

Professional Learning for Linked Learning Series

A District Linked Learning Principal Network Grows Leadership Capacity

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About Linked Learning

Linked Learning is an instructional approach that provides students with academically challenging pathways leading to careers in high-need, high-growth occupational sectors and prepares them to succeed in postsecondary educational institutions. By design, Linked Learning pathways aspire to develop students' academic and industry-related knowledge and skills by engaging them in projects and coursework that blend career and technical education (CTE) content with a traditional core curriculum (e.g., mathematics, English, and science). To do so, Linked Learning pathways are career-themed. They offer a sequence of rigorous coursework, integrated projects, and work-based learning experiences designed to develop students' abilities to pursue careers in a field of their choosing and in postsecondary education.

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Critical to the long-term success of Linked Learning is developing principals' knowledge and capacity to lead high quality Linked Learning programs in their schools. In this brief, we identify five lessons for district leaders to support Linked Learning principals. The lessons below are drawn from a series of Linked Learning Principal (LLP) meetings that occurred within one district.

From December 2013 to June 2014, a group of district Linked Learning principals was convened by an external district coach who was hired to support them. The initial question that began their work together was: What does it mean to be a leader of a Linked Learning High School? Over the course of six LLP meetings, the principals explored two related questions: 1) What does it mean to be a Linked Learning principal in this district?; and 2) What can I do to deepen the quality and grow the quantity of Linked Learning pathways in my school?

Because the principal coach who facilitated these meetings made sure the content of the meetings was driven by the principals' needs and questions, principals found the meetings extremely valuable. After an hour-long initial meeting in December, principals asked for more time to meet together—to surface their struggles, to learn from one another, and to figure out how to move the work of Linked Learning forward at their individual school sites. This brief describes these LLP meetings—the participants, the meeting content and the learning design—and provides analysis of how the particular features of these meetings contributed to principals' learning and also afforded opportunities for the district to act strategically to better support its Linked Learning principals in their work.

Lessons for Districts to Support Linked Learning Principals as They Lead Instructional Change

1. Recognize that Linked Learning principals have distinct learning needs.
2. Provide resources to cultivate learning relationships among the principals and facilitate their meetings.
3. Recognize the value of sharing resources and strategies among district principals.
4. Foster communication between principals and administrators.
5. Articulate clear pathway goals and then provide sufficient resources to schools.

>> *Learn more about these lessons on the back page of this brief.*

Supporting a District Cohort of Linked Learning Principals to Lead Change

District principals with vastly different experiences and circumstances discovered the value of meeting together regularly to share successful strategies and to wrestle with problems related to leading Linked Learning pathways in their schools. In the particular district we focus on in this brief, there were six comprehensive high schools with Linked Learning pathways. All schools were in different stages of developing Linked Learning pathways. A few schools were comprised entirely of Linked Learning pathways; in the Linked Learning vernacular, this is called a “wall-to-wall” school. Two schools were predominately Linked Learning pathways, but also had strong enrollment in Advanced Placement (AP) tracks that were separate from Linked Learning pathways. The AP students and their families were not interested in participating in Linked Learning pathways. Finally, a few schools only had one or two pathways. The pathways in these schools tended to be less stable than in the other schools. Principals in these schools were trying to strengthen the pathways and increase their overall number.

As a group, the principals represented a continuum of professional experience and expertise. A few were veteran principals and a few were in their first or second year on the job. Most had worked in this school district for many years, but a few were relative newcomers to the district. One was new to the field of education. Because the principals recognized their range of experience as principals and the different school contexts in which they work, they viewed themselves as being in different places with regard to Linked Learning. Initially, they questioned the value of forming a principal learning community. One principal said, “What I do is so different from the other principals in this district.” In addition, the principals said they already had “tons of district meetings” and were not interested in any more. According to the principal coach, there was “a lot of pushback” from the principals at the beginning, and she recognized “it was important to meet the principals where they were.”

In response to these concerns, the coach met individually with each principal in the fall to learn how Linked Learning worked at each school. The coach also conducted a central office inquiry to learn how the district supported principals’ learning. In doing so, she forged connections with the Curriculum and Instruction Department, where most of the mandatory principal meetings emanated. By developing a relationship with the Curriculum and Instruction Department, the coach made sure that their respective efforts to support principals were coordinated and complementary. The approach—taking time to understand the district context as well as each individual school context—enabled the coach to design a support structure that served the various needs of the individual principals and also helped the district to become more strategic in supporting its principals.

