify potential documents for our analysis. We acknowledge that our roles within the district may have influenced aspects of the project; however, we implemented structured research protocols to reduce potential bias during data collection and analysis.

We recognized that most capstones typically employed no more than two methods for investigating a research question. With three researchers on our team, we were able to apply a more expansive approach and use multiple methods. This allowed us to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the practices of principal supervisors and how they influence principals' instructional leadership. Our three-member team was particularly advantageous during observations of systemic leadership meetings, enabling us to cover breakout rooms at the elementary, middle/K–8, and high school levels simultaneously.

Each subsection of the broader capstone was initially drafted independently—following an outline or conversation to frame what would be written—and later reviewed and synthesized as a group to ensure alignment and consistency. One researcher typically initiated a section, but the section would then go through several drafts until all three team members reached agreement on the final product. For instance, Felice DeSouza initiated the development of the fishbone diagram, driver diagram and created figures for data analysis; however, all three researchers

contributed to refining and finalizing them. Courtni Ball drafted the initial findings of the survey analysis and the impact product, including the initial development of the methods section, which were then reviewed and edited collaboratively. Similarly, Trina Hayes drafted the initial version of the introduction, preface and conclusion, which was also refined through group revision.

In the literature review section, each researcher initially worked independently to gather information and build foundational knowledge. Felice DeSouza drafted the sections on the role of the principal supervisor and standards for principal supervision. Courtni Ball focused on hiring and selection, professional learning, and budgeting for principal supervisors. Trina Hayes contributed drafts on principal supervisors as coaches, mentors, and brokers. After each draft, the team worked collaboratively to ensure coherence, alignment with the research purpose, and consistency in voice.

In conducting the field research, we divided responsibilities based on school levels. Felice DeSouza conducted interviews with elementary principals and principal supervisors, Courtni Ball conducted interviews with middle school principals and principal supervisors, and Trina Hayes with high school principals and principal supervisors. Before collecting data, we standardized our interview and observation protocols—including expectations, delivery, and setting—to ensure validity and reliability.

Our collaborative approach and iterative process allowed us to develop a comprehensive understanding of how principal supervisors influence instructional leadership. The combination of perspectives and methods deepened our insights and contributed to the broader body of research on educational leadership and improvement.

Section 3

Findings

Overall Findings

The shift in the roles of school and district leaders toward instructional leadership that centers equity, access, and accountability has not been without its challenges. Our firsthand experiences with these challenges within a large urban school district, GRSS, led us to these research questions: What do principal supervisors do to build principals' capacity for leading teaching and learning? To what extent do principal supervisors' actions contribute to principals' ability to lead teaching and learning? As noted in *From Tinkering to Transformation: How School District Central Offices Drive Equitable Teaching and Learning,* district leaders often position principal supervisors to be key influences on principals (Honig & Rainey, 2023). Based on our research, this proved to be the case in GRSS. Principals often cited their supervisors as impactful and influential figures in their work. But, as Honig and Rainey learned, when principal supervisors focused mainly on evaluation, compliance, and operations, they did not reinforce and in some cases interfered with principals' ability to lead teaching and learning.

After finalizing our data collection and examining the data, we concluded: (1) principal supervisors spend the bulk of their time supporting principals with non-instructional issues; (2) while supervisors have the potential to influence instructional leadership they are limited in the support they can provide because of administrative burdens and lack of training; (3) principal supervisors vary widely in the amount and types of support that they offer to school leaders, regardless of those leaders' levels of experience; and (4) at this time, principal supervisors' actions provide limited and inconsistent support for principals' ability to lead teaching and learning.

In the pages that follow, we present our findings through the framework of our study's design, organized to mirror the structure of our surveys. We structure the analysis into three sections, each capturing distinct but interconnected patterns in how principal supervisors support school leaders. The first section examines the frequency and nature of interactions between principals and their supervisors, drawing on both groups' perspectives regarding years of experience, the number of supervisors principals have had, and how often supervisors visited schools during the 2023–2024 school year. The second section explores perceptions of how supervisors engage in key elements of their role—such as goal-setting, shared learning, fostering professional growth, and prioritizing instructional leadership. The third section investigates the extent to which supervisors model specific instructional leadership practices for principals. Throughout each section, we triangulate survey data with insights from interviews, document analysis, and observations to provide a richer, more nuanced understanding of how principal supervisors spend their time—and the ways their efforts may influence principals' capacity for instructional leadership.

Time on Task: Frequency and Nature of Principal and Supervisor Interactions

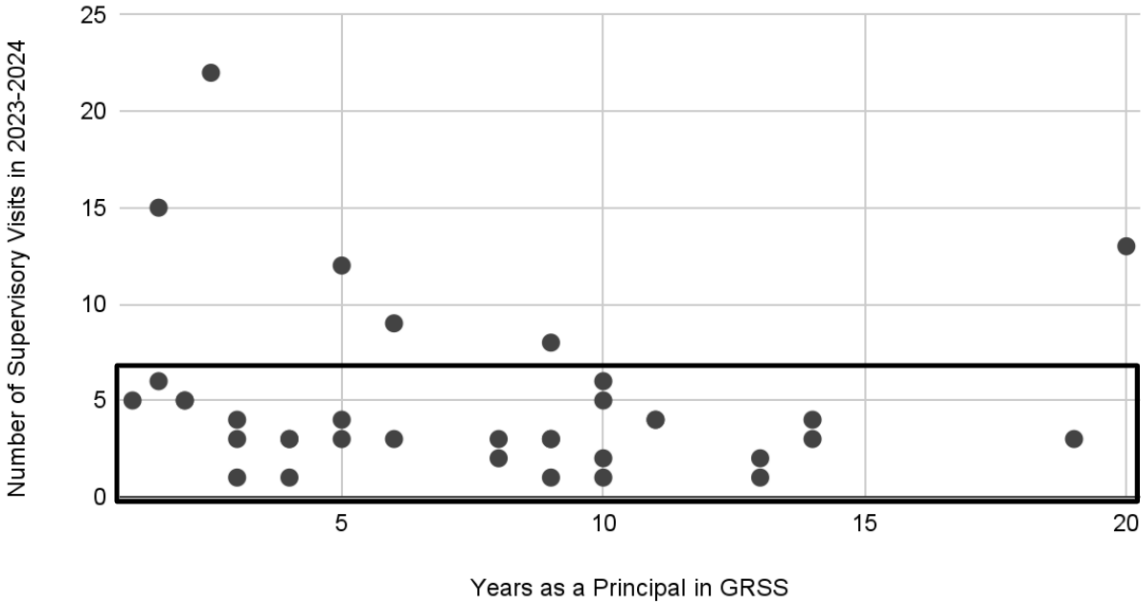
We used the first few items from the principal and supervisor surveys to gather information about each participant's years of service and, for principals, how often their supervisor visited their school during the 2023-2024 school year (Figure 7). We sought to determine whether a principal's years of service influenced the frequency of their interactions with their supervisor. Much of the research we reviewed before conducting our study indicated that supervisors who successfully took a teaching and learning approach to leadership coaching often engaged in joint work with the principals they serve (Honig & Rainey, 2023; Thessin & Reyes, 2023). These supervisors involved themselves in the work of the schoolhouse by visiting

regularly and leading alongside administrators and teacher leaders (Thessin, 2021). Research also suggests that strong principal-supervisor relationships develop through the differentiated support supervisors offer to principals.

Connecting Years of Service to Quantity of Interactions. We hypothesized that the length of a principal's tenure might influence the frequency of supervisor visits. Upon analyzing the data (Figure 7), we found no statistically significant differences in the number of supervisor visits based on a principal's years of service. In a simple bivariate regression, there was no statistical relationship between the number of visits a principal received and the number of years of experience of the principal. The R-squared was 0.00, indicating that there was no correlation between the two variables ($p = 0.659$). There is no evidence that, on average, less experienced principals received more visits from their supervisors.

Figure 7

Comparison of Principal Experience and Supervisor Visits



Note. Regardless of length of tenure, most principals were visited six or fewer times.

There was, however, a significant difference in the number of visits for tenured and non-tenured principals, as shown by a T-test ($p < 0.05$). Non-tenured principals, defined as those with fewer than three years of experience, received an average of 7.25 visits during the 2023-2024 school year, whereas tenured principals received an average of 5.10 visits during the same period. This suggests that, on average, supervisors may have prioritized support for newer principals over veteran principals.

Some outliers exist where principals with higher years of service (e.g., above 10 years) received either very few or very frequent visits, suggesting potential differences in supervision practices based on other factors (e.g., performance, school needs).

Connecting Quantity of Interactions to Perceptions of Support. We also explored whether a connection existed between the number of supervisor visits and principals' perceptions of support. The survey data analysis found a small but significant increase in perceived support for each additional supervisor visit ($p=0.03$). However, the adjusted R^2 value of 0.04 suggests that the number of supervisor visits explains only a small portion of the variability in principals' perceptions of support. Additionally, approximately 30% of principals did not agree that their supervisor focused primarily on their growth as instructional leaders. This group represented a full range of experience levels, from first-year principals to 20-year veterans. Of those who disagreed, most (26 out of 30) reported receiving five or fewer visits during the 2023–2024 school year.

Connecting Quantitative Findings to Qualitative Evidence. These findings were supported by insights from principal interviews. We learned that, for most principals, the five visits from their supervisor consisted of required beginning-, middle-, and end-of-year evaluation conferences and two associated observations. Calendars shared by principal supervisors

indicated that these required evaluative visits were a time-consuming priority. One supervisor, who has served in the role for four years, blocked off an entire instructional day for one formal observation. At this pace, supervisors can only visit a limited number of schools per week. Since GRSS supervisors support caseloads of six to sixteen schools, a single round of evaluation meetings can take nearly a month to complete. Once they allocated time for mandatory tasks, supervisors had to balance their schedules with systemic and level-alike meetings. All nine supervisors interviewed mentioned that their time was divided between managing crises, handling parent concerns, and addressing administrative issues, leaving little room for instructional leadership. One supervisor stated:

> I often feel that much of my time is spent on operational management rather than instructional leadership. I find myself constantly putting out fires, which has shifted my role. However, I do try to stay intentionally engaged with instruction and alignment, especially in our signature schools.

Another supervisor reinforced this challenge, detailing the breadth of non-instructional responsibilities that dominate their role:

> As a principal supervisor, I am primarily responsible for evaluating principals. I'm also responsible for overseeing the management of ensuring that they are exercising good budgetary practices in terms of spending down their money and making sure their way they're spending their money is in alignment with their school improvement efforts. I'm also responsible for handling parent concerns and engaging with parents to try to seek resolution when different situations come up regarding their children or concerns that they may have with the school as a whole. In addition, I'm also responsible for monitoring completion of various reports, monitoring sure that certain assessments are

being completed in a timely fashion, as well as planning, facilitating principals, meeting and designing, and in many cases leading and facilitating principal professional development, and coaching to support their growth and development.

The lack of focus on instructional leadership was also echoed by principals, one whom described their limited engagement with supervisors in academic matters: “Most of my interactions with my supervisor revolve around non-instructional issues that arise in the building. When it comes to academics, I would say I engage with my supervisor maybe once or twice—unless it’s just an informal conversation.”

Several supervisors expressed a desire to spend more time coaching principals and observing instruction but found themselves frequently pulled into problem-solving and operational management. When asked how they primarily spend their time with principals, one supervisor responded, “Coaching principals, but it's not enough time..."

When we designed our study, our research team sought to uncover instances of meaningful joint work between principals and their supervisors within GRSS through interviews and surveys. While survey data suggested that most supervisors visit schools only five times a year for required formal observations, interview responses provided deeper insight into moments of true collaboration. One principal described her supervisor as an “equal participant” in a school-wide learning walk, where they collectively examined trauma-informed practices, collected data, and engaged in a student panel discussion on social-emotional learning. She valued the experience because it felt like a real partnership. Another principal shared that their supervisor was actively involved in observing leadership team meetings, providing structured feedback, and following up to ensure progress: “She tries to see me in different elements of what I do in the work... we sit down and have a discussion around what she saw, what things she

thinks I can do to improve my engagement with my staff." Additionally, one principal noted the value of ongoing instructional dialogue, explaining that their supervisor would regularly check in between formal meetings to follow up on prior discussions: "So we had a meeting on, let's say, the first of the month. On the 14th or 15th, she's following up—'How is this going? What are you doing?" These examples illustrate that while many interactions may be primarily evaluative, others foster ongoing dialogue, instructional improvement, and shared leadership in ways that extend beyond compliance driven visits.

Most principals in our interview sample reported interacting with their supervisors daily or multiple times per week through phone calls, check-ins, and operational support, however they noted that school visits typically occurred only during structured events, such as evaluation conferences and observations. Several principals mentioned that their supervisor was "a text message away" for urgent needs. Therefore, while supervisors and principals may have had limited opportunities for in-person collaboration, about 58% of the principals surveyed perceived their time together as dedicated to instructional leadership growth.

Missed Opportunities for Collaborative Leadership Development. Another key finding regarding the frequency and nature of principal interactions was the number of missed opportunities for principals and supervisors to learn together. During observations of systemic and level-alike meetings, principal supervisors sat together, separate from the principals they support. In many of these meetings, supervisors did not interact with principals, even when principals engaged in guided practice related to coaching and feedback. One supervisor reflected on this, stating, "We are learning with principals, and I'm not saying that we should not, but I do believe there should be a level of differentiation for us in this space and in our position." This highlights a gap in professional development and the need for a more structured, differentiated

approach to ensure principal supervisors are actively engaged in these learning spaces alongside the principals they support.

When asked about their interactions with supervisors, principals often overlooked these monthly meetings as spaces for shared learning or leadership development. Of the twelve principals interviewed, none identified the monthly systemic school leader or area leadership meetings as meaningful interactions with their supervisor. One supervisor shared, "We had a whole overview of what that was going to be like...and since then, it's not been like a separate, strictly for principal supervisors. We've not had that." This quote highlights that while there was an initial intention to provide dedicated professional development for supervisors, it was not sustained. Instead, the ongoing professional development opportunities for supervisors have been limited to participating alongside principals, without targeted, differentiated support for their unique role. This lack of intentional and separate learning for principal supervisors has contributed to missed opportunities for collaborative, developmentally focused interactions between supervisors and principals.

Research indicates that substantive improvements in principals' instructional leadership require supervisor visits at least once per month to engage in collaborative work with school-based teams (Thessin et al., 2018; Rogers et al., 2021; Meyers et al., 2024). Supervisor-principal pairs that demonstrated robust changes in instructional leadership practices generally met at least every two weeks, with additional communications occurring in between. The most impactful visits involved joint work, with supervisors acting as coaches rather than conducting visits solely to fulfill district and state evaluation mandates. Data from our study indicate that these productive types of school visits occur inconsistently across the district, limiting the ability of principal supervisors to engage in effective coaching practices as part of their supervisory

responsibilities. Table 3 presents data on the number of visits made by principal supervisors to principals during the 2023-2024 school year. It categorizes the number of visits into three ranges: 1 to 5 visits, 6 to 10 visits, and 11 or more visits. The majority of principals (68) received between 1 and 5 visits, while 24 principals were visited 6 to 10 times. A smaller group of 8 principals received 11 or more visits. This distribution suggests that most principals receive a limited number of supervisory visits, with fewer experiencing more frequent engagement from their supervisors, further punctuating the fact that limited interaction with a principal supervisor may hinder a principal's development as a strong instructional leader.

