

Developing District Instructional Leadership Capacity:

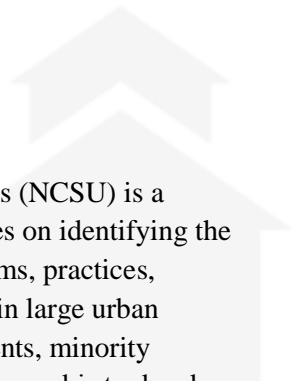
*Creating the Conditions for
Learning to Lead Instructional
Improvement*

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The National Center on Scaling Up Effective Schools (NCSU) is a national research and development center that focuses on identifying the combination of essential components and the programs, practices, processes and policies that make some high schools in large urban districts particularly effective with low income students, minority students, and English language learners. The Center's goal is to develop, implement, and test new processes that other districts will be able to use to scale up effective practices within the context of their own goals and unique circumstances. Led by Vanderbilt University's Peabody College, our partners include The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Florida State University, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Georgia State University, the University of California at Riverside, and the Education Development Center.

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Developing District Instructional Leadership Capacity: Creating the Conditions for Learning to Lead Instructional Improvement

The Common Core State Standards are calling upon us to think in new and different ways. It calls for new levels of teaching and learning. We are asked to think about a new way of doing our work. It is not simple, if we do this well.

How do we dig in to a new generation of work? Students are asked to work together—for example, to make comparisons across texts and to discuss texts. This calls for collaboration [not only among students but] among educators; it calls for principals to work directly with teachers.

*~ Remarks from a District Administrator
to School Instructional Leadership Teams
(June 2015)*

The Common Core State Standards and the Smarter Balanced Assessments call upon educators to think in new and different ways about the type of instruction they are preparing and providing to students. Consequently, district and school leaders must also think differently about how they conduct their work. Specifically, this paper considers the nature of the support that principals need and how districts can best provide that support to them. Although recent research has investigated dimensions of leadership that are associated with improving teaching and learning, how district and school leaders learn to lead instructional improvement is not well documented in the research literature.

The Work of Leading and Instructional Leadership

To understand the work of leading, we draw upon several ideas grounded in the research literature. One idea is the notion that leading involves taking action, and that the work of leading is seen as *embedded in action* rather than embodied in the behavior or traits of an individual person. This conceptualization of leading locates it in the “activities engaged in by leaders, in interaction with others in particular contexts around specific tasks” (Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2004, p. 5), rather than something that, in the words of Viviane Robinson (2001),

“floats ethereally above the humdrum of organizational life, abstracted from the tasks that leaders are alleged to help others accomplish” (p. 90).

Recent scholarship has also shown that it is useful to view the work of leading as a distributed activity. Spillane and colleagues (Spillane et al., 2004) describe leadership as “stretched over the social and situational contexts of the school” (p. 5). This distributed notion of leadership also applies to the work of leading at different levels of the system, such as within the central office, or even across levels of the system, such as when district leaders work in concert with principals on a particular problem of practice.

Finally, some leadership research (e.g., Leithwood & Stager, 1989; Robinson, 2001) has pointed to leaders’ problem-solving practices as particularly instructive sights for examining and understanding the work that leaders perform. For instance, Keith Leithwood and Mary Stager (1989) assert that the school administrator’s problem-solving process is crucial to understanding “why principals act as they do and why some principals are more effective than others” (p. 127). In addition, they distinguish between the types of problems administrators face, identifying problems as either more or less structured. Unstructured problems are what they call “messy situations in which [administrators] must first spend considerable effort identifying the problem and the values at stake in the solution” (p. 128). Of course, problems may be unstructured and poorly defined for a variety of reasons. There may not be agreement on what the problem is, what would qualify as a solution to it, or what actions might help to solve it. In contrast, Leithwood and Stager define structured problems as problems that are “clearly presented, with all the information needed at hand, and with an appropriate ‘algorithm’ guaranteeing a correct solution” (Leithwood & Stager, 1989, p. 128). By this definition, few educational problems are well structured. Importantly, they also find that the problem solver’s knowledge of the problem,

including his approach to information gathering, is a particularly important factor in developing a solution to a problem and distinguishes expert problem-solving actions.

Leading Instructional Improvement

Leading instruction is a subset of the work of leading. Instructional leadership is not a new concept (e.g., Blasé & Blasé, 1999; Bryk et al., 2010; Little & Bird, 1987). Typically, the term has pertained to acts of leadership intended to improve teaching and learning. In their work on essential supports for improving schools, Anthony Bryk and colleagues (2010) suggest that instructional leadership is critical for driving such change. Like other researchers, Bryk (2010) situates this type of leading with the principal describing the work of leading instructional improvement this way:

School leaders influence local activity around core instructional programs, supplemental academic and social supports and the hiring and development of staff. They establish strategic priorities for using resources and buffer externalities that might distract from coherent reform. Working in tandem with this, principals build relationships across the school community. Improving teaching and learning places demands on these relationships. (p. 25)

In this description of instructional leadership, *how* a principal actually goes about establishing strategic priorities or building relationships across the school community is not clear. Spillane and colleagues (2004) point to an extensive literature that identifies broad school level functions that are characteristic of a principal's instructional leadership, as well as the underlying practices that constitute these functions. For example, two such functions are: "procuring and distributing resources, including materials, time, support and compensation" and "developing and managing a school culture conducive to conversations about the core technology of instruction by building norms of trust, collaboration, and academic press among staff" (p. 13). An underlying practice for this function involves "building norms of trust, collaboration and academic press among staff" (p. 13). To develop norms and knowledge conducive to such conversations also necessitates

having organized time when such conversations occur. In addition, these types of conversations may be aided by routines, practices and supporting materials to conduct them.

In a meta-study of the leadership literature (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008), researchers examined the relative impact of different types of leadership practices on students' academic and nonacademic outcomes. These researchers found five broad leadership actions associated with higher performing schools:

- Establishing goals and expectations;
- Resourcing strategically;
- Planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum;
- Promoting and participating in teacher learning and development; and
- Ensuring an orderly and supportive environment.

These leadership actions, like the work of other researchers, broadly frame the arenas in which the work of leading instruction, at least for positional leaders like principals, occurs.

Practices Embedded in Leading Instruction

Similar to the functions described by Spillane and colleagues (2004), these instructional leadership actions consist of an array of practices. These practices are conducted within a particular context in dynamic interaction with others. For instance, if a district leader wants to establish district-wide goals and expectations to improve student learning, he will need to pay careful consideration to students', teachers', and principals' particular learning needs, both within and across all schools in the district. This task is not a simple undertaking and is likely to be replete with unstructured problems; even the formulation of the goal is a problem in itself. For these reasons, the approach to solving this problem is not routine and will probably require coordinated action and interdependence across various people, located at different levels of the system, who must do the actual work of solving this problem—most of whom probably work in isolation from each other.

The *How* of Leading: Identifying and Solving Problems

Scholars agree that while we know a great deal about the structures, roles, and processes that are needed for school change, we know relatively little about *how* these changes are undertaken by school or district leaders. Increasingly, those who study the work of leading assert the need to understand more about such leadership practices (e.g., Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2004), particularly those aimed at improving teaching and learning. Investigating instructional leadership actions and practices requires examining the tasks that leaders engage in: how they identify and formulate problems related to teaching and learning as well as how they organize tasks to work toward a solution to those problems.

Leading as Acts of Problem-Solving

Appropriating Viviane Robinson's view that the work of leading involves formulating problems and developing solutions to those problems, we also see the practice of leadership as "inextricably woven into the fabric of task performance" (2001, p. 92). Robinson's definition of leadership not only captures this idea that leadership is embedded in organizational action, but she also connects leadership action to specific problems that matter to other individuals. These ideas are particularly useful for the purposes of our study. According to Robinson, "Leadership is exercised when ideas expressed in talk or action are recognized by others as capable of progressing tasks or problems which are important to them" (2001, p. 93).

For Robinson, progressing a task means problem solving. Like Leithwood and Stager, Robinson sees the work of leading as involving the selection, formulation and structuring of a problem. In general terms, Robinson (2001) describes the knowledge and skills that are involved in making progress on problems. These are: 1) gaining and utilizing knowledge relevant to the problem, including an understanding of the various conditions, which may be in tension, and that must be satisfied to reach a solution; 2) skill in integrating these conditions; and 3) gaining and utilizing knowledge of actual or potential followers. Furthermore, because Robinson concludes

that the work of leadership becomes almost invisible when problems are well defined, an examination of leaders engaged in the act of structuring unstructured problems has the potential to be particularly instructive for developing knowledge about *how* leading instructional improvement occurs. Leadership practices become more visible when leaders engage in actions to figure out how to structure problems and define tasks that will make progress toward a solution. Such leadership actions undertaken by district level leaders are the object of analysis in this paper.

