

ELAINE LIN WANG, HEATHER L. SCHWARTZ, MONICA MEAN, LAURA STELITANO, BENJAMIN K. MASTER

# Putting Professional Learning to Work

## What Principals Do with Their Executive Development Program Learning

**S**ince 2004, the National Institute for School Leadership (NISL) has offered the Executive Development Program (EDP), a leadership program for sitting school principals that is typically delivered in two-day workshops once per month over 12 months. Through 2018, 15,000 principals across 23 states have participated in the EDP.

To assess the EDP's effects on student achievement and to better understand how principals apply their EDP learning, NISL obtained two federal grants (as described in the text box on the next page) that funded studies of the provision of the EDP to principals in school districts in California, Florida, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Pennsylvania. RAND is the independent evaluator of these two grants, and this report presents findings from part of RAND's evaluation. In it, we describe how principals applied their EDP learning and coaching to their work as school leaders. We draw on a survey of 172 EDP participants, phone interviews with 74 principals, and nine in-depth case studies to examine what improvement efforts principals with EDP experience attempted in their schools and what strategies they applied to reach their goals. Our findings are intended to be of interest to district and state education agency administrators, to school leaders implementing similar improvement efforts, and to NISL.

### KEY FINDINGS

- Principals felt that the EDP improved their ability to conceptualize and lead school improvement efforts.
- Principals learned and adopted EDP concepts and processes.
- Principals would recommend the EDP to fellow principals.
- Principals highly valued NISL coaching.
- School improvement takes time: Over several years, principals leveraged EDP learning and NISL coaching to enact strategies reflecting core EDP concepts and processes that supported staff take-up of school improvement efforts and eventual changes in teachers' instructional practices.

## EDP Evaluation Funding and Sample

NISL obtained an Investing in Innovation Fund (i3) grant in 2014 and a Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) grant in 2015 from the U.S. Department of Education. The school principals and coaches described in this report participated in one of these two grants. These two grants also paid for this independent evaluation of the EDP.

Across the studies, principals were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. One group, consisting of 117 principals, received the EDP alone. A second group, consisting of 437 principals, received the EDP and EDP-aligned coaching. (Most of these principals in this second group took the EDP and got coaching at the same time. However, 85 of the 437 principals engaged in coaching had taken the EDP prior to the study, which meant that they received only EDP-aligned coaching during the study.) The third, “business-as-usual,” group consisted of 545 principals; these principals received the EDP at the end of the study period.

## Overview of the Executive Development Program and National Institute for School Leadership coaching

NISL’s EDP is a 12-unit leadership program for sitting principals. Although arrangements vary, districts typically contract with NISL to provide this program to their principals.<sup>1</sup> About once a month over a period of 12 to 15 months, the principals in the EDP convene at a regional location for two days to participate in professional learning led by a NISL facilitator. The facilitators are often retired educators or district or state administrators whom NISL has hired and trained. Principals do not receive an endorsement for completing the EDP.

The EDP has evolved since 2004, but its core topics and concepts have remained the same. In the

<sup>1</sup> For more detail about NISL and about the EDP, see NISL, “Leading Transformation: The EDP,” webpage, accessed July 2019 at <http://www.nisl.org/creating-high-performance-schools/leading-transformation-the-executive-development-program>.

latest iteration (2016 edition), the EDP was organized around three major topics:

1. **Vision and goals for world-class schooling:** The focus of this part of the program is on using strategic thinking to drive a vision of high-quality teaching and learning for all students. Principals learn about the importance and components of a standards-aligned instructional system.
2. **Teaching and learning:** This portion of the program focuses on developing instructional leadership in each of four core content areas: English language arts, history/social studies, science, and mathematics. Principals learn to lead improvements in teaching quality, including by serving as a coach to teachers. They explore how to integrate curricula, instruction, and assessments to support students’ mastery of standards. Principals also gain exposure to research on how people learn and how to design collaborative professional learning opportunities for teachers.
3. **Sustaining transformation through capacity and commitment:** The focus here is on how to promote and sustain the school as a high-performance organization and a learning organization. This includes developing teams for instructional leadership and designing a change process that drives continued improvement of student achievement.

About three months into the EDP, principals start to outline an Action Learning Project (ALP) for their school, which they revise over the remainder of the program. Principals are expected to enact their ALP to apply EDP principles and concepts in their schools. The ALP directs principals to engage in an iterative process that incorporates the following features and tenets:

- **Use data to identify an opportunity for change.** To help principals identify a pressing issue, the ALP guides them to consider the school history and context and gather and examine data from multiple sources. Three NISL diagnostic tools support this process: the Instructional Leadership instrument,

Learning Context Assessment, and Standards Aligned Instructional Systems Diagnostic.

- **Articulate a vision for schoolwide improvement.** An effective principal is guided by a vision of what will be achieved, and that vision focuses on student learning.
- **Develop a strategic intent.** Expressed as a series of “if . . . then” statements, strategic intent articulates the new organizational direction and what will result from it.
- **Identify strategies for achieving the vision.** Strategies form a coherent plan of action to advance from vision to reality. Identifying strategies involves considering the context, core values, and assumptions of stakeholders; available resources; potential risks; and personal and organizational capacity for change.
- **Operationalize strategies by determining action steps and a timeline.** Action steps make strategies concrete. They represent specific tasks and activities (e.g., meetings, decision points) that occur at a specific time to advance toward the goals of the improvement effort, as well as identification of the persons responsible for these activities.
- **Identify necessary resources and supports.** Resources and supports include personnel, finances, time, facilities, tools, and data.
- **Implement the ALP.** With the support of key implementers in the school, the principal enacts the strategies and action steps he or she has outlined.
- **Evaluate and reflect on progress.** This requires first having a clear vision of what is expected to change and how such change or success will be measured. Progress is continuously monitored and necessary course corrections are made.