Table 3

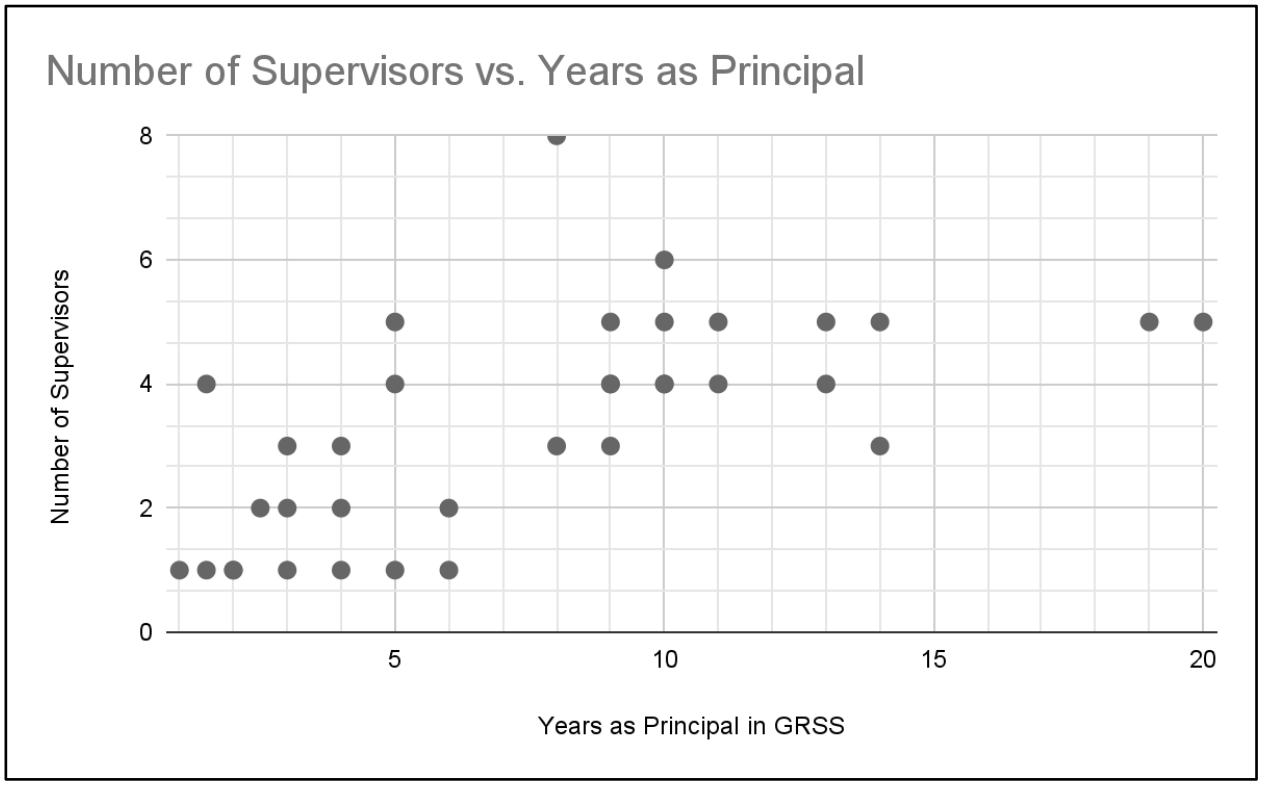
Number of Principal Supervisor Visits to Principals in 2023-2024

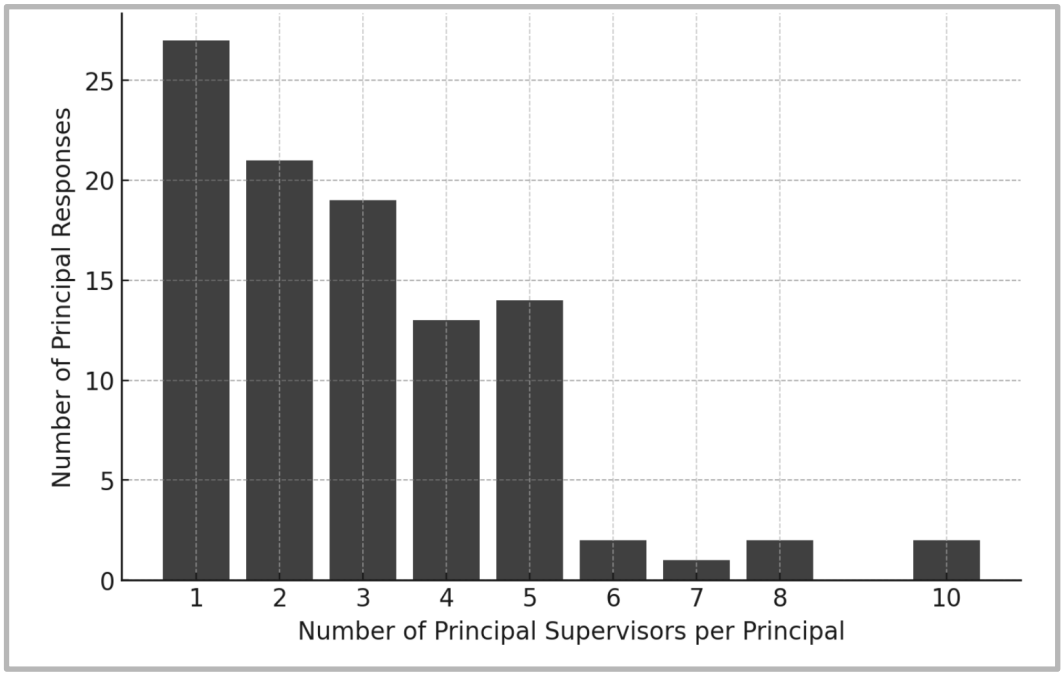
Range of visits	Number of principals (n = 101)
1- 5	68
6-10	24
11 or more	8

The Impact of Turnover. The last open-ended item in the participant profile section of our survey gathered information from principals about how many supervisors they have had since they entered the role. We hypothesized that high principal supervisor turnover was a barrier to successful implementation of the role, and our results confirmed this theory. Initially, we looked at the distribution of the responses, and noted that most of the principals surveyed have had between one and five supervisors since they entered the role (Figure 8).

Figure 8

Distribution of Principal Supervisors Per Principal

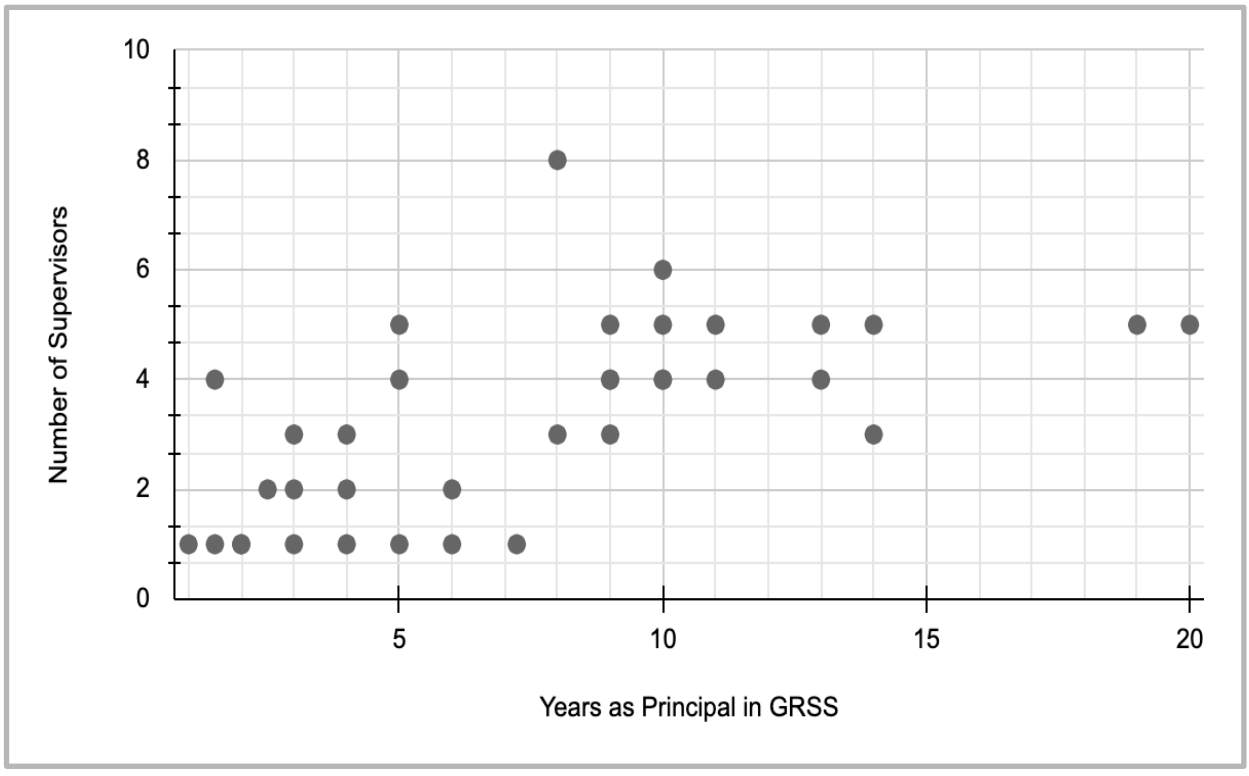




On average, our survey respondents have served seven years, and the average number of supervisors was three. While our data had a few outliers–principals that have served over 15 years–we noticed that many principals have experienced high supervisor turnover. Further analysis of principal responses (Figure 9) indicated that some of our newest building leaders–those with five or fewer years in the principalship–have already had more than one supervisor. Some principals have had more supervisors than years of service. This range suggests a lack of stability in supervisory relationships, which may contribute to the mixed perceptions of coaching and support for instructional leadership indicated in the next section of our survey. Frequent changes in supervisors disrupt the continuity of professional development efforts, making it challenging for principals to build trust and receive sustained, meaningful guidance.

Figure 9

Number of Principal Supervisors Over Time Per Principal



One supervisor told us that when they start working with principals, they spend a lot of time going back to the initiating phase of the coaching relationship because they have to learn about the principals in order to support them. Another supervisor mentioned that "Trying to navigate people and how they feel about different things [becomes] very nuanced so that can be challenging." Principals experience this discomfort as well. One principal noted, "Given that I've had four supervisors in the last five years, their roles and approaches have varied depending on their experience with supervising principals." Another stated, "Each supervisor tends to emphasize their own priorities. While they all follow district initiatives, their leadership often centers around specific areas, such as academics, operations, or student services related to climate and culture." This inconsistency often creates challenges in forming strong coaching relationships, as some supervisors prioritize technical guidance and operational oversight over meaningful instructional mentorship.

Perceptions of How Supervisors Engage in Key Elements of the Role

In their work with school districts, Honig and Rainey (2020b) observed that principals who demonstrated positive results in their instructional leadership had principal supervisors that took a teaching and learning approach. These supervisors helped principals exercise agency over their learning and prioritized principals' growth as instructional leaders. The next items on our survey were designed to gather perception data from principals and principal supervisors about the supervisors' approach to building principals' capacity for leading teaching and learning. Our comparisons of each group's responses to these survey items paints a clear picture of a district where supervisors have the potential to catalyze the growth of the principals they serve, and to advance in their own leadership journeys, but are hampered by an abundance of operational duties that constrict their ability to engage in valuable joint work and coaching.

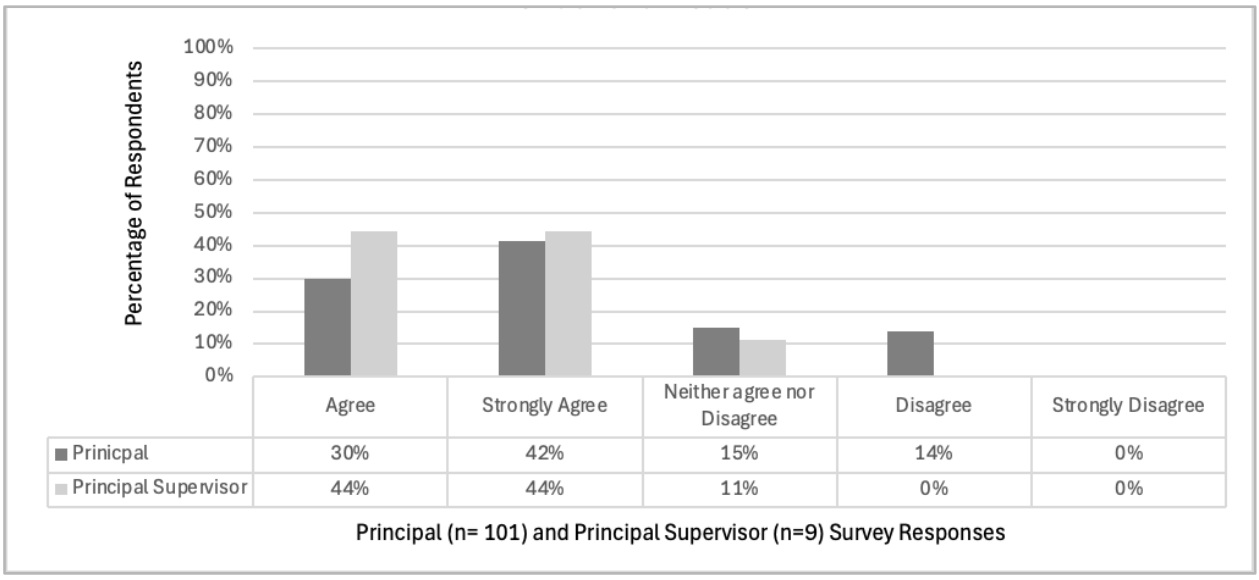
Coaching Over Compliance: The Core of Effective Supervision. Honig (2012) asserts that principal supervision should center on coaching and capacity-building rather than compliance-driven oversight. She argues, "When central offices shift from top-down compliance monitoring to developing principals as instructional leaders, school performance improves" (p. 738). This perspective is echoed in our findings, where both principals and principal supervisors emphasized the need for a shift toward meaningful coaching relationships. However, our surveys, interviews, and document analysis revealed a different reality.

Figure 10 of our survey results reveals that 72% of principals (a combination of "Agree"' and "Strongly Agree") felt their supervisor prioritized their growth as an instructional leader. However, interviews painted a contrasting picture: many principals described their interactions as compliance-driven, with meetings often focused on mandates, operational concerns, and evaluations rather than instructional leadership development. Principals also expressed concerns about whether coaching discussions influenced evaluations, creating hesitancy in fully engaging with their supervisors. One spoke very candidly about their discomfort with the principal supervisor's coach-as-evaluator dynamic:

> When a supervisor is in the building, the expectation is that their role is to provide coaching and guidance, not to turn the experience into something evaluative. It should be treated as a learning experience, not an opportunity to assign critical feedback. This creates a tricky situation with ebbs and flows in the supervisory relationship. While I can't definitively say that any of my supervisors have failed to support me, it often feels like a lack of support. The process doesn't always feel like coaching—it feels more like scrutiny.

Figure 10

Supervisor Prioritization of Principal Growth



Similarly, while 57% of principals reported that the majority of their time with their supervisor was dedicated to instructional leadership, interviews and document analysis suggested otherwise. Principal supervisors frequently managed non-instructional responsibilities such as staffing, budgeting, and community concerns, leading to an imbalance between their intended coaching role and operational demands. Supervisors acknowledged their desire to focus more on mentoring and instructional leadership but felt constrained by district expectations and compliance-based duties. These findings reinforce Honig et al.'s (2017) assertion that when compliance takes precedence over coaching, opportunities for meaningful instructional growth are significantly diminished.

Despite the widespread recognition of the importance of coaching, only two principals mentioned an instance where they felt they received coaching that directly supported their ability to improve teaching and learning in their schools—making this experience an outlier rather than the norm. One principal described how their supervisor modeled effective instructional feedback

by guiding them to take the lead in teacher observations:

> Even though she wasn't the one directly addressing the teacher, her influence was clear. She leveraged me as a conduit to communicate the message, which had a significant impact on both the teacher's growth and my development as a leader.

However, principal supervisors also highlighted significant challenges that hinder their ability to focus on coaching. One supervisor reflected, "We have created this culture of compliance and operational management. And we kind of got stuck in that space for so long. And it is very difficult to get out of that space." Another supervisor emphasized how systemic meetings and administrative tasks have consumed their time, preventing meaningful engagement with principals:

> My work is consumed right now. I feel like I'm in meeting after meeting after meeting, and I can't get into the heartbeat of the real work. And this year, more so than ever, I don't feel as effective as I would like to be.

These concerns were echoed by other supervisors who noted that the constant demand for compliance-related tasks pulls them away from instructional leadership. One supervisor described their struggle balancing the need for direct instructional support with bureaucratic demands:

> I often find that when you ask about the time management piece of my calendar… I get very frustrated with my calendar. I just feel like it's almost a waste of time to create time because someone else is going to come in and wipe out whatever.

Another supervisor pointed out that the disjointed communication structure within the district creates inefficiencies:

> One of the biggest challenges [is] that the area office itself is almost the catch-all for

everything and everybody. So sometimes there is this belief that others cannot speak directly to principals, and instead, they must go through me first, which adds another layer of complexity and delays in action.

Despite these challenges, at least one principal supervisor has found ways to support principal development by fostering a sense of ownership over instructional decisions. They shared their strategy for empowering principals: "I have gotten better with asking questions of the principals to have them come up with their next step… so that they can take more ownership of what their next steps are to impact the data." This aligns with Honig's (2012) argument that principal supervision should move beyond compliance to focus on meaningful instructional leadership development. However, the structural barriers that currently exist within GRSS must be addressed to enable supervisors to fully embrace this role.

Goal Setting and Collaborative Learning. Key findings from our study highlighted the prevalence of goal setting and collaborative learning in principal supervision. Over 85% of the principals reported setting goals collaboratively with their supervisor (Figure 11). Interviews further confirmed this, with principals highlighting that their formal meetings, typically five times per school year, focused primarily on goal-setting, formal observations, progress monitoring of goals, and final evaluations.

Beyond goal-setting, 68% of principals agreed that they engaged in professional learning alongside their supervisor (Figure 12). Interviews revealed that systemic principal meetings and area/cluster meetings were the primary sources of district professional development opportunities for principals. However, a notable gap emerged in the structure and delivery of these learning opportunities.

