

March 2022

# Research Brief

## Capital Improvements to Principal Leadership

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## Purpose

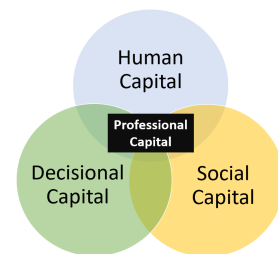
Principals matter to the success of schools. They play a critical role in supporting student achievement; attracting, developing, and retaining educators; and creating a culturally inclusive community (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2004; Levin et al., 2020). Furthermore, the job of the principal is intensifying in terms of its complexity, volume of responsibilities, and increased accountability (Pollock et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2018).

**“Professional Capital** is...about what you know and can do individually, with whom you know it and do it collectively, and how long you have known it and done it and deliberately gotten better at doing it over time.” (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012, p. 102)

High-stakes accountability for student achievement, increased school choice options, the adoption of the common core standards, and revised teacher evaluation systems have added to the intensification of the role (Pollock et al., 2015; Grissom et al., 2021). Moreover, a heightened attention to

diversity, equity, and inclusion nationally has dramatically added to the work of the school principal (Grissom et al., 2021). Given the increasingly complex and sometimes competing measures for success that principals are expected to meet, it should come as no surprise that the principalship has seen increased job stress, higher turnover rates, and elevated transfers from urban schools (Seashore Louis & Robinson, 2012).

Our study is important because the principal's role has intensified; therefore, the conditions for hiring, supporting, and retaining school principals need to change in order to see dramatic and sustained improvements in schools. Yet in the literature, empirical research focused on the strategies to effectively hire, support, and retain principals is still evolving (Grissom, 2021). As a result, our research team sought to contribute to the literature and to inform practice through exploring how principals benefit from and shape professional capital (Figure 1) to enhance their knowledge, their relationships, and their abilities to make decisions.



**Figure 1**  
*Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012*

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## Five Studies on How Principals Benefit From and Shape Professional Capital

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Author/Year	Title	Research Questions
Banks (2022)	The Principal's Influence on the Retention of Educators of Color	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What leadership strategies, if any, do principals use to support the retention of educators of color in the Elody Public School District?</li> <li>2. Why do those educators of color remain in their district?</li> </ol>
Hahn (2022)	The Individual Journey of the Building Principal and its Impact on Recruitment	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How do principals make sense of how they became principal?</li> <li>2. What influences a building principal's decision to recruit, "tap," or recommend a potential school leader?</li> </ol>
Herman (2022)	Culturally Responsive District Strategies to Retain School Principals	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What strategies, if any, does the district employ toward the retention of school principals?</li> <li>2. How, if at all, do these strategies influence a principal's decision to remain in their role?</li> </ol>
Landry (2022)	The Influence of Relationships on Principals' Perceptions of Self-Efficacy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. In what ways do districts organize and encourage relationships with and among principals?</li> <li>2. To what extent do strong relationships with central office leaders and other principals impact principals' feelings of efficacy?</li> </ol>
Viviani (2022)	Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Policy Implementation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What are the organizational factors that contribute to principals' decisional capital about DEI policy implementation?</li> <li>2. What are the individual factors that contribute to principals' decisional capital about DEI policy implementation?</li> </ol>

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## Methodology

This qualitative case study was conducted by five researchers who were interested in investigating how principals benefit from and shape professional capital to improve schools (see Table 1). Below, we discuss the shared methodological approaches to our study, including a brief description of the site selection, participants, and documents used.

### Site Selection

Our team selected the Elody<sup>1</sup> Public School District with both our team and individual studies in mind. We chose Elody for three main reasons:

1. We wanted to conduct our research in a large, urban public school district that employed multiple principals in similar grade bands. According to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), Elody School District met the criterion for size with 15,265 students and 22 principals.
2. We wanted a district with five or more educators of color. According to DESE, Elody met this criterion as the number of educators of color in this district in the 2021-2022 school year was nearly 23% compared to the Commonwealth's 11%.
3. We wanted a district that was implementing at least one policy across schools.

### Participants

Our team interviewed 21 participants from a variety of roles within Elody using a semi-structured interview approach. Though the focus of our overarching study was on building principals, in order to gain a better understanding of their role and how they benefit from and shape the three dimensions of professional capital we included district leaders and educators. Table 2 illustrates the role and number of participants who agreed to take part in our study.

