

Stories From the Field

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MAKE ROOM FOR THE PRINCIPAL SUPERVISORS

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Photos: Courtesy of Denver Public Schools.

Cover photo: Instructional Superintendent Diane Smith and Deputy Jermall Wright each oversee nine schools and jointly supervise one.

Word cloud (p. 7): Courtesy of the Council of the Great City Schools. From p. 3 of *Evaluations and the Principal Supervisor: Survey Results from the Great City Schools*. Available at: <http://www.cgcs.org/cms/lib/DC00001581/Centricity/Domain/87/Principal%20evaluation%20report.pdf>

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Make Room for the Principal Supervisors

Despite tight budgets, Denver Public Schools has hired more people to coach and evaluate leaders. Here's how the district did it.

By Jennifer Gill

When Antwan Wilson became an instructional superintendent for Denver Public Schools in 2008, he took over supervision of its 21 high schools. He considered himself lucky if he could visit each school once a month, for a three-hour meeting in the principal's office on a topic set by the district. He never sat in on a principal's meetings with parents or observed a principal running a professional-development workshop with teachers. He often didn't know if a principal had carried out a particular idea they had discussed because there wasn't time to circle back and check. With so many buildings to supervise, he recalls,

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"I wasn't able to do anything deeply except at a few targeted schools."

Fast-forward to today, and Wilson is Denver's assistant superintendent of post-secondary readiness. His division manages 55 schools – all of the district's middle and high schools as well as its lowest-performing elementary schools, which have been targeted for intense intervention. He oversees a team of eight instructional superintendents, with plans to add another, and each is responsible for about seven to nine schools. Seventy percent of their time is spent in those buildings. They visit principals at least once every two weeks, more if the school is struggling. They observe classrooms, review data on student test scores, coach their principals through difficult decisions – and follow up with a phone call to see how those decisions played out. In other words, they're the type of instructional superintendent Wilson wanted to be but couldn't.

Denver is one of a small but growing number of districts around the country that are rethinking the job of principal supervisors and the critical work they do with schools. A major feature of the overhaul is what's known in the business world as "reducing the span of control," or decreasing the number of people a supervisor manages so he or she can better support each one. "Instructional superintendents are the most

important link between district leadership and our schools,” says Denver Public Schools Superintendent Tom Boasberg, who joined the district as chief operating officer in 2007 after a career in business and government. “You wouldn’t see other knowledge-based professions in the public or private sector with such wide spans of control.”

Management theories abound on the optimal size of the span of control. The short answer is, there isn’t a magic number. A study by *Harvard Business Review* found that the average Fortune 500 CEO has 9.8 direct reports, but many factors can push that figure up or down.¹ A wider span can work with jobs that are simple to do and therefore need little supervision. A narrower span lets a manager give more hands-on support, which can be crucial for jobs that require a high degree

1 Gary L. Neilson and Julie Wulf, “How Many Direct Reports?” *Harvard Business Review*, April 2012. <http://hbr.org/2012/04/how-many-direct-reports/ar/1>

of skill or that are being redefined. That aptly describes the work of principals today. With research linking effective school leadership to student success, principals everywhere are being asked to drive better instruction and learning in their buildings. Many are looking for guidance from their district offices, but it’s not always available: A survey of 41 urban school districts by the Council of the Great City Schools found that the average principal supervisor manages 24 principals with little support staff.²

Denver bucked that trend in 2010 when it received federal funding to support its school turnaround efforts. The district serves nearly 85,000 students from

2 Michael Casserly, Sharon Lewis, Candace Simon, Renata Uzzell and Moses Palacios, *Principal Evaluations and the Principal Supervisor: Survey Results from the Great City Schools*, 2013, 23. <http://www.cgcs.org/cms/lib/DC00001581/Centricity/Domain/87/Principal%20evaluation%20report.pdf>

Denver’s Central Office Seeks to Satisfy Its Customers: Principals and Their Supervisors