Figure 11

Perceptions of Goal Setting

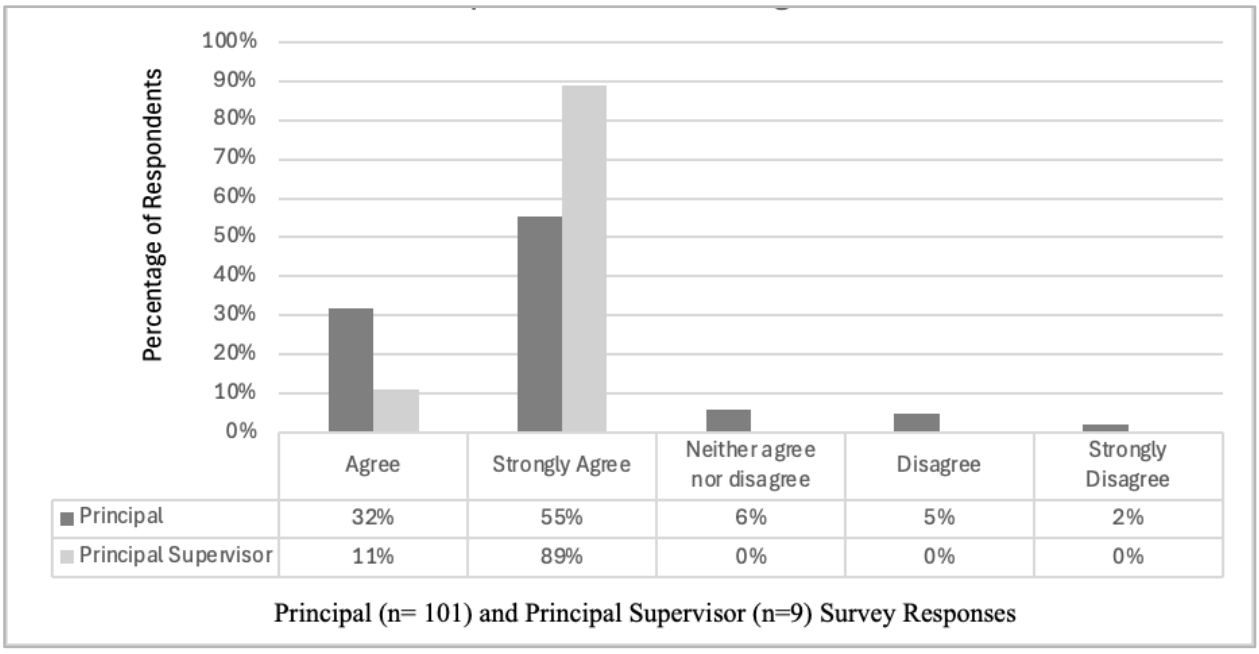
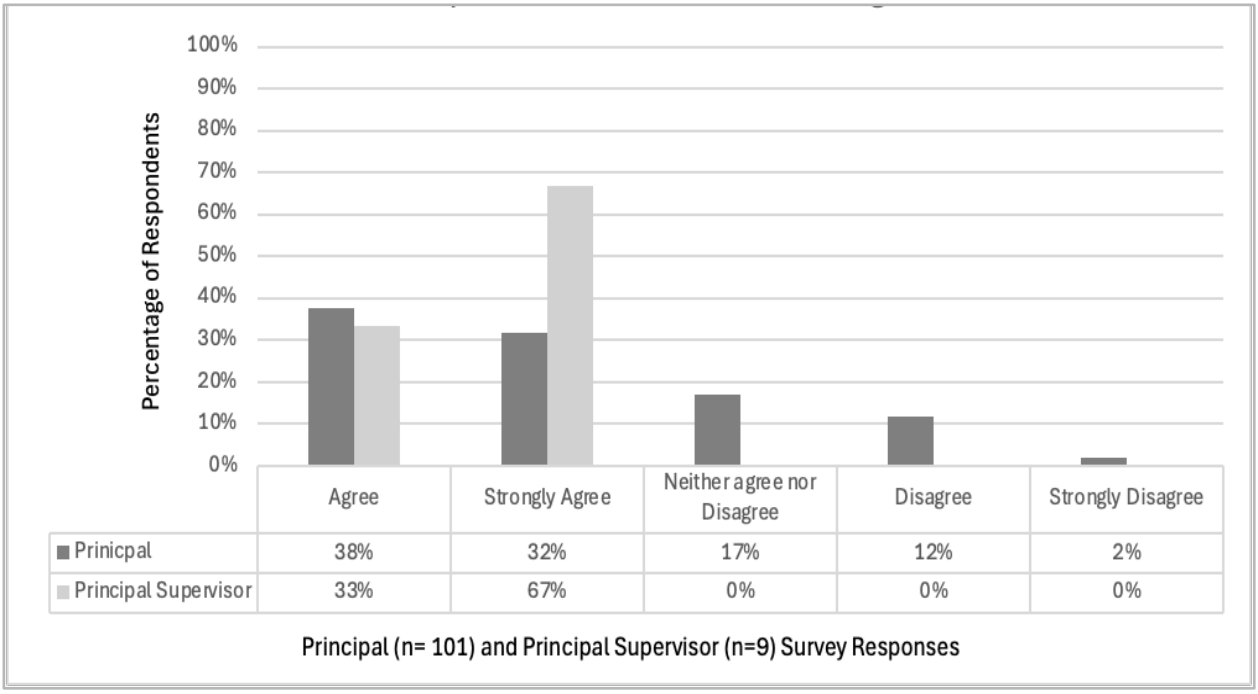


Figure 12

Perceptions of Collaborative Learning



Principals and supervisors noted that principal meetings served as professional development for both groups. As stated previously, these meetings were not included when interviewees discussed meaningful interactions between principals and supervisors. Supervisors and principals typically did not sit at the same tables during these meetings, which both the principals and supervisors, as well as the researchers, saw as a missed opportunity for meaningful interaction and expanded learning. Additionally, principals and supervisors shared that principal meetings were often led by other departments, with supervisors rarely facilitating professional learning except during area/cluster meetings. This structure contributed to a disconnect, as supervisors were not consistently positioned to reinforce or contextualize the learning that principals received during larger district-wide meetings. One principal supervisor reflected:

> We depend largely on what the district is providing to principals so that we can provide the same level of support. But lately, we have not focused on our own learning… A lot of our work is just literally self-directed.

Interestingly, many principal supervisors took personal initiative in their own professional growth, seeking and funding their own learning opportunities to better support their principals. Three supervisors explicitly stated that their development was largely self-driven, requiring them to pay for research subscriptions, scholarly articles, and professional development experiences independently. One supervisor shared, "Externally, I'm very limited because, of course, I don't have a budget as a principal supervisor either." Another added, "We used to meet every other week, tapping in and learning, but we don't do that anymore. Well, they're [GRSS] not giving us the training—we're actually training ourselves." This lack of structured, district-supported training highlights a gap in ensuring principal supervisors are fully equipped to

provide the necessary instructional coaching.

Despite these challenges, some principals did report engaging in meaningful professional learning within their area/cluster groups. Monthly PLC sessions, led by principal supervisors, are often tailored to the needs identified by principals at the beginning of the year. By organizing and facilitating learning sessions around principals' self-identified areas for growth, area/cluster meetings provided a more targeted and relevant approach to professional development for principals. A principal supervisor described their approach:

> If I'm designing professional development for my cluster, I will look at trends in their evaluations. Where do I see most of them struggling? I'll look at my notes and my feedback from school visits to figure out what I'm noticing across the board.

However, the inconsistency in how professional learning was structured across different settings further emphasized the need for a more coherent, intentional approach to instructional leadership development. While principal supervisors sought to support their principals, their ability to do so was often limited by structural challenges, including a lack of dedicated funding and professional learning opportunities for their own growth. As one supervisor puts it, "The learning experiences that principals get from us should be equivalent to support their growth as leaders."

These findings align with Honig and Rainey's (2020b) argument that structured, ongoing professional learning is essential for principal supervisors to effectively support school leaders. Without targeted, high-quality professional development, principal supervisors may struggle to provide the kind of deep, instructional coaching that fosters true leadership growth.

The Need for Professional Learning for Principal Supervisors. Honig et al. (2017) emphasize the importance of equipping principal supervisors with robust professional

development to help them navigate their complex role. Similarly, Honig and Rainey (2020a) argue that without intentional and sustained investment in professional learning, principal supervisors may struggle to build the instructional leadership capacity of the principals they support. Their work underscores the need for central offices to shift from compliance-driven oversight to developmental approaches grounded in coaching and continuous learning.

Our study findings confirm this assertion. Document analysis and interviews revealed that seven out of nine principal supervisors reported rarely participating in professional development tailored to their role. In the 2023-2024 school year, most training sessions for principal supervisors prioritized technical and compliance-related topics over instructional leadership development. The only exception was a single session focused on reflection and coaching practices using the "See It, Name It, Do It" method.

This gap in professional learning is reflected in the experiences of principal supervisors. One supervisor expressed frustration, stating, "Since I have been in this role, we have not received a lot of professional development. And as a learner, that's something that I crave." This sentiment underscores the need for targeted investment in learning opportunities that go beyond administrative requirements.

Faced with the lack of structured professional learning within the district, some principal supervisors have sought external opportunities to fill this void. One supervisor shared, "I have leveraged several networks outside the district for professional development. I have an executive coach, and I am in a group for executive leadership. And that has also been really helpful." While these external resources offer valuable support, they also highlight a systemic issue: principal supervisors must look outside their organizations to access meaningful professional development.

Moreover, document analysis confirmed that most available training sessions for principal supervisors centered on compliance mandates, corrective action plans, and data dashboard reviews. However, they overwhelmingly stated that they needed more opportunities to develop mentoring, coaching, and instructional leadership skills to be more effective in their roles. As one supervisor pointed out, "We have meetings where we discuss tasks. We have some PD that is around reflecting on our model principal standards, but we haven't had deep professional development like we did when we had Wallace Grant funding."

These findings align with the research of Honig et al. (2017), reinforcing the urgent need for districts to prioritize and invest in high-quality professional development for principal supervisors. Without this investment, supervisors will continue to struggle in their critical role of developing instructional leadership among principals, ultimately impacting student outcomes at the school level.

Balancing Operational and Instructional Leadership Support. A recurring challenge in principal supervision is the tension between instructional leadership and operational responsibilities. Honig and Rainey (2020b) describe how principal supervisors are often pulled between coaching school leaders and addressing urgent school needs, stating, "Principal supervisors often find themselves pulled between instructional leadership and the pressing operational demands of schools, which can dilute their ability to focus on teaching and learning."

Our study revealed that principal supervisors frequently managed non-instructional concerns, including family/community issues, staffing shortages, financial oversight, and district-mandated compliance tasks. Interviews showed that four out of nine supervisors explicitly cited managing heating issues as a routine responsibility, demonstrating the extent to which operational matters consume their time.

Budget support also emerged as a major aspect of the principal supervisor role. While ensuring principals had the necessary resources was seen as important, supervisors acknowledged that their focus on budgeting and operational concerns often overshadowed opportunities for instructional leadership growth. As one supervisor noted, “conversations around how they spent this money” were frequent but did not seem to contribute directly to improving teaching and learning practices. Similarly, a principal shared, “I often feel a lot of my time is spent with operational management and less on instructional management. Just putting out fires consistently is where I feel my role has shifted more.” These findings highlight the need for a more balanced approach, where principal supervisors are empowered to prioritize coaching and instructional leadership while still addressing necessary operational concerns. The focus on financial matters, such as “how they spent this money,” appears essential for resource allocation, yet it risks pulling time and attention away from meaningful instructional support. This underscores the importance of carving out dedicated space for instructional leadership development, enabling supervisors to assist principals in honing their pedagogical skills without being overwhelmed by administrative tasks.

The Disconnect Between Role Expectations and Reality. Principal supervisors expressed a significant disconnect between the expectations of their role and the realities they face daily. While they are expected to be instructional leaders and mentors for principals, their time is often consumed by compliance-related tasks, operational concerns, and crisis management.

Despite the expectation that principal supervisors serve as instructional leaders and mentors, survey data suggest that learning alongside principals does occur to some extent. Sixty-seven percent of principal supervisors strongly agreed that they learn alongside the principals

they support. Similarly, 68.9% of principals reported that they and their principal supervisors learn together. However, interviews with principal supervisors revealed a lack of co-planned professional development opportunities, with supervisors having minimal involvement in shaping the learning experiences of the principals they support.

Many principal supervisors expressed a significant disconnect between the expectations of their role and the realities they face daily. While their job descriptions emphasize coaching and developing principals, much of their time is consumed by compliance-related tasks, operational concerns, and crisis management. One supervisor explained, “I support the overall culture and climate of the school, handle crisis management, and interpret policies—but so much of it isn’t about leadership development.” Another added that they are expected to be “everything to everybody,” juggling responsibilities far beyond instructional leadership noting, “We’re supposed to be focused on coaching, but we spend a lot of time just making sure things don’t fall apart.” As a result, their ability to engage in meaningful instructional leadership is often overshadowed by the immediate demands of school operations and administrative tasks.

This misalignment is felt by principals as well. While some principals recognized the instructional support provided by their supervisors, others saw a gap. "I wouldn't say my supervisor has helped with instructional planning, and I'm not saying that in a bad way," one principal noted. "It’s just that other departments have been the ones stepping in." This highlights a challenge: while principal supervisors aim to provide instructional guidance, their other responsibilities often limit the depth of support they can offer.

Additionally, while principal supervisors saw themselves as bridges between departments, ensuring that principals had access to necessary resources, principals sometimes experienced this support in a reactive rather than proactive way. One principal reflected, “My

supervisor was really there for me in an emergency. When we had a major incident, they helped craft messaging and provided immediate support. But when it comes to long-term instructional leadership? That's not always as present."

Furthermore, while mentorship was a stated priority for many principal supervisors during our interviews, they often struggled to fulfill this role as they intended. One supervisor explained, "Good leaders build good leaders. But too often, the job's compliance-driven demands get in the way." A principal echoed this sentiment, acknowledging the importance of feedback but also recognizing its inconsistencies: "I remember my last supervisor—she was very honest with me, which helped me reflect. But at the same time, I know that not every supervisor takes the time to do that."

This imbalance between expectations and reality not only affects principal supervisors but also has implications for the principals they support. One principal shared a moment of valuable instructional insight from their supervisor during a learning walk. The supervisor noticed that in one of the math classrooms, a specific math term was being used frequently by the teacher. However, the supervisor pointed out that there was no visual representation of this term in the classroom or in the instructional materials. The supervisor explained that if the term had been displayed in the classroom, along with examples of how it was used, it would have helped reinforce students' understanding of the concept. This small yet impactful observation pushed the principal to be more intentional in the support they provided to the teacher during instructional planning, ensuring that key terms were not only spoken but also visibly represented to enhance student comprehension. While these moments of instructional feedback were impactful, our study found that they are not consistently integrated into the supervisor-principal relationship.

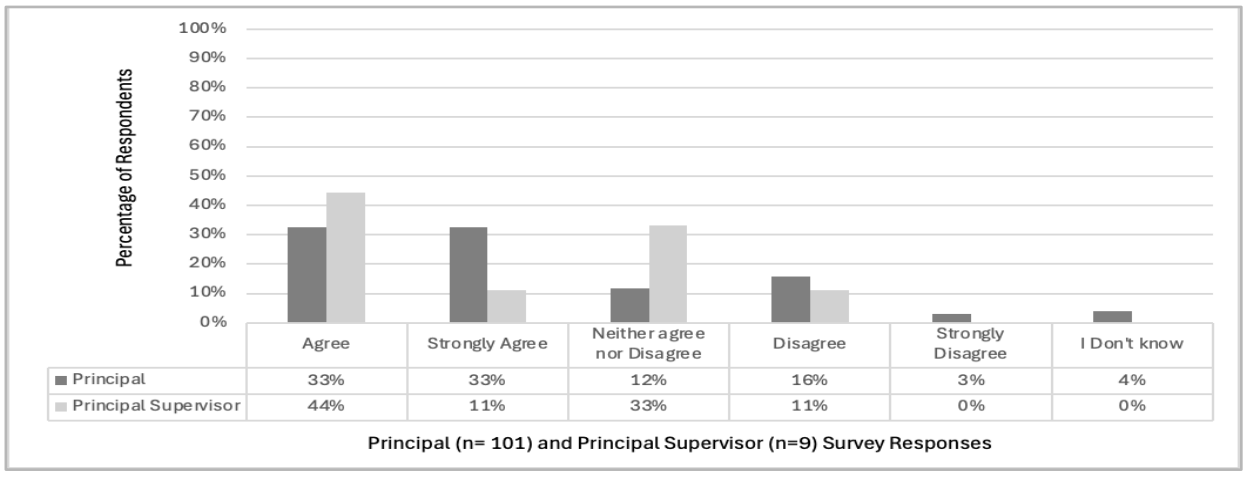
Ultimately, both principal supervisors and principals acknowledged that while the role of

the supervisor is meant to be centered on leadership development, the reality is often far more operational and compliance-driven. This disparity is illustrated in the final survey item in this section, which asked whether principals and supervisors agreed on the definition of instructional leadership (Figure 13). Honig and Rainey (2023) contend that shifting the principal and supervisor roles requires school districts to rethink the core of these leaders' work. This includes level-setting at the school and district level to ensure that stakeholders can explain what is expected of them. Our survey revealed that 35% of principals and 44% of supervisors either disagreed, were neutral, or didn't know whether they agreed on a definition of instructional leadership. Most of the principals in this subset have only had one supervisor. This indicates that the deep work of shifting attitudes associated with teaching, learning, and leadership is not yet occurring with all principals and supervisors.

This disconnect makes it difficult for supervisors to provide sustained coaching for instructional leadership and for principals to receive the consistent support they need to grow. The challenge remains in re-aligning expectations with the realities of the job so that principal supervisors can fully step into their intended role as instructional leaders.