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<sup>1</sup> pseudonym

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**Table 2**

## Interview Participants

Role in District	Number of Participants
Superintendent	1
Central Office Administrator	5
Principal	8
Educator	7
Total	21

**Documents**

We asked the participants for documents related to each individual study and received the DEI policy manual. During the interviews, many leaders referred to the recently completed district review by DESE. As a result, we reviewed DESE's report.

## Findings

We first begin with a summary of the strengths of the Elody School District related to professional capital and school leadership. We then synthesize our individual research studies to explore how principals benefit from and shape professional capital, particularly through the lenses of relationships and race, to introduce a new perspective, inclusive capital.

**Strengths of Elody**

- There is a sense of pride about their community and its rich traditions. All staff spoke at length about their commitment to the community and the students in the district.
- A grow-your-own program has existed for several decades. This focus on human capital showed an investment in helping the district's educators grow their talents and skills through training and internship programs. As a result, the Elody School District had high retention rates among principals and district administrators.

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- Elody recently added an office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion<sup>2</sup> (DEI). This human and social capital investment to DEI demonstrated a commitment to cultural proficiency and a priority to diversifying staff and ensuring an inclusive environment where all students and community members were welcomed.
    - Elody implemented a DEI professional development (PD) day required for all certified staff; and open to all district employees, the initial purpose of which was to introduce the newly hired DEI executive team, describe the district's commitment to DEI, and outline the office's guiding principles.
    - These guiding principles were actionable by four focus areas which included:
      - i. increased recruitment and retention of diverse educators and staff
      - ii. improved school climate
      - iii. focused professional development so that they are able to deliver high quality services
      - iv. more inclusive curriculum and instructional practices.
    - Furthermore, the day offered the opportunity for staff to engage in critical self-reflection and design ways to implement DEI practices in their daily work.
  - Elody has confronted a number of challenges navigating their schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants that were interviewed during this study demonstrated resilience when faced with adversity during the pandemic, demonstrating their commitment to the success of students.

## **Harnessing Relationships**

We believe that how principals manage groups and harness relationships is critical in meeting the needs of staff and students (Spillane & Sun, 2020); however, in a range of organizations, people associate more with others who are similar to themselves (Kleinbaum et al., 2013). As a result, homophily limits people's access to social capital in a way that has powerful implications for the information they receive, the attitudes they form, and the interactions they experience (McPherson et al., 2001) Herman (2022) found that relationships and growing one's own leaders were positively attributed to strong principal retention; however, these were identified as barriers to enacting culturally responsive

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<sup>2</sup> Elody did not use the typical phrasing and acronym for its diversity, equity, and inclusion work in the same way as its peer districts across the Commonwealth. As a result, we referred to Elody's work on diversity, equity, inclusion in this specific order, using the acronym DEI where appropriate, in order to maintain anonymity.

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district leadership practices. In addition, Landry (2022) found in her study that homophilous relationships can hurt those within the relationship by creating a sense of expectation or entitlement.

In schools, groupthink limits the collaboration and voice of school leaders districts claimed to support. This was true in the Elody School District and we suspect that other districts also unwittingly build or encourage a groupthink mentality that leads to a homophilous

**Homophily:** connecting with others who are like yourself

**Groupthink:** the practice of thinking or making decisions as a group in a way that discourages creativity or individual responsibility

**Multiplex Relationships:** relationships grounded in both work and friendship-related interactions, leading to more substantive, diverse, and bidirectional interactions with peers

workforce (Janis, 1982). Hahn (2022) found that mostly White administrators with long term tenures with the district were the ones actually benefiting from the administrative internship program. When districts rely on “grow your own” programs, they must deliberately give voice to those that are outside of the group and target the demographics in such a way that their staff reflects their students. Viviani (2022) found, educators of color were

concerned about their White counterparts not embracing the DEI work initiated by the Elody School District. Therefore, as districts embrace DEI work, they must ensure that all of their educators come to the table prepared to discuss divergent viewpoints and hear voices that are not typically represented in the majority and thereby understand how implicit bias perpetuates groupthink. “The work really starts with focusing on your own identities and recognizing how your own bias interferes with your ability to see the world in the same way as somebody next to you.”

Building multiplex relationships ensure districts will be better prepared to navigate complex problems such as the underrepresentation of teachers and leaders of color faced in Elody. Banks (2022) found in his study that educators of color desired more critical feedback on their pedagogical practices in addition to the recognition of being an educator of color within their buildings. As one educator put it, “What I need is more like [pause]; my love language is words of affirmation.” In Elody, principals’ words of affirmation led to greater retention. By capturing the expressive and instrumental sides of what educators of color need, principals can harness the multiplex relationship to better support their educators of color and create a more inclusive school environment.



