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School Leadership: Study Looks at Stemming Principal Turnover | Oct. 11, 2018 | OAS Episode 45

Welcome to “Our American States,” a podcast of meaningful conversations that tell the story of America’s state legislatures, the people in them, the politics that compel them, and the important work of democracy. For the National Conference of State Legislatures, I’m your host, Gene Rose.

Our topic on this issue of “Our American States” is school education leadership. We have the pleasure of learning today from Dr. Mollie Rubin, who is a research assistant professor in the department of Leadership Policy and Organizations at Vanderbilt University. Dr. Rubin, welcome to the program and tell us how you became interested and involved in the school leadership field.

Rubin: This could be a long story, but I have had the great pleasure of moving from a focus particularly on teachers to starting to look at systems of education, so everything from what’s happening at central office level through school leadership principals in particular, and then teachers and how that whole organizational situation affects teachers’ work lives in particular and now with the trajectory of my career also, principals’ lives.

I come at this as a former public school teacher, so that was sort of the first entrée into really wanting to delve further from a research perspective into school improvements and school policy-related issues. And beyond that I started realizing that I couldn’t just focus on teachers, which is really I think where I came from just because of my background, but that all these other components from policy to organizational context had a profound effect on the way teachers are able to function in their classrooms and ultimately the greatest concern being, of course, outcomes for students.

Gene: As we all know, the education system in America is constantly being evaluated and analyzed and currently there seems to be a lot of attention paid to leadership within the education system. Explain to us why education leadership is such a focal point right now.

Rubin: I think for so long we’ve been focused on teachers and teachers absolutely matter, but what we have not addressed as much is that leadership matters too, and that school leaders need support to do a good job. So just to speak to that first point of leadership mattering too, and what we know, we know that school leaders have a profound effect on lots of school-based and student-based outcomes.

So, for instance, research studies have pointed to the importance of effective leaders for teacher satisfaction and retention, school climate, parent engagement and student achievement. We also know that principals need support, as I said. At a most basic level we know that over the last at least 20 to 30 years, there has been a decrease amongst public school principals in the amount of experience they have, and that there is also a very high rate of turnover for principals.

Furthermore, we know that this issue of turnover is exacerbated at low-performing schools, schools located in high-poverty communities and schools with more minority and limited-English proficiency students.

In addition, when we think about more veteran principals, the job of the principal has changed over the last many years as well, from one that is primarily focused on building management and operations to a role that expects principals to be instructional leaders in their building.

Gene: Do we know the reasons that there is such a high turnover in the principal position right now?

Rubin: We could probably talk about this for an hour, but one thing I'll say is that principals and people in general, the one thing we know about turnover is that when people feel as if they are doing a job that they cannot do well, they tend to leave and exit the profession, which is I suppose something of a plug for providing support for principals so that they feel that there is hope that they can do a better job and do their job well.

No one wants to feel as if they are incapable of doing what they do, and being a school principal is an extremely difficult job with a tremendous responsibility.

Gene: More attention is being paid to the role of the principal supervisor. Now, I'm probably giving away my age ... I don't believe I had a principal supervisor position in my school district when I was growing up. Can you explain to us what this position entails and how it impacts the education system?

Rubin: Sure. It's not surprising and, in fact, I think if you went around many school districts today, you would maybe not even find someone who is called a principal supervisor. There are usually one or two of these people in a traditional district and what their job is, is to ensure that the compliance piece is done, that all the legal forms are taken care of at the school level and things like that, and then to make sure that principals are evaluated. So that's the kind of more common role and, again, these folks would have in a large district—perhaps 25-30 principals that they're overseeing, maybe even more.

What we're talking about in terms of this new idea of a principal supervisor role is something very, very different. There may be some work that has to do with operations and compliance. These principal supervisors are still the evaluators of principals, but their core function is to work closely with principals and to be in schools to provide training and support.

And what this really looks like is they're providing both individual and small-group support for principals, they're doing a lot of coaching; they are getting to really know the context as well as the skillsets of their principals. They are sounding boards and thought partners for principals.

Inherent to linking this with evaluation is that one of the goals is that evaluation becomes not just something that says you did good or you didn't do well, but more: Here are areas where you're doing well and here are other areas where we've identified needs for support and I will support you in those areas as your principal supervisor.

Gene: And is addressing the turnover part of the hope of this as well?

Rubin: Absolutely.

Gene: I understand there is a movement to focus attention on this issue called the Principal Supervisor Initiative. Can you explain to us what the purpose of the PSI is?

Rubin: Sure. The Principal Supervisor Initiative is an initiative that was sponsored by The Wallace Foundation. They focus quite a bit on school leadership-type matters in addition to lots of other things. And the idea is that, or the foundation is that, the PSI sees principal supervisors as a potential point of leverage for supporting and developing principals.

Again though, that means changing this role of the principal supervisor, like I said, from one that's focused on compliance and operations to a role focused on providing support, particularly around instructional leadership. The hypothesis here is that when you do that you can drive improvement in principal effectiveness, which should then lead to all of these other types of outcomes and improvements that we know are associated with strong principal or school leadership in the first place.