NISL coaching consists of one-one-one sessions with coaches whom NISL has recruited and trained. These coaches are typically retired principals who

work in the same state as the coached principal. Some coaches are sitting principals in the districts where they coach. In assigning coaches, when possible, NISL also considers the coach’s prior experience in a similar school setting as the principal (e.g., elementary or high school). At the minimum, the coach visits each principal’s school once per month for a half day. The principal and the coach also hold coaching sessions by phone, email, or web conferencing. The coaching sessions are structured around the ALP. The principal and coach discuss progress made, reflect on challenges, and strategize next steps. As part of the visit, the coach may engage in a variety of supportive activities, such as observing a professional learning community (PLC) meeting and conducting walkthrough observations of instruction with the principal. In addition to the focus on the ALP, the coaching sessions may address emergent topics reflecting the day-to-day realities of school leadership, such as staffing open positions, managing resources, and responding to new district directives.

## The principals in this study

The 192 principals we collected data from for this report work in schools that represent a variety of contexts.<sup>2</sup> They come from rural to urban districts; work with elementary, middle, or high schoolers; and have from one to 17 years of experience as a principal. All completed at least some of the EDP’s 12-unit program; 89 percent completed 10 or more units. In addition, 116 out of the 192 principals received about two years of one-on-one NISL coaching, as described above. The technical appendix at [www.rand.org/t/RR3082](http://www.rand.org/t/RR3082) provides descriptive information about the 192 principals and the schools that they led.

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<sup>2</sup> Our sample of principals includes 172 survey respondents, as well as 20 of the interview and case study participants who either did not respond to the survey or were not contacted for the survey.

## How we collected data

In this report, we draw on survey data, interviews, and case studies to identify principals' views about the EDP and patterns in what lessons they applied from the EDP in their schools.

In each of the two studies we conducted, we surveyed principals approximately two years after they began the EDP. For the principals who participated in at least some of the EDP units and/or received coaching, we solicited their perspectives about their experiences with those programs. The response rate for the survey was 63 percent. Among other topics, the survey asked about principals' opinions of the EDP, key concepts they took away from the program, and their view of coaching.

In December 2018, we invited 153 of the principals who had participated in the EDP or received coaching to participate in a 30- to 45-minute phone interview. Eligible principals had to have completed 10 of the full 12 units of the EDP and not have been selected as case study participants (see below). Among the 153 principals we invited, 74 agreed and subsequently completed the phone interview between December 2018 and February 2019, a 48 percent participation rate. In these interviews, we asked each principal about their perceptions of the EDP and coaching (if relevant), their ALP, and the topics of their school improvement effort.

For the case studies, we selected the nine principals in spring 2017 from among 26 best-practice candidates nominated by NISL. NISL nominated principals who had consistently attended EDP sessions, were deeply engaged in coaching, and developed what NISL coaches deemed to be excellent plans for their ALP. We selected the nine cases to reflect a variety of school improvement topics (as outlined in the principal's ALP), levels of schools, and urbanicity. Over two school years (from spring 2017 to spring 2018), we visited each of the nine schools twice to interview the principal and key implementers of the principal's school improvement initiative. We also

conducted multiple focus groups with teacher leaders and other selected instructional staff. When relevant to the effort undertaken, we also observed classes and collected supporting documentation. We conducted additional phone interviews with the principal and separately with each principal's NISL coach to supplement our site visits.

## Limitations and strengths of this report

There are several limitations to this report. The most important one is that we primarily rely on principals' self-reports about their work for the surveys, interviews, and case studies, so it is possible that participants provided socially desirable responses about their work or about the EDP. A second limitation is that the views of principals who agreed to take our survey or participate in a phone interview may not generalize to all principals who experienced the EDP and/or coaching. A third limitation concerns the case studies: We selected schools with a high degree of ALP implementation from a list that NISL had created, and we interviewed some, but not all, staff at the case study schools. So the case studies do not necessarily represent the views of all staff at a given case study school, nor do the case studies generalize to all schools. Fourth, school improvement involves a lengthy process, and the case studies charted only the early phases of implementation. It is possible that some of the early positive shifts in practice we documented might not be sustained.

The strength of this report is that we conducted a large number of surveys, interviews, and in-depth case studies to provide rich information about the school improvement work that principals report engaging in after the EDP. We designed the report to complement our future independent, causal analysis of the EDP on subsequent student achievement. The appendix at [www.rand.org/t/RR3082](http://www.rand.org/t/RR3082) provides more details of our sample, data collection procedures, and methods of analysis.

## Putting the EDP learning and coaching to work

### Satisfaction with the Executive Development Program and coaching

#### Principals felt that the EDP improved their ability to conceptualize and lead school improvement efforts

As shown in the top left of the infographic on the next page, 92 percent of principals we surveyed agreed somewhat (35 percent) or to a great extent (57 percent) with the statement, “The NISL EDP courses helped me to lead my school better.” Findings from the interviews we conducted were similar but even more positive. In interviews, 97 percent of principals agreed (54 percent) or strongly agreed (43 percent) with the statement, “The EDP improved my ability to conceptualize and lead school improvement.” Unlike the survey, in which respondents answered questions about the EDP if they self-reported taking any part of the 12-unit course, all of the principals we interviewed had taken 10 or more of the units, according to attendance records. So the interviewees may be a more self-selected sample who were more committed to or satisfied with the program.

While all subgroups of principals we interviewed responded positively, urban principals agreed more strongly with the statement than did their rural and suburban counterparts—52 percent of urban principals strongly agreed, compared with 25 percent and 33 percent of rural and suburban principals, respectively. Results based on school level showed that a lower proportion of high school principals (21 percent) strongly agreed compared with principals of elementary schools (46 percent) and middle schools (43 percent).

In addition to learning from the EDP content, principals we interviewed said that they valued opportunities to learn from fellow principals in their EDP cohort. Hearing how other principals dealt with challenges in their respective schools helped interviewees anticipate and navigate challenges in their own contexts. Several principals noted that the ALP, which they began after the third EDP unit and continued to develop through the rest of the nine units of the EDP, helped them to stay accountable to

following through on applying the EDP learning in their schools.

#### Principals especially valued three EDP concepts

In open-ended interview questions, we asked principals how the EDP changed their leadership style and what they most valued about the EDP courses. The left side of the infographic presents in rank order the three most frequently mentioned themes. Table A.4 in the online appendix lists the full set of responses.

