Redesigning the Role of the Principal: Mobilizing and Organizing the Field to Lead for Racial Equity

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Accessibility
Redesigning the Role of the Principal:
Mobilizing and Organizing the Field to Lead for Racial Equity

Doctor of Education Leadership (Ed.L.D.)
Capstone

Submitted by
Erica Jordan-Thomas

To the Harvard Graduate School of Education
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education Leadership

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Dedication

“I come as one but stand as ten thousand.”
- Maya Angelou

I dedicate this capstone to my ancestors. You are the giants on whose shoulders I stand.
Acknowledgments

To Jennifer Cheatham, you are more than an advisor. Your support has been an incredible gift. Thank you for seeing me, believing in me, teaching me, and challenging me. Because of you, I have 20/20 vision on what it looks like to lead systems with love, healing, and racial equity...AND taking care of yourself while you do it. This and so many more lessons I will hold forever.

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To my mother, Dr. Freddie Jordan, thank you for your sacrifice. You gave me the blueprint for courage and excellence. You laid the pathway to becoming a doctor and I am just following.

To the best cohort, C9. You all have changed my life. I am so grateful for the 24 lifetime bonds that I have built and look forward to all the ways we will change the world.

#C9WeShine

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To my support system, Ashley Ingram, Linda T. Poindexter, and Anthony Harris, friends and my family thank you for your love and consistent belief in me. We did it.
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Abstract

The mission of the Education and Society Program (ESP) Team at the Aspen Institute is to improve public education by informing, influencing, and inspiring education leaders across policy and practice, with an emphasis on achieving equity for students of color and students from low-income families. In December 2019, ESP submitted a grant proposal to fund a learning agenda entitled “Evolving the Role of the Principal.” The purpose of this learning agenda at conception was to increase the sustainability of the role by: clarifying what a principal can uniquely accomplish; identifying leadership responsibilities that can be distributed to empower teachers and others; and exploring the research base, promising practices, and political context surrounding the evolving role of the principal. A few months after submission, ESP was awarded the grant; however, no one knew that a public health pandemic and a racial reckoning were on the way, which would force the field to transform the role of the principal yet again.

My residency, based on the ESP Team, involved leading the “Evolving the Role of the Principal” learning agenda as my strategic project. This capstone examines the social history of the principal role, change management, and mobilizing and organizing practices for change, all in service to discover what it would mean for the role of the principal and district systems to lead for racial equity. I describe my work in three phases: redefining the problem through an equity lens, building a guiding coalition to reconceptualize the role, and experimenting with mobilizing and organizing practices. Through my analysis of the progress made and not yet made to date, I explore the organizational change required to center racial equity and offer implications for the site, sector, and myself.
Introduction

Since the inception of the role of the school principal in the mid-nineteenth century, the role has adopted many identities. The first vision for the role was that of a principal teacher, one who managed the building of a single-room schoolhouse while still teaching students. In the early twentieth century, as schools were growing from one-room schoolhouses to multiple grade-leveled classrooms within a building, the role transitioned to take on more supervision and evaluation responsibility to mirror a middle manager (Rousmaniere, 2007). Fast forward a century to the passing of No Child Left Behind in 2002, which placed an emphasis on high-stakes school accountability and defined student achievement as the goal of school improvement efforts, thus forcing principals to prioritize instructional leadership (Grissom et al., 2021). In each new iteration of the role, new responsibilities have been added to the principal’s plate, but few responsibilities have been removed, leading to principals spending an average of sixty hours a week on their job (Lavigne et al., 2016). The role has become unsustainable.

The lack of sustainability of the role of the principal presents a grave concern because the principal is one of the most powerful positions in a school system. The effectiveness of a principal is just as important as the effectiveness of a classroom teacher because of their school-wide impact (Grissom et al., 2021). In December 2019, the Education and Society Program (ESP) at the Aspen Institute acknowledged the weight of this issue and submitted a grant proposal to the Joyce Foundation to fund a learning agenda entitled “Evolving the Role of the Principal.” In the grant application, the purpose of this learning agenda was identified as “clarifying what the principal is uniquely able to accomplish, identifying leadership responsibilities that can be distributed to empower teachers and others, and an exploration into the research base, promising practices, and political context surrounding the evolving role of the principal.” A couple of months following proposal submission, ESP was awarded the grant; however, no one
knew that a public health pandemic and a racial reckoning were on the way, which would force the field to evolve the role of the principal yet again.

When I joined the Education and Society Program (ESP) team at the Aspen Institute on July 1, 2020, the nation was under a public health lockdown due to COVID-19. School districts across the country closed school buildings and transitioned to virtual instruction. Principals were responding to sudden and unprecedented circumstances by attending to basic needs of students such as food and internet access. Principals had to redefine their school’s instructional approach and ensure that their school communities stayed connected while learning virtually. In the midst of a global health pandemic, the world was also coming to terms with the pandemic of racism that had been infecting us all for centuries. Protestors filled the streets around the world declaring that Black lives mattered in response to the death of George Floyd, a black man who was suffocated at the knee of a police officer, and other black lives lost at the hands of police brutality. There was a public urgency for all Americans to lead for racial equity, including principals and school districts.

The impact of these multiple crises added more responsibilities to the principal’s already full plate, causing 45 percent of principals to report that the pandemic conditions were prompting them to leave the job sooner than they had previously planned (Maxwell & Superville, 2020). The role of the principal was in urgent need of redesign to make it sustainable while also centering racial equity leadership. I was charged with leading ESP’s learning agenda focused on the role of the principal. “How can the role of the principal be redesigned to create sustainability while also centering racial equity?” became my guiding question for my strategic project.
Organizational Context

The Aspen Institute is a global nonprofit founded in 1949. The institute’s mission is to drive change through dialogue, leadership, and action to help solve the greatest challenges of our time (Aspen Institute, n.d.). The organization comprises almost 70 program teams, each focused on an area of policy, Aspen public program, or an Aspen fellowship—for example, the College Excellence Program, China Fellowship Program, or Justice & Society Program. I sit on Aspen’s Education & Society Program (ESP) Team.

According to ESP’s 2020 Strategic Plan, ESP’s mission is to improve public education by “informing, influencing, and inspiring education leaders across policy and practice, with an emphasis on achieving equity for students of color and students from low-income families” (Aspen ESP, 2019, p. 1). The team has developed the following theory of action to guide their work:

If Aspen Education creates opportunities for learning in a safe space, connections across policy-practice, and resources and tools for education leaders at the district, state, national and federal level, then Pre-K-12 education leaders will design, implement, learn from, and share and adapt effective policies and practices and reform efforts will be more effective, accelerating better education outcomes for all students, especially students of color and those from low-income families (p. 1).

The strategic plan also defines two domains to ESP’s theory of change:

1. **Direct engagement** with ESP creates value and impact on its own (e.g., learning about why, learning about how), and those who engage with ESP change and improve their leadership.

2. **Framing, insights, and recommendations** that ESP gleans from all of its engagements and interactions, then processes, publishes and promotes, changes the conversation and leads to more action, including changes in policies, aligned activity in the districts, or propagating the wave of discussion with peers and other influencers (Aspen ESP, 2019, p. 1).

The ESP team is organized by the two streams of their work: policy and practice.

The policy side of ESP is focused on a target audience of congressional and state education leaders. The practice side of ESP is focused on a target audience of
practitioners including superintendents, C-suite district leaders, principals, and teachers. My position as Doctoral Resident was situated on the practice side of the team reporting to the Director of Practice & Leadership.

The practice side of the team enacts ESP’s theory of action through Urban District Leadership Networks (UDLN). Fifteen urban school districts are members of ESP’s UDLN, which provides professional learning and a leadership development space for superintendents, chiefs of schools, chief academic officers, and chief financial officers. Leading learning agendas is another way the practice side of the team executes ESP’s theory of action. Learning agendas span 12-24 months and focus on convening the field around a single issue with outcomes that inform the field and influence change. As the ESP resident, I led the learning agenda on “Evolving the Role of the Principal” as my strategic project.

In this capstone, I will describe in detail my work as the ESP’s resident leading this learning agenda. In the Review for Knowledge in Action (RKA) section, I will explore the historical context of the principal, and draw on literature on change management and community organizing that informed the design and execution of my strategic project. I will then present the theory of action, informed by my RKA, that guided my work. The description section will detail the action I took inspired by my theory of action. I lay out my work in three phases: 1.) Redefine, 2.) Build, 3.) Experiment. I will share evidence-to-date of my progress and my analysis of what happened. Lastly, I will present implications for Aspen ESP, the American Pre-K-12 sector at large, and myself.

**Research for Knowledge in Action (RKA)**

Given the national context of a global health pandemic and racial reckoning, "How can the role of the principal be redesigned to create sustainability while also
centering racial equity?” became a central question for my strategic project. I structured my review of knowledge for action around the following sources of knowledge:

- The social history of the role of the principal and to what extent the role has been influenced by racism and white supremacy
- Leadership actions to manage the change needed
- Organizing and mobilizing strategies for change

**Defining Racism and White Supremacy**

Centering racial equity within my strategic project meant that I had to interrogate the role of the principal with an equity lens. Researcher Robin DiAngelo (2012) states “from an antiracist perspective, the question is not, ‘Did racism take place?’ but ‘How was racism taking place?’ because the assumption is that racism is always at play, always operating” (p. 290). Consequently, racism has influenced the role of the principal, and, in order to see how the role could become a force for racial equity, it was important to define how racism was at play and operating.

Racism and white supremacy are invisible forces and in order to “see” racism and white supremacy in the history of the principal role, I first needed to define both terms. “Racism is a marriage of racist policies and racist ideas that produces and normalizes racial inequities; a racist policy is any measure that produces or sustains racial inequity between racial groups” (Kendi, 2019, p. 18). White supremacy is the idea that white people and the ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions of white people are superior to people of color and their ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions (dRworks, n.d.-b).

Okun (n.d.) defines fifteen characteristics of white supremacy culture that show up in an organization—these three specifically apply:
• **Paternalism** - “Those with power think they are capable of making decisions for and in the interests of those without power” (p. 4)

• **Power Hoarding** - “Little, if any, value around sharing power and those with power assume they have the best interests of the organization at heart” (p. 5)

• **Individualism** - People are accountable to themselves and not a group; “Little experience or comfort working as part of a team” (p. 6)

I used these definitions as the lens through which I examined the history of the role of the principal to “see” how racism and white supremacy have influenced the role.

