PLAYMAKERS: HOW GREAT PRINCIPALS BUILD AND LEAD GREAT TEAMS OF TEACHERS

NOVEMBER 2012

New Leaders
THE PLAYBOOK: THREE TYPES OF PLAYS THAT PRINCIPALS MADE TO AMPLIFY GREAT TEACHING
Great principals amplified great teaching by working in three intersecting areas:

1. Developing teachers.
3. Creating a great place to work.

In the following sections, we discuss in detail the numerous and specific ways the principals in our study pursued each of these goals, including the ways in which some actions served multiple purposes at once (Figure 1). Strong principals seamlessly integrated their work to develop teachers with their work to manage talent and create a great place to work. We found that principals who led the highest gaining schools focused on at least one action in each of the three areas. They didn’t merely go through the motions of developing teachers, managing staff and creating a great place to work. They executed their strategies for improving the quality of teaching in their schools with quality and intensity, while also customizing their approach to fit the context of the school.

This finding—that the highest gaining schools had principals who were explicitly committed to pursuing great teaching in all three areas—has important policy implications. For the sake of ...
of narration, we will first describe the actions the principals in our study undertook in each of these three areas, painting a vivid picture of the well-documented claim that principals do indeed have an impact on teaching. We hope the detail contained in this section, “The Playbook: Three Types of Plays that Great Principals Made to Amplify Great Teaching”, will help policymakers understand all the types of actions principals took in the three areas to influence teaching in their schools. Later, in the section called, “Championship Coaches: What Principals of the Most Successful Schools Did Differently,” we go into more specifics regarding how the most successful principals strategically utilized the playbook to maximize results by simultaneously attending to each section of the playbook while also calling the right plays at the right time and executing them flawlessly.

In this section, we begin by defining the leadership actions in each area. Actions in the area of developing staff—such as leading professional development, conducting frequent observations and inspiring teachers to believe that all students can succeed at high levels—were aimed at improving the knowledge, skills and beliefs of teachers. Actions in the area of managing talent—such as recruiting, selecting, hiring and placing staff—were aimed at obtaining the best possible teaching staff as well as defining roles and responsibilities to maximize results. Actions in the area of creating a great place to work—such as building a supportive culture of respect and instituting a student code of conduct—were aimed at fostering a workplace where teachers wanted to stay and grow. Leadership actions (such as observation and useful feedback) that served multiple areas are discussed in each area they serve.
Most principals viewed developing teachers as one of their primary responsibilities. The highly-effective principals in our study understood that developing staff capacity means both hands-on skill building as well as nurturing independence and career growth. Highly-effective principals worked explicitly to improve instruction in the classroom in the form of conducting observations and giving feedback, leading professional development sessions, leading data-driven instruction teams and insisting on high expectations for all students. The principals also provided ways for teachers to continuously grow in their careers: they arranged opportunities for staff to learn from one another and they delegated leadership roles.

When developing teachers, principals consistently performed the following actions:

- Conducting observations with useful feedback
- Leading professional learning activities
- Creating a professional climate of shared accountability for student learning
- Fostering “Teacher Learning Communities”
- Leading group learning activities
- Cultivating leadership
- Managing Talent

Each of these activities are important, but several pay dividends beyond just developing teachers; they also help principals manage talent and build a great place to work. In this section, we talk specifically about how these actions served to improve the quality of classroom instruction. It is hard to imagine, for instance, instruction improving in every classroom without a knowledgeable principal willing to engage every teacher in targeted, hands-on instructional support.
Highly-effective principals excelled at giving teachers feedback throughout the year—and not only as part of the formal evaluation process. They made it their mission to know how every member of the staff was performing and delivered feedback in a way that gave their staff clear direction and guidance on how to improve. In many schools where the previous principal had not provided feedback on a regular basis, great principals built a professional culture that established new norms for how principals and teachers interacted that emphasized observation for the purposes of professional growth rather than monitoring and compliance. Great principals also had to find ways to de-prioritize other work to make time for observation and feedback. In secondary schools with large numbers of teachers, strong principals trained and involved their leadership team in carrying out the observation and feedback process.

When Principal Michelle Pierre-Farid started at Tyler Elementary School in Washington, D.C., she spent a significant portion of each day observing classrooms to understand the current practices of her teachers and to support their ongoing development and growth. When delivering feedback, Pierre-Farid identified specific aspects of instruction for each teacher to work on, such as the appropriate use of learning centers. She intentionally gave concrete feedback to each teacher so that they were able to improve a specific classroom practice or instructional strategy. For teachers who needed additional supports, she also directed staff to a colleague’s classroom to see specific elements of good instruction in action.

Providing teachers with precise, actionable feedback on a regular basis.

Highly-effective principals visited teachers’ classrooms to observe instruction and provide feedback at least once per month. While the nature of the observations varied from walk-throughs lasting only a few minutes to observations of entire lessons, the key ingredient for successful classroom observations was the follow up. High-performing principals gave specific, timely and actionable feedback that teachers could use immediately to improve their practice. Then, they followed up consistently throughout the year. Great principals returned regularly to observe teachers’ efforts to incorporate feedback and they provided additional feedback to continuously respond to evolving skills. They also helped teachers to identify other resources to support growth areas, for example, by recommending that teachers attend particular professional development workshops or observe other teachers who were particularly strong in the growth area.
In addition to individually coaching their staff, effective principals also identified team- and school-wide needs for improvement and ensured that their teachers received training and professional development that would enable them to succeed.

**Leading professional development.**
Highly-effective principals used professional development days strategically. Even when principals did not directly facilitate the day, strong principals were deeply involved in planning the content and ensuring that it linked to other school-wide initiatives. In many cases, they were also very involved in running the sessions. Their involvement was critical because they organized sessions in response to the needs they had witnessed in their ongoing observations and followed up on the covered concepts in subsequent observations.

