Supervising school leaders in a rapidly changing world

School leaders’ changing roles

Education is changing rapidly in most countries; with those changes come swiftly evolving expectations for school leaders, who are on the front line of educational reforms. In the USA, for example, the role and responsibilities of the principal changed following the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002, which embodied the expectation that the school’s principal would lead instructional improvement to ensure equitable outcomes for all students. While school leaders scaled up their improvement efforts, school results were inconsistent, leading to a need to reconsider the role of the school district in improvement efforts (Finnigan and Daly, 2016). The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 subsequently gave more authority to states and districts to design accountability systems and to lead the difficult work of improvement. Internationally, a similar trend can be observed (OECD, 2013). Changing expectations for the role of the principal to serve less as a manager of operations, and more as an instructional leader, have led to changes in expectations for local education agencies, including school district offices, to support school leaders in improving student outcomes.

Most of the scholarly investigations of new school leader roles on which these policy shifts are based come from English-speaking countries; the ideas generated by this work, such as transformational, instructional and shared leadership, have spread rapidly (Schliecher, 2012; Clarke and Wildy, 2009). At the same time, there is also an emerging line of research suggesting that it is important to be attentive to local values and traditions of schooling that affect leader behavior (Khalifa et al., 2018; Truong et al., 2017; Lee and Hallinger, 2012). Among these leadership approaches, research demonstrating that leadership is second only to classroom instruction in its influence on student learning has led the role of the principal as an instructional leader to garner attention and importance internationally (Leithwood et al., 2004). Broadly defined, as instructional leaders, principals work closely with classroom teachers to improve classroom instruction and produce improvements in student learning (Elmore, 2004; Grissom et al., 2013; Knapp et al., 2014).

However, our understanding of the role of the principal as an instructional leader has also shifted in recent years. At one time, the primary role of the principal as an instructional leader was in providing constructive feedback on instruction to teachers, classroom-by-classroom, as a monitor, evaluator and coordinator of curriculum. More recent research points to the principal’s critical role in instruction on the school level as a coach and modeler, as one who stimulates innovative teaching behaviors, and as a supporter and facilitator of teacher learning (Grissom et al., 2013; Leithwood and Louis, 2011). Further, as instructional leaders, principals foster professional community in which collaborative work among teachers leads to improved instruction and student achievement (Wahstrom and Louis, 2008; Kruse et al., 1995). Subsequently, based on these emerging research findings, evidence of change in expectations of school leadership that blend Western ideas with local interpretations is emerging from post-Soviet settings (Yakavets, 2016), Southern Asia (Bush et al., 2018; Kulophas and Hallinger, 2019; Sumintono, 2006), the Middle East (Sezer, 2016; Oplatka and Arar, 2017), Africa (Ogina, 2017) and South America (Ahumada et al., 2016).

While expectations have changed for the role of the principal in virtually every country, less attention has been paid to how principals are learning to meet these new expectations. In fact, until recently, approaches to supporting principals’ ongoing learning and continued development had remained relatively stagnant internationally. Commonly, principals are brought together in district professional development sessions a few times a year to learn...
about new district initiatives, curriculum and protocols and procedures. Yet, as research on
teacher professional development has demonstrated, these “sit and get” sessions cannot be
one-shot experiences and must involve active learning and time for application (Curry and
Killion, 2009; Guskey and Yoon, 2009; Honig, 2012; Zepeda, 2013). Principals, like the
teachers they supervise, benefit from ongoing, intensive, job-embedded, professional
learning to facilitate changes in instructional leadership practice and improve student

Changes in expectations for principals have subsequently led to changes in expectations
for those who support and supervise them. Principal supervisors are rising to fill this role by
providing ongoing learning and coaching support to principals (Goldring et al., 2018; Honig,
2012; Thessin, 2018). In most economically developed and developing countries, principals
are supervised and their performance is assessed by some “middle tier” government agency
(such as a municipality or district at the regional level) or through national inspections.
However, traditions of principal supervision vary enormously, as does the historical role of
the agencies responsible for principal supervision. It is therefore important to consider how
the role of supervisors is changing, and whether these changes are adequate to provide
principals with the learning they need to enact new expectations. With this need in mind,
this special issue will examine the following topics:

(1) The role of the “middle tier” agencies that have responsibility for assessing and
supporting school leaders is changing and in flux; and

(2) The changing role of the principal requires a change in the role of the principal
supervisor.