The feedback stung: Only 43 percent of Denver’s principals who were asked were happy with the service they got from the district’s human resources department. That feedback five years ago kick-started a huge shift in how HR interacts with school leaders. Under the direction of its chief human resources officer, Shayne Spalten, the district appointed a full-time HR staffer to every instructional superintendent and corresponding cluster of 17 to 20 schools. Now when principals have a question about benefits or hiring, they don’t waste half a day on the phone trying to find the right person to talk to – or give up and ask their instructional superintendents to figure it out. They just call their HR partner. If that person doesn’t know the answer, it’s his or her job to find out and get back to the principal. The partners are also expected to spend half their time in schools to discuss staffing, explain new HR policies – and gather valuable intelligence for the central office. “They’ll come back and say, ‘There’s a missing policy on this issue. Can we figure out a solution?’” says Spalten. Within 18 months of implementing the new procedure, principal satisfaction with human resources soared to more than 90 percent.

Now Boasberg is putting the rest of the central office on speed dial to better support school leaders – and, in turn, their supervisors. Starting this year, every in-

structional superintendent and deputy has a team of 10 partners in key departments of the central office to assist the group of schools they oversee. These are not new positions but redesigned ones, in departments such as HR, finance, data assessment, curriculum and mental health. Some specialists, such as in HR and finance, work on behalf of the schools full time. For others, the job is on top of the work they’re already doing. The district’s math coordinator, for instance, is also the main contact in the curriculum department for a group of schools. Those principals know to call her with any curriculum questions, whether they’re math-related or not, and she’ll coordinate the relevant services from her department. “It takes the burden off of instructional superintendents and sets the expectation – both theirs and the rest of the office – that their job is to be in schools coaching our principals,” says Boasberg.

Patricia Gonzales, an elementary school principal on Denver’s southwest side, is starting to see a difference in the level of support. Last year, she had trouble even getting her calls returned in a timely fashion from district departments such as student services. In a marked contrast, her new mental-health partner now visits her school monthly to check in. She hopes the other partners follow suit and get to know her school’s needs, rather than swoop in only when a problem arises. “That,” she says excitedly, “would be ideal.”



Denver Public Schools Superintendent Tom Boasberg says that principal supervisors are “the most important link between district leadership and our schools.”

Principals wanted more time with instructional superintendents.

preschool to 12th grade in 128 conventional public schools and another 66 more autonomous charter-type programs. With the federal grant, the district took about 20 failing schools and grouped them into two geographic clusters, each overseen by an instructional superintendent. Recognizing that the schools’ success hinged on effective leadership – and that those leaders needed sufficient support to achieve results – the district also hired deputy instructional superintendents for each cluster so that each supervisor managed only four or five buildings. The feedback from the field was swift, says Wilson. “I started getting unsolicited calls and e-mails from principals saying, ‘I’ve seen my

supervisor more in the past month than I did all last year;” he recalls. “They really wanted that support.” Wilson believes the extra oversight played a role in the turnarounds at several schools.

Those school leaders weren’t the only ones looking for more face time with their supervisors. “Regardless of the achievement level of their school, principals were telling us that they wanted more time with instructional superintendents so they could observe their practice and be a thought partner,” says Patricia Slaughter, assistant superintendent of the elementary schools division.

The upshot? Slaughter’s division – which oversees 73 conventional schools split into five regional clusters averaging 14 schools, each managed by an instructional superintendent – began testing out a reduced span of control, too. In a pilot project last year, Slaughter hired a deputy to work alongside Instructional Superintendent Ivan Duran and help him manage the 17 princi-

The district has limited district-level meetings to Mondays and Fridays so supervisors can spend most of their time staying in touch with principals.

pals and schools on the southwest side of the city. Duran and deputy Brette Scott divvied up the schools and jointly supervised one that was particularly struggling.

The change was felt immediately, says Cristina Bansch-Schott, then a principal at one of the schools that Duran supervised. “Right away, I saw a difference in his availability and the length of time he spent at my school,” she recalls. His visits, before a bit scattered, became a monthly routine. He checked in by phone regularly just to see how things were going.