**Leading data-driven instruction teams.**
Extensive research has documented the positive impact of data-driven instruction (DDI), in which teachers carefully analyze students’ interim achievement results to diagnose individual, group and classroom level needs and plan instruction accordingly. At the time of these site visits, DDI was a relatively new concept and many principals found that teachers were not comfortable or skilled in the practice. We found that great principals were almost always hands-on in leading DDI, particularly during their first year or two in the school. In several cases, principals later delegated leadership for this process to others, but only after they felt comfortable that teachers understood the process, had expertise in data analysis and felt ownership of it.

---

12 Black & William, 1998; Leithwood et al., 2004
Exceptional principals built and maintained Teacher Learning Communities in which teachers problem-solved together, provided each other with feedback and built a sense of community along the way. Highly-effective principals made consistent time in the day for collaboration, and they developed norms and protocols that focused peer observations, feedback and planning meetings on improving student outcomes. Often, principals were heavily involved in setting up Teacher Learning Communities, but then encouraged teachers to take more leadership of learning community activities to enable more peer-to-peer interaction.

The examples below are components of Teacher Learning Communities. Either executed separately or as part of a more comprehensive Teacher Learning Community, these actions served to develop and support teachers. However, true Teacher Learning Communities also built a sense of shared identity among teachers. We later discuss the other components of Teacher Learning Communities in “Creating a great place to work.”

**Providing time, protocols and an instructional focus to structure team meetings.**

Great principals made it possible for grade-level or subject area teachers to meet at a common time during the school day by finding other coverage for students. During team meetings, teachers provided input and feedback on each other’s lesson plans, used data to inform planning, worked together to troubleshoot and conducted systematic, transparent examinations of student work. Principals offered guidance for how best to use this time to make a direct impact on instruction. They established protocols to guide group critiques of classroom practices, analyses of student learning across grade levels and across the curriculum and conversations about expectations, teaching and re-teaching. In addition to being a forum for planning instruction and interventions, the meetings were an opportunity for job-embedded, peer-centered professional development.
Providing time and protocols to structure peer observation and feedback.

Successful principals encouraged teachers to observe each other’s practice and provide each other with feedback. Such peer observation allows veteran teachers to counsel novices, novices to observe good teaching and all teachers to share tips and best practices. Principals made peer observation possible by arranging for substitutes so that teachers could observe a colleague at work and by creatively using video technology. They also frequently provided standard protocols for conducting peer observations and giving feedback, and they made sure teachers felt safe to admit mistakes and receive feedback from their peers.

Principal Tatiana Epanchin-Troyan of Monarch Academy in Oakland, California established a system for grade-level team meetings that facilitate meaningful collaboration within her teacher teams. She realized that having the teams analyze their data together set a collegial and supportive environment where teachers could look to their peers for ideas on how to teach content. Their grade level meetings, called Data Talks, are structured conversations during which teachers work together to analyze students’ formative and interim assessment data to track mastery of content and skills.

To support high quality conversations that are driven by data, Principal Epanchin-Troyan developed and shared a common set of protocols for analyzing student data and targeting instruction based on the findings. During the Data Talks, teachers are expected to offer each other support in analyzing the data to determine where the weaknesses are and to give advice on developing strategies to address those needs. They also use this time to give feedback from peer observations.

To create time within the school day for regular Data Talks to occur, Principal Epanchin-Troyan hired art, music, P.E. teachers and a librarian to supervise students while classroom teachers met in grade-level teams.

Eileen Callahan, the Dean of Curriculum at Boston Collegiate Charter School in Boston, MA, wanted to give extra support to new teachers in their first year by giving them opportunities to learn through observation. She established a weekly session where new teachers took turns presenting videos of their teaching. The presenting teacher would complete a written reflection assessing the lesson before the presentation and would debrief the lesson with Callahan during her weekly one-on-one meeting to choose a particular area for peer feedback. In the weekly session, observing teachers would watch a video clip of the lesson and ask clarifying questions, offer areas of strength and specific suggestions for improvement. These questions provided guidance to Callahan in her support of the observing teachers, while also giving first-year teachers many opportunities to see teaching in action and to analyze what works.
Highly-effective principals rallied their staffs around a vision of success for all students and created a professional climate of shared accountability for that vision by setting targets and challenging any beliefs or behaviors that ran counter to this view.

**Raising expectations.**
Great principals inspired teachers to believe in the ability of all students to achieve at high levels. The highly-effective principals in our study worked explicitly and relentlessly to raise teachers’ expectations of all their students. In the face of negative expectations, they offered proof that ambitious goals were indeed within reach. They asked teachers to compare their student achievement data to schools with similar demographics and they arranged opportunities for teachers to visit schools where students with similar backgrounds were achieving at high levels. They were relentless in ensuring that all groups of students were improving and being held to high standards, and they did not settle for proficiency, but pushed to move students to score at advanced levels.

**Setting targets.**
We found that highly-effective principals created a professional climate of shared accountability by setting specific school-wide student achievement targets. For example, in the previous example, Principal Terry Carter insisted that the school would reach a 70 percent proficiency rate within a few years. These targets established shared expectations for what was possible and expected as well as shared ownership for achieving the targets.

**Improving cultural competency.**
In some cases, the work of raising expectations involved developing the cultural competency among staff to understand and address issues of culture, race and class to ensure that these are understood as assets, not barriers, to success. This strategy was particularly important in schools where the faculty was largely white and middle-class and the students were largely students of color from lower-income families. Great principals folded cultural competency lessons into professional development sessions, using books, case studies and self-reflection to challenge entrenched beliefs. They also questioned the cultural biases of individual teachers in explicit, one-on-one conversations when they saw evidence of low expectations.
Because great principals recognized that they couldn’t do it alone, they cultivated staff leadership skills and encouraged professional growth. As described below, principals utilized formal and informal strategies for cultivating leadership. Distributing and cultivating leadership proved to be essential to all three ways that principals ensured consistently strong teaching across a school. In this section, we focus on how principals gave teachers the tools to nurture new skill sets. In later sections, we discuss how principals used distributive leadership to manage talent and create a great place to work.