Figure 13

Agreement on the Definition of Instructional Leadership



Modeling Specific Instructional Leadership Behaviors

Honig and Rainey (2020b) define modeling as "the ability to demonstrate new work practices using metacognitive strategies, including clear explanations of what is being modeled and why" (p.21). Effective modeling requires supervisors to go beyond simply demonstrating leadership behaviors; they must break down actions, explain their rationale, and make the learning process transparent for principals. Without this guidance, principals may struggle to develop essential instructional leadership skills, leading to inconsistent practices and variability in instructional quality across schools. This issue is evident in the modeling portion of our principal and principal supervisor survey (see Table 4). We asked principals to report on the frequency with which their supervisors modeled six key instructional leadership behaviors: observing classroom teaching quality, providing constructive feedback, leading professional development, guiding school improvement planning, analyzing data for informed decision-making, and fostering teacher leadership. Additionally, the principal supervisors reported how often they engaged in modeling these same behaviors. Our intention for this section of the survey was to gain insight on which actions supervisors prioritize when they provide support to their principals.

Table 4

Perceptions of Supervisor's Instructional Leadership Modeling

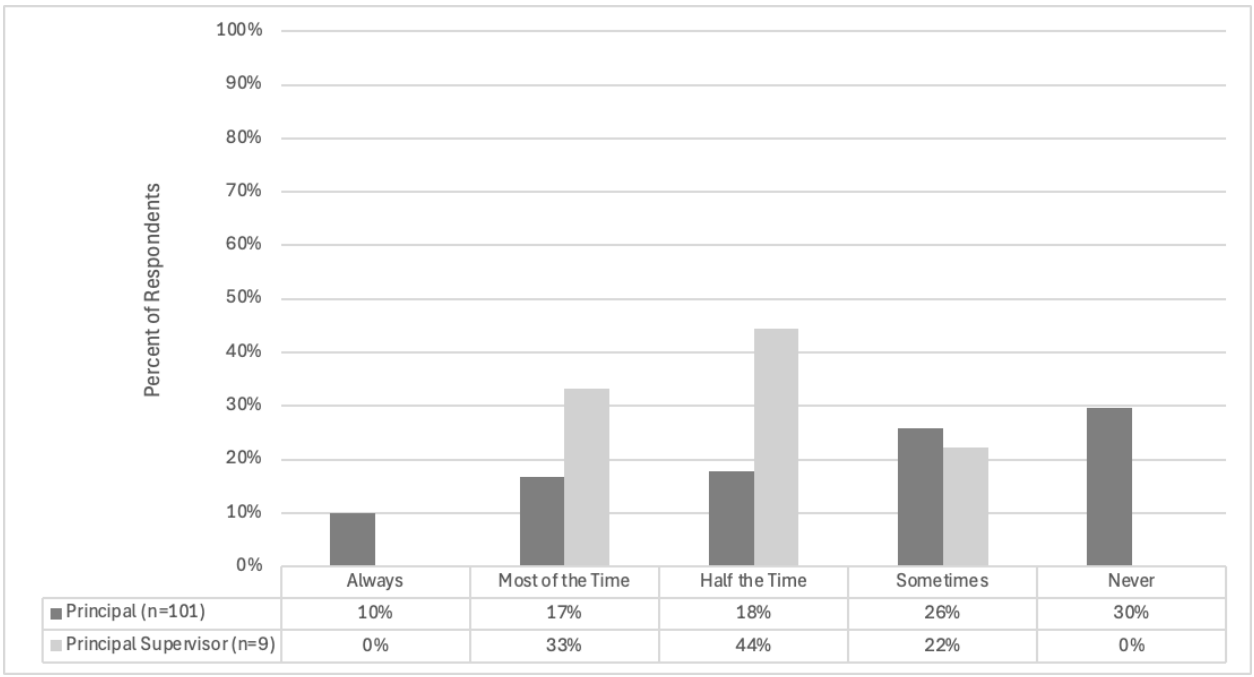
Survey category	Respondent	Never	Sometimes	Half the time	Most of the time	Always
Observing the quality of teaching	Principal	30	26	18	17	10
	Supervisor	0	2	4	3	0
Providing feedback to teachers	Principal	20	31	12	19	19
	Supervisor	0	6	1	2	0
Leading teacher professional development	Principal	55	20	9	10	7
	Supervisor	1	7	0	1	0
Leading school improvement planning	Principal	30	28	13	14	16
	Supervisor	0	4	3	2	0
Analyzing data/evidence for school improvement	Principal	18	36	10	20	17
	Supervisor	0	2	2	4	1
Developing teacher leadership	Principal	29	35	9	18	10
	Supervisor	0	5	3	1	0

Note. Data are represented by the number of respondents.

Modeling Facilitation: Leading Teacher Professional Development. A notable discrepancy emerged between principal and principal supervisor responses regarding the modeling of teacher professional development (PD). Figure 14 indicates that while 55% of principals reported that their supervisors "never" model how to lead PD, 78% of principal supervisors indicated that they "sometimes" do. Additionally, only 7% of principals stated that their supervisors "always" model this behavior—the lowest percentage among all leadership activities—whereas no supervisors selected "always," and only one reported doing so "most of the time." Notably, one supervisor admitted to never modeling how to lead teacher PD, further emphasizing the inconsistency in supervisory support.

Figure 14

Supervisor Models Leading Teacher Professional Development



	Always	Most of the Time	Half the Time	Sometimes	Never
Principal (n=101)	10%	17%	18%	26%	30%
Principal Supervisor (n=9)	0%	33%	44%	22%	0%

This gap between supervisors' perceptions of their modeling efforts and principals' experiences suggests a lack of deliberate instructional leadership, which may hinder principals' ability to effectively support teacher development and, ultimately, instructional quality. The absence of consistent modeling is further reinforced by document analysis and observations, which provide no evidence that supervisors demonstrate how to lead teacher PD. A review of two supervisors' calendars revealed no scheduled school visits specifically focused on modeling PD leadership with principals.

The infrequency of direct modeling was evident in principals' descriptions of their interactions with supervisors. One principal stated, "My supervisor visits me once or twice a month, and that's when she does her school visits or we have our observational sessions—probably five times per year." This limited engagement suggests that even when supervisors do visit schools, the opportunities to observe and model PD leadership are sporadic at best.

Additionally, one principal explained:

> It’s not often, but when it does happen, my supervisor typically models a small portion of a PD session or demonstrates a specific focus area that we can work on with our teachers. These modeling sessions usually highlight a particular strategy or technique, but they are infrequent and not enough to have a consistent impact on my instructional leadership development.

As the data shows, while supervisors may occasionally demonstrate parts of a PD session, the lack of consistent modeling, practice, and follow-up limits opportunities for principals to strengthen their leadership skills in coaching and effectively leading teachers. These infrequent modeling opportunities, occurring "once or twice a month" and only "five times per year," reinforce the need for more consistent, structured professional development sessions where modeling, feedback, and reflection are integral components of the supervisory role.

Some principals acknowledged indirect modeling of feedback strategies but noted that it did not equate to explicit guidance on leading PD. One principal described their experience, saying, "She hasn't directly told me, but indirectly, she's modeled an approach that really stood out to me... She was present, but instead of delivering the feedback herself, she provided it to me, allowing me to guide the teacher directly." While this approach may be beneficial for developing leadership autonomy, it does not fully address the need for structured and deliberate modeling of PD leadership. The principal’s statement suggests that while indirect modeling can be insightful, it is insufficient for those who require clearer guidance and support in leading professional learning initiatives.

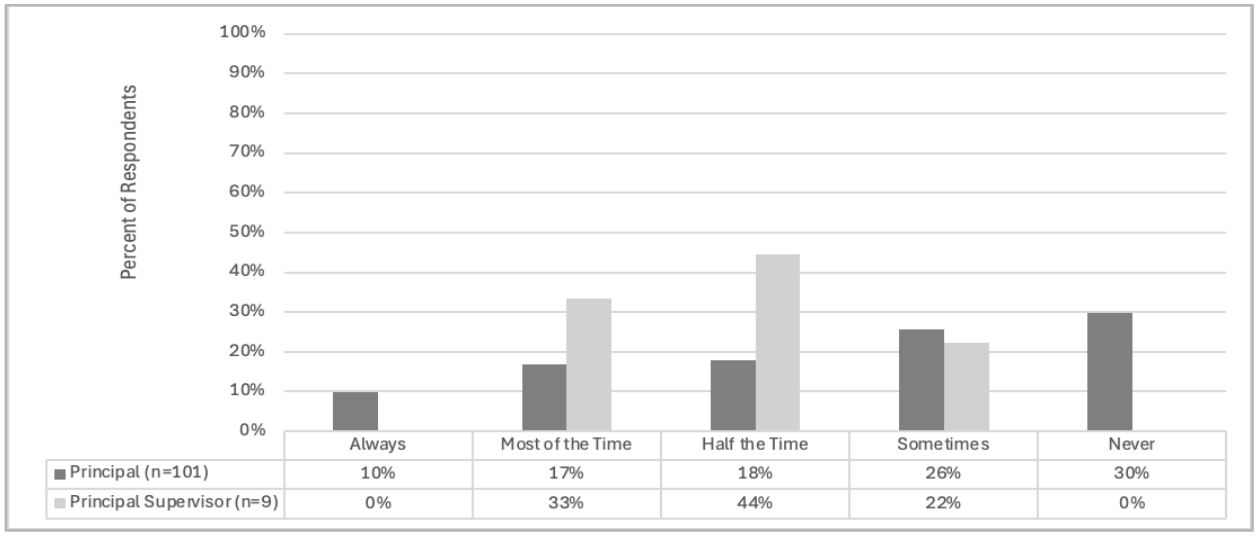
Overall, these findings highlight a gap in instructional leadership. While some supervisors may believe they are providing sufficient support, principals’ experiences suggest

otherwise. As illustrated in Figure 14, the absence of direct modeling, coupled with inconsistent interactions, may leave principals underprepared to effectively lead teacher PD. This misalignment between perception and reality underscores the need for more intentional, structured modeling of PD leadership to enhance instructional quality and principal capacity.

Modeling Observation: Monitoring the Quality of Teaching in Classrooms. Our data further reveal inconsistencies in how supervisors model teacher observations (Figure 15). Four supervisors reported modeling this "About Half the Time," while three indicated they do so "Most of the Time." None selected "Never" or "Always." Similarly, in modeling providing feedback to teachers, six supervisors reported modeling it "Sometimes," and only two indicated they do so "Most of the Time," with none selecting "Always." These patterns suggest that while some supervisors model these practices for the principals, their involvement is irregular. As a result, principals may lack a clear reference for effectively conducting classroom walkthroughs or delivering meaningful, developmental feedback to teachers. Strengthening supervisors' consistency in modeling these practices is crucial for fostering instructional improvement.

Figure 15

Supervisor Models Observing Quality Teaching

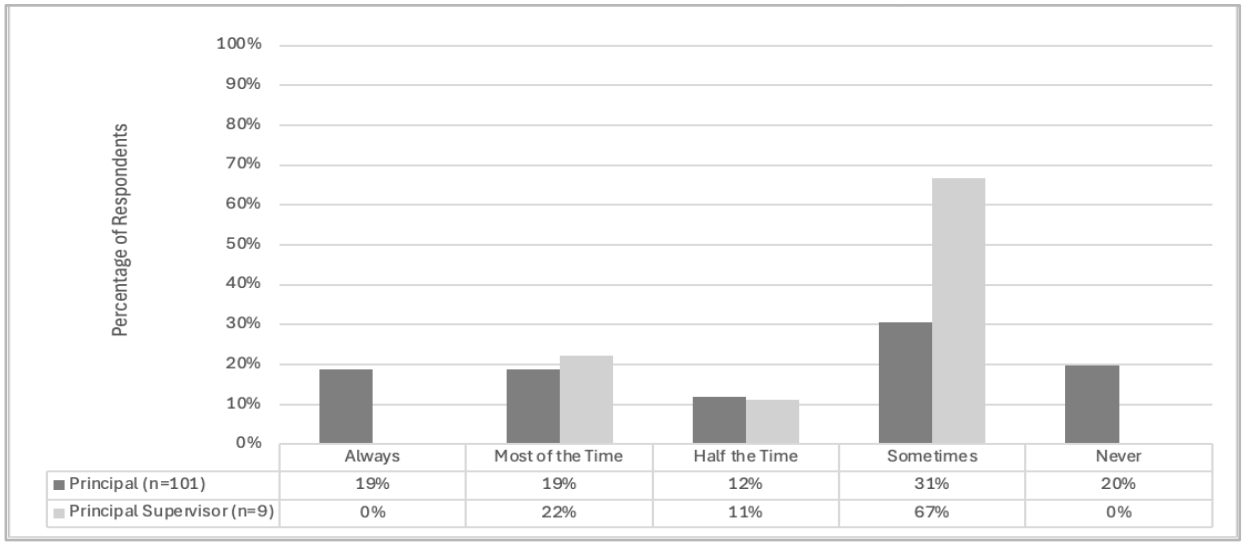


	Always	Most of the Time	Half the Time	Sometimes	Never
Principal (n=101)	10%	17%	18%	26%	30%
Principal Supervisor (n=9)	0%	33%	44%	22%	0%

Modeling Feedback: Providing Guidance to Teachers. According to our principal survey data (Figure 16), providing Feedback to Teachers is the most actively modeled instructional leadership behavior, with 38% of them reporting that their supervisors engage in this practice "Most of the Time" or "Always." While this figure is still less than ideal, it suggests that principals perceive feedback as a relatively higher priority for their supervisors compared to other instructional leadership behaviors. However, a notable contrast exists between principals' perceptions and supervisors' self-reports. While principals indicate a stronger emphasis on modeling providing feedback, 67% of supervisors state that they only "Sometimes" model this practice, and only two supervisors report doing so "Most of the Time." Notably, none selected "Always," suggesting that even in this comparatively stronger area, consistency remains a challenge. This misalignment raises questions about the effectiveness and frequency of feedback modeling. If supervisors are not deliberately and consistently demonstrating how to provide constructive feedback, principals may struggle to develop the skills necessary to foster teacher growth.

Figure 16

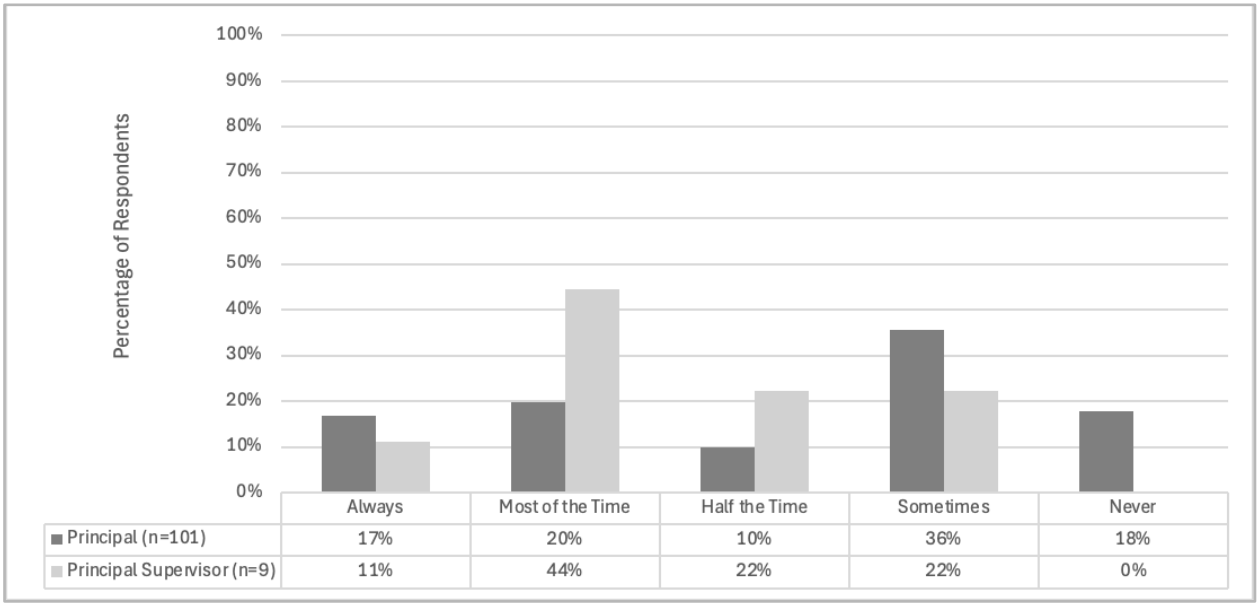
Supervisor Models Providing Feedback to Teachers



Modeling Data Analysis: Examining Evidence for School Improvement. Among all leadership practices, analyzing data for school improvement shows the most balanced distribution, though inconsistencies remain. In Figure 17, 36% of principals report that their supervisors "Sometimes" engage in this activity, 47% indicate their supervisors do so "Most of the Time" or "Always." Although 18% of principals state their supervisors "Never" model data analysis, this practice appears relatively more consistent compared to other leadership behaviors. Similarly, supervisors' responses cluster in the middle frequency ranges: 22% report modeling data analysis "Sometimes," another 22% do so "Half the Time," and the largest group (44%) engage in this practice "Most of the Time." Notably, no supervisors selected "Never," suggesting universal, albeit inconsistent, engagement with data analysis. However, only 11% of supervisors report "Always" modeling this behavior, highlighting a lack of consistent, ongoing support in this critical area.