The most frequently mentioned way in which the EDP changed principals’ practice, cited by 35 percent of principals, was making them more strategic in their approach to school and instructional improvement. For example, principals described how the EDP taught them to consolidate previously disjointed school improvement efforts into cohesive plans, equitably distribute resources such as personnel and money, and revamp their school’s mission and vision. Principals also explained that the EDP helped them be more proactive rather than reactive in planning for school improvement work. For example, some principals reported that before the EDP, they were making hasty decisions as a reaction to their school’s day-to-day issues, but after the EDP, their decision-making was more purposeful around a common goal. Principals with fewer than five years of experience stressed that learning to think strategically to identify priorities was a particularly important skill for navigating their first few years as a principal. Other principals reported being more intentional and reflective in their school improvement planning. One principal said that before taking the EDP, she felt that when she solicited school-wide teacher input, she would then have to enact everything the teachers suggested. After the EDP, she realized that this was neither necessary nor wise; it was in fact better to involve selected teachers in a leadership team and elicit input from this specific group consistent with the focus of the instructional improvement effort.

The second most frequently mentioned takeaway from the EDP, named by 24 percent of principals we interviewed, was that they embraced a more collaborative or distributed leadership style because of the EDP. The EDP helped them to realize the value

## What principals said about the EDP and coaching

The EDP courses helped me to lead my school better



NOTE: Percentage of 172 principals who completed the RAND survey.

Coaching was more valuable than the EDP itself for helping me improve my school



NOTE: Percentage of 101 principals who got coaching and completed the RAND survey.

### Principals' top 3 takeaways from the EDP

1. Learning to be more strategic
2. Learning to distribute leadership more
3. Learning to integrate how adults and children learn

### What principals valued the most from coaching

1. Having a thought partner
2. Learning to be more strategic
3. Learning to distribute leadership more

## School improvement takes time

*Nine in-depth case studies showed that principals typically followed a progression over 2–3 years that started with getting buy-in, led to horizontal and vertical alignment of instruction across the school, and developed teacher leaders along the way. In most of the case studies, principals tended to progress through these strategies in the order presented here, from bottom to top. However, these strategies are not rigidly chronological, and case study principals often applied and refined them iteratively.*



of distributing leadership to other administrators or teachers and utilizing teacher leaders to spread instructional improvements. One principal described his change in leadership style as follows:

I thought I had to lead everything, I had to sort of be the center of anything that we had going on. . . . After the NISL program, I started delegating. I started growing my people. I didn't call them teachers anymore; they became teacher leaders.

The third most frequently mentioned EDP takeaway, named by 23 percent of interviewees, was learning about how adults and students learn. Principals reported using that knowledge to shape their approach to teacher professional development (PD) and classroom instruction. For example, the EDP taught principals the importance of surfacing and addressing up-front misconceptions that students may hold about topics that they are learning about. Principals conducted PD sessions for teachers that covered how teachers can anticipate, recognize, and address misconceptions and confront their own assumptions about their students; these topics reminded teachers that they have to teach students *how* to think.

There were two EDP takeaways about which principals differed substantially based on the urbanicity or level of their school. A higher proportion of rural principals (31 percent, compared with 7 percent of all principals) mentioned that the EDP helped them use data more or more effectively in their work. And a higher proportion of middle school and urban principals mentioned equity as a concept they valued from the EDP. About 24 percent of middle school principals and 11 percent of urban school principals mentioned equity, compared with 5 percent of all principals. When discussing equity, principals pointed to the EDP concept of “all means all” and focusing time and resources on the most vulnerable

populations while having high expectations for all students. For one middle school principal, the equity concept resonated so much with her that she embedded the phrase “all means all” in her school’s vision and mission statements.

### Principals would recommend the EDP to fellow principals

Among survey respondents, 89 percent either agreed somewhat (26 percent) or to a great extent (63 percent) that they would recommend the EDP to other principals. Principals we interviewed were more enthusiastic, with 96 percent either agreeing (30 percent) or strongly agreeing (66 percent).

When explaining why they would recommend the EDP to others, interviewees said that the courses covered the essential research-based concepts and best practices they needed to lead their schools. Many also reiterated the point that taking a course with a cohort of other principals was a significant benefit. Principals felt that the EDP provided a rare opportunity to have in-depth discussions with other principals about successes and challenges in their schools and, as such, helped to overcome a sense of isolation.

Elementary school principals we interviewed were the most positive about the EDP. Seventy-four percent of elementary school principals agreed strongly that they would recommend the EDP to others, compared with 57 percent of middle school and 57 percent of high school principals. An approximately equal proportion of rural, suburban, and urban principals strongly agreed.

Principals we spoke with felt that the EDP would be most beneficial under certain conditions or for certain groups of principals:

- principals who have completed their first year but were still new in the job, because the program provides important knowledge and opportunities for application when principals

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Principals we interviewed said that they valued opportunities to learn from fellow principals in their EDP cohort.

are naturally experimenting with school improvement

- principals who are not juggling too many other initiatives while taking the EDP, because the requirement to spend two days per month outside of the building to attend the EDP can make balancing the demands of the EDP difficult
- principals who willingly attend the EDP rather than those who are mandated by their district to do so.

### Reducing the time required for the EDP was the most common suggestion for improvement

Interviewees also offered some suggestions for improving the EDP. The full set of suggestions is listed in Table A.7 in the online appendix. We present the most frequently mentioned answers here:

- Reduce the time required for principals to be away from their schools to attend the sessions (20 percent of interviewees offered this answer when we asked an open-ended question about what they would suggest to improve the EDP). Principals believed that two consecutive days per month was too much time to be away from their school. Some newer principals, those without assistant principals, and those whose schools were experiencing other problems (e.g., behavioral challenges) found this to be particularly stressful and distracting.
- Improve the quality of the EDP facilitators (16 percent)—for example, by ensuring that they had experience as principals, were engaging, and could facilitate discussions effectively.
- Reduce the amount of required reading (14 percent).
- Condense the EDP (14 percent). Principals who felt that leaving their school for two days per month was problematic often suggested shortening the EDP, believing that the content could be delivered in one day per month rather than two.
- Alternatively, some principals (7 percent) felt that the EDP should be spread out over the course of two years rather than one, because

the content involved too much information to take in all at once. As one principal described,

The short turnaround with the amount of information was just a lot. You get some really good stuff . . . but it was like information overload in a short amount of time, and then you only have a month to come back and implement that. . . . I feel like I had to kind of be selective in what I wanted to put into place. But if it was over two years, I would have felt more comfortable. . . . I'd have more time to reflect and then take that next step.

