

The Best Practice Handbook

For Student Achievement
in Public Education

Office of the Legislative
Auditor General

Report to the UTAH LEGISLATURE



LEGISLATIVE AUDITOR GENERAL



1975 - 2025



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SEPTEMBER 25, 2025

TO: THE UTAH STATE LEGISLATURE AND
STATE OF UTAH EDUCATIONAL LEADERS

Transmitted herewith is our report:

“The Best Practice Handbook for Student Achievement
in Public Education” [Report #2025-13].

This handbook contains the best practices LEAs should consider adopting to improve student learning and academic achievement. There are three distinct sections within the handbook that cover the three basic levels of an LEA:

- Section 1 discusses the best practices related to school boards and their role as an oversight body.
- Section 2 discusses the best practices for LEA central offices and how they can support school improvement.
- Section 3 discusses the best practices for school principals and how they oversee and guide teacher performance.

As LEAs adopt these best practices, they will create education systems that are aligned around the clear goal of student learning and academic achievement. Each section has numerous examples as well as questions and resources to help LEAs apply these practices. We encourage LEA leaders throughout the state to carefully consider this handbook, identify ways they can improve, and apply the practices to create strong and effective educational systems.

Sincerely,

Kade R. Minchey, CIA, CFE

Auditor General

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Acknowledgements

Special thanks to the various organizations and individuals we worked with during our fieldwork. Their feedback and guidance were critical for the development of this handbook:

- The Utah State Board of Education
- The Utah School Boards Association
- The Utah State Superintendents Association
- The Utah Association of Public Charter Schools
- Utah State University Center for the School of the Future
- The Brigham Young University-Public School Partnership
- Dr. Richard Nye, Governor's Education Advisor

We are also grateful for the numerous superintendents, district personnel, school administrators, teachers, and education stakeholders who shared their insights throughout this process.





LEA Best Practice Handbook Summary

What is the Office of the Legislative Auditor General?

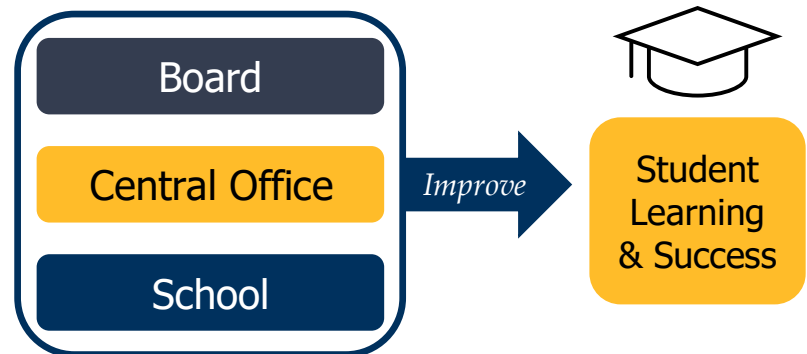
The Office of the Legislative Auditor General (OLAG) is a legislative office given constitutional authority to “conduct audits of any funds, functions, and accounts in any branch, department, agency or political subdivision of the state.” In addition, OLAG has been tasked with conducting systemic performance audits of one or more local education agencies (LEA) each year.

What is the Handbook?

OLAG is committed to the belief that every organization can improve. Our 2023 Best Practice Handbook outlined key practices organizations can employ to improve their performance. This handbook acts as a companion to that with a particular focus on LEAs.

This handbook is based on nearly two years of research and audit work, as well as numerous audits of public education. By using this handbook, school boards, LEA administrators, and school leaders can learn strategies and practices they can implement to improve student academic achievement.

The core purpose of public education is to produce an educated citizenry. To do that, public education must ensure high-quality student learning and achievement. This handbook is focused on how **boards**, **central offices**, and **schools** can align their efforts to improve academic success for all students.



SELECT BEST PRACTICES FOR SYSTEM-WIDE STUDENT SUCCESS

- ✓ 1.3 Each school board should develop the LEA’s vision mission, and goals to focus on student learning and academic achievement.
- ✓ 1.6 School boards should regularly review student achievement data.
- ✓ 2.3 LEA central offices should coordinate efforts to break down department and staff silos to provide robust support to principals.
- ✓ 2.4 LEA central offices should create a principal pipeline to identify and develop promising instructional leaders.
- ✓ 3.1 Principals should develop clear school plans that align with LEA goals.
- ✓ 3.7 Principals should support teacher collaboration.

Organization of the Handbook

The handbook is broken out into three sections: board, central office, and school. Each section contains a description of the best practices within that level of public education governance and how people at that level can meaningfully improve student learning and academic achievement. A complete list of all the recommended best practices is contained at the end of the handbook for easy reference.

Below are brief descriptions of the major ideas contained within each section.

Board of Education

Local boards of education provide foundational oversight of their local education agencies (LEA). Effective boards set the vision, mission, and goals of the LEA and maintain a focus on those priorities. Effective boards of education also develop relationships with the superintendent that emphasizes their distinct roles to ensure a proper level of oversight.

Central Office

High-performing LEA central offices align their efforts around providing robust supports to principals and schools to ensure student learning. They ensure every school has a high-quality principal to guide the school's improvement efforts and hold that principal accountable for results. Central offices also provide clarity on curriculum and instructional practice to ensure every student has access to high-quality learning opportunities.

Schools

High-performing principals serve as their school's instructional leader. They align the school around clear goals and practices. They also observe teachers and provide robust feedback to improve instruction. Effective principals understand the importance of teacher collaboration and provide support when students struggle to succeed. Principals also hold teachers accountable for their students' learning.

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Introduction

The Legislature’s vision and mission for public education is “...to assure Utah the best educated citizenry in the world and each individual the training to succeed in a global society.”¹ Inherent in this mission is the provision of high-quality education by all of Utah’s local education agencies (LEAs) and a focus on student academic achievement. We acknowledge that public education professionals are being asked to do so much in and out of the classroom. But this handbook focuses on the one core function that cannot be delegated, which is student learning. It is therefore the goal of the legislative auditor to provide guidance on achieving the highest student learning and academic outcomes for an educated citizenry by providing these LEA best practices. Our office will consider this handbook a success if its use and implementation lead to markedly improved student academic learning and achievement and better educated children all throughout the state.



The goal of the legislative auditor is to provide guidance on achieving the highest student learning and academic outcomes for an educated citizenry by providing these LEA best practices.

Within the following sections we present best practices for governance and management of Utah’s public education system based on extensive research, collaboration with education experts within Utah, and observation from schools and LEAs from around the country. Through applying the principles and practices in this handbook, LEAs can create education systems that are aligned around a clear vision of every student succeeding.



We encourage LEA leaders to apply the recommended best practices within their own LEA. These identified best practices can help improve student performance and mitigate potential risk areas which may come up in future LEA audits.

Throughout the handbook, readers will find resources, questions, and examples that LEA leaders throughout the state can use to improve their performance. We encourage LEA leaders to apply the recommended best practices within their own LEA. These identified best practices can help improve student performance and mitigate potential risk areas which may come up in future LEA audits.

We also want to be clear about what this handbook is *not*. We recognize the myriad standards and requirements that LEAs need to follow. This handbook is not meant to be another set of standards LEAs need to adopt. We do not intend to replace any standards or performance benchmarks

¹ *Utah Code* 53E-2-301(2)

that have already been established. Instead, we outline an approach by which LEAs can reach those benchmarks in a sustainable and effective way.

This handbook is also not a comprehensive list of everything an LEA should do to succeed. Nor is this handbook a checklist of everything our audit teams will examine during their fieldwork. Every LEA will have nuances that our teams will need to examine, but we believe that as LEAs apply the practices contained within this handbook, they will see greater success.

We also recognize the variety of challenges LEAs face. We worked with some of the highest performing and some of the lowest performing schools during our fieldwork. Every school we visited had unique challenges and opportunities. Throughout this handbook, we seek to highlight examples from different LEAs, locations, and school sizes to emphasize that these principles and practices can be applied universally. No single example on its own demonstrates a perfect education system but provides context for what a specific practice could look like when applied. For that reason, we also highlight opportunities to improve to showcase instances where an LEA could better implement a specific practice.

As readers apply the principles and practices presented in this handbook, we want to emphasize that this approach may take time to implement. This handbook is not advocating for a simple solution but rather a systemic effort to reform and realign every element of the LEA. Rather than simply adopting one practice or strategy from this report, we encourage LEAs to adopt the complete list to ensure a fully aligned education system. This takes time, resources, and effort from everyone in the LEA: board members, superintendents, district administrators and staff, principals, school administrators, support staff, and teachers. When everyone can operate according to a set of guiding principles with clear expectations, everyone works towards the overarching goal of student academic achievement.

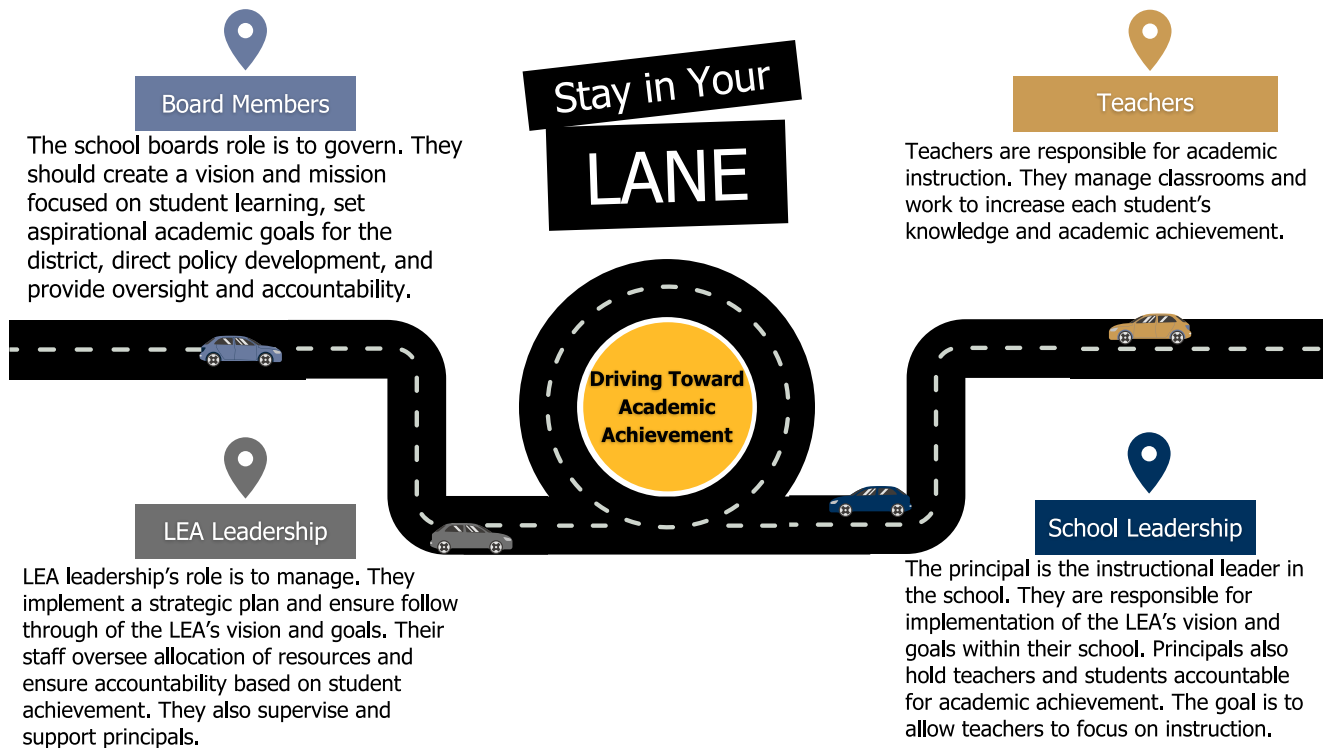


Rather than simply adopting one practice or strategy from this report, we encourage LEAs to adopt the complete list to ensure a fully aligned education system.

The handbook will be broken into three distinct sections: board, central office, and school. These three levels generally make up the local education system and should be working together towards the goal of student learning and academic achievement. Every level of the system also needs to respect the other levels and not overstep its bounds.

Board members set the strategic direction for the LEA and provide oversight, but boards do not micromanage the LEA. LEA central offices then focus on achieving the board's vision through managing central office resources to support principals and

schools. Finally, school principals focus on supporting teachers and improving instruction to realize the LEA's vision for academic achievement. When this happens, teachers can focus their time on high-quality student learning. Every level of the system should strive for high-quality student learning and academic achievement through the critical functions specific to each level. This is captured in the following infographic:

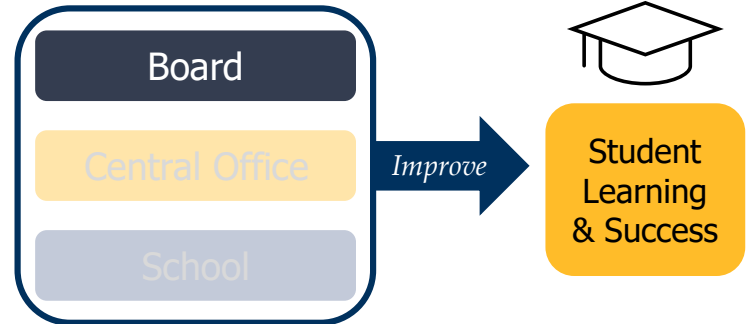


Leaders at each level of public education honoring designated roles is crucial. It is a central theme of this handbook—one we hope will assist everyone involved with improved student learning and achievement.



