EAB

Preparing Principals to Lead

Best Practices for Equipping Principals with Essential Leadership Skills

▶ **Study in Brief**

Principals are critical to school success, but the demands on schools have proliferated, making the role increasingly complex. As a result, principals often struggle to make a significant impact on teaching and learning. This report profiles a variety of strategies from innovative districts that have supported their principals in leading school success.

3 Things You'll Learn

- Which leadership competencies enable principals to have the greatest impact on teaching and learning
- How districts can scale ongoing opportunities for principals to develop and hone their leadership competencies
- Which strategies best support principals in maximizing their time on high-impact activities

District Leadership Forum

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Maximizing Principal Impact in Schools

A Growing Need to Equip Principals with Essential Leadership Skills

◆ **Principals are key to significantly improving teaching and learning outcomes.** Research shows that principals are second only to teachers in improving student achievement. Quality school leadership also increases teacher effectiveness and reduces teacher turnover. Indeed, high quality school leadership is often the common denominator among top performing schools.

◆ **Yet, principals rarely achieve the desired improvements in these outcomes.** Despite school leaders' diligent efforts to impact teaching and learning, only 30% of teachers nationwide have substantially improved in their performance evaluations over the past three years. Additionally, academic outcomes nationwide have remained mediocre and largely unchanged in the past decade.

◆ **Fortunately, five meta-analyses reveal the leadership competencies that have the greatest impact on student achievement: strategic and analytical thinking and interpersonal skills.** Not only do these two competencies distinguish the most effective principals from the rest, but they are also the same distinguishing competencies of top-performing leaders of any organization, regardless of industry.

◆ **However, whether or not school leaders possess these core leadership competencies is too often left to chance.** Although these competencies are essential to leadership success, most aspiring principals do not formally learn and hone these competencies in either their principal preparation programs or district sponsored professional development. Almost all principal development offerings tend to over-emphasize instruction-specific leadership activities—which research suggests are insufficient on their own.

◆ **Every student and school deserves a highly effective school leader, and districts have a key role in ensuring this becomes a reality.** To do so, district leaders will likely need to adjust their approach to principal hiring and development offerings. This study presents a series of best practices to achieve that goal.

Principal Competencies Associated with Improved Academic Outcomes

Number of School Leadership Competencies Determined to Have a Positive Effect Size Across Five Meta-Analyses[1]

Bar chart:
- Pedagogical Knowledge: 5
- Strategic & Analytical Thinking: 9
- Interpersonal Skills: 14
- Operational Acumen: 3

Strategic & Analytical Thinking and Interpersonal Skills are most prominent among competencies with effect sizes on student outcomes
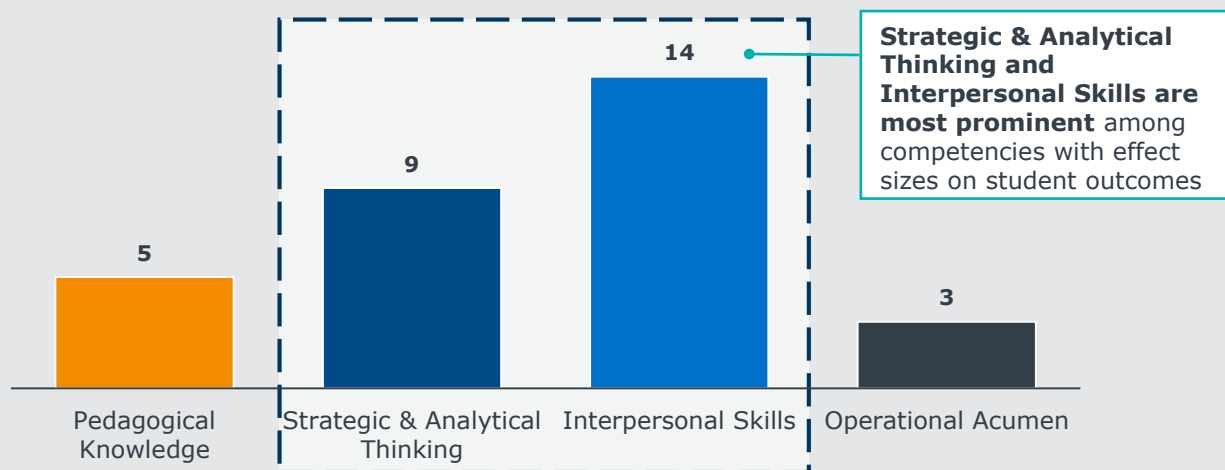
1) According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