Over time, the variation among these principals and the way Linked Learning was configured in each of their schools became an asset for principals learning from each other in the LLP meetings. The principal coach was also strategic in how she guided principals’ thinking. For instance, she didn’t let principals dwell on their desire for more full-time (FTE) staff for their pathways, which they all wanted, because this was not something principals controlled. Instead, she asked principals to identify what they were struggling with at their own site (e.g., pathway enrollment and student recruitment; teacher interest and commitment to pathway teaching; managing variable funding streams; and identifying and coordinating work-based learning experiences). And, she asked principals to identify what was within their control to change. In doing so, she helped principals figure out what they could do to begin to bring about the particular changes to their Linked Learning pathways that they wanted to achieve. For example, several principals wanted higher enrollments in pathways. They turned to each other for student recruitment ideas and ways to reach out to the community both to educate families about existing pathways and to gather ideas for future pathway designs.

Because all six principals worked in the same district, they were also able to discuss the district’s

expectations for Linked Learning and what was expected of them as principals. These discussions were helpful to the principals and to the district, ultimately improving district and principal communication regarding the district's expectations for Linked Learning.

Principals' Needs Determined the Meeting Content

The principals identified challenges they faced in leading Linked Learning pathways at their individual schools. These challenges and their needs for support determined the focus of each LLP meeting. By their third meeting, principals were trying to answer the question: What does it mean to be a Linked Learning principal in this district? The district's goals for Linked Learning were unclear to them. Some thought the expectation was to convert each high school into a "wall-to-wall" school. They all agreed that the messages coming from central office sent mixed signals.

Principals wanted to know what resources were available to them to develop new Linked Learning pathways in their schools, especially now that the state's Career Pathway Academy funding was going away. In one school, a principal could not attract enough students or teachers to a particular pathway and its source of state funding was going away. Consequently, this principal decided he would need to discontinue this pathway the following year for lack of resources and interest. But when he indicated his intention, the district signaled disapproval, leaving the principal in a quandary about the district's expectations as well as the boundaries of his decision-making authority. Other principals wanted to know how they were supposed to respond to families in their communities who valued Advanced Placement courses and did not want to enroll their children in Linked Learning pathways. And, still other principals led schools in communities rife with violence and gang activity, where additional social supports were badly needed. These principals wanted to know how they could possibly attend to the complicated work of developing Linked Learning pathways in their particular schools—

a task that required forging new structures and re-designing approaches to teaching and learning—when establishing a safe school environment with consistent teacher and student attendance seemed insurmountable.

As principals from the same district, they were able to examine the district expectations together and consider ways in which the district was hampering their success as Linked Learning principals. With the principal coach's help, these principals considered the information they needed from the district and developed a strategy for making that request. This is not a trivial undertaking in districts where communication is typically one-way and top-down and where principals feel their job may be in jeopardy. According to the principal coach, once the six principals were able to identify the root of their frustrations, they realized that their frustration was confusion about the district's goals and expectations surrounding Linked Learning. Discovering they shared this confusion, they felt more comfortable and emboldened to seek out the information that they needed from the district in order to become more effective Linked Learning leaders in their schools. The district, which did not seem to recognize the various ways in which it sent mixed messages to the principals, responded quickly and clearly to their request for information. The principals learned that not all schools in the district have to become "wall-to-wall" schools. This information was a relief to the principals. The clear direction enabled each principal to re-prioritize how best to strengthen the Linked Learning program in his or her school.

Learning to Deepen the Quality of Linked Learning Pathways

Principals' needs and interests drove the learning design of the LLP meetings. Because principals identified the support they needed, the meetings were valuable to the principals. As a result, the principals increasingly set aside time for them. They invited their principal colleagues into their schools and introduced their leadership practices to each other. For instance, one principal asked his pathway lead teachers to attend an LLP meeting. These lead teachers talked with the other district

Exhibit 1: December 2013 Meeting Agenda

District Linked Learning Principals Cohort Meeting

Tuesday, December 10, 2013, 10:00–11:00am

Location: High School Number 1

Before the meeting, please review the attached documents:

One page overview – *Communities of Practice*

“Communities of Practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger et al, 2002, p. 4).