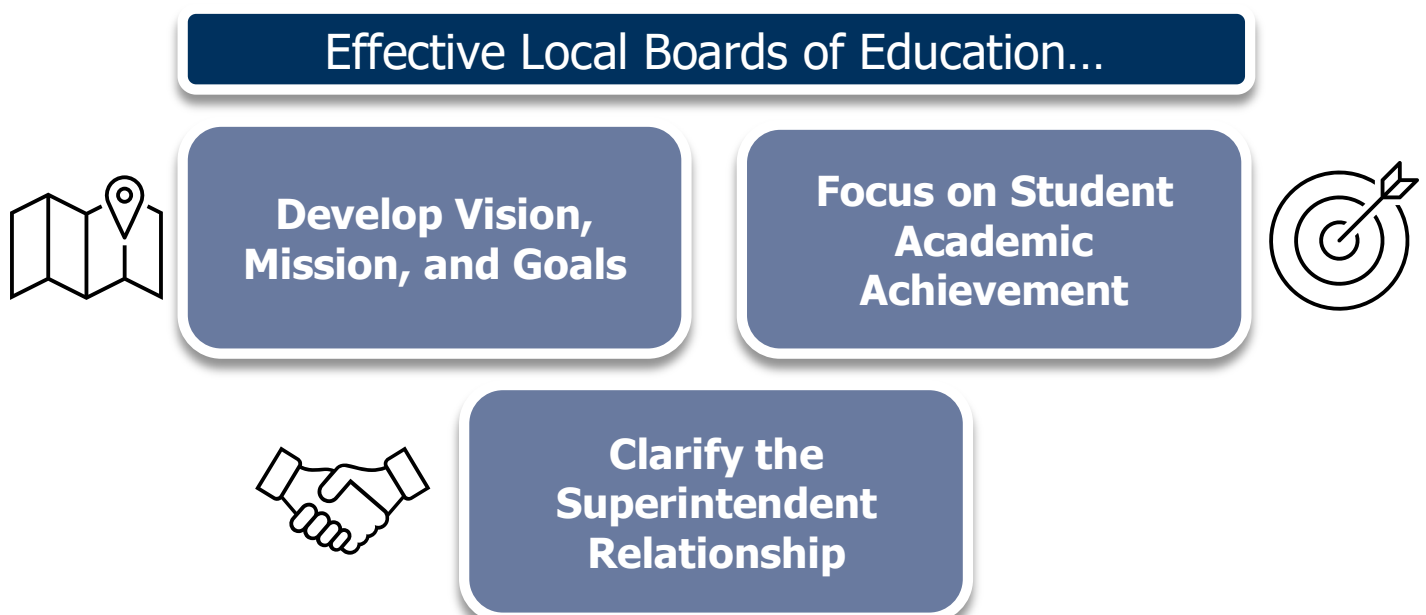
Section 1

Local Boards of Education's Purpose is to Enhance Student Learning and Academic Achievement



Locally elected boards of education in Utah provide valuable oversight and guidance to Utah's local education agencies (LEA). Effective boards create a clear vision, mission, and goals to guide LEA improvement. To ensure alignment with the LEA's strategic plan, boards of education should also maintain a consistent focus on student learning and academic achievement and a strong relationship with the superintendent.

This section will explore the best practices local boards of education can adopt to support and improve student learning and academic achievement throughout their LEA.







Section 1

Local Boards of Education's Purpose is to Enhance Student Learning and Academic Achievement

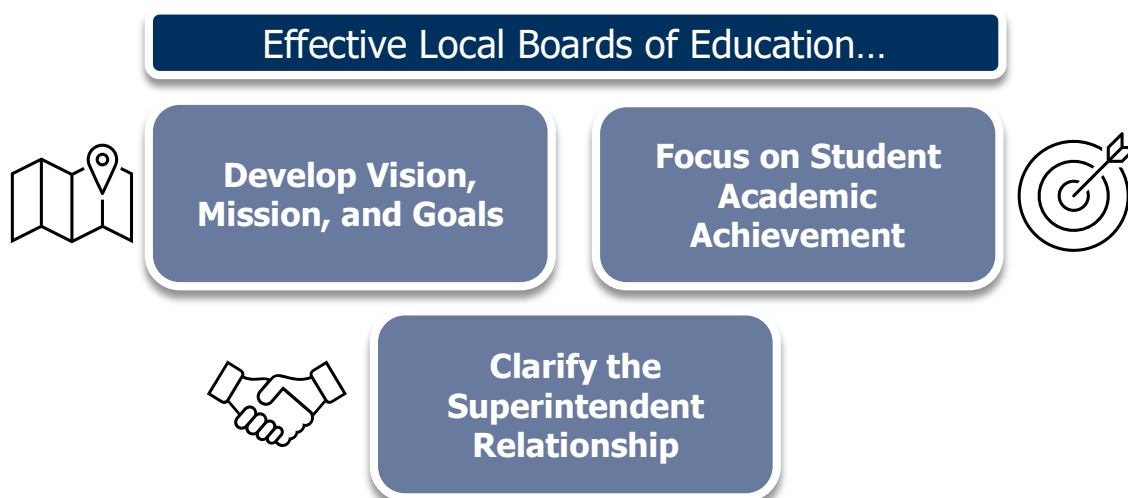


Local boards of education are the foundational governing body entrusted with shaping the future of public education and promoting growth and learning for all students.

Local boards of education (LBEs) are the foundational governing body entrusted with shaping the future of public education and promoting growth and learning for all students. Additionally, charter school board members are appointed to support the charter's vision of student success.

Effective boards commit to a vision of high expectations for student learning and academic achievement and quality instruction and set clear goals to realize that vision. Boards also understand their role as a governing

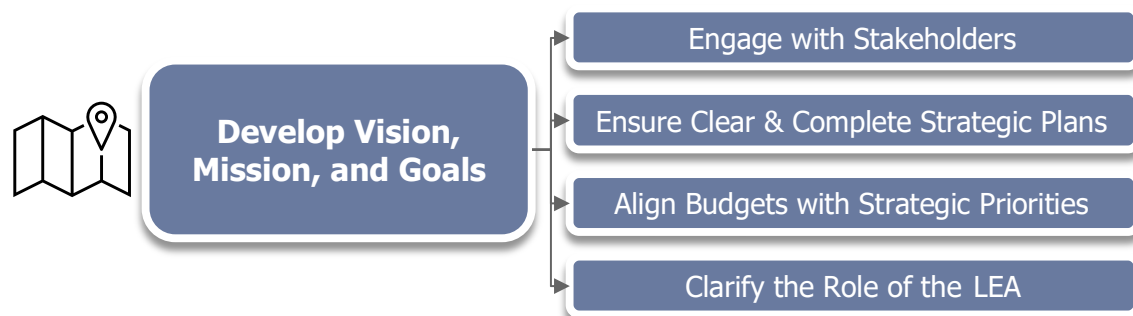
body and hold the local education agency (LEA) to ambitious standards to ensure students have every opportunity to learn and grow. This section of our handbook will emphasize three key principles, as shown in the graphic below, that encourage stronger, more effective board governance for the ultimate benefit of students. When boards apply these three principles, they will focus on their LEA goals and work with their superintendents to achieve their vision for student learning and academic achievement.





1.1 School Boards Should Define Vision, Mission, and Goals Focused on Student Learning and Academic Achievement

Effective LBEs oversee the development of a vision, mission, and goals to improve LEA performance by outlining clear goals for student learning. LEA leaders then develop a strategic plan to realize that vision. This strategic plan focuses on improving student outcomes for all students and becoming a high-performing LEA, not just maintaining the status quo. In this section, we emphasize key aspects of strategic planning and system governance that are particularly important for LBEs:²



Successful School Boards Engage With Key Stakeholders to Set A Vision Focused on Student Academic Achievement

Both *The Best Practice Handbook* and the *GOPB Guide to Strategic Planning* outline the importance of involving stakeholders in the strategic planning process. Gathering input from groups and individuals, such as parents, teachers, community members, and other LEA staff, will help ensure that the strategic plan addresses the priorities of these stakeholders. However, LBEs should also make sure the plan's goals and objectives revolve around student learning and academic achievement.

Example of Positive Implementation: Canyons School District implemented this practice during the creation of their 2022 strategic plan. District leadership set a strategy to gather stakeholder input prior to the creation of their strategic planning. They met with parents, community members, administrators, and teachers in a series of focus group meetings. Canyons also utilized a series of surveys to gather input from parents and employees.

**Positive
Implementation** ★

² Office of the Legislative Auditor General, *The Best Practice Handbook: A Practical Guide to Excellence for Utah Government*, (Report No. 2023–05), 19. This report outlines the significant role of a well-developed strategic plan in organizational alignment. We encourage all school leaders to review this guidance and implement it throughout their strategic planning process.



BEST PRACTICE 1.1

School boards should meet with key LEA staff, principals, teachers, parents, and community stakeholders to gather feedback about the vision, mission and goals and understand the barriers to student learning and academic achievement. School boards should consider this feedback as they develop their vision, mission, and goals. However, since school boards are responsible for development of the vision, mission, and goals, they should view these engagements as opportunities to learn rather than as requirements for what the vision, mission, and goals should include.

Successful School Boards Ensure Detailed Strategic Plans Are in Place to Create Clarity and Accountability



LBEs create clarity for their LEAs and schools by outlining what they expect the LEA to accomplish through a vision, mission, and goals that are clearly focused on student academic achievement.

Strategic plans need to clearly define the goals, objectives, and strategies an LEA will pursue to achieve the LBE's vision of student learning and academic achievement. LBEs create clarity for their LEAs and schools by outlining what they expect the LEA to accomplish through a vision, mission, and goals that are clearly focused on student academic achievement. When LBEs are not organized around clear goals, LEAs struggle to make meaningful improvements. Superintendents, in turn, work with their LBE to articulate how the LBE's vision, mission,

and goals will be accomplished using the strategic plan. LBEs hold the superintendent accountable for accomplishing the LEA goals.

Opportunity to Improve: Several audit reports have noted LEAs are missing key elements within their strategic plan, making it difficult to know whether the plan is working. Our office's *Best Practice Handbook* as well as the *GOPB Guide to Strategic Planning* outline all the necessary elements for effective strategic plans. We recommended LEAs incorporate missing elements into their strategic plans and ensure that they have performance measures tied to each goal, allowing the district to monitor and measure the plan's success.

**Opportunity
to Improve**





BEST PRACTICE 1.2

Each school board should develop the LEA's vision, mission, and goals for student learning and academic achievement. They also oversee the development of a strategic plan by the superintendent that includes all the necessary elements to ensure the LEA's success. Complete, detailed strategic plans will also outline who is responsible for each element to ensure people are accountable for implementing the strategic plan.

Successful School Boards Ensure That Budgets Align With the Priorities of the Strategic Plan

LBEs must ensure throughout the goal setting process that they are providing the resources and support necessary to reach their goals. Both the budgeting and strategic planning processes should be mindful of one another. Performance management handbooks for government agencies outline the importance of “a budget process that allocates resources according to priorities.”³

Business administrators act as the custodian of LEA funds and should play “...a big role in bringing a LEA's strategic plan to life by ensuring LEA resources align with strategic priorities and that those priorities can be sustained over time.”⁴ LBEs should work with their business administrators and superintendents to make sure strategic plans have the funding and resources they need to be successful. In turn, business administrators should act as the strategic CFO for the LEA and monitor finances to ensure resources are being used to fulfill the LEA's plan.

Example of Positive Implementation: One example of this can be seen in Park City School District's strategic plan. The plan outlines goals and initiatives and provides information on what funds will be used for the goal. Section 3 of their plan includes a column for “Budget & Resources” that outlines where funding for each objective will come from. This type of clarity helps define how an LEA will achieve its objectives for student learning and academic achievement.

**Positive
Implementation** ★

³ National Performance Management Advisory Commission, “A Performance Management Framework,” 14.

⁴ Black, R., and Travers, J, “The Strategic CFO”, 20.



BEST PRACTICE 1.3

School boards should ensure they are providing appropriate funding for their stated goals and aligning their fiscal and strategic priorities so that the LEA has the resources needed to achieve the strategic goals. Strategic plans should indicate how the LEA will provide resources and support to ensure the achievement of key objectives.

Successful School Boards Outline the Relationship Between the LEA and Schools

LBEs should clearly define the role of the LEA in overseeing school operations and implementing the strategic plan.⁵ LBEs need to decide on a framework that reflects their core beliefs about how schools should be managed. For example, LBEs may decide to grant the LEA more direct oversight of the schools. Other LBEs may grant their schools more autonomy. And LBEs in the middle may decide to grant more autonomy to their high-performing schools while also maintaining oversight of their low-performing schools.



Boards should clearly define the role of the school LEA in overseeing school operations and implementation of the strategic plan.

Example of Positive Implementation: Houston Independent School District (ISD) in Texas is an example of a district using a clear framework to manage their schools. In 2023, The Texas Education Commissioner replaced the Houston ISD elected school board with a nine-member board of managers and the superintendent during a state takeover largely due to chronically poor academic ratings. Houston ISD now uses school grades based on state accountability data to more directly manage its schools.

