Discussion Guide
Introduction

This discussion guide is designed to be used in conjunction with School Leadership in Action: Principal Practices, a series of videos anchored in the five leadership practices identified in a decade of research supported by The Wallace Foundation. The questions can be used to frame reflective conversations about leadership practices in university-based coursework, district-based training programs, coaching or supervisory conversations, or peer-run professional learning communities.
Key Practice 1: Shaping a Vision of Academic Success for All Students

1. **Vision Statements: Process and Product**: In creating a school’s vision statement, the actual statement and the process at arriving at the statement are both important. Principals William Bassell and Susan Bearse describe how their schools arrived at their current vision statements using stakeholder feedback and comprehensive needs assessments. How and in what ways does the process for creating the vision matter? If you were to design a process for creating or adapting a school vision, what are some key elements you would include in that process?

2. **Vision and Demographic Change**: Both principals describe how a change in student demographics—related to learning needs and family resources—pushed the schools to think differently about their vision statements and/or the methods used to achieve the vision. How should the characteristics of a school’s student body relate to and shape a school’s vision and the instructional and organizational approaches implemented in an effort to achieve the vision?

3. **Formal Communication of the Vision**: Both principals describe formal communication channels through which they express the vision to various stakeholders and community members. What is the purpose of these formal communication channels and how do they carry the lived vision of the school?

4. **Branding a School’s Vision**: Principal Bill Bassell discusses the branding of the school’s vision. Branding is most often associated with product promotion. What is meant by “branding” a school vision? Why would a school leader want to brand a school vision?

5. **Vision-driven Instructional Decisions**: Principals Bill Bassell and Susan Bearse tie key instructional decisions back to the schools’ vision. How can the vision be used as an organizing principle for making concrete decisions about daily practices such as (a) how AP and/or gifted courses are offered, (b) the professional learning opportunities available to teachers, (c) the instructional strategies implemented in classrooms, (d) the administration’s approach to teachers struggling to ensure academic success for all students, and (e) the teachers’ and support staff’s approach to students for whom current instructional approaches are not effective?

6. **Evidence of Staff Living the Vision**: How would a school leader know whether a teacher, a guidance counselor, a related service provider, and/or a custodian were incorporating the vision into her or his daily professional practice?

7. **Inheriting a Vision**: If you were assuming the principalship of an existing school, what would you want to know about the school’s vision for academic success? About the process used to create it? About the ways in which current instructional and administrative practices align to it? How would you go about gathering this information and what would you do with it?
8. **Re-visioning:** How often and under what circumstances should a school revisit its vision statement? Why?

9. **Leading a Vision of Academic Success:** What are leadership behaviors that align to a vision of academic success for all students in terms of (a) communication with students and parents, (b) coaching and supervision of instructional and non-instructional staff, (c) organizing for providing mandated special education instructional and related services (d) allocating staffing resources based on student needs?

10. **Skills for Leading with Vision:** What are the skills necessary for a principal to lead the work of crafting, working toward, and holding staff accountable for professional practices that align to the school vision? How did the two principals in the video demonstrate these skills? Which of these skills are growth areas for you? What experiences would you need in order to further develop these skills?
Key Practice 2: Creating a Climate Hospitable to Education

1. **Climate, Culture and Academic Performance:** Principals Kimberly Washington and Tom DeGrazia discuss the relationship between school climate, culture and academic performance. How would you characterize the connections between school culture and academic performance in the schools where you have worked? Were there any deliberate efforts at school culture that were oriented toward improving academic outcomes?

2. **Systems and Structures for Supporting Teachers:** Key to both principals’ leadership is to create a supportive environment for teachers. What systems, structures and personnel did each principal put in place in an effort to support teachers?

3. **Aligning Adult Expectations:** When Kimberly Washington became principal, she determined that there was a “misalignment” of adult expectations for and response to student behaviors. What skills does it take for a leader to help a school community get alignment in adult expectations? Which of these skills are growth areas for you? What experiences do you need in order to further develop these skills?

4. **Focusing on Individual Students:** In both schools, teacher and administrator teams analyzed individual students to create webs of support for academic success. What are the benefits of this individualized approach? How can careful, customized consideration of individual student needs drive school- and system-wide improvement?