Leading Instructional Improvement Across Levels of the System

Applying Robinson's definition of leadership to acts of leading *instructional* improvement within the context of our study, we examine how instructional problems get formulated, who frames these problems, and how the work of resolving these problems gets accomplished. Acts of instructional leadership within a district, of course, vary in size, scope, location and magnitude of complexity. Such acts of instructional leadership might include how district leaders organize and implement a district approach to aligning instruction to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in all classrooms, as the district administrator's remarks at the opening of the paper indicate. Or, they might include how a principal works with teachers to engage in professional learning that enables teachers to co-design CCSS aligned instructional approaches and examine the results of this instruction on student learning. Both acts of leadership, located at two different levels of the system, involve an array of practices to design and implement professional learning. Our study considers acts of instructional leadership at both the district and the school level. However, for the purposes of this paper, we focus on district-level acts of leading instructional improvement. We pay attention to the interaction of leadership practices across levels of the system, such as when district leaders design tasks for principals. Acts of instructional leadership can also be narrower in scope, such as facilitating a group

conversation and asking questions that push principals to more closely consider the relationship between their actions and the opportunities created for teacher learning. These examples of instructional leadership, which vary in size, scope and location in the system, show some of the variation in leadership acts. They also suggest that different actors residing at different levels of the system—teachers, academic coaches, principals and/or district administrators—are capable of leading instruction. In our view, leading is defined through actions rather than by position.

Research Design and Methods

Context of the Study

In the past year, the Urban School District (USD)ⁱ made significant changes in accordance with its 2013-15 Strategic Plan. The strategic plan identifies several strategic priorities, including: implement the district core curriculum and use student data; provide academic and behavioral support; and differentiate central office supports. Our research project, which was designed in partnership with the District Elementary Supervisors (DES)ⁱⁱ and has its roots in previous related researcher-practitioner work, followed a designed based implementation research (DBIR) approach. The project focus was on how DES led instructional improvement work during the 2014-15 academic year. We focus, in particular, on several changes that DES introduced to their bi-monthly principal meetings. DES replaced one of its monthly principal meetings with a monthly school visit rotation and made other structural changes to the remaining principal meeting to include a structured conversation, in which principals take turns bringing a problem of leadership practice to the group for feedback and problem-solving help. In the words of one DES,

What I think is most essential right now is principals being positioned to describe the shifts in vision in the Common Core standards and knowing them well enough to be able to inspire teachers to want to make those shifts for themselves, to look for them when they visit classrooms, and to comment on those things directly.

Building upon previous research, we developed this DBIR project in partnership with district administrators.

The District's Instructional Problem

The major instructional problem facing the USD was how to improve the learning outcomes for all students, particularly those who were lowest performing. The seven DES reformulated the problem this way: How can we help principals to grow as instructional leaders? District leaders sought to address this problem by working together to determine how to best support the 60 principals in their charge, each with varied knowledge, skills and principal experience, to lead the necessary instructional improvement efforts in their different schools. As part of this work, DES organized, framed and facilitated inquiry-based conversations among principals intended to improve student learning in 60 elementary schools. Making the design and enactment of these structures as our objects of research allowed us to see the ways that these particular approaches to structuring principal learning functioned in the context of the USD, amidst the needs, constraints, and interactions of local practice (The Design Based Research Collaborative, 2002).

As research partners, we organized and facilitated an analogous set of conversations among the seven district elementary supervisors. Relatively little is known about how to develop interdependent and coherent actions across different levels of the system to support ongoing instructional improvement. To begin to develop such process knowledge, we documented various cross-role and cross-level conversations intended to support leading instructional improvement, and we analyzed the contexts in which these conversations occurred. Our DBIR project examines these contexts, the opportunities for conversation that they afforded, and the leadership actions involved in their design and use at different levels of the system. To

investigate the systems level question of how to support instructional improvement, our project asks:

- 1) How do district leaders create the conditions for principals to learn how to lead instructional improvement in their schools?
- 2) How, and in what ways, do district leaders learn how to support principals to lead instructional improvement?

Our Design-Based Implementation Research Approach

As Penuel and colleagues (2011) describe, DBIR studies like ours have four key elements: a) a focus on persistent problems of practice from multiple stakeholders' perspectives; b) a commitment to iterative, collaborative design; c) a concern with developing theory related to both classroom learning and implementation through systematic inquiry; and d) a concern with developing capacity for sustaining change in systems. Our study sought to examine the persistent problem of practice that is leading instructional improvement: how to engage district leaders and principals in structured, conscientious efforts that lead to greater learning outcomes for students across the district. We took part as observers and thought partners while district leaders implemented Critical Friends conversations and Instructional Site Visits with principals. We collected information on how district leaders and principals were interacting in these contexts and offered our findings to DES as they revisited the design of these activities. Simultaneously, we returned to the literature on educational leadership (Leithwood & Stager, 1989; Robinson, 2001; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008), leading school improvement (Bryk, et al, 2010), and the role of conversations in improving instruction (Earl, 2008; Horn, Kane & Wilson, 2015; Timperley, 2008) as we endeavored to connect theory to the practices we were studying and to develop new theories. We also returned to the methodological literature (e.g., Cobb, Confrey, diSessa, Lehrer & Schauble, 2003; Dede, 2005; Penuel, Coburn, & Farrell, 2015) as our study evolved.

This approach to research allowed us to examine the work of leading instructional improvement that is deeply embedded in numerous practices, contexts and levels of the system across a mid-sized urban school district. Our goal is to deepen our knowledge about what is involved in leading so that teaching and learning improve and figure out ways to scale such practices across the USD. By better understanding the challenges and opportunities affecting DES's implementation of two structures (Critical Friends and Instructional Site Visits), we anticipate that what we learn can inform other districts, that are also intent on creating capacity for deep and long-lasting instructional improvement, and can inform other research-practitioner partnerships.

Sample

Urban School District is a mid-sized K-12 district with 110 schools, 72 of which serve elementary students in either a K-5 or K-8 setting. Our project worked at three levels of the system: with two teams of central office elementary principal supervisors (n=9), with four cohorts of elementary principals (n = 66) and with a select sample of school principals and their site-based instructional leadership teams. Our sample for this analysis includes 7 district administrators and the 60 elementary and K-8 school principals that they supervise and support. These elementary schools vary considerably in their size, student demographics and overall academic achievement as measured by student performance on standardized test scores.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection occurred at three levels of the system: DES planning meetings and retreats, principal monthly meetings and school site visits, and a small sample of purposefully selected schools. Data from DES meetings and principal meetings and school site visits were analyzed for this paper. Data sources include: field notes of our observations at the various meetings; recordings of select instructional site visits and DES team retreats; two rounds of semi-

structured interviews with all 7 district leaders; and document collection from all meetings. A Principal Survey, designed to gauge principals' perceptions of the altered meeting structures, was administered to principals in the late Fall. A small survey measure was designed in the Spring and administered to all principals in April and again in May 2015. This open-response survey was administered to principals in order to understand their use of specific instructional leadership practices and gauge their learning needs. As part of the iterative design process, we shared our evolving understanding with our district partners in several ways—by leading discussions among DES and the research team, by developing conceptual frameworks to describe DES actions, and by creating brief data analysis memos for DES. Some of the data for this paper is drawn from these sources.

Data analysis occurred throughout the year in multiple stages: iteratively from August through June, and then comprehensively at the conclusion of the 2014-2015 academic calendar. Central to our role as thought-partners with the district leaders, we had opportunities throughout the year to share what we were noticing with DES, gleaned from the data we had been collecting through our observations, interviews, and other interactions with district personnel involved in the project. The SCOPE research team read transcripts and field notes, annotating them with analytic memos that would then serve as information to be shared with the DES team at their meetings and retreats. We developed coding categories and analyzed the principal survey and small survey measures, and shared our findings with the DES team in the form of data displays such as conceptual maps, matrices and tables. Through this iterative process, we examined our preliminary analyses. This process helped us to strengthen our understanding of what we observed, sometimes by helping us to reconsider our interpretations of actions and decisions. This information fed into DES discussions and sometimes led to new insights, which opened up further opportunities to examine DES's work in-action. Comprehensively, at the end of the

school year, we engaged in more focused coding and writing of theoretical memos, as well as returned to analytic memos written earlier points in the year (Glaser & Strauss, 1999).

Findings

To answer the question of how district leaders create the conditions for principals to learn to lead instructional improvement in their schools, we examine the design and use of two organizational structures that DES introduced to elementary principals at the start of the 2014 school year: Critical Friends sessions (CF) and Instructional Site Visits (ISV). CF provided a designated time for monthly conversations among principals about a problem related to leading instructional improvement, and ISV was a monthly school site visitation cycle where principals observed teaching and learning in classrooms (see Table 1). By design, these new structures were intended to create different kinds of learning opportunities for principals. One district administrator explained the reason for creating these structures “was for principals to find a meaningful learning environment for themselves where they could have more of an opportunity to form partnerships and collectively work together to ... implement [instructional shifts] at the school sites.” The two structures marked a significant departure in the way the district organized and used principal meeting time. Through the use of these structures, DES aimed to increase principals’ instructional leadership capacity.