Positive Implementation ★

When schools are below a certain grade, they must participate in the New Education System (NES). NES schools use a district-defined curriculum, performance-based pay for teachers, and unique support staffing models. Schools meeting the performance benchmarks may choose either to continue managing their school or to engage in the NES program. This approach shows how both NES and non-NES schools handle issues like curriculum, staffing, and compensation. LBEs need to clearly define how their central office will manage and oversee the schools to clarify which decisions the central office will make versus which decisions a school will have control over.

⁵ McAdams, *What School Boards Can Do*, 35.

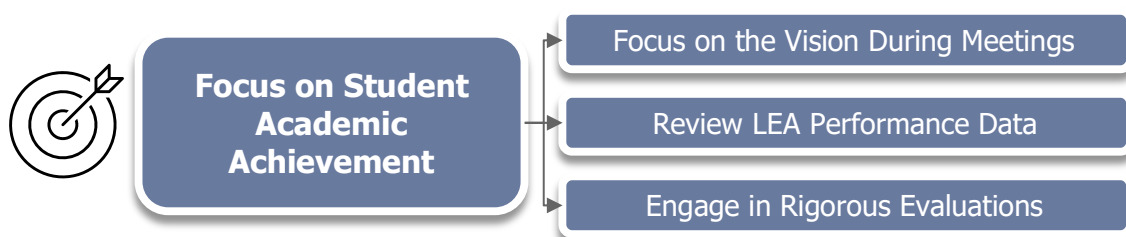


BEST PRACTICE 1.4

School boards should clearly define the relationship between the LEA and the schools to ensure clear roles and responsibilities for curriculum, compensation, staffing, and instruction. Each role should be focused on student learning and academic achievement. When defining each role, school boards need to articulate the role of the LEA in overseeing schools and how much autonomy the LEA will grant schools. This framework creates clarity for how the LEA and schools will accomplish the strategic plan.

1.2 School Boards Should Maintain a Focus on Student Learning and Academic Achievement and the Vision of the Strategic Plan

Effective LBEs do more than monitor—they inspire and articulate a vision, mission, and goals to support student success. LBEs perform multiple functions, and those functions are important. *Utah Code* clearly outlines these duties.⁶ With all these responsibilities, boards should remain focused on the vision of student growth and achievement. LBEs must commit to the belief that every student can learn and succeed. This section presents principles for how LBEs support student learning and academic achievement through the following best practices:



Successful School Boards Maintain a Focus on Student Learning and Academic Achievement

Effective LBEs spend time focusing on their vision of student learning and academic achievement and the strategic plan. This plan acts as a guide for overseeing and evaluating LEA operations. As various issues arise, LBEs maintain a focus on their overarching strategic plan and do not allow themselves to get distracted. One method for accomplishing this is to include agenda items related to the organizational vision and strategic plan during public meetings. The Utah School Board



The Utah School Board Association recommends that effective LBE meetings spend time addressing the organization's vision and goals as well as the progress the LEA is making towards achieving those goals.

⁶ *Utah Code* 53G-4-402.



Association recommends that effective board meetings spend time addressing the organization's vision and goals as well as the progress the LEA is making towards achieving those goals.

Opportunity to Improve: In one of our LEA audits, we found that the LBE needed significantly better focus on student learning and academic achievement to improve the district's low student performance. We recommended that the LBE regularly include items related to student learning and academic achievement in its public board meetings to ensure a consistent focus on the district's priorities.⁷ More than an annual review, a regular focus on the district's vision, mission, and goals ensures items brought before the LBE focus on improving student outcomes.

Opportunity to Improve

BEST PRACTICE 1.5

To focus on meaningful academic achievement, effective school boards intentionally align their governance practices with the LEA's strategic plan and the vision, mission, and goals that they create. They ensure that board meetings are purposefully focused on student outcomes—prioritizing discussions, decisions, and oversight that advance strategic goals focused on student learning and academic achievement.

Successful School Boards Review Student Learning and Academic Achievement Data

Another key aspect of focusing on student learning and academic achievement requires LBEs to analyze assessment data. Using student data to drive board decisions helps the board identify critical learning gaps and support the LEA and schools in their efforts to close those gaps. The National School Boards Association states the following:⁸

National School Boards Association

"Future-ready school boards have a laser focus on low-performing schools based on measurements assessing student progress over time. These boards use resources from state departments of education, universities, foundations, and state school boards associations to analyze data. With the data in hand, they tailor solutions based on the needs and strengths of each school and its community."

⁷ Office of the Legislative Auditor General, Report No. 2025-10, 16.

⁸ National School Boards Association, *The Key Work of School Boards Guidebook*, 14.



Opportunity to Improve: Our office’s audit on student performance data found a statewide performance gap between students who are in an underperforming student group with a higher-than-typical chance of performing below proficiency, and those who are not. After considering multiple statewide exams, our office found the following:⁹

**Opportunity
to Improve**

“Students who are proficient will likely remain proficient the following year, and students who are not proficient will likely remain not proficient.”

This statement speaks to the chronic gap in student performance between those who are proficient and those who are not. Three LEA audit reports also identified performance gaps where certain groups of students were chronically underperforming compared to their peers. We make recommendations in those reports for school districts and boards to analyze their student data and identify these learning gaps so they can improve.

Opportunity to Improve: Our 2021 report on charter school governance found that charter schools vary widely in their performance. Charter high schools have a higher percentage of schools in the top 10 percent, but they also have a higher percentage of schools in the lowest 10 percent. Charter elementary schools also have double the percentage of schools in the lowest 10 percent of elementary schools.¹⁰ Both of these examples present an opportunity for school boards to more critically examine their assessment data and identify where they can improve their performance, especially for specific student groups.

**Opportunity
to Improve**

Similarly, national research on charter school performance notes that although charter schools appear to be outperforming traditional public schools in reading and math, there are still gaps in student performance. Specifically, students enrolled in an online charter school lost on average 58 days of reading and 124 days of math.¹¹ Students receiving special education services also had significantly weaker growth in both math and reading.

⁹ Office of the Legislative Auditor General, *A Performance Audit of Student Performance on Statewide Tests* (Report No. 2024–23), 28.

¹⁰ Office of the Legislative Auditor General, Report No. 2021–09, 20.

¹¹ Center for Research on Education Outcomes, *The National Charter School Study III* 2023, 58.



BEST PRACTICE 1.6

School boards should regularly review academic data with a particular focus on low-performing schools and large learning gaps. With this data, boards should develop clear plans to support LEA and school efforts to improve learning and fulfill the board's strategic plan.

Successful School Boards Engage in Rigorous Evaluation

LBEs that set clear performance targets and engage in rigorous evaluation relative to those targets are more successful. Research recommends that LBEs regularly review board performance (which includes looking at board goals and meeting effectiveness) as well as LEA performance (which includes examining student performance data).¹² The Utah School Boards Association outlines similar questions that LBEs should consider as part of their own evaluation:¹³

Is our board prioritizing the decisions it should be making, or is it getting overwhelmed with administrative matters? Is the superintendent involved with making policy decisions?

What kinds of problems are coming to the board? Would they be more readily solved by adequate policies and planning?

Is the board adequately informed about the district's problems, progress, accomplishments, and needs? Do board members and the superintendent agree on what the schools are supposed to accomplish?

Source: Utah School Boards Association.

Opportunity to Improve: One LEA audit report found that the district was missing key elements of an effective strategic plan and that the LBE was not connecting district accomplishment to the strategic plan during public meetings. We recommended that the LBE annually evaluate its progress towards the strategic plan, including a review of district performance measures.¹⁴ LBEs that engage in this type of rigorous evaluation better focus their efforts on

**Opportunity
to Improve** 

¹² Christopher Maricle, "Governing to Achieve," California School Boards Association, 18.

¹³ Utah School Boards Association, "A Guide to Effective Utah School Boards," 33.

¹⁴ Office of the Legislative Auditor General, Report No. 2023-11, 42-45.



matters related to the overarching strategic plan and vision, mission, and goals of the LEA. The above questions can serve as a template for that evaluation.

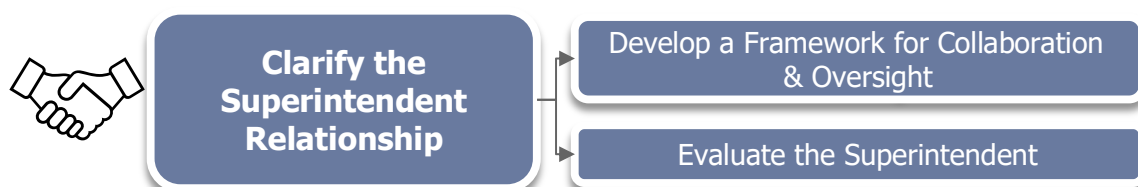
BEST PRACTICE 1.7

School boards should engage in regular, rigorous evaluation of their performance, including a review of their progress towards achieving the LEA's vision, mission, and goals within the strategic plan. This evaluation should happen annually.

1.3 School Boards Should Clearly Define How They Govern the Superintendent to Ensure a Healthy Working Relationship

The LBE is responsible for hiring and evaluating the superintendent. The LBE also sets the strategic direction for the LEA. Superintendents are then responsible for managing the day-to-day affairs of the LEA while implementing the vision laid out by the LBE in the strategic plan. This distinction between LBEs and the superintendent is a clear example of both parties embracing their roles.

However, research on effective LBEs found that one of the largest contributing factors to superintendent resignation was the superintendent's relationships with their board.¹⁵ When local education boards develop collaborative relationships with their superintendent and each can respect the other's distinct roles, LEAs are better able to focus on the important work of student learning. Our third main principle is for LBEs to foster a relationship with their superintendent and focus on these main two points:



Successful School Boards Develop a Framework for Effective Collaboration and Oversight

The key to this relationship is having a clear framework that establishes roles and responsibilities between the board and the superintendent. In a literature review of LBE and superintendent relations, Hanover Research also noted that LBEs and superintendents function best when roles and responsibilities are clearly

¹⁵ Weiss et al, "Superintendent and School Board Relations," 17.



defined.¹⁶ LBEs should focus on creating policies to improve student learning and academic achievement. In turn, superintendents should focus on handling the daily affairs of the LEA.

Opportunity to Improve: Another past LEA audit identified numerous instances where locally elected school board members were improperly involved in district administration. These types of behavior exemplified a governance problem within the LEA where board members did not respect the authority of the superintendent and did not have sufficient boundaries to ensure they did not overstep their role. Our office was able to substantiate the following instances of board members engaging in inappropriate behavior:¹⁷

Opportunity to Improve

Examples
of Board
Behavior
from a
past audit

- Board members requested the superintendent terminate specific principals.
- During a school orientation event, one board member spoke over the school's principal and provided incorrect information to parents.
- One board member contacted numerous district staff directly regarding where a student athlete lived to see if that student lived within district boundaries.
- A board member requested the district investigate a cancelled vendor contract. It came to light that the board member had a personal relationship with the vendor.

Opportunity to Improve: In our 2021 report on charter school governance, our office noted a significant lack of training for charter school board members. The audit also found that “the requirements and expectations for Utah’s local governing boards are inconsistent. This inconsistency results in varying levels of expertise, experience, and accountability.”¹⁸ Training on specific board duties and the overall role of the board is one way that all school boards can effectively improve their oversight and hold schools accountable.

Opportunity to Improve

¹⁶ Hanover Research, “Effective Board and Superintendent Collaboration,” 6.

¹⁷ Office of the Legislative Auditor General, Report No. 2022-16, 13.

¹⁸ Office of the Legislative Auditor General, Report No. 2021-09, 56.



Research shows that when boards outline clear roles and responsibilities for the board and superintendent and adopt a policy governance model, they are more effective.

Hanover Research shows that when LBEs outline clear roles and responsibilities for the board and superintendent and adopt a policy governance model, they are more effective.¹⁹ LEAs in Utah have done this through board handbooks and policies. These board handbooks and policies likewise outline expectations for governance of the LEA and how the LBE will interact with and support LEA administrators.

Example of Positive Implementation: The Alpine

Positive
Implementation ★

School District School Board has a board handbook that outlines clear expectations, policies, and norms relating to how the board will interact with the superintendent. The handbook also includes policies to ensure effective communication, such as regular update meetings between the superintendent and a minority of board members. When LBEs develop this clear framework, they can better oversee the superintendent and focus on the important work of improving student outcomes based on the LEA's strategic plan.

BEST PRACTICE 1.8

To strengthen communication and develop a stronger relationship between school boards and superintendents, school boards should develop board handbooks and policies outlining clear expectations, norms, and procedures for collaboration with the superintendent. Boards should refer to these handbooks and policies often and evaluate how well they maintain an effective working relationship with the superintendent centered on improving student learning and academic achievement.

¹⁹ Hanover Research, "Effective Board and Superintendent Collaboration," 1.



Effective Superintendent Evaluations Should Tie Back to Clear Accountability Measures and Focus on LEA Goals



The National School Boards Association notes that superintendent evaluations could be extremely helpful at improving LEA performance but are oftentimes ineffective and lack objective measures.