**The Social History of the Principal**

The role of the principal originated as a head or principal teacher; one teacher who continued to maintain teaching duties while also serving as the building manager. The head/principal teacher role was created to “address the organizational demands of the new graded school where students were classified by age and achievement and placed in separate classrooms under a single teacher” (Rousmaniere, 2007, p. 7). In the early twentieth century, in an effort to professionalize the role, school districts evolved the role to more closely mirror that of middle managers in the business world. This led to an increase in supervision responsibility and a decrease in teaching responsibility. Principals were given the authority to evaluate, hire and fire, and promote staff and teachers. Rousmaniere (2013) argues that “the creation of the principal role significantly restructured power relations in schools, reorienting the source of authority from the classroom to the principal’s office” (para. 5). This shift in power to a single individual in the “principal’s office” is an example of paternalism and power hoarding.

The nature of the position also institutionalized gender inequality. In the 1930s, as the principal was becoming a prominent position of authority in schools, the social status of the role was diverging at the elementary and secondary levels. This was not a
coincidence, given that at the time two-thirds of elementary principals were women (Goodykoontz & Lane, 1938). The elementary principal role maintained more teaching responsibility than secondary principals. Secondary principals were required to have an advanced degree (elementary principals were not), therefore excluding women who lacked access to higher education. Elementary principal salaries were lower than secondary principals, institutionalizing a difference in the status between the two positions. Consequently, in American cities, women secondary school principals could be counted on one hand (Rousmaniere, 2007).

The correlation between women making up the majority of elementary principals and earning lower principal salaries continues today. Sixty-six percent of today’s elementary principals are women and over sixty percent of today’s secondary principals are men (Taie & Goldring, 2019). According to the National Center of Education Statistics, the average salary for secondary principals is almost $7,000 higher than the average salary for elementary school principals (Figure 1). Consequently, on average, women principals earn lower salaries than their male counterparts ($98,300 vs. $102,700) (NCES, 2020).
Prior to the historic 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* supreme court decision, which ruled that racial segregation in schools was unconstitutional, Black schools and principals in the North and South were neglected by all-white school boards and white superintendents (Tillman, 2004 as cited in Rousmaniere, 2007). This neglect meant segregated Black schools were shielded from the power dynamics that a school’s dependent relationship with the central office of a district creates. Rousmaniere (2007) highlights the resulting irony that Black principals leading segregated schools were viewed in the community as role models and community liaisons, as opposed to white principals who were viewed by the community as liaisons to the central office and a role of authority. In other words, power hoarding and paternalism were not at play in the same way in Black segregated schools pre-*Brown vs. Board of Education*, as they were in segregated white schools. This resulted in Black principals sharing power with their communities.
Black principals sharing power with their community looked like exercising collective leadership. Black educators recognized their progress and advancement, as educators were tied to the overall progress of the Black community (Franklin, 1990). Prior to the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Black American voters were disenfranchised, contributing to a lack of Black leadership in political offices. This lack of an official voice led to Black professionals serving as spokespersons and representatives of the interests of Black communities at the local and national level, with educators making up the largest group of Black professionals (Franklin, 1990). This collective leadership approach is the opposite of individualism, a characteristic of white supremacy culture.

With the ban of segregation in schools due to Brown vs. Board of Education, the role of Black principals and the number of Black principals shifted drastically:

Because white school boards seemed to believe that black principals did not have the educational capacity to run a school, especially a school in which they would supervise white teachers and oversee the education of white children, black principals were often forced to forfeit their leadership positions. The result was that 30,000–50,000 of the teachers and principals who understood how to build aspirational climates for all children never entered the desegregated world (Walker, 2019, p. 17).

This historical firing of Black teachers and principals, because of the belief that they were not capable of leading and serving white teachers and students, is an example of racist ideas and racist policies at play.

This history of racist ideas that excluded Black principals from the role has influenced the demographics of today’s principals. Black principals account for only 11 percent of today’s public school principals (Figure 2). Additionally, Black principals are more likely to serve students of color and students from low-income backgrounds. “72% of public school students in schools with Black principals were from low-income families,” in comparison to “47% of public school students in schools with white principals were low-income. A similar pattern holds for students of color, who make up only 34% of
students at the average white principal’s school but 72% for Black principals” (Grissom et al., 2021, p. 17).

**Figure 2 - Public School Principal Race or Ethnicity over Time**

![Figure 2 - Public School Principal Race or Ethnicity over Time](image)

*SOURCE: Grissom et al., 2021, p. 15*

The complex and unjust history of the principal role shows up in the present-day expression of the role and supports the notion that the blueprint of the role of the principal is faulty and inequitable—and in need of a redesign.

**Change Management**

Change is complicated. “Change consists of great rapidity and nonlinearity on the one hand and equally great potential for creative breakthroughs on the other. The paradox is that transformation would not be possible without accompanying messiness”
In order to influence change within the role of the principal, I would need to exercise change management leadership within my strategic project. There are many different change management frameworks. I chose John Kotter’s eight-step process for leading change (Figure 3) because it could be applied to the two types of change I would need to lead; internal change within ESP to evolve my strategic project to explicitly center racial equity leadership and external change to influence the field to redesign the role of the principal for racial equity and sustainability.

Figure 3 - Kotter’s Eight Steps to Transform Your Organization

1. Establishing a Sense of Urgency
   - Examining market and competitive realities
     • Identifying and discussing crises, potential crises, or major opportunities

2. Forming a Powerful Guiding Coalition
   - Assembling a group with enough power to lead the change effort
   - Encouraging the group to work together as a team

3. Creating a Vision
   - Creating a vision to help direct the change effort
   - Developing strategies for achieving that vision

4. Communicating the Vision
   - Using every vehicle possible to communicate the new vision and strategies
     • Teaching new behaviors by the example of the guiding coalition

5. Empowering Others to Act on the Vision
   - Getting rid of obstacles to change
     • Changing systems or structures that seriously undermine the vision
     • Encouraging risk taking and nontraditional ideas, activities, and actions

6. Planning for and Creating Short-Term Wins
   - Planning for visible performance improvements
   - Creating those improvements
   - Recognizing and rewarding employees involved in the improvements

7. Consolidating Improvements and Producing Still More Change
   - Using increased credibility to change systems, structures, and policies that don’t fit the vision
     • Hiring, promoting, and developing employees who can implement the vision
     • Reinvigorating the process with new projects, themes, and change agents

8. Institutionalizing New Approaches
   - Articulating the connections between the new behaviors and corporate success
     • Developing the means to ensure leadership development and succession

Kotter’s first step is developing a sense of urgency. He states that urgency is necessary for change because it combats complacency. Aspen ESP had begun to cultivate urgency, as shown in their grant proposal to the Joyce Foundation naming a problem with the principal role. I would need to build on this narrative and leverage the major crises of the pandemic and racial reckoning to cultivate urgency around centering racial equity within my strategic project.

Kotter’s second step is “Building a Powerful Guiding Coalition” given that major change cannot occur at the hands of just one; it requires a committee of individuals. He identifies four characteristics of effective guiding coalitions: positional power, expertise, creditability, and leadership. He also notes that an effective guiding coalition must build trust and share a common goal. Trust leads to teamwork, and a common goal makes authentic teamwork feasible (Kotter, 2012). To usher in the two types of change within my strategic project, I would need to build a guiding coalition internally amongst ESP leadership and build a guiding coalition externally amongst education leaders in the field.

The third and fourth steps are “Creating the Vision” and “Communicating the Vision.” A vision provides direction and alignment, and motivates people to take action that may not be in their personal best interest but in service of the vision. He notes the process of vision creation as one individual drafting a vision based on their experience and values. The draft is then presented to the guiding coalition for feedback and workshopped to create a final version. When undertaking the vision creation process, Kotter (2012) emphasizes that it will be messy and require both head and heart.

A vision can only be fully realized when those in the organization have a common understanding of the goals and direction. Therefore, communicating the vision helps motivate and coordinate the actions of individual people to create transformation. Kotter urges to keep the vision simple and free of jargon. He identifies key elements of communicating the vision as metaphors to create a verbal picture, repetition to reinforce
the vision, and using multiple forums to share the vision; such as written and verbal communication, small informal gatherings, and large formal meetings (Kotter, 2012).

Given step four, the vision of centering racial equity within my strategic project and within the role of the principal needed to be clear, concise, and compelling.

Step five is “Empowering Others to Act.” This stage includes removing barriers to the change by creating systems compatible with the vision, aligning information to the vision, and if necessary, providing training to build the skills needed for others to carry forth the change (Kotter, 2012). Removing barriers is also defined as addressing and minimizing resistance when it occurs. Two strategies Kotter identifies to minimize resistance are education and communication, which are best when the resistance is rooted in a lack of information, and participation and involvement, so the advice of others is included in the design of the change. This step would make it critical that I include ESP leadership in my work as thought partners and co-designers.

“Planning for and Creating Short-Term Wins” is step six. Short-term wins build momentum, they make the sacrifices of the change “worth it,” and they build morale as those involved have an opportunity to celebrate their hard work. Kotter defines three characteristics of good short-term wins. First, they are visible, meaning a large number of people can see the win and know that it occurred. Secondly, they are unambiguous so classifying the actions as wins is undeniable. Lastly, the win clearly relates to the change effort (Kotter, 2012). He also notes that, in small organizations, wins should occur within six months of initiating the change.

The first four steps of Kotter’s (2012) eight-step model help defrost a hardened status quo. Steps five to seven introduce new practices, and step eight helps root the changes into the organization’s culture so they stick. Kotter stresses the importance of not succumbing to the pressures to produce and skip stages. As I lead change throughout my strategic project, I must consider the stages identified by Kotter to shift
the status quo of the role of the principal and introduce new practices to ESP to support racial equity practices.

**Mobilizing and Organizing for Change**

Community organizing has been a historical strategy to raise public consciousness of an issue and dismantle racist ideas, structures, and policies. As I moved through the stages of Kotter’s framework, experimenting with community organizing principles and practices seemed to be a promising leadership strategy to activate change and the social movement necessary to redesign a role with a deep public value that also holds an unjust history.

The faulty and inequitable blueprint of the principal—which models power hoarding and paternalism, and deliberately pushed out Black people out of the role—compromises the public value of the role. Public value is the benefits and costs of a public service, and how that service affects important civic and democratic principles such as equity and citizenship (Moore, 2013 as cited in Kavanagh, 2014). The history of the role limits the extent to which principals can impact social conditions to benefit communities and children, and affect racial equity within a school.

