AMBITIOUS LEADERSHIP: HOW PRINCIPALS LEAD SCHOOLS TO COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS
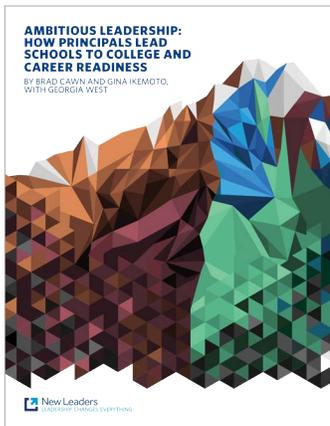## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**AMBITIOUS LEADERSHIP:
HOW PRINCIPALS LEAD
SCHOOLS TO COLLEGE AND
CAREER READINESS**
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New Leaders
LEADERSHIP CHANGES EVERYTHING

**To learn more, read
the full report,
*Ambitious Leadership:
How Principals Lead
Schools to College and
Career Readiness*.**

**For detailed information
about the critical
knowledge held by
ambitious leaders, and
links to resources for
building this knowledge,
read Appendix A.**

**For detailed information
about what key
practices look like
at some of our study
schools, read the
case studies.**

AMBITIOUS LEADERSHIP FOR AMBITIOUS LEARNING

"We were a high-performing school. Now we're not." These words — spoken in 2015 by the head of a respected network of "no excuses" charter schools — could have come from any number of school leaders across the country, as they adjusted to the "skyrocketing"[1] demands of new college- and career-ready (CCR) standards. The standards — and their respective assessments — have revealed a yawning gap between what our students need to know and be able to do to succeed in college and beyond, and how we are currently preparing them.

The stakes couldn't be higher. American students will increasingly compete with individuals from around the globe for jobs and other resources. It is a formidable landscape that they can only navigate with a strong core of knowledge and the ability to think carefully, analytically, and creatively as they face new circumstances and adapt to new challenges. While steep declines in student performance on CCR-aligned tests were not unexpected, they nevertheless make clear that our initial efforts to prepare students for the demands of this changing world have been too timid. Moving all students toward college and career readiness calls for an entirely new level of sustained and focused effort.

In the face of such challenges, strong school leadership is essential. As the primary culture builders, talent managers, and instructional leaders at their schools,[2] principals are the lynchpins to successful implementation of any school-level improvement initiative. To help students meet the new expectations — to read and comprehend increasingly complex literary and informational texts, to think analytically and develop well-supported arguments, and to flexibly apply computational strategies to solve complex, multi-step problems — principals must lead their schools in implementing a more challenging curriculum, more sophisticated instruction, and more intensive instructional supports. Curriculum and teaching that supports students in developing these capabilities is known as "ambitious instruction."

But leading schools to consistently enact ambitious instruction has been a challenge even for our most talented and dedicated principals. Delivering such instruction demands a degree of pedagogical and content expertise that prior standards did not. So what are principals doing at schools that are successfully advancing students toward college and career readiness?

In our new report, we share findings from a study of principals at 10 schools[3] that have made progress in helping students meet CCR standards. We found that principals successfully making this shift were executing instructional leadership practices at exceptionally high levels of intensity, quality, and intentionality. We call this new generation of learning-focused leadership **"ambitious instructional leadership."**