Source: Waters, T et al. (2003) "What 30 Years of Research Tells Us about the Effects of Leadership on Student Achievement"; Robinson, V et al (2008) "The Impact of Leadership on Student Outcomes"; Heck R.H. & Hallinger, P (2010) "Testing a Longitudinal Model of Leadership Effects on School Improvement."; Supovitz, J. "Instructional Leadership in American High School"; Scheeren, J (2012) "School Leadership Effects Revisited: Review and Meta-Analysis of Empirical Studies"; EAB interviews and analysis..

Four Barriers to Highly Effective School Leadership

Most district leaders are fully aware that the quality of their principals is critical to the success of their schools. Districts have experimented with various efforts to support principals, such as providing professional development, hosting principal PLCs, and implementing pipeline programs for aspiring principals. However, many districts continue to observe that principals have inconsistent and limited impact on high-priority outcomes. Below are four common barriers to school leadership success.

Formalized Training on Core Competencies Often Absent in Principal Development

Many district-led principal development offerings overemphasize school-specific or education-focused topics at the expense of equipping principals with the industry-agnostic competencies that are most essential for leadership impact. A review of higher education principal prep programs and district leadership development opportunities reveals that principals either receive insufficient or no formal training on honing core leadership competencies.

Screening for Core Competencies When Hiring Remains Subjective and Inconsistent

District leaders rarely objectively screen for these core leadership when hiring principals. Because these competencies seem abstract and districts often have limited tools for rigorously assessing potential hires, many district leaders overly rely on their subjective perspectives during the hiring process. As a result, district leaders rarely gain visibility into how a candidate thinks, solves problems, or works with others, even though these competencies are critical for leadership success.

Districts Often Limit Ongoing, Personalized Support to Early-Tenured Principals

Although researchers and practitioners agree that consistent and personalized support is critical for honing leadership skills, district leaders often struggle to provide the meaningful support that principals need. Most principal supervisors have limited time and capacity to offer consistent support, and hiring external coaches can be costly for districts. As a result, many principals don't receive the individualized support that is vital to their professional development, leaving roughly 75% of principals feeling ill-prepared to lead today's schools.

Many Principals Struggle to Find Enough Time to Focus on High-Impact Activities

Even if principals have the necessary competencies to lead, most principals are limited in their ability to exercise those competencies due to competing demands on their time. In fact, 77% of principals report that their outsized workload and increasing responsibilities remain the biggest barrier to their leadership. As a result, many principals are reactive to immediate demands and often spend the most amount of time on activities that yield minimal impact on student success.

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

Our Research Study Roadmap

16 Best Practices for Equipping Principals with Essential Leadership Skills

This study is based on a series of interviews with more than 130 K-12 leaders representing school districts nationwide. To support district leaders in ensuring highly effective school leadership across schools, EAB has identified **16 best practices** across four critical initiatives aimed to elevate the impact of school leaders on teaching and learning outcomes. This brief will focus on four representative best practices from our larger study.

I	II	III	IV
Cultivate Strategic & Interpersonal Competencies	**Transform Candidate Interviews to Screen for Core Competencies**	**Provide Personalized Support Throughout Principals' Tenure**	**Refocus Principals' Time on High-Impact Activities**

I	II	III	IV
1. Leadership Framework Guidelines	4. Strategic Thinking Case-Interview Prompts	7. 360-Degree Leadership Evaluations	**12. Principal Time Audit and Prioritization Support**
2. Principal Core Competency Development	**5. Interpersonal Demonstration Exercises**	8. Leadership Development Dashboard	13. District-Issued Email Safeguards
• **Root-Cause & Data Analysis Training**	6. Quantified Feedback Scorecard	9. Redistributed Supervisor Caseloads	14. Meeting Representative Rotations
• Brain-Based Interpersonal Skills Development		10. Alternatively Sourced Mentorships	15. Distributed Leadership Model
3. Competency-Aligned Principal Pipeline		**11. Business Executive Peer Mentorships**	

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

Four Ways to Promote Principal Success

Given how critical principals are to school success, finding highly effective leaders should not be a lucky coincidence but rather an intentional and districtwide systematic effort. Below are four best practices from our study of leading districts that have improved the quality and impact of their school leaders.