Table 1

Comparison of the two principal learning structures

	Critical Friends	Instructional Site Visits
PURPOSE	“Examine a problem related to leading instruction and to structure solutions, sometimes in the form of specific action steps, that principals could take”	“Analyze student learning under new standards; Sharpen equity lens; Share strategies for improving teaching and learning; Develop a commitment to action”

DEVELOPING DISTRICT INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP CAPACITY

PARTICIPANTS	Principals and DES	Principals and DES (sometimes assistant principals, literacy coaches and district C&I staff)
TIME ALLOTTED	45-50 minutes	3 hours
CONTENT		
<i>Data used</i>	Principal recounting of situation and problem; 1-2 key documents related to Problem of Practice.	Participants' scripted classroom observation notes.
<i>Next Steps</i>	Presenter summary and short and long term next steps (5 minutes)	Developed as a group for host principal/school (15 minutes)
ACTIVITY STRUCTURE		
<i>Facilitator</i>	Principal	2 District Elementary Supervisors (DES)
<i>Problem of Practice</i>	Principal-selected problem of leadership practice; usually a managerial or operational problem	Principal-selected problem of leadership practice with DES support, related to instruction and the CCSS.
<i>Follow up</i>	None	Nothing formal

Sites for Analysis: Critical Friends and Instructional Site Visits

Given the purpose of CF and ISV, we situate our analysis within the contexts of these principal learning experiences. We examine how DES organized learning in these contexts and used CF and ISV to create the conditions for principals to learn how to lead instructional improvement. We analyze four context dimensions—the purpose, participants, content and activity structures—that affect opportunities to learn (Jaquith, 2015; Wilson & Berne, 1999). In particular, we consider how CF and ISV focused attention on problems related to leading instructional improvement. We also examine the particular actions DES took to facilitate CFs and ISVs and how doing so contributed to the development of principals' problem-solving capacity. Finally, our analysis examines how the use of these two organizational structures aided or constrained opportunities for principal learning.

Critical Friends as a Context for Principal Learning

Purpose, Participants, Content and Activity Structures

During Critical Friends sessions, the sixty elementary principals met in three separate cohorts led by their supervisors. The purpose of the Critical Friends discussions was to involve principals in small group discussions about an instructional leadership problem that the presenting principal “would like peers to help solve”. The intention was for the conversation to be anchored in an authentic problem of leading that the principal could represent with “one or two key documents.” According to the Document-Based Critical Friends Groups Protocol that DES used,

Critical friends are good listeners and problem solvers who help others sort out their thinking and make sound decisions. They ask provocative questions that help others define expectations and intentions, help them realize when their expectations for themselves and others are too low, and help them realize when their actions don’t match their intentions.

DES used this protocol to structure this monthly conversation among small groups of 5-7 principals. Discussions occurred in forty-five minute blocks of time and group membership stayed the same all year. In a monthly rotation, principals took turns assuming the roles of presenter, timer and facilitator.

Identifying Problems of Leading Instructional Improvement

At the outset, Critical Friends sessions were designed to help principals examine a problem related to leading instruction in their school. Principals were asked to formulate a problem of practice that met the following criteria:

- High leverage and will impact your school if addressed;
- Actionable—something leaders can do to implement change;
- Relevant to instructional improvement at your school

The opportunity for principals to identify their own problems of practice to discuss with colleagues was a novel experience for many. Some principals appreciated this opportunity. One

principal, who was not alone in her view, said, “Critical Friends is one of the best things we do.” Others were less comfortable bringing real problems of leadership to the group.

Selecting and formulating the leadership problem to bring to the group became an important component of the CF design. In advance of CF sessions, DES helped principals identify and formulate their problem of practice in a one-on-one conversation. DES found these conversations helpful and instructive. It provided an opportunity “to explore what’s on [principals’] minds about a problem they have.” One district administrator described these preparatory conversations as “very meaningful and poignant ... and in some cases profound, because it’s just you and the principals, and they’re sharing what they need help with.” Through the use of this structure, DES created an occasion to talk with each principal about a specific leadership problem.

In practice, however, the problems that principals brought to CF sessions were typically managerial or operational rather than aimed specifically at improving instruction or aligning instruction to the expectations of the CCSS. For example, typical sorts of problems were “how to manage the school secretary to become a positive liaison with the parents” or “what to do about tardy students who missed important instructional time.” Although DES realized principals were not selecting problems focused on instruction, some district administrators did not see this as problematic.

How the Critical Friends Structure Contributed to Principals’ Problem-Solving Capacity

Early on, DES observed that principals needed help formulating “high leverage problems that would affect their school if addressed.” For instance, one district administrator commented that when he heard what one principal planned to share at a CF meeting, he needed “to refocus him” because essentially the problem could be “distilled down to wanting to talk about a pregnant woman being angry.” Another district administrator said when a “principal presented a

problem of practice that was ... a very small issue at the school with personnel ... it was not a good use of the time.” Through the CF process, DES identified principals’ needs to get better at identifying worthwhile problems and formulating solutions to them. While these needs for principal learning emerged through this process, DES did not explicitly name learning how to formulate worthy leadership problems as a goal for the CF work.

Table 2

Critical Friends discussion procedures

Critical Friends
1. Principal presents problem of practice (5-10min)
2. Participants ask clarifying questions and presenter responds (5min)
3. Participants write probing questions; presenter reflects out loud on questions that resonate the most (10min)
4. Participants discuss solutions; presenter listens (10-15 min)
5. Presenter summarizes and addresses short and long term next steps (5min)
6. Debrief of process (5min)

The CF structure (see Table 2) helped principals to better structure the messy problems that they brought and work towards possible solutions to them. This occurred through a round of clarifying questions, a round of probing questions, and a round of discussion on potential solutions. The structured conversation, guided by the protocol, aided principals in developing a deeper understanding of the leadership problems they brought. When the protocol was followed, the steps helped structure principals’ thinking. The round of clarifying questions about the problem raised additional considerations related to the problem and revealed aspects of the context that principal colleagues thought might matter for resolving the presented problem. Writing probing questions provided individual participants with time to think more deeply about the problem and raise ideas or concerns in the form of questions. Adhering to the protocol, questions were then read aloud without discussion and handed to the presenting principal. From

this process, a disentangling of issues could begin to occur. The protocol then directed the presenting principal to “think aloud about the questions [and] use them to think deeper about the problem of practice.” The variety of questions typically illuminated multiple perspectives and facets of the problem and prompted the principal to consider some information that they had previously not considered.

Despite differences in the types of problems presented, the conversation routine helped to progress solutions to them. The routine did so by keeping the conversation focused on the problem at hand. By systematically gathering questions and ideas from the whole group and by naming these questions in succession without a response from the presenter, the complexity and multi-faceted nature of a particular problem emerged. When groups adhered to the protocol, the process uncovered and disentangled various aspects of the presented problem, which sometimes enabled the presenting principal to formulate a short-term action to take in working towards a problem solution.

A Critical Friends Conversation: Robert’s Problem

One Critical Friends session found a principal struggling to make progress with one such “messy” problem: Robert had recently become principal of his school, and had inherited a teaching faculty that, while widely trained in a workshop model for literacy instruction, had begun to lose momentum in their implementation of this approach. “I’ve realized that although I have been supportive of teachers continuing to implement the reading and writing workshop model at [our school], the majority of teachers have continued to move this work slowly,” he said. He pointed to his school’s standardized test results, noting that they were remaining consistently flat, with only half of his (mostly bilingual) student population scoring as proficient in English language arts. He continued: “I feel like the substitute in a classroom where students have gotten away with doing the minimum throughout the day.” He felt challenged in his ability

to offer the necessary feedback to teachers to “move their thinking forward” in regard to the workshop model. He struggled with striking a balance between urgency and complacency, and wanted to avoid a leadership approach that came off as “too top-down, too dictatorial”.

During the clarifying question portion of the protocol, one colleague wondered if he was collecting any other evidence of teachers’ work with the literacy workshop model in addition to standardized test scores. While Robert did not have a response on hand, it seemed this was something he would now begin to consider, moving forward with his work, seeking new ways to gather information about his problem of practice. Another colleague wondered what other individuals could be designated as “leaders” in helping forward the workshop model, noting that he knew there were instructional leaders at his site – naming a literacy coach and another instructional coach. Again, this seemed a helpful question for the presenting principal to consider, implying his leadership work could be distributed across multiple actors in his school.

Writing down probing questions for the next step of the Critical Friends process, principals went deeper into Robert leadership problem. One probing question asked him to consider the positive and negative effects of adopting a “dictator” approach to this particular instructional leadership issue. Another asked him to consider what features of the workshop model make him believe so strongly in it. A third colleague simply asked him to reflect more on the ways he conceives of “urgency” when it comes to promoting instructional improvement. Robert decided to respond to the probing question regarding “urgency.” He raised the point that, similar to the way that principals were being asked to have such “courageous conversations” amongst themselves at these principal meetings, perhaps he, too, could adopt such an approach. Through this, approach of having conversations with teachers that were grounded in honest, constructive feedback and characterized by trust, high expectations, and structure, he wondered if he could generate “urgency” amongst his faculty to use the literacy workshop model.

After responding to his colleagues' probing questions, adhering to the protocol, he took a step back and allowed them to discuss his problem of practice amongst themselves. One colleague offered a suggestion about a specific professional development that trained educators in having such structured "courageous conversations". Another suggested how he might benefit from more contact with grade-level team meetings. A third principal suggested that he fully embrace a dictator approach and simply demand teachers do more with their workshop training.