The National School Boards Association notes that superintendent evaluations could be extremely helpful at improving LEA performance but are oftentimes ineffective and lack objective measures. In developing this handbook, our office found that superintendent evaluations should function as a tool for improving superintendent and LEA performance. These evaluations may be one of the most important tools that school boards use for leading an aligned and effective school system.²⁰

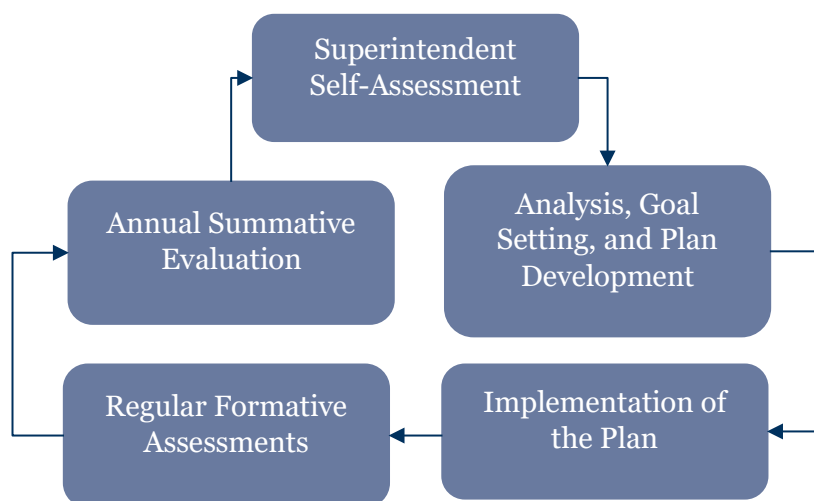
Regular and effective superintendent evaluations can also help improve superintendent/LBE relations.

Hanover Research found that successful superintendent evaluations play a critical role in developing a collaborative relationship between the LBE and superintendent.²¹ The process of regular superintendent evaluations keeps the superintendent accountable to the overall vision of the LEA.

Effective superintendent evaluations should be tied back to clear accountability measures and focus on a few goals that tie back to the strategic plan. They should also rely on clear documentation and not just board member opinions, as recommended by the Utah School Boards Association. This type of concrete feedback can support superintendent growth and help provide the board with a clearer understanding of how they can support each other in their distinct roles.

²⁰ National School Board Association, “A Case for Improving Superintendent Evaluation,” 3.

²¹ Hanover Research, “Effective Board and Superintendent Collaboration,” 12.



Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education.

Example of Positive Implementation: An example of one model for superintendent evaluation is the Massachusetts Annual Five-Step Cycle for Superintendent Evaluations. Superintendents engage in self-

Positive Implementation ★

assessment and propose goals that clearly align with LEA goals. Then the board of education develops a plan for the superintendent and uses this plan for later evaluations.

Through developing and implementing a clear plan tied to LEA goals, this model allows LBEs to monitor superintendent performance and provide feedback throughout the year on how the superintendent can improve.²² We are not specifically advocating for the Massachusetts model, but we do encourage LBEs to adopt a robust superintendent evaluation framework that focuses on clear performance benchmarks and implementation of the strategic plan.

BEST PRACTICE 1.9

School boards should evaluate the superintendent annually using clear performance benchmarks, reliable data, and an overall evaluation system aligned with strategic priorities and focused on student learning and academic achievement.

²² Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, "The Massachusetts Model System of Educator Evaluation," 2.



Strategic Questions for Board Consideration

- Does the LEA have a strategic plan? Does this plan contain all the necessary elements and is it clearly focused on student learning and academic achievement?
- Are there sufficient resources to support the LEA's strategic plan and objectives?
- Does the LEA have a clear framework outlining the relationship between the LEA and the schools? How much autonomy do individual schools have?
- What processes, policies, and norms are in place to ensure the board respects the authority of the superintendent and does not overstep its role?
- How often is the school board using their strategic priorities to ensure the LEA is progressing towards LEA goals?
- How often does the school board review LEA performance data? How does the LEA use this data to identify areas of improvement, low-performing schools, or potential learning gaps? What does the board do with this data?
- Do the superintendent evaluations provide meaningful feedback to the superintendent and boards on ways they can improve student learning?
- How can the board's self-evaluations be used to help board members identify ways they can improve and better focus on their strategic priorities?

Additional Resources

- Governor's Office of Planning and Budget. Guide to Strategic Planning. 2022. https://gopb.utah.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/2022_07_11-Strategic-Plan-Guidance.pdf.
- National School Boards Association. The Key Work of School Boards. 2018. <https://tsba.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Key-Work-Cover-and-Text-20Jan15.pdf>.
- Black, R., and J. Travers. "The Strategic CFO: Re-imagining the Job of the School District CFO." Education Research Strategies, 2023. <https://www.erstrategies.org/tap/the-strategic-cfo/>.
- Hanover Research. Effective Board and Superintendent Collaboration. 2014. <https://www.hanoverresearch.com/media/Effective-Board-and-Superintendent-Collaboration-Featured.pdf>.
- Walser, Nancy. The Essential School Boards Book. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2021.
- Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. The Massachusetts Model System for Educator Evaluation: Evaluating Superintendents and District Level Administrators. <https://www.doe.mass.edu/edeval/model/evaluating-superintendents.pdf>.

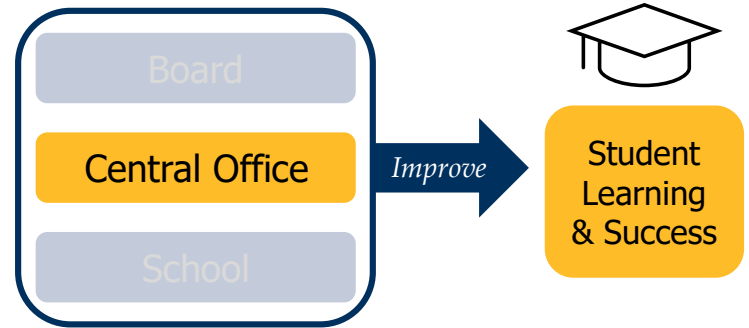


SECTION 2 Summary

The Central Office Should Provide Robust Support for Schools to Improve Student Academic Achievement

Section 2

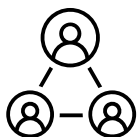
The Central Office Should Provide Robust Support for Schools to Improve Student Academic Achievement



Local Education Agency (LEA) central offices should align sufficient resources around supporting principals and improving instruction. The central office should consider where staff have the most impact and ensure all staff work together to support learning and academic achievement for every student. LEAs should ensure they provide robust training and support for principals, so principals have the tools they need to fulfill the board's strategic priorities. Central office staff should also provide clear directions on curriculum and provide support and resources for principals, instructional coaches, and teachers as they work to adopt the curriculum.

This section will explore the best practices school district central offices can adopt to support and improve student learning and academic achievement throughout the LEA.

Effective LEA Central Offices...



Align Staff Around Supporting Schools

Ensure Each School Has a High-Quality Principal



Provide Instructional Clarity





Section 2

The Central Office Should Provide Robust Support for Schools to Improve Student Academic Achievement



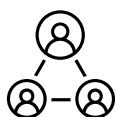
A school district's central office, through the superintendent, plays a vital role in supporting schools and improving student learning and academic achievement. Additionally, charter schools rely on an executive director to improve student learning throughout their schools.

A school district's central office, through the superintendent, plays a vital role in supporting schools and improving student learning and academic achievement. Additionally, charter schools rely on an executive director to improve student learning throughout their schools. Throughout this section we will refer to LEA central offices to indicate anyone serving in LEA administration.

The central office should ensure that all individual parts of the LEA are aligned and working toward increased student learning and academic achievement. While the central office faces many demands, quality partnerships with principals is a core focus of LEAs who are able to improve teaching and learning. Principals often need robust and

personalized support from the central office to develop as leaders who can improve their schools. This section will explore how LEA central offices support schools through three best practices:

Effective LEA Central Offices...



Align Staff Around Supporting Schools

Ensure Each School Has a High-Quality Principal



Provide Instructional Clarity



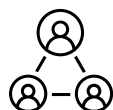
2.1 LEA Central Offices Should Align Departments and Staff Around Supporting Schools



Central offices need to be thoughtful about where they invest staff and resources to align with LEA goals and enhance leadership capacities.

Central offices need to be thoughtful about where they invest staff and resources to align with LEA goals and enhance leadership capacities. Research shows that investments in staffing need to be partnered with investments in resources to support the staff over time.²³ Central office leadership should weigh the needs of the central office against in-school staffing needs when considering where individuals will have the greatest impact on student learning and

academic achievement. This section will discuss how central offices balance staffing needs, use instructional coaches to improve achievement for all students, and ensure departments work together to support principals.



Align Staff Around Supporting Schools

Balance Staffing Needs

Use Instructional Coaches

Work Together to Support Principals

Successful Central Offices Should Balance Office Staff With In-School Staffing Needs

Transformative central offices focus on placing staff where they will have the most impact on student learning and academic achievement. Examining where staff are placed, and how positions are being supported over time, allows leaders to determine if they are adequately supporting student learning and academic achievement. Staffing allocations should be based on research-backed initiatives and LEA or school data. We recognize that the size and location of the LEA will have a significant impact on personnel availability. However, we encourage central offices to consider the significant impact that quality in-school personnel have on students.

Example of Positive Implementation: Provo City School District is an example of a district working to balance staffing needs between the district office and schools. The Provo superintendent recently led the district office through a process of examining each role and determining where staff would have the

Positive Implementation ★

²³ Wallace Foundation, "How Leaders Invest," xi.



greatest impact. This led to a decrease in their district office staff and an increase in the number of individuals working directly in schools. While this approach may not work for every district, it is an example of what thoughtfully balancing resources might look like.

BEST PRACTICE 2.1

LEA central offices should balance the needs of the LEA office with the need for in-school personnel for the purpose of supporting student learning and academic achievement. Staff should be placed where they will have the greatest impact on student learning and academic achievement.

Successful Central Offices Use Instructional Coaches to Improve Instruction

Instructional coaches can act as additional support for instructional improvement throughout the LEA. While all central office staff should support principals and teachers in improving student learning and academic achievement, instructional coaches can be a particularly impactful tool. Coaches partner with teachers in a nonevaluative way to set and reach improvement goals that will have a positive impact on student learning and academic achievement. A lack of clear policies and direction from LEA leadership can lead to inconsistent coaching practices and teachers who are reluctant to work with coaches.

Opportunity to Improve: One past audit found a Utah district lacked a cohesive understanding of instructional coaching and had not prioritized a formal framework for the instructional coaching role. For example, the district had not created an instructional playbook or defined clear coaching roles. The audit outlines the importance of instructional coaches and the instructional coaching framework in the following statement:

Opportunity to Improve

Instructional Coaches play a crucial role in helping teachers develop professional skills, set meaningful goals, and ultimately improve learning for their students. For instructional coaches to thrive they need a strong system of support with established practices and leadership in place to support their professional development.²⁴

The past audit also summarized these elements in a list of seven success factors generated from *The Definitive Guide to Instructional Coaching* by Jim Knight. We recommend that leadership review this guide and implement its practices to ensure consistency in instructional coaching throughout the LEA.

²⁴ Office of the Legislative Auditor General, Report No. 2024-10, 19.



The Utah State Board of Education (USBE) provides training and support for instructional coaches. USBE resources also outline the coaching cycle and other coaching best practices. We encourage LEA leaders to consult with the USBE team as they review their instructional coaching programs. Robust instructional coaching programs include the following:

- Clear coaching expectations.
- A district-wide instructional playbook.
- Quality training for coaches and staff on the instructional coaching cycle.

We acknowledge that instructional coaches may be hired at the school, LEA, or regional education service agency level. However, each LEA should ensure they create clear direction and resources for the instructional coaches that they work with.

BEST PRACTICE 2.2

LEA central offices should clearly define their expectations for instructional coaches, ensure coaches use a proven coaching cycle, establish an LEA-wide instructional playbook, and provide quality training for instructional coaches. Doing so provides much needed support for teachers throughout the LEA and creates clarity for the role of instructional coaches.

Successful Central Offices Ensure Departments Work Together to Support Principals



Central office teams each have unique roles and expertise, but all members of the LEA office share the same objectives of implementing the LEA's strategic plan which should include supporting principals, supporting educators, and improving student learning.

Successful LEAs ensure that central office staff work together to support principals and evaluate the success of the schools they lead. Central office teams each have unique roles and expertise, but all members of the LEA office share the same objectives of implementing the LEA's strategic plan which should include supporting principals, supporting educators, and improving student learning. The Wallace foundation found that principals are unlikely to adopt a leadership style focused on student learning and academic achievement if the LEA is unsupportive, disinterested, or pursuing other agendas. Research on principal development highlights the importance of



breaking down department silos so that LEA teams can coordinate their support of school leaders.²⁵

Example of Positive Implementation: Practices at Uintah School District are an example of district teams working together to support principal leadership. The district created shared responsibility for principal support and evaluation by using a district scoreboard and creating a cadence of accountability. This district-wide accountability system helps to distribute responsibility for principal supervision across multiple district office teams by requiring various department directors to visit schools throughout the year.

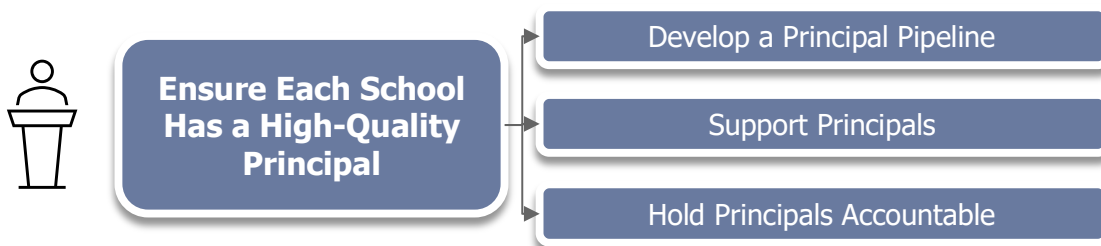
Positive
Implementation ★

BEST PRACTICE 2.3

LEA central offices coordinate efforts to break down department and staff silos to provide robust support to principals in their own efforts to improve student learning and academic achievement. By strengthening communication and coordination within the LEA office, principals are given clearer guidance on how they can improve and what resources are available to them.