5. **Distributed Leadership:** In the video, several meetings were led by staff members other than the principal. In some, the principal was not present. How does this reflect on the skills, knowledge and disposition of the principals? How might the meetings be different if the principal were there?

6. **Involving Students in Culture and Climate:** Students at Kimberly Washington’s school produced a video describing the school’s uniform policy. Why did the school institute a uniform policy? How does the student-produced video communicate the policy? What message is sent when students are involved in generating and communicating policy decisions connected to school climate and culture?

7. **Teacher Intervisitation:** How do regularly scheduled teacher inter-visitations and debriefs of instructional practice contribute to the overall culture and climate of a school? What has to be put in place in order to implement such an inter-visitation schedule? What are the skills a school leader needs in order to put such teacher-focused practices in place?

8. **Behavioral Incentives:** What was the role of incentives for student behaviors and academic performance in both schools? How would you evaluate the effectiveness of these approaches?
9. **Engaging Parents**: Principal Tom DeGrazia notes the importance of parental involvement in creating a sound climate and culture for academic learning. How might giving parents a place and space to discuss parenting and issues of concern to their children contribute to the school's culture and climate?

10. **Systems Thinking**: Principal Tom DeGrazia talks about his school's efforts to "prevent problems before they occur." What information/data would you look at to determine which problems require a system or structure in order to prevent their occurrence?
Key Practice 3: Cultivating Leadership in Others

1. **Leadership Beliefs:** Principal Penny Young states: “Cultivating leadership is not a process, but a set of behaviors that a principal must demonstrate on a consistent basis.” If behaviors are an expression of our beliefs, what beliefs do you think the principals have—as evidenced in their behaviors—regarding adult learning? The role of the principal? Their own leadership style?

2. **Supporting a School and a System:** Principal Jackie Haynes describes cultivating leaders as a way to “support the mission and vision of a school and to move students’ academic achievement as well as their social, emotional learning.” She further states that she wants to make sure that the APs who work with her understand the role of principal before they walk into it. How can principals balance the leadership development needs in service of their own schools with the leadership development needs in service of the broader school systems in which they work?

3. **Balancing Adult Learning with School Needs:** Adult learning happens through action and reflection, often through trial and error. Given the needs of a school, how can principals balance the need for concrete work to get done with providing the appropriate learning opportunities to aspiring leaders within the building?

4. **Adult Learners’ Zone of Proximal Development:** What would you look for to assess what leadership tasks an emerging leader can do independently, what he or she can do with guidance, and what he or she cannot yet do?

5. **Leading from the Middle:** Principal Jackie Haynes uses the metaphor of keeping a wheel turning by leading from the middle. What does it look like to “lead from the middle”? How is that different than the notion of leading from the top?

6. **Giving Feedback:** Assistant principals in both schools discuss the benefit of receiving feedback on their leadership skills from their principals. Describe a time that you received effective feedback from a supervisor toward your leadership development. What made the feedback effective?

7. **Formal Evaluation Process:** What leadership skills are necessary to implement a formal evaluation process for Assistant or Vice Principals using self-assessment and goal setting? Which of these skills do you currently have and which are growth areas for you? What kinds of experiences do you need in order to develop those skills?

8. **Modeling:** In both schools, staff members describe the benefit of observing the principals model leadership practices. What are the benefits and limitations of teaching leadership through modeling?

9. **Leadership Skills and Dispositions:** Principal Penny Young describes the following key skills and dispositions as being necessary for effective school leadership: a passion for quality, a focus on results, relationship building,
community engagement, and a focus on student achievement. How do the ways in which Penny Young and Jackie Haynes cultivate leadership demonstrate their mastery of some or all of these leadership skills and dispositions? How do they provide opportunities for future school leaders to develop them?
Key Practice 4: Improving Instruction

1. **Focusing Instructional Improvement**: Principals Niki Brown and Deirdre Keyes build instructional leadership capacity among teaching and administrative staff in order to improve student outcomes. If the adult learning is on behalf of student learning, how should instructional leaders figure out where to focus professional development time and resources?

2. **Exploring Mental Models of Leadership**: For instructional council meetings, Principal Niki Brown is described by one of the school’s instructional lead teachers as “there to guide us but she doesn’t necessarily lead the meeting.” When should principals lead meetings, when should they be participants, when should they be observers, and when should they not attend at all? What are the potential implications of how a principal does or does not participate in a meeting for (a) the staff’s sense of ownership and decision-making authority, (b) the willingness of staff to share openly and honestly (c) the perception of the principal’s knowledge and authority, (d) accountability for professional practice?