At the end, Robert re-joined the conversation. He remarked that it sounded helpful to have more contact with the grade level teams, as well as spending more time in classrooms in general. He also began thinking of what other actors he might involve in forwarding the literacy workshop model, considering how he could better employ the structure of an Instructional Leadership Team (ILT). His colleagues, in turn, shared what they had begun to think about as a result of their participation: many were now considering the nature of "urgency" and instructional leadership in new ways, and deliberating how creating new structures could go hand in hand with the work of instructional improvement.

What the Critical Friends Process Afforded

As described, the CF process did help some principals to see messy problems more clearly and to get ideas from their colleagues about how to work toward a solution to them. One district administrator said,

Listening to their peers gives them some ideas about what to do. That's probably the most powerful ... I see their faces feeling that they're not alone, other people have had this problem before and then here's a solution for it. You can see their stress level lightening a little bit.

Because the job of a principal is lonely and isolated, the opportunity to talk with peers about difficult problems also provided principals with emotional support and camaraderie. Through the intimate conversations about a colleague's areas of struggle, principals who previously didn't

know each other by name or even by school got to know one another. Through conversations about their work, they began to develop professional relationships, increased their trust, and learned which principals had particular task knowledge, such as how to develop a school budget. Principals appreciated knowing who to call upon for advice about particular leadership matters.

In addition to providing collegueship and helping principals determine specific actions to take as they worked toward solutions to a particular problem, the CF process modeled a way principals could think through a problem and work toward formulating a solution. Through repeated practice with this conversation routine, principals got better at asking clarifying questions and raising questions that pushed the presenting principal to think more deeply about his problem. Although one goal DES had was for the CF to “provide a modeling of the way that you need to [have a conversation and] ... a modeling of what you need to focus on,” there is limited evidence that this practice actually found its way into the schools. One principal, however, did report “creating critical friend protocols for [teachers] to have confidential conversations so we can better use our collaborative time.”

Missed Opportunities for Learning

DES frequently commented on the need to “follow-up” with principals after CF visits. One district administrator said, “Once you’ve shared what your problem of practice is, there needs to be a way to revisit that, not just a one-shot deal.” Because DES’s work was so time-consuming, they found it almost impossible to conduct such follow-ups with principals in a systematic way. As they reported and we observed, “leading the work on a daily basis, what it takes to do any one piece of the structures we put in place [required] hours and hours of time on top of everything else.” Following up with principals was just not feasible. One district administrator said,

I don't think the follow-up necessarily has to be from me. In building the collegiality, maybe a person like the [CF] facilitator, for example, of that session could be the one to make the phone call, "Hey, just checking in. How's it going with your problem of practice?"

Even when ideas such as this were generated, DES was rarely able to find the time to share these ideas with their colleagues and put them into practice.

When principals brought forward problems that were "*really pressing for them* at their school site" but were focused on managerial or operational problems, DES allowed these problems to become the focus of CF conversations. One district administrator said, "Originally when we were planning the Critical Friends, we want[ed] to focus around instruction.... That's not what's happening in these meetings." Several DES felt that adhering to the criterion that principals' leadership problems relate to instruction was the wrong thing to do. One said, "We want to make this Critical Friends the principals' time to air out and flesh out some of the things that are big challenges at their school and keep them up at night." Another thought principals needed opportunities to get help with the other sorts of leadership problems they faced:

Site visits are always around instruction. I don't want take that opportunity away from the principals and say that the critical friends have to be around instruction, because these [managerial and operational concerns] are real things, real leadership moves that they need to make that are equally as important as instruction.

Yet, a different district administrator was concerned about this decision. This DES said the "Common Core state standards is a huge shift in the way that we educate children, and the way that we need to work together as professionals." She expressed concern about letting go of the focus on instructional leadership. She said, "Some [principals] ... are starting to bring in problems that are real to them that don't have to do with instruction, but with the managerial side or another problem that they have." Although she recognized principals appreciated this opportunity, she wondered about the learning value of these problems. She said DES needed to

figure out if CF would “remain just a structure where you have a time to talk about what’s important to you.” She noted the differing views among DES about the purpose of CF and said, “We have not ever sat and said, ‘What are [principals] learning in these groups?’”

A conversation amongst the DES about the affordances of a more instructionally-focused CF might have been an opportunity to consider the interdependent nature of managerial, operational and instructional leadership problems and to make this intersection explicit to principals. Indeed, often a principal’s presenting problem had components of each. For example, one problem presented at a CF session was “how to shift grade-level team meetings from a focus on business and logistics to a focus on instruction.” Implicit in this leadership problem are issues related to managing people, establishing the structure and operation of grade-level meetings and communicating expectations for how teachers will use their time. In addition, underlying this problem might be the need to learn how to use grade-level time to focus on instruction rather than the teachers’ unwillingness to do so.

A leadership problem, then, that emerged for DES as they used the Critical Friends sessions to support principal learning was a lack of clarity about what principals most needed to learn from the CF process. This affected how DES implemented CF to support principal learning. For example, even though the protocol provided a sturdy structure to assist principals in having meaningful conversations, not all district administrators expected principals to adhere to the protocol. In one cohort the protocol was loosely used; principals in this cohort did not write down their “probing questions” for each other or read the facilitator’s script. Consultation meetings with principals in advance to discuss their identified problems provided a way for DES to learn more about how individual principals thought about their role as leaders, but how DES structured these conversations to further principals’ learning is less clear. Arguably each of these components of the process might have been strengthened if principals were asked how their

problem was relevant to improving instruction. By doing so, leading instructional improvement might have been seen as a more urgent need. In addition, providing a narrower and common focus to the CF problems that principals shared might have done more to develop principals' collective expertise at leading instructional improvement. And, if DES had felt more certainty about its learning goals for CF, perhaps DES would have been more likely to provide direct feedback to principals on how well their facilitation of CF served this goal.

Finally, the particular stance that each principal assumed when presenting his or her problem to the CF group also affected the extent to which learning occurred for that principal. For instance, when a principal was willing and able to put forth a messy problem of leading and allow him or herself to be vulnerable in front of colleagues, greater learning occurred. In the absence of a clearly articulated expectation for how principals' were to engage in CF, principals participated in whatever manner was most comfortable to them.

Instructional Site Visits as a Context for Principal Learning

Purpose, Participants, Content and Activity Structures

Small groups of 5-8 principals were organized into Instructional Site Visits (ISV) groups and visited one school a month, with their sessions facilitated by two district administrators. The purpose of the visit was to consider a problem of instructional leadership practice, identified by the host principal, by observing teaching and learning in classrooms and discussing what they saw. In a handout given to principals, the *School Visits Overview* named two purposes for these visits:

1. Administrators will participate in school visits using a focused walkthrough protocol so that they calibrate on cognitive demand and develop a common understanding of instructional shifts, and
2. Administrators will use this common understanding and apply it to teacher collaboration, assessing student learning and providing teacher feedback.

At the start of each site visit, four objectives, written on the ISV agenda and related to the broader purposes for the ISVs, were reviewed with principals. These were:

- Analyze student learning under the new standards using the evidence of learning and production
- Sharpen the equity lens to focus on historically underserved student and/or students who have historically struggled
- Share strategies for improving teaching and learning
- Develop a commitment to action

While these worthy objectives focus attention on the relationship between teaching and learning, the role of the principal in this work is not clearly specified. In addition, as stated, the goal to “develop a commitment to action” actually stops short of insisting that some action is taken.

Identifying the Problem of Practice

The problems of practice for ISVs were framed around instruction, and unlike Critical Friends discussions, this focus was maintained. Host principals developed these problems with guidance from their district elementary supervisors. A majority of the schools we observed concentrated on the same problem of practice related to implementing the Common Core State Standards (CCSS): “How do we implement a meaningful and engaging instructional program, which is aligned to CCSS, to produce high levels of learning for our diverse students?” DES intentionally worked with principals to help develop their problems of practice in this way around instruction connected to the CCSS. A few schools narrowed the problem to concentrate specifically on particular components of writing instruction or academic conversations: “How are teachers differentiating instruction for students in Writers Workshop? What are students saying and writing during Writers Workshop?” and “How do we increase academic conversations in ELA and Mathematics in order to improve engagement and rigor?”. These so-called “problems of practice” are actually framed as questions that seek out additional information. For example, one question asks for an inspection of instructional practices during

writer’s workshop and whether or not observed practices are differentiated appropriately for the particular students in the room. In addition, observers are asked to pay attention to students’ behaviors and, presumably, level of engagement during writing instruction.

Table 3

Instructional Site Visit procedures

Instructional Site Visit
1. Host principal presents context and problem of practice (15-25min)
2. Classroom visits and scripting (60min)
3. Debrief discussion (60-80min)
4. Group identifies leadership next steps* (15-20min)
5. Group learning and commitment to action* (5-15min)
*In the initial protocol developed by DES in the beginning of year, these two steps were not listed. These steps began to appear mid-year.