Cultivating leadership skills early and often.
Great principals encouraged staff to practice leadership skills, providing many opportunities for teachers to be in charge of school-wide projects, even early in a teacher’s career. As early as during hiring conversations, these principals identified future leaders. They encouraged all members of a teaching team to practice small acts of leadership, such as running individual meetings. They distributed larger leadership roles to teachers who had demonstrated success in the classroom and were ready to take on more responsibility. Perhaps most importantly, principals encouraged teachers to mentor other teachers. Peer mentoring improves teacher capacity at two levels: the mentors gain new leadership skills and novices learn how to be better teachers.

Mentoring school leaders.
Just as great principals coach teachers to improve their instructional skills, great principals also coached their instructional leadership team (such as assistant principals, school-based coaches, department chairs and team leads) to improve their leadership skills. For example, highly-effective principals regularly provided team members with feedback on how they ran meetings, led professional development and/or coached teachers. Some principals in our sample served as official mentors for aspiring principals and worked closely with these candidates to provide them with opportunities to practice and receive feedback on leadership skills.

At Barnard Elementary School in Washington, D.C., Principal Grace Reid gave teachers leading roles in staff development. She encouraged teacher-led presentations during staff development time. She also asked veteran teachers to mentor new teachers and set goals for their development. Reid said that the mentoring relationship provided new teachers with support as they became acclimated and fostered collaboration among all teachers. It also provided opportunities for veteran teachers to practice and build their instructional and leadership skills.
Managing Talent

Highly-effective principals worked hard to hire effective teachers, match staff strengths with school needs, and hold teachers accountable.

Principals had the vital responsibility of making human capital decisions that influenced the quality of teaching in their schools. Great principals recognized this as a tremendous opportunity to match skilled teachers with roles and responsibilities that fit the needs of students and the school. For them, managing staff was a chess match with a big pay-off: maximizing the talent within the school to see better results for kids. We identified five actions that high-performing principals took to make sure they had the right people in the right roles:

- Highly-effective principals worked hard and deliberately to recruit and hire effective teachers. Once in the door, they thought carefully about how to define the roles and responsibilities of individual teachers to match staff strengths with school needs. Then, they held teachers accountable for meeting high expectations and improving on identified weaknesses. They set clear goals for dramatically increasing student learning, and they focused the majority of their time and effort on monitoring teachers to hold them accountable for reaching those goals.
Successful principals set clear guidelines for what defined a great teacher candidate and they vigorously recruited the best teachers for the job, even outside of hiring season.

**Defining the selection criteria.**
Great principals set the bar high when defining the characteristics they sought in applicants. Primarily, they sought out candidates who demonstrated content knowledge and core pedagogical skills. They also sought applicants who had the right attitude: a deep commitment to the belief that every student is capable of academic success, dedication to improving student learning and a genuine connection to, and interest in, students. Finally, they sought personal attributes—such as a willingness to constantly learn and improve, a capacity for teamwork and leadership and cultural sensitivity. More specifically, highly-effective principals sought teachers who were a good fit for the school’s particular culture and instructional approach. Where possible, principals wanted a demonstrated track record of measurable growth in student achievement. Even as early as the hiring process, they were looking for teachers who exhibited potential to develop into future leaders.

**Recruiting the right candidates.**
With such selective criteria, finding teachers who are up to the task required consistent effort on the part of principals to find the right people. Highly-effective principals tapped their own professional networks to search for candidates and extended their recruiting efforts to surrounding districts, local nonprofits and alternative certification programs.

**Recruiting early.**
Highly-effective principals make a point of recruiting year-round, whether or not they have immediate openings. Even in rapidly improving schools, teacher turnover in urban districts often remains high and district hiring practices can be inefficient and complicated. Therefore, the principals in our study reported that it was imperative for them to develop their own pipeline of quality candidates who had the potential to meet all of the selection criteria.

**Hiring the best applicants.**
Highly-effective principals rigorously screened candidates and selected the ones who had the most potential to increase student achievement while also meshing well with the culture of the school. They led an intensive process that included perspectives and input from school leaders, teachers and community members. The selection process typically involved an application; interviews with the principal and leadership team members; demonstration lessons with teachers, students and sometimes even families; and opportunities for candidates to receive constructive feedback and reflect on their own learning and professional growth.
Terrence Carter, the principal of Clara Barton Elementary School in Chicago, IL, remarked that finding the perfect candidate is, “literally like looking for a needle in a haystack.” Clara Barton is situated in a traditional school district, but Carter said he recruited far beyond the district pool. He maintained close ties with local alternative certification programs that required yearlong residencies and produced candidates who, he said, have been trained to diagnose and address students’ needs.

Principal Tina Chekan, of Propel McKeensport Charter School in McKeesport, PA, employed an extensive array of rubrics and activities to assess potential hires for teaching positions. At each stage, multiple staff members assessed candidates using rubrics and scoring sheets to determine if they had the desired combination of pedagogical skills and commitment to student academic success. The principal had the final decision in who would be hired. Chekan explained, “Our goal is to be the highest achieving high-poverty school in the region. That is a goal in our Staff Success Statement, which we discuss at every staff meeting and training. But not every educator truly believes that all kids can achieve no matter their circumstances in life. We need teachers who have a ‘no excuses’ philosophy. They must have a strong work ethic and be willing to put forth extra hours for professional development...to find those teachers, we need more than a standard 15-minute interview. We need to assess the candidates on multiple dimensions.”

