CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF EDUCATION POLICY
ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

Building the Organization Without Leaving Instruction Behind

Signal Results

Center for the Study of Education Policy (CSEP)
October 2026 | Issue 2

Signal Question and Vote Distribution

Signal question: "How strongly do you agree that a principal's highest-leverage work is building the organizational conditions for teaching and learning, rather than driving instructional improvement individually?" **106 education stakeholders responded.**

Response	Count	Share
Strongly Agree – Building organizational capacity is the principal's highest-leverage work	53	50%
Agree – Principals should balance organizational leadership with direct instructional leadership	47	44%
Disagree – Principals should remain primarily responsible for instructional leadership	3	3%
Strongly Disagree – Schools improve best when principals directly lead instruction	3	3%

Respondents were also invited to leave an open-ended comment explaining their vote. Of the 106 respondents, 51 did so (26 of 53 Strongly Agree voters, 22 of 47 Agree voters, 2 of 3 Disagree voters, and 1 of 3 Strongly Disagree voters).

Summary of Open-Ended Responses

The written comments track the vote closely. Strongly Agree respondents describe a principalship whose reach depends on others; Agree respondents accept that premise but insist the principal stay connected to instruction; the small group offering an alternative perspective views instruction as the core business of the school and, by extension, of its leader.

Strongly Agree (n = 26 comments)

The dominant argument is one of scale and sustainability. Respondents described the "heroic" model, in which the principal personally supports every teacher, as impossible in large schools and unsustainable in small ones, and they framed organizational capacity as what allows improvement to outlast any single leader. Many defined the principal's distinctive contribution as aligning time, talent, and resources; building climate and culture; and ensuring teachers are supported, while instructional coaches, assistant principals, department chairs, and teacher leaders carry the day-to-day instructional work.

Agree (n = 22 comments)

These respondents did not dispute the value of organizational capacity; most affirmed it directly. They objected to the word "rather." Three concerns recur: (1) principals cannot design effective structures for instructional improvement without understanding instruction themselves; (2) visible principal involvement in instruction signals its importance to the school community and sustains accountability; and (3) the right balance depends on context, including school level, size, rurality, and whether other instructional leaders exist.

Disagree and Strongly Disagree (n = 3 comments)

The three comments offering an alternative perspective emphasized that schools are "institutions of learning" and that principals are "first and foremost instructional leaders." These comments did acknowledge organizational responsibilities. One Disagree comment called for "a balance" between organizational and instructional leadership responsibilities, and the Strongly Disagree comment allowed that principals could "tap into instructional experts." No respondent argued that organizational conditions are unimportant.

Thematic Analysis

Theme 1: Reach, scale, and sustainability

The most frequent theme among Strongly Agree respondents, and present among Agree respondents as well, is that a principal-centered model of instructional improvement is limited by time and reach. Respondents framed organizational capacity as the mechanism that extends leadership beyond one person and allows improvement to persist after a principal leaves, linking the principalship to leadership pipelines and succession.

> *"Even if the highest-capacity principals we could imagine were able to do it all themselves, that impact ends abruptly when the principal leaves the school. Great leadership is measured not just in the results delivered today - but in the health of the organization years after the leader has left."*
>
> **Strongly Agree Respondent**

Theme 2: The principal as designer of the conditions for learning

Respondents who strongly agreed described the principal's distinctive role as what only the principal can do: align time, talent, and resources; set vision and tone; build culture and climate; and ensure professional

learning, discipline, and operations support classroom work. One respondent extends "conditions" beyond academics to belonging, dignity, and social-emotional development, arguing that a narrow focus on instruction risks neglecting these.

> *"What only the principal can do is make sure that teachers are well-supported, that their professional learning is aligned with their instructional needs, that the climate is positive, that other functions support teaching and learning, and that discipline is fair and minimizes classroom disruptions."*
>
> **Strongly Agree Respondent**

Theme 3: Instructional knowledge as a prerequisite, not an alternative

The defining argument of the Agree group is that organizational and instructional leadership are interdependent rather than competing. Respondents argued that a principal cannot design structures for instructional improvement without understanding instruction, and that the principal's visible engagement in instructional work carries symbolic weight for the school community.