Cultivate Strategic Thinking & Interpersonal Competencies

Root Cause and Data Analysis Training
Develop Core Strategic and Analytical Thinking Competencies in All Principals

To ensure principals develop the necessary strategic and analytical thinking skills, leaders at Mansfield Independent School District provide explicit training in root cause problem-solving and data analysis during principal onboarding and professional development. Principals must demonstrate their mastery of these skills to district leadership and use root cause analysis to inform school improvement plans.

Transform Candidate Interviews to Screen for Core Competencies

Interpersonal Demonstration Exercises
Use Role-Playing Activities to Assess Prospective Principals' Interpersonal Skills

Ravenscroft School evaluates candidates' interpersonal strengths by observing their interactions, language, and demeanor in the context of a (simulated) difficult situation. Prospective candidates participate in role play activities during the interview process to demonstrate how they would handle some common challenges.

Provide Personalized Support Throughout Principals' Tenure

Business Executive Peer Mentorships
Pair Principals with Business Executives to Provide Targeted Leadership Guidance

The Association of Washington School Principals pairs principals with chief executive officers and other high-level executives from local corporations to create one-on-one leadership mentorships. Participants use a shared leadership framework and terminology to ensure that conversations are grounded in practice, more than theory. These mentorships provide principals the opportunity to learn cross-sector leadership skills from business executives.

Refocus Principals' Time on High-Impact Activities

Principal Time Audit and Prioritization Support
Assist Principals in Reallocating their Time Towards Key Priorities

Realizing how valuable principals' time is, administrators at Clarksville-Montgomery County School System implemented a system in which principals audit and reflect upon their weekly time use, identify gaps between their time use and their supervisors' expectations, and maximize the use of their calendars to preserve time for high-priority and high-impact activities.

Source: EAB interviews and analysis.

Looking for Frontier Practices

> ❝

How can we equip all school leaders with the essential skills needed to lead successful school outcomes?

The four practices outlined in this brief provide a sample of some of our most promising findings. In addition to describing the steps and details necessary to execute these practices, sample tools and templates are included to ease the implementation process for district leaders.

Featured Institutions

Mansfield Independent
School District
Mansfield, TX

Ravenscroft School
Raleigh, NC

Association of Washington
School Principals
Olympia, WA

Clarksville-Montgomery
County School System
Clarksville, TN

Root Cause & Data Analysis Training

Practice in Brief

Mansfield Independent School District dedicates principal onboarding and professional development time to root cause and data analysis. This training helps principals cultivate the necessary skills to uncover the underlying causes of any problem that arises, create strategies that address those core problems, and monitor the effects of their efforts using data.

Key Components

Make Training Central to Principal Development

- Incorporate root cause and data analysis training into new principal onboarding and orientation

- Provide training to all current principals during professional development or professional learning community (PLC) sessions

Hold Principals Accountable for Mastery

- Require all principals to demonstrate mastery of each competency to district leadership by asking principals to identify the root cause of a real school problem and then use data analysis to propose a solution

- Provide meaningful feedback to principals in one-on-one or small group sessions

Integrate Root Cause and Data Analysis into School Strategy

- Mandate that root cause analysis be used to inform school improvement plans

- Require data monitoring of new school improvement initiatives

Benefits to School Leadership

» 95% of principals learned how to solve problems using root-cause analysis for the first time

» 67% of principals demonstrated proficiency in root-cause problem solving within the first year of learning the skill

» 90% of principals found root-cause analysis a 'very helpful' leadership tool

> "
> When the principal of [the school with the lowest reading scores in the district] used root cause analysis to examine why their students were low in reading, she uncovered a core problem: teachers did not feel competent teaching students decoding skills. **Root causing was the first step to improving this essential adult skill, and that led to dramatically improved student outcomes**.
>
> Dr. Jim Vaszauskas, Superintendent
> *Mansfield Independent School Districts*

Abbreviated Sample Root-Cause Analysis and Accompanying Process Steps

Root cause analysis is a widely-used problem solving tool that is designed to help leaders of any industry address the underlying causes of a challenge. The skill requires asking a series of 'whys' to identify all of the potential root causes of a problem and then rigorously examining every possible explanation to isolate the real reasons a problem exists. The below example is a root cause problem tree used to understand a second-grade reading challenge that Mansfield ISD was facing.