One of the highest priorities for the leadership team at E. L. Haynes Public Charter School, a charter school in Washington, D.C., was recruiting and hiring the right faculty. As Eric Westendorf, the school’s chief academic officer, pointed out, “We know that when we get it right, it makes a big difference for kids, and when we get it wrong, it takes up a lot of time trying to address the problem.” The E. L. Haynes leadership team began their recruitment and hiring cycle each January with a meeting to assess their staffing needs and review the effectiveness of the previous year’s recruitment and hiring practices. Based on this assessment, the team set priorities and revised or refined its processes and tools as needed.
Outstanding school leaders think carefully about how to define roles and responsibilities of individual staff members in order to maximize success.

**Creating new roles and responsibilities.**

In assigning roles and responsibilities, great principals considered ways to provide opportunities for staff to practice new skills as well as responsibilities that leveraged their current strengths. Schools saw double the payout—teachers gained expertise and developed new skills, and the principal built an instructional team to support strong consistent teaching.

**Matching teacher strengths with student needs.**

Highly-effective principals made strategic teaching assignments. They often reassigned the strongest teachers to work with the students who were struggling the most. In some cases, this meant placing teachers in different grade-level or subject teaching assignments. This required strategic vision and a soft touch.

At Alice Deal Middle School in Washington, D.C., Principal Melissa Kim realized that she needed to create teacher teams that were not hierarchical. To help staff practice new roles and responsibilities, Kim created a structure where each member was assigned a specific role to strengthen and distribute teacher leadership. Members of these horizontal teams at Deal Middle School assumed one of the following roles:

- **Team leader:** Facilitated meetings and provided overall team leadership.
- **Communication chief:** Communicated with administrators and oversaw all parent contact for members of the team.
- **MYP master:** Focused on curriculum issues, in particular the school's International Baccalaureate Middle Years Program.
- **Data dean:** Handled data collection and analysis, as well as facilitated team discussion of “bubble” students on the verge of proficiency.

Kim had teachers rotate through all of the assigned roles over the course of the year to ensure that they were experiencing multiple functions; her goal was to engage staff while also exposing them to new and varied opportunities.

When Vincent Hunter became principal of Whitehaven High School in Memphis, TN, the school was performing poorly on state tests in Algebra I. However, Hunter quickly realized that he had eight highly-effective, veteran math teachers who were teaching higher-level math courses like trigonometry. He approached them and asked them to teach lower-level classes. “When I approached these veteran teachers about teaching lower-level students, they were not completely excited about the idea. Some teachers had been in the same classroom since their first year at Whitehaven. I had to be humble in asking them to make this change for the good of the school. And I had to show support for them, by letting them still teach some upper-level courses and by allowing them to pick their own planning period. Approached this way, I saw the teachers become zealous and enthused about helping their students succeed on the state exam and about helping the school meet its AYP goals.” Through approach and compromise, Hunter was able to leverage the talent within his building to support content areas that were not appropriately staffed.
Managing talent means more than moving staff around like chess pieces on a board. Rather, great principals built career pathways for teachers to grow their expertise and corresponding leadership responsibilities. They created both formal and informal opportunities for teachers to practice leadership. By cultivating leadership, principals are able to extend the reach of great teachers to touch the lives of more than just a single classroom of students.

Creating and fostering an Instructional Leadership Team.
Highly-effective principals almost always had a team of teachers who were jointly responsible for school-wide instructional initiatives. The members of these teams were deputies for the principal, enforcing consistent instructional practices and expectations throughout the school. These teams made important decisions about curriculum and instruction based on frequent analysis of data. Each member typically oversaw a grade-level or subject-area group of teachers, for which they facilitated instructional planning, monitored the consistency of instruction and provided individual coaching.

Principals selected team members carefully. They worked closely with the team to make sure everyone shared the same vision for the school and had the right tools to carry out their leadership responsibilities. They clearly delineated what results they expected from grade levels or content areas. In some cases, they had difficult conversations around changing the membership of the team.

Tatiana Epanchin-Troyan of Monarch Academy in Oakland, CA thought carefully about whom to include on her leadership team. In her words, “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 looked for leadership team members who were reflective, “someone who gets that you’re never a perfect teacher and that there are always [areas where you can] grow and learn.” Finally, she sought out candidates who were trustworthy, both in their relationships with her and with other teachers across the school. She felt that these qualities, along with instructional expertise, were essential for leadership team members to be able to lead other adults. Once she selected highly-effective teachers to be a part of her leadership team, Epanchin-Troyan supported each team member in their new role.
Great principals set clear performance expectations, closely supervised classroom instruction and held teachers accountable for meeting expectations. They made a dedicated effort to support teachers in reaching these goals but took corrective measures when necessary.

**Rigorously conducting formal evaluations.**
As currently cast, the majority of state- and district- mandated teacher evaluation systems rate nearly all teachers as good or great and produce very little actionable knowledge. Highly-effective principals, by contrast, were more likely to use formal evaluation systems to differentiate strong teachers from weaker ones and to use the information gathered in the process to develop tailored improvement plans for every teacher. These principals took detailed notes during the observation process and provided teachers with specific and concrete evidence to justify their assessment. Such thorough feedback helped teachers to understand what was expected of them and to buy into a common vision of quality teaching.

**Dismissing or counseling out underperforming teachers.**
When efforts to improve teacher performance failed, great principals were not afraid to give difficult feedback or to remove a teacher through formal processes. They did not make this decision lightly. As frequent classroom observers, they documented what they observed, continued to offer support and noted efforts to develop. Because of the principal’s thoroughness, teachers who were unable or unwilling to meet expectations often decided to transition out on their own. When they didn’t, highly-effective principals pursued formal dismissal from the school, and where appropriate, the system as well.