The changing role of “the middle tier”

Patterns of formal authority for supporting principals/school leaders vary between countries,
but in the current global expectations of increased accountability, local agencies/district offices
that occupy the “middle tier” are in closer touch with the particular needs of school leaders and
schools today than in the past. As accountability systems have required the shifting of roles for
the middle tier in practice, in the USA, the last 15 years of research have portrayed the “middle
tier” school district office as an essential component of systemic change. While central offices
have historically carried out a range of regulatory and business functions (Honig, 2012), in
many parts of the USA and Canada, district central offices have now adjusted their approach to
focus the whole district on teaching and learning and on strengthening leadership at the school
level. Rather than utilizing a “school-by-school” approach to improvement, just as principals
previously led change classroom-by-classroom, more districts now focus on systemwide
improvement efforts (Finnigan and Daly, 2016). As such, the central office has recently been
described as a collaborative partner for principals (Bottoms and Fry, 2009; Leithwood et al.,
2007), a support that shares the work (Derrington and Campbell, 2015; Honig, 2012) and a
facilitator or builder of networks (Clarke and Wildy, 2011; Daly and Finnigan, 2010).

In parallel to the changing recognition of the principal’s role as a leader of learning,
research highlights central offices’ increased focus on learning: central office organizational
learning (Honig, 2008), district leaders’ learning (Thompson et al., 2008) and central office
support of both teacher and student learning in schools (Cobb et al., 2013). This focus has
changed central office administrators’ work with principals and other school-based
professionals such as teachers, instructional coaches and department chairs (Anderson et al.,
2012; Leithwood, 2010; Leithwood and McCullough, 2016; McLaughlin and Talbert, 2003;
Smith and Wohlstetter, 2001). In the USA, the central office’s direct support of principals’
professional development has evolved from a focus on supervision to one focused on
coaching, mentoring and collaborating (Browne-Ferrigno, 2006; Clarke and Wildy, 2011;
Johnson and Chrispeels, 2010; Leithwood, 2010).
In other countries, there has been increasing reliance on centrally funded initiatives to provide the same resources to support school leaders. Planned transitions from centralized control to municipal responsibility in some countries have resulted in less clear patterns of obligation for school leader improvement (Holmgren et al., 2012), while in others, the responsibilities of local authorities for supporting school leader development appear to have eroded (Woods and Simkins, 2014) and have been replaced with alternative non-governmental providers of support. The results are variable. In Australia, this change has resulted in a variety of support providers (Gurr and Drysdale, 2015), while a more centralized/nationally coordinated approach has characterized countries, such as New Zealand, England and Austria (Bush et al., 2018; Huber, 2010; Youngs and Cardno, 2016). Nevertheless, most countries have some recognized “middle tier” support for school leaders’ ongoing learning and development after leaders’ initial appointment.

The changing role of supervision

Historically, and particularly in centralized systems, principal supervision has not been a priority, since principals focused primarily on managing national regulations and administrative reporting. Principals were rarely subjected to serious evaluation but were “inspected” to determine if they met minimal standards of performance. Even in more decentralized systems, such as in the USA, districts paid limited attention to principal assessment and even less to serious supervision. In the mid-1980s, for example, 25 percent of USA states had no state requirements for principal assessment and principal evaluation practices were considered poor (Peters and Bagenstos, 1988; Stufflebeam and Nevo, 1991). The expectation that supervision could provide support and feedback rather than just summative evaluation was limited, and the idea that principals might be responsible for school improvement as well as maintaining bureaucratic functioning was just emerging (Leithwood and Montgomery, 1982; Murphy and Hallinger, 1986). In addition, in many countries where a focus on improvement was prevalent, the emphasis was on building capacity for school self-review rather than on changing the role of external inspection in improvement (Holly and Hopkins, 1988).