1 Begin analysis with **clear and specific problem statement**

2 **Ask probing 'whys' until root issues are clear**

- Ask at least '5 whys' to drill down to root cause
- Categorize reasons into MECE[1] categories
- Map all possible reasons, withholding assumptions and edits
- Simplify language to ease analysis

3 **Draw a circle or box around the bottom root problems**

- Solid boxes indicate problems within the school's locus of control
- Dotted boxes indicate problems that are not within locus of control

4 **Prioritize root problems to address** by distributing weights—that sum 100—across each boxed root cause

Second grade students struggle to read

- Taught, but didn't learn
  - Instruction-related problem
    - Poor curriculum
    - Poor instruction
      - Teachers don't know how (70)
      - Teachers know how, but don't do
        - Don't buy in (20)
        - Buy in, but don't have resources (7)
  - Non-instruction related problem
- Not taught
  - In class, not taught
    - Classroom disruptions impede learning (2)
    - No qualified teacher (0)
  - Not in class (1)

1) Mutually exclusive, collectively exhaustive.

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Select the Right Data-Based Indicators to Monitor Progress of Root-Cause Solutions

Developing principals' problem-solving skills through root cause analysis training is the first step in knowing the most effective strategies to address a problem; using the right data to monitor and adjust those strategies is also critical. Principals should be able to select and use the most relevant data to track and monitor solutions —a skill that should be taught explicitly. Below are several tips for principals to keep in mind when selecting key performance indicators (KPIs) and choosing outcomes-based goals to indicate the success of any initiative.

Strategically Select Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)
Criteria for Choosing Which Data to Monitor

Accessible
Information system (e.g., SIS, LMS) should be able to readily generate metric data

Tracked Frequently
Monitoring should be able to be conducted at regular intervals throughout the year

Reliable
Data should be accurate; consistently defined and measured over time

Easily Communicated
Definition and rationale for metric should be easy to understand and replicate

Under Principal Span of Control
Metric should comprise components solely within principal's purview

Create Outcomes-Based Goals to Propel Action

Establish Performance Targets
Select performance targets to identify concrete goals and **drive performance on selected KPIs**

Set Thresholds to Indicate Underperformance
Establish these thresholds to clarify when **corrective action is required** to maintain minimum performance levels

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1) Mutually exclusive, comprehensively exhaustive.

Interpersonal Demonstration Exercises

Practice in Brief

To screen for hard-to-quantify interpersonal skills, Ravenscroft School, an independent school in North Carolina, incorporates interactive scenarios into their principal hiring practices. As part of their interview, principal candidates engage with current school staff to play the role of the principal in a difficult situation, such as delivering constructive feedback to a struggling teacher or helping an angry parent feel heard and understood. These exercises help administrators evaluate how the candidate would use their interpersonal skills to respond on the job.

Implementation Steps

Set the Stage

- Develop a scenario that models common, difficult situations (e.g., parent upset over student grade)
- Provide candidates relevant background information pertaining to the scenario prior to interview day

Play Out the Scene

- Instruct candidate to carry out the role play activity with current district/school leader or teacher (20-30 minutes)
- Allow other participants flexibility to ad lib or draw on previous experience to respond to the candidate's words and actions

Observe and Score Performance

- Observe and evaluate candidate's performance using set rubric
- Ensure rubric outlines the visual and oral cues to look for during activity

Elements of Core Competencies Assessed

- Assertiveness
- Emotional Expression
- Empathy
- Impulse Control

- Optimism
- Problem Solving
- Self-Regard
- Stress Tolerance

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Business Executive Peer Mentorships

Practice in Brief

To scale opportunities for ongoing leadership coaching and support, the Association of Washington School Principals pairs principals in the Seattle Area with business executives of large companies who volunteer to provide ongoing leadership mentoring. These mentorships allow principals to learn from leaders outside of education, which in turn encourages a strong focus on the core leadership competencies—strategic and analytical thinking and interpersonal skills.