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1 Peterson, P.E., Barrows, S., & Gift, T. (2016). After Common Core, States Set Rigorous Standards. *Education Next* 16(3).
2 Ikemoto, G., Taliaferro, L., & Adams, E. (2012). *Playmakers: How great principals build and lead great teams of teachers.* New York: New Leaders.
3 We selected ten schools: one K-3 school, four K-5 schools, one K-8 school, three middle schools, and one high school. Two elementary schools in our sample are charters; the rest are district schools.
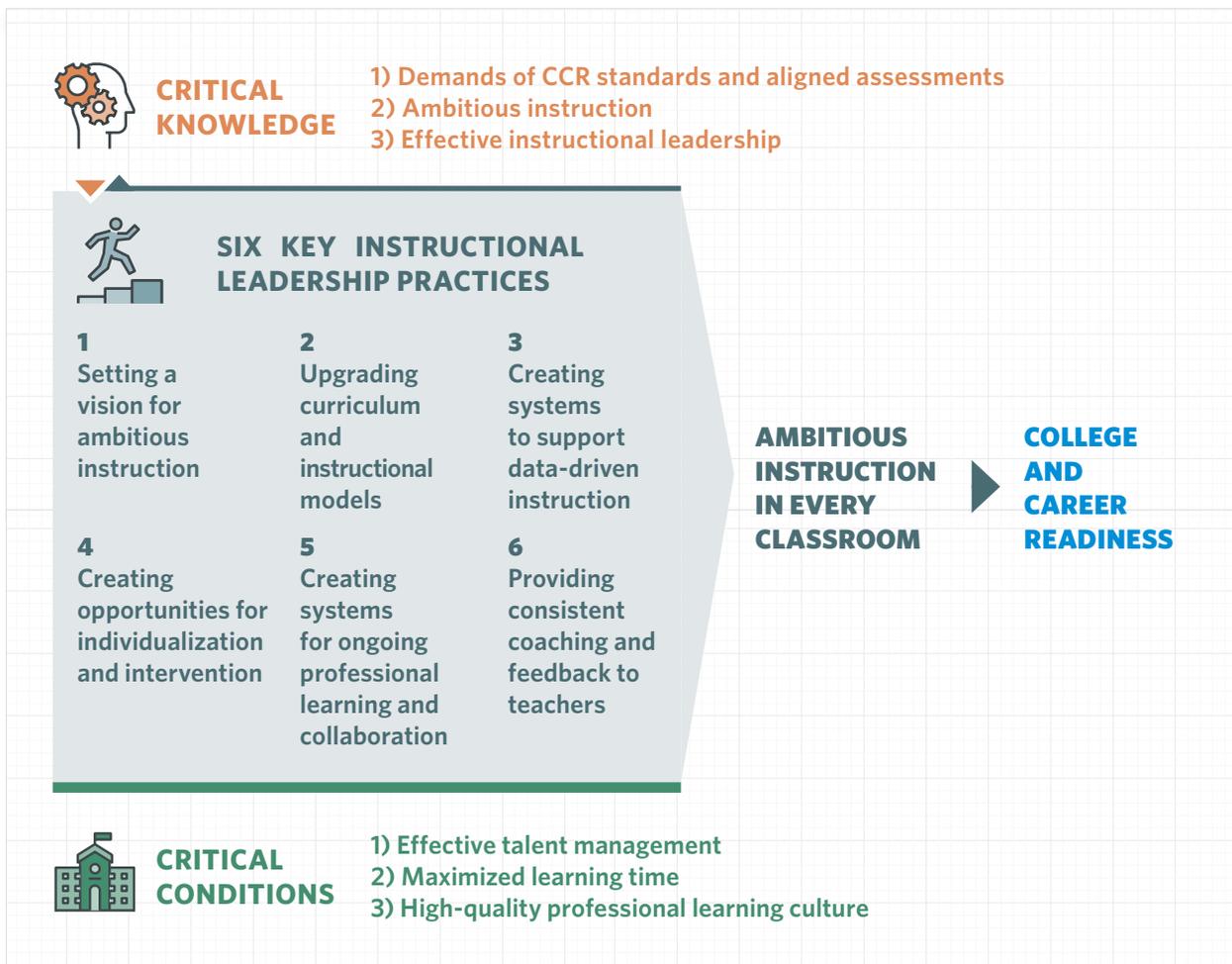
THE FINDINGS

Currently, the field lacks examples of principals who have begun to make progress in helping students meet CCR standards. New Leaders set out to find those exemplary leaders and share detailed information about how they went about the process. We asked:

1. What do principals need to know and do to effectively lead to higher standards?

2. What factors enable or hinder principals in leading to higher standards?

To answer these questions, we identified a set of urban schools that were outpacing their district or state peers, either in absolute proficiency or in student progress on CCR standards-aligned state assessments. We then conducted site visits, interviews, and document reviews to learn more about their work. The diagram below illustrates our findings regarding: 1) what principals did; 2) what principals needed to know; and 3) the factors that enabled their work.