3. **Building the Team**: Principal Niki Brown discusses a gradual process for moving from working as a “lone soldier” to building teacher leaders. Principal Deirdre Keyes discusses the shift from “working hard to working smart” in her early days as a principal. What were the steps each took to build their instructional teams?

4. **Building the Structures (1)**: What is the role of the Grade-level Chairs in Niki Brown’s school? What is the role of the Instructional Council Meetings? How do these structures work toward horizontal and vertical integration in instructional approach and student assessments?

5. **Building the Structures (2)**: What is the role of the “Go-to List” in Deirdre Keyes’s school? How does this school use intervisitations? How are these two professional learning structures related?

6. **Creating a Culture of Collaboration**: Principal Niki Brown discusses how her school’s staff is accustomed to “pushing back on each other’s thinking.” Instructional Lead Teacher Karen Riley Jeffers notes: “This year is the first year that most of our teachers have opened doors and are now like, ‘Hey I’m willing to get help, I want to be helped, I want to work with someone.’” What leadership skills must a principal demonstrate in order to establish the trust necessary for this type of professional culture to be possible?

7. **Failing Forward**: Principal Niki Brown observes that after creating a culture of collaboration, her teachers are now “comfortable with making mistakes.” Why is that something a school leader might strive to achieve?

8. **Trust**: Assistant Principal Nina Ishmael notes the trust Principal Deirdre Keyes has for key instructional staff members. Describe what school-based professional learning looks like when based on trust and when based on distrust of staff capacity.
and professional integrity. What are leadership behaviors that help to establish trust? What are behaviors that work against establishing trust?

9. **Finding Time:** Both Niki Brown and Deirdre Keyes provide teachers with time for professional learning, including meetings across subject areas and grade levels as well as intervisitations. What are the implications of regularly providing this time on budgeting, staffing, and programming/scheduling?

10. **Leadership Skills:** What leadership skills are evidenced in the work of Deirdre Keyes and Niki Brown? Which of these skills are growth areas for you? What experiences will you need in order to develop these skills?
Key Practice 5: Managing People, Data, and Processes

1. **Time as a resource**: Principals Jeanne Fagan and Clayborn Knight both discuss the need to “protect” their time. What are some of the processes, procedures and personnel they put in place to ensure that they maximize the amount of time they have to focus on instructional improvement in their schools?

2. **Delegation and Accountability**: Both principals discuss the roles of various staff members in the school, such as the school secretary, assistant principals, teachers, guidance staff, custodian and instructional coaches. What are some of the roles these various staff members play in the two schools? How do the principals communicate their expectations to these staff members and what are the systems for accountability for their professional practice?

3. **First Responders**: Principal Clayborn Knight discusses the First Responders in his school—an identified set of individuals who should be approached prior to approaching the principal, established through his participation in the National SAM Innovation Project (samsconnect.com/?skip_welcome=1). However, as noted by Fred Bauman, Assistant Principal in Jeanne Fagan’s school, most people want to speak directly to the principal. How does the establishment of “First Responders” shift the solutions away from the principal and toward other staff members?

4. **Leadership Challenge**: What might be hard for a new principal in setting up systems for other staff members to solve the problems that parents and teachers are expecting the principal to solve?

5. **Data Analysis**: Both principals demonstrate analysis of school-wide and classroom-based student performance data, as well as analysis of their own calendars to determine the amount of time spent on instructional improvement. What are some of the processes they have put in place to make data analysis a part of instructional improvement at every level of their schools?

6. **Use of Time Focused on Instruction**: How did the principals use the time they so carefully protect to focus on instruction? What was their focus? What did they do with their observations?

7. **Observing Instruction**: Teacher Jon-Paul Coutourier describes the ways in which principal Clayborn Knight provides feedback on the evidence of rigor in his classroom. How do you define academic rigor? Based on the snippets of Mr. Coutourier’s teaching in the video, what evidence of academic rigor, based on your definition of such, do you see?

8. **Leadership skills**: What are the leadership skills both principals demonstrate in their approach to managing people, data and processes? Which of these skills do you have and which ones are growth areas for you? What experiences will you need to develop your skills in this area?