The new structure also led to fruitful exchanges of information and ideas. Schools on Denver’s southwest side share similar challenges, including a high number of English Language Learners, so Duran and Scott found themselves talking about common problems and cross-pollinating ideas that worked in each other’s buildings. “Being the single support for 17 schools is a very large responsibility,” says Duran. “With a deputy, there’s shared ownership.”

It didn’t take long for the four other instructional superintendents in Slaughter’s division to start clamoring for a deputy, too. Slaughter believed she had a strong argument for the additional personnel: Denver is rolling out a new approach to evaluating principals, one that is heavily observation-based. To do it right, instructional superintendents need to spend significant time in their schools gathering evidence of a principal’s performance. Then they need time to give feedback and identify training to shore up a principal’s weak areas. How could that be possible, asked Slaughter, if they’re overseeing as many as 19 schools?

Boasberg and other district senior leaders agreed, but the question of money – how to pay for the deputies – loomed large. The answer was to reduce the number of staff people working for instructional superintendents and use the savings to hire four more deputies for the

elementary schools division. Now all five clusters of elementary schools have an instructional superintendent and a deputy; each oversees an average of seven buildings. At the same time, the staff, which as recently as 2008 consisted of as many as eight direct reports to the instructional superintendent, is down to one specialist focusing on instructional support. “They are very thinly staffed to concentrate our resources where we think they matter most, which is to support and coach principals,” says Boasberg.

The reduction in staff size didn’t happen in a vacuum. Boasberg also restructured the central office to make departments such as human resources and finance more responsive to both the supervisors and their principals. [See sidebar on p. 4.] In addition, he limited district-level meetings to Mondays and Fridays so supervisors can spend most of their time visiting schools and staying in touch with principals.

In introducing the new deputies, the district, to be sure, added managers, a move that might be expected to elicit eye-rolls from the people being supervised. So far, however, that hasn’t happened, says Susana Cordova, Denver’s chief academic officer. In addition, she believes downsizing the staff was a reasonable trade-off to reduce the span of control. “If what you’re hoping to do is add to your existing structure, you’re never going to have enough money,” she says. “We’ve added a higher

‘I have to learn the balance between coaching and listening, and directing and telling,’ one principal supervisor says.

utility player to the mix. Having all been principals, the deputies have both the content and the leadership expertise we need.”

The elementary schools division has 10 instructional superintendents and deputies as of fall 2013, and six are new to the group. Slaughter, concerned about how the team would bond, took steps to ease the transition. To foster better communication, she relocated the division to another floor in the district building so that instructional superintendents and deputies could sit together. The move means the division no longer occupies

