THE PRINCIPAL STORY

CONVERSATION GUIDE
North Grand
Effective leadership in our nation’s high schools is arguably more important than ever. As workforce demands increase and U.S. businesses face stiffer global competition, the preparation of high school graduates is of utmost interest. Research reveals an estimated 7,000 students drop out of school every day, resulting in 1.2 million students leaving school without a diploma or an adequate education.

To change student outcomes, low-performing schools rely on intervention by strong leaders. Principals who can articulate and implement a vision for teaching and learning are increasingly seen as central to school improvement strategies. Superb leadership is also the main reason that teachers are attracted to and remain in challenging schools. Clear definitions of such leadership exist and have gained wide acceptance at the elementary school level; that’s not the case at the high school level.

Since 2000, The Wallace Foundation has made a commitment to elevating the quality of education leadership as a critical, yet often-missing ingredient for improving teaching and learning. Through extensive research and work with states and districts across the country, Wallace and its partners are gaining new perspectives on what effective school leadership in general looks like and the role it plays in strengthening schools and instruction. Nonetheless, understanding effective high school leadership, along with how to improve training and support for high school principals and their leadership teams, has proven difficult.

This film, North Grand, was created as part of THE PRINCIPAL STORY PBS documentary and media project, which addresses the changing role of today’s principals and the challenges they face in turning around low-performing schools. This special 25-minute special documentary aims to inspire deeper understanding of effective leadership at the high school level. It follows Principal Asuncion “Sunny” Ayala through a year at North Grand High School, a four-year-old school on Chicago’s west side. Eighty-nine percent of North Grand students are Latino and most are from low-income families; they deal with poverty, gangs, teen pregnancy and learning in a non-native language. We see Sunny meet these challenges and share her joy at reaching her goal of a 98 percent graduation rate for the school’s first graduating class – a dramatic contrast to the 52 percent overall graduation rate for Chicago Public Schools.

Educators, policymakers and others interested in improving our nation’s high schools can use North Grand and this conversation guide to discuss what’s necessary to train and support high school leaders so they can close achievement gaps, enhance graduation rates and boost outcomes for all students.

Raising Questions about Instructional Leadership in High Schools

Progress toward defining the role of leaders – and helping them fulfill that role – varies at different levels of K-12 education. There are signs at the elementary school level, for example, that more principals are embracing instructional leadership as a priority and that more tools are being put in place to help them improve their performance on the job. Many high school principals, however, encounter levels of
complexity not generally present in elementary schools. Principals may feel they have less autonomy and less ability to have a major impact on instruction and school reform for several reasons: the size of the organization, subject matter content they have not mastered and the tendency of parents to be less actively involved. A recent report by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) lays out several conditions conducive to excellence in high school leadership. For example, high school leaders are most effective when the district expects them to become instructional leaders, gives them the authority and support to assume that role, and holds them accountable. The report adds that effective leaders shape a vision for teaching and learning around high expectations and emphasize relevant and engaging instruction.

We see this in North Grand in Sunny’s leadership as she empowers teachers to be innovative and collaborative. As the principal, Sunny demonstrates how her vision is a catalyst for high expectations and outcomes. Her optimistic goal to graduate nearly all of her students sets the tone for the academic year. She takes further steps to identify school policies and programs to secure buy-in from teachers – as well as from students.

**Conversation Questions**

1. Sunny accomplishes her goal of a 98 percent graduation rate for her first senior class. Does this make her a successful principal? What does it mean to be an effective high school principal and how does this differ for an elementary school principal?

2. How do you respond to the suggestion that there is a leadership deficit in our nation’s high schools? Do you agree that this is more prevalent in high schools than in elementary schools?

3. How do you define the success of high school leaders in your district? What state and district policies, processes and structures support them? What can district-level leadership do to further the high school principal’s reform efforts?

4. Can you think of factors to explain why it is difficult for high school principals to influence and strengthen instruction? What part do department chairs play – should they take on the role of instructional leader? What other leadership structures might work specifically for high schools to improve student outcomes?

5. High school leaders must meet increasingly higher expectations to bolster achievement in order to prepare students for college and the workplace. Given these demands, are leadership training programs adequately equipping leaders? How can these programs change to produce high school leaders who can create schools capable of improving student outcomes?

**Focusing on the Whole Student**

Effective principals set a direction for their schools and keep their teachers, staff members and students on course. In the film, Sunny makes clear that educating the whole student is critical to her vision. In one scene, she says, “I need student engagement. If you can’t get them engaged, how are you going to get them from one level to the next?” She follows up by promoting policies and practices that support this objective.

Through collaboration and planning, Sunny encourages the teachers, staff members and students to dedicate themselves to making the vision a reality both inside and outside of school. For example, she reserves half a day each week for student development sessions. These may include gang prevention workshops, team-building sessions and technical education classes. She also hires a full-time social
worker to reinforce the work of the teachers. In the classroom, Sunny expects teachers to find innovative ways to make course content relevant to all students.

**Conversation Questions:**

1. With the backing of her staff, Sunny developed, articulated and implemented a vision of learning at North Grand High School. What helped Sunny succeed? What are the best ways for principals to create and implement a vision for teachers and students?

