



Research Brief August 2020

This brief summarizes the video, *Principal Supervision and Distance Learning: What's the Right Approach?*¹. The video is produced by Digital Promise, a nonprofit organization focused on closing the *digital learning gap*. Nancy Gutierrez, President and CEO of the NYC Leadership Academy, moderates a discussion with Meredith Honig, professor at the University of Washington and Director of the University's District Leadership Design Lab.

Honig's research focuses on the integral role a school district's central office can play in developing equity-focused leaders. Honig asserts that central offices are a key part of the educational system and thus essential to a district's efforts to ensure educational equity. These efforts have assumed even more importance as traditionally underserved African-American and Latinx students have become the most disadvantaged by the academic and social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the presentation, Honig explains how her research shows that the central office's role of Principal Supervision is capacity building – bringing principals to their best selves. More specifically, it is neither about supervision in the traditional sense of evaluating and assessing, nor helping principals with operational tasks. Principal supervision is about building culturally-responsive, equity-focused instructional leaders. Honig's book, *Supervising Principals for Instructional Leadership: A Teaching and Learning Approach*² lays out the seven strategies of this approach:

1. Fostering learners' agency
2. Joint work moves
3. Modeling
4. Talk moves
5. Brokering
6. Recognizing all learners as learning resources
7. Differentiation

The foundation of effective principal supervision is helping principals lead their own learning through setting professional growth and learning goals. In this process, Honig stresses that principals should not set goals for their students or schools, but for their own growth and development which in turn is a key contributor to student learning. This begins with developing intentional learning plans, based on adult-learning theory. These plans focus principals on themselves and their own growth and are supplemented with one-on-one coaching and learning communities.

¹ Digital Promise: Educational Leadership for a Digital World. (2020, June 16). *Principal Supervision and Distance Learning: What's the Right Approach?* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1GlfNdbmTuU&feature=youtu.be>

² Honig, M.I. & Rainey, L.R. (2020). *Supervising Principals for Instructional Leadership: A Teaching and Learning Approach*. Harvard Education Press.

Principal supervision also includes a series of moves, the most important being a modeling move. During a modeling move, the supervisor demonstrates the desired behavior, narrating what they are intending to demonstrate and explaining why the behavior matters. The supervisor should not be concerned if they are not perfect themselves with the move – this can be a behavior that the principal and the supervisor strive to perfect together.

Honig integrates effective principal supervision into the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the social movement for racial justice. First, she posits that principal supervision activities, such as one-on-one interactions, developing learning plans, coaching and learning communities, can thrive in a virtual environment.

Honig then discusses how the social movement for equity is *daylighting* systemic inequities in educational systems, accentuated by distance learning. This can help principal supervisors stay focused on promoting instructional leadership for their principals who can, in turn, support teachers to contribute to maximum student learning. Principal supervisors should help principals put systems in place to improve instruction for underserved students by:

- Assessing how much they know about their students – for example, which students are experiencing food insecurity – and putting systems in place to really know them.
- Assessing and strengthening teacher collaborations as these collaborations have helped schools pivot to distance learning.
- Assessing and strengthening the family and community partnerships essential to successful distance learning.
- More broadly, the current crisis daylightes the importance of principals knowing how to take an explicit, anti-racist approach to instruction and how to develop and strengthen culturally responsive learning and teaching. It is particularly important to move away from the *deficit* conversation of lost learning due to the pandemic and move to a strength-based approach.

Honig concludes by stressing that the current health crisis and the social movement for equity is not just about improving distance learning. It is to take this moment to look at all aspects of the central office, where systems live. Districts need to assess how practices related to hiring, professional development and student assignment, for example, reinforce inequities and then move forward to change these systems. It is important for district leaders to continue to look for good models and to *train their smarts on this and bring a new imagination to what their school systems can be*.