Fast-forward 30 years and an accumulation of research, we now know that principal leadership has a significant impact on student learning and that it is, therefore, important to provide principals with developmental feedback and support to increase their potential for improving student outcomes (Leithwood and Levin, 2005; Parylo et al., 2012; Simkins, 2012). In countries where there is a strong line of authority between local agencies/districts and schools, as in the USA, principal supervisors serve as a promising lever for supporting and developing principals’ instructional leadership (Goldring et al., 2012; Honig, 2012). As a key piece of central office support in their potential to provide leadership for learning with principals, principal supervisors have been at the center of major initiatives and efforts by USA districts across the country.

In 2015, the Council of Chief State School Officers (a national professional association) issued standards for principal supervisors that focused on development, coaching and the creation of a continuous improvement culture (CSSO, 2015). Like most professional standards, this key report was a response to changes that were already underway. Rather than overseeing and approving the improvement efforts of principals and serving as a resource in specific challenging situations, principal supervisors are now asked to develop principals as coaches of ongoing learning and to collaborate with them as partners to jointly facilitate improved student achievement (Stein and Coburn, 2008). Across the USA, central offices in mid-sized and large urban districts are reshaping the role of the principal supervisor from a role focused on business and compliance to now provide intensive, job-embedded coaching to strengthen principals’ instructional leadership and improve student achievement (Corcoran et al., 2013; Honig, 2012; Jerald, 2012).
In contrast, in countries where local agencies have more limited authority, multiple strategies from multiple sources, including universities and private NGOs, distinguish between formal evaluative supervision (through government inspection) and professional development. In many countries, national evaluation programs and municipal/district/regional agency responsibilities are beginning to attend to principal development (Huber, 2003; Johansson, 2001; Simkins, 2012).

The Chronic Problem of Implementation
While supporting principals’ growth and development has become a focus of educational reform efforts internationally, there has been less attention to shifting principal evaluation instruments and procedures from a bureaucratic administrative task to one now focused on the development of instructional leadership. In the USA, principal evaluation is the responsibility of the district and districts needed, therefore, to change their procedures away from formal compliance with state guidelines toward a formative and developmental perspective. Efforts to develop a “360” approach to principal evaluation that presumed a formative, as well as a summative, purpose emerged from the Val-Ed project at Vanderbilt University (Goldring et al., 2012). At least one study indicated that USA districts had shifted their principal evaluation rubrics away from management to focus almost exclusively on instructional leadership (Donaldson et al., 2017), although research noted that effective management was still critical for effective school leadership (Grisson and Loeb, 2011), and international data suggested that hands-on management of instruction was less effective than goal setting (Loveless, 2012). A broad definition of research-based standards for school leadership was rarely well established in district practices, even after several years of experience with NCLB (Goldring et al., 2009).

The call to integrate school leader assessment and support is not confined to North America. Nor are the present issues with implementation. A number of countries have been engaged in a similar quest to make significant changes in policies and practices. Some (like Chile) have focused on school-level goals setting, with leader effectiveness determined largely by a review of formal reports of progress toward local goals (OECD, 2013, p. 491). The conflating of school-level appraisals with school leader appraisals is common: the assumption is that if a school is doing better, the school leader must be doing something right. In countries where local boards carry out leader assessments, but national inspectors also have a role (New Zealand and Portugal), determining whose criteria carry what weight is a negotiated process (Santiago et al., 2012; Timperley, 2013). The issue of what to do about supporting school leaders whose functioning is adequate, but unexceptional, is more perplexing. While many countries have voluntary or mandatory national or regional/state principal preparation programs, few have established continuing development options for school leaders – much less a “middle tier” that has experience in assessing and providing development.

In many countries, the university community has lagged behind as a partner in the effort to study and strengthen the role of the principal supervision as a support for principals’ leadership after initial or early career principal preparation. As this special issue notes, the challenges involved in shifting ideas about school leader supervision to match the expectations of changing roles for principals is being addressed in countries as variable as Indonesia, Georgia, the USA, Australia, Germany and Norway. We are confident that the research reported in this issue will contribute to an enhanced understanding of the role of the middle tier, and of the principal supervisor internationally, as well as offer practical implications for central office systems, states and nations engaged in this work.