2. Sunny says, “We are committed to helping all these students graduate. I don’t want them to become another [dropout] statistic.” She refuses to accept low expectations. How do visionary leaders challenge the status quo? What resistance are they likely to face?

3. In the film, English teacher David Brown shares his support for Sunny’s vision: “She’s said to me: ‘You’re not teaching English; your subject is the student.’” What does Sunny mean? Is this a realistic view for every classroom teacher?

4. What can high school principals do to develop instruction that better connects with students? How does the department structure hinder or facilitate this vision? Are there organizational structures, aside from the traditional departmental one, that high schools should consider?

5. Principals face persistent challenges in translating their visions into accountable practices that improve teaching and learning. In your experience, what are these challenges? What district and state policies create a barrier to effective school leadership – and which ones would promote it?

**Distributing Leadership**

It takes more than one person to create an environment that promotes student success. New research suggests that team-based instructional leadership can better focus efforts to dismantle learning barriers and improve student achievement. The principal is responsible not only for setting a vision for schoolwide improvement, but also for distributing authority among teachers and other staff members, and providing the necessary support and accountability for results. To build more leadership capacity in their schools, principals provide opportunities for teachers to experience a continuous cycle of coaching and feedback. Principals also model and encourage effective practices.

In the film, Sunny leads professional development days to allow staff members to share their successes and challenges in meeting student achievement goals. At one session, biology teacher Phil Kantor talks about how new data have exposed trends that went unnoticed before.

**Conversation Questions:**

1. Music teacher John Escutia explains that student success “takes all parts of the equation: the teachers, the administrators, the community and the parents, so if one of those is missing ... it’s not going to work.” What is needed from your district, state or community to guarantee the presence of “all parts of the equation”? What are concrete ways to ensure that strong leadership exists at all levels of a school? What is the principal’s role in making this happen and who are his/her most important allies?
2. Distributing leadership at the high school level tends to rely on department heads to be instructional leaders. Does this structure further a schoolwide vision for improvement? Does it empower individual teachers or rely too heavily on the role of department heads? How could this system be improved? What is the role for instructional coaches in the high school?

3. Sunny recognizes that she must give her staff members running room to be successful. For example, she encourages them to try new ideas and methods of instruction. Is this approach unique among principals? To what extent should high school principals encourage and create opportunities for teachers to act as leaders as well? What qualities do principals need to distribute leadership effectively?

4. To what extent do principals have access to relevant data in your state or district? How should principals share data with their teachers, students and community? How can data be made more accessible and useful to principals? To teachers? To community members and primary caregivers?

5. North Grand teachers grow alarmed that students are not supporting each other in the classroom. We hear from students that it’s “not cool to be smart.” How can principals and teachers address student attitudes and behaviors to create a better environment for learning? How can principals encourage families to reinforce student learning?

District Role in Supporting Instructional Leadership

Even with a strong vision and abundant talent, the best principals cannot succeed without the right working conditions. According to the SREB report, such conditions are largely determined by the district central office. That conclusion is backed up by a National Academy of Sciences study that found “district-level support of high school reform even more critical than that of elementary or middle school reform.”

Yet research shows that most school district central offices are not giving high school principals the necessary support. States and districts need to work more closely to develop well-coordinated policies to improve principals’ training and working conditions. New policies should foster mentoring, the use of timely and relevant data, the authority to allocate resources, and assessments tied to ongoing professional development. With such support in place, high school principals are more likely to become instructional leaders and implement innovative strategies focused more clearly on the needs of their students.

In the film, Sunny has the authority to make hiring decisions and allocate resources in concert with her goals. She also can hire a full-time social worker and create student-development days. With the district’s support, Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley sees to it that Sunny receives even more autonomy. Many experts say that school leaders would be more effective if districts provided more principals with such authority and support.

Conversation Questions

1. What behaviors characterize a high school principal who is an instructional leader?

2. Many districts consist of schools with a variety of needs. How can districts set systemwide goals while supporting the unique characteristics of each school? How can districts build the capacity of each school leadership team to implement effective strategies? Should districts use site-specific or more districtwide approaches to improve instruction and raise standards and achievement?
3. How can districts simultaneously support principals and hold them accountable? How should districts measure principals’ effectiveness? At the high school level, should students be part of the evaluation process for staff members and administrators?

4. There is increasing consensus that states, districts and schools need to better allocate resources to raise student achievement. Describe the resources that principals have at their discretion. How do principals influence resource allocation? Do they need greater influence over this process?

5. Unlike most principals, Sunny has autonomy in hiring and other areas. How important is greater principal autonomy to realizing a vision? In what areas do principals need the most autonomy? Are principals adequately trained for these responsibilities?

6. Districts churn out loads of education data. But often the data are not of the right kind or delivered in useful, timely ways. How should data be used at the district level? What are the best ways to share data with school leaders? With the community? How can districts support the best use of data at the school level?

7. Research shows that when there is a “collaborative working relationship” between a district and its schools, principals are able to focus more on teaching and learning. What do you think this relationship entails? How can districts and schools create such a relationship?

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This project is part of THE PRINCIPAL STORY outreach campaign, which is made possible by a grant from The Wallace Foundation, a source of ideas for improving school leadership. Visit www.wallacefoundation.org/principalstory.

For more information and research about education leadership, visit the Wallace Knowledge Center at www.wallacefoundation.org.

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