



## New Leaders for New Schools: Forming Aligned Instructional Leadership Teams

Ben Fenton

In a series of columns in ASCD Express, the cofounder of *New Leaders for New Schools*, a nonprofit for education reform, shares promising practices in principal leadership for improving some of the nation's most challenged urban schools.

Principals cannot lead schools to make breakthrough achievement gains on their own: the support of an aligned instructional leadership team is crucial. Depending on the *strengths* and the job design of the individuals in the school, the aligned instructional leadership team may include teacher leaders, instructional coaches, and assistant principals. Leadership team members are responsible for implementing schoolwide initiatives for instruction, and they also model cultural norms. So it's imperative that the members of the leadership team share the principal's vision for the school.

### Responsible, Reflective, Extended Leadership

In their interactions with other teachers, leadership team members must constantly reinforce the messages that all children are capable of academic success and that it is the responsibility of adults to help them achieve. New Leader Tatiana Epanchin-Troyan of Monarch Academy in Oakland, Calif., explains: "For my leadership team, I look for someone who definitely has the efficacy down—who really, really thinks that there's no reason that we can't get to *90-90-90* or that kids—all of our kids—can learn."

Epanchin-Troyan also looks for leadership team members who are reflective: "someone who gets that you're never a perfect teacher and that there are always [areas where you can] grow and learn," she says. Finally, she seeks out candidates who are trustworthy, both in their relationships with her and with other teachers across the school. These qualities, along with instructional expertise, are essential for the work that highly effective principals expect their leadership teams to do.

As instructional leaders, team members typically meet once per week. At these meetings, they analyze formative and summative student learning data, identifying trends and discussing strategies for reteaching or intervention. They make key decisions about the school's curriculum, strategic direction, and even staffing.

Leadership team members are also typically assigned a group of teachers—usually by grade level or subject area—for whom they facilitate planning and professional development meetings and provide individual coaching. In this way, they extend the reach of the principal, help to create schoolwide consistency of practice, and provide support (especially to new teachers). Coaching often involves conducting classroom observations similar to those of the principal, providing feedback, and identifying staff for targeted



professional development. This is particularly important in larger or secondary schools, where principals are less likely to be able to visit every teacher's classroom on a weekly basis.

### Identifying Emerging Leaders

Though most schools have some form of leadership team structure, it is unlikely that a new principal will enter a school where the instructional leadership team is fully aligned and prepared to take on the work identified above. For this reason, principals maintain a constant focus on identifying and developing emerging leaders, and leadership team meetings become a place for job-embedded professional [development activities](#).

For example, team members may conduct classroom observations with the principal, comparing notes and coming to agreement about what effective teaching should look like across the school. They might also spend significant time reflecting on what it means to be a leader. At Monarch, Epanchin-Troyan says that because team members "didn't see themselves as leaders . . . we need[ed] to build our capacity and our belief around what it is to be a part of the leadership team, and to help each of them harness the leader within." As leadership team members come into alignment and build their skill sets, the principal entrusts the team with more responsibility for leading the core instructional work of the school.

Highly effective principals also seek to create a broad understanding across their faculty that service on the leadership team is both a reward for demonstrated effectiveness (identified by observations and student learning data) and an opportunity for professional learning. Creating a sense of ongoing development and [career advancement](#) is one important method by which highly effective principals retain their best teachers.

That aspect of the school's culture will also help the principal attract new teachers and build internal and external pipelines of potential leadership team members. Ideally, the pipelines are enhanced by professional development activities targeted to leadership capacity building, in addition to professional development that all teachers receive. Moreover, principals begin assessing as early as during initial hiring conversations whether teachers and coach candidates are willing and able to grow into [leadership roles](#).

We look forward to sharing insights about a robust teacher recruiting and hiring practice in our next column.

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