CRITICAL KNOWLEDGE
1) Demands of CCR standards and aligned assessments
2) Ambitious instruction
3) Effective instructional leadership

SIX KEY INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

1
Setting a vision for ambitious instruction

2
Upgrading curriculum and instructional models

3
Creating systems to support data-driven instruction

4
Creating opportunities for individualization and intervention

5
Creating systems for ongoing professional learning and collaboration

6
Providing consistent coaching and feedback to teachers

AMBITIOUS INSTRUCTION IN EVERY CLASSROOM

COLLEGE AND CAREER READINESS

CRITICAL CONDITIONS
1) Effective talent management
2) Maximized learning time
3) High-quality professional learning culture

What did principals do? The principals at our study schools enacted **six key instructional leadership practices** to move their schools toward ambitious, CCR-aligned instruction in every classroom. These practices included:

- Setting a vision for ambitious instruction
- Upgrading curriculum and instructional models
- Creating systems to support data-driven instruction
- Creating opportunities for individualization and intervention
- Creating systems for ongoing professional learning and collaboration
- Providing consistent coaching and feedback to teachers

While these practices are not new — prior research has identified them as hallmarks of effective instructional leadership — what distinguished the principals we observed was that they enacted these practices at a far more rigorous level. These principals carried out key instructional leadership practices more frequently, with greater consistency, and with a more intensive focus on the instructional core. The inset describes the dimensions of rigor that distinguished the six key leadership practices we observed.

Dimensions of rigor distinguishing ambitious instructional leadership practices

- **Informed by critical knowledge:** Practices were informed by principals' in-depth knowledge of college- and career-ready standards, ambitious instruction, and high-impact approaches to instructional leadership (e.g., creating effective systems for building staff capacity).

- **Intensity:** Practices were carried out with significant frequency and consistency; principals had increased the amount of time and/or staff they apportioned to instructional leadership to facilitate this level of intensity.

- **Quality:** Practices reflected research findings on "best practices" (e.g., feedback on instruction was specific and included actionable steps teachers could use immediately).

- **Intentionality:** Practices focused on achieving clearly defined, standards-aligned outcomes related to the instructional core.

What did principals know? As the ambitious instructional leadership practices suggest, our research indicates that what principals must know and be able to do in regard to the instructional core has increased dramatically. Our findings suggest that principals at our study schools possessed **three types of critical knowledge** that they drew upon to enact these practices. Specifically, 1) they had a deep grasp of the demands of CCR standards and the aligned assessments; 2) they understood — in a detailed and concrete way — the components of ambitious instruction that could support students in developing the necessary capabilities; and 3) they had command of instructional leadership "best practices," such as effective methods for building teacher capacity to enact more rigorous pedagogical practices. This knowledge was not fixed: principals had to possess a certain level of critical knowledge to embark upon and carry out ambitious instructional leadership. At the same time, this knowledge was deepened as they and their teachers enacted the key practices.

What enabled their work? Implementing instructional leadership practices at such high levels of consistency, frequency, and quality is not easy, and may be especially difficult to initiate at less-developed schools. When **three critical conditions** were firmly in place, however, principals were able to more quickly and rigorously implement key practices focused on improving the instructional core. These conditions included: 1) effective talent management; 2) maximized learning time; and 3) a high-quality professional learning culture. These critical conditions were not specific to CCR standards and for that reason, some of our study schools already had them in place when the new standards were introduced. Others prioritized putting them in place as the first stage of their work.

Distinctions between "Standard Instructional Leadership" and "Ambitious Instructional Leadership"

The chart below describes some of the concrete features of ambitious instructional leadership practices observed at schools making progress toward preparing students to meet CCR standards and expectations.