This impact on public value led me to draw on strategies for social movements. Christiansen (2009) defines social movements as organized yet informal social entities that are engaged in extra-institutional conflict-oriented toward a goal. These goals can be either aimed at a specific and narrow policy or be more broadly aimed at cultural change. He identifies the first stage of a social movement as “emergence” (Christiansen, 2009). At this stage, stakeholders are unhappy with a particular policy or social condition, “but they have not taken any action in order to redress their grievances, or if they have it is most likely individual action rather than collective action” (Christiansen, 2009, p. 2). In order for a social movement to move to the second stage of
“coalescence,” Christiansen notes that those involved must serve as agitators to raise the public consciousness of the issue and develop a broader sense of discontent.

Raising public consciousness requires organizing. Ganz (2002) defines organizing by naming actions that organizers take:

Organizers challenge people to act on behalf of shared values and interests. They develop the relationships, understanding, and action that enable people to gain new understanding of their interests, new resources, and new capacity to use these resources on behalf of their interests...Organizers interweave relationships, understanding, and action so that each contributes to the other. One result is new networks of relationships wide and deep enough to provide a foundation for a new community in action (p. 16).

Speer and Han (2018) also define relationships as foundational to organizing and write about processes that undermine the relational focus in organizing. One of these processes is the overreliance on professional expertise rather than an emphasis on community expertise. They note that an overreliance on outsourcing work to experts, instead of creating the conditions for the community to lead the work, can lead to people becoming props in organizations run by professionals (Speer & Han, 2018). Within the context of my strategic project, I define community experts as those closest to the problems in the role of the principal; principals, students, families, and education leaders whose work intersects with the role of the principal.

To help me make sense of how to apply organizing practices within an existing organization, I turned to Han’s (2014) How Organizations Develop Activists: Civic Associations and Leadership in the 21st Century. Han (2014) defines three models of organization engagement; lone wolves, mobilizers, and organizers (Figure 4). Lone wolves are organizations that choose advocacy strategies that can be done without many people. She notes that mobilizing and organizing are often conflated, however, they are different. Mobilizers focus on maximizing membership and they do not seek to transform interests as they are recruiting members for action. Organizers focus on
transforming the interest of others and building leadership capacity. Underneath each of
these three models of engagement is an assumption of how power is built. Han (2014)
states that lone-wolf organizations choose to build power through information, and
mobilizers and organizers choose to build power through people.

**Figure 4 - Lone Wolves, Mobilizers, and Organizers Comparison**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>LONE WOLVES</th>
<th>MOBILIZERS</th>
<th>ORGANIZERS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategy for building power</strong></td>
<td>Build power through information</td>
<td>Build power by building membership; take people where they are</td>
<td>Build power by building leadership; transform motivations and capacities of members to take on more leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategy for building membership</strong></td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Build membership by getting as many people as possible to take actions; build a bigger, more targeted prospect list</td>
<td>Build membership by developing leaders who can engage others; constantly develop leadership among new prospects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Implications for advocacy</strong></td>
<td>Choose advocacy strategies that can be done without many people (i.e. writing comments, research)</td>
<td>Choose advocacy strategies that require quick engagement by lots of people (i.e. petitions); focus on reacting to timely events that engage people</td>
<td>Choose advocacy strategies that build people’s engagement over time; focus on campaigns that sequence actions people can take</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Implications for structure</strong></td>
<td>Centralize responsibility in the hands of staff or a few key volunteers</td>
<td>Centralize responsibility in the hands of staff or a few key volunteers</td>
<td>Distribute responsibility out to a large network of volunteers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Implications for types of asks made to volunteers</strong></td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Focus on discrete requests that often allow people to act quickly and alone</td>
<td>Focus on interdependent asks that are often more time-intensive, force people to work with others, and give them some strategic autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Implications for communications with volunteers</strong></td>
<td>Provide information and updates to interested people</td>
<td>Focus on reaching out to as many people as possible by developing attractive “pitches” that will draw in the most people and new networks</td>
<td>Focus on reaching out to people by building relationships and community with them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Implications for support</strong></td>
<td>Minimal resources needed for training and reflection</td>
<td>Minimal resources needed for training and reflection</td>
<td>Need extensive resources for training, coaching, and reflection</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SOURCE:** Han, 2014, p. 9

Han also notes the difference in how the work of mobilizers and organizers is
structured and the type of outcomes they each focus on. The work of mobilizers is often
structured with centralized leadership of a few that can activate the membership base for transactional outcomes—for example, signing a petition or showing up at an event. Mobilizers tend to focus on “discrete, easy requests that allow people to act alone” (Han, 2014, p. 17). On the other hand, organizers focus on collective action that requires members to work together in order to achieve outcomes. Organizations with low engagement were identified as those using a combination of lone-wolf strategies. High-engagement organizations used a combination of mobilizing and organizing strategies. As I am moving through Kotter’s eight stages of change throughout my strategic project, adopting mobilizing and organization practices as my approach will ensure community voice is centered and the change is community-led, thus positioning ESP to be a high-engagement organization.

**My Theory of Action**

An approach to redesigning the role of the principal must take into account the role’s inherent inequities as described through the review of literature on the social history of the principal. This history provides context to understanding the present-day demographics of the role, and acknowledging this history will lead to systemic and sustainability solutions. The change management literature, paired with the bodies of work detailing organizing and mobilizing practices, highlight the need for centering community voice in the design process. Given the public value implications of the role, creating public urgency and consensus as an early step to an effort to influence the field would position ESP to effect broad-scale change.

Consequently:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If I:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Redefine the problem through an equity lens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Build and virtually convene a powerful guiding coalition to reconceptualize the role of the principal in service of racial equity</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
• Experiment with mobilizing and organizing practices to position those closest to the problem as designers of the solutions

Then:
• Aspen ESP will create more urgency and public consensus around the need to reconceive the role of the principal
• Aspen ESP can influence the field by redesigning the role of the principal as a leader for racial equity and can inform policy changes to enable racial equity leadership

So that:
• Racial equity is centered within the role of the principal and the role becomes sustainable

Description of the Strategic Project

When I started my residency, the “what” behind my role was clear: I would be leading the “Evolving the Role of the Principal” learning agenda as my strategic project. This wasn’t ESP’s first learning agenda. In 2017, the team launched a learning agenda on social-emotional and academic development (SEAD) which produced a public action guide for school leadership teams entitled Integrating Social, Emotional, and Academic Development which was distributed amongst ESP’s broader network. The guide provides practical advice, curated resources, and action steps for school leaders to improve the student experience, while calling out specific equity implications (The Aspen Institute, 2019). When I joined the team, ESP was in the later stages of a learning agenda focused on school climate data and releasing a publication to the public entitled Coming Back to Climate: How Principals Can Use School Climate Data To Lead Improvement. This publication provides guidance and ready-to-go tools for improving school climate within existing school routines (Aspen ESP, 2020c). With each learning agenda, the team identified a need in the field, convened leaders and practitioners for exploration and collaboration on said topic, and produced public resources to influence change in the education field.
Because of COVID-19, there was a significant new dimension of change related to the “how” of leading this learning agenda. The grant proposal to the Joyce Foundation outlined a series of in-person convenings as the strategy to execute this learning agenda. Due to COVID-19, all in-person convenings at the Aspen Institute were canceled through 2021, meaning I had the unique opportunity to redefine the “how” behind my strategic project. I had space to innovate through my process and approach to building urgency and consensus around the need to redesign the role of the principal and center racial equity within the role. In the following section, I describe my process of developing my strategy and executing that strategy. I classify my work into three phases:

- **Phase 1** (August 2020 - October 2020): Redefining the Problem
- **Phase 2** (August 2020 - October 2020): Building the Coalition
- **Phase 3** (September 2020 - March 2021): Experimenting with Mobilizing and Organizing

Phase 1 and 2 ran concurrently, concluding in October, while Phase 3 occurred throughout the duration of my residency (Figure 5). There were actions I took that served dual-purposes and overlapped across phases. In the following sections, I will isolate these actions and discuss the purpose and impact of each strategy according to the three phases.

**Figure 5 - Timeline of the Three Phases of My Strategic Project**

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<td><strong>Phase 1:</strong> Redefining the Problem</td>
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<td><strong>Phase 2:</strong> Building the Coalition</td>
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<td><strong>Phase 3:</strong> Experimenting with Mobilizing and Organizing</td>
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My strategic project was slated to kick off with ESP’s Summer Workshop 2020, a multiday event in Aspen, Colorado, during the summer months, that ESP hosts with education leaders of diverse roles and divergent perspectives. The purpose of the summer workshop is to have a sustained, focused dialogue on a single issue, with the goal of participants learning and taking action. In February 2020, ESP had drafted a two-page document presenting their definition of the problem regarding the role of the principal and the intended outcomes they sought to achieve through the summer workshop (Appendix A). This document defined the role of the principal as “a unicorn,” requiring the leader to be an “instructionally expert, visionary, culturally responsive, data-driven, persuasive, fiscally adroit, creative, community-engaged, and current in research, and a strong manager” (Aspen ESP, 2020a, p. 1). The problem was defined as school systems “not currently creating conditions that enable [principal] success” and the outcome was defined as “defining the role of the principal to allow districts to craft a spectrum of expectations and experiences, supports and supervision, and essential functions for viable, impactful school leadership” (Aspen ESP, 2020a, p. 1).

Since this problem definition and outcome were written prior to COVID-19, it didn’t take into account the new context of principals leading during a global health pandemic. It also did not explicitly name the impact of racism, a pandemic that predated COVID-19 by centuries, and its influence on schools and the role of the principal. Within the first month of my residency, I decided that I needed to expand how the problem of the role of the principal was articulated within my strategic project so that it acknowledged the principal’s inequitable and prejudiced history and the impact of COVID-19 and racism, while still aligning to the goals outlined in the grant proposal to the Joyce Foundation.
ESP has a practice called scoping calls. A scoping call is a one-on-one conversation focused on a stakeholder’s experience, background, and education philosophy. Objectives of scoping calls include informing the learning agenda and helping assess the stakeholders’ fit for engagement in ESP’s annual summer workshop.

Prior to my arrival, ESP had begun scoping calls in February 2020 in preparation for Summer Workshop 2020. They had paused their scoping calls given the cancellation of the summer workshop due to COVID-19.

Scoping calls felt like a promising strategy to help me reach two objectives: leverage community voices to help redefine the problem of the role of the principal through an equity lens; and build a guiding coalition to reconceptualize the role. I conducted 28 scoping calls with education leaders to meet both of these objectives. In this phase, I will share the process of using the scoping calls to redefine the problem through an equity lens, and in phase 2, I will detail how I used the scoping calls to build the guiding coalition.