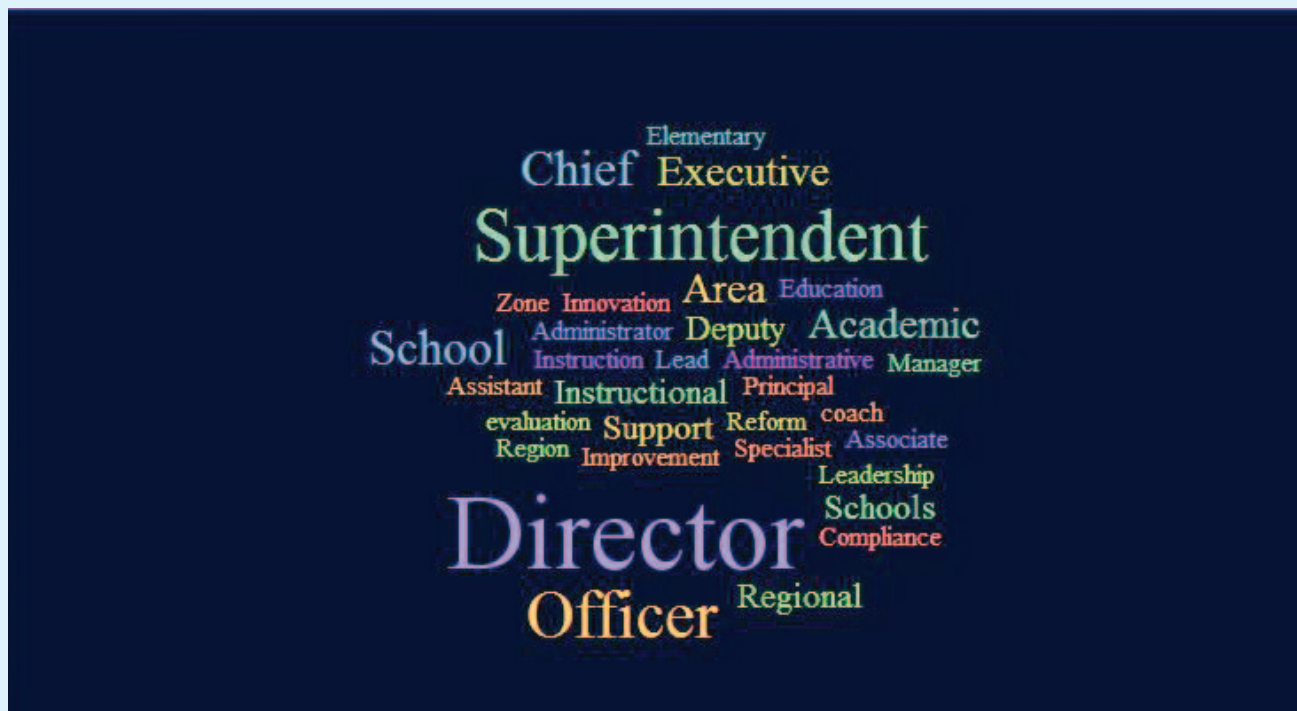
the same floor as Boasberg and other senior leaders, but it allows teams such as Instructional Superintendent Diane Smith and deputy Jermall Wright to push back their chairs and talk over the cubicle wall.

Wright is one of the new deputies, joining DPS after a decade as a principal, most recently in Washington, D.C. He and Smith each oversee nine schools and jointly supervise one. Smith, who has a long tenure with the district, originally took over supervision of all the neediest schools, including those with new principals. But once she became familiar with Wright and his past experience, the two revised the groupings to more evenly balance the caseload between them. Wright, for one, is still getting comfortable in his new role. “As a principal, I was used to being in control and making decisions for my own school,” he says. “I have to learn the balance between coaching and listening, and directing and telling. I’m not here to do the job for them. It’s not an easy skill to learn when you’re so familiar with the role that you’re now supervising.”

Logic might suggest that more personalized, hands-on support for principals will ultimately lead to better student outcomes, but such a link has not been demonstrated. The district’s own findings are mixed: In last year’s pilot test that reduced the span of control of schools on the city’s southwest side, some schools saw gains in achievement while others declined. Faculty dismissals – and the upheaval that went along with it – likely played a role at the schools that dropped, says Duran, but he still believes having fewer schools to manage can make a long-term difference.

Bansch-Schott, the former principal Duran supervised, agrees. This year, she left the principal’s office to become one of the new instructional superintendents in the elementary schools division. She knows that all eyes are on her and the new crew of supervisors. “The district has invested in doubling the size of our division,” she says. “We are all accountable for having schools that meet expectations.”

A Variety of Titles for ‘Principal Supervisor’



The Council of The Great City Schools found many different terms for “principal supervisor” when it surveyed large school districts in late 2012, as this word cloud shows. The larger the typesize the more common the term.

The Wallace Foundation is a national philanthropy that seeks to improve education and enrichment for disadvantaged children. The foundation has an unusual approach: funding projects to test innovative ideas for solving important public problems, conducting research to find out what works and what doesn't and to fill key knowledge gaps – and then communicating the results to help others.

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