### Principals highly valued coaching

Among the 172 survey participants, 101 also received EDP-aligned NISL coaching. According to NISL coaches' logs, these 101 principals participated in an average of 64 hours of coaching over as many as 18 months. They averaged 28 meetings total with their coach over this period of time, whether in person, over the phone, or via email. Fifty-seven of the 74 interviewees likewise received NISL coaching for an intensive amount of time. They averaged 67 hours of coaching over 27 meetings in a span of up to 18 months.

As shown in the top right of the infographic, of the 101 surveyed principals who received coaching, 89 percent either agreed somewhat (29 percent) or to a great extent (60 percent) that NISL coaching was more valuable than the EDP itself for helping them to improve their school.

In interviews, we asked a similar question. The result is similar but more positive. Among the 57 principals who received coaching, 96 percent either agreed (19 percent) or strongly agreed (77 percent) that coaching added value beyond the EDP courses. Of our interviewees, a higher proportion of urban school principals strongly agreed (72 percent) about the value of coaching than did their rural (44 percent) and suburban (33 percent) counterparts.

### Principals valued coaching for similar reasons that they valued the EDP

Principals we interviewed felt that coaching enhanced the EDP by helping them apply their learning to their school's context. Here we discuss

the three most frequently mentioned answers to our open-ended question “What top three lessons or ideas have you used the most from NISL coaching, if any?” Table A.5 in the online appendix presents the full set of responses. As shown in the right section of the infographic, the most frequently mentioned reason was that the coach served as a thought partner with whom principals could brainstorm and problem solve. This was mentioned by 26 percent of the 57 coached principals we interviewed. Because the coach was not employed by the district or state, principals felt that they could have uninhibited conversations with their coaches about challenges they were facing, without fear of being judged or evaluated. Principals also reported valuing the collegial relationship they had with their coach and said that they benefited from their coach’s prior school leadership experiences, especially when the coach had worked in a similar school context.

The second most frequently mentioned answer, provided by 25 percent of interviewees, was that coaches supported them in adopting a more strategic approach to leadership. For example, principals said that coaches helped them become better instructional leaders by helping them become more effective coaches to their teachers. Principals learned to ask intentional questions that helped probe teachers’ thinking to help them reflect on their teaching. NISL coaches also helped principals develop focused, achievable goals around a shared mission and vision. Principals reported that, before coaching, they typically implemented multiple, unaligned initiatives simultaneously in their schools. For example, one principal said that his coach kept him focused on smaller, achievable goals:

I previously had tried to do too many things at one time. . . . I was all over the place. [My coach] helped me focus and realize that . . . rather than try to do everything and get nothing accomplished, at least try to start with something smaller and accomplish one thing and then move on to another.

The third most frequently mentioned answer, given by 14 percent of the principals we interviewed who received coaching, was that NISL coaching led them to adopt a more collaborative leadership style.

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## The coach served as a thought partner with whom principals could brainstorm and problem solve.

They learned from coaches the importance of shared leadership in a well-functioning school and practical strategies for building effective teams and setting clear and high expectations. One coach introduced a principal to inquiry cycles as a way to foster problem-solving in teacher team meetings, which the principal subsequently adopted. When teams needed to make a decision, they would bring all the information forward and ask each other questions before deciding on a course of action. Coaches also helped principals see how teacher-led decisionmaking creates more ownership. As one principal described:

[My coach] talked to me about releasing the team, giving them more responsibility. She’s also the one that reminded me that sometimes as a leader, you don’t need to be the one to [lead]. They can do it on their own because they see the need themselves, and that point was so true. [My coach helped me to] really have an understanding that letting teachers step into the leadership role will only benefit your school.

We noted two themes in how principals’ answers differed by the type of school they worked in. A higher proportion of high school principals reported that their coach helped them see the importance of attending to school culture and shared strategies to help create such a culture (55 percent of high school principals who received coaching mentioned this, compared with 9 percent of all principals who received coaching). For example, coaches guided principals to demonstrate that they were attentive to staff needs. The coaches shared the importance of eliciting the perspective of all stakeholders in the building, discussing those perspectives in

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# School improvement is the work of years, not months.

staff meetings and taking a slower, less top-down approach to change. Another coach helped the principal brainstorm ways to engage families in their children's learning as a way to better connect with the home and larger community. She suggested that the principal get to know parents better and structure homework assignments in a way that encouraged students to engage their caretakers in the learning process.

A higher proportion of suburban principals reported that coaching helped them improve their instructional leadership abilities (38 percent of suburban principals who received coaching, compared with 9 percent of all principals who received coaching). The suburban principals reported that coaches helped them become more effective at leading PLCs by considering school context when designing them; debriefing with teachers after classroom observations by knowing ahead of time what to listen and look for and how to give more clear, specific, and timely feedback; and coaching teachers one-on-one by honing principals' listening and questioning skills.

## School improvement takes time: Principals enacted certain strategies that supported staff take-up of school improvement efforts and that influenced teachers' instruction

Here we transition from focusing on the results of the 172 survey responses and 74 interviews to summarizing the key insights we gained from the nine in-depth case studies, as depicted in the bottom half of the infographic.

We designed the case studies to illustrate how principals applied their EDP learning and used NISL coaching to enact school improvement over at least two school years. The cases expand on what we could learn from phone interviews by examining the main influences of the EDP in-depth and over time. In short, the case studies portray examples of what core EDP concepts and processes look like in practice:

how principals established and shared a vision for schoolwide improvement, how they took a strategic and intentional approach to school change, how distributed leadership works, and how they integrated concepts about how people learn in their school improvement effort.

As has been widely found in prior research, school improvement is the work of years, not months.<sup>3</sup> Even after two school years, principals and their teams in these nine cases were still in the process of implementing their EDP-initiated school improvement efforts. While many themes emerged from the nine case studies, we identified eight strategies that principals, school staff, or the NISL coach reported as effective and/or that demonstrably contributed to staff take-up of the school improvement effort and eventual changes in teachers' instructional practice. All eight themes align with EDP core concepts. We show these strategies in the infographic and describe them below.