At E.L. Haynes Public Charter School, a pre-K–8 charter school in Washington, D.C., Jennie Niles, Michelle Molitor and Eric Westendorf used the formal teacher evaluation process as an opportunity to support teachers’ professional growth. At the end of the annual evaluation meetings, teachers and supervisors created a professional growth plan for each teacher that outlined concrete actions and gave specific timelines for improving performance in a limited number of competencies. Principal Molitor said limiting the number of goals on professional growth plans increased the chances that teachers would accomplish them: “If you make a long laundry list, the likelihood is high that you won’t complete any of it, because it’s paralyzing to think about having that much to think about correcting. Our focus is on what’s going to do the most to improve your practice and what can you actually accomplish—and that’s what we’re going to hold you accountable for.”
As discussed above, frequent classroom observations were a hallmark of great principals. We are addressing them separately here, instead of as part of “Monitoring performance,” because of the nuanced way highly-effective principals used informal observations to both supervise teachers and develop their capacity.

**Ongoing monitoring of progress toward performance goals.**
Highly-effective principals set clear expectations for performance and conducted ongoing observations of classroom practice to determine whether expectations were being met. Principals monitored both school-wide and individual performance and took action accordingly. Throughout the year, they held teachers accountable for implementing strategies from professional development sessions and improving in the areas identified during the formal and informal observation processes. Struggling teachers were monitored even more closely, both to provide additional support to the teacher and to supply the principal with up-to-date information on their progress. As one teacher put it, “Since I know [the principal] will be coming to my room, I don’t let things slip the way I might otherwise. [The visits] help me stay accountable and on top of my game.” Strong principals provided difficult feedback even to strong teachers to push all teachers to continuously improve their practice.

**Ongoing assessment of individual and collective strengths and growth areas.**
Highly-effective principals used frequent classroom observations and the results of interim student assessments to develop a clear picture of the strengths and needs of every teacher in the building. By closely monitoring staff performance, principals were able to make informed decisions about assigning roles and responsibilities that matched strengths and growth areas, to identify appropriate school-wide professional development topics and to clarify expectations, if needed.
At A.B. Hill Elementary in Memphis, TN, led by Principal Tyrone Hobson, the principal, assistant principal and instructional facilitator conducted daily observations, using an instructional checklist to survey and improve upon the consistency of instruction. “This is a tool to help us monitor instruction,” said the principal. “It gives us a quick snapshot of what’s going on.” Using the trends across classrooms, the leadership team was able to address gaps in instruction and areas of growth with individual teachers or in grade-level team meetings as they were observed.

The teacher-evaluation process at YES Prep North Central in Houston, TX, where Mark Dibella served as school director, included a formal midyear evaluation in addition to an end-of-year summative evaluation. DiBella said, “The purpose of our midyear evaluation is to ensure that we’re getting a chance to focus in on student achievement data and make sure that there is a connection [to] the goals that teachers are setting instructionally...It’s a way to make sure that we’re having focused conversations around those two things.” The midyear evaluation cycle included an announced, full-lesson observation conducted by the dean of instruction to measure each teacher’s performance on aspects of the school’s Instructional Excellence Rubric. Midyear observations data was cross-checked with the data collected during the 15-20 minute observations conducted throughout the first semester and followed by a post-observation conference with each teacher to review their evaluation, identify target areas for growth and brainstorm possible second-semester goals in preparation for the year-end summative evaluation meeting.
Creating a Great Place to Work

Successful principals made sure teachers knew they were valued and fostered a strong community among colleagues. They delegated leadership and responsibility, and in doing so, gave teachers ownership over school decisions and initiatives.

Great principals shaped their schools into places where effective teachers wanted to work and stay. Successful Fortune 100 companies have long understood the need to create positive and productive environments to keep scarce talent and maximize productivity. Effective principals understood this, too, and recognized that teachers want to work in environments where they are valued, trusted and respected as individuals. They want to work with colleagues who genuinely care about their well-being and success, and they want to work in a place where they have opportunities to develop professionally. High-performing principals attracted and kept the best staff by making sure teachers felt respected and had opportunities to grow.

We found that principals directly influenced five areas of the school environment:
Successful principals understood that effective instruction could not occur in chaotic classrooms. They established uniform, enforceable codes of conduct that were aligned to school values.

**Enforcing school-wide consistency.**
Highly-effective principals implemented clear and consistent codes of conduct that reinforced positive behavior and disciplined infractions. Principals insisted that every adult in the building implement the code of conduct in the same way so that students would know exactly what is expected of them. As a result, individual teachers no longer had to develop their own strategies for classroom management. A school-wide approach meant that no one teacher stood on his or her own, and it provided valuable scaffolding for novices. Teachers of all experience levels reported finding it easier to focus on the core of their work: instruction.

**Aligning codes to school values.**
Great principals made sure the codes of conduct buttressed their efforts to build a culture of high achievement for all students. The codes of conduct were designed to reinforce positive learning behaviors, such as demonstrating consistent effort and showing respect for oneself and others. They also provided a framework for discipline when students failed to meet expectations. The rewards for positive behaviors and the consequences for infractions were clear and understood throughout the entire school community, and were primarily handled within the classroom, not in visits to the principal’s office.

Enforcing school-wide consistency

When Lori Phillips was assigned to be principal of Dunbar Elementary in Memphis, TN, she determined through observations and interviews that to improve academic performance she had to address the lack of order in the building. Phillips reflected, “Without structure and a positive climate, there is no way you can focus on academics. I knew we’d be able to shift our focus to improving instruction once we had order and a positive learning climate.” She established consistent expectations for student and staff behavior across the school and modeled the behavior she wanted to see. These consistent expectations made it clear how infractions were to be addressed. According to Phillips, “Chaotic and unruly behavior in the cafeteria and in the hallways improved right away. Children came in the building quietly and were no longer wild and loud. Teachers quickly learned not to discipline children by sending them out of their classrooms. And there was no running in and out of classrooms as there had been before.”
Highly-effective principals were considerate leaders who made sure teachers knew how much they mattered.

