

# 3 Ways to Be an Instructional Leader: A Guide for Principals



By [Olina Banerji](#) — December 13, 2024 ⌚ 6 min read



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When a school rolls out a new curriculum, a number of levers have to be pulled. Teachers must be coached, new timelines need to be drawn up for professional development, and a robust feedback system must be set up to ensure implementation is on track. In most schools, this long list of tasks falls to the principal.

The contemporary principal knows, inherently, that instructional leadership is just as important as their operational capabilities. Most principals even self-identify as instructional leaders. Yet there is no consensus on what defines one, according to a [report](#) published in November by

Instruction Partners, a national nonprofit that trains principals and other instructional staff to adapt to big curricular shifts.

The report, drawn from interviews with 24 elementary and middle school principals across nine public school districts and six charter school systems in Tennessee, also noted that while principals had the same vocabulary for tasks that constitute instructional leadership—collaborative planning, giving feedback to teachers, and using data to keep track of achievement goals—they approached these tasks very differently. This, in turn, was linked to the difference in the titles and roles of other members of schools’ instructional teams, like coaches.

It’s important for schools and districts to clearly define what they expect from a principal as an instructional leader, said Emily Freitag, the CEO of Instruction Partners and an author on the report.

Over the past nine years, Freitag has worked with hundreds of school systems on instruction and has seen a range of different budgetary and operational contexts that school leaders operate within. Such range “makes it very hard to say anything decisive” about instructional leadership, Freitag said.

But getting to a common understanding about the role of an instructional leader, at least within the same school system, is crucial, Freitag added, because principals are next in line to teachers when it comes to improving student achievement. Replacing a less effective principal with a more effective one can add an average of three months of learning across math and science for students, studies show.

Teachers’ impact is limited to the classroom, but as Freitag notes, an effective principal can improve the whole school.

## How principals work as instructional leaders

Freitag and her team delineated the three most common ways that principals exercise their role as instructional leaders.

1. **The principal is directly in charge of instruction.** In this model, the principal personally executes tasks like coaching, giving feedback, and analyzing and using student data, and leaves the non-instructional work to other school administrators. These principals will

directly facilitate, for instance, collaborative planning time for their teachers—which is crucial to instructional change, Freitag said.

2. **The principal coaches others to execute instructional leadership.** The principal still sets the schoolwide vision, but picks someone else to execute it, like an instructional coach. The coach will do the actual work of convening collaborative planning meetings, for instance, but will be accountable to the principal. The principal coaches the coach in this model, gives them feedback, and keeps track of how the instructional change is implemented.
3. **The principal designates others to be the school’s instructional leaders.** In this model, the principal designates another leader, like an assistant principal, to be the instructional lead for the school. The principal, instead, focuses on the non-instructional parts of their role. Under this model, Freitag said it’s crucial that the assistant principal gets guidance and coaching from someone else in the district, like a director of instruction or curriculum.

Freitag said the third model often gets the “strongest reactions” from school leaders because technically, the principal neither delivers the coaching nor sets the vision for the instruction. But that’s the reality of what’s going on in many schools, Freitag said.

“We included it because we felt like it is really important to be honest about the places where they haven’t foregrounded the instructional leadership in the principal role [but have] ways that they can still manage and support effective instruction,” said Freitag.

The report also found that multiple models can exist within the school system. A former math teacher-turned-principal can personally lead professional development in a new math curriculum, but for a literacy program, they may choose to simply set the vision or support the instructional coach.

For each model, it’s important to clearly delineate tasks, roles, and responsibilities to people in the system, which affects resource allocation, Freitag said. For instance, a principal may need to add an instructional coach to their team if they decide they don’t want to be the primary coach. Or, Freitag added, districts may have to provide additional coaching and support to an assistant principal leading the instructional leadership team.

In model three, a big challenge will be to maintain constant communication between the principal, the designated instructional leader, and the “knowledgeable other,” like a district official.

“It’s critical that the principal backs the [assistant principal],” Freitag said “If the AP says one thing, and the principal another, that’s a recipe for problems.”

## **District leaders want schools to establish instructional teams —not just leaders**

District leaders should specifically spell out the details about the roles of schools’ instructional leaders and activities they should lead, said Freitag. The expectations for principals should “live in their handbooks, in the evaluation and rubrics, and in the coaching guidance for whomever guides principals,” she added.

Adrienne Battle, the superintendent of the Metro Nashville school district, has tried to do just that—create one model of instructional leadership that all principals in her 160-school district must follow. Instructional leaders must be able to “drive instruction, manage operations, and prioritize talent,” Battle said.

Metro Nashville’s model is two-fold: First, principals must have the subject knowledge and be able to coach teachers. They should also have the skills to build capacity in other educators in their building.

The principal needs to be visible, plan collaboration time, facilitate professional development, and keep track of data, said Battle. This involvement can vary between subjects.

“You might be stronger in literacy than numeracy, but the structures and the expectations are still the same,” she said. “That’s where your instructional leadership team comes in. The principal’s role never changes, but they do have the ability, through leverage and instructional leadership team, to bring in additional expertise.”

A key element of the Metro Nashville model is coaching the principals. Their supervisors can help principals focus on cultivating more instructional leaders and improving students’ performance, Battle said.

The increased focus on instruction will mean that principals may have to delegate non-instructional tasks to others. Battle is clear that the trade-off is worth it.

“If we’re really grounded in what the research says, ... [that] the principal is the next largest lever of change and positive impact for students, then we must leverage the principal role right to

focus on the instructional development, the instructional delivery, and planning to make sure students get what they deserve,” she said.

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