We derived these strategies from our study of NISL-nominated best-practice sites, but most of these strategies or practices were not unique to the case studies. Among the 172 survey respondents, for example, 79 percent of principals reported that they adopted or increased to "some extent" or "a great extent" the core EDP concept of using teams to help distribute leadership. And about 83 percent of principals employed the tenets of how people learn to drive the development and alignment of curricula, instruction, and assessments. Moreover, 84 percent of respondents said that they worked to align teachers' instructional activities within and across subjects and grade levels.

The cases also exemplify how principals used their NISL coach as a thought partner for feedback and reflection on their ALP steps. Coaches responded by asking open-ended, probing questions and rarely

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Michael Fullan, "The Three Stories of Education Reform," *Phi Delta Kappan*, Vol. 81, No. 8, 2000, pp. 581–584; and Andy Hargreaves, Ann Lieberman, Michael Fullan, and David Hopkins, eds., *International Handbook of Educational Change: Part Two*, Springer, 2014.

providing an answer themselves, which provoked deeper thinking on the part of principals. To help principals track and reflect on progress, coaches engaged in a variety of activities, including conducting classroom walkthroughs, observing coaching conversations between the principal and teachers, and, of course, facilitating reflection. Consistent with the interview findings, several case study principals noted that the NISL coaching relationship was distinct and valuable because the NISL coach did not have a position within the district and was by definition a non-evaluative partner. These attributes facilitated honest conversations and meant that the principal had the benefit of an outside perspective.

We present the eight EDP-aligned strategies that emerged from the case studies in an approximate chronological order that we identified from principals' multiyear engagement in instructional improvement. In most of the cases in which the implemented changes reached all the way into classrooms and altered instruction, principals tended to progress through these strategies in this order. However, these strategies or processes are not rigidly chronological or linear. In fact, case study principals often applied and refined them iteratively.

### **Establish a positive school culture as a foundation for school improvement**

A positive school culture was necessary to facilitate the change effort, which required collaboration and communication among and between administration and staff. Many of the principals reported working in schools with an existing positive culture at the time of their ALP school improvement effort. This meant that there was positive morale among staff, collegial rapport and trust among administrators and staff, respect for each other as professionals and as persons, and a sense that all voices mattered. Some principals' prior history at the school as a teacher or assistant principal meant they already had a relationship with some teachers. Other principals had spent their earlier months and years in the building earning a respected reputation. In some of the cases, however, the school culture at the time principals attended the EDP was not conducive to teacher collaboration. In these cases, as part of a first step of their

ALP implementation, these principals had to work explicitly to build trust and rapport with and among teachers.

Principals earned the respect and trust of staff and helped to cultivate an overall positive school culture in several ways. Notably, several case study principals involved staff in identifying aspects of school improvement. This helped generate early buy-in and commitment across the cases. The process gave the staff a voice, allowing them to jointly draw conclusions about the school's and students' needs. Rather than having the school improvement agenda imposed on them in a top-down directive that positioned teachers as the object of improvement, this approach framed teachers as partners in a schoolwide improvement process.

One way that case study principals gathered staff input was by having staff examine student achievement data to identify which skills required instructional attention or which groups of students needed targeted support. Other principals presented a focus for school improvement but engaged the staff in figuring out how to enact change. A third way in which principals helped teachers commit to their vision of school improvement and implementation activities was to demonstrate that they were making decisions aligned with teacher feedback—for example, based on teachers' satisfaction with PD offerings, as indicated on annual surveys.

Another approach principals used to cultivate a positive school culture was to make themselves approachable. They had an "open door," elicited staff opinions and perspectives, walked the halls during all classroom transitions, very frequently observed teachers' classrooms, and listened and acted on teachers' suggestions and concerns. Principals reported that they did not ask anything of teachers that they would not do themselves, and they often went above and beyond. One principal took the time to review each student's formative assessment data to better know the students and be prepared to discuss their progress with teachers. Principals gained staff trust by showing a genuine interest in developing teachers' capacity rather than mandating PD for compliance's sake. Principals took time to acknowledge students and teachers and celebrate accomplishments. Finally, they conveyed and exemplified the focus on adults

working together for the benefit of students; it was evident to teachers that principals put students first.

Cases 2, 4, 5, and 9 provide examples of principals who prioritized establishing a positive school culture at the beginning of their ALP implementation, including by gathering staff input about school improvement.

### Set a clear vision during launch and repeatedly reiterate commitment to the improvement effort

Case study principals found it effective to launch the school improvement initiative at an all-staff event, such as the welcome-back PD to open a school year or a staff meeting, because it helped establish a shared vision and helped position the initiative as a whole-school effort. At such a meeting, principals motivated the need for school change, which could have included asking teachers to provide input, as characterized above. Moreover, principals sometimes hearkened to past initiatives to draw a connection and remind teachers that they were building on prior efforts, rather than changing direction altogether. To gain buy-in, some principals included teachers in exercises to redraft school mission and vision statements.

Beyond the launch, principals continuously reinforced their vision and messaged their commitment to the improvement effort. For example, in weekly staff newsletters or intercom announcements, they encouraged or communicated the expectation that teachers implement newly acquired instructional practices. Principals also proved their commitment by protecting scheduled, paid time for engaging in desired practices. At one school focused on improving reading instruction, the principal carved small-group reading instruction time into the master

schedule. Some principals actively worked to buffer teachers from district priorities or messages that may have conflicted or distracted teachers from their vision of school improvement. Teachers reported that they felt urgency and recognized the effort at hand as truly important when principals were consistent and *persistent* in their messaging. The teachers were inclined to buy in and commit when they sensed that the initiative would be a bedrock of how their school functioned, not just a passing idea.

Some of the case study principals strategized early on how to sustain the changes they were introducing. They recognized that planning for sustainability was important, because district priorities could shift, school leaders could be replaced, and technological tools come and go. Any of these factors could threaten progress toward a high-quality instructional system. As part of their ALP implementation and to gain some longevity, three principals reworked their school's vision and/or mission statements to reflect their vision. At another school, teachers recrafted the school-level instructional policy to include mention of critical writing, their area of focus. Yet another principal decided that, beyond changing practices, changing teachers' mind-sets about how to teach (specifically, why it was important to use data to personalize learning experiences for students) had to be the fundamental goal of his school improvement effort to help ensure that the school would continue to strive toward his vision.