How the Instructional Site Visit Process Contributed to Problem Solving

Like the Critical Friends (CF) sessions, the ISVs involved a multi-step protocol. Table 3 summarizes these steps. Each step of the ISV was allotted specific amounts of time, with a full hour spent visiting classrooms. The specific way each step was supposed to occur, however, was not indicated in the protocol. Unlike the Critical Friends protocol, there was no script to guide the specific actions of the group. Consequently, district leaders developed their own way of organizing and facilitating each part of the ISV. Understandably, how participants engaged in each part of the process varied from visit to visit as well as across ISV groups, depending upon who was leading them.

Typically, after hearing the host principal present his or her problem of practice, ISV groups sub-divided into two or three smaller groups to visit a selected set of classrooms. Often, a classroom from three different grade-levels was observed. Sometimes, principal subgroups visited a unique set of classrooms; other times, all principal groups rotated through the same

classrooms. Which classrooms were observed, however, affected the nature of the conversation that followed.

During the classroom observations, participants were asked to take non-judgmental, specific, and student-focused notes: “What are the students hearing, reading, saying, and writing?” How each principal approached the observational note taking, of course, affected what data was available for discussion afterwards. Principals approached this specific task differently. As reported to DES in a written mid-year analysis memo in February,

We notice that some principals are quite skilled at documenting what students are doing or saying and other principals struggle to document what actually occurs in the classroom without judgment. We wonder how the principals who are not able to document action without judgment are receiving the feedback and support they need to develop descriptive observation skills.

In response to this memo, the DES made efforts to guide principals’ note-taking during their classroom visits, by discussing the host’s problem of practice and identifying teacher and student actions they might look for during observations. An example of this pre-observation thinking, shown in Figure 1 below, led to participants brainstorming teacher actions to look for with respect to “sentence frames/prompts” that are “differentiated [for] higher levels” and student actions like “use of frames [in] turn and talk”. These possible actions to look for were closely related to the problem of practice: “How are teachers differentiating instruction for students in Writers Workshop?” Although these anticipated teacher and student actions could be more specific, focusing principals’ attention on what to look for in advance of conducting the observation shows DES trying to focus principals’ classroom observations on collecting meaningful data for the conversation to follow.

Writing Workshop - EL Supports

Mini-Lesson	Teacher Actions	Student Actions
Connection	incorporate gestures hand signals Cultural hooks connected to long term goals - anchor chart w/ strategy	hand gestures non-verbal quick turn + talk with vocab
Teaching Point	Visual attached anchor chart - modeling brief context language used that point	
Teach/Demonstration	Sentence frames/prompts Visual introduced modeling	use of frames different turn + talk higher levels
Active Engagement	teacher part "on ground"	use visual supports scat-fold in hand Cued hints Manipulation of text think time/plan the stop + job
Link	remember... I just showed you... today when you write...	

Figure 1. Pre-observation brainstorming of what to look for in classrooms related to the problem of practice.

To make sense of so much data from different classrooms, discussions occurred by sub-groups. As DES tinkered with its protocol, a decision was made in some ISV groups to focus the discussion on one observed classroom, typically one that seemed most instructive in terms of the host principal’s problem. Participants were asked to script observations from their notes onto post-its and place them in one of two columns – teacher actions or student actions – on a poster. During this debrief portion of the meeting, DES aimed to accomplish four tasks: 1) have principals share their observations with each other and discuss what they saw children doing and what they observed teachers doing; 2) use the CCSS standards as a lens through which to analyze the observed teaching and learning; 3) discuss the relationship between their observations and the host principal’s problem of practice and 4) identify some next steps for “action.”

Effective execution of each task required its own task knowledge. For instance, sharing classroom observations of student and teacher actions necessitated that observers know how to see and document these actions and their relationship to each other. Using the CCSS as a lens

through which to analyze teaching required having knowledge of the standards and the ability to apply these standards to demonstrations of teaching and learning. In our mid-year memo to DES we noted:

We notice that when groups are able to discuss the relationship among the task, student actions, and the role of the teacher, a richer understanding of what enables and/or constrains learning emerges. In these instances, we see principals begin to focus on the opportunities for learning that are created in a particular classroom and the structure of these opportunities.

We also reported, “while principals share their classroom observations, they do not typically engage in much discussion or sense-making about what they see. We notice minimal dialogue among the principals and relatively few probing questions or requests for principals to explain their thinking after they state an observation.” These observations and reflections on what we were seeing led us to ask several questions about the debrief portion of the ISV regarding its purpose, what DES wants principals to learn from this conversation, and how, if at all, DES is considering what principals’ individual learning goals are.

What the Instructional Site Visit Process Afforded

The ISV process allowed principals exposure to other schools, so they might observe learning structures other than their own and acquire a sense for how colleagues undertook the work of instructional leadership. One DES explained what principals gained in visiting other schools:

They’re getting to see what structures other principals in other schools have in place so that they can replicate it in their school. They’re also getting time to reflect on how they can make small changes in their own schools from what learning they’ve gotten from the visit.

Another explained that principals receive validation through the site visits: “There’s a validation of the problem that they have.” The ISV process allowed principals to see other structures, potentially learn from them, and feel validated when others visited their school.

During the observational debrief at one school, DES facilitated a discussion about how *what they observed in classrooms* lined up with the CCSS. Discussants wondered how the same standard was implemented across the grade levels and what the standard is actually asking for. In this discussion, there was more focus on the instruction and its connection to the CCSS as well as the opportunities for student learning that were afforded. The group noticed that in the classrooms they observed, the posters with sentence prompts and anchor charts looked exactly the same from one grade to the next. This prompted a more probing question to the host principal:

DES: “What opportunities do teachers have to take prompts and anchor charts and see where [these materials] are [according to] grade level standards?”

Literacy Coach: “Grade level team meetings could be spent on Standards. Looking at student work and asking what a high, middle and low [performance] looks like.

Host Principal: “Picking anchor charts and anchor pieces.”

Literacy coach: “Yes, take one anchor standard and develop what [student work] looks like across [grades].”

DES: “They need to be very concrete though.”

The DES facilitator emphasized the need again later to push for specificity and the need “to calibrate” vertically across the grades. As a participant in this conversation, the literacy coach was well positioned to devise actionable next steps, which *she* could enact with the teachers in subsequent Grade Level Team (GLT) meetings. The ISV structure didn’t focus attention on the principal’s role in affecting instruction or student learning, but having the school literacy coach participate helped this principal see how other staff and structures (e.g., GLT meetings) could be used differently at her school to support instructional change. When outlining next steps during each ISV, DES directed participants to identify next steps for specific actors, such as the school’s instructional leadership team and grade-level teams. Examples of these next steps included: “In GLT, develop a focus mini-lesson on engagement ” and “Use Lesson Study with grade level teams.” Previously, next steps were generated for an unspecified category of “leadership.”

As the ISV evolved throughout the year, district facilitators increasingly emphasized the need to distribute instructional leadership among other district administrators, teachers, literacy coaches and other on-site personnel. By February, DES invited district coaches and Curriculum and Instruction staff to attend ISVs. DES recognized the opportunity for learning that was created for both district and school staff by collectively examining teaching. Although C&I staff began attending some ISVs, their role in the visits was not explicit and their participation was often passive.

The ISV process also unearthed principal learning needs that DES may not have anticipated. Increasingly, it became clear to DES and principals that teachers were going to be instrumental in leading instructional improvement. Principals began voicing their desire to learn how to develop stronger relationships with their teachers and to learn how to better utilize their teacher teams. In a short survey given to all 60 principals in May, 48% of principals wanted to learn how to better facilitate teacher collaboration and 40% of principals wanted to get better at structuring time for staff learning. In particular, one principal expressed a desire to learn “more coaching strategies” and another said, “I’d like to be more skilled in using some of the technology resources we now have at our fingertips.” A third wanted to learn “how to structure time for collaboration.” A fourth wanted to learn “how to better support my teachers without necessarily adding more to their workload,” and a fifth principal wanted to learn “how to differentiate staff meetings and professional development with meaningful follow-up.”

Missed Opportunities for Learning

Although problems of practice for the ISVs were intentionally linked to instruction, the problems remained fairly unstructured. For example, as formulated, these problems did not specify who would need to be involved in solving them. A common ISV problem of practice was framed as: *How do we implement a meaningful and engaging instructional program, which is*

aligned to CCSS, to produce high levels of learning for our diverse students? In this formulation of the problem, the elements of a meaningful and engaging instructional program are not specified. Nor is it clear who needs to be involved in implementing this program or what their roles ought to be. For instance, what is the principal's role in this work? What is the role of other on-site support staff? What is the role of teachers? And how will an understanding of these various roles as well as their interdependencies become clear?

In this way, the ISV problems of practice seemed to conflate the principal and teacher roles in the work of improving instruction. For example, an ISV problem of practice asked, "How are teachers differentiating for students in Writers Workshop?" This is a teacher problem of practice. The corresponding leadership problem of practice asks how to support teachers to better differentiate writing instruction for students. However, the ISV process often did not prompt the question about the principal's specific role to develop teachers' instruction. Thus, principals did not receive much guidance on how to influence the named instructional problem.