Establishing routines and rituals that signal teachers are valued.
Great principals found ways to celebrate teacher success. They recognized teachers who made progress in improving student achievement. They also found ways to express appreciation for hard work. Teachers reported that simply saying “thank you” went a long way towards making them feel valued.

Demanding that teachers respect one another.
Effective communication fosters community and eliminates the corrosive effects of closed-door venting. Great principals were sensitive to workplace tensions and counseled staff on how to respectfully resolve differences.

Respecting teachers’ time and opinions.
Effective principals respected teachers’ boundaries and incorporated their views into decisions. Principals acknowledged when their requests were impractical or unfair and respected a teacher’s prerogative to set boundaries. When principals approached and treated teachers as professionals, the teachers felt and acted like professionals.

Exceptional leaders instilled a sense of community among staff members to improve retention and intensify staff commitment to school goals. Teacher Learning Communities, first discussed under “Developing Teachers,” gave teachers a structured way to learn from each other and push each other to improve as educators. They also contributed to making teachers feel comfortable in and dedicated to their school.

Building a community.
Great principals encouraged collaboration among teachers. This not only improved instruction through shared practice, it also created relationships between colleagues. Working closely together gave teachers a chance to get to know each other, learn from each other and develop trust in each other’s opinions. Teachers who are part of a learning community share values, develop a common repertoire of techniques and develop an allegiance to the community. This sense of community makes teachers more likely to experience a sense of belonging and commitment, which in turn enables schools to retain effective teachers.

Airways Middle School was known by members of the Memphis community as a school afflicted by violence and frequent disruption—a place where limited learning took place. Principal Sharron Griffin and her assistant set about changing student behavior as the first step in changing school culture. Griffin said, “One of my first priorities was discipline and order. I knew that without discipline and order, instruction couldn’t take place, not effectively.” For this reason, she and her assistant principal put in place the Progressive Discipline System (PDS), which teachers and students were expected to follow consistently and with fidelity. The PDS protocol is designed to manage student infractions with scaffolded interventions. A student who continued to act out after two initial interventions met with all of his or her teachers, and together they identified any common academic and behavioral challenges the student was facing. After that meeting, the student was asked to sign a “Behavior Contract,” which Griffin explained, “empowers the student to say, ‘Hey, I do have a problem here... and if I do the right thing, these are all the incentives that I want.’” Teachers felt that the school’s fidelity to the PDS was a critical step in the school’s turnaround. Ultimately, the development of school identity—and respect within the building—set the stage for learning without disruptions.
According to Principal David Ayala of KIPP DC: KEY Academy in Washington, D.C., a key to building a strong and cohesive staff was to encourage a direct, respectful approach to having difficult conversations. Whenever interpersonal problems or conflicts arose, staff members were expected to confront and resolve their differences in direct one-to-one conversations. The school designed professional development sessions based on the book Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most. All staff members received explicit instruction in how to productively conduct difficult conversations. They were given opportunities to practice through role-play activities during summer professional development and throughout the school year. They acted out scenarios typical of school conflict, including upholding administrative norms, talking about students and complaining about other teachers.

Terry Ross at Getwell Elementary School in Memphis, TN explained, “I really learned that you need to treat your teachers like professionals, respect their ability and tap into their ability. I promised teachers that if we managed our time well during the day, they wouldn’t have to give the school their time during the weekend and in the evenings. I remember one faculty meeting when we were supposed to meet from 3:30 to 4:30 P.M. I realized it was 5:15 P.M. I apologized to everyone and was waiting for people to rush out, but they didn’t. There were groups of teachers still working in different pockets of the library. One fifth-grade group was going over a rubric for scoring student writing with a couple of newer teachers.”
Great principals considered individual teacher preferences when making teaching assignments and defining other roles and responsibilities. Accommodating teacher preferences, even in small ways, was a critical strategy for improving teacher's happiness in their role and therefore a critical strategy for retaining effective teachers.

**Taking teacher preferences into account when assigning roles.**

Great principals understood their staff’s teaching interests and made every effort to accommodate that. Principals were willing to do this even if the assignments didn’t necessarily serve greater school effectiveness or staff development—they recognized the importance of staff happiness as a goal in-and-of-itself.

Although classroom teachers usually have a standard core set of responsibilities, there are often several roles and responsibilities that principals distribute across the staff. For example, teachers frequently share responsibilities related to planning the grade-level field trip, running an after-school program or serving on various school committees. Highly-effective principals sought to assign responsibilities in ways that matched individual teachers’ interests and desires for professional growth. For example, a principal in our sample allowed and encouraged two teachers in the same grade level to share teaching responsibilities across their two classes because one teacher was particularly interested in teaching math and science while the other preferred to teach reading and social studies. This decision did not support professional growth or staff management—it was solely designed to make the role more desirable for the teachers. Teachers were more likely to want to stay when their principal found ways to accommodate their interests and preferences.

Sometimes, for the good of the school, principals made the tough decision to reassign teachers in ways that might not be popular. By being responsive and respectful, principals built trust among their staff, which made great teachers more likely to accept role changes and more likely to stay.

---

**Building a community**

Dee Weedon became principal of Keystone Elementary in Memphis, TN, as the school was expanding, enrolling a bigger, more diverse, student population and hiring more teachers. Weedon’s goal was for new and veteran teachers to build working relationships with each other as they evaluated the needs of the new students. To accomplish that, she gave every teacher a role in drafting the school-improvement plan (SIP). Says Weedon, “I focused on finding ways to encourage new and veteran teachers to work collaboratively and understand the academic strengths and challenges of the changing student population. Just as important, we had to develop a common mission, vision and beliefs around the ‘new’ Keystone. By involving the entire staff in the process of developing the school-improvement plan, which Tennessee requires every three years, I set out to do all these things.”