All the case study narratives describe the principals' launch of their school improvement initiative, but see cases 4, 5, and 7 for particularly clear illustrations of how principals reinforced their commitment to the effort. Cases 3, 4, 6, and 8 provide examples of principals planning for the sustainability of their school improvement work.

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Principals continuously reinforced their vision and messaged their commitment to the improvement effort.

## Identify a willing and enthusiastic leadership team

Forming a “guiding coalition”—i.e., a team of willing and enthusiastic teachers or staff members in positions with peer influence—helped launch the initiative, gain momentum, and provide the support principals needed to drive it further. Typically, assistant administrators, department leads, and instructional coaches formed the guiding coalition. Principals generally engaged these and other enthusiastic individuals in leading tasks through which they would help communicate the vision and generate further buy-in. Multiple case study principals agreed that it was important at the beginning to leverage willing participants who were on board rather than invest energy in trying to convince naysayers or potential saboteurs to engage.

Although case study principals intentionally surrounded themselves with willing and supportive staff early on, they did not ignore staff who were resistant to change. Instead, as the improvement effort progressed, principals applied mitigating strategies to help bring hesitant teachers on board. Most typically, they held individual conversations with teachers, which helped the principals build rapport with the teachers and position them as experts whose support and contribution were welcomed; these conversations also helped principals understand the sources of teachers discomfort and work to address them. In one case, as it became apparent that a few teachers were disinclined to adopt the instructional shifts aligned with the school improvement effort, the conversations evolved such that the principal began asking difficult questions that prompted the resistant teachers to reconsider remaining in the school. Overall, though, the case study principals took the approach of introducing initiatives or new practices and providing support to help teachers buy in and learn these new practices, rather than mandating that teachers comply and reprimanding them if they did not.

Preemptively making strategic staffing moves can also bolster staff capacity to implement instructional improvement. Several case study principals were in a position to hire or reassign staff. One took advantage of this by hiring experienced teachers to

strengthen a particularly weak grade-level team. Another principal, who was about to lose two teacher-coaches because of a budget crunch, instead increased class size, redesigned in-school suspension to lower staff costs, and reassigned a teacher in order to create four rather than two teacher-coach positions. Both principals made their staffing moves in the belief that in-house expertise was critical for effecting change in teaching and learning schoolwide.

Cases 1, 2, and 3 provide some of the clearest examples of principals identifying a willing and enthusiastic leadership team early in the initiative. See cases 1, 3, 4, and 9 for examples of principals working to support teachers resistant to change or making strategic staffing moves to support the school improvement effort.

## Establish structures and processes for teacher collaboration and learning

To support collaboration and sharing of best practices, on which school improvement efforts often depended, principals needed to establish structures or forums. Collectively, the case study principals implemented or leveraged the following structures: principal-led meetings, expert-facilitated PD, subject-based PLCs, cross-subject pedagogy-focused PLCs, grade-level teams, vertical teacher teams, and common planning time.

In spite of hurdles such as district or union restrictions, case principals found it crucial to find time for deep and productive teacher professional learning to strengthen their instruction. Most of the case study principals found workable ways to implement their professional learning plan for teachers during the school day or within allotted before- or after-school time. Often, this involved a sacrifice on the part of the principal and/or teachers. One principal, for example, had to eliminate a tutoring program to pay for common teacher planning during the school day. In other cases, principals leveraged the strong relationships they had developed with staff and the buy-in they had garnered for the school improvement effort by asking staff to participate in PD beyond contracted work hours.

While sufficient time is a necessary precondition, it is not enough for effective professional collaboration. In some schools, teachers had grown accustomed to working in isolation or had relatively shallow models of how to work productively with colleagues. Principals could not assume that staff had the skills or capacity to learn together; rather, the principals needed to train staff on how to collaborate effectively. Case study principals devoted time and resources to coaching and helping teachers to engage effectively in PLCs. For example, principals and their assistant principals attended the collaboration meetings themselves, reviewed protocols and guidelines for effective PLCs with their leadership team, or implemented a faculty-wide book study focused on collaboration. Some principals purposefully signaled to teachers that PLCs and other meeting structures were no longer to be used to take care of housekeeping and management items; they were to focus on professional learning and instructional improvement.

In all cases, principals established structures to facilitate teacher collaboration and learning. See cases 1, 2, 5, and 6 for examples of principals making time for teacher learning. These cases also feature examples of principals expressly helping teachers to engage effectively in PLCs.

### Press teachers to adopt targeted instructional practices to support student learning

Once support structures and processes for collaboration and professional learning were in place, principals pressed teachers to focus on instructional improvement. This involved supporting and coaching teachers to adopt a set of desirable instructional practices, such as formative assessment or data use, increasing the rigor of academic work for students, and/or aligning instruction with state standards. This process generally required teachers to examine and revise their existing curricula, pacing guide, assessments, and pedagogical strategies or to develop such tools if none existed.

To support instructional change, principals needed to be visible as instructional leaders. According to those we interviewed, most of the case study principals led not only in vision but in action. They went beyond attending meetings or conducting

walkthroughs to monitor compliance or progress; they were “in the trenches” or “on the ground” leading schoolwide PD, participating in PLCs, coaching teachers, and visiting classrooms to work with students. A particularly powerful way for principals to help teachers adopt desired practices was to model such practices, such as how to collaborate effectively, provide helpful observation feedback to peers, and use data to inform instruction. Being visible and active helped principals gain the respect and buy-in of teachers. Principals demonstrated their genuine desire to understand what their staff and students needed and to help improve teaching and learning. In fact, in the few cases where principals were less visible, teacher buy-in and shifts in practice seemed more tentative, and teachers vocalized their desire for more active leadership.

Another way that principals supported teachers to strengthen their instruction was to explicitly acknowledge that they were pushing teachers out of their comfort zone and to encourage risk-taking, such as trying new instructional strategies or allowing peers to observe and provide feedback on their teaching. When teachers recognized they were being challenged and felt comfortable trying and failing in the name of improvement, true change tended to follow. To help encourage such risk-taking, some principals took professional risks of their own by opening their leadership practices to feedback, showing staff that they, too, were learners in the process.