Figure 17

Supervisor Models Analyzing Data/Evidence for School Improvement



	Always	Most of the Time	Half the Time	Sometimes	Never
Principal (n=101)	17%	20%	10%	36%	18%
Principal Supervisor (n=9)	11%	44%	22%	22%	0%

Modeling Strategy: Leading School Improvement Planning Processes. A clear discrepancy emerges in how principals and principal supervisors perceive the frequency with which supervisors model the school improvement planning process (Figure 18). While 30% of principals report that their supervisors "Never" model this behavior, none of the supervisors claim to "Never" model it. Interestingly, 28% of principals say their supervisors model the practice, with 13% reporting this happens half the time, 14% "Sometimes," and 16% "Always." In contrast, none of the supervisors reported modeling the behavior "Always." Instead, 44% said they model it "sometimes," and 56% model it "half" or "most" of the time. This discrepancy suggests that, while supervisors recognize their role in modeling leadership behaviors, the frequency and consistency of their involvement in the school improvement planning process may not align with principals' expectations.

Some principals shared positive experiences, noting that their supervisors played a crucial role in their leadership development and school improvement efforts. One principal stated, "My supervisor helped me develop a problem of practice that encompassed all my challenges. She was supportive and non-judgmental, and recognized the limitations of my students." Another principal described how their supervisor provided critical feedback and encouraged them to shift their focus, stating, "My supervisor provided feedback on instructional details that I had overlooked. She also helped me recognize the need to step back and not be too focused on pleasing others." However, other principals expressed concerns about inconsistency in supervision. One principal noted, "I've had several principal supervisors throughout my 5 years as a principal, and my current supervisor has been the most consistent. But I've also had times when my supervisor has been absent or not involved in decision-making processes." Another principal echoed this sentiment, saying, "I've noticed that my supervisor tends to come in

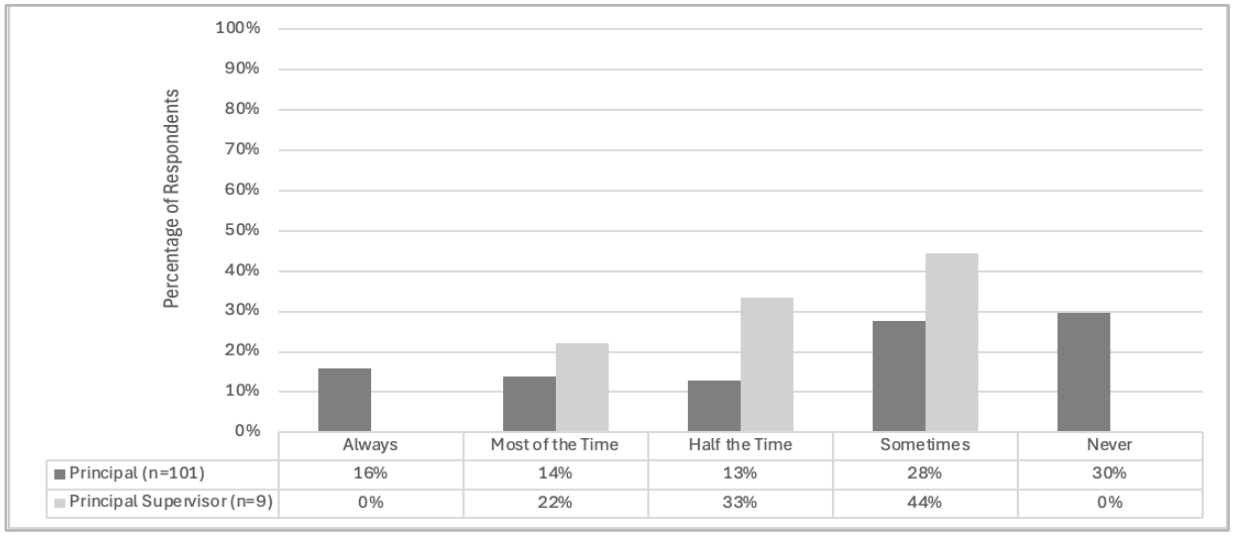
sporadically, but I would have liked more frequent and consistent support and guidance."

On the other hand, principal supervisors generally reported modeling the school improvement planning process frequently, though not always consistently. One supervisor explained, "I try to model the school improvement planning process by setting up regular meetings with my principals and providing feedback on their instructional practices." Another supervisor emphasized the balance between guidance and autonomy, stating, "I make an effort to be involved in decision-making processes and provide guidance and support to my principals, but I also recognize that they need to take ownership of their own decision-making."

These findings suggest a gap between supervisors' self-perceptions and principals' experiences regarding the modeling of school improvement planning. While some principals benefit from consistent guidance, others experience sporadic support, leading to uncertainty in leadership development. The data indicate that effective school improvement planning requires not only regular and structured modeling from supervisors but also a shared understanding of expectations.

Figure 18

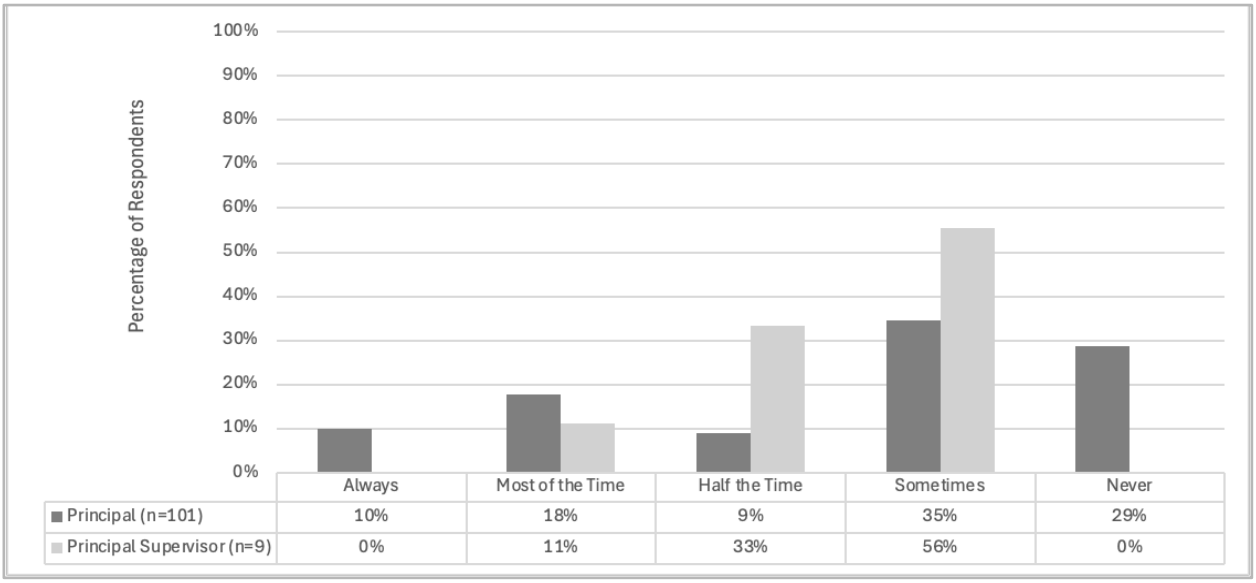
Supervisors Models Leading School Improvement Planning Process



Modeling Mentorship: Developing Teacher Leadership. Figure 19 highlights that the most glaring and persistent gap between principals' and supervisors' perceptions lies in Developing Teacher Leadership, where inconsistency dominates. Among principals, 35% indicated that their supervisors "Sometimes" model this practice—the highest response for this category—highlighting sporadic and unreliable support. In stark contrast, 56% of supervisors reported "Sometimes" modeling teacher leadership, with an additional three supervisors (33%) stating they do so "About Half the Time." Only one supervisor reported modeling this practice "Most of the Time," while none selected "Always" or "Never," suggesting a tendency toward moderate, but inconsistent, engagement. On the principals' side, the distribution paints a more polarized picture: 29% reported that their supervisors "Never" model developing teacher leadership, indicating a gap in this area, while just 10% reported that their supervisors "Always" model the practice—a striking difference from the supervisors' self-assessment. Additionally, only 9% of principals selected "Sometimes," reinforcing the impression that teacher leadership development remains an underemphasized and inconsistently supported element of instructional leadership.

Figure 19

Supervisor Models Developing Teacher Leadership



	Always	Most of the Time	Half the Time	Sometimes	Never
Principal (n=101)	10%	18%	9%	35%	29%
Principal Supervisor (n=9)	0%	11%	33%	56%	0%

Our analysis reveals a significant gap between principals' and supervisors' perceptions of modeling instructional leadership within GRSS, highlighting a systemic issue rather than isolated inconsistencies. While supervisors may believe they are providing sufficient support through informal conversations and operational guidance, principals appear to assess this support based on direct, observable actions—especially in critical areas such as leading professional development and developing teacher leadership. The data suggests that instructional leadership support is often sporadic and inconsistent, with supervisors more frequently engaged in compliance-driven tasks than in coaching and modeling practices that build principals' instructional capacity. This imbalance creates a culture where instructional improvement takes a backseat to operational oversight, contributing to school-to-school variability in teaching quality and professional growth opportunities.

Beyond the Data–What We Didn't Expect

Although we designed our interview protocol to deepen our understanding of the survey data, we also invited participants to share additional reflections about how the principal supervisor role is implemented in GRSS. These perspectives did not always align with the framework established by Honig's survey items, but they revealed important contextual factors that shape the daily experiences of both principals and their supervisors. In several cases, these themes influenced the way we interpreted our survey findings and prompted us to reconsider some of our initial assumptions about the role. The insights that follow—though unexpected—shed light on key dynamics within the system, including the limited authority of principal supervisors, the inconsistent impact of school visits, and a shared sense of nostalgia for earlier models of support.

One surprising finding from our interviews was the limited authority that principal supervisors possess. While we were aware of their role as middle managers—positioned between central office leadership and the schoolhouse—we nonetheless perceived supervisors as individuals with the power and influence to "get things done" at the school level. However, in eight out of nine interviews, supervisors described a lack of control over their schedules and workflows. They spoke of being constrained by union-negotiated agreements, directives from their own supervisors and other central office departments, and the frequent emergence of school-based crises that disrupted even the most carefully planned calendars. As one supervisor explained, "It is very hard to lock things in because my calendar is often having to be adjusted to meet the needs of another agenda item for another office or leader. So I cannot effectively plan the way that I would like to." Another shared the limitations imposed by contractual constraints: "We don't ultimately make many of the decisions that directly impact our immediate learner."

In addition to time and scheduling challenges, three supervisors voiced concern about their lack of influence over professional learning decisions for principals. Despite being uniquely situated as both coaches and evaluators—with insight into each principal's growth areas—they were rarely consulted when the district set professional development priorities. At the same time, they were expected to ensure principals complied with those very mandates. As one supervisor put it bluntly: "Everyone in the district knows, you give it to the instructional directors and we handle it." This was especially upsetting for one supervisor who shared that the quality of instructional leadership in the district is the lowest they have ever experienced.

Another insight from our interviews that may shape how we interpret our survey data is the wide variability in how supervisory visits are perceived and experienced across the district. We entered this study assuming that site visits would be a primary lever for developing principals' instructional leadership. However, we found that the impact of these visits is often limited—not because they lack potential, but because supervisors leverage their presence in markedly different ways. As a result, the purpose and quality of visits vary, which diminishes their overall effectiveness.

Several principals described a reactive, rather than proactive, approach to visits. Some viewed the presence of their supervisor as a signal of a leadership issue and worked to keep those visits to a minimum. One principal expressed pride in this approach, saying, "I avoid putting any more pressure on my supervisor than they already have, and that's been a success that I have here." Another described how their supervisor's support faded over time: "When I was beginning, it was evident that she was definitely more active, and as time went on, she's active, you know, when needed." Others emphasized that they only seek out their supervisor in moments of distress. "I view my supervisor as someone that I want to make sure they maintain

my level of competency, credibility—the person I reach out to as a last resort when I'm just like, okay, I throw my hands up." One principal noted that even when visits occur, interaction may be minimal:

> [My supervisor is] like, 'I don't want to bother you. You do what you need to do. I'm just gonna go on, be around the building,' and then we meet afterwards. Or if I'm available, then we'll do some instructional rounds together.

This range of approaches made it difficult for our team to draw consistent conclusions about the relationship between site visits and supervisor support. What we initially expected to be a clear indicator of meaningful instructional leadership turned out to be far more variable and context-dependent than anticipated.

The final theme that emerged from our interviews was an unexpected sense of nostalgia—for former practices, structures, and relationships that many felt had been more supportive and coherent. While our district frequently revises its processes in pursuit of greater operational effectiveness, the adage "you don't know what you've got until it's gone" seemed to resonate with both principals and supervisors. Principals recalled supervisors who connected with them on a personal level and brought a strong understanding of their school communities. One principal reflected, "My first supervisor regularly checked in, focused on emotional wellness, and visited the school often. The support wasn't always structured, but it was direct and responsive." Another principal shared that they still reach out to a former supervisor for guidance, suggesting that some of the most trusted relationships extend beyond current organizational structures.

Supervisors, too, expressed a longing for earlier models of support and collaboration. Several described the early days of the role as more collegial and developmental. "We used to

spend a lot of time together—like a family—learning the position, developing case studies, and diving into the work," one supervisor said. "We don't do that anymore." Five supervisors specifically mentioned a former regional structure that brought instructional and administrative leaders under one roof. One noted, "Reading, math, science, special education, tech, school improvement—all of that was in one space for your assigned region. It was aligned, targeted, and supportive." Another emphasized, "The best structure was when instructional resources were directly attached to schools. It made it easier to talk about what schools needed and support them with a unified approach."

While supervisors affirmed the value of their current role in bridging schools and central office, many expressed that the position was more effective—and more connected—when it was first introduced.

From Findings to Conclusions

Taken together, these findings offer a multifaceted view of the principal supervisor role as it is currently enacted and experienced across GRSS. By examining patterns of interaction, perceptions of support, and the modeling of instructional leadership behaviors, we surface both areas of strength and opportunities for growth. These insights, in combination with the unanticipated narratives from our interviews, serve as a foundation for the concluding section that follows, where we revisit our initial causal system analysis, synthesize key takeaways, and offer targeted recommendations for driving improvement over time.

Conclusions

In this final section, we revisit the causal system analysis and the key drivers that shaped our understanding of the problem of practice, grounding our conclusions in the broader context of systemic change. We then summarize the central findings and insights that emerged from our

study, highlighting their implications for practice and policy within GRSS. Building on this foundation, we offer a set of short-term, intermediate, and long-term recommendations designed to support sustained improvement over time. We also acknowledge the study's limitations, which provide important context for interpreting our results. Finally, we close with reflections on the broader significance of this work and its potential to inform future efforts in the field.

Revisiting Causal System Analysis and Drivers of Improvement

When we began our study, we used our literature review and our experiences as GRSS employees to hypothesize about the root causes of our problem of practice (Figure 20). Given our firsthand knowledge of the district's structures and priorities, we were particularly curious about how the principal supervisor role was being implemented. Our study focused on identifying the gaps between the support principals need and the support they receive. Now that we have gained deeper insight into the conditions that hinder principal supervisors from fostering principals' instructional leadership growth, we revised our causal system analysis (Figure 21) to incorporate findings from our study.