I asked the same set of questions in each of the 28 scoping calls (Appendix B). This led me to identify themes, areas of divergent opinions about the role of the principal, and gaps in terms of knowledge, practice, and research. Across the calls, I identified racial equity leadership as an overwhelmingly key issue for research related to the principal role and consensus that the problem statement had to be redefined. A former superintendent shared, “The center of this [ESP’s original problem definition document - Appendix A] is still absent. The principal’s role is to produce deep belonging in a society that has created othering for everyone who isn’t white.” One researcher said, “We [education] are lots of big movements...anti-racism and closures and reopening are the two big ones. I hear lots of conversation now about people in schools who do not feel equipped or prepared to teach or lead in this movement related to racism, white supremacy culture.”
The interviews demonstrated coherence around racial equity leadership as a critical need that had become more urgent and visible with the COVID-19 pandemic and Black Lives Matter protests. A CEO of a school leadership development organization stated, “How do we dismantle the system we created? How do we give feedback on the art of teaching? We need to start from a new foundation and rebuild this new system with an equity and inclusive lens.”

The calls uncovered dissonance around what racial equity leadership looks like. A theme emerged that the problem went beyond the role of the principal, and district systems needed to create the conditions to center racial equity leadership. Each member seemed to identify a different entry point for change. One researcher identified professional development as a strategic entry point stating, “If your PD system doesn’t support teacher learning, this won’t support anti-racist / equity learning. An equity agenda requires rewiring the central office around planning and learning for teachers.” In contrast, another researcher and former principal proposed accountability systems as the entry point to change, sharing, “The widespread barrier to racial equity is performative anti-racism. Districts want to do something (have a speaker, read a book, implement anti-racist policy) which doesn’t transform in the practice setting. We need an accountability system – what are your goals? Who is holding you accountable? How does policy translate to practice?”

Defining the problem prepared me to create a vision, Kotter’s third stage of change. Data from the scoping calls guided that new vision for my strategic project. Additionally, the global pandemic shed a light on the ways racism is structural and institutionalized. It highlighted a clear urgency around racial equity that I needed to reflect in my strategic project by applying an intentional equity lens toward “the way the field identifies and frames vital challenges and opportunities, develops goals and outputs, and explores the themes and tensions regarding the role of the principal”
Given Kotter’s (2012) emphasis on keeping the vision simple, I defined the new vision for my strategy project through a central question: “What does it mean for the principal to be a leader for racial equity?”

I needed to ensure ESP’s leadership was invested in this new central question. My supervisor supported this shift as he had attended most of the scoping calls and observed the same themes of racial equity leadership. I presented this update to ESP’s leadership team during a leadership team meeting to propose evolving how we defined the problem of the role of the principal. I shared anecdotes from the scoping calls as support for making the change. The leadership team inquired if this shift would still be in line with what the team had written in their funding proposal to the Joyce Foundation. I stated that according to the grant application, one of the areas of focus for the Joyce Foundation was racial equity, and the team had submitted their grant application under this focus area. Therefore, this shift would create greater alignment to the priorities of the funder of my strategic project. The leadership team supported revising my strategic project to center racial equity.

I partnered with a consultant from Education First, a policy organization of public education improvement advisors, to synthesize the learnings from the scoping calls and the social history of the role of the principal in order to draft a new definition of the problem that centered racial equity.

The roots of American education are intertwined with our country’s history of racism and oppression. The role of the principal is baked into the foundation of American education. Consequently, we find it critical to (a) identify the ways the history of racism and oppression in American education influences the role of the principal today, and (b) design solutions that position principals and district systems to lead for racial equity (Aspen ESP, 2020b).

This new problem definition was developed in October 2020 and outlined in a two-page document that served as the anchor for my work with the guiding coalition (Appendix C).
**Phase 2: Building The Coalition (August 2020 - October 2020)**

One of the early tasks in my strategic project was determining how to meet the purpose of ESP’s summer workshop, but within a virtual context. In partnership with my residency supervisor, we decided that I should build an advisory group of education leaders to convene over the course of my residency as a strong alternative to the summer workshop. The advisory group model felt like a meaningful strategy because I could organize their work to serve as a guiding coalition that Kotter (2012) names as step two in the eight stages of change. Consequently, the scoping calls I conducted to redefine the problem through an equity lens also served to recruit education leaders to my guiding coalition, which I would call “The Role of the Principal” advisory group. Prior to conducting any scoping calls, I took steps to ensure I was engaging with a diverse set of education leaders who understand the nuances of the role of the principal and would center racial equity while reconceiving the role.

The team had artifacts from their summer workshop planning prior to its cancellation. I reviewed ESP’s Summer Workshop 2020 scoping call list to gain insight into the relationships ESP already had established. There were 43 education leaders previously identified for summer workshop scoping calls. I approached the list with three criteria that I developed for the advisory group. The first criterion was diversity of perspectives and identity. In order to redesign the role of the principal, it would require a systematic approach. Therefore, the advisory group needed to include perspectives from every sector within education; school districts, policy, higher education, foundations, leadership development organizations, etc. It was also important to have diversity in racial and gender identity amongst the advisory group. I took the summer workshop scoping call list and organized it by the sector of education each person represented to see what perspectives were present and which may be missing. I also tracked demographic information.
The second criterion was having experience leading as a principal. Since the role of the principal is so complex, I valued having education leaders in the advisory group who had experience serving as a principal. I researched the professional background of each leader on the list to determine if they had been a principal as a part of their leadership trajectory. Having members of the advisory group who previously served as principals would ensure the group had a robust understanding of the demands on the role in order to authentically reconceptualize the role for sustainability and in service of racial equity.

The final criterion was a commitment to racial equity. In order to center racial equity in this learning agenda, I needed members of the advisory group who had already demonstrated this commitment in their professional roles. I explored to what extent each of the education leaders, or the organization they represented, centered racial equity in their public-facing work. To determine this, I reviewed publications the leaders had authored and mined their organizations’ websites for statements on racial equity, equity frameworks, and to what extent they spoke about the impact of race and racism in their work.

After organizing the list of 43 education leaders by these three criteria, I found that about a third of the summer workshop scoping call list were education researchers, a third were school district superintendents, and the remaining third were leaders of leadership development organizations, foundations, and community organizations. There was an absence of education leaders who represented principal preparation programs at higher education institutions. There was an opportunity to include more education leaders who had previously served as a principal beyond those on the list who were currently sitting superintendents, and as well as a need to include more leaders and organizations who explicitly centered racial equity leadership in their work.
In reviewing the list, I was also concerned about the ability of a school district superintendent to commit to attending the advisory group meetings given the turbulent impact COVID-19 had on school districts. It was important to have the perspective of school district leaders represented in the advisory group so instead of engaging superintendents in the advisory group, I targeted C-suite district positions that reported directly to a superintendent for advisory group membership; Chief of Schools, Chief Equity Officers, and Chief Academic Officers.

Many of the 43 education leaders on the original scoping call list had previously attended an ESP summer workshop or were members of ESP’s UDLN. I had a goal of recruiting 15 to 20 leaders for the advisory group, and I saw the advisory group as a way to bring new leadership voices into ESP’s work. I conducted my own personal research on what organizations were best known for training and developing principals, researchers who were focused on racial equity in school leadership, and school leadership development organizations that included race and equity within their leadership framework. As a result, I drafted a new scoping call list of 44 advisory group prospects, only 12 of which were on the original summer workshop scoping call list.

I ranked the list of prospects based on my three criteria and reached out in order of the rankings to conduct scoping calls. I conducted 28 scoping calls using the same set of questions (Appendix B). If, during the conversation, the advisory group prospect presented new implications for the role of the principal and spoke explicitly to racial equity leadership, I would verbally extend the invite to join the advisory group. I shared the vision of the advisory group as an opportunity to build relationships with other education leaders, elevate their work and perspective, and serve as a guide to ESP as we sought to redesign the role of the principal in pursuit of sustainability and racial equity.
I extended 21 invitations to join the advisory group and serve as the guiding coalition for my strategic project. All 21 invitees accepted. The final 21 members of the advisory group represented different sectors within education such as school districts, higher education institutions, foundations, and policy organizations (Figure 6).

**Figure 6 - Titles of advisory group members and sectors of education represented**

*Titles represented amongst the advisory group*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Former Superintendent</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief, School Improvement and Supports</td>
<td>Chief Program Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief Executive Officer</td>
<td>Senior Program Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President &amp; Chief Executive Officer</td>
<td>Education Program Director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor of Public Policy and Education</td>
<td>Professor Emeritus of Educational Policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Dean of Leadership Programs</td>
<td>Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing Director</td>
<td>Chief Academic Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief of Schools</td>
<td>Assistant Professor of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief Equity Officer</td>
<td>Former State Education Chief</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Sectors of education represented amongst the advisory group*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sectors of education represented</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Former superintendents and state chiefs</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>3/21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current district leaders</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>6/21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership development organizations</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>4/21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foundations</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>3/21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher education</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>4/21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy organizations</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1/21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I planned for the advisory group to meet three times over the course of my residency to have a sustained, focused dialogue on the role of the principal and identify action needed to redesign the role for sustainability and in service of racial equity. My original timeline planned for the first advisory group meeting to take place in September,
but it took longer than anticipated to conduct all the scoping calls. Some advisory group members had to schedule their scoping call three to four weeks out given their schedule. There was also required email follow-up after each scoping call to confirm the person’s decision to join the advisory group meeting. The final advisory group list was not confirmed until September.

**Phase 3: Experimenting with Mobilizing and Organizing (August 2020 - March 2021)**

In considering Han’s (2014) three models of organizational engagement, ESP’s strategy at the time most aligned with the lone-wolf approach, given the limitation of being unable to host in-person convenings due to COVID-19. ESP was building power through information by hosting webinars and developing resources for the field, so I prioritized creating the conditions of high-engagement organizations by experimenting with mobilizing and organizing strategies to build power through people. There were three mobilizing and organizing experiments I attempted. The first was through the advisory group, the second was through a series of principal focus groups, and the third was through a set of principal design sprints.

*Experiment #1 through the Advisory Group*

Many organizing strategies require time to implement, however, Han (2014) states that mobilizing can lay the foundation for organizing when there is a relational focus with those who are being mobilized. I decided to take the approach of leveraging organizing practices that didn’t require significant time while also exercising mobilizing strategies that led with relationships to build toward longer-term organizing practices. My scoping calls were an act of mobilizing. Focusing on discrete requests and developing attractive “pitches” that will draw in people and new networks are characteristics of
mobilizers (Han, 2014). Asking education leaders to join the advisory group was a discrete request and required an attractive pitch.