> *"Principals need to build organizational leadership for instructional improvement, but it should always be rooted in the knowledge of how to improve instruction, and I believe you have to stay personally involved in that process as a leader to really know how to structure it."*
>
> **Agree Respondent**

Theme 4: Context determines the balance

Respondents across both majority groups conditioned their answer on school context: whether the school has assistant principals, coaches, department chairs, or a curriculum director; whether it is an elementary, middle, or high school; and whether it is small or rural. Several noted that in schools where the principal is the only administrator, direct instructional leadership is unavoidable. Rural context cuts both ways, however. One rural respondent argued that the "heroic leadership" model is precisely what has proven unsustainable there, suggesting that the absence of staff may be a reason to build distributed capacity rather than a reason to forgo it.

> *"In a small, rural district without a curriculum director or instructional coach, the principal may be the primary person responsible for driving instructional improvement. In that situation, the principal must balance creating the conditions for effective teaching with directly supporting and improving instruction."*
>
> **Agree Respondent**

Theme 5: Distributing instructional expertise across roles

Many respondents named specific roles that should carry instructional improvement: instructional coaches, assistant principals, department chairs, team leads, and PLCs. Some proposed an explicit division of labor between the principal and assistant principals. One respondent, an author of a recent study of Memphis school reform, reported that the principal who was least hands-on built the most robust infrastructure for instructional improvement.

> *"Assuming they have instructional coaches on their leadership team, they should 100% be focused on fostering the organizational conditions for teaching and learning and trust that their*

> *team will rise to the occasion. A principal focused on directly leading instruction is an exercise in micromanagement and duplicative effort with minimal payoff, as well as likely negative implications for campus culture."*
>
> **Strongly Agree Respondent**

Theme 6: Preparation and support have not caught up with the role

A smaller set of comments pointed to capacity gaps in how principals are prepared and supported, and these gaps ran in two directions. Two respondents noted that principals often lack deep instructional expertise; one said the Illinois principal endorsement emphasizes organizational leadership, policy, and budgeting rather than instructional skill, and both offered this as a reason to center the principal's organizational role. A leadership coach observed the reverse gap: principals become absorbed in management and student behavior, lack the skills to lead improvement teams or learning cycles, and need different kinds of support from districts to build organizational capacity.

> *"Districts need to transform the way they support and develop principals- this work is right on the money. So many principals I coach spend the majority of their day as managers- often overseeing disruptive students- and they don't have the capacity to lead instructional improvement teams; they don't understand how to implement a learning cycle"*
>
> **Strongly Agree Respondent**

Theme 7: Instruction as the core business, and accountability as the risk

Respondents who marked Disagree or Strongly Disagree, joined by a few Agree respondents, located the principal's identity in instruction because instruction is the school's purpose. A related concern was accountability: if the principal steps back from instructional leadership, respondents worried the school's instructional work could lose its anchor. This theme is less a rejection of organizational leadership than a caution about what could be lost if "rather than" is read literally.

> *"While building principals manage the building and are responsible for organizational leadership, schools are institutions of learning, and the building leader should be responsible for instructional learning."*
>
> **Disagree Respondent**

Subscriber Research and Resources

This section highlights research and resources subscribers send us related to the current issue's focus. Below is a resource that addresses principal leadership and the infrastructure for instructional improvement.

- ***The Grit and the Grind: Building High-Performing Education Systems in an Era of Polarization*** (Glazer, Egan, Berry, and Fattal, University of Chicago Press, 2026): Compares two efforts to improve Memphis's lowest-performing schools, a state-run turnaround district and a locally driven district initiative, and examines how improvement depends on professional, organizational, and political factors. The book profiles three Memphis principals who led ambitious reforms and found that the principal who built the most robust infrastructure for instructional improvement did so through

collegial structures, new routines, and problem-solving processes rather than personal force. More information is available on this website.

- **How Student Enrollment Declines Are Affecting Education Budgets, Explained in 10 Figures** (Bellwether, 2026): Examines how declining student enrollment is reshaping school funding, staffing, and organizational structures across the country. The report highlights the challenges schools face in maintaining instructional quality with fewer resources and changing student needs. These trends underscore the importance of principals building strong organizational systems, aligning resources with instructional priorities, and developing leadership capacity to sustain teaching and learning amid changing conditions. Read the report.

Have a report, article, or resource that furthers our understanding of a topic in future Education Horizon issues? Send it to Lisa Hood at lhood@ilstu.edu for possible inclusion in a future Signal Check brief.