Figure 20

Original Fishbone Diagram

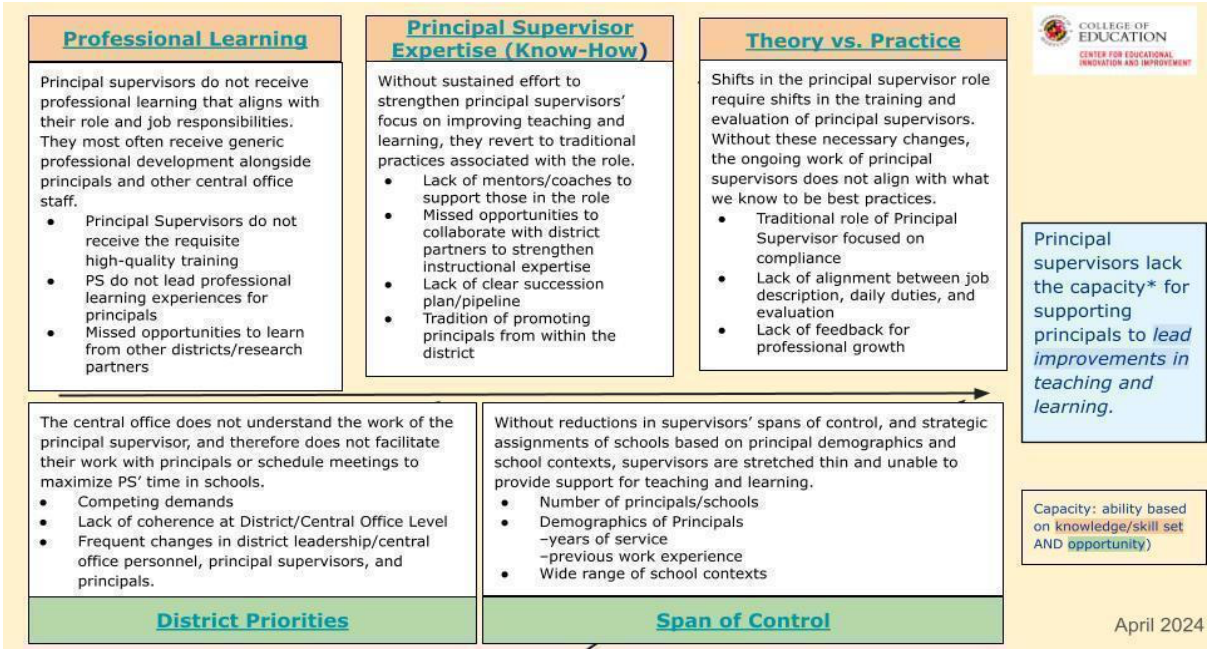
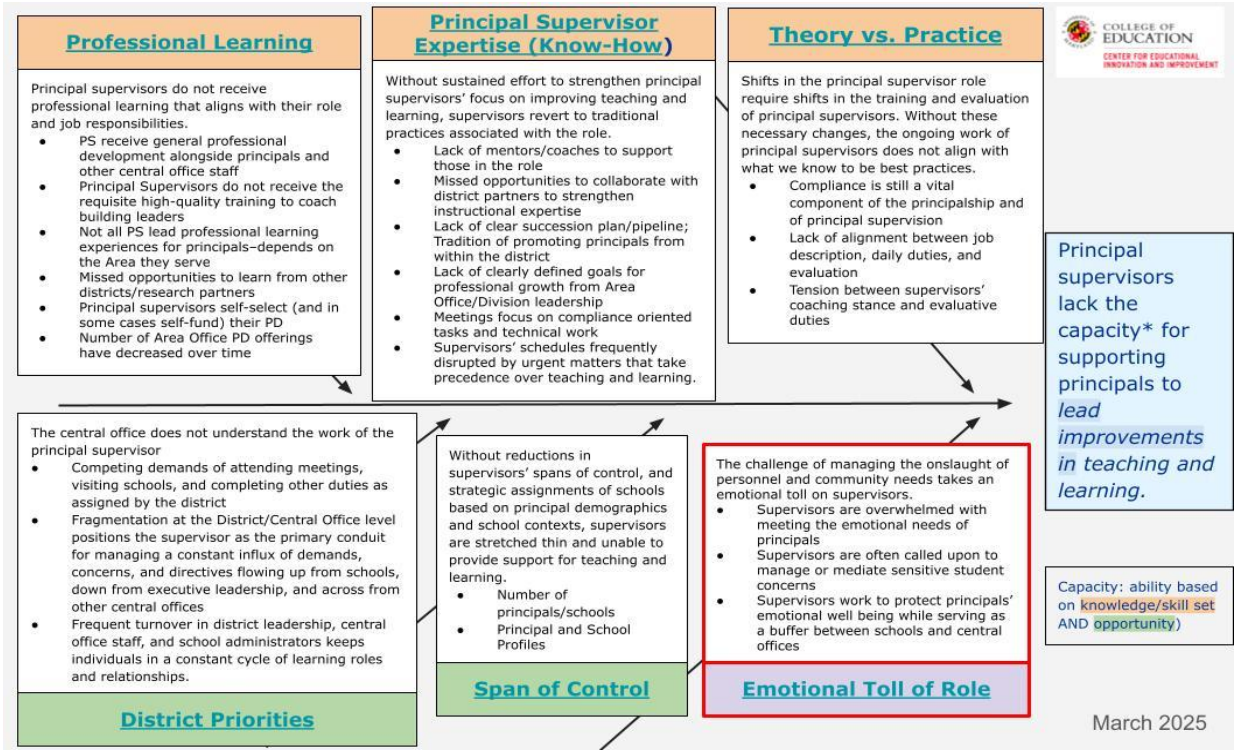


Figure 21

Revised Fishbone Diagram



Professional Learning. Initially, we theorized that principal supervisors do not receive professional learning that aligns with their role and job responsibilities. Our findings support this theory. One supervisor shared:

> We don't meet as much as we used to. We used to literally be together every other week. I can appreciate it now, because we were really tapping in and learning. But we don't do that anymore. Well, they're not giving us the training. We're actually training ourselves. A lot of our work is just literally so self-directed.

During interviews, seven principal supervisors mentioned that although principals receive monthly training at systemic and area meetings, they rarely engage in any professional development that is specific to the supervisor role. Over the past two years, two meetings were dedicated to professional development on coaching, with the November 8, 2024 agenda specifically focusing on principal supervisors' reflection and coaching practice using the "See It, Name It, Do It" method. Two supervisors described receiving coaching support from the associate superintendent who oversees their work. However, this experience was not universal. Several supervisors did not highlight coaching from their associate superintendent as a meaningful component of their professional learning. Instead, they reported needing to self-assess their strengths and areas for growth—and then seek out development opportunities independently. As one supervisor explained:

> Since I have been in this role, we have not received a lot of professional development. And as a learner, that's something that I crave…I know what I'm strong in, and I know my areas of opportunity for growth. So as a result of that, I have leveraged several networks outside the district for professional development.

This sentiment was echoed by others. In total, six supervisors reported turning to resources beyond the district to support their professional learning. One remarked, “We have to kind of branch out on our own to figure out our own professional learning.” Another shared that she personally funded a continuing education course on instructional coaching. Across the board, supervisors expressed a strong desire for more professional development opportunities—particularly those tailored to the unique demands of their role.

Principal Supervisor Know-How. In our original fishbone diagram, we identified principal supervisor expertise or “know-how” as a causal factor that contributes to the system’s problem of practice. We used Bryk et al.’s (2015) definition of “know-how” as the acquired knowledge and practical skills needed to effectively implement and sustain improvements in a system or process. We stated that without sustained effort to strengthen principal supervisors’ focus on improving teaching and learning, supervisors revert to traditional practices associated with the role. We learned through our study that principal supervisors in GRSS spend most of their time supporting principals with non-instructional issues and conducting activities related to the mandatory evaluation process. This is at least partially due to the ways that they are initiated and supported in the role. During the 2024-25 school year, nine of the 17 principal supervisors were in their first or second year in the position. None have been paired with a job-alike mentor, or received specific training designed for new principal supervisors. More experienced principal supervisors described the lack of uniform processes and requirements associated with the role, with one stating directly, “I didn't get any training on how to do this job.”

When we asked specific questions about induction and onboarding processes for principal supervisors, one supervisor had this to say:

A lot of your growth is really coming from, or for me and my experience, is learning

> from those around me who've been in the position, right? And because there is no one set way to do things, every person that I may go to may give me a different response.

This lack of a standard operating procedure to support the district's administrative policies becomes especially problematic in GRSS, where there can be a great deal of supervisor turnover.

The rolling agenda from Area Office leadership meetings is heavily focused on technical support rather than providing opportunities for supervisors to learn new strategies for helping principals grow as instructional leaders. Examples of these technical supports include training on the mechanics of corrective action processes, data dashboard access, growth improvement planning, and formal evaluation timelines, as well as updates on community schools and other school budgets.

Despite this emphasis on learning managerial and operational topics, supervisors report being overwhelmed by trying to balance these responsibilities with what they perceive to be the real work within the schoolhouse. Supervisors try to prioritize school visits to support leadership teams, visit classrooms, and coach principals. However, their schedules are often disrupted by other urgent duties. According to one supervisor we interviewed:

> [The] hardest part of the job is things being thrown in our lap that are not our responsibility, and we end up having [to] plan for it. It takes time away from schools. It takes time away from our own reflection and our own learning.

Theory vs. Practice. In our original fishbone diagram, we established that without the necessary changes to the training and evaluation of principal supervisors, the ongoing work of principal supervisors does not align with what we know to be best practices. One principal supervisor was generous enough to share her evaluation with us for our document review. We learned that supervisors are evaluated according to the Model Principal Supervisor Professional

Standards, which focus on developing the effectiveness of principals rather than overseeing their compliance with regulations (CCSSO, 2015). Although our survey data points to goal-setting and providing feedback as key functions of the principal supervisor role in GRSS, overall we found that principal supervisors' actions provide limited and inconsistent support for principals' ability to lead teaching and learning. Supervisors are aware that they should be coaching and engaging in joint work within the schoolhouse, but the system is not set up for this to occur. One supervisor summarized this dilemma thusly: "We have created this culture of compliance and operational management. And we kind of got stuck in that space for so long. And it is very difficult to get out of that space."

This is also at odds with the way that principal supervisors are evaluated. In GRSS, supervisors are evaluated according to the 2015 Model Principal Supervisor Professional Standards. Based on the idea that supervisors can help shape effective principals, the standards de-emphasize managerial duties in favor of prioritizing the development of principals as professionals who can improve teaching and learning. As described by one principal supervisor, the evaluation process is as follows: "Every month, we get this paired opportunity to observe classrooms, give feedback [using] the See It, Name It, and Do It protocol and then receive feedback from our supervisor."

While this process aligns with best practices for principal supervision that centers teaching and learning, it is not an authentic measure of the actual tasks that occupy supervisors' time. The school visits help principals and supervisors improve their execution of observation, coaching, and feedback cycles, but they are initiated for the sole purpose of complying with evaluation mandates. What could and should be a rich professional learning experience for

building and district leaders, becomes an exhibition in which school leaders stage a learning walk that does not necessarily represent the day-to-day experience in the schoolhouse.

We attribute this misalignment and lack of authenticity to the tension between the coaching and evaluative roles of the supervisors. This tension hampers the coaching dynamic between principals and supervisors because principals are afraid to demonstrate their vulnerability or to ask questions for fear of being penalized on their evaluations. As one principal supervisor expressed to our team, "The quality of instructional leaders is low right now." In some cases, this inherent bias translates to fraught relationships between supervisors and principals, wherein principals don't want their supervisors to visit their schools. Principal supervisors are challenged balancing support and accountability. As one supervisor noted, "It's a delicate dance…because principals have to see you as a coach. But then there are times we have to step [up] and be evaluator. And so building trust and relationships are key and important."

District Priorities. As district employees, we have firsthand knowledge of the fragmentation that can occur due to the large size of GRSS. When we completed our original causal system analysis, we concluded that the central office does not understand the work of the principal supervisor and, therefore, does not facilitate their work with principals or schedule meetings to maximize supervisors' time in schools. Our study confirms this in many ways. Supervisors spoke to us about the competing demands that pull them away from meaningful engagement with principals and school leadership teams in the schoolhouse. Supervisors specifically mentioned the number of meetings that prevent them from engaging with principals in schools:

> I feel like I'm meeting after meeting after meeting after meeting and I can't get into the heartbeat of the real work. And this year, more so than ever, I don't feel as effective as I would like to be.

Another supervisor quipped, “We meet a whole lot. We meet before the meeting before the meeting, so that becomes a competing demand, too.”

Principal supervisors also cited a lack of coherence across the various central offices in the district that support school leaders. Our study also uncovered the negative impact of frequent principal and central office turnover on supervisors’ ability to support principals with leading improvements in teaching and learning:

> As a supervisor of [X-NUMBER OF] schools, then you have several different people coming to you about different issues. and it's hard to keep track of all of that as well as to take action on all of that and then to follow up and monitor all of that. One of the things that I find is most complicated is people's direct connections to schools. I think supports can sometimes be indirectly connected to schools and like to use the principal supervisor as a way or entry point into schools.

Supervisors also expressed frustration at the lack of responsiveness from other central offices as compared to their feeling of always being on call for schools. A supervisor told us, “One thing that we don't get to do is opt out of being there for schools, and sometimes the feeling is that there are central offices that get to choose their work stream.”

Overall, the lack of clarity about the principal supervisor’s role, and the support that they are supposed to render to schools, is a source of frustration for supervisors that feel overwhelmed by their workloads. As one supervisor explained, “The role of the instructional director in my

district is like everything to everybody; other departments may not truly understand what we do on a daily basis."

Span of Control. Our first fishbone placed a good deal of weight on the number and characteristics of schools as a causal factor for the district's problem of practice. We stated that without reductions in supervisors' spans of control, and strategic assignments of schools based on principal demographics and school contexts, supervisors are stretched thin and unable to provide support for teaching and learning. We heard from supervisors that the large number of principals and the disparate profiles of the principals they support can serve as barriers to providing balanced and differentiated support. Several of the supervisors that we interviewed mentioned that the large number of schools that they support makes it difficult to visit schools on a regular basis. Supervisors also shared that the challenges associated with supporting high-need schools are often associated with factors other than instruction. This makes it difficult for supervisors to concentrate on instructional leadership because they must manage other, more urgent, needs. One supervisor shared that supervisors don't ultimately make many of the decisions that directly impact principals. Another stated, "I wish that it would slow down and get to the point where we could just really focus on principal development–not just help them not make the news."

New Causal Category: Emotional Toll of the Role

The interviews that we conducted uncovered an additional causal category that we perceive as a major contributor to the problem of practice. The challenge of managing the onslaught of personnel and community needs takes an emotional toll on supervisors, thus reducing their capacity for supporting principals to lead improvements in teaching and learning.

Supervisors are overwhelmed with meeting the emotional needs of principals. They are often called upon to manage or mediate the most sensitive and traumatic student concerns. Supervisors work to protect principals' emotional well-being while serving as a buffer between schools and central offices, and between school staff, families, and students and the principals themselves. Our review of the literature revealed substantial attention to many aspects of the principal supervisor role; however, research specifically focused on how burnout manifests in principal supervisors appears to be lacking. The compelling examples cited by supervisors in our interviews make this causal factor worthy of additional attention. One supervisor mentioned how the stress manifests in physical ailments. They stated, "I think sometimes people forget the stress, the anxiety. There are days I have headaches. The anxiety with every time you know this phone rings because it's the work phone. It's just heavy." Another supervisor highlighted the mental toll of the role as an overlooked challenge of the position:

> It can also be very emotionally taxing. We don't talk about it a whole lot, but like mental health and well-being for principal supervisors, because not only do you take on the support of supporting principals and their own emotional things and supporting them and making sure that they're okay. You also take on the emotional tolls of different events that happen in different buildings, involving families, children learning about different traumas that people have faced in their own lives trying to find resources for people who have really experienced some traumatic experiences.

Several supervisors pointed out how overwhelming it is to provide support across so many different areas to such disparate school sites. One supervisor lamented that some days they do not engage in any instructional work due to managing crises that receive media attention. The supervisor went on to say:

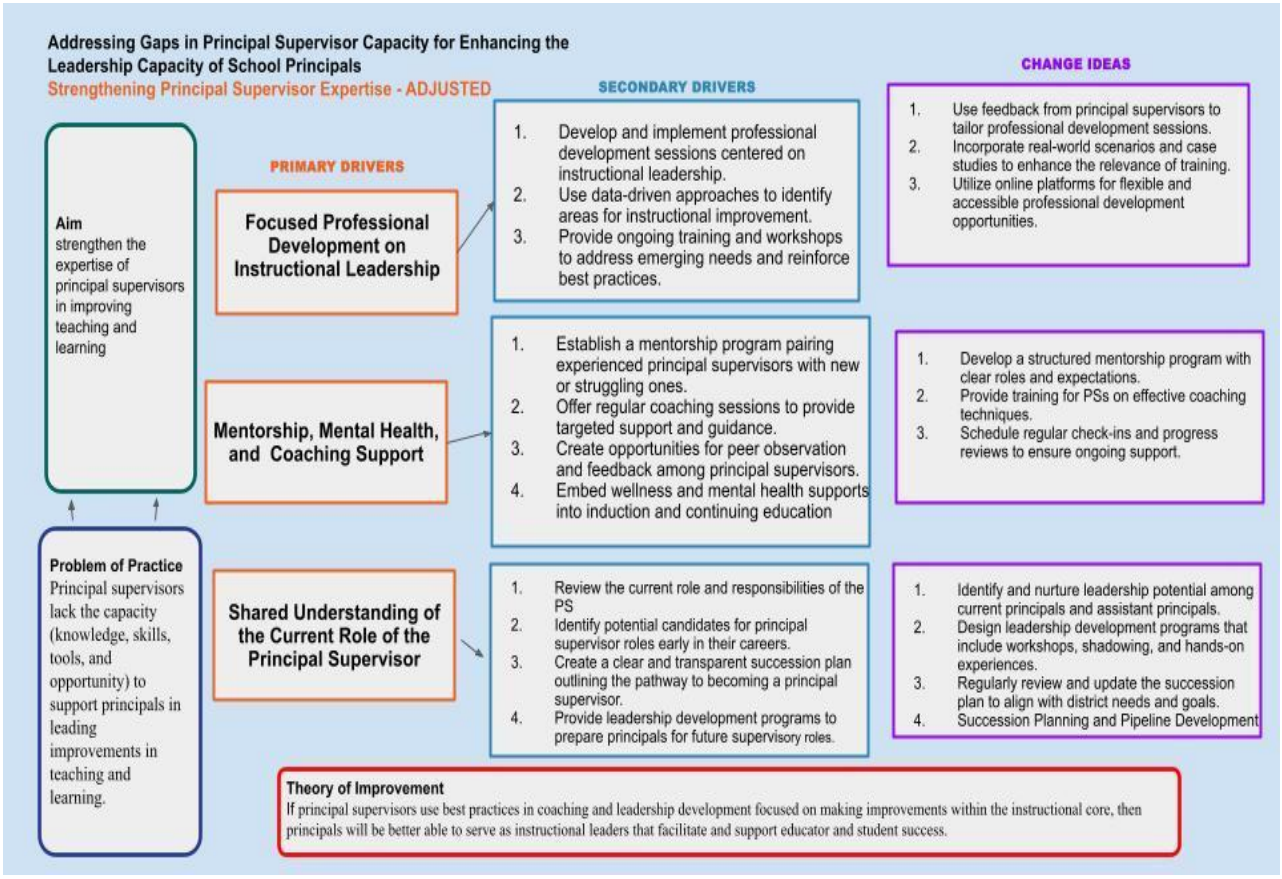
That's the part that's probably the most disheartening, because the expectation is that we do a lot of that [instructional] work...But the reality is if we got [expletive] going on on TV, and we're getting emails from the County Council–our position has really become politicized.