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## The Influence of Race

We found that race had an influence on the way principals acquired knowledge and skills, developed social interactions, and made decisions. Elody mirrored districts nationwide in the fact that a majority of their principals identified as White (The State of Racial Diversity in the Educator Workforce, 2016); therefore the following sections will focus on how race and critical consciousness affect professional capital and how the importance of diverse representation in leadership leads to greater school outcomes.

### *Race and Critical Consciousness*

With a diversifying student population, being critically conscious about race and its effect on curriculum and instruction, hiring practices, and retention have become increasingly important to promote positive outcomes for students (Welton et al., 2015). Especially key in these decisions about how to promote racial equity is the principal (Swanson & Welton, 2019). An effective avenue for creating lasting, systemic anti-racist practices is to examine the way race, especially the role of Whiteness, affects social relationships and decision-making through the lens of critical consciousness. Only through self-reflection on the role of race and a commitment to understanding the impact of White privilege, can educational leaders begin to actualize the tenets of professional capital. Viviani (2022) found that in her study to authentically meet the organizational changes that DEI policies require, districts must provide more opportunities for introspective growth.

**Critical Consciousness** goes beyond the adages of “colorblindness” and “multiculturalism” and instead moves towards acknowledging the role of race and engaging in an introspective and personal examination of one’s beliefs about race (Swanson & Welton, 2019)

### *Diverse Representation*

Diverse representation in leadership matters. Although harnessing professional capital increases the benefits of being a strong leader, it fails to adequately address the importance of representative leadership. Diverse leadership leads to increased student achievement in areas such as strong role modeling for students, a drop in disciplinary sanctions for students of color, and an increase in students of color being a part of gifted and talented programs (Moore et al., 2017; Sanchez et al., 2008). As districts create and

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hone their DEI work, they may find that racial diversity at the principal level also affects retention outcomes for both principals and staff.

As our team found, districts may find that culturally responsive environments that support leaders of color are more likely to lead to increased diverse leadership (Hahn, 2022), stronger self-efficacy (Landry, 2022), and greater retention for the principal (Herman, 2022). Furthermore, in schools in which there are principals of color, the research supports that educators of color are more likely to stay and are also more satisfied with their jobs (Gates et al., 2006; Grissom & Keiser, 2011). One reason for the lack of representation at the principal level is that a majority of teachers are White, and, in turn, they use their professional capital to join school administrations. Educators of color generally do not have access to this same pathway. As Hahn (2022) noted in his study of principal pathways, “Building principals often credited [their] collegial connections and interactions as playing an important role in their pathway to the principalship” (p. 26). Districts should therefore consider how they can harness the characteristics of inclusion to help them more fully consider the barriers that prevent educators of color from becoming principals. Some of the barriers educators of color face include a lack of support and mentoring from their principal when they are in the teacher role and a lack of leadership opportunities to develop their administrative skills (Rogers-Ard & Knaus, 2020). Districts that deliberately scrutinize human, social, and decisional capital through an inclusive lens become not only more culturally responsive, but also more representative of the diverse student population they aim to serve.

### **Inclusive Capital**

We introduce a new perspective that embodies Hargreaves and Fullan’s professional capital, while adding a fourth dimension that includes the lens of diversity, equity, and inclusion. We call this framework inclusive capital (Figure 2).