To monitor staff’s progress toward desired practices, principals established several mechanisms. These mechanisms provided principals with timely feedback about the extent to which improvement strategies were being implemented, helped them to informally assess whether a teacher needed additional support to implement practices aligned with the improvement effort, and helped hold teachers accountable for applying instructional strategies that were the focus of PLCs and other PD efforts. Processes the principals established to monitor progress included classroom walkthroughs, one-on-one conversations or meetings with teachers (often to discuss student data), and observations of PLCs and team meetings. Principals varied, however, in their use of these mechanisms to systematically and formally collect and track data in a way that allowed

them to determine whether and to what extent teachers—individually or collectively—were making desirable shifts in their practices. Some principals, for example, conducted informal observations or classroom walkthroughs but did not seem to have tracked or used data to help gauge whether teachers had developed over time. One principal who did attempt to track data systematically and use the data to motivate continued progress conducted twice-monthly walkthroughs. Afterward, he and his leadership team analyzed the data by department to determine the extent to which each of the expected practices was being implemented (i.e., was observed). They subsequently presented the data to department teams, and the teams used the information to benchmark where they aimed to be in the next two-week cycle.

See cases 1, 7, 8, and 9 for examples of principals encouraging teachers to focus on instructional improvement, being visible as instructional leaders, and modeling desired practices. Cases 1 and 8 also provide examples of principals encouraging risk-taking, and case 9 illustrates an instance of a principal using mechanisms for monitoring progress.

### Increase transparency around instruction

Principals believed that making teachers' instruction more public was critical to making teachers more accountable, elevating their practice, and raising student achievement. They acknowledged, however, that doing so might increase teacher vulnerability. Thus, they did not typically introduce such processes until at least the second year of implementation, once trust among teachers had been solidly established, often through the PLC process.

Principals implemented a variety of processes to increase transparency around instruction. By conducting peer observations, for example, teachers gained a better sense of what quality instruction could look like, and by being observed they received peer feedback that they had not been used to getting on their instruction. Moreover, through PLCs, teachers became accustomed to bringing problems of practice, instructional artifacts, student work, and student data to meetings for discussion. Data warehouses and data walls—compilations and displays of student progress, usually in the form of assessment

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By conducting peer observations, teachers gained a better sense of what quality instruction could look like, and by being observed they received peer feedback that they had not been used to getting.

data over time—were mechanisms that case study principals implemented to make data public among teachers. These efforts all helped teachers better understand what and how teachers taught in their grade and in grades above and below them and helped teachers recognize the need to standardize certain high-leverage teaching practices.

See cases 2, 3, 7, and 9 for examples of principals increasing the transparency of teachers' instruction.

### Surface inconsistencies in practice or policy and continue to align system components

The work of writing common assessments, implementing a common curricula, and making instruction transparent was only the beginning of the effort to elevate instructional quality. Substantive change required principals to continue surfacing inconsistencies in practice or policy and working to change practices to achieve more-intentional alignment among system components (e.g., standards, curricula, instruction, and assessments). For example, one case study principal led teachers to examine common assessment results to see whether they reflected the instructional changes teachers had been making and, if not, what adjustments were needed in instruction or assessments. Another principal guided staff to more deeply understand the relationship between standards and formative assessment processes by

engaging them in PD focused on deconstructing standards (i.e., identifying what students should know and be able to do) and identifying the assessment they would administer to measure students' knowledge and the other evidence they would need to collect to determine whether students mastered a given standard. A third principal realized that the formal teacher evaluation system was unsupportive of the environment he sought to cultivate—one that valued collaboration and instructional innovation and risk-taking. Thus, he replaced the formal evaluation process with one that prioritized peer evaluation and reflection on desired instructional practices.

See cases 1, 4, and 9 for examples of principals discovering misalignment of system components and working to increase alignment.

### **Distribute leadership, identifying experts to share and model practices**

Finally, a genuine distribution of leadership roles typically occurred late in the school improvement process. The distribution hinged on having sufficient staff with developed expertise. A distributed leadership approach helped foster staff ownership of the improvement initiative and professional learning and effect instructional change in the case study schools. Distributing leadership generated ownership by inviting deeper involvement of more staff and giving teachers more voice and autonomy in school-level decisions. Case study principals, for example, invited teachers to chair PLCs. They encouraged teacher leaders to set the agenda for PLCs and adjust norms and goals for the meetings as necessary, in line with the overall vision. They also had teachers pilot ambitious initiatives and provide feedback and recommendations based on their experiences. Importantly, principals listened to and, when feasible, acted on teachers' suggestions, demonstrating that they valued teachers' input and ownership. Based on teacher feedback, for example, principals moved PLC time, provided opportunities to learn across professional learning groups, and arranged for additional one-on-one training on data analysis.

Distributing leadership often entailed identifying staff members as having instructional expertise that could benefit others and, in this way, helped to

effect instructional change. Case study principals tapped strong teachers to lead PD (instead of or in addition to accessing district consultants or external providers) and to model desired practices—for example, through opening these teachers' classrooms for peer observations. Overall, the distributed leadership approach positioned teachers to take greater responsibility for their professional growth and their school's improvement.

See cases 4, 5, and 8 for examples of principals enacting a distributed leadership approach to school improvement.

## **Summaries of the nine cases**

In this section, we present summaries of each of the nine cases. We identify each principal's impetus for school improvement and the principal's goal, some of the key strategies the principal enacted, and school staff's perceived progress at the end of about two years of the school improvement effort. To read the full case narratives, visit [www.rand.org/t/RR3082](http://www.rand.org/t/RR3082).

### **Case 1: Shaping a standards-aligned instructional system through formative assessment practices**

Although this middle school had a history of high student performance, the principal noted a lack of collaboration among staff around instruction and student learning, particularly diagnosing and meeting students' needs. He launched an improvement effort in spring 2017 that brought teachers together to learn effective formative assessment practices. He first put in place a supportive school culture and structures and then built a leadership team with strong teacher representation to guide the improvement effort and help build buy-in. He took steps to encourage teachers to be comfortable with taking risks—for example, by allowing other teachers to observe them and inviting feedback on their instruction. Most importantly, he sought to align components of the school system. Although he faced some implementation challenges, one and a half years into the school improvement effort, we found evidence of increased and more effective collaboration among

staff and increased staff knowledge about formative assessment and data use practices.