2.2 LEA Central Offices Are Responsible for Ensuring Each School Has a High-Quality Principal

Principals play a crucial role in student learning and academic achievement and, as such, LEA central offices should ensure they are adequately training principals in their role as an instructional leader. Throughout this project and past audits, our office has seen a consistent need for more principal training and support. This process of training principals should include developing a principal pipeline, ensuring effective principal supervision, and creating ongoing training opportunities for principals throughout their career. This section will discuss how LEAs develop, support, and ensure adequate accountability for the principals in their LEA.



²⁵ Wallace Foundation, “Planning and Developing Principal Pipelines,” 33.



Successful Central Offices Develop a Principal Pipeline to Improve Principal Preparation



Research shows that schools who hired through principal pipeline infrastructures outperformed peer schools.

The principal development process should begin before the principal steps in as the instructional leader of a school. Research shows that schools who hired through principal pipeline infrastructures outperformed peer schools.²⁶ Principal pipelines should focus on LEA priorities and student learning and academic achievement. A successful pipeline will

help LEA central office identify and develop promising instructional leaders.

The Wallace Foundation has created a principal pipeline learning community, which supports the efforts of LEAs to develop principal pipelines.²⁷ A principal pipeline may include the following:

- Partnerships with local colleges and universities.
- Setting clear standards.
- Pre-service preparation.
- Selective hiring practices.
- Robust on the job training and support.

Opportunity to Improve: Our 2022 audit of principal performance found that principals across 10 districts throughout the state reported a need for better training and support. That same audit found that the second-most common cause of teacher stress is poor administrative support and noted an opportunity to better train and educate principals.²⁸ Throughout this project, we spoke with multiple school principals who described a lack of training, support, and clear standards provided by the district leadership. While our past findings show that overall preparedness and support varies by district, the impact of effective principals on student learning and academic achievement means this is a significant area for every district to improve in.

Opportunity to Improve



One LEA audit demonstrated the positive impact of a principal leadership academy created by Houston Independent School District. Individuals who

²⁶ Wallace Foundation, "Principal Pipeline Self-Study Guide," 1.

²⁷ Wallace Foundation, "Planning and Developing Principal Pipelines," 1.

²⁸ Office of the Legislative Auditor General, *A Performance Audit of Teacher and Principal Performance Within Utah's Public Education System* (Report No. 2022-03), 37-39.



wanted to be a school principal could apply for the academy. Applicants who were accepted received the following:

- Training in future job responsibilities.
- Guidance on district expectations.
- Help with preparing to apply for principal positions.

The district saw a significant improvement in school performance, with 80 schools significantly improving performance. They attributed the improvement to their educator support and intensive training of new school principals as contributing factors.²⁹

Example of Positive Implementation: One example of partnerships with local colleges and universities can be seen in the Brigham Young University (BYU)-Public School Partnership program. The BYU-Public School Partnership is a collaborative effort between five public school districts and various BYU programs to “guide educators to engage in change and continuous improvement.” Part of this program includes a two-year principals academy designed to “enhance development of administrators.”³⁰ Additionally, the Partnership offers an Aspiring Principals Academy (APA) that brings together innovative teachers, counselors, psychologists, and school staff who want to become future school leaders.

Positive
Implementation ★

Example of Positive Implementation: The Utah Association of Public Charter Schools (UAPCS) offers multiple avenues for training school leaders and potential charter school directors. They offer executive seminars throughout the year to provide training for people interested in becoming charter school administrators. The seminars cover topics like teacher evaluations, time management, the role of a charter board, and other topics. In addition, they have a mentor program which pairs new directors with more established directors so they can get guidance and feedback on how to improve their performance.

Positive
Implementation ★

UAPCS also offers an incubator program for potential charter school directors. Potential charter school directors work alongside multiple current directors for a year prior to them opening their own school. Those in the incubator program learn firsthand what it takes to run a charter school and what it means to be an effective leader. These programs, akin to the best practice of a principal pipeline,

²⁹ Office of the Legislative Auditor General, *A Systemic Performance Audit of Alpine School District* (Report No. 2025-07), 21-22.

³⁰ BYU Public School Partnership website: <https://byupartnership.org/>.



provide opportunities for charter school leaders to gain valuable experience in leadership and improve their performance as an instructional leader.

As promising future leaders are invited to participate in a principal pipeline, LEA central offices can identify unique leadership skills they possess and use those to match new principals to schools. Training could include a mentorship program, principal shadowing, training on LEA resources and processes, and instruction on coaching and accountability systems for teachers. Principal



Principal pipelines are not “one size fits all” but rather work best when they align with the specific goals and leadership needs of the LEA.

pipelines are not “one size fits all” but rather work best when they align with the specific goals and leadership needs of the LEA. Central offices should consider their existing initiatives to train and develop principals and find ways to create a more robust principal pipeline focused on helping them become instructional leaders.

BEST PRACTICE 2.4

LEA central offices should create a principal pipeline to identify and develop promising instructional leaders. The pipeline should include robust preparations before the principal is placed in a school, continuous support from LEA leadership, and ongoing training centered on becoming a strong instructional leader who improves student academic outcomes.

Successful Central Offices Support Principals Throughout Their Time as a School Leader



LEA leadership should ensure the training they provide is focused on building the knowledge and skills that principals need to accomplish the goals the LEA has set.

Principal support should begin early via the principal pipeline process and should continue throughout their tenure as a school leader. Supports should include training that is tailored to LEA and school needs. LEA leadership should ensure the training they provide is focused on building the knowledge and skills that principals need to accomplish the goals the LEA has set. Additionally, access to principal cohorts and leadership groups who can help principals brainstorm and identify best practices is

also an important support. Research shows that principals working in well-structured cohorts built on shared accountability and regular collaboration can do the following:



- Develop stronger professional relationships.
- Create and exchange knowledge.
- Collectively improve student outcomes.³¹

The principal supervisor should act as a mentor for the principal by helping them identify ways they can improve instruction and student learning in their school.

Opportunity to Improve: An audit found that one district’s area directors were primarily focused on day-to-day issues rather than principal growth.³² While the area directors were supportive of principals, they were not providing adequate guidance to help schools improve their academic success. This led to our recommendation for the district to assess the area director role and evaluate their work on principal’s growth as instructional leaders. In the district’s written response, they have a goal to align with the principal supervisor performance standards by May 2026.

**Opportunity
to Improve**

One study, which used evidence from the Principal Supervisor Initiative, aimed at researching and improving the effectiveness of the principal supervisor role. Based on the study findings, principal supervisors should move away from focusing on compliance issues with principals.³³ Rather, supervisors should focus on instructional leadership and instructional quality as they work with principals. We recommend LEA central offices work with their principal supervisors to make these two changes to ensure they are helping principals improve as instructional leaders.

BEST PRACTICE 2.5

LEA central offices should have established procedures and resources to provide principals with robust and ongoing support. This support begins with a principal pipeline and continues throughout their tenure with mentorship from a principal supervisor and coordinated support from LEA central office staff.

Successful Central Offices Hold Principals Accountable for Student Learning and Academic Achievement

Principals are ultimately responsible for the quality of instruction that takes place within their school. While the central office should do all it can to support and

³¹ Umekubo, “The Cohort Model,” 451–470.

³² Office of the Legislative Auditor General, Report No. 2025–10, 26–27.

³³ Goldring, “Changing the Principal Supervisor,” 21.



encourage principals, they also need to hold principals accountable for outcomes. Student learning and academic achievement, along with other school data identified by the central office, should be clearly stated as key performance indicators of principal success and measured regularly. Principal supervisors and LEA leadership are responsible for holding principals accountable for key school and LEA metrics and helping them to address challenges they may face.

The Wallace Foundation outlines the importance of principal evaluation in creating effective principal leaders. Central offices should evaluate principals and regularly assess the actions that research shows are most closely tied to improving teaching and student learning and academic achievement. However, evaluation alone is not enough. Each principal must also receive professional development and mentoring that responds to evaluation findings. LEA leadership and principals should remember that school improvement takes time. Research shows that principals should be in place for about five to seven years to have a beneficial impact on a school.³⁴ LEAs should provide principals with adequate time to make change and hold them accountable for the outcomes of their leadership.



Student learning and academic achievement along with other school data identified by the central office, should be clearly stated as key performance indicators of principal success and measured regularly.

BEST PRACTICE 2.6

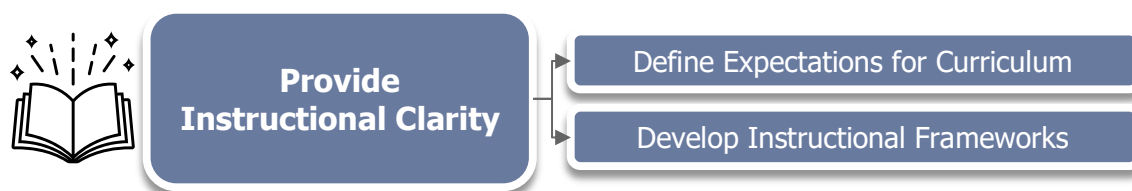
LEA central office leadership and principal supervisors should hold principals accountable for student learning and academic achievement while helping them to overcome challenges they may face. LEAs should develop clear key performance indicators for principal performance and use those whenever they evaluate principal performance.

³⁴ Wallace Foundation, "The School Principal as Leader," 15.



2.3 LEA Central Offices Should Ensure Teachers Have Access to High-Quality Instructional Materials and Resources

To produce consistent results, central offices need to set consistent expectations for what is being taught in schools and how it is being delivered. Through clear curriculum adoption policies and mechanisms to ensure consistent instruction, LEAs provide all students with quality instruction aligned to state standards. Similarly, when central offices develop clear instructional frameworks and use those frameworks for teacher evaluations, central offices support consistent, high-quality teaching practices throughout the LEA. This section will explore the important role the central office plays in setting expectations around curriculum and instruction.



Successful Central Offices Outline Expectations for Curriculum and Instructional Materials



Central offices should develop clear expectations for how content will be taught in their schools and what resources teachers can use to support student learning.

The Utah State Board of Education outlines clear standards for what content will be taught in schools.³⁵ Central offices should then develop clear expectations for how content aligned with the standards will be taught in their schools and what resources teachers can use to support student learning. Research on effective school practices found high-quality curriculum to be the most significant predictor of student success.³⁶ However, research conducted by

the RAND Institute found that most teachers use instructional materials from sources like Teachers Pay Teachers and Pinterest.³⁷ These sources may not be evidence based and can lead to teachers adopting inconsistent instructional practices across classrooms and schools.

Opportunity to Improve: Our audit of curriculum and teaching training found that many districts lack processes to guide the selection of curriculum and instructional materials. The Instructional Materials Commission curates the

Opportunity to Improve

³⁵ *Utah Code* 53E-4-202 and *Administrative Rule* R277-700.

³⁶ National Institute for Excellence in Teaching, “High-Quality Curriculum,” 1.

³⁷ Tosh, “Digital Instructional Materials,” 1.



Recommended Instructional Materials System, which provides guidance on quality materials, but districts do not appear to be using this resource, and the Utah State Board of Education does not have a way of tracking whether the resources are used. The audit also found that districts are not using state-recommended curriculum materials, and some teachers report preferring internet resources for instructional materials.³⁸

Example of Positive Implementation: That same audit on curriculum found that Davis School District has strong processes for selecting and adopting districtwide curriculum materials. The district approves materials and then pushes those down to the school level. If district-wide adopted materials are not available for a particular course, district policy outlines the steps a school must follow. These include obtaining materials approval from the district’s director over teaching and learning and reviewing USBE materials. Principals are also required to develop curriculum selection procedures that align with those of the district. This process of overseeing curriculum ensures teaching materials are consistent across district schools and teachers.

Positive
Implementation ★

BEST PRACTICE 2.7

LEA central offices should adopt clear policies for selecting and adopting curriculum aligned with state standards. LEAs should regularly evaluate whether content being taught throughout schools is consistent with these expectations and policies and leading to improved learning and academic performance throughout the LEA.



In addition to setting clear expectations for curriculum materials, successful LEAs develop coherent instructional systems that set expectations for what teachers do in their classrooms.

Successful Central Offices Develop Clear Instructional Frameworks to Drive Teacher Improvement

In addition to setting clear expectations for curriculum materials, successful LEAs develop coherent instructional systems that set expectations for what teachers do in their classrooms. These frameworks outline which instructional strategies teachers should use to deliver high-quality lessons. Effective instructional frameworks, or instructional rubrics, create consistent expectations for teacher performance and a common language for how to refer to instructional practices

³⁸ Office of the Legislative Auditor General, Report No. 2022–12, 26.



within an LEA. Section 3 will describe how principals use instructional frameworks for teacher evaluation.