I took a relational approach while preparing for our first advisory group meeting. Typically, ESP’s approach to organizing events is deciding the event date and communicating these dates to their invitees. Because the voice of each advisory group member was so critical to my strategic project, I set a goal of 100 percent attendance for each meeting. I knew that advisory group members had complicated schedules given the time it had taken to schedule scoping calls. I partnered with ESP’s event manager to gather the availability of each advisory group member in order to select a meeting date that prioritized their availability rather than ESP’s availability.

This relational approach required a longer runway of planning time. We began planning in September for the first advisory group meeting. We were able to work with each advisory group member to identify a meeting date that worked for the majority of the group, however this date was not until December. Our first advisory group meeting occurred on December 2, 2020, and 20 out of 21 advisors attended.

My scoping calls highlighted a theme of the dependent relationship between schools and district central offices. If principals were to lead for racial equity, school districts had to create the conditions for racial equity leadership. Given this theme, the topic of our first advisory group meeting was identifying district conditions necessary for racial equity leadership.

During our first meeting, advisory group members engaged in a two-hour dialogue around the guiding question “How would district systems need to reorganize to center racial equity?” In small groups, members explored ideas for a new vision for district leadership and the role of the principal. One advisory group member spoke directly to a shift in mindset necessary for the principal to lead for racial equity and the tension created at the district level: “The role of the principal requires a healing
mindset...the challenge is “the dance” with funding, federal accountability. Performance on achievement tests is an arbiter...The external conditions (racism) don’t get addressed, but schools are expected to solve while also hitting accountability targets.”

One advisory group member spoke of a vision of a supportive culture amongst district leadership, noting, “Adults need to be set up to be learners. The central office must think about how they can support leaders who make mistakes in ways that are positive instead of condemning.” Another member spoke to the opportunity for districts to leverage resources in service of racial equity, stating, “Districts have [resources], but they are spending them on the wrong things. They have it, but they have a performative, intellectual narrowing conception of the consultation or treatment that they need and then don’t go for the right things.”

The first advisory group meeting provided many implications for reconceiving the role of the principal as a leader for racial equity through district conditions. In partnership with the consultant from Education First, I reviewed the notes from each small group to synthesize into a meeting recap memo. One of the themes from the first advisory group meeting was, “Racial equity requires a reenvisioning of success, accountability, and power” (Aspen ESP, 2020d, para. 10). In the recap memo, we elaborate on this theme in the following way:

Historically, measures of success have been rooted in white supremacy. As educational leaders continue to grapple with racial equity, their definitions of success, accountability, and power must shift. Advisory group members expressed a need for an engagement with the historical contexts of both the education system and the communities they serve in order to construct a definition of racial equity that provides clear direction (para. 10).

This theme informed the objective of the second advisory group meeting, which was to redefine student and school measures of success through an equity lens. Our second advisory group meeting took place on February 10, 2021, and 18 of the 21 advisory group members attended. Given the objective, I viewed it as necessary to
mobilize student voices. Students would be most impacted by any definition of student and school success, therefore, during the second advisory group meeting I sought to position students as advisors to the advisory group by organizing a student panel.

While identifying students for the student panel, I prioritized three characteristics. First, I prioritized students from different racial backgrounds. Secondly, I prioritized students who were in college or their senior year of high school. Students later in their educational journey would be better able to reflect on the impact of the various definitions of success they experienced. Thirdly, I valued a diverse representation of the types of schools the students attended. This diversity in school models experienced by the student panelists would allow for us to compare and contrast the definitions of success they each experienced and the opportunity for each student to share their perspective on the impact of said definition of success. The final student panel consisted of the following perspectives:

- Student #1 - A high school senior attending a magnet public school and experienced redefining success as a result of virtual learning due to the pandemic
- Student #2 - A college sophomore who attended independent schools K-12
- Student #3 - A college junior who attended a public high school and was enrolled in the International Baccalaureate magnet program while in high school
- Student #4 - A college senior who attended a personalized project-based charter school
- Student #5 - A college senior who attended a public high school

Pre-reading for the meeting included a framework entitled “Schools That Work For Us” which provides “a way of looking at and analyzing our educational system...that literally puts young people who have been marginalized at the center, and that is built on their lived experiences, analysis, and brilliance” (Hearing Youth Voices, n.d., para. 3). The framework reflects six years of research and data that had been collected by Hearing Youth Voices, a youth-led social justice organization working to create systemic
change in education. The two-hour advisory group meeting included a 45-minute student panel with the five students who shared their responses to the following questions:

- Briefly describe what success meant at your high school.
- When did you feel most successful in high school?
- How did your school prepare you for life after school?
- What curriculum changes can schools make to facilitate deeper learning?
- In what ways have you experienced or witnessed racism in your school?
- What advice would you give to principals in order to create schools in which every student can be successful?

After the panel, the advisory group debriefed the advisement received from the student panel in virtual breakout rooms and discussed the guiding question, “If all schools and districts were centering racial equity, how would they define success? How would they measure success?” The meeting concluded with a whole-group debrief on implications for the role of the principal given an equity-centered definition of success.

**Experiment #2 through Principal Focus Groups**

In the spirit of centering the voices of those closest to the problem, given Speer and Han’s (2008) caution of overly relying on outsourcing work to experts, in addition to the advisory group members, I wanted to mobilize acting principals. I sought to center their voices in how the role should be redesigned. In December 2020 and January 2021, I organized principal focus groups and approached them as empathy interviews. “Empathy means trying to understand deeply the experiences and feelings of other people” and “help ensure that the diverse lived experiences of people are centered in decisions and actions” (Nelsestuen & Smith, 2020, p. 59). An empathy interview approach would allow me to determine where the pain points existed in the role, understand the position’s power to lead for racial equity, and identify aspects that, if redesigned, would have the greatest impact for sustainability and racial equity leadership.
In ESP’s previous learning agendas, a focus group and empathy interview approach were not typical. I used one of Kotter’s (2012) strategies to minimize resistance from the leadership team to this new approach by seeking their advice to inform the design of the focus groups. I presented the idea during a leadership team meeting to get their input on what questions I should ask during the focus groups and invest them in this approach.

I worked with the district partners in ESP’s UDLN and a leadership development organization to organize five principal focus groups. I was able to engage with thirty-three principals representing eight different school districts to collectively explore answers addressing my strategic project’s central question “What does it mean for the principal to be a leader for racial equity?”

Experiment #3 through Principal Design Sprint

I invited the same group of principals to a two-hour design sprint session to redesign an aspect of the role of the principal in service of racial equity. Inviting the same group of principals to the design sprint is an example of building engagement over time, which is a characteristic of organizers (Han, 2014). I chose the design sprint approach because it is a process intended to test critical ideas and prototype solutions with the end-user (Knapp et al., 2016). It would position those closest to the problem—sitting principals—as the designers of the solutions for the role, as identified in my theory of action.

A design sprint is typically a five-day process (Figure 7) that includes mapping the user’s journey on day one, sketching possible solutions on day two, deciding on a solution to design for day three, prototyping on day four, and testing on day five. Asking principals to be offline for five days was not a feasible request so I modified the process
into a two-hour agenda and conducted two design sprint sessions with two different groups of principals.

**Figure 7 - Overview of 5-Day Design Sprint vs. the 2-Hour Principal Design Sprint Agenda**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>5-Day Design Sprint Overview (Knapp et al., 2016)</th>
<th>2-Hour Principal Design Spring Agenda</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Duration</strong></td>
<td><strong>Focus</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Day 1</td>
<td>Develop your design goal</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Create a customer map</td>
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<tr>
<td>Day 2</td>
<td>Sketch potential solutions</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day 3</td>
<td>Decide on an idea for prototyping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day 4</td>
<td>Prototyping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day 5</td>
<td>Test</td>
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</table>

Participants identified the goal of the design sprint as “to redesign the role of the principal in service of racial equity and system change.” During a typical design sprint, participants map the customer journey end-to-end to get a clear picture of the customer’s experience. I modified this step of the design sprint to have participants define the life cycle of the principal—the stages of a principal’s experience—to map out the possible entry points for change. They identified entry points for change through scripting “How might we…” questions. After discussion, principals then voted on the “How might we…” question they were most intrigued to design around and then sketched potential solutions.
By January 2021, I had mobilized education leaders, principals, and students through advisory group meetings, principal focus groups, and principal design sprints. Each of these experiences provided themes and implications for the redesign of the role of the principal that were generated from those closest to the problem of the role. This community input influenced the next phases of the project. It helped identify what new partnerships to prioritize in order to create more urgency and public consensus around the need to reconceive the role of the principal. It also informed what public-facing resources ESP could produce to influence the field to redesign the role of the principal as a leader for racial equity and to inform policy changes to enable racial equity leadership.

Evidence

During my residency, I collected evidence to measure my progress toward ESP’s goals outlined in their strategic plan and the theory of action I identified for my strategic project. The evidence presented in the following section captures my progress as of February 2021. I organized my evidence by the “if” and “then” statements of my theory of action. The table below provides my overall assessment of my progress toward each statement of my theory of action. The first column notes the “if” or “then” statement of my theory of action. The second column shares my assessment of my progress; green indicates there is evidence to date that I met the goal, yellow indicates there is partial evidence suggesting the goal has been met, red indicating that there is not yet evidence of the goal being met. The third column provides an overview of the relevant outputs and outcomes for each statement.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory of Action “If” Statement</th>
<th>Progress</th>
<th>Relevant Outputs and Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Redefine the problem of the principal role through an equity lens</td>
<td>![Green Circle]</td>
<td>“Evolving our Learning Agenda Focus on the Role of the Principal” document that articulate the new problem definition of the role of the principal and the new focus for the learning agenda (Appendix C)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Build and virtually convene a powerful guiding coalition to reconceptualize the role of the principal in service of racial equity | ![Green Circle] | Conducted 28 scoping calls; built a diverse advisory group of 21 education leaders.  
Hosted two advisory group meetings; the first on reconceptualizing district conditions necessary for racial equity leadership and the second on redefining student and school measures of success through an equity lens. Both produced a set of themes for further exploration outlined in a meeting recap memo.  
The third advisory group is scheduled to take place in late April with a focus on defining the leadership dispositions necessary for a principal to lead for racial equity. |
| Experiment with mobilizing and organizing practices to position those closest to the problem as designers of the solutions | ![Yellow Circle] | **Experiment #1 through the Advisory Group** - 100% of education leaders invited to the advisory group accepted; 95% attendance at advisory group meeting #1; 85% attending at advisory group meeting #2; 96% of advisory group members reported making a new connection with someone they had not met before; themes from both advisory group meetings identify potential areas for focus for reconceptualizing the role  
**Experiment #2 through the Principal Focus Groups** - conducted five focus groups to mobilize 33 principals; engaged principals in empathy interviews that cultivated relationships and produced themes in the challenges and opportunities in the role to lead for racial equity  
**Experiment #3 through the Principal Design Sprint** - Partnered with the same focus group principal participants to build relationships over time; principals crafted a design question to identify a focus area for redesigning the role “How might we redesign principal development and system support to manage the change required to lead for racial equity?”; principals created sketched as potential solutions to the design question |
Redefine the problem of the role of the principal through an equity lens. I made significant progress in this area of my theory of action. I succeeded in revising the learning agenda to acknowledge the troubled history of the role of the principal and center racial equity leadership. Revamping the scoping call list to include leaders who had prioritized racial equity in their work, in tandem with scoping call questions that included a focus on racial equity, gave me the data from the field to confirm the urgent need for a focus on racial equity leadership within this learning agenda. I then could leverage this external sense of urgency to invest ESP’s leadership in the change to the learning agenda.