Revised Driver Diagram

The addition of an additional causal category prompted us to incorporate primary and secondary drivers that address the mental health and wellness needs of supervisors (Figure 22). This Driver Diagram remains a work in progress. We will work with the district to revisit and refine the diagram in conjunction with the district's efforts to improve teaching and learning.

Figure 22

Revised Driver Diagram



Summary of Conclusions

Our study highlights significant challenges faced by principal supervisors at GRSS, particularly the gap between their expected role as instructional leaders and the reality of their daily responsibilities. Despite the district's restructuring of the role in 2012 which tasked principal supervisors with supporting instructional leadership, supervisors often spend much of their time on non-instructional duties such as compliance, professional evaluations, and operations management. This imbalance limits their ability to provide the ongoing, impactful instructional support that principals need. Principals reported varying levels of support, with much of the interaction focusing on compliance rather than fostering instructional growth. As a result, they are left without the consistent and meaningful guidance necessary to strengthen their instructional leadership capacity.

This disconnect between expectations and reality echoes existing research that warns against oversimplifying principal supervision (Honig & Rainey, 2020b; Thessin & Reyes, 2023. Our findings point to a need for a shift in principal supervision at GRSS—from a transactional oversight model, which prioritizes compliance and administrative tasks, to a more developmental approach that emphasizes transformational coaching. Rather than merely ensuring that principals adhere to rules and meet basic standards, principal supervisors should be empowered to serve as coaches and mentors, helping principals grow as instructional leaders capable of supporting teachers and improving student outcomes.

For this transformation to succeed, GRSS must invest in continuous, specialized training for principal supervisors, ensuring they have the skills to support principals in their leadership roles. Shifting from a compliance-based management model to one focused on instructional coaching will create a stronger support system, enabling principals to lead more effectively. By

reducing administrative burdens, focusing on leadership development, and aligning district expectations with the realities of principal leadership, GRSS can better equip supervisors and principals to meet the challenges of improving student achievement and equity.

Despite these challenges, the study also reveals promising strategies for enhancing principal supervision. For example, many principals reported being actively involved in goal-setting with their supervisors, aligning with research that advocates for relationship-driven instructional leadership (Honig et al., 2017). Supervisors who focused on leadership development and learning, rather than just management, had a more meaningful impact on principals, empowering them to make better instructional decisions and lead school improvement efforts more effectively.

Short-Term, Intermediate, and Long-Term Recommendations:

Our findings provide clear steps for GRSS and similar districts to improve principal supervision:

- **Short-Term Recommendations:** Immediate actions should focus on reducing the compliance-related burdens placed on principal supervisors. GRSS can implement clearer role definitions to ensure that supervisors dedicate more time to instructional coaching rather than operational management. Additionally, training sessions can be developed to enhance supervisors' coaching skills.
- **Intermediate Recommendations:** Establishing a Principal Supervisor Network Improvement Community (PSNIC) will serve as an initial step toward systemic improvement. This collaborative network will engage stakeholders in a structured, research-informed process to refine and improve the supervisory role. This stage will also involve reworking policies and guidelines to align the district’s expectations with the

practical realities of principal supervision.

- **Long-Term Recommendations:** Over time, GRSS must aim to embed coaching-based supervision into the district's culture. This would involve restructuring how principal supervisors are trained, evaluated, and held accountable. If successful, this transformation will not only enhance principal effectiveness but also drive broader improvements in student outcomes and educational equity.

Scalability and Broader Implications

While this study is specific to GRSS, its findings offer valuable insights for other districts seeking to improve principal supervision. The challenges identified, balancing instructional leadership with compliance, fostering trust in coaching relationships, and providing meaningful support, are not unique to GRSS. Districts nationwide face similar struggles in ensuring that principal supervisors can effectively mentor school leaders while meeting administrative expectations.

The scalability of these findings will depend on district context. The proposed solutions, such as reducing compliance tasks, providing coaching-focused training, and establishing improvement communities, are adaptable but require leadership commitment, policy shifts, and cultural changes. Some districts with more centralized control may find it easier to implement these recommendations, while others with decentralized governance structures may face additional challenges.

Study Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights, it is not without limitations. First, the sample size was limited: only 101 of 207 principals and nine supervisors responded, which may not adequately represent the broader population. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported data,

introducing potential biases that could affect the generalizability of the findings. One further limitation is the small number of high school principal supervisors represented—only one responded to the survey and participated in an interview—which may have influenced the overall conclusions.

The design of the study also presented limitations. A more direct way to understand how supervisors spend their time would be to shadow them throughout their workday. In the absence of that, a useful alternative might be to have participants select from a list of common supervisory tasks. However, in an effort to use Honig's survey items verbatim and maintain an inductive approach, we did not incorporate these more structured methods. As we continue to explore this problem of practice within the context of networked improvement communities (NICs) in GRSS, a logical next step would be to ask NIC participants to rank items from the principal supervisor job description by level of engagement.

Another constraint was the limited availability of supporting documents. Although we requested materials that might shed light on how supervisors are supported in building their capacity, the small number of documents collected restricted our ability to understand the full scope of that support.

Finally, our status as district employees was both an asset and a limitation. On the one hand, our existing relationships with participants likely encouraged a level of candor that might not have been extended to external researchers. This positionality also granted us access to sensitive materials—such as a supervisor's schedule and another's professional evaluation—shared by colleagues committed to improving the district. On the other hand, these same personal relationships complicated our ability to secure district approval to shadow supervisors during

one-on-one meetings with principals. Our internal roles also limited access to confidential documents, such as those related to principal and supervisor evaluations.

Final Thoughts

GRSS should consider implementing a comprehensive support system that emphasizes instructional coaching. In the long term, the district can work to shift the focus of principal supervision to prioritize instructional leadership, with a clear emphasis on reducing compliance-related tasks. These changes will not only empower principals but also lead to meaningful improvements in student outcomes and equity.

While this study is specific to GRSS, its findings provide valuable insights for other districts and educational leaders seeking to improve principal supervision and support. By ensuring that principal supervisors receive the necessary training, resources, and support, districts can enhance the quality of instructional leadership, which is crucial to improving student outcomes.

Proposed Impact Product: Principal Supervisor Network Improvement Community

Principal supervisors play a crucial role in helping principals create strong environments where teaching and learning can thrive (Goldring et al., 2020). Upon completion of the study, we will develop a two-part impact product designed to foster systemic change within GRSS and serve as a model for other school districts.

We will create and facilitate a PSNIC with stakeholders in GRSS. The PSNIC will engage in an improvement journey through a series of ninety-minute collaborative in-person work sessions (Appendix E). We aim to leverage the collective expertise and insights of district level and school-based stakeholders to enhance the principal supervisor role. As suggested by Bryk et al. (2015), we will invite outside researchers to be members of the PSNIC. They will

serve in a dual role within the community, actively learning from the PSNIC participants while also connecting their experiences to relevant educational theory.

The findings from our study will be the foundational basis for the PSNIC. We will integrate our findings into the sessions to provide context and to develop a shared understanding of how the principal supervisor role is perceived and utilized in GRSS. The improvement journey will consist of presenting our findings, reviewing and revising the fishbone diagram and the theory of improvement depicted by our driver diagram, developing actionable change ideas, testing and refining the changes, and producing a change package that can be used by other school districts, the *PSNIC Toolkit*. Additionally, after the establishment of the PSNIC and creation of the toolkit, we will facilitate PSNICs in other school districts in the country to test the use of the toolkit in various contexts (Biag, 2019; Parkerson et al., 2021).

PSNIC Stakeholder Engagement

In order to ensure that those who are closest to the work are regularly and consistently (Bryk et al., 2015; Russell, et al., 2021; Valdez et al., 2020) involved in the PSNIC, these sessions will bring together key district leaders, such as the Chief of Schools, associate superintendents, principal supervisors, principals, assistant principals, principal leadership coaches, school-based teacher leaders, and school board members. Personalized invitations to the NIC will be communicated through various channels, such as email and targeted presentations at relevant events (area office meetings, executive leadership meetings, and board sessions). Diverse stakeholder engagement in the NIC is essential to this process for several reasons (Bryk et al., 2015, Russell, et al., 2021). Engaging these key leaders will contribute to alignment and coherence across different levels of the district (Goldring, Clark, et al., 2020; Honig & Heller, 2018; Honig & Rainey, 2023; Park, et al., 2022; Srinivasan & Archer, 2018).

This helps to create a unified vision and approach to principal supervision and school leadership. Each group contributes a unique perspective and set of experiences. By incorporating diverse voices from various roles, the discussions and ideas developed will be comprehensive and take into account the needs, perspectives, and challenges faced by principals and their supervisors at different levels of the school system. By involving these stakeholders in the improvement journey, we solicit their active participation in strengthening principal supervision (Honig & Heller, 2018). This sense of ownership fosters accountability and commitment to implementing and sustaining the changes (Bryk et al., 2015; Iriti et al., 2021; Srinivasan & Archer, 2018). These leaders have firsthand experience with the day-to-day operations and challenges of schools. Their insights are invaluable for identifying practical and effective change ideas that can be realistically tested (Bryk, et al., 2015; LeMahieu, 2015). By participating in these sessions, leaders can develop their skills, share best practices, and learn from each other, contributing to overall professional growth of the PSNIC members, especially the principal supervisors (Honig & Heller, 2018; Russell et al., 2021). For changes to be sustainable, they need to be supported by those who are directly responsible for implementing and overseeing them (Bryk et al., 2015; LeMahieu, 2015). Engaging these leaders ensures that the changes are embedded into GRSS's organizational culture and practices. We recognize the critical role of district leaders with decision-making power. These leaders can significantly influence the success of the PSNIC by allocating resources, creating time and space for the work, and fostering a collaborative environment (Bryk et al., 2015; Iris et al., 2021). By including a diverse group of stakeholders in the PSNIC sessions, the network aims to tap into their shared expertise, experiences, and influence to improve the principal supervisors' role in supporting principals' instructional leadership, ultimately leading to lasting and impactful changes (Russell et al., 2021).

PSNIC Improvement Journey

The initial launch of the PSNIC will consist of six collaborative, interactive sessions, with the anticipation of the improvement community's continuation beyond this initial phase. The first session will begin with organizing the team, emphasizing the importance of confidentiality through the PSNIC collaborative conversation agreements. This emphasis on confidentiality in the PSNIC will aid in fostering a culture of safety, vulnerability, risk-taking, and honest discussion (Mejia, 2014; Parkerson et al., 2021). For effective problem solving, we have to be able to share failures in a judgment free setting (LeMahieu, 2015). We will present an overview of our study, detailing the background and rationale. We will share the key findings from our study, followed by an overview of the PSNIC improvement journey.

The second session will start with developing a common understanding of causal system analysis. We will examine our fishbone diagram, identifying its key components and the relationships between different factors contributing to the root causes of the problem of practice. After a thorough review, we will refine the fishbone diagram to ensure it accurately represents all relevant elements and provides a clear visual representation of the problem. This process will involve collaborative discussions and adjustments to enhance the diagram's effectiveness in diagnosing and addressing the root causes.

Session three will begin with professional learning experiences related to the factors that drive the improvement process in the creation of a GRSS PSNIC theory of improvement. We will then compare the components of our theory of improvement to identify overlaps, gaps, and potential areas for improvement with the goal of consolidating the theories of improvement. To further enhance our work, we will engage experts (Bryk et al., 2015) in the field along with the PSNIC community members to help develop effective change ideas and this will extend our

learning and facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the interconnected factors influencing the PSNIC aim. Finally, we will create outcome measures to determine whether the changes implemented will lead to improvements, allowing us to track progress and adjust as needed (Premo et al., 2023).

Embracing measurement and learning by doing are the themes for the fourth session. It involves identifying change ideas for testing among subsets of principal supervisors. We will introduce the Model for Improvement (MFI) to respond to the questions: defining the aim, establishing criteria to measure improvement, selecting a change idea likely to bring about improvement, planning the PDSA (Plan-Do-Study-Act) cycle, refining measures, making predictions, and creating an action plan for testing the change ideas within a timeframe of up to four weeks.

Session five represents the study of the PDSA cycle. We will document the findings from the tests and compare them to the initial predictions, analyze the results to determine if the change led to an improvement, and discuss the insights gained to guide future tests. Each test will lead to subsequent tests in different contexts. After multiple cycles in varied situations, the PSNIC will identify the changes that are effective and scalable, incorporating them into the PSNIC Toolkit.

The final phase of this initial cycle of the PSNIC will be to reflect on this first cycle, discuss new tests, and refine the PSNIC Toolkit. We will evaluate the scalability of the PSNIC using Coburn's (2003) four dimensions of scale: widespread use, depth of implementation, shift in reform ownership, and sustainability. For each dimension, we will discuss the questions corresponding to each dimension (Appendix H) to determine if any modifications are needed to the PSNIC toolkit to enhance its scalability. According to Coburn (2003), in order to create and

sustain meaningful change, the beliefs, norms, and principles within GRSS and other districts must be addressed. Having multiple stakeholders in the PSNIC who support the depth of change needed enhances the likelihood that each dimension will be addressed at multiple levels of the district.

The PSNIC Toolkit

The development of the PSNIC and the toolkit fills a critical gap in educational leadership development. While there is extensive research on principals, the role of principal supervisors, who directly guide and support principals, remains understudied. This NIC offers a unique space for principal supervisors to learn from each other's experiences and develop best practices – a knowledge base currently limited by the scarcity of research in this area. Furthermore, the resultant impact product, *The PSNIC Toolkit*, will enrich a relatively unexplored field of study, enabling principal supervisors and other district stakeholders to implement and refine change ideas within their unique contexts, drawing lessons from our NIC's change ideas. *The PSNIC Toolkit* also represents a medium for us to effectively capture and share the learnings from individual efforts so that the network can build a collective repository and understanding of what works and what doesn't (Iriti et al., 2021). This will foster a broader community of practice among principal supervisors, facilitating continuous learning and improvement in the realm of education.

Why a PSNIC now?

The PSNIC becomes particularly meaningful, relevant, and timely for several reasons. Firstly, effective principal supervision is directly linked to improved school leadership, a crucial factor in student success. By collaborating, testing, and sharing effective change ideas, principal supervisors can enhance their own practice, ultimately leading to better support for principals.

Secondly, the PSNIC's focus on practical, tested approaches ensures the tools and resources developed are directly usable by supervisors in their day-to-day work. Finally, Bryk et al. (2015) posit that there is power in a network improvement community. They further assert that groups of individuals collaborating to tackle a common problem—using shared measures, a defined theory of change, and appropriate tools—are more effective at finding solutions and generating innovative ideas than an individual working alone (Bryk et al., 2015; LeMahieu, 2015; Russell et al., 2021). The development of the PSNIC aims to cultivate the power of the collective individual roles in GRSS to impact the role of the principal supervisor. Each member contributes their unique perspective, expertise, and resources to inform the principal supervisor's decisions, professional growth, and strategies. This collaborative approach not only leverages the collective power of individual roles but also elevates the principal supervisor's function from a solitary leader to an orchestrator, guiding and facilitating the work of the principal through the combined efforts of the community. This PSNIC provides a timely platform for supervisors to stay ahead of the curve and address the evolving needs of principals and schools.

Appendix A: Recruitment, Confirmation, and Reminder Emails

Initial Recruitment Email: Survey

Subject: Invitation to Participate in Research Survey on the Role of Principal Supervisors

Dear [Recipient's Name],

We hope this message finds you well. We are reaching out to invite you to participate in an anonymous research survey focusing on the role of principal supervisors in educational leadership.

As a key figure in the district's leadership, your insights are invaluable to understanding the impact and effectiveness of principal supervision. The survey aims to gather anonymous feedback on various aspects of the role, including responsibilities, challenges, and support for professional growth.

Your participation will contribute to a deeper understanding of how principal supervision influences school leadership. The survey is anonymous and should take approximately 30 minutes to complete.

To participate, please click on the following link: [Survey Link]

Your responses will be confidential and will only be used for research purposes. Should you have any questions or require further information, please do not hesitate to contact any of the members of our research team.

Thank you in advance for considering this invitation. Your contribution is highly valued, and we look forward to receiving your insights.

Best regards,

[Names]
[Contact Information]
[Institution or Organization]

Reminder Recruitment Email Survey

Subject: Invitation to Participate in Anonymous Research Survey on the Role of the Principal Supervisor

Dear [Recipient's Name],

I hope this message finds you well. We are conducting research on the role of the principal supervisor in educational settings. Your insights are valuable to this study, and we would like to invite you to participate in an anonymous survey.

Your responses will contribute significantly to understanding the perspectives and experiences related to this important educational role. The survey will only take about 30 minutes to complete, and your participation is completely voluntary.

Survey Link: [Insert Survey Link]

Survey Deadline: [Insert Deadline]

Please feel free to contact any member of our research team if you have any questions or require further information about the survey. Your responses will be kept confidential and will be used solely for research purposes.

Thank you for considering this invitation. Your participation is greatly appreciated.