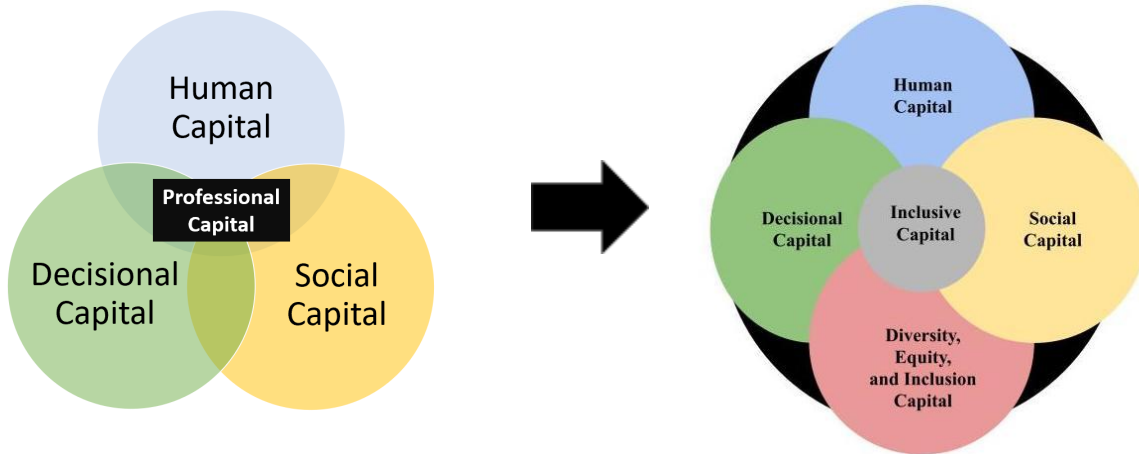
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**Figure 2**

*The Evolution of Professional Capital to Inclusive Capital*

*Professional Capital, Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012*

*Inclusive Capital*



Inclusive capital builds upon the older framework of professional capital by elevating the significance of diversity, equity, and inclusion. The DEI dimension must be understood as an asset based element that elevates the intersectionality of race, gender, and identity in a way that gives power and voice to those who have not historically been included in the conversation (Lugg, 2003). Below we capture how the additional dimension of DEI strengthens the professional capital framework to create more inclusive systems.

Human capital encourages effective human resources practices to make the best hires. With the added dimension of DEI, districts ensure inclusivity by creating pipeline programs that attract and hire educators of color. Social capital encourages professional learning communities that allows educators to collaborate on best practices. With the added dimension of DEI, districts ensure inclusivity by creating affinity groups that support educators of color by enhancing social networks across the district. Decisional capital encourages policies that support strong communication and consensus building. With the added dimension of DEI, districts ensure inclusivity by bringing to the forefront the voices of the most underrepresented staff in all policies. Thus, in each of these examples, inclusive capital is the systematic development and integration of four forms of capital - human, social, decisional, and DEI - into the principalship.

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## Recommendations

Our team has several recommendations for harnessing the power of inclusive capital for school leaders, outlined below:

- Urban districts like Elody should work to embrace divergent voices. To do so, districts must look beyond the traditional educator and administrator pools to areas in which talented staff, ranging from paraprofessionals to career-switchers, may be overlooked.
- Districts must actively recruit a more diverse leadership team who bring a variety of experiences and personal insights to the table.
- Districts must create systematic structures that consider formalized relationships and support networks that value inclusivity and reciprocal sharing.
- As districts navigate traditional practices, such as hiring, they need to deliberately create conditions that foster creativity and the underrepresented voice.
- Leaders in districts should be empowered to take deliberate action to provide opportunities for educators to build multiplex relationships, where they can demonstrate their expertise and show their authentic identity in an inclusive way.
- Leaders in schools must develop and hone their skills to challenge systemic racism, and to do this they must acquire knowledge and skills about race, engage in discussions with others about race, and make decisions about how to implement equitable initiatives using a critical-consciousness lens.
- For lasting organizational change, individual school leaders must be critically conscious to improve their own fluency in discussing race and the role of Whiteness to mitigate biases.
- DEI must be prioritized and institutionalized as a core competency and made everyone's responsibility.
- Districts should continue to focus on growing and supporting their leaders of color, while at the same time recognizing that "as numbers of nontraditional leaders (women, people of color, young adults) increase in school leadership, particularly in urban settings, districts must adjust to accommodate the needs of this unique (and diverse) population" (Peters, 2012, p. 36).

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## Conclusion

Our team found that using the perspective of inclusive capital for principal leadership better correlates with the evolving, intensifying nature of the role and the sustained adaptive changes needed for long-term success in schools. School principals have a positive influence on student outcomes, school culture, and teacher quality (Leithwood et al., 2004 & Levin et al., 2020). Diversity, equity, and inclusion must remain central to leadership practices and be at the center when observing principals and assessing their leadership practices (Hernandez et al., 2014). Therefore, districts should invest in school leader development by creating conditions for principals to shape and benefit from inclusive capital (Banks, 2022; Hahn, 2022; Herman, 2022; Landry, 2022; Viviani, 2022). Ultimately, true change in the face of adversity requires an individual and collective investment that does not protect the dominant voice; rather, it builds everyone's capacity to learn, be challenged, and move forward towards a shared vision.

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