The ISV process revealed several areas of principal learning needs: 1) how to work effectively with teachers to improve instruction; 2) how to analyze the level of thinking student tasks require; 3) how to facilitate and structure teacher conversations about student work that examine the relationship between evidence of student understanding and the teaching. The DES team ended the year with this realization and made plans to address them in the summer and following year. For example, DES funded principals to bring instructional leadership teams to a two-day summer workshop, the design of which grew out of this project. At the institute, school teams were supported to consider how they could work together most effectively. Teams also practiced working together and learning from each other as they were guided through a process of analyzing student tasks and their relative level of cognitive demand. They were also given opportunities to practice using a simple routine to analyze student work for evidence of

understanding. With this support, DES actively engaged principals in growing the capacity of teachers and principals to work together to support instructional improvement.

How, and in what ways, do district leaders learn how to support principals to lead instructional improvement?

As DES created opportunities, in the form of Critical Friends sessions and Instructional Site Visits, for principals to learn how to lead instructional improvement, DES undertook a great deal of learning themselves. While many opportunities for learning were informal and occurred in the context of doing the work, our researcher-practitioner partnership also played an important role in formalizing and facilitating opportunities for DES to learn from their work during the year, often in the form of inquiry-based conversations about their efforts to strengthen principals' instructional leadership capacity. In this section, we will share how we helped DES to look at their work with district principals in three ways: 1) by co-creating a conceptual map of their work; 2) by framing questions about their practice for them to discuss and 3) by facilitating conversations about their work grounded in video-recorded representations of their practice.

Conceptualizing DES's Work

At the outset of our project, DES produced a visual that showed their conception of leading instructional improvement entitled "Instructional Leadership" (See Figure 2 below). Pictured below, the graphic consists of a series of nested circles, representing the embedded sites where the work of instructional leadership takes place:

Instructional Leadership

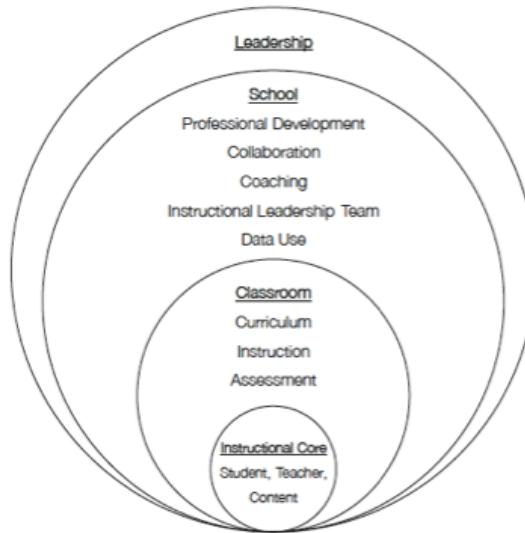


Figure 2. Instructional Leadership Graphic, District Elementary Supervisor Team

Throughout the fall of 2014, this graphic was frequently offered to principals at their monthly meetings and instructional site visits, as either a hand-out, an addendum to the Critical Friends agenda, or as a slide in DES’s presentations to principals and coaches. At the outset of DES’s work, it was a helpful graphic because it portrayed the various settings and locations where leading instruction occurs; the embedded circles imply that the work resides in nested contexts. Within the graphic’s “classroom” circle, the instructional core is named, implying a relationship between the teacher, the content and the student. Surrounding the instructional core are the elements of the curriculum, instruction and assessment. However, the relationship between these elements and the instructional core is not made clear. Similarly, it is unclear how various listed school features—professional development, collaboration, instructional leadership team, coaching and data use—relate, which is problematic given that these are presumably places to support instruction. Lastly, the outermost circle, “leadership”, is the least specified. Examining this graphic reveals that it does not specify actions or actors. The work of instructional leadership is represented as “disconnected from tasks,” which Robinson (2001) warns can cause us to “pay

too little attention to their structure and to the resources required to progress them” (p. 90).

Although the graphic served a useful starting place for the work DES embarked upon, it could not guide their actions going forward or help them see the complexity of leading instructional improvement across the district. Thus, at the project’s midpoint, we developed a more detailed conceptualization of their work. The map was created as a way to make DES’s work more visible and show elements of the complexity of connecting DES’s leadership actions (e.g., CF and ISVs) to changes in schools.

Our Conceptual Map: Making “The Work” Visible

In our graphic representation of the DES’s work, we wanted to make the interrelated and interdependent nature of instructional leadership more clear. In addition, we wanted to portray some of the actions that individuals in various roles at different levels of the system could take to lead instructional improvement. In this way, the graphic portrays instructional leadership as embedded in action and shows points of possible intersection in the form of actions to take at adjacent levels of the system.

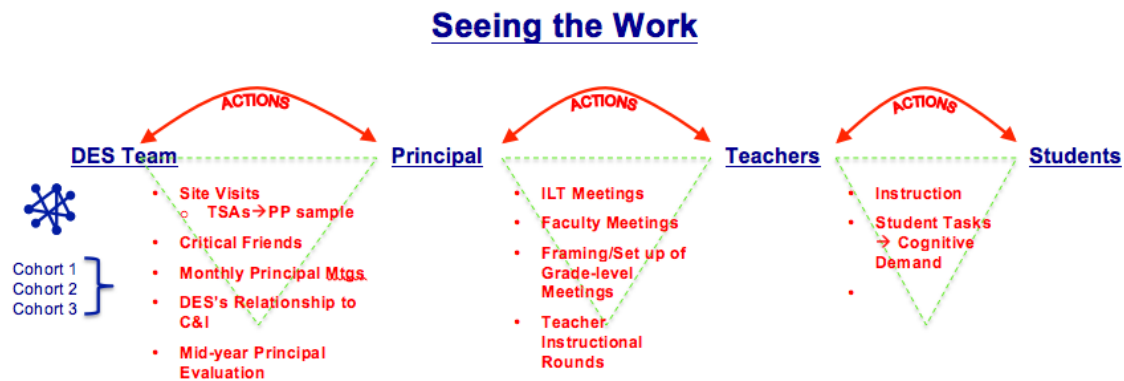


Figure 3. “Seeing the Work” Conceptual Map, January 2015

As a conceptual map, “Seeing the Work” (Figure 3) shows four levels of the system: the district level, the cohort of principals, the schools, and the classrooms. In addition, it makes visible some of the intersections between the levels of the system where acts of instructional leadership can occur. A point that DES members emphasized with their concentric-circles graphic was that instructional leadership was directed at affecting the “instructional triangle” in the classroom: the dynamic between student, teacher, and content. The map outlines parallel relationships and leadership tasks (e.g., the content) between district leaders and principals, between principals and teachers, and between teachers and students. Thus, the conceptual map also shows how instructional leadership actions taken at one level of the system typically only had direct influence at the adjacent level of the system. Consequently, the map helped depict how acts of instructional leadership taken at different levels of the system could work more coherently. Providing this conceptual frame for DES’s work helped make the connections between leadership actions more apparent, and also illuminated the extent to which designing learning experiences for others is an analogous activity for teachers, principals and DES.

Framing Questions about their Practice

By virtue of being outsiders to the work but with a great deal of inside knowledge, we were also able to raise questions about DES’s practice that they were not likely to ask themselves. Displaying our “Seeing the Work” graphic, we directed the DES’s attention to the activity triangle where the ISVs and CFs were placed, and asked, “What is it you want principals to learn from these experiences? What is it you want to see them doing in their schools as a result of participating in these experiences?” DES responded this way:

- To see “big instructional shifts from their principals”;
- For principals to hone their ability to “name” what is and is not working in their classrooms;
- To raise principals’ awareness of CCSS

As DES considered the specifics of what they wanted principals to learn from these experiences, they generated new ideas about how they could support principals' learning. One mentioned the benefits of involving the district's curriculum and instruction department in the ISVs. Another thought they needed to make their expectations for principals' actions more explicit. All thought they needed to find a way to follow-up with principals after the ISVs. The graphic helped make the links between acts of instructional leadership at each level of the system visible—from participating in an ISV, to leading a staff or grade-level team meeting at the school site, to seeing a particular type of instruction in classrooms. The potential intersections between various instructional leadership activities became more salient to DES. Where once DES had seen its leadership activities driving specifically toward strengthening the quality of the “instructional triangle”, now DES saw analogous learning triangles connecting several levels of system.

As DES considered how their actions could affect principal learning, they discussed the explicit ways they wanted these actions to influence what principals did with their teachers. For example, as the group discussed the structure of ISVs, members of the DES team deliberated ways that principals might follow up with their teachers and have evidence-driven conversations with them that centered on artifacts of their teaching practice. Furthermore, much in the way a teacher might consider how to deepen the connection between students and content in the “instructional triangle”, DES began to consider ways that they could deepen the connection between principal learning and the “content” of this work – such as the design and ownership of more specific and productive problems of practice, or a more honed sense for selecting rich student work samples to fuel conversation with their colleagues. In so doing, DES's thinking during the retreat became more contextualized by the specific tasks of instructional improvement, and they identified ways to adjust these tasks to increase the likelihood for principal learning.