Best regards,

[Names]
[Contact Information]
[Institution or Organization]

Recruitment Email: Interview

Dear [Principal/Supervisor's Name],

We hope this message finds you well.

We are conducting a research study on the role and impact of principal supervisors in educational settings. Your expertise in this area would provide invaluable insights for our project.

Purpose: The primary objective of this research is to explore and understand the responsibilities, challenges, and effectiveness of principal supervisors in supporting school leadership.

Interview Format:

- **Duration:** Approximately 60 minutes
- **Platform:** Zoom
- **Structure:** Semi-structured interview focusing on:
    - Your experiences and perspectives on the role of principal supervisors
    - Effective strategies in supporting and developing school principals
    - Challenges faced and recommendations for improvement

Confidentiality: Your participation in this interview will be kept strictly confidential. All data collected will be anonymized and used solely for research purposes.

Participation: Your contribution to this study is highly valued. If you are willing to participate, please let me know your availability for a suitable time slot. Alternatively, if you require further information before committing, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Next Steps: Once your availability is confirmed, we will send a calendar invite with details of the interview and any additional information you may need.

Thank you for considering this invitation. Your insights will greatly enrich our understanding of principal supervision in education. We look forward to the possibility of collaborating with you on this important research.

Warm regards,

[Names]
[Contact Information]
[Institution or Organization]

Confirmation Email (sent with calendar invitation)

Dear [Principal/Supervisor's Name],

We hope you're having a great start to the new school year.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in our research study focused on understanding the role of the principal supervisor.

The purpose of this study is to investigate if and how principal supervisors in the district support principals as instructional leaders. We have included a digital copy of the consent form for your review. In brief, participation would involve:

- Participating in one 60-minute interview by Zoom in the Fall of 2024.

Participation in this research is completely voluntary. As we detail on the consent form, the interview will be conducted by one member of our research team and take place at a time of your choosing. We will give you time to review and sign this consent form, and ask your permission to record the interview for transcription purposes. Your name and identifying information will not be used at any time during this study.

Please reply to this email with any questions you may have.

Thank you so much.

[Names]
[Contact Information]
[Institution or Organization]

Documentation Request Email

Dear [Principal Supervisor's Name],

Thank you for agreeing to participate in our research study focused on understanding the role of the principal supervisor.

The purpose of this study is to investigate if and how principal supervisors in the district support principals as instructional leaders.

As we move forward with our study, we kindly request the following documentation:

- The rolling agendas of your meetings with both a novice principal (1-3 years) and a veteran principal (4 or more years) for School Year 2023-2024.
- Any materials used to support your meetings with the principal(s).
- Access to your School Year 2023-2024 calendar.

Your participation in the document analysis will be kept strictly confidential. All data collected will be anonymized and used solely for research purposes.

Your cooperation is greatly appreciated and will contribute significantly to our research.

Your documents will greatly enrich our understanding of the principal supervisor’s role. Thank you for considering this request

Warm regards,

[Names]
[Contact Information]
[Institution or Organization]

Appendix B: Principal Supervisor Survey Questions

Survey Questions sourced from Honig, M. I., & Rainey, L. (2020). *Supervising principals for instructional leadership: A teaching and learning approach*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

How long have you been a principal supervisor?

Did you serve as a principal before you became a principal supervisor? If yes, how many years did you serve as a principal?

During the past school year, approximately how many times did you visit each principal that you supervise at his/her school?

Thinking about the past school year, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your one-on-one work with principals:

1. My principals and I set goals together

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

2. My principals and I learned together

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

3. I demonstrated that my main priority is my principals' growth as instructional leaders

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

4. My principals and I spent almost all of our time together on their growth as instructional leaders

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

5. I valued my principals' growth as instructional leaders

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

6. I helped principals value their growth as instructional leaders

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

7. My principals and I agreed on our definition of instructional leadership

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

How frequently did you model how to engage in the following instructional leadership activities:

8. Observing the quality of teaching in classrooms
Never Rarely Occasionally Frequently Very Frequently

9. Providing feedback to teachers to improve their teaching
Never Rarely Occasionally Frequently Very Frequently

10. Leading teacher professional development
Never Rarely Occasionally Frequently Very Frequently

11. Leading school improvement planning processes
Never Rarely Occasionally Frequently Very Frequently

12. Analyzing data/evidence for school improvement
Never Rarely Occasionally Frequently Very Frequently

13. Developing teacher leadership
Never Rarely Occasionally Frequently Very Frequently

Appendix C: Principal Survey Questions

Survey Questions sourced from Honig, M. I., & Rainey, L. (2020). *Supervising principals for instructional leadership: A teaching and learning approach*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

How long have you been a principal?

How many different supervisors have you had since you became a principal?

Base your next responses on your most recent supervisor if he/she has served in that capacity for three months or more:

During the past school year, approximately how many times did your supervisor visit your school?

Thinking about the past school year, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your one-on-one work with your supervisor:

1. My principal supervisor and I set goals together

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

2. My principal supervisor and I learned together

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

3. My principal supervisor demonstrated that their main priority is my growth as an instructional leader

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

4. My principal supervisor and I spent almost all of our time together on my growth as an instructional leader

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

5. My principal supervisor valued my growth as an instructional leader

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

6. My principal supervisor helped me value my growth as an instructional leader

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

7. My principal supervisor and I agreed on our definition of instructional leadership
Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

How frequently did your principal supervisor model how to engage in the following instructional leadership activities:

8. Observing the quality of teaching in classrooms
Never Rarely Occasionally Frequently Very Frequently

9. Providing feedback to teachers to improve their teaching
Never Rarely Occasionally Frequently Very Frequently

10. Leading teacher professional development
Never Rarely Occasionally Frequently Very Frequently

11. Leading school improvement planning processes
Never Rarely Occasionally Frequently Very Frequently

12. Analyzing data/evidence for school improvement
Never Rarely Occasionally Frequently Very Frequently

13. Developing teacher leadership
Never Rarely Occasionally Frequently Very Frequently

Appendix D: Interview Protocol

Interviewer: [Introduce yourself and your role briefly, and thank the interviewee for participating.]

Interviewee: [Introduces themselves.]

Interviewer: Today, we'll be discussing the role of the principal supervisor in educational settings. Your insights will greatly contribute to our research.

Your honest feedback is crucial for the success of this research. Please feel free to share your true thoughts and experiences. All responses will be kept confidential, and there are no right or wrong answers. We want to understand your genuine perspectives to gain valuable insights

I will be recording this interview for transcription purposes. Your participation in this interview will be kept strictly confidential. All data collected will be anonymized and used solely for research purposes. Will you please verbally give me permission to record?

Interviewee: [Acknowledges and gives permission]

Interviewer starts recording interview

Let's begin:

Principal Supervisor	**Principal**
1. Can you describe your current role and responsibilities as a principal supervisor? 2. What do you spend the bulk of your time doing? 3. What are some of the common challenges you face in your role, and how do you address them? *Probe as needed for 1-3: Can you share specific examples of how you support and develop principals under your supervision?* 4. What is your approach to professional development and continuous learning in your role as a principal supervisor? *Probe as needed: For yourself? For your principals?*	1. Can you describe the role of your supervisor in your work as a principal? 2. How often do you interact with your principal supervisor? What do you do when you are together? 3. What are the biggest challenges you face in your role as a principal? How, if at all, has your supervisor assisted you in overcoming them? *Probe as needed: Has there been a situation where your principal supervisor provided particular support or guidance that was not particularly valuable or helpful?* 4. Can you describe a situation where your principal supervisor provided valuable feedback or guidance that led to improvements in teaching and learning in your school?

5. Finally, is there anything else you would like to share about the role of the principal supervisor that we haven't discussed?	*Probe as needed: Can you describe a time you wished your supervisor had offered feedback or guidance but did not?What would have been helpful in that moment?* 5. Finally, is there anything else you would like to share about the role of the principal supervisor that we haven't discussed?

Interviewer: Thank you so much for sharing your valuable insights and experiences today. Your input will be incredibly valuable to our research. If you have any further thoughts or would like to expand on any points, please feel free to reach out. Thank you once again for your time.

Interviewee: [Offer closing remarks.]

Appendix E: Direct Observation Protocols

Systemic or Level-Alike Principals' Meetings

We will use this template when we are observing the interactions between principal supervisors and principals in real-time. Our goal is to capture specific behaviors, communication patterns, and strategies employed during their interactions. During formal meetings, we will aim to have at least two team members observing from opposite sides of the meeting space.

1. Gather artifacts directly related to the day's schedule such as agendas, notes, presentation materials, pre-meeting activities for use during document analysis.
2. For each meeting, take notes on:
   - Room arrangements: Diagram seating assignments, labeling principals and principal supervisors, note proximity of principal supervisors to principals, if/how groups are clustered
   - Participant engagement: Note whether formal roles have been assigned as part of the meeting design, if/how participants are taking notes or completing written tasks, any observation of side conversations, unrelated work or other off task behaviors
   - Meeting facilitation: Note the flow of the conversation and activities, and how the meeting is facilitated. Track contributions from participants.

0. When in the meeting, take particularly detailed notes on interactions where principals and principal supervisors are engaging in joint work around instructional leadership. This includes principal supervisors helping principals to lead their own learning (as opposed to positioning themselves as main leaders of principals' learning), and use of teaching and learning moves rather than those that promote task compliance.
0. Star/highlight moments you want to ask participants about in follow-up conversations.
0. Within 24 hours, aim to:
   - Debrief the experience with the team
   - Compile field notes describing the key notes from the meeting, tracking trends, patterns, etc.
   - Label field notes: [Type of Meeting], [date], [time], [length of period]
   - Save the file in password protected location: UMD Box https://umd.app.box.com
   - Compile and share follow-up questions for participants

Observation Template

Adapted from Johnson, L. R. (2016). *Community-based qualitative research: Approaches for education and the social sciences*. Sage Publications.

Date:	Time:
Duration of Meeting/Shadowing Experience:	Site(s):

Participants:	
Documents Passed (*link when possible*):	
Descriptive Notes: *Descriptions of participants, activities, interactions*	Reflective Notes: *Questions to self, interpretations*

Attached: Diagram(s) of room arrangements

Appendix F: Document Analysis Protocol

Adapted from the *Systemic Improvement Leads' Affinity Protocol*, https://systemimprovement.org/uploads/resources/Affinity%20Protocol%201_19_22.pdf and the *Center for Educational Equity Affinity Mapping Protocol* *https://www.schoolreforminitiative.org/download/affinity-mapping/*

Purpose
This protocol aids researchers in effectively analyzing data by organizing and synthesizing information into coherent themes and facilitating a deeper understanding and interpretation of the research findings.

Confidentiality
All of the data related to the Document Analysis Affinity Protocol will be saved in a password protected file located in the UMD Box https://umd.app.box.com

Materials
Virtual Affinity Protocol Space linked here
Documents that will be analyzed

Instructions
In the Virtual Affinity Protocol Space:

- Assign a text box color to each researcher.
- **Evidence Documentation**
  - Independently and silently:
    - Review the documents gathered during the data collection.
    - Type in the text boxes evidence of the work the principal supervisors engage in with the principals on the appropriate Document Evidence slide.
    - Type one piece of evidence per text box using the assigned text box color.
- **Affinity Groupings**
  - As a group and silently:
    - Review the completed Document Evidence slides and silently group like evidence together on the Affinity slide.
    - Researchers may rearrange each other's evidence, if necessary.
    - Once most of the text evidence has been grouped, end this phase of the protocol.
- **Affinity Labels**
  - Read each grouping and discuss whether all of the evidence text boxes belong in the groups and move any that don't.
  - When a grouping is finalized, give the affinity group a title and label it. Do this for each group of evidence text boxes. Note: It is acceptable to have a few outliers at the end of this protocol.
- **Summary of Findings**
  - As a group, reflect on and discuss the emerging themes, unexpected findings, potential gaps, and whether/how this information enhances our understanding of

the relationship between the principal supervisor's work and principals' instructional leadership capacity.

- Document the summary notes on the Summary of Findings slide.

Appendix G: Principal Supervisor Network Community Improvement Sessions

Principal Supervisor Network Improvement Community Sessions			
Session	**Title**	**Objectives**	**Agenda**

1	Organize for collaborative PSNIC work and presentation of findings	To present research findings on the role of principal supervisors and collaborate with school district leaders to develop strategies for improving teaching and learning in their districts.
		
		Prework: Read Ball, DeSouza, Hayes (BDH) Capstone
			• Introductions
			• Purpose setting
			• Team organization
			• Develop PSNIC Collaborative Conversation Agreement
			• Review of session objectives and agenda
			• Study Overview
			  ○ Background and rationale for the study
			  ○ Research questions and methodology
			  ○ Presentation of key findings
			• Overview of the PSNIC improvement journey:
			  ○ Review and refine the:
			  ▪ problem of practice
			  ▪ the fishbone diagram
			  ▪ the driver diagram
			  ○ Building a theory of improvement
			  ○ Scaling what works: PSNIC toolkit development
			  **each represents a session*
			• Next steps
			• Session Evaluation

2	Root Cause Analysis	To review and refine the BDH fishbone diagram *Prework: Reading about fishbone diagrams*	• Check in • Overview of the session objectives and agenda • Level set understanding of a fishbone diagram • Review the BDH root cause analysis, fishbone diagram. • Refine the fishbone diagram
3	Building a Theory of Improvement	To achieve consensus on the key drivers impacting PSs capacity (knowledge, skills, tools, and opportunity) to	• Check in • Overview of the session objectives and agenda • Leve-lset understanding of a driver diagram • Engage in Design Sprint Protocol to create a GRSS PSNIC Driver Diagram • Review BDH Driver Diagram • Refine the Driver Diagram

		support principals in leading improvements in teaching and learning and to collaboratively refine the driver diagram to reflect this understanding. *Prework: Reading about driver diagrams*	○ Engage an expert(s) in the field to support with the develop change ideas • Develop outcome measures to determine if the change is an improvement
4	Learn by Doing	To use the model for improvement to prepare for the PDSA cycles.	• Check in • Overview of the session objectives and agenda • Review the change ideas from the driver diagram • Identify one or more change ideas to test and the subset of Principal Supervisors that will test the change ideas ○ Introduce the Model for Improvement (MFI) ▪ Come to consensus for the answers to the MFI: • What are we trying to accomplish? ○ Create the aim • How will we know that a change is an improvement? ○ Determine the measures • What change can we make that will result in an improvement? ○ Select the change idea • Plan the PDSA cycle ○ Solidify the measure(s) ○ Make a prediction

			○ Create an action plan to test the change idea ○ Identify the length of the test (less than or equal to four weeks)
Run the tests up to four weeks			
5 *Sessions 4 and 5 may be repeated depending on the findings	Study the results	To study the findings, refine the change ideas, and determine the next steps.	• Check in • Overview of the session objectives and agenda. • Document the findings from the test. • Compare the results to the prediction. • Analyze the findings to determine if the change was an improvement. • Discuss learning from the test to inform the next test. ○ *The initial test will always lead to another test in another context. After multiple cycles in varied situations, the PSNIC will identify the spreadable and scalable changes to include in the change toolkit.*
6	Scaling what works	Develop of PSNIC Change Toolkit	Develop understanding of Coburn's Dimension of Change to discuss Toolkit's scalability PSNIC Toolkit Structure: • Introduction • Purpose • PSNIC Session structures ○ Facilitation Guide ○ Facilitation notes ○ Session agendas • Tools and templates ○ Fishbone diagram template ○ Driver Diagram template ○ Model for Improvement template ○ PDSA Worksheet • Change Package: ○ Table Headers ▪ Secondary Drivers ▪ Tested Change Ideas and context ▪ Results

Appendix H: Four Dimensions of Scale

Dimension of Change	Discussion Questions
Depth: Nature of the change	• Does the change go deep into the organization's beliefs? • Individual beliefs? • Does the change have an impact on the classroom or is it simply a surface • change? • Who is responsible for the change?
Sustainability: Endurance over time	• How long will the change endure? • What strategies are in place to ensure sustainability of the change?
Spread: Norms, principles, beliefs understood by greater numbers of people	• How widespread is the change? • Who is involved in the change? • Who should be involved • Who will benefit from the change?
Ownership: Shifts in reform ownership (knowledge and authority) to implementers	• Who "owns" the process?

Appendix I: Capstone WorkFlow

Courtni Ball, Felice DeSouza, and Trina Hayes are committed to empowering all schools within our district with the methodologies, strategies, tools, and resources essential for enhancing teaching and learning outcomes. Our capstone writing process was a collective effort from all members.

We began by identifying specific research topics that would support our study. After gathering individual research, we reconvened to share our findings and collaboratively determine which resources were most relevant for our work. This cycle of research and sharing is ongoing, with a focus on principal and principal supervisor professional development, roles, responsibilities, expectations, and the methods used to develop, coach, mentor, monitor, assess, and enhance their progress.

Once we had amassed a substantial amount of research, we started writing our capstone. We divided the work by assigning each group member a section with a set deadline for completion. After the deadline, each team member reviewed the completed section, adding, adjusting, or refining the content. This practice continued throughout the entire development of our capstone. For example, if Felice was assigned the Introduction section, once completed, Trina would review and add to the section, then submit it for the team to review. Following Trina's contributions, Courtni would then review, comment, and make any necessary adjustments.

Our capstone was and continues to be a fully collaborative effort.

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