Example of Positive Implementation: South Summit School District (SSSD) is an example of a district that has adopted an instructional framework to improve teacher clarity. Through a needs assessment and robust engagement with teachers and staff, the district learned that teachers wanted greater clarity about what the district expected of them. SSSD has defined their expectations for high-performing teacher quality in their guaranteed strategies and intentional practices (GSIP), which were developed in collaboration with school leaders.

Positive
Implementation ★

The GSIP report identified six content areas teachers are to focus on (access, assessment, engagement, planning, reflection, rigor), including specific behaviors they expect to see from their teachers. For example, one of the key instructional strategies is focused on rigor. This means that when district staff engage in teacher observations, they expect to see teachers using intentional questioning methods. Each of the six GSIP are tied back to Utah Standards for Effective Teaching and are also tied to the district's teacher evaluation system.

Example of Positive Implementation: Wallace Stegner Academy has also created clear expectations for how they want their teachers to teach. The charter school outlined key behaviors they expect from their teachers, such as regularly cold calling on students to respond. Principals observe teachers regularly and evaluate how well the teacher is incorporating these expected behaviors into their instruction. Teachers are then given clear feedback on how they can improve. Directors also engage in principal observations and identify specific ways in which the principals could improve, based on a defined rubric, like transitions and school culture. Principal evaluations are based in part on how many poor classroom lessons directors observe.

Positive
Implementation ★

BEST PRACTICE 2.8

LEA central offices should develop clear instructional frameworks that set expectations for teacher performance and define LEA standards for high-quality teaching. This framework should be applied throughout the LEA and align with teacher evaluation systems. This framework should prioritize student learning and academic achievement.



Strategic Questions to Consider for LEA Management

- Are we placing staff where they have the greatest impact on instruction and student outcomes?
- How can we develop a more robust principal pipeline that trains principals in how to be an instructional leader? How do we identify potential future principals?
- What ongoing supports are in place for principals after they are hired?
- How do we ensure principal supervisors are acting as mentors focused on instructional leadership rather than compliance?
- How do we measure the effectiveness of our instructional coaching program?
- Do we have clear policies and processes for selecting and adopting curriculum across the LEA?
- How do we hold principals accountable for student learning and academic achievement while also supporting their growth?
- What data do we use to evaluate the effectiveness of our leadership development and instructional support systems?

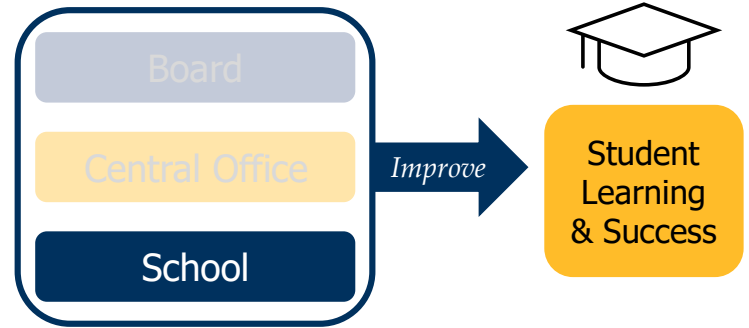
Additional Resources

General Guidance on LEA Management

- Wallace Foundation. *Planning and Developing Principal Pipelines*. <https://wallacefoundation.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/planning-and-developing-principal-pipelines.pdf>. 2023.
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Section 3

Effective Principals Transform Schools and Elevate Student Learning



School principals should be instructional leaders in their school and promote best practices to improve student learning. They coordinate efforts around clear school plans that are focused on student academic achievement. They also are actively engaged in observing teachers and providing robust feedback to improve teacher performance. Effective principals understand that teachers need time and support for collaboration to do their jobs. And when students struggle to learn, principals have effective systems in place to intervene and support those students.

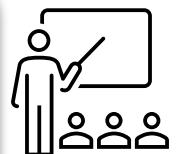
This section will explore the best practices school principals can adopt to support and improve student learning and academic achievement throughout their school.

Effective Principals Are...



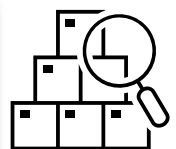
**Visionary School
Planners**

**Instructional
Leaders**



**Champions of
Teacher
Collaboration**

**Experts in Tiered
Interventions**







Section 3

Effective Principals Transform Schools and Elevate Student Learning

Principals play a key role in supporting student learning and academic achievement. Research from the Wallace Foundation found that if below-average elementary principals were to be replaced by above-average principals, students would gain an extra 2.9 months of math learning and 2.7 months of reading.³⁹ A past audit also found:

“...Principals have a particularly important role in enhancing classroom instruction, elevating and supporting teachers, and improving student outcomes.”⁴⁰

When schools are managed by effective principals, teachers can focus on classroom instruction. Teachers who receive more support can better focus on student learning and academic achievement. In addition, when principals align their work with local education agency (LEA) and board priorities, they also support growth in learning for all students in the LEA. This section will explore four key principles and strategies that school principals can use to effectively improve student learning and academic achievement:



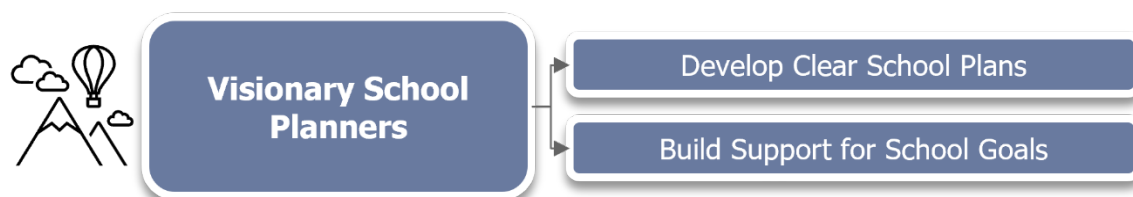
³⁹ Wallace Foundation, “How Principals Affect Students and Schools”, xiii.

⁴⁰ Office of the Legislative Auditor General, *Report #2022-03*, 37.



3.1 Principals Should be Visionary School Planners

Principals lead school improvement through goals and planning. Principals set high expectations for student learning and achievement and rally teachers around goals for student learning and academic achievement. This section describes how principals use school plans to create that clarity and build support for the school plan.



Effective Principals Develop Clear School Plans Aligned with LEA Goals

At the school level, principals and school community councils are responsible for creating and submitting several annual school plans. Each plan should show how a school intends to use their resources to improve student performance. When these plans do not have a single clear goal, the multiple, overlapping goals create confusion and can lead to wasted effort and frustrated staff and faculty. When school plans and LEA plans do not align, schools can be faced with too many initiatives, with competing LEA and school level goals. Effective principals distill all the different school efforts together into clear list of priorities that support the LEA's strategic goals for student learning and academic achievement.⁴¹



Effective principals distill all the different school efforts together into clear list of priorities that support the LEA's strategic goals for student learning and academic achievement.

Opportunity to Improve: Federal guidelines and state statute⁴² require states to develop systems for identifying and supporting the lowest-performing students in the state. LEAs that serve an identified student group must ensure schools are specifically supporting those students. However, an LEA audit found that multiple school plans within the LEA did not specify how they will support these underperforming student groups. Several schools did not have a school goal for any of the identified student groups. Other schools did not include evidence-based interventions they will use to improve underperforming students' scores in their school plan. Instead, school plans included broad

Opportunity to Improve



⁴¹ Utah State Board of Education, "Driving Continuous School Improvement Toolkit", 6 & Utah State Board of Education, "Practicing Visionary Leadership Toolkit," 6.

⁴² *Utah Code* 53E-4-301.5.



language about how they will support the students. The plans were incomplete and failed to explain how schools would support underperforming student groups.⁴³

Example of Positive Implementation: Multiple Utah districts require their principals to align school plans with district goals. Iron County School District has developed the *Iron Growth Cycle* model. This model outlines three areas the schools should focus on: academics, behavior, and instruction. Each school in the district then aligns their school plans into a single document that connects to those three focus areas. Our audit of Alpine School District found that the district has a similar approach.⁴⁴ The district outlines their priorities within a strategic plan (referred to as their coherence map) and allows schools to implement unique initiatives within the district-defined domains. The process of aligning school plans with district initiatives clarifies what the school will focus on and how the school will realize the district's vision.

Positive
Implementation ★

BEST PRACTICE 3.1

Principals should establish a single, clear, and actionable school plan that aligns with the LEA's vision, mission, and goals and meets all the requirements of *Utah Code* to guide school improvement efforts. This plan should contain all the elements of an effective strategic plan including clear goals, measures, and objectives as well as indications of what resources will be used to support the plan. The plan should be focused on student learning and academic achievement.

Effective Principals Build Support for School Goals

Another important piece of school leadership is receiving feedback from stakeholders (such as parents and community members) for the school plan. Effective principals know how to integrate teacher, staff, and stakeholder feedback into school plans to ensure they are focusing on the school's biggest needs. Through gathering feedback, principals understand how the school can improve to better support student learning and academic achievement. Principals then rally support and resources for these school plans.

Principals also set clear expectations for school staff associated with the school vision for student learning and academic achievement. **Example of Positive Implementation:** The principal at Mountain Shadows Elementary uses contracts to define expectations for teachers for each school year and how

Positive
Implementation ★

⁴³ Office of the Legislative Auditor General, Report No. 2023-11, 31.

⁴⁴ Office of the Legislative Auditor General, Report No. 2025-07, 33.



teachers will support school improvement efforts. Teachers then decide if they feel they can support the school's expectations. This process of gathering feedback from key stakeholders, defining a clear plan, and then articulating clear expectations are effective practices for ensuring schools' success.

BEST PRACTICE 3.2

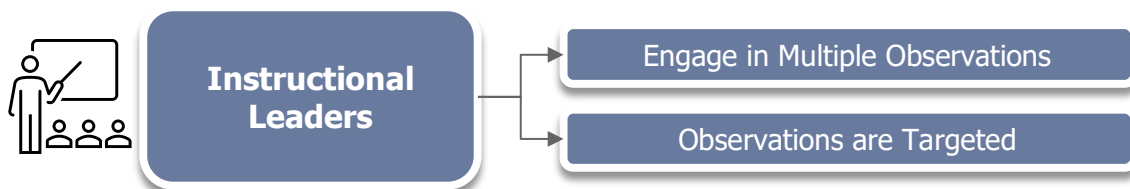
Principals should engage in robust stakeholder engagement to understand their school's biggest barriers to student learning and academic achievement as they develop their school's annual plan.

BEST PRACTICE 3.3

Principals should set clear expectations for teachers and staff about how they can implement the school's plan for student learning and academic achievement. These expectations make it easy for teachers and staff to understand their role within the school plan and how they can support both the school's goals and the LEA's vision for student learning and academic achievement.

3.2 Principals Should be Instructional Leaders and Improve Teacher Performance

Principals serve a variety of dynamic functions within a school. These responsibilities are important for helping the school to function, but principals should remain focused on student learning and achievement. Principals should improve teacher performance through effective teacher evaluations. These evaluations should provide regular guidance on how teachers can apply best practices within their classrooms using clear, high-quality standards. This section will outline best practices for evaluating teachers and how principals can improve teacher performance.



Effective Principals Engage in Multiple, Brief Observations

Best practices encourage principals to be engaged in multiple classroom observations throughout the year so they can improve performance for all



teachers. These multiple, brief teacher evaluations should occur throughout the school year and help contribute to a culture of feedback. Our 2022 audit of teacher and principal performance also found that multiple visits support teacher improvement.⁴⁵

Opportunity to Improve: That same audit noted that districts conduct summative evaluations on career teachers once every three years, which is contrary to requirements outlined in *Utah Code*.⁴⁶ The audit also found that teacher evaluation systems focus heavily on remediation instead of teacher improvement and growth. For example, student growth data is only considered a minor factor in a teacher's evaluation rating.

**Opportunity
to Improve**



More frequent visits and continual feedback can also improve a teacher's desire to receive and incorporate that feedback into their instruction.

Effective teacher observations should be short, in the classroom, and oftentimes unannounced. Principals should also provide specific, and actionable feedback to the teacher at the end of classroom observation. This feedback should mobilize teachers to practice new skills and reflect on their teaching style. Principals have regularly cited time constraints as a barrier to more regular classroom visits. However,

our office found that regular and brief visits not only improve feedback but can improve the relationship between teacher and principal. More frequent visits and continual feedback can also improve a teacher's desire to receive and incorporate that feedback into their instruction.⁴⁷

Example of Positive Implementation: In our 2022 audit of teacher and principal performance, we found that one LEA had increased the frequency of its classroom observations. At the time the LEA shifted to annual evaluations, many districts were only conducting evaluations every three years. Our audit of teacher and principal performance found that annual evaluations shifted the focus to teacher improvement instead of a compliance tool.⁴⁸ One district employee also described that the continual observations led to teachers getting more clarity on how they could improve because they received a new rating every year. We encourage LEAs and principals to improve their teacher evaluations through engaging in multiple visits throughout the year and providing regular feedback to improve teacher performance.

**Positive
Implementation**



⁴⁵ Office of the Legislative Auditor General, Report #2022-03, 23.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 9-10. See also *Utah Code* 53G-11-507.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 28.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 26.



BEST PRACTICE 3.4

Principals should engage in multiple teacher observations throughout the year to ensure they are frequently in the classrooms observing instruction and providing targeted feedback to teachers. These observations should provide teachers with an opportunity to meaningfully improve their instructional practices and classroom management skills in a manner that will improve student learning and academic achievement.