Overview of the issue
The idea to prepare this special issue emerged from a Critical Conversation on the role of principal supervisors at an annual meeting of the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA), which followed previously held panel discussions on this same topic.
at AERA. In serving as the co-editors of this special issue of the *Journal of Educational Administration*, we each contributed a distinct lens to our review and shaping of the issue. Rebecca Thessin brought a researcher/practitioner lens to this project as a former central office administrator. In her former roles, she coached school principals on developing, implementing and sustaining an ongoing process of school improvement in their schools; this professional learning was provided in real-time, was context-based and focused on principal and school needs for growth. Karen Seashore Louis brought her deep knowledge of school and district leadership and school reform to the issue and her understanding of the role of the emergent and shifting character of middle tier. As she has previously argued, there are gaps between a common policy language and what is actually happening as varied national systems (Louis and van Velzen, 2012). This special issue illustrates the differences not only between the USA and other English-speaking countries (Australia, Canada and Scotland are represented), but also countries with culturally distinct approaches to the role of the principal and school accountability (Norway, Indonesia, Germany and Georgia). Observing the myriad roles and approaches of supporting school leadership from the middle tier abroad further heightened the need to capture what is working well and what is not.

Therefore, the intent of this special issue of the *Journal of Educational Administration* is to explore the topic of supporting principals’ instructional leadership from agencies – whether governmental or non-governmental – to increase their capacities to support teachers and students in their learning. The issue seeks to address the gap in the literature on the role of the district central office, and the principal supervisor specifically, by including three studies on this topic from the USA. A comparative perspective from two empirical studies of agencies supporting school leader development in other countries will examine how other “middle tier” agencies support principals’ leadership and student outcomes across the globe. Two additional articles will examine the role of the national government in facilitating principal learning in Europe and the UK. Finally, three commentators who have researched, observed and/or facilitated principal learning apply the findings from the articles to their own international contexts of Georgia, Indonesia and Germany to consider the relevance of these results for their own nations and to consider “Where do we go from here?”

Collectively, the articles and commentaries in this special issue engage in three different levels of analysis in examining the role of the middle tier and of principal supervisors specifically, as shown in Table I.

At the lowest level of analysis, authors considered the conditions and qualities that support principals and principal supervisors in the collaborative work of improving teaching and learning. Honig and Rainey identified conditions that support principal supervisors in taking a teaching-and-learning approach to their work with principals. Interestingly, they concluded that principal supervisors in positive cases actively led their own learning and learned from their supervisors, as opposed to benefiting from outside coaching. This finding parallels conclusions from Thessin’s study, in which she examined the specific qualities of the principal and principal supervisor partnership. Thessin found that principals who made robust changes in their instructional leadership practice identified as self-regulated learners and were motivated to lead the work of improvement. In the partnerships in which robust changes were made, principal supervisors also demonstrated their willingness to learn with principals and to provide support and collegiality. In both Honig and Rainey and Thessin’s studies, a broad focus on instructional leadership growth by the principal and the principal supervisor could be tied to the presence of a productive partnership with the supervisor (either the principal supervisor, or the chief academic officer, for instance) in which a focus on learning was paramount.

Three articles consider the role of the school district, or middle tier, in this special issue. Across these three articles, the authors considered, “What needs to change at the system level to allow individuals to take on new roles?” Rigby *et al.* examined principal supervisors’
leadership in districts engaging in equitable leadership practices. They found that framing the work of schooling as a race-explicit endeavor at the school district, or system level, is an essential criterion to engaging in this work, and proposed a new framework to guide district improvement efforts. Wilkinson et al. examined two districts’ approaches to leading for school improvement. These authors found that districts should consider the practices that must be changed to facilitate principals’ thinking and acting in new ways. In other words, instructional practices are unlikely to change without changing the conditions that surround them. In Rigby et al.’s article, authors highlighted that one of these social-political conditions to change may be an explicit focus on how leadership for equity is framed. Finally, Leithwood et al. surveyed school leaders in 45 school districts and found that seven district characteristics served as powerful mediators of student achievement. These findings suggest, as in Rigby et al.’s study, that district central offices/middle tier organizations should consider specific district characteristics as part of the district’s framework for improvement efforts.