I partnered with a consultant from Education First to outline the new problem definition of the role of the principal that acknowledged its unjust history and articulated an explicit focus of racial equity within the learning agenda. The document was entitled “Evolving Our Learning Agenda Focus on the Role of the Principal” and was shared with the advisory group prior to our first meeting as context for our work together (Appendix C).

Build and virtually convene a powerful guiding coalition to reconceptualize the role of the principal in service of racial equity. I made solid progress in this section of my theory of action as evident by recruiting 21 diverse education leaders to join “The Role of the Principal” advisory group. There were two ways I partnered with the advisory group to reconceptualize the role of the principal in service of race equity. The first way was through the scoping calls. The scoping calls highlighted the leadership tensions that arose when leading for racial equity. I used these tensions to develop the following guiding questions for the advisory group to explore:

- If racial equity is the starting point, how can principals be developed to serve and improve schools for racial equity?
- How would a district need to reorganize to center racial equity?
In what ways are established professional standards for principals in line with racial equity leadership? In what ways do they undermine?

How does a principal’s own racial identity and school demographics influence their racial equity leadership posture?

How can district conditions and policy embolden a principal’s racial equity leadership? How are current district conditions and policies constraining a principal’s racial equity leadership?

The second way I partnered with the advisory group to reconceptualize the role of the principal in service of race equity was through our advisory group meetings. The first meeting focused on the guiding question “How would a district need to reorganize to center racial equity?” Advisory group members engaged in two virtual breakout room conversations in groups of three to four. The first breakout room focused on district systems and structures that inhibit and enable a principal’s racial equity leadership. The second breakout room focused on identifying district needs and ways the group could collectively respond to those needs.

As a result of this meeting, I identified the following themes to serve as starting points for reconceptualizing the role of the principal through cultivating district conditions for racial equity leadership.

| Theme #1 | Racial equity is not a separate competency, it is a way of being. It cannot be separate from instructional excellence. |
| Theme #2 | Leaders for racial equity make a long-term commitment to their own introspection and learning. |
| Theme #3 | Systems and systems leaders must provide space, license, and cover for principals to lead for racial equity. |
| Theme #4 | Racial equity requires a reenvisioning of success, accountability, and power. |
| Theme #5 | Principal support organizations and systems (i.e., principal training, development, and licensure programs) must build their own expertise, mindset, and learning around racial equity. |

(Aspen ESP, 2020d)
The second advisory group meeting’s objective was redefining student and school measures of success through an equity lens. The group spent the first hour and fifteen minutes engaging with a student panel sharing their perspective on the meeting objective. In the remaining forty-five minutes, advisory group members engaged in small-group dialogue debriefing the advice received from the student panel and creating a new equity-centered definition of student and school success. The group debriefed to determine implications for the role of the principal given their equity-centered vision of success. The following themes and implications for the role of the principal emerged from advisory group meeting #2.

**Theme #1 - Racial equity requires a reenvisioning of success, accountability, and power that is student and community-centered.**

“The appreciation for alternative pathways is steeped in a reenvisioning of success, accountability, and power that is grounded in racial equity. School systems can be the place where national conversations around racial healing, reconciliation, and racial equity are realized but to do so requires deep reflection, coherence, and the encouragement of risk-taking” (Aspen ESP, 2021a, para. 5).

**Theme #2 - Success needs to be one student at a time and defined by the students themselves.**

“It’s imperative that principals meet students where they are and help them to realize and develop their talents over time. This will look different among different school-aged groups but what remains is that at each level of their learning students desire a personal investment from principals and teachers and can articulate or demonstrate a set of personal goals that reveal their personal definition of success” (para. 7).

**Theme #3 - The principalship is a uniquely positioned role that directly impacts school culture and student experience.**

“In order to leverage the unique positionality of the principalship, district leaders have to create the conditions for principals to do their best work around centering racial equity. One way to achieve this is to identify how to leverage principal experience and
expertise to mitigate the fear of risk-taking. Practitioners who are concerned with equipping principals to lead for racial equity should consider principal evaluations” (para. 9).

Experiment with mobilizing and organizing practices to position those closest to the problem as designers of the solutions. I spent significant time in this area of my theory of action executing three experiments with organizing and mobilizing practices. The evidence shows significant progress in positioning those closest to the problem as designers, however, there is more work to be done to codify solutions for leveraging the principal as a leader for racial equity.

Experiment #1 through the Advisory Group

Organizing the advisory group was an act of mobilizing. I conducted 28 scoping calls to identify advisory group member prospects. Framing the advisory group as a discrete request and developing an attractive pitch, two characteristics of mobilizing Han (2014) points out, led to 100 percent acceptance rate of the invitations I extended to join the advisory group.

Because relationships are critical to organizing, I took a relational approach to planning the advisory group meeting. Prior to each meeting, I would send a meeting favor, such as a box of cookies from a Black-owned business, as a token of gratitude for their time and commitment to the advisory group. It was very important to me to have 100 percent attendance at each advisory group meeting. Following ESP’s typical approach of determining meeting dates without considering the schedule of participants would be an approach of centering ESP and would increase the risk of scheduling conflicts. Instead, I worked with ESP’s events manager to develop an availability survey
to send to all advisory group members and their scheduling assistants. I partnered with the event manager to send individual follow-up email communications to ensure a 100 percent response rate to the availability survey. We then selected a date that worked for the majority of the group and sent follow-up communication to every advisory group member who reported a conflict with the selected date to see if they would be able to adjust their schedule to attend. This resulted in higher attendance rates compared to other ESP events. 95 percent of advisory group members attended the first advisory group meeting and 85 percent attended the second meeting.

I leveraged organizing strategies to create the conditions for advisory group members to build relationships with each other. Han (2014) notes relationships among members as a characteristic of high-engagement organizations and a prerequisite to creating broad-scale change. Prior to the first advisory group meeting, I sent an advisory group biography book so members could learn about one another. Additionally, when arranging logistics for each meeting, I was intentional about ensuring that no two advisory group members were in the same breakout room more than once in order to provide the opportunity for advisory group members to build new connections. Figure 8 shows that, of the 16 advisory group members who completed the post-meeting survey after our first advisory group meeting, 94 percent agree that they were able to build a new connection with someone they had not met before.

**Figure 8 - Advisory Group Members Reporting a New Connection After Meeting #1**

I was able to build a connection with at least one person whom I had not met before.

- Strongly Disagree: 0
- Disagree: 0
- Neutral: 1
- Agree: 9
- Strongly agree: 6

\[
(9+6)/16 = 0.937
\]
Experiment #2 through Principal Focus Groups

Through my principal focus groups, I mobilized 33 principals from across the country. One organizing practice identified by Han (2014) is “focusing on reaching out to people by building relationships and community with them” (p. 9). I intentionally approached the principal focus groups as empathy interviews because this approach allowed me to build relationships and community with principals by listening to their experiences. I developed questions that would allow me to learn from their perspectives on the biggest enablers and inhibitors to leading for racial equity as a principal (Appendix D).

There were three implications for redesigning the principalship that emerged from the principal focus groups. The first theme was “Leading for racial equity requires coherence across district levels.” Some participants expressed a lack of coherence between district priorities and the district’s racial equity policy.

When district leaders publish messaging in support of racial equity or anti-racist resolutions, execution often falls on the principal. The tension lies in the ways that some district systems and practices like curriculum adoption or school evaluations prove counterproductive to racial equity initiatives (Aspen ESP, 2021b).

The second theme was “Leading for racial equity requires adult social-emotional supports.” Many principals described the emotional labor that is involved in leading for racial equity. They revealed learning over time the importance of doing their own personal work to strengthen their racial literacy in concert with their professional skill-building. One participant shared the necessity of having a therapist co-facilitate conversations around racial equity to help staff manage their emotions as they confronted their biases. Structures and support are necessary to bear the intrapersonal and professional skill-building needed to lead for racial equity (Aspen ESP, 2021b).

Lastly, the third theme was similar to a theme that emerged in the first advisory group meeting, “Systems and systems leaders must provide space, cover, and targeted
support for principals to lead for racial equity.” Principals expressed a need for a common language in central offices around racial equity to strengthen their authority to name racial equity as a core priority in their school. Many principals also mentioned the need for racial equity training to consider and center the experience of principals of color. For example, one principal shared a concern that racial equity tends to speak to white principals early in their racial identity development journey, which does not prepare principals of color who share racial or minoritized identity with their students, nor provide support for principals of color to explore other marginalized identities outside of their own that are represented in their student population. For example, a Black principal whose native language is English would not have the opportunity to explore racial equity learnings related to English language learners. This assumption of shared racial identity or minority status equating to a shared experience is a missed opportunity to develop the racial literacy and racial equity leadership of principals across racial groups (Aspen ESP, 2021b).

Experiment #3 through Principal Design Sprints

The principal design sprints allowed me to pinpoint potential solutions for the role that were designed by sitting principals. During the design sprint, principals created a life cycle map to outline the stages of a principal’s experience. Principals used the life cycle map to identify the ripest opportunities to redesign the principalship in service of racial equity and systems change (Figure 9).
There was consensus in designing around the question, “How might we redesign principal development and system support to manage the change required to lead for racial equity?” One principal said, “When all principals operate from equity, you force the system to operate from equity. This work is messy; it’s muddy, it’s bloody, it’s uncomfortable. When we talk about systemic change, I have to go toe-to-toe to fight and undo inequitable policies.”