Each teacher sat on a subcommittee in charge of a specific component of the plan. The subcommittees were made up of teachers from different grade-levels and subjects, enabling collaboration between staff members who normally wouldn’t interact.
Highly-effective principals did everything in their power to create clear pathways for great teachers to expand their reach both inside and outside the classroom.

**Giving teachers a voice in decisions.**

Great principals offered teachers many opportunities to take on leadership responsibilities, and in doing so, gave teachers a voice in how the school was run. They gave teachers a role in leading professional development, conducting classroom observations, designing the curriculum and even hiring new staff. In doing so, they gave teachers a sense of ownership over decisions, leading to increased acceptance of and commitment to school-wide initiatives.

**Rewarding teachers with increased leadership.**

Great principals rewarded highly-effective teachers with increased leadership responsibilities, such as becoming mentor teachers or members of Instructional Leadership Teams. Successful principals also recommended strong candidates to become assistant principals and principals. Teachers valued these assignments not only because they sought opportunity for professional growth, but also because they signaled recognition and appreciation of their strengths and potential. Such support for career advancement helps principals retain the best teachers (in the district, if not always in their school), as it demonstrates confidence in teacher abilities and a true personal commitment to teachers as individuals with career goals.

---

**Giving teachers a voice in decisions**

Dr. Dee Weedon, of Keystone Elementary in Memphis, TN, needed to hire more staff, as the school transitioned from an optional school with selective admission requirements to a neighborhood school with 180 new students and 10 new teachers. She included all grade-level teams in the hiring process. Teachers collaboratively developed interview questions and scoring rubrics, participated in interviews and reached a consensus on which candidates to hire. Says Dr. Weedon, “One of the first things I did to prepare for this transition was to meet with each teacher individually. While everyone told me they were happy with the school and how it was run, about half of the school’s 20 teachers told me they wanted a greater voice in how things were done.”

Dr. Weedon wanted to make sure that by hiring 10 new teachers, “we didn’t create an us-versus-them situation. I also wanted to send the message that it was a new day at Keystone and that there would be some decisions we would all make together. So I decided to include the staff in the hiring process for new teachers.” Says Dr. Weedon of the impact, “Teachers here are very focused; they tend to work very hard. They support one another, they share and they stick up for one another—not because they have to, but because they see themselves as a team. I think the hiring process contributed to that sense of teamwork...I also think the hiring process helped teachers realize they do have a say, and it strengthened their sense of ownership in the school.”
CHAMPIONSHIP COACHES: WHAT PRINCIPALS OF THE MOST SUCCESSFUL SCHOOLS DID DIFFERENTLY
Legendary coaches who lead their teams to championships and sustain success over time rise above other talented head coaches.

We conducted an analysis to examine whether the practices of highly-effective principals (those that led dramatic gains in the UEF data set and those that led schools with relatively higher value-add scores in the EPIC data set) differed from the practices of less-effective principals (those that led incremental gains in the UEF data set). Just like championship coaches, we found that the most successful principals:

1. **See the full game.**
   Like championship coaches who attend to all aspects of the game—offense, defense, and special teams—great principals have a playbook that covers developing teachers, managing talent and creating a great place to work, often achieving two or more of these goals with just one action.

2. **Focus on the right plays at the right time.**
   Like great head coaches who develop a new game plan each week tailored toward the specific strengths and weaknesses of the next opposing team, great principals diagnose the strengths and weaknesses of their schools and identify particular strategies they want to emphasize from their playbook. They adjust these strategies over time as the needs and context of their schools change. They call the right plays at the right time.

3. **Emphasize flawless execution.**
   Like legendary coaches who are perfectionists, great principals implement their strategies with greater quality and thoroughness, performing actions with frequency and intensity.

First, the most successful principals understood that they could not achieve success by only developing teachers, or only managing talent, or only improving school culture. They understood that they needed to address all three areas to recruit the right people, develop them to their full potential and retain them over time. They did not execute every leadership action in the playbook, but they did focus on at least one in each of the three areas.

Second, with only so much time in the day (and school year), the most successful principals strategically focused their time and energy towards particular strategies across the three areas. This approach often meant focusing on the “high yardage plays” at the intersection of the Venn Diagram, like cultivating leadership, conducting observations with useful feedback, fostering “Teacher Learning Communities”, and individualizing roles and responsibilities.

Most importantly, the most successful principals tailored their focus appropriately to the specific (and changing) needs of their schools. This was especially important in chaotic schools, where principals worked first on establishing order and getting the right staff on board before tackling peer-led instructional support.

Finally, the most successful principals were thorough and relentless in their efforts to improve teaching, performing their leadership duties frequently and with intensity. For example, they observed classrooms often enough to be familiar with every single teacher’s strengths, weaknesses and progress toward improvement.
SEEING THE FULL GAME

The most successful principals saw all three areas of staff development, management decisions and workplace environment as critical to improving and sustaining teacher effectiveness. Whereas the less successful principals tended to focus in just one or two of these areas, the more successful principals made plays that serviced all three goals. They also saw these three areas as linked, not as discrete and disparate problems to tackle. They understood that the solution to one challenge could also go a long way toward resolving another. The most successful principals were vigilant in identifying “high-yardage plays” that simultaneously addressed teacher development, talent management and school culture, and therefore made large strides in improving instruction. These high-yardage plays included: cultivating leadership, conducting observations with useful feedback, fostering “Teacher Learning Communities”, and individualizing roles and responsibilities.

Highly-effective principals utilized classroom observations to simultaneously improve teachers’ instructional ability and monitor performance. Similarly, when these principals fostered “Teacher Learning Communities”, they not only supported peer-led instructional assistance, they also created a community that made the school a place where teachers wanted to work. When especially strong principals made decisions about teacher roles and responsibilities, they balanced the needs of the school and the interests of the teachers – strategically managing talent while building trust. When these leaders distributed decision-making authority to teachers, it served all three areas by building skill, leveraging talent and providing an opportunity for career growth that made teachers want to stay.