At the highest level of analysis, across systems and states, authors considered “What gets in the way of a uniform solution? And what factors affect resulting variability?” Aas and Paulsen’s study of a national program in Norway and Sweden and Chapman’s review of educational reform in the middle tier in Scotland both bring the reader’s attention to the importance of school-to-school, and system-to-system, collaboration, while traditional school improvement efforts have focused on the school as the unit of change. Aas and Paulsen found that principals gained motivation to change their instructional leadership practices through participation in collective school visits, required tasks to complete between

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| Table I. Article levels of analysis in this issue |
seminars and learning groups. On the other hand, Chapman highlighted both the complexities and the unintended consequences of establishing a “learning system,” calling attention to the need for not only structural, but also cultural, change in creating a more collaborative educational system.

Our commentary writers considered the findings of all of these contributors to reflect on the potential impact in their own nations – Georgia, Indonesia and Germany. We are grateful for the time the authors dedicated to reflect on how these findings may inform next steps for the middle tier in a variety of contexts – a nation of the former Soviet Union in which educational practices were highly centralized; a developing country in which administrative powers have been transferred to local governments at the district and school levels during the last two decades; and a German context in which school supervision is carried out in a low-accountability environment across federal states. These perspectives offer insights on how new research reported in this issue may be likely to inform next steps in myriad settings.

Conclusion
The contents of this issue demonstrate the varied roles and functions of the middle tier and begin to examine the results of these approaches by district central office/middle tier agencies in supporting principals’ efforts to improve teaching and learning. Despite the unique setting and history of the context from which each of our special issue authors writes, common challenges exist in reaching the goal of providing high quality professional learning to principals to ensure that they have the skills and knowledge as instructional leaders to facilitate improved teaching and learning.

One finding is clear, however, the studies in this special issue confirm that the role of the school district central office matters for principal learning and leadership and for student outcomes. Still, in the USA much of the work of reform to support principals’ instructional leadership through a new, redesigned role for the principal supervisor is carried out in the nation’s largest, big-city school systems. And numerous questions remain – how might district central offices effectively provide ongoing learning and instructional leadership support to school leaders in mid-sized and rural districts in the USA? In countries in which small schools outnumber the large urban schools and myriad languages exist, how can principals be “coached” in real-time to guide instructional improvement efforts? Finally, how do we effectively build the capacity of central office and middle-tier agency administrators to engage as teachers of instructional leadership practices, so that they can support and develop the capacity of school leaders?

We are also left with the vexing question of sustainability. The degree to which school districts and middle-tier agencies can provide the job-embedded coaching and instructional leadership support to principals that is needed to change principal practice is dependent on state and district policy decisions and on funding allocations over time. First and foremost, these changes to support principal growth prioritize professional learning, thereby weighing developmental goals with potential long-term gains equal to or higher than an immediate goal of improving outcomes. Further, such changes to the organizational level of school systems require consistency in structure and policy over time, even while the average tenure of a US superintendent remains around three years as reported by superintendents’ associations. For instance, while numerous large city school systems in the USA allocated additional funding to reduce the ratio of principal supervisors to principals within the last ten years, many of these same districts have since increased the number of principals supervised by each central office administrator to 18–25 direct reports following a change in the district’s superintendent. Such high ratios of supervision serve as a barrier to ongoing engagement in collaborative learning and leadership of improvement between central offices and schools.

This issue has not answered all of our questions on how to initiate, support and sustain the work of meeting principals’ learning needs. In particular, because we know that the principal's
role faces changing expectations in every country, we can study, at best, a moment in time. However, by capturing the efforts in various contexts we can see progress toward our intended aim of understanding how district central offices and emerging variations of “the middle tier” have the potential to support principals’ instructional leadership efforts.

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