Principals then designed potential solutions. One design was a principal-led learning community model made up of principals facing similar equity issues at their school. It was noted that this type of model would allow for collaboration and peer support. Another design was racial equity teams developed in all schools to lead school improvement and provide training based on the school’s specific needs. One principal shared, “[School systems] are not learning organizations. We don’t institutionalize learning. We don’t have our learnings documented to be able to build off of them. I actually think our equity issues come from not learning from the past. We don’t value
learning, we value products and data.” Consequently, their design focused on school districts having a knowledge management system to institutionalize lessons learned in leading for racial equity and case studies of success.

Themes Across Experiments

The principal design sprint provided many possibilities within the role of the principal to pursue for redesign. The design question and solutions sketched by principals, along with the themes and implications raised during the advisory group members and principal focus groups provided enough data to extract trends across the three experiments. Across all three experiments there were two recurring themes.

The first theme was that principals need political cover to lead for racial equity, and political cover is cultivated through system coherence. During the first advisory group meeting, members identified that the best principals are already leading for racial equity, but are doing so by running around and through district and societal obstacles that are a result of a lack of system coherence (Aspen ESP, 2020d). During the principal focus groups, some principals expressed feeling incoherence between a district’s priorities and its public-facing messaging. Principals identified districts adopting an equity policy and providing anti-bias training as a necessary first step, however, taking this action without a district-wide audit of policies and practices that are producing or enforcing inequities creates further incoherence between beliefs, visions, and execution, which is a barrier to racial equity advancement (Aspen ESP, 2021b). Building this system coherence will reduce the roadblocks principals face when leading for racial equity and will allow principals to feel supported as they lead change efforts focused on racial equity.

The second theme that emerged was the need to redesign principal training, licensure, and evaluation to center racial equity. Advisory group members expressed
that principal licensure programs must be held accountable for demonstrating evidence that their curriculum and the experiential components of their teaching and support are supporting principals on their racial equity journeys. Additionally, when creating the “Life Cycle of a Principal” (Figure 9) during the principal design sprint, principals honed in on the stage of principal licensure and development. The experiences principals shared in obtaining their principal licensure varied, however, there was consensus that their preparation program did not provide learning experiences focused on preparing them to lead for racial equity. Both principal and advisory group members named the tensions in leading for racial equity when school and district accountability measures are inequitable. Both groups expressed a need to redefine principal success and accountability through redesigning principal evaluation to center racial equity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theory of Action “Then” Statements</th>
<th>Progress</th>
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</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Then Aspen ESP will have cultivated new partnerships positioned to create more urgency and public consensus around the need to reconceive the role of the principal</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>• Only eight of the advisory group members were on the original summer workshop scoping call list meaning 13 out of 21 advisory group members were new partnerships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Currently conducting opportunity calls with three types of partnerships identified in response to the recurring theme of the need to center racial equity in principal training and development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Then Aspen ESP can influence the field by redesigning the role of the principal as a leader for racial</td>
<td>[ ]</td>
<td>• At the time of writing this capstone, I am still in the partnership building phase, and</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Aspen ESP will have cultivated new partnerships positioned to create more urgency and public consensus around the need to reconceive the role of the principal. At the time of writing this capstone, new partnerships have been identified; however, they are still in the process of being activated to create more urgency and public consensus around the need to reconceive the role of the principal. The mobilizing practices I used to build the advisory group resulted in new partnerships. Of the twenty-one advisory group members only eight were on ESP’s original summer workshop scoping call list. Therefore, my mobilizing practices resulted in cultivating thirteen new relationships on behalf of ESP.

Just as I leveraged the organizing practice of building engagement over time by inviting the principals from the focus group to participate in the design sprint, I took a similar organizing approach to cultivating partnerships for public urgency and consensus around the need to reconceive the role of the principal. I had already established relationships with members of the advisory group and, given the diversity of perspective within the group, I decided to target advisory group members for a deeper partnership to enact the “then” statements of my theory of change.

I developed a strategy called “opportunity calls.” Opportunity calls are similar to scoping calls in that they are a one-on-one conversation with a stakeholder, but the objective of an opportunity call is to identify an opportunity for collaboration that is beneficial for both parties and aims to create more urgency and public consensus around the need to reconsider the principalship. As mentioned, redesigning principal licensure, training, and evaluation as a lever to center racial equity within the role of the
principal was identified across the advisory group, principal focus groups, and principal
design sprints. This recurring theme informed the subgroup of advisory group members I
would target for deeper partnerships and schedule for opportunity calls.

The first subgroup of advisory group members I targeted for deeper partnership
were advisory group members whose work focused on racial equity leadership in
schools. Given that racial equity leadership is still an emergent practice in education,
elevating the racial equity work of advisory group members will build knowledge of racial
equity leadership in the field and provide more examples of what racial equity leadership
looks like in practice.

The second subgroup were advisory group members who are leading
organizations that train and develop school and system leaders. These opportunity calls
will allow me to learn what shifts leadership development organizations have made in
response to COVID-19 and the public urgency for racial equity leadership. This could
lead to sharing broader learnings publicly to inform the field on how principal training and
development should evolve in response to our current context. Opportunity calls with
these groups of partners also might surface ways to see how the themes that are
emerging in this learning agenda could influence their programming with school and
district leaders.

The third and final subgroup examined through opportunity calls were advisory
group members who had experience in developing policy. Centering racial equity within
principal training programs and principal evaluation systems has policy implications at
the state and federal levels. This set of opportunity calls engage leaders from state
education agencies and policy organizations to explore entry points to influence principal
training and evaluation standards.

At the time of writing this capstone, opportunity calls are in progress and we are
still in the early stages of forming partnerships to identify the best strategies for change
and influence. Opportunity calls with advisory group members can co-create strategies that spur more urgency and public consensus around the need to reconceive the role of the principal. Leading with opportunity calls positions ESP to explore new strategies of influence and exercise deeper organizing practices through distributing the responsibility of enacting change.

Aspen ESP can influence the field by redesigning the role of the principal as a leader for racial equity and can inform policy changes to enable racial equity leadership. The work that has occurred within my strategic project has set the foundation for influence in the field and for policy change; however, there is still much work to be done. I have identified three strategies for what’s to come in terms of codifying and disseminating the themes and implications we have already discovered. The first strategy is publishing an article on the history of the role of the principal and its blueprint, marred by oppression, to create more public consensus and urgency on the need to redesign the role. The second strategy is publishing an article to narrate the themes and implications we have learned so far through the advisory group meetings, principal focus groups, and the design sprint. Lastly, the opportunity calls to date have led to exploring the development of a podcast in partnership with multiple advisory group members to share implications for the principal and district systems when leading for racial equity.

**Analysis of the Strategic Project**

Organizations are complex. Experimenting with mobilizing and organizing practices within my strategic project within an established organizational culture created opportunities and challenges. Bolman and Deal (2017) introduce the concept of reframing, the “ability to think about situations from more than one angle” (p. 6). They
introduce four frames to view an organization through; structural, human resource, political, and symbolic. In this section, I will use the four frames and integrate research on power, grief, and racialized organizations to make meaning of why I did and did not make progress within my strategic project according to my theory of action.

**The Structural Frame**

The original timeline I had planned for my strategic project identified the first advisory group meeting happening in September and a focus on cultivating partnerships to begin in December. The first advisory group meeting did not happen until December. Because building the guiding coalition was an early step that would influence much of my strategic project, this shift in timeline impacted the timeline for cultivating partnerships which was not able to occur until February. The shift in the timeline of my strategic project can be explained through the structural frame.

The structural frame is the structural view of an organization, frequently thought of as the organizational chart. Bolman and Deal (2017) state “division of labor, or allocating tasks, is the keystone of structure” (p. 53). An assumption of the structural frame is “organizations increase efficiency and enhance performance through specialization and appropriate division of labor” (p. 48). Prior to the pandemic, the team had invested significant time in developing their structural frame. The team evolved the organizational chart to include a Managing Director position to oversee team structures and the integration of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practice within the team’s work. The team also developed job descriptions for every position on the team and built a performance management process to provide clear role expectations and reduce the occurrence of personal bias when assessing individual performance. However, the pandemic created barriers to act upon this work, and ESP experienced changes to their team structure. These structural changes delayed the original timeline of my strategic
project; however, I was able to creatively address them to move my work forward despite the pandemic.

During the first three months of my residency, the Aspen Institute was in the midst of a hiring freeze due to the financial impact of COVID-19. Consequently, ESP had four vacant positions they intended to hire prior to my arrival, however these positions’ recruitment was frozen when I joined the team in July 2020, causing the team to be under capacity (Figure 10).

**Figure 10 - ESP’s Organizational Chart July 2020 through October 2020**

One of the vacant positions that was frozen for hire was an associate on the practice team. This role would be responsible for providing project management and administrative support to practice workstreams including my strategic project. In the absence of this position, the responsibilities of this role were split among three different team members. Because team members were taking on responsibilities outside of their assigned role due to vacant positions, it created structural tensions. For example, the finance associate was tasked with creating project management plans for my strategic
project within our team’s project management system. This task was outside of the scope of her role managing our team’s budget. Our team did not have the capacity to provide each member of the team assigned to new responsibilities with training on their new tasks. Additionally, because I was new to the team, I did not have context on all the moving parts that were customary to include in the team’s project management plans. Consequently, I had to leverage other members of the team to help review project plans for feedback. When elements were identified as missing from the project plan, I would share them with the finance associate for her to make the necessary updates.

In August, I proposed shifting which ESP team members were assigned to different responsibilities of the vacant associate position. The intention of my proposal was to reduce complexity in the role structures and increase capacity. I proposed that our events manager take on the responsibility of developing project management plans for my strategic project. Given the event manager’s expertise in planning and managing events, she had more context to all the aspects of an event that must be included in a project management plan. My supervisor agreed, and we made the shift. My supervisor also secured additional project management support for my strategic project through contracting a consultant through Education First. This additional support advanced the change I was leading by providing me the staffing support needed to review and synthesize all the data collected through the scoping calls and first advisory group meeting. The team filled the associate position in November; however, my timeline for my strategic project had already been impacted by this temporary vacancy.

The Human Resource Frame

In viewing my work through the human resource frame, I believe I was attentive to the needs of people I was working with who were managing personal grief due to the pandemic and an increased workload as previously mentioned. Responding to the
needs of people slowed down the work and contributed to why the “then” statements of my theory of action are still in progress. However, it was the right thing to do because powering through the project is not in the best interest of our team. The human resource frame centers on what organizations and people do to and for one another (Bolman & Deal, 2017). The human resource frame views the success of any organization through the well-being of its people. The human needs ESP had to meet had complexified as a result of the pandemic. This created challenges and opportunities within the human resource frame.

