

COMMENTARY

Supporting Principals



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When the pandemic hit in 2020, school principals had to pivot, navigating the virtual world of engagement and instruction as well as the physical and mental toll of COVID-19 on students and staff. 2021–22 was supposed to be better, but for many principals, it was worse. Schools went back in person, but staffing shortages created daily challenges to covering even the basics, and COVID testing and tracing became additional urgent demands on already overwhelmed staff. Educators were emotionally and sometimes physically exhausted due to COVID. Kids acted out more, as reported by [The New York Times](#), [Pew Charitable Trusts](#), and [Developmental Psychology](#). Learning trajectories became even more differentiated, as documented by many organizations, including [The Brookings Institute](#) and [McKinsey & Company](#). Before the pandemic, principals already had difficult jobs juggling budgeting, hiring, and supervision of teachers and staff; student discipline issues; campus maintenance; plus family and community engagement.

What was a difficult job may now be becoming untenable. Surveys from the National Association of Secondary School Principals reported by [EdWeek](#), [District Administration](#), and [The 74](#) show that, due to stress and lack of support, between 25 and 45 percent of school principals are thinking of leaving their positions. In conversations with organizations like [EdSource](#) and interviews with major media outlets such as the [Wall Street Journal](#) and [The New York Times](#), principals have spoken about feeling that they have been asked to navigate uncharted territory and manage crisis after evolving crisis, alone.

The question is not how to get principals through COVID or how to help them get back to “the way it was.” Instead, the question is: *What helps principals do their jobs well, in a manner that improves the quality of teaching and learning at their schools?*

The worst of the pandemic may be behind us, but the long work of recovery is still ahead. Change is the new constant as educators navigate a context of [volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity](#). Most principals, however, do not currently have what they need to help them adapt and improve—namely supports and structures that promote their learning, growth, and resilience.

Over the past two years, policymakers, funders, and nonprofits have provided a variety of supports for school leaders. *Which ones have helped principals not only bounce back from stressors and shocks but also adapt and improve the quality of teaching and learning at their schools?*

We, the authors of this commentary, are able to bring a unique perspective to answering these questions: Dr. Tomika Romant is a first-year principal at Richard D. Browning High School in Long Beach Unified School District and Kiley O'Meara is a PACE researcher working in roughly 20 districts across the state. Over the course of the pandemic, PACE has had the opportunity to speak with principals in several dozen schools, large and small, K–12, across the state of California. These confidential conversations, shared as part of data collection for various research–practice partnerships, have allowed principals to describe

their challenges candidly. School leaders also talked about what has helped them continue to manage the vast number of new responsibilities that have emerged in response to COVID-19.

Now that the 2021–22 school year has wrapped up, we have an opportunity to think differently about what principals need when they return in the fall. Here are three key lessons that have emerged from our collective research and experience.

LESSON 1: SURROUND SCHOOLS WITH SUPPORTS

Principals need wraparound support from community-based organizations, district and county offices, and other external support providers to meet leaders' needs as well as those of students and staff. The principals we spoke with have appreciated partnerships with organizations that can provide expertise beyond leaders' own skillsets or that can offer assistance beyond what is available in the immediate site or district. Students and staff have had a growing variety of needs that simply cannot be met within the confines of school walls and that continue to far exceed principals' sphere of control. School leaders have therefore valued partnerships that address issues such as student and staff health and wellness, technology and internet access, and food provisioning for communities.

The key, Romant has stated, is having in place both the supports and the learning systems to maximize them: "Frequent data review is central to everything," she says, as it's what allows leaders to continually inform and improve support structures. Hearing from stakeholders such as students and teachers about what they need to be successful—as well as continually reflecting on a variety of student academic and wellness indicators—has helped principals learn as they go, making informed course corrections so that they can maximize the utility of supports.

LESSON 2: HELP PRINCIPALS FOCUS ON INSTRUCTION

During the ongoing pandemic, principals have been devoting much of their attention to crisis management. COVID testing and case management alone take a tremendous amount of time and resource. Many principals have appreciated when district and/or county offices stepped in to assist with additional COVID-related administrative burdens and to provide clear guidance on COVID response.

Mental health strain and social isolation from the pandemic have led to more behavioral problems among students; attempting to meet these needs without adequate support can prevent principals from fulfilling their core responsibility of quality teaching and learning. As Romant has reflected: "Since COVID, a lot of students need more social and emotional support—and that can impact my ability to get into the classrooms." Principals have benefitted from partners such as coaches and support structures like learning networks that can help school leaders stay focused on instruction. School leaders have articulated that these supports can help expand their understanding of and expertise around being an instructional leader, can give them good ideas to test at their site, and can encourage them to feel accountable to their central goal of supporting high-quality teaching and learning.

Coaches work with principals to make sure they have good information to inform their decision-making, which sometimes simply means better using existing classroom assessments to connect learning results to instructional strategies. Without anyone in the system clamoring for the principal to focus on instructional leadership, it's easy for this important role to get lost. When principals were given time and support to set specific improvement goals related to teaching and learning, to strategize about them, and then to feel accountable to coaches and peers to share what they did—and to learn about what others did—they reported that they were better able to focus on instructional leadership.

LESSON 3: SUPPORT PRINCIPALS IN COLLABORATING AND LEARNING TOGETHER

The principles we spoke with strongly valued the opportunity to connect with and learn from other principals, especially during a time of uncertainty and crisis. Structured peer-to-peer conversations about teaching and learning have helped principals reconnect with the “big why” of their jobs, infused school leaders with energy and a renewed sense of purpose, and provided a space to understand how others are managing the ongoing crisis. Reflecting on some of the practical advice and ideas she has received in learning networks for principals, Romant commented: “You get to ask—‘Hey, how are you doing this? ... Sometimes you start with this big, lofty initiative, and maybe instead you could start with something small that has the potential to have a big impact. Learning from the expertise of veteran principals has really helped me.”

Peer-to-peer learning for principals can happen in a variety of ways, from monthly check-ins supported by district administrators to learning networks facilitated by external support providers. Whatever the forum, principals have said that candid conversations with leaders in similar contexts helped them problem-solve and gave them a variety of ideas to test in their own sites. This kind of learning also raises the bar: discovering how other principals were supporting teachers gave some principals the impetus to aim for the same high standards at their sites. Isolation has bred stress and burnout, but when principals had time with peers in a coached learning network they were able to increase their capacity to do their job.

LOOKING AHEAD

The 2022–23 California state [budget](#) for K–12 education includes several large investments that have the potential to better support school principals. Investments in California pathways, teacher residencies, and additional school counselors—as well as other supports for families and students—create opportunities for improvements. These could possibly address many of the concerns principals have raised regarding their constant state of “crisis management,” enabling them to focus on instructional leadership.

Learning systems and structures, however, are essential to making sure that funding is used well. With additional staff and programming to address mental health, social, and academic supports, principals will also need help managing the new complexities these resources bring. They will require information and support to understand what’s working well in their school and why, and what else people at the school need to be successful. They will also need structured time to connect with and learn from other principals.

California has a multitude of opportunities in upcoming policy initiatives. Resources that both fortify whole-child wellness and growth need to be coupled with supports for school leaders so that they can continually learn about the strengths and possibilities within their system and connect with coaches and other principals outside their system for support and ideas. As the new funding takes shape and begins to be implemented, policymakers should prioritize making the role of principal still challenging—but doable. When our principals thrive, our children have the opportunity to thrive, too.

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