Examining Representations of Practice: Videos of ISV Debriefs

Throughout the year, our research team captured and selected representations of DES's practice to examine alongside them, with the aim of helping DES to refine their own instructional leadership. In this section, we will focus on how we employed one set of these artifacts – a series of video-recordings of DES facilitating ISV debriefs – to explore the affordances of grounding our conversations with the DES in representations of their practice.

As part of their work with principals, members of DES facilitated approximately eight instructional site visits apiece. DES team members would lead participants through the ISV protocol: setting expectations for the group, discussing the host principal's problem of practice, visiting classrooms alongside principals, and finally leading a debrief discussion in which all participants reflected on their classroom observations and offered feedback to the host principals to address his/her problem of practice. The debrief afforded opportunities to observe DES actively involved in the work of instructional leadership alongside principals. During these debriefs, DES experienced first-hand what it was like to facilitate an evidence-based discussion about instruction – a routine they wanted principals to adopt at their own sites – including negotiating the challenges that such discussions entail. For example, DES team members often had to decide how to address principals who were quick to judge the teaching that they had seen, offering prescriptions for how they thought the teacher could have done better.

Furthermore, after having observed a number of ISVs, SCOPE researchers were aware that different members of the DES team chose to facilitate these sessions in varied ways. Some led open-ended discussions, others chose to be more directive in their approach; some positioned themselves seated amongst the principals, others stood in front of the room at the white board; some abided by the established protocol, others felt comfortable diverging from it. With this in mind, we chose to design an activity for DES's end-of-year retreat in June to examine the nuances of facilitating the ISV debrief, and reflect on how DES managed the task of leading

these discussions. In doing so, we hoped to engage DES in an inquiry-based conversation grounded in the work of their instructional leadership actions.

Structuring the Conversation and Supporting DES's Learning

We selected video clips from each of their debriefs, choosing thin slices of DES's interactions with principals that represented the varying approaches to facilitating these conversations. One by one, we presented these clips to DES at their retreat, and framed their watching of the videos by posing three prompts:

- What do you see or hear in this segment or clip?
- What do you think is going on in this clip?
- What insights or questions come up for you about the structure and/or facilitation of site visits?

These prompts were intentionally chosen for their open-endedness, as well as for the way they modeled the types of prompts the DES might pose to principals (and teachers) in order to lead instructional improvement through conversation grounded in evidence of practice. After viewing the clips, DES engaged in a discussion of what they observed in each other's facilitation of these debriefs; below, we elaborate on what emerged from this conversation.

DES team members all seemed to agree: facilitating productive discussions of practice-based evidence, in the interest of leading instructional improvement, appeared to be hard work across all the clips. In one clip, a DES team member is shown trying to refocus a conversation amongst principals that had veered off-topic: away from classroom observations and towards a charged question about using talk-based approaches to mathematics with Chinese bilingual students:

Principal: Can I ask a cultural piece about this, because I'm noticing the last two classrooms are both Chinese bilingual, and we have a large Chinese population at our school. A lot of them go to Chinese school on the weekends and there is that expectation that you pick it up, you do your pencil, and the idea is about getting your answer right so I'm wondering how culture intersects with what you guys

observed in those two classrooms and how you could see...how we with a Chinese demographic work on that shift [towards talk-based math instruction]?

DES facilitator: I think let's keep that question...I think we may find that we'll be circling back to it, but very good point. Um, can someone talk a little bit more about the task, like what were the students asked to do and maybe the cognitive level of that demand?

As SCOPE researchers and the DES team discussed the facilitator's response in this clip, one of her colleagues marveled at her ability to manage so many competing demands with her facilitation:

In watching that, you see how hard it is to facilitate these conversations in terms of: Do principals at this point really understand what the conversation is that they should be having? And I don't think they do, at least when I facilitate. They're having this conversation *here*, and I'm trying to get them to have *this* conversation around the task. And they want to have the very important conversation about the culture, but you have to point out that *this* is why we're doing this work, this is why we're having these conversations.

In this comment we see DES considering the array of in-the moment thinking and split second decision-making that facilitators need to employ. Knowing what the learning goal is can help facilitators to make better decisions about how to direct a conversation when it is in progress. In another clip, a DES team member is shown interacting with a small group of principals; he is facilitating a debrief of a mathematics lesson, and trying to get the group to consider, based on what they saw, the extent to which students had been offering elaborated justifications for their answers. One principal offers his take on the lesson, describing his observation of a single student, and her failure to elaborate on her answer:

Principal: I focused on a table, where there were two boys and a girl, and the girl did something but the boys disagreed and...she had to re-explain how she got the number, I think she was trying to multiply two-digit numbers, and she was like, I'll just say '125', because she couldn't really convince them because she didn't have the ability to break apart the number mentally.

Upon viewing this clip, the DES team was struck by how much facilitation would be required to leverage one principal's reflections on a single student's thinking into actionable strategies that could lead to school-wide improvement. One member of DES commented:

[The facilitation] was aimed in the exactly right place in the sense that it is about the quality of children learning as evidenced by what they saw and heard. But to get to the place where you say, alright, in this interaction, the child provides a one-word answer, that's the child's only evidence of learning...so what would it have sounded like if the girl had actually offered an explanation of her thinking, and then what would the lesson have been like, had she had that opportunity. You want to back out from evidence and strategy, but...that's a lot of facilitation steps for just an individual!

Here, we see a district administrator noticing the facilitation move that was used and wondering about what other moves might have furthered the principals' learning, or what it would mean to "back out from evidence." In other words, if the student can only provide a one-word answer to describe how she approached solving this math problem, can the principal imagine what a richer answer might have been and what the teacher could have done to coax such an answer from the student? Finally, does the principal know what to say to the teacher to help her consider how to expand her own instructional moves in such a situation? This is what leads this district administrator to conclude, "that's a lot of facilitation steps." The other DES team members agreed with their colleagues' thinking, remarking, too, about how facilitating this "backing out from evidence to strategy" took on an even greater challenge when one considered the number of other principals attending an ISV.

Challenges in Leading the Work of Learning

This attention to the nuanced challenges inherent in facilitation continued to surface throughout the discussion of the other clips. DES team members remarked that, with ISVs consisting of so many brief classroom observations, there seemed to be too much terrain to cover when debriefing them all. One DES team member remarked how challenging it was for him to

decide when it would be safe, or fruitful, to intervene in principals' conversations, in order to push against them or push principals further as they reflected on evidence of their teachers' practice. Another DES member, when reflecting on his own facilitation of a debrief involving principals' effective use of their grade level teams, remarked that it had been challenging for him because of the sheer "range in the room" when it came to principals' preparedness to think about how to make use of structures in his school to support teachers' learning. These challenges are analogous to the ones principals face as they work to lead instructional improvement at their own sites. In naming these challenges, DES team members took steps towards recognizing the practices embedded with facilitating a discussion: knowing how to frame conversations; choosing what content to focus upon; knowing when to interject and when to listen; and knowing how to examine the evidence and then back out from that to develop strategy.

After the clips had been discussed, a SCOPE researcher asked the DES team: "What are the implications from our discussion for next years' instructional site visits?" One by one, the DES team members shared suggestions for adapting the structure of the ISV: some suggested having principals view only one classroom; another suggested improving the preparation of the host principals before the ISV took place, as they formulate their problem of practice; and others suggested having more structured approaches for following-up after visits to ascertain whether host principals were pursuing action steps that they had co-generated with their visiting colleagues.

Certainly, having an opportunity to reflect upon the challenges of facilitating an ISV, as well as how one might improve upon the structure of the ISV as a whole, was an important opportunity for DES team members to learn more about supporting principals in leading instructional improvement. As leaders, they were embedding themselves in the task at hand, opening themselves up to the experience of having inquiry-based conversations with their own

work on the table, as they sought to have principals and teachers to do the same. Furthermore, naming problems inherent in the ISV's current form allowed the DES to determine ways of further structuring the ambiguous work of leading, and learning to lead, instructional improvement. In fact, one of the concerns that emerged from our video debrief exercise was the fact that it was difficult to follow-up with principals after they had hosted an ISV, to learn what actions they were taking in accordance with what they had learned from their colleagues. After interviewing the DES team in June, the SCOPE researchers learned that there had been a collective decision to pair the ISV structure with the Critical Friends structure in a new, intentional way: after a principal hosted an ISV, that principal will present at the following month's Critical Friends session and share what specific actions he has taken to advance the teaching and learning at his school in the interim.