### **Case 2: Building a collaborative, data-driven school culture to strengthen instructional quality**

Upon his arrival, the principal described the middle school as having a culture of teacher isolation, little accountability for teacher collaboration and classroom-level results, and little to no common planning time. In fall 2017, the principal decided to implement PLCs and common assessments to motivate teachers to examine student data. He built capacity in his leadership team to help lead PLCs, and the leadership team, in turn, helped build teachers' capacity to lead them. He provided training and support on how to collect, analyze, and use data to strengthen and guide instruction. He used staff feedback and observations to guide his continuous improvement efforts and better meet the needs of both his staff and students. Over the course of two years, teachers began collaborating between and within subject areas and grade levels, sharing their classroom data with each other regularly.

### **Case 3: Building a culture and capacity for collaboration to foster instructional improvement**

To transform a middle school with a culture of teacher isolation, low morale, and a lack of teacher say in school decisions, the principal focused on building relationships and trust among staff beginning in fall 2015. He did this, in part, by inviting staff to collaboratively rewrite the school's vision statement and create the master schedule, building the leadership capacity of the administrative team, laying the groundwork for departments to operate as PLCs, and then providing tools and support for teachers to work on instructional improvement. Despite initial negative perceptions of PLCs, among other challenges, by the end of the 2017–2018 school year, the culture of collaboration and teacher voice in school decisions appeared to have improved. Teachers reported increased morale, greater willingness to get

involved in school initiatives, and more purposeful collaboration.

### **Case 4: Raising school culture and student achievement through a focus on writing**

After taking the helm of the low-performing elementary school, the principal diagnosed it as having a culture of low expectations. She aimed to elevate teachers' conceptions of what students were capable of and raise the standard of assigned work. Specifically, she believed meaningful writing assignments would increase student engagement and learning. Beginning in fall 2016, she worked to align instruction, curricula, standards, and assessments. Although the principal had to navigate some contextual challenges and uneven implementation of critical writing across the school, over the course of two years, teachers appeared to have embraced the importance of challenging students to demonstrate their learning through writing. They also reported an increase in student engagement in classes.

### **Case 5: Implementing teacher-centered learning to elevate engagement in a high-performing high school**

Although this high school was designated a School of Distinction by the state, student performance on state assessments suggested room for improvement. The principal identified a culture of complacency among teachers and students. He addressed this beginning in fall 2016 by providing intensive, ongoing professional learning that focused on teaching in ways that challenged students' thinking and encouraged student ownership of learning. Among his key strategies, the principal ensured that structures supportive of school culture were in place, teachers had opportunities to lead, and teachers had a say in charting their professional growth. Over two years, the improvement effort appeared to have garnered strong teacher buy-in, as evidenced by greater teacher satisfaction with professional learning opportunities and observable shifts in instruction.

### **Case 6: Developing teachers' instructional leadership capacity**

This middle school principal focused on developing the instructional leadership capacity of a team of teacher leaders. Before the principal began this improvement work, teacher leaders (i.e., department heads) performed perfunctory functions, such as relaying information between the principal and teachers in their departments; moreover, PLCs were unstructured and unproductive. In winter 2016, the principal decided to build teachers' skills to effect meaningful collaboration around instructional practices that support student progress. He worked with the team to establish structures to support their regular meetings, codeveloped a vision with the team, engaged in professional readings and discussions, and monitored the team's progress. Although the principal had to navigate a difficult school culture, by the end of the 2017–2018 school year, the school improvement effort appeared to have grown the leadership capacity of teachers. Staff on the instructional leadership team grew in their confidence and began to challenge teachers in their departments to engage as PLCs.

### **Case 7: Improving small-group reading instruction by building teacher capacity for data use**

This principal focused on improving reading instruction in her elementary school. Previously, reading instruction involved whole-group instruction and isolated phonics skills. The principal led an effort beginning in fall 2016 that centered on implementing and refining small-group reading time. Her key strategies included developing structures to support small-group reading instruction and building teachers' capacity for instructional decisionmaking and delivery using performance data on students' reading skills. Despite some contextual challenges hindering implementation, over the course of two years, this work appeared to have contributed to increased teacher capacity in reading instruction and may have contributed to accelerated growth in reading for students.

### **Case 8: Fostering a culture of effective data use to support students' personalized learning**

This principal shifted the mind-set and practice of staff at two elementary schools that he was leading during their merger into a single, new school. Specifically, beginning in fall 2016, he instilled a culture of using data to adjust and customize instruction to better meet students' needs. His key strategies included adopting a strong formative assessment component within a new reading curriculum, establishing structures to enhance teacher collaboration around data, coordinating deliberate roll-out of complex initiatives, providing continuous support to garner teacher buy-in, and monitoring progress. By the end of two years, although teachers' capacity to use data to inform instruction varied, the principal's improvement effort appeared to have increased teachers' confidence in their instructional capacity and fostered a collaborative culture at the newly established school.

### **Case 9: Supporting students' mastery of English language arts standards through data use and curriculum alignment**

Upon her arrival at the middle school, the principal identified a complacent school culture and recognized that teachers were frustrated with leadership and staff turnover and with frequent changes in state assessments. Against this backdrop, in winter 2016, the principal decided to make teacher collaboration and data use the cornerstones of improving sixth-grade mastery of ELA standards. By aligning curriculum; developing common strategies, procedures, and rubrics; and implementing a schoolwide data room, the principal's efforts appeared to have positively influenced the culture of the school. Although the principal encountered challenges in managing the change process, over the course of two and a half years, teachers appeared to have bought into the process and structural changes that the principal implemented.

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## About this report

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More information about RAND can be found at [www.rand.org](http://www.rand.org). Questions about this report should be directed to [ewang@rand.org](mailto:ewang@rand.org), and questions about RAND Education and Labor should be directed to [educationandlabor@rand.org](mailto:educationandlabor@rand.org).

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