Key Components

Establish Common Leadership Terminology

- Equip participants with shared leadership terminologies and definitions to promote meaningful dialogue

- Provide conversation starters around that shared understanding of leadership to ease initial interactions

Encourage One-on-One Interactions

- Require principals and business executives to provide one another individualized attention and support

- Encourage executives to use these one-on-one sessions to share their most pertinent leadership lessons

Allow for Self-Paced Schedules

- Allow mentorship partners to determine the frequency and time of their interactions to accommodate busy schedules

Require a Two-Year Partnership Commitment

- Stipulate that partnerships must be a minimum of two years to promote meaningful, long-term relationships

Benefits to School Leadership

» 95% of participating principals found the program to be extremely valuable in their leadership development

» 98% of participating principals in high needs schools reported the program increased their commitment to stay in their schools

» 45 senior executives volunteered to partner with a principal for at least two years

"

Both principals and business executives were surprised by the **alarming similarities between [the competencies] needed to run a school and what's needed to run a large company**…Whether their challenges related to change management or smartly allocating limited resources to address core problems, both groups were able to exchange their experiences from leading the organization and share approaches with each other.

Dr. Scott Seaman, Executive Director
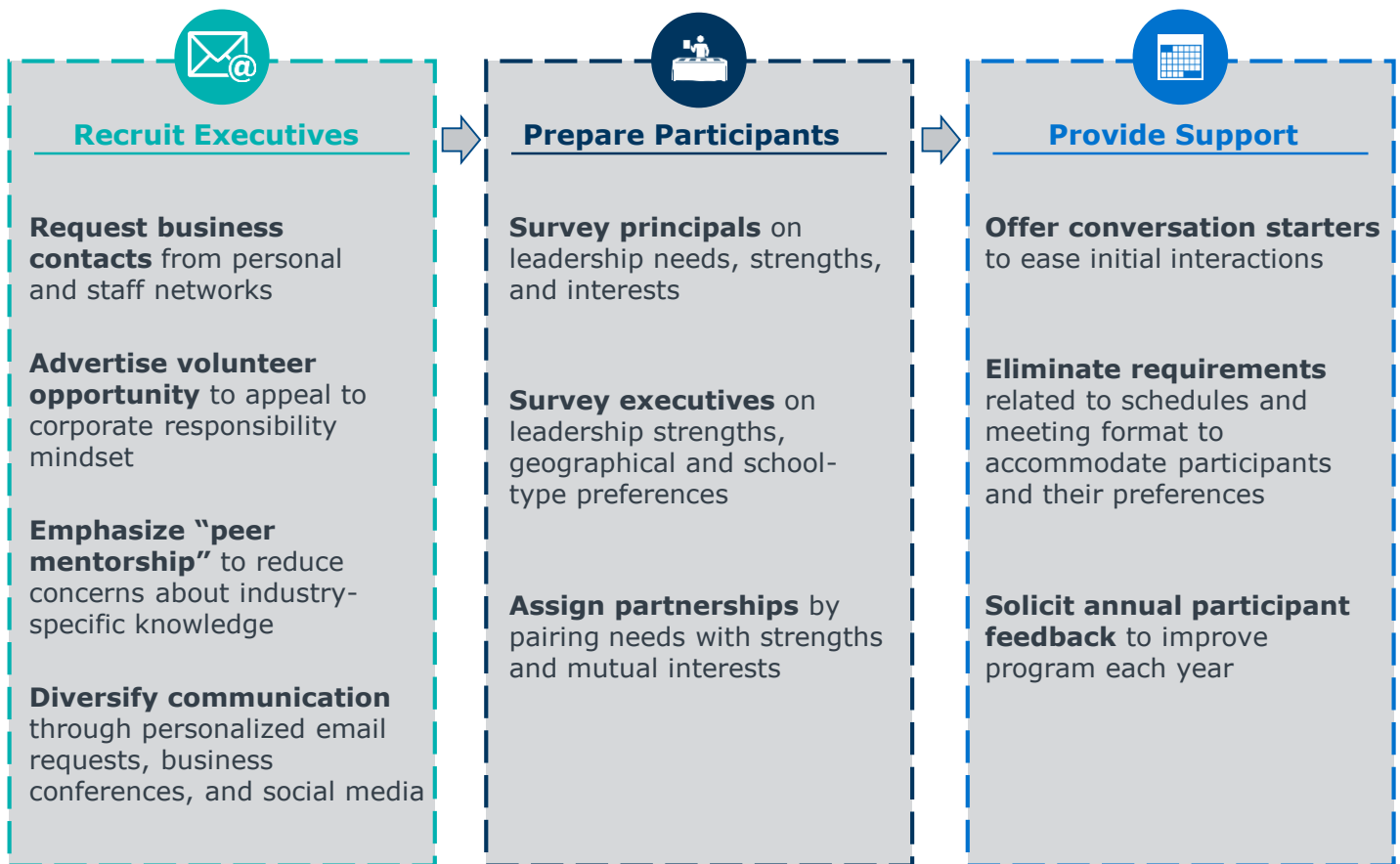*Association of Washington School Principals*