One limitation of our video debrief exercise, however, was that it did not create sufficient opportunities for DES team members to explicitly consider what principals might do, or do differently, as a result of having hosted an ISV. In the video clips, the DES team members saw ISV debriefs that revolved around what principals had observed in the classrooms they had visited: principals discussed teachers' lessons and instructional tasks, critiquing them on their level of cognitive demand and their alignment with the CCSS. However, it soon became apparent that influencing an individual teacher's moment-by-moment instructional choices was not within a principal's locus of control as an instructional leader. Rather, what the principal could control was the creation of new structures that would support teachers to think differently about their instruction, a goal that remained somewhat elusive for DES as they watched videos of themselves facilitating ISV debriefs. While one DES member talked about "backing out from evidence to strategy" as he watched a clip of a principal scrutinizing a student's mathematical reasoning, the specific facilitation strategies that he had in mind still remained unclear. And, as

the group watched another video, in which their DES colleague proposed shifts in the way a school conducts its grade level team meetings, the most salient take-away for DES was that their colleague was “doing what he does best”, being directive and taking charge and telling principals exactly what their next steps should be. What was not explicitly named during the discussion of this clip, however, was that this facilitation move offered a way the principal could lead instructional improvement at his school. In other words, the district administrator was proposing a way to structure the ambiguous problem of leading instructional improvement for the host principal, naming the grade level team meeting as something within that principal’s locus of control, and identifying that context as a potentially constructive place to hold meaningful conversations grounded in practice-based evidence.

Thus, while the ISV debrief video exercise became an important moment for members of the DES team as they considered how to further support principals to lead instructional improvement, it was also an opportunity for the researchers to learn as well. As researchers, we saw ways that we could better structure the reflection that DES would do on its work in the future. Specifically, as we continue to work with DES in the coming school year, we want to create opportunities for DES to examine ways that principals are supported to define short-term actions to lead instructional change in their schools.

Discussion and Implications

In order to improve instruction district-wide, districts need to be able to lead instructional change within and across levels of the system. Our analysis suggests that to progress solutions to the messy problems inherent in leading instructional improvement, districts need to develop the capacity to identify, prioritize, and formulate problems. Approaches to solving most problems related to teaching and learning, especially on a district-wide scale, are not routine. As our discussion of Robert’s problem indicates, solving these instructional problems at the level of the

school typically involves an array of other problems. These other problems include: managing people, setting goals and expectations, resourcing strategically, planning, coordinating and evaluating teaching and the curriculum, as well as promoting and participating in teacher learning and ensuring an orderly and supportive environment (e.g., Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). Our analysis of the CF and ISV structures shows that figuring out how best to support principals to lead instructional improvement in schools is similarly complex and also involves an array of intertwined problems. Thus, two important aspects of leading instructional improvement across a district emerge. These are: 1) creating the conditions for actors at each level of the system (e.g., the classroom, the grade-level team, the school, across schools and within the central office) to identify, prioritize and formulate worthy problems and work toward solving them, and 2) to simultaneously identify the related problems (e.g., goals or needs) at adjacent levels of the system so that the connections across problems residing at different levels of the system become explicit. Linking the formulation of problems in an explicit manner at each level of the system is one way to support the coordinated action that is required to progress solutions to complex district-wide problems. It is also a means to make the interdependent action that is necessary across various people, who typically work in isolation from each other, more visible.

Creating District-wide Conditions for Learning

Creating conditions to support the identification and formulation of problems at each level of the system is critical because approaches to solving these complex problems are neither routine nor straightforward. Furthermore, the formulation of a problem can help to structure its solution, which requires having knowledge and skills to do so. As shown in our analysis of the instructional site visit conversations and the analysis of DES's facilitation of the ISV debriefs, developing this knowledge and skill is difficult work that requires continuous practice and feedback. While setting out broad goals at each level of the system can help establish a direction

for action, much of the work of leading comes in the form of identifying the particular problems that emerge as actors work towards accomplishing these goals.

Doing this for each level of the system is also essential. In other words, while principals may need to understand problems of teaching and learning, they need to do so in order to create the conditions for teachers to learn; importantly, they also need to understand how to create these conditions, and they need to have the know-how to do so. One way to develop district capacity for leading instructional improvement, then, is to develop the ability of leaders at various levels of the system to identify the appropriate problems to work on, to diagnose the underlying issues and begin to formulate a solution to the problem. As this paper describes, there are routines and processes—for defining problems of practice, for selecting and examining evidence that is aligned to a specific learning goal and for conducting purposeful conversations—that district leaders can use to help principals identify, select and formulate worthy problems and analogous routines and processes for principals to do the same with teachers.

Conversations that are well structured and grounded in analysis of relevant evidence are an important component of these processes. As we have demonstrated, conversations can provide a way to help leaders get a handle on complex and messy problems, discern which formulation of the problems is appropriate for particular actors and thereby help leaders to structure solutions to them. Researchers (e.g., Earl & Timperley, 2008; Horn et al, 2015) who have studied teacher conversations also find conversations in which evidence of teaching and learning is examined to be one means to structure complicated problems of teaching practice. These researchers, find, as do we, that how the conversation is structured (Timperley, 2008), the nature of the evidence that is presented (Horn et al, 2015), the actors' stance toward learning (Horn et al, 2015; Earl & Timperley, 2008) and the manner in which the analysis of evidence is conducted (Horn, et al, 2015; Timperley, 2007) all affect opportunities for learning.

Our study extends these findings by suggesting that supporting instructional improvement across a system requires having such conversations at each level of the system and being able to make explicit connections between these various conversations occurring at different levels of the system. This requires making the connections between problem-formulation and action clear as well as determining the type of work that needs to be done by actors in various roles at different levels of the system. In other words, in the context of an Instructional Site Visit, it is essential to consider the work that the principal needs to do to support teachers to improve instruction in the school. Only examining the work that teachers must do is insufficient. The work that district administrators need to do to support the principal and/or teachers also needs recognition.

Implications for District Leadership

The implications for a district to be able to engage in such meaningful conversations are significant. For instance, a district needs to create opportunities for conducting cross-role conversations, like the Critical Friends and the Instructional Site Visits describe. Districts also need to intentionally develop the capacity of their leaders to participate in and facilitate such conversations. Finally, districts need to provide opportunities for leaders at all levels of the system to participate in such conversations. Districts should also determine when having those conversations led by someone outside of the system, such as a research partner, is particularly instrumental in supporting the conversation.

Conclusion

Our research-practice partnership continues. At the outset of the 2015-16 school year, USD has adopted the “Seeing the Work” Conceptual Map as its theory of action (See Figure 4).

**DES Elementary Team/SCOPE
Theory of Action
To Support Instructional Leadership**

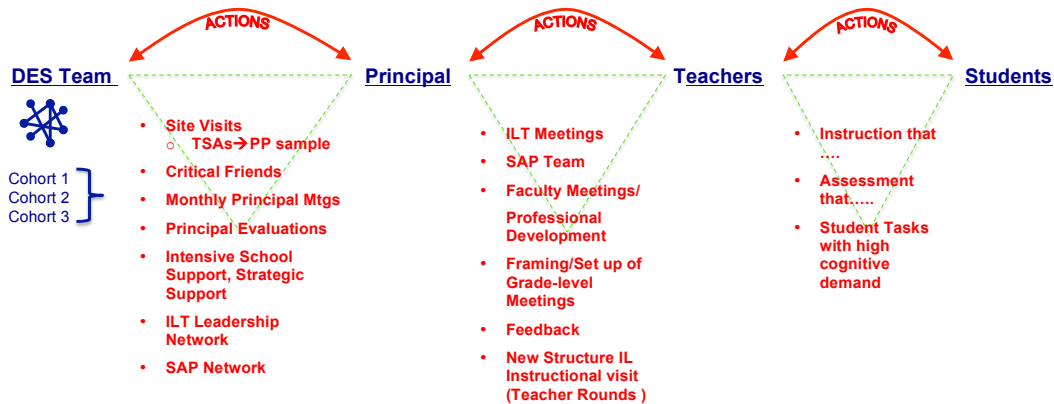


Figure 4. DES Elementary Team/SCOPE Theory of Action To Support Instructional Leadership. In interviews with DES in June, this new “Theory of Action” was mentioned across nearly every conversation. In one instance, a district administrator reflected on some changes that DES intended to make to the structures of the instructional site visits and the critical friends sessions. As she elaborated on how DES planned to be more intentional in connecting the work of each structure, she pulled out a printed and updated version of the “Theory of Action”. She gestured to the ISVs and CFs – two structures located between the DES and principal columns – and said, “These are the places [where] principals can affect change at their schools. So, at the end of the school visit, the question will be: *What are you going to do differently in these places in order to bring about this change?*” This administrator, as did other members of DES, indicated that the intention this year is to explicitly connect the Critical Friends sessions to the Instructional Site Visits and to use the CF structure as a way to follow up on actions taken after the ISV occurs. In this way, DES will help principals begin to test the efficacy of the actions and strategies that they try out as result of the site visit.

As the research-partnership continues, it will remain important for us to continue to co-design and co-construct relevant, short-term measures of the impact of this work at different levels of the system that can inform and guide our actions. In addition, it will be important to continue to provide a safe space in which to try out new approaches, and examine and test our assumptions grounded in our joint analyses of the work as it unfolds. Maintaining a learner stance toward this work at each level of the system, and as research partners, will be critical for growing the conditions in which learning to lead instructional improvement can continue to occur.

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ⁱ All names are pseudonyms.

ⁱⁱ Glossary of abbreviations is listed below

DES = District Elementary Supervisors

CF = Critical Friends Sessions

ISV = Instructional Site Visits

DBIR = Design Based Implementation Research