So this is a four-year initiative that began in 2014/15 school year; just ended, I guess, in August 2018. And The Wallace Foundation has supported six midsize to large urban districts across the country to engage in this work. They developed a model and the districts have all been working to fulfill this model with the support, both technical and financial support, of the foundation.

Gene: And can you tell us where these school districts are where they did this study?

Rubin: Sure. The districts are across the country. They range in size. They are: Baltimore City Public Schools, Ballard County Public Schools in South Florida, Cleveland Public Schools, Long Beach Public Schools, Des Moines Public Schools and the Minneapolis Public School System.

Gene: What are the core components of this PSI study?

Rubin: There are five sort of laid-out core components that make up the study. The first one, which is really the first piece of the work for all of these districts, was to revise the job description of the principal supervisor to focus on instructional leadership. So this really was not just a process of creating a piece of paper, but really thinking through what that meant and both what the core components of the work would be as well as thinking about what supervisors in the current state were doing, and subsequently if they were going to focus on instruction and instructional leadership, what kinds of tasks they needed to shed and needed to be reassigned to others in the district. So that was the first piece.

The second piece is reducing principals' span of control or the number of principals they oversee. So in the PSI districts before the work began, the average was 17 principals for every one principal supervisor, but that was the average so this ranged upwards of over 20 principals per supervisor. And the second piece of working with span of control is also thinking about strategically assigning principals to supervisors.

So, for instance, having networks of principals that are either all in the same area and all at the same level, like elementary schools are all grouped together, or putting all of the priority schools, schools in need of greatest improvement, into one network, so that you can focus on their particular needs and hopefully assign them a principal supervisor who has the experience and capacity to address those needs as well.

The thing with the theme of capacity is recognizing that training supervisors and developing their capacity to support principals is another core component of the PSI, and basically that's an acknowledgment that when you ask people to do a very different job, you need to train them in how to do that.

Fourth is the idea of developing systems to identify and train new supervisors for principals, so thinking about succession planning for this role. This role was traditionally one that people did not stay in for a very long period of time and so districts would often find themselves running around trying to slot somebody into the role, but with the acknowledgment that you need a cadre of people who have a particular set of skills to effectively support principals, you need to kind of have a pool of people who are able to step into that role when people do transition out of the supervisor role.

And then the fifth piece is kind of all-encompassing. It was conceived of as something that would happen towards the end of the work, but really has happened in many places across the whole timeframe of the work, which is strengthening central offices to support and sustain the changes of the principal supervisor role.

Gene: As you looked over these components, Dr. Rubin, was there anything that was surprising to you or anything that came out that you hadn't anticipated?

Rubin: Well, I don't think anybody anticipated from the beginning how important changes at central office would be and how also the change in the role actually served in many places as a catalyst for these changes, and these are changes that are kind of nagging problems often in traditional school districts.

So, to give you an example, once principal supervisors are intimately involved in schools, they become a go-between between schools and central office and they are interacting with many, many departments. So they become more closely linked, for instance, to the office of academics or teaching and learning and things like that.

So because you start having these individuals, the supervisors, who are working across different departments in central office, they begin to catalyze communication between different departments as well.

Gene: What advice do you have for policymakers across the country on how to use the information that came from this study?

Rubin: First and foremost is that the studying of what has happened is ongoing, so our results thus far are really about the implementation. I confidently say we have learned a lot, but I think we will know more about the actual effects on principals' effectiveness as well as the change in the role when comparing the work that's happened in the PSI districts to similar districts across the country from ongoing work that we are doing.

That said, I think one thing about this work is a clear demonstration that districts do have the ability to make these kinds of changes. I think sometimes large organizational change in these districts is thought of as intractable. But the PSI is an example of a comprehensive approach to providing support for principals that they need to lead their schools, and it also provides a roadmap for developing the capacity of the individuals who act as the principal supervisors.

Our preliminary findings from the first three years demonstrate that, by and large, principals appreciate support and having access to supervisors when they believe those supervisors have the ability, skills and knowledge to be useful to them. We really have heard from principals that when their supervisors are more than just compliance officers who show up once or twice a year and instead are providing ongoing coaching and walking classrooms and serving as thought partners, that they really do feel as if they are becoming better at their job and that they are supported in doing the work.

And so that, to me, is definitely something that should make us think about the fact that principals do need support, leadership matters and that change and development are possible.

Gene: OK, so we've talked about a lot of things today. Is there something I haven't asked you about on either the study or the principal supervisor position that you think lawmakers and state legislative staff across the country should know about?

Rubin: I think it's really exciting that we have made a shift not away from teachers, but broadened our focus to think more broadly about the ways leaders have an impact directly and indirectly, whether that's coming from the central office or school leaders on what happens in schools and ultimately to foster better outcomes for children.

Gene: We've had the pleasure of talking with Dr. Mollie Rubin, a research assistant professor in the department of Leadership Policy and Organizations at Vanderbilt University. Dr. Rubin, thank you so much for taking time to talk with us today.

Rubin: Thank you.

Music and Gene VO:

And that concludes this edition of "Our American States." If you'd like more information about this topic, simply go to the National Conference of State Legislatures website at www.ncsl.org and search for [school leadership](#) or [school principals](#).

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