The strongest principals not only understood this overlap, they used it to their advantage. A previous example described how Michelle Pierre-Farid used observation and feedback to develop teacher capacity. In addition, she communicated clear performance expectations at the beginning of the year (for example, including the use of active word walls, bulletin boards with student work, learning centers and desks arranged to encourage small group instruction) and then tied her feedback to those performance expectations to monitor and hold staff accountable for meeting those goals. Also, by conducting these observations in every classroom on a regular basis, she became well informed about the strengths and weaknesses of each individual teacher, thereby allowing her to assign roles and responsibilities that fit teacher strengths and growth areas.

As this example illustrates, highly-effective principals linked their classroom observations to both staffing decisions and professional development. They designed relevant professional development, targeted at the needs they witnessed firsthand during classroom observations. Then, they followed up with additional observations to hold teachers accountable for implementing the skills addressed in training sessions. Finally, they made staffing decisions (hiring, assigning roles, and when necessary, counseling out) based on the school-wide and individual needs they discovered through ongoing classroom observations.

By contrast, classroom observations that were divorced from professional development and staffing decisions fell short. For example, one principal who distributed leadership to an instructional leadership team, but who did so in ways that were not thoughtful about teachers’ professional interests and growth trajectories, achieved a short-term gain in efficiency but missed an opportunity to maximize the school’s ability to retain its best talent.
The best principals recognized the trifecta of leading great teachers: develop them, manage the talent in the school and make the building a place where great teachers want to work. Addressing these goals head-on and with a well-rounded approach led to rapid and significant improvement in student achievement.

FOCUSING ON THE RIGHT PLAYS AT THE RIGHT TIME

Like leaders in any other field, the most successful principals did not attempt to do everything at once; they targeted and adapted their strategies to fit the situation at hand.

Highly-effective principals approached the goal of improving teacher effectiveness in different ways depending on the specific needs of the school. Some principals led dramatic gains in schools that were chaotic and low-performing (i.e., proficiency rates below 30 at the start of their tenure at the school). Other principals led dramatic gains in schools that were moderately-performing when the principal took the helm. Great principals were able to correctly diagnose what needed to be done and hone in on actions appropriate to the particular situation. For example, in chaotic schools, principals dedicated themselves first and foremost to creating an atmosphere conducive to learning. In moderately-performing schools, principals focused on ways to give teachers more ownership over the school-wide goal of higher achievement. In each case, the strongest leaders recognized the need to tailor improvement strategies to the very individual circumstances that a school presented.

Highly-effective principals not only employed a wide variety of strategies to improve teacher effectiveness but also knew which actions to emphasize when. Like running a two-minute offense at the beginning of the first quarter, mistimed improvements can disrupt school tempo and throw off the leadership team’s game. Instead, a carefully queued approach to improving teaching can create a cascade of positive changes. Leadership is not one-size-fits-all. The most capable leaders know their team and know their playbook. They tailor their actions to meet the needs of their students, teachers and school.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actions emphasized in chaotic, low-performing schools</th>
<th>Actions emphasized in moderately-performing schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Getting the right people on the bus.”[^13]</td>
<td>Fostering teacher learning communities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raising expectations.</td>
<td>Cultivating leadership.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instituting a code of conduct.</td>
<td>Distributing decision making.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building capacity &amp; monitoring for consistent instructional practices.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**TABLE 1**
Variation in actions to improve teacher effectiveness between principals in low-performing versus moderately-performing schools.
EMPHASIZING FLAWLESS EXECUTION

The principals of the highest-gaining schools in our study made effective teaching their top priority and performed their responsibilities with exceptional thoroughness and quality.

The specific types of strategies that all principals used to improve teacher effectiveness were similar across the board. When we compared the actions of principals in schools that made dramatic gains in student achievement with principals of schools that made incremental gains, we found that principals who led dramatic gains employed these strategies with greater frequency and intensity.

For example, the most successful principals conducted teacher observations more frequently and provided teachers with more precise and detailed feedback. They followed up by persistently monitoring the progress of teachers as they implemented feedback from the observations. Similarly, codes of conduct in high-gaining schools were more thorough and more consistently enforced.

Simply going through the motions was not enough to ensure great teaching in every classroom, every year. Rather, the most effective leaders were perfectionists who executed their strategies to improve teacher effectiveness with greater quality and intensity.

**TABLE 2**
Examples of how leadership actions differed in quality and intensity between principals of high-gaining and incrementally-gaining schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership action</th>
<th>Principals of high-gaining schools</th>
<th>Principals of incrementally-gaining schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conducting observations and giving feedback.</td>
<td>• Observed each teacher at least 1-2 times a month.</td>
<td>• Were faithful to the formal evaluation process and minimum number of evaluations, but provided feedback that was less concrete.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Gave immediate, specific and actionable feedback.</td>
<td>• When professional goals were identified, they were less specific and measurable, and often accompanied by inconsistent follow-up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Identified specific and measurable targets for growth and timelines for meeting those targets, then held teachers accountable for progress.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruiting, selecting and placing staff.</td>
<td>• Planned ahead to identify vacancies and proactively recruited broadly.</td>
<td>• Did recruit, but not as widely and not as early.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Led a rigorous screening process, including interviews and demonstration lessons.</td>
<td>• Included a range of stakeholders, but did not necessarily use a rigorous interview protocol or require demonstration lessons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Included a wide range of stakeholders.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instituting a code of student conduct.</td>
<td>• Established codes of conduct that reinforced positive learning behaviors and provided a framework for discipline.</td>
<td>• Instituted codes of conduct, but did not enforce consistent implementation by all adults and for every student.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Insisted that every adult implement the codes of conduct in the same way.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>