The first challenge was our team experiencing a sense of loss and grief. The pandemic created a loss of normalcy, coupled with the fear of an economic toll and the loss of connection (Berinato, 2020). Grief expert David Kessler also identified that people were feeling anticipatory grief as a consequence of the pandemic. He defines anticipatory grief as the anticipation of a storm, a loss of safety, and a feeling about what the future holds when we’re uncertain (Kessler as cited in Berinato, 2020).

The transition to working remotely created barriers to relationship building, which was the second tension within the human resource frame. The unplanned interactions that occur in a physical work office, such as bumping into a colleague in the hallway or cafeteria, which cause people who don’t normally work with each other to connect by chance are lost in remote working environments (Bernstein et al., 2020). When I joined ESP in July, the team had been working virtually for three months. About 50 percent of the staff had been on the team for fewer than six months, therefore some members had experienced working virtually on the team longer than they had experienced working with the team in-person.

The third challenge was an increased workload. In response to the pandemic and its turbulent impact on education, ESP had increased its support to the field. Within the first six months of the pandemic, ESP had hosted 17 weekly meetings among
superintendents, led 5 Congressional briefings, held 8 webinars, and published 10 articles and podcasts (Team communication, August 28, 2020). The ESP team of eight were managing their own personal grief due to COVID-19 while concurrently managing an increased workload while five vacant positions were frozen for hire. On August 28, the leadership team shared via email “..all of this work is taking a toll and, at least for some on our team, it’s felt overwhelming and just too much, too many different things, and/or too fast...we will close our office the Friday before Labor Day so each of us can take some time to unplug, recharge, and replenish ourselves AND we will make Tuesday, September 8th, a day without any meetings or internal emails -- a day to catch-up, to reflect, and attend to self-care without worrying about anyone waiting for an email or other deliverable, and without things piling up in your "in-box," at least from us” (Team communication, August 28, 2020). What we were experiencing as a team was a common impact of the pandemic on organizations. The Harvard Business Review conducted a survey to measure COVID-19's impact on individual well-being. 89 percent of respondents reported a decline in their workplace well-being and "increased job demands" was identified as the biggest contributor (Campbell & Gavett, 2021).

Slowing down the work created the opportunity to build relationships and establish trust with ESP team members. My strategic project involved the majority of the team, therefore, it was necessary that I built relationships with each member of the team. Adjusting my timeline created the space needed for me to learn more about each members’ area of expertise, seek their input on decisions, and leverage their support to help me build context as a new team member.

*The Political Frame*

The political frame places politics at the heart of decision-making. Bolman and Deal (2017) define politics as “the realistic process of making decisions and allocating
resources in a context of scarcity and divergent interests” (p. 178). Power is central to the political frame. Within the political frame, power is not evil, it is necessary to accomplish your aims (Bolman & Deal, 2017). Viewing my strategic project through the political frame provides insight into why I was able to make progress with the “if” statements of my theory of action that are classified as green. Because experimenting with mobilizing and organizing practices would be in some ways new to ESP, I had to leverage my sources of power to execute my three experiments.

The political frame views authority as only one among many forms of power. McGinn and Lingo (2007) identify three sources of individual power: personal, position, and relational. Personal power is “derived from your unique personal attributes and skills” and “helps to determine your ability to create cooperation with others, win when competitive situations arise, and gain support from those around you” (McGinn & Lingo, 2007, p. 3). Redefining the problem through an equity lens, the first “if” statement of my theory of action, required personal power. Given the visibility of racial injustices happening in our country, I was focused on centering racial equity leadership in my strategic project. This focus led me to include education leaders and organizations in my scoping call list who had made an explicit commitment to racial equity in their work. Including these voices in our scoping calls created the internal “fire” to redefine the role of the principal through an equity lens and a clear theme across the scoping calls that racial equity leadership had to be a clear priority in my strategic project.

Strong communication is a critical attribute of personal power (McGinn & Lingo, 2017). I was able to gain the necessary support of ESP’s leadership team to evolve my strategic project by communicating the themes from the scoping calls that supported redefining the problem through an equity lens. By using the scoping themes as evidence, I positioned redefining the problem as being responsive to the field. I communicated with an emphasis on the values of the leadership team of meeting the
expectations of our funders by highlighting that racial equity was a program focus for the Joyce Foundation, the funder of my strategic project, and the program area of focus we selected in our funding application.

Building and virtually convening a powerful guiding coalition to reconceptualize the role of the principal in service of racial equity required relational power. McGinn and Lingo (2007) point out that one’s relational power flows from one’s direct ties and the interaction among them. A complex analysis of relational power also includes one-step removed from your direct ties; “the people with whom your direct ties interact make up your indirect ties” (McGinn & Lingo, 2007, p. 9).

My relational ties help explain the progress I made in building and virtually convening a guiding coalition. To build the guiding coalition and bring new voices into ESP, I scanned my network to identify two groups within my direct ties. The first group were my direct ties with content expertise that would be a fit for the guiding coalition. I invited each of these direct ties to a scoping call. The second group were direct ties whose interactions created indirect ties with other education leaders who would be a fit for the advisory group. Through this second group of direct ties, I broadened the advisory group beyond my direct ties by seeking recommendations for whom I should invite to a scoping call from this second group. With each recommendation, I also asked for an email introduction. Each of the 13 advisory group members who were not on the original summer workshop scoping call list was a result of my direct ties or indirect ties, demonstrating the importance and use of this type of power.

The Symbolic Frame

Experimenting with mobilizing and organizing practices within my strategic project were in some ways counterculture to the systems and structures within the Aspen Institute and ESP. These new, less-tested practices created tensions that required
time to resolve, delaying progress in the “then” statements of my theory of action: creating more urgency and public consensus around the need to reconceive the role of the principal; and influencing the field by redesigning the role of the principal as a leader for racial equity and informing policy changes to enable racial equity leadership. The tensions I experienced and how I navigated them can be explained through the symbolic frame and by viewing the Aspen Institute and ESP as a racialized organization.

The symbolic frame focuses on how “symbols help humans make sense of the chaotic, ambiguous world in which they live” (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 250). The meaning humans make is what manifests culture, consequently the symbolic frame examines the culture of an organization. Ray (2019) states that, typically, organizational theories view organizations as race-neutral bureaucratic structures. Ray defines race beyond a demographic variable and instead defines race as a relationship between persons mediated through things. He argues that organizations are racial structures that play a role in institutionalizing race. Similar to Bolman and Deal, Ray (2019) explains organizational culture as the result of individual meaning-making, which Ray calls cultural schemas, but he makes the distinction that schemes are encoded in the concept of race. Viewing organizations as racial structures would also encode organizational symbols in the concept of race. The interaction of cultural schemes and organizational symbols, such as organizational rules and organizational resources (both material and intangible), are the mechanisms that produce racial structures and construct racial inequality (Ray, 2019).

The Aspen Institute was founded shortly after World World II, and 15 years prior to the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which legally ended segregation that had been institutionalized by Jim Crow laws (Jim Crow Laws, 2021). Since its founding in 1949, the Aspen Institute has yet to have a president that identifies as a woman and/or person
of color. Aspen Institute leadership has acknowledged the necessity to view itself as a racialized organization:

Although we are a decentralized organization, it’s essential that we develop a comprehensive approach to diversity, inclusion, equity, and anti-racism. This will entail looking inward at internal operations, and how our culture, policies, and practices need to change; looking within ourselves, at how our personal beliefs or behaviors may need to transform; and looking outward, at what more we can do to advance racial equity and justice in society. This is not only work we must do now, but a commitment we must act on continuously in the future (personal communication, July 15, 2020).

Because Aspen Institute is a decentralized organization, ESP had already begun the work of recognizing itself and other organizations as racialized structures, independently from the Aspen Institute as a whole. ESP had developed an equity statement and created diversity goals that have resulted in racial diversity amongst our team, our learning networks, and our public events. Additionally, when I joined the team, ESP was engaging in a team book study on *So You Want to Talk About Race?* by Ijeoma Oluo. This activity supported the team in developing a shared language and understanding around racism. This work was having an impact and provided me the runway needed to center racial equity within my strategic project.

ESP is still in the process of centering equity in its team structures and processes. Hence, ESP does not yet have a structure to collect community input, which was the source of my challenges when attempting to center the voices of those closest to the problem. “As racial structures, organizations partially delineate where, and how, one is to spend one’s time” (Ray, 2019, p. 37). Because ESP had not built a structure to share decision-making with community partners and institutionalize student input, doing so required an extra time investment. In the context of a team that is under capacity and managing an increased workload, investing more time disincentivizes those team members who seek to center students and community voice in team projects and
events. This additional time investment played a role in my “then” statements being still in progress.

An example of a tension within the symbolic frame that I had to creatively resolve occurred when I was attempting to center the voice of those closest to the problem when planning for the second advisory group meeting. I had planned to include a student panel as a part of the agenda. The team was in the process of contracting a student organization to provide an ongoing student perspective within the team’s work; however, the contract was held up within Aspen’s legal department. This meant that I was unable to leverage this student partnership during the second advisory group meeting and instead had to leverage my direct ties to secure student panelists.

It was also ESP’s culture to create a calendar for their public events months in advance. Selecting dates in advance did not allow for shared decision-making with community partners and co-creation on public-facing resources created to influence the field. In my experimentation with mobilizing and organizing practices, my calendar of events was developing as I was engaging with partners as opposed to populating in advance. Additionally, rather than deciding meeting dates and announcing them to stakeholders, in my approach with both the advisory group and principal focus groups, I provided a set of dates as options and allowed them to have input in when we would meet. These two approaches created shared power with external partners and led to high attendance and engagement at our meetings.

Because my approach of mobilizing and organizing was countercultural to ESP, I had to be intentional with communicating my progress to the team and manage the team impact of my timelines shifting and evolving. When asked for a calendar of events, I was transparent with the team that I was experimenting with mobilizing and organizing practice in my strategic project, which shared decision-making with community partners. I would also celebrate the short-term wins that were a result of my mobilizing and
organizing practices. For example, during the team debrief of the first advisory group meeting, the team noted the high attendance at the advisory group and wondered what actions I took to achieve this outcome. I shared my relational approach to determine advisory group meeting dates.

Implications

Given the evidence and analysis mentioned in the previous sections, I have identified key implications for ESP and the Aspen Institute, the sector of American Pre-K-12 education, and myself.

Site

Explicit Commitment to Equity

Racial equity practice is not a destination but a journey, and ESP has already taken its first steps. Dismantling Racism’s Six Phases of Racial Equity Practice (Figure 11) identifies