Time	Topic	Outcomes	Activities	Follow-Up
Pre-reading	Community of Practice	Understand what a CoP is.	Read overview of Communities of Practice (CoP)	
10:00am	Introduction	Launch the group; build community	Use diagram to see connections among Principals	At next meeting, have absent members fill in their connections.
10:10am	Community of Practice: Focus on Domain	Identify individual and collective areas of focus	Think/Write/Share <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is our common purpose? • What do we want to accomplish? • What topics & issues do we really care about, are we really passionate about, deeply concerned about? 	Chart notes for future use
10:30am	Community of Practice: Focus on Community	Provisional set of ground rules/operating agreements/principles	Forming Ground Rules (quick whip)	Norms <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confidentiality
10:40am	Community of Practice: Focus on Practice	Clarity about meeting schedule & ongoing communication	Ongoing Meetings/Connections: Given our purpose, what we want to accomplish, & the connections we need... How often will we meet, & how will we connect on an ongoing basis? What sort of relationships & connections do we need? Who or what needs to be connected? How? What roles are people going to play?	Meeting Schedule: Formal (monthly) Informal

Source: Content of agenda provided by the principal coach.

Exhibit 2: March 2014 Meeting Agenda

District Linked Learning Principals Cohort Meeting

Wednesday, March 26, 2014, 8:00–10:00am

Location: High School Number 2

Before the meeting, please review the attached documents:

Sample OPTIC Self-Assessment Summary; Essential Elements summary description

“Communities of Practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger et al, 2002, p. 4).

Time	Topic	Outcomes	Activities	Follow-Up
Pre-reading	Optic Self-Assessment; Essential Elements	Deepen understanding of the new self-assessment tool	Read attached documents. Identify questions about the use of the self-assessment tool.	
8:00am	Community of Practice: Focus on Community	Gather, get coffee, check-in	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revisit Ground Rules • Check-In: Confidence level as site leader for a Pathway. (How comfortable are you with LL/Pathway implementation?) 	
9:00am	Community of Practice: Focus on Practice	Examine one model for working with Pathway Leads (HS No. 2 Pathway Leads)		
9:20am	Community of Practice: Focus on Domain	Understand the tool our pathways are completing within ConnectEd Studios.	Take a look at the self-assessment tool, ConnectEd Studios, and the Essential Elements. Identify what questions, concerns or needs this raises as we support the growth of our various pathways.	
9:40am	Closing	Reflect on meeting and propose outcomes for March meeting	Reflection question: How can we modify the Pathway Lead/Principal component of our next meeting?	NEXT STEPS: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schedule April meeting

Source: Content of agenda provided by the principal coach.

principals about their grade-level pathway goals and the school structures their principal had put in place to facilitate communication and provide collective leadership of the pathways. They shared their meeting agendas with the principals, who were interested in how they might adapt this distributed leadership approach in their own high schools. A particular topic of interest at this meeting was the recruitment strategies this high school was using to educate its ninth grade students about the various pathways they could choose to enter in tenth grade. Several principals attending the LLP meeting were struggling to recruit enough students into their pathways and so these recruitment strategies were pertinent. At another LLP meeting hosted by a different principal, the group wrestled with that principal's dilemma of needing more dedicated resources to support the development of a new pathway. He wanted to provide more release time to the pathway teachers to plan and work together. He also needed strategies for managing a community member who would donate a large sum of money to his school pathway, but in return wanted to have some control over how that money was spent. This principal turned to more veteran principals for suggestions and ideas.

Lessons for Districts to Support Linked Learning Principals

At the end of the year, these six principals felt they were able to move the work of Linked Learning forward in their schools. Beyond principals' individual learning, we draw several lessons for districts to support the learning of Linked Learning principals. District leaders should:

1. Recognize that Linked Learning principals in comprehensive high schools will have learning needs that are distinct from other principals and that these needs will vary according to the school context;
2. Provide resources. Employ an external facilitator/coach who has explicit strategies for building a trusting relationship among the principal group and will focus on actions principals can take. Schedule meeting times to facilitate principals' individual and collective learning;
3. Recognize the value of bringing district Linked Learning principals together to learn from one another and share resources and strategies;
4. Seek out ways to learn about the particular support that its Linked Learning principals need from the district. In so doing, districts should foster two-way communication between principals and central office administrators; and
5. Articulate clear goals regarding Linked Learning pathways and then provide sufficient resources to schools so that these goals can be realized.

The relationships that these principals developed with one another as they shared their leadership struggles in the LLP meetings are likely to facilitate continued learning after the formal structure is discontinued. However, dedicating resources to support principal learning as they lead instructional change at their sites is the best way to ensure continuous systemic progress and improvement in Linked Learning.

Acknowledgments

This brief is one of four in our Professional Learning Series for Linked Learning practitioners, school leaders, and district administrators. This series is prepared with support from the James Irvine Foundation. We gratefully acknowledge their support.

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