Practice Spotlight

Association of Washington
School Principals

Recruit and Prepare Local Business Leaders
to Mentor Principals

To organize an out-of-industry mentoring initiative, district leaders can recruit leaders from local businesses to partner with their schools' principals. This type of opportunity allows principals to learn from leaders outside of education, which in turn encourages a strong focus on the core leadership skills that are critical in any industry. Below are the recommended steps for launching a business executive peer mentorship program.

Recruit Executives

Request business contacts from personal and staff networks

Advertise volunteer opportunity to appeal to corporate responsibility mindset

Emphasize "peer mentorship" to reduce concerns about industry-specific knowledge

Diversify communication through personalized email requests, business conferences, and social media

Prepare Participants

Survey principals on leadership needs, strengths, and interests

Survey executives on leadership strengths, geographical and school-type preferences

Assign partnerships by pairing needs with strengths and mutual interests

Provide Support

Offer conversation starters to ease initial interactions

Eliminate requirements related to schedules and meeting format to accommodate participants and their preferences

Solicit annual participant feedback to improve program each year

Source: EAB interviews & analysis.

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Principal Time Audit and Prioritization Support

Practice in Brief

To help principals spend their time wisely, Clark County Montgomery School System uses three district initiatives aimed at helping principals proactively allocate their time to key priorities. First, the district engages principals in ongoing training on time prioritization. Second, the district encourages principals to audit their time and meet with an accountability partners every other week to promote reflection and refinement of time use. Lastly, the district protects principals time from low-impact activities using protected office hours and discipline rotations.

Implementation Steps

Equip Principals With Time Management Tips and Support

- Integrate time management training into principal onboarding and professional development offerings
- Facilitate discussions with principals on time priorities and expectations to set shared time goals
- Encourage principals to code their calendar to signal level of priority for each activity and budget time accordingly (i.e. "essential" and "non-essential" to school outcomes)

Promote Time Audits and Accountability Partnerships

- Schedule a reoccurring dedicated time slot every two weeks for principals to audit and reflect on their time use in relation to their goals with an accountability partner
- Instruct principals to select and pair up as their year-long accountability partners at the start of the school year
- Disseminate suggested discussion questions to promote meaningful reflection and proactive planning among accountability partners

Establish District-Wide Safeguards to Protect Principals' Time

- Send reoccurring Monday morning "plan week" calendar invites to remind principals about proactive weekly planning
- Request that principals establish weekly "office hours" each week, which can be used to impromptu demands and meetings from parents, teachers, or other stakeholders
- Encourage school administrators to take turns in addressing student discipline

Benefits to Institution

» 100% of principal participants find time audits and proactive weekly planning "very helpful"

» 75% of principal participants reported spending more time on key priorities post-initiative

> "
> Being intentional and proactive about my time has also helped me protect and honor my personal responsibilities. By noticing trends in how I spend my time and adjusting my practice, I have been able to ensure that each hour is wisely spent... and at the end of the day, I can come home to my family.
>
> Principal
> *Clarksville-Montgomery County School System*

Practice Spotlight

Clarksville-Montgomery County
School System

Accountability Partner Meeting Template
Suggested Guided Discussion Questions

Examining the Facts	
Last week's goals: What were your priorities and targeted goals?	**Last week's actual (%):** How did you actually spend your time?

Reflection Questions
How well did you meet your weekly goals and priorities?
In what ways were you successful in aligning your time with your goals and priorities?

Accountability Partner Meeting Template (Cont.)

Suggested Guided Discussion Questions

Reflection Questions (cont.)
What challenges hindered you from aligning your time with your goals and priorities?
How do you plan to address or mitigate those challenges next time?
What are your goals and priorities for next week (or several weeks)?

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