KEY PRACTICE	STANDARD INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP	AMBITIOUS INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP
Setting a vision for ambitious instruction	Establishes an ambitious goal for the school at large (e.g., all students will be prepared for college) but does not articulate a vision for challenging, standards-aligned instruction to support students in achieving that goal.	Envisions teaching and learning based on robust instructional models that will equip students with the higher-order thinking skills and knowledge they need to compete at the highest levels.
Upgrading and aligning curriculum and instructional models	Curriculum decisions and development are carried out in isolation of CCR standards. For example, teachers write new standards at the top of existing lesson plans without substantive changes to what or how content is taught.	CCR standards inform decisions about which curriculum to adopt and develop; curriculum materials are adapted to align with instructional vision. This approach leads to fundamental shifts, such as what mathematical content is addressed over the course of the year and the types of classroom activities used to support student learning.
Creating systems to support data-driven instruction	Assessments are not redesigned to align with CCR expectations and are limited to interim assessments. Teachers may use their own formative assessments (e.g., exit tickets) but data are not systematically tracked and shared to inform instruction.	Assessments are aligned to CCR expectations and both interim and a variety of formative assessments (e.g., exit slips, running records) are administered. Systems for tracking and sharing data allow teachers to collaboratively identify needed adjustments to instruction.
Creating opportunities for individualization and intervention	Opportunities for individualized learning are typically provided to struggling students or those with special needs, and these students are exposed to below-grade-level content.	Opportunities for individualized learning are prioritized for all students and the focus is on providing supports for students to master rigorous, grade-level content.
Creating systems for ongoing professional learning and collaboration	Opportunities for professional learning focused on classroom practices at the school are infrequent (e.g., quarterly learning walks, a single lesson study).	Practice-centered study, such as peer observations and feedback, and collaborative study of videotaped instruction, happens regularly (often weekly) at both the all-staff and teacher-team levels.
Providing consistent coaching and feedback to teachers	Feedback is broad and not focused on specific CCR-aligned practices.	Coaching and feedback is strategically aligned with schoolwide efforts to improve quality of specific, standards-driven instructional practices.

STAGES OF INSTRUCTIONAL IMPROVEMENT

Another quality that distinguished instructional leadership practices at the schools we observed was their alignment to their school's stage of improvement. Our research suggests that the trajectory of CCR-focused reforms is long: CCR-focused improvement efforts at our study schools spanned several years prior to the study and were expected to continue in subsequent years. In general, the schools in our study tended to fall into one of three stages in the journey to higher standards. The first stage focused heavily on establishing and building buy-in for an ambitious instructional vision and putting in place the three critical conditions for instructional improvement; the second stage focused heavily on establishing or upgrading systems and structures school-wide; and the third stage focused heavily on consistently carrying out the school's vision of ambitious instruction. Accordingly, the principals we observed implemented ambitious leadership practices in a particular sequence based on their school's stage within this longer trajectory. While principals never exclusively worked on just one focus area, their primary focus shifted depending on the needs of teachers and students.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRINCIPALS

The evidence we have gathered from schools indicates that helping all students become college- and career-ready demands a deep and shared understanding of the standards and their expectations for learning, a strong instructional vision informed by this understanding, and careful and continuous monitoring and refinement of curriculum and instruction to ensure this vision is brought to life in classroom practice. These actions are facilitated by three critical conditions that are unrelated to CCR standards, but allow for enactment of instructional leadership at high levels of consistency and quality.

Finally, our research suggests that schools move through three stages of development as they put in place the systems and structures that allow teachers to deepen their expertise and master concrete instructional changes. Principals in our study schools were not trying to do everything at once, but were instead identifying their schools' most pressing needs and taking actions that would have the greatest impact on moving it toward ambitious instruction for all students. Therefore, our recommendations include a list of high-impact practices based on a school's stage of development.

Getting Started	**Build knowledge about the standards and develop an ambitious instructional vision informed by CCR expectations.**	**Create a multi-year plan for moving the school and teachers toward this vision.**	**Identify likeminded staff and partners to help you lead the work and build buy-in for the vision.**	**Change structures and schedules to maximize learning time for both teachers and students.**
Stage 1	**Grow knowledge about the standards through repeated study of standards and review of curriculum.**	**Engage teachers in the process of creating a CCR standards-aligned curriculum map.**	**Build capacity for instructional leadership among teachers.**	**Target a particular instructional focus for study.**
Stage 2	**Clearly define and support expectations for rigor across the school.**	**Intensify focus and precision of curriculum development and monitoring.**	**Distribute instructional leadership responsibilities.**	**Increase focus and frequency of feedback and coaching.**
Stage 3	**Create structures for staff to own and contribute to organizational learning.**	**Continuously study and improve curriculum and instruction toward vision.**	**Develop individualized professional development programs, particularly career pathways to leadership.**	