

Developing Principals' Instructional Leadership in Math in Common Districts

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This report is part of a series summarizing learnings from the five-year Math in Common (MiC) initiative. During MiC, teams from 10 diverse California school districts engaged in learning about and sharing best practices for implementing the Common Core State Standards for Mathematics (CCSS-M) in grades K–8.

Over the course of the MiC initiative, a key focus for districts was developing principals into instructional leaders who could help facilitate CCSS-M implementation. Many districts shifted their teacher professional learning from districtwide, centralized meetings to learning that happened at school sites, connecting the learning more closely with everyday classroom instruction. As more teacher learning moves to school sites, principals can become vital allies for district math staff, and can become key instructional leaders for the CCSS-M. But this is only possible when principals are supported to understand the standards and the district's vision for realizing them, and to observe classrooms to understand how instruction is evolving.

Findings on Principal Leadership

This report describes how MiC districts empowered their principals to lead CCSS-M implementation and instruction at their schools. The report includes profiles of three MiC districts that built their principals' instructional leadership in math over time. Following are some of the report's key findings:

MIC DISTRICTS SECURED TIME WITH PRINCIPALS TO TALK ABOUT MATHEMATICS.

Almost all MiC districts had or created at least one type of structured, regular meeting where principals could interact with district math central office staff. District math leaders sometimes had to leverage relationships with higher-level administrators in order to gain this access reliably.

MIC DISTRICTS EMPOWERED PRINCIPALS TO BECOME MATHEMATICS INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERS.

There were three chief benefits when district staff interacted with principals about the districts' math visions: the process offered professional development about mathematics instruction to principals; it helped create energy and excitement around math at sites; and it provided a pathway to communicate messages about math instruction between sites and the central office.

MIC DISTRICTS SUPPORTED PRINCIPALS IN COLLABORATING WITH TEACHERS AT THEIR SITES.

With support from their districts, principals leveraged teachers' existing collaborative structures (e.g., professional learning communities) to provide instructional leadership to their entire sites.

MIC DISTRICTS GOT PRINCIPALS INTO CLASSROOMS TO OBSERVE MATHEMATICS INSTRUCTION AND TO BUILD THE PRINCIPALS' UNDERSTANDING OF STANDARDS-ALIGNED INSTRUCTION.

MiC districts encouraged and supported principals to develop understanding of the CCSS-M and to then observe math classes at their sites, with a focus on looking for evidence of CCSS-M-aligned instructional practices. The observations often created valuable learning opportunities for principals, who might not otherwise have had a chance to think deeply about the standards with peers.

Recommendations for the Field

Based on the report's findings, we offer recommendations to district staff for empowering their principals to lead CCSS-M implementation at their sites:

- **Create or access spaces for routine face time with principals.** Establishing solid district–school relationships and lines of communication can help principals be fully aware of the district central office math team's vision.
- **Support principals to develop and lead a site math vision.** Support and improve site-based collaboration between principals and district math coaches, to make existing relationships more fruitful both for principals' learning and for the development of sites' CCSS-M implementation plans.
- **Encourage principals to attend teacher professional development.** Participating in CCSS-M–aligned professional learning can position principals to offer teachers instructional feedback and to understand whether and how the districts' focal mathematics instructional practices are working.
- **Offer tools for principals to make professional learning communities (PLCs) that support powerful math instruction.** To help maximize the impact of PLCs, district math staff can offer principals a clear format for understanding, supporting, and monitoring the efficacy of site-based teacher PLCs.
- **Support classroom observation as a form of professional learning for principals.** To help principals better understand what standards-based teaching and learning looks like in real classrooms, familiarize principals with observation tools designed to identify instructional shifts, visit classrooms together, and debrief afterward.

Policymakers should pay greater attention to systems of support for principals across the state. These are our recommendations:

- **Organize principal training institutes.** The State Board of Education could release grant funds for principal institutes focused on instructional leadership for standards implementation. Principal institutes like those in the MiC initiative worked because staff from different strata attended alongside principals, deepening shared understandings about math implementation.
- **Incentivize districts to fund principals' professional development.** To extend the idea of principal training institutes, the state could signal to districts that they should devote more of their own professional development dollars to working with principals.
- **Reconceptualize site leadership.** It's unrealistic to expect a single principal to manage everything. California policymakers should consider incentivizing districts to make it a more common practice to split site leadership into multiple roles, allowing one person to develop and support a site plan for instructional improvement in each content area.

WestEd's formative evaluation over the five-year initiative period draws on an array of data sources, including annual surveys of teachers and administrators, focus groups on topics of interest, classroom observations, district grant reports, and observations of learning events held across the five years. This report draws on teams' work and data gathered at a 2018 leadership convening.

WHAT IS MATH IN COMMON?

The Math in Common initiative provided funding to 10 school districts to support their efforts to implement the CCSS-M. With support from California Education Partners and WestEd, the 10 districts were organized into a community of practice, to accelerate their learning about standards implementation. The best practices identified by the community of practice are intended to be shared broadly to support standards implementation and math improvement in all California districts. For more information about the Math in Common evaluation, see <https://www.wested.org/project/math-in-common-evaluation/>.