Effective Principal Observations Rely on Targeted Standards

Teacher evaluations should be based on a simplified rubric with a few standards that focus on teacher improvement and student growth. Traditional summative evaluations create a large administrative burden.

Opportunity to Improve: Our audit of teacher and principal performance found that summative teacher evaluations require “significant time, energy, and resources for principals in most districts” and all the requirements resulted in a “large administrative burden placed on principals.”⁴⁹ These summative evaluations were also heavily focused on remediation and identifying poor-performing teachers. Our office concluded that “the evaluation system lacks a broader focus on assisting high-quality, intermediate, and long-time career teachers to continually improve their professional skills.”⁵⁰

Opportunity to Improve

Example of Positive Implementation: In contrast, Uintah School District provides its principals with an observation rubric which connects to the district’s seven point instructional framework. The expectation is that principals regularly use this rubric to observe instruction based on the instructional framework. Cache County School District has its Big Five Elements of Effective Instruction which include five principles for classroom management and five principles for instructional practice. Instructional coaches use the Big Five Elements to help teachers identify specific areas where they can improve. For example, one of the areas focuses on responding to disruptions and one of the strategies teachers could improve on is delivering individual and group corrections. These tools provide clarity on district expectations for high-quality teaching and how principals should evaluate classroom instruction. We encourage principals to adopt similar approaches to their evaluation systems by

Positive Implementation

⁴⁹ Office of the Legislative Auditor General, “A Performance Audit of Teacher and Principal Performance Within Utah’s Public Education System”, 26.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 10.



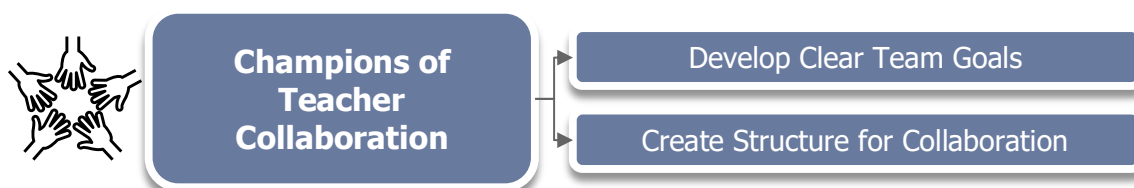
focusing on a few key standards that emphasize best practices in instructional quality.

BEST PRACTICE 3.5

Principals should use clear rubrics during their teacher evaluations that align with LEA expectations. Doing so provides clarity for the principal and teacher on what is being measured and how it supports the LEA vision for student learning and academic achievement.

3.3 Principals Should be Champions of Teacher Collaboration

Effective principals intentionally support and monitor teachers as they collaborate to develop high quality lessons and resources for their students. Research demonstrates the importance of teacher collaboration and shows it has a positive impact on teacher satisfaction and student learning and academic achievement. *Utah State Standards for Education Leadership* Standard 2.2 states that educational leaders “Build a professional culture of trust and collaboration, engaging teachers in sharing information, analyzing outcomes, and planning improvement.”⁵¹ This section outlines how principals support and strengthen teacher collaboration to ensure high-quality learning for all students.



Effective Principals Help Teacher Teams Develop Student Learning and Academic Achievement Goals

As discussed in Section 1 regarding the importance of board vision, mission, and goals, teacher teams also need a clear vision of student learning and academic achievement and goals for how they will realize that vision. Teacher goals should align with school-level goals and priorities. The process of aligning teacher goals with school goals creates harmony with LEA initiatives and ensures teacher teams are moving towards the same clear targets.

⁵¹ Utah State Board of Education, “Utah State Standards”, 1.



Principals should help teachers develop clear goals that align with schoolwide plans. In a recent review of effective principal practices, Hanover Research found that effective principals “...monitor stakeholder actions to ensure that they improve school outcomes and correspond with the school’s established vision, mission, and target goals.”⁵² These goals should focus on improvement and significant growth as opposed to maintaining the status quo.



Principals should help their teacher teams develop clear goals that align with schoolwide plans.

Example of Positive Implementation: Teacher teams at Rocky Mountain Middle School (Wasatch) have clear goals for student proficiency. They create both a regular goal for proficiency as well as a stretch goal that is posted on regular teacher team agendas for the team to use during their planning.

Positive Implementation ★

In adopting goals that push the teams, principals should ensure these teacher goals are also based on student performance. When teacher goals are based on performance and aligned with school and LEA priorities, teachers can better focus on student results. We encourage principals to support teacher teams as they seek to develop goals that are focused on improving student performance and that align with school and LEA priorities.

BEST PRACTICE 3.6

Principals should help teacher teams develop instructional goals that align with school and LEA priorities and are based on student learning data. These goals should significantly push teams to improve student learning and academic achievement.

Effective Principals Create Time and Structure to Support Collaboration



Effective principals help teachers engage in collaboration so teachers can realize their student learning and academic achievement goals.

Principals engage directly with teachers to support their collaborative work. Effective principals help teachers engage in collaboration so teachers can realize their student learning and academic achievement goals. This means examining common formative assessments, reviewing student data, and identifying effective practices. Effective principals also develop campus-wide leadership teams to help

⁵² Utah State Board of Education, “Practicing Visionary Leadership Toolkit”, 15.



support and improve teacher collaboration efforts. These teams help monitor collaboration on a more regular basis.

Research shows that teachers can engage in what is called surface-level collaboration instead of deep collaboration, which is more focused on significantly improving instruction.⁵³ Teachers may spend time meeting but not sharing teaching practices and reviewing student data to drive instruction. Through the process of providing time, structure, and support, principals and schoolwide leadership teams create the conditions for teacher teams to effectively collaborate to improve student outcomes. Teacher teams are then supported to meet their team goals and improve learning across the school.

Example of Positive Implementation: Through providing structured agendas for collaboration meetings, principals empower teachers in their efforts to collaborate. Rocky Mountain Middle (Wasatch) and other schools developed templates for their teacher teams to use during their collaborative meetings.. Principals designed these templates to encourage teachers to examine student data and keep teachers focused on the essential elements of teacher collaboration. Principals also periodically review these documents to monitor teacher team performance.

Positive
Implementation ★

Opportunity to Improve: Principals should also support teacher teams by ensuring teachers have adequate time to collaborate. One LEA audit found that the district lacked a formal structure for teacher collaboration. Instead of dedicating time for teacher collaboration, the district believed that informal discussions during staff meetings and lunch breaks were sufficient. However, the audit team observed that these meetings were not focused on important elements of teacher collaboration such as data analysis and peer-to-peer learning. Staff meeting conversations were focused on issues like student misbehavior, budgets, and scheduling. The audit recommended that the LEA adopt a more formal structure for collaboration to “give the district dedicated time to promote collective responsibility, cultivate accountability and responsibility, as well as become more data and goal oriented.”⁵⁴

Opportunity
to Improve ⚡

Example of Positive Implementation: In Washington County School District (WCSD), the school board passed a resolution supporting the professional learning community model and outlining expectations for teachers to participate in collaborative and learning opportunities. WCSD Principals and administrators that we spoke to from across the district affirmed that they create

Positive
Implementation ★

⁵³ Coombs, D., et al, “Effective First Grade Literacy Teaching Teams,” 22.

⁵⁴ Office of the Legislative Auditor General, Report No. 2025-10, 32.



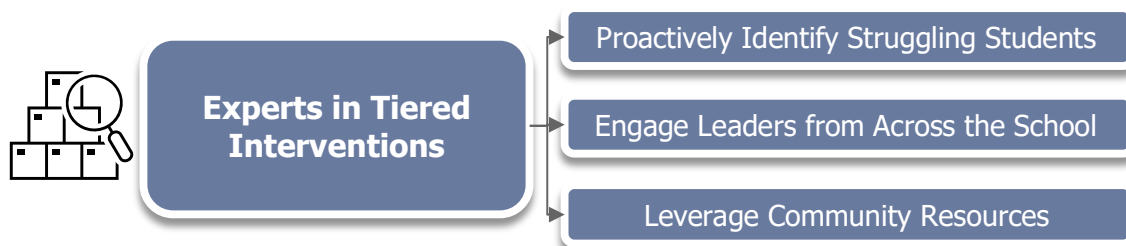
dedicated time for teachers to collaborate weekly. We visited teacher team meetings throughout the district and saw teams engaged in collaborative efforts to identify student barriers to learning and improve instruction.

BEST PRACTICE 3.7

School leaders should actively support teacher collaboration through providing time, structure, and oversight of collaboration meetings. By providing effective support, principals help teams adopt best practices for teacher collaboration including reviewing student learning data, identifying effective teaching practices, and finding ways to improve student learning. This support may also come in the form of campuswide instructional teams that help improve collaboration to meet the LEA's vision for student learning and academic achievement.

3.4 Principals Should Be Experts in Tiered Intervention Systems

The primary purpose of school is to ensure student learning. Everyone working within the school should be focused on that goal. Core instruction and schoolwide practices should support most students. However, schools need to have effective methods of intervening when students fall behind their classmates, especially when it comes to core subjects like basic literacy and numeracy. Our audit of statewide tests found that high-performing LEAs throughout the state utilize effective interventions to support student learning and academic achievement.⁵⁵ This section will outline the best practices principals can employ to ensure that school-based interventions help students achieve academic success.



⁵⁵ Office of the Legislative Auditor General, Report # 2024-23, 5.



Effective Principals Use Data to Identify Students Who Need Support

Principals should rely on comprehensive schoolwide data to proactively identify students in need of support. There are multiple forms of data principals could use to identify struggling students, such as screener assessments which are assessments designed to identify students at risk of academic failure. These screeners should be given to all students, be both reliable and valid, and help identify students who might need additional support. Principals should use further assessments and resources to pinpoint other student needs.

An early warning system (EWS) can also effectively and proactively identify students who may need additional services. EWS are data systems that combine student data to identify students who may be at risk of dropping out of school or to avoid negative outcomes. For example, research shows that students who are chronically absent are less likely to graduate.⁵⁶ An EWS can identify students who are close to becoming chronically absent so schools can reach out to better support that student. An EWS can help schools identify students and intervene early to give students the tools and support they need to be successful.

Example of Positive Implementation: Administrators and Teachers at Spectrum Academy, a charter school with locations in North Salt Lake and Pleasant Grove, rely on a variety of data sources to identify students who need additional support. Teachers complete data forms which require them to track student behavior and coursework data. After trying interventions, teachers submit their information to school administrators for further guidance and support.

Positive
Implementation ★

In addition to these forms, administrators routinely collect behavior data for the school which helps them identify trends and prevent disruptive behavior. The school has also developed clear thresholds and processes for knowing when students need additional Tier 2 and Tier 3 academic support based on assessment data. There is also clear time in the schedule to accommodate additional intervention time. This whole process is focused on combining behavior and academic data together to help teachers and administrators identify which students need additional support and what interventions could be effective.

⁵⁶ Institute of Education Sciences, “Preventing Dropout in Secondary Schools”, 14-15.



BEST PRACTICE 3.8

Principals should rely on multiple data sources to analyze student performance and proactively identify students who need more support to achieve academic success. This data analysis feeds directly into a larger system of identifying students and intervening to improve their academic outcomes.

Effective Principals Engage Leaders from Across the School to Develop Effective Systems of Support

Sifting through student data can be challenging, especially in large schools. Recent reports from the Utah State Board of Education also show that schools are seeing an increase in behavioral needs among students. To ensure that teachers remain effective at providing high-quality learning and to ensure principals do not become overwhelmed, principals should develop school-based intervention teams.

School-based intervention teams should include not only school administrators, but also counselors, instructional coaches, teachers, and behavioral support staff to assist in this process. By bringing in expertise from around the school, schools are better able to triangulate individual students' obstacles to learning. These teams can also work with parents and families to understand potential reasons why students are struggling to learn. Principals should work to develop these teams, define roles and responsibilities, and develop clear protocols for school interventions. Principals should also develop a method for teachers to refer students to this team for additional help.



Once identified as needing more support, school teams need to determine which intervention best meets the needs of that student.

Once identified as needing more support, school teams need to determine which intervention best meets the needs of that student. Teams should be familiar with evidence-based interventions and have a comprehensive list of available interventions as well as guidance on how to implement them. Once an intervention is in place, school teams should actively

monitor student progress to determine if an intervention is working or whether they need to adjust the intervention. Through monitoring interventions, these teams examine whether students have the right resources to help them achieve academic success.



To ensure students' academic success, school teams should ensure intervention systems are working, including non-academic interventions for social-emotional challenges and behavior supports.

To ensure students' academic success, school teams should confirm intervention systems are working, including non-academic interventions for social-emotional challenges and behavior supports. Research shows that providing high-quality, evidence-based support for student behavior and social-emotional needs can improve student academic outcomes.⁵⁷ However, principals and schools will need to be strategic about how they implement both academic and non-academic interventions to ensure they integrate and align with each other. Effective

principals understand that supporting students in non-academic areas supports their academic success.

Example of Positive Implementation: We observed a student success team operating at Lakeview Elementary in Provo City School District. This team has clear norms and protocols teachers follow for submitting students to the group including a detailed description of why the teacher is referring the student and what the teacher has already done to support the student. These referrals work in conjunction with different forms of student performance data to provide the school leadership team with clear indicators of which students need support and what their obstacles to learning might be (academic, behavioral, and/or social-emotional). The team is then able to assign staff throughout the school to support the student, and the team has a process to follow up to ensure these interventions are helping students progress.

Positive
Implementation ★

Example of Positive Implementation: A report published by the Utah State Board of Education identified three charter schools in the state that had closed achievement gaps among student groups.⁵⁸ Good Foundations Academy was identified in that report and one of the key strategies the school employed was an emphasis on a strong, positive climate. Specifically, the school followed the Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS) model. The school relies on a ticket system for misbehaviors. Students can be given either red, yellow, or blue tickets based on the severity of the behavior infraction. Each color comes with a predetermined consequence. Students with repeat behaviors are shown

Positive
Implementation ★

⁵⁷ Freeman et al, "Relationship Between School-wide Positive Behavior", 3; Crocker et al, "Mental Health and Schools", 4.

⁵⁸ Billig, "Utah Charter Schools", I-1.



specific consequences of both positive and negative actions to demonstrate what positive behavior looks like.

Example of Positive Implementation: The report also identified Channing Hall as a top-performing charter school and found that the school relied on the Response to Intervention approach for academic interventions.⁵⁹ Students are placed into ability groups based on diagnostic reading assessments. Teachers provide robust instruction based on students' diagnosed reading ability and students can progress to more advanced reading groups after passing certain exams. Aides and other instructors routinely pull groups of students out of class to provide targeted reading support based on the students' identified needs. Students who do not respond to small group interventions are tested again. Teachers discuss these students regularly and ensure they are tracking each student's progress.

Positive
Implementation ★

BEST PRACTICE 3.9

Principals should develop schoolwide teams to oversee and guide tiered intervention systems. These teams meet regularly to monitor student progress and ensure interventions improve student learning and academic achievement.

Effective Principals Leverage Community Supports to Meet Student Needs

Some schools serve students who exhibit high levels of needs such as high-poverty and food insecurity. These needs present serious barriers to student learning. The American Psychological Association notes:

*"Children and families living in poverty often attend under-resourced, overcrowded schools that lack educational opportunities, books, supplies, and appropriate technology due to local funding policies. In addition, families living below the poverty line often live in school districts without adequate equal learning experiences for both gifted and special needs students with learning differences and where high school dropout rates are high."*⁶⁰

Our office found the community school model to be an effective method of developing robust support for students and improving student outcomes. Multiple studies also show that the community school model can help improve

⁵⁹ Billig, "Utah Charter Schools," II-1.

⁶⁰ American Psychological Association, Mental Health Effects.



attendance, improve student behavior, increase student academic outcomes, and raise the graduation rate.⁶¹ The model relies on a school-based coordinator being embedded in a school leadership team. These coordinators align school, family, and community resources to support the school's plan for achieving student results.⁶²

Example of Positive Implementation: Coordinators that we worked with connect students and families with community-based resources to ensure students have the resources they need to learn effectively. These resources range from after-school tutoring opportunities to dental screenings and food pantries. One principal we spoke to noted that having a community school facilitator in his school has given him time back so that he can be in the classroom more often.

Positive
Implementation ★

We recognize that the ability to rely on community resources will depend largely on individual school circumstances, but we encourage principals to identify needs within their own school and find ways to leverage community resources to meet that need. Doing so allows them, as the school's instructional leader, to remain focused on improving teaching and learning. Principals should consider whether having a school-based community school facilitator would be beneficial.

BEST PRACTICE 3.10

Principals should rely on community support and resources to help students overcome obstacles so that the principal can remain focused on being an instructional leader. Some principals may need additional support to leverage community resources and should identify key personnel within their school and community who can assist them in this effort.

⁶¹ Oakes, et al., "Community Schools," 7-10; Maier, et al., "Community Schools as an Effective School Improvement Strategy," v-vi; Johnston, et al., Illustrating the Promise of Community Schools, xii; Caldas, et al., "A Comparative Analysis," 1.

⁶² Institute for Educational Leadership, Community School Standards, 7.



Strategic Questions for Principal Consideration

- Does your school have a single, clear plan which guides all improvements or are there multiple, disconnected plans? Does this plan align with LEA initiatives?
- How do you build support for the school plan from school staff and teachers?
- How often are you in the classroom observing instruction? What do you use to determine how instruction could be improved? What type of feedback do you give to your teachers?
- Do your teachers have enough time, training, and support for effective collaboration? How can you improve teacher collaboration?
- Do your teachers have clear team goals that they follow?
- Do you have a school team to assist you in overseeing and improving student support systems?
- How do you identify a student who needs support? How do you know what support they need and whether interventions are working?

Additional Resources

- Wallace Foundation. *The school principal as leader: Guiding schools to better teaching and learning* (2nd ed.). 2023. <https://wallacefoundation.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/the-school-principal-as-leader-guiding-schools-to-better-teaching-and-learning-2nd-ed.pdf>.
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- USBE has a series of training videos on MTSS and how to use it across various domains. For more information visit <https://schools.utah.gov/curr/umtss>.
- Our office found this resource from the American Institutes for Research helpful for evaluating MTSS: American Institutes for Research. *Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) fidelity of implementation rubric (Version 3)*. MTSS Center, 2025. <https://mtss4success.org/sites/default/files/2025-01/mtss-fidelity-rubric-2025.pdf>.
- Blitz, C. L., & Schulman, R. *Measurement instruments for assessing the performance of professional learning communities* (REL 2016–144). U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic, 2016. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED568594.pdf>.



Complete List of Best Practices





Complete List of Best Practices

This handbook identified the following best practices. The numbering convention assigned to each best practice consists of its section followed by a period and best practice number within that section.

Board Members

Best Practice 1.1 - Stakeholder Engagement

School boards should meet with key LEA staff, principals, teachers, parents, and community stakeholders to gather feedback about the vision, mission and goals and understand the barriers to student learning and academic achievement. School boards should consider this feedback as they develop their vision, mission, and goals. However, since school boards are responsible for development of the vision, mission, and goals, they should view these engagements as opportunities to learn rather than as requirements for what the vision, mission, and goals should include.

Best Practice 1.2 - Robust Strategic Planning

Each school board should develop the LEA's vision, mission, and goals for student learning and academic achievement. They also oversee the development of a strategic plan by the superintendent that includes all the necessary elements to ensure the LEA's success. Complete, detailed strategic plans will also outline who is responsible for each element to ensure people are accountable for implementing the strategic plan.

Best Practice 1.3 - Strategically Aligned Budgets

School boards should ensure they are providing appropriate funding for their stated goals and aligning their fiscal and strategic priorities so that the LEA has the resources needed to achieve the strategic goals. Strategic plans should indicate how the LEA will provide resources and support to ensure the achievement of key objectives.

Best Practice 1.4 - Clearly Defined Roles

School boards should clearly define the relationship between the LEA and the schools to ensure clear roles and responsibilities for curriculum, compensation, staffing, and instruction. Each role should be focused on student learning and academic achievement. When defining each role, school boards need to articulate the role of the LEA in overseeing schools and how much autonomy the LEA will grant schools. This framework creates clarity for how the LEA and schools will accomplish the strategic plan.

Best Practice 1.5 - Strategically Aligned Governance

To focus on meaningful academic achievement, effective school boards intentionally align their governance practices with the LEA's strategic plan and the vision, mission, and goals that they create. They ensure that board meetings are purposefully focused on student outcomes—prioritizing discussions, decisions, and oversight that advance strategic goals focused on student learning and academic achievement.

Best Practice 1.6 - Review Student Learning Data

School boards should regularly review academic data with a particular focus on low-performing schools and large learning gaps. With this data, boards should develop clear plans to support LEA and school efforts to improve learning and fulfill the board's strategic plan.

Best Practice 1.7 - Regular and Rigorous Evaluations

School boards should engage in regular, rigorous evaluation of their performance, including a review of their progress towards achieving the LEA's vision, mission, and goals within the strategic plan. This evaluation should happen annually.

Best Practice 1.8 - Board Handbooks and Policies

To strengthen communication and develop a stronger relationship between school boards and superintendents, school boards should develop board handbooks and policies outlining clear expectations, norms, and procedures for collaboration with the superintendent. Boards should refer to these handbooks and policies often and evaluate how well they maintain an effective working relationship with the superintendent centered on improving student learning and academic achievement.

Best Practice 1.9 - Superintendent Evaluations

School boards should evaluate the superintendent annually using clear performance benchmarks, reliable data, and an overall evaluation system aligned with strategic priorities and focused on student learning and academic achievement.

LEA Central Offices

Best Practice 2.1 - Strategic Staff Placement

LEA central offices should balance the needs of the LEA office with the need for in-school personnel for the purpose of supporting student learning and academic achievement. Staff should be placed where they will have the greatest impact on student learning and academic achievement.

Best Practice 2.2 - Instructional Coaching Expectations

LEA central offices should clearly define their expectations for instructional coaches, ensure coaches use a proven coaching cycle, establish an LEA-wide instructional playbook, and provide quality training for instructional coaches, all consistent with the board's vision. Doing so provides much needed support for teachers throughout the LEA and creates clarity for the role of instructional coaches.

Best Practice 2.3 - Remove Department Silos

LEA central offices coordinate efforts to break down department and staff silos to provide robust support to principals in their own efforts to improve student learning and academic achievement. By strengthening communication and coordination within the LEA office, principals are given clearer guidance on how they can improve and what resources are available to them.



Best Practice 2.4 - Principal Pipeline

LEA central offices should create a principal pipeline to identify and develop promising instructional leaders. The pipeline should include robust preparations before the principal is placed in a school, continuous support from LEA leadership, and ongoing training centered on becoming a strong instructional leader who improves student academic outcomes.

Best Practice 2.5 – Robust Principal Supports

LEA central offices should have established procedures and resources to provide principals with robust and ongoing support. This support begins with a principal pipeline and continues throughout their tenure with mentorship from a principal supervisor and coordinated support from LEA central office staff.

Best Practice 2.6 - Principal Accountability

LEA central office leadership and principal supervisors should hold principals accountable for student learning and academic achievement while helping them to overcome challenges they may face. LEAs should develop clear key performance indicators for principal performance and use those whenever they evaluate principal performance.

Best Practice 2.7 - Curriculum Adoption Policies

LEA central offices should adopt clear policies for selecting and adopting curriculum aligned with state standards. LEAs should regularly evaluate whether content being taught throughout schools is consistent with these expectations and policies and leading to improved learning and academic performance throughout the LEA.

Best Practice 2.8 - Clear Instructional Frameworks

LEA central offices should develop clear instructional frameworks that set expectations for teacher performance and define LEA standards for high-quality teaching. This framework should be applied throughout the LEA and align with teacher evaluation systems. This framework should prioritize student learning and academic achievement.

School Principals

Best Practice 3.1 - LEA-Aligned School Plans

Principals should establish a single, clear, and actionable school plan that aligns with the LEA's vision, mission, and goals and meets all the requirements of Utah Code to guide school improvement efforts. This plan should contain all the elements of an effective strategic plan including clear goals, measures, and objectives as well as indications of what resources will be used to support the plan. The plan should be focused on student learning and academic achievement.

Best Practice 3.2 - Principal Stakeholder Engagement

Principals should engage in robust stakeholder engagement to understand their school's biggest barriers to student learning and academic achievement as they develop their school's annual plan.

Best Practice 3.3 - School Expectations

Principals should set clear expectations for teachers and staff about how they can implement the school's plan for student learning and academic achievement. These expectations make it easy for teachers and staff to understand their role within the school plan and how they can support both the school's goals and the LEA's vision for student learning and academic achievement.

Best Practice 3.4 - Frequent Classroom Observation

Principals should engage in multiple teacher observations throughout the year to ensure they are frequently in the classrooms observing instruction and providing targeted feedback to teachers. These observations should provide teachers with an opportunity to meaningfully improve their instructional practices and classroom management skills in a manner that will improve student learning and academic achievement.

Best Practice 3.5 - Teacher Evaluation Rubrics

Principals should use clear rubrics during their teacher evaluations that align with LEA expectations. Doing so provides clarity for the principal and teacher on what is being measured and how it supports the LEA vision for student learning and academic achievement.

Best Practice 3.6 - LEA-Aligned Instructional Goals

Principals should help teacher teams develop instructional goals that align with school and LEA priorities and are based on student learning data. These goals should significantly push teams to improve student learning and academic achievement.

Best Practice 3.7 - Teacher Collaboration

School leaders should actively support teacher collaboration through providing time, structure, and oversight of collaboration meetings. By providing effective support, principals help teams adopt best practices for teacher collaboration including reviewing student learning data, identifying effective teaching practices, and finding ways to improve student learning. This support may also come in the form of campuswide instructional teams that help improve collaboration to meet the LEA's vision for student learning and academic achievement.

Best Practice 3.8 - Robust Data Analysis

Principals should rely on multiple data sources to analyze student performance and proactively identify students who need more support to achieve academic success. This data analysis feeds directly into a larger system of identifying students and intervening to improve their academic outcomes.

Best Practice 3.9 - Schoolwide Teams

Principals should develop schoolwide teams to oversee and guide tiered intervention systems. These teams meet regularly to monitor student progress and ensure interventions improve student learning and academic achievement.

Best Practice 3.10 - Community Support

Principals should rely on community support and resources to help students overcome obstacles to learning so that the principal can remain focused on being an instructional leader. Some principals may need additional support to leverage community resources and should identify key personnel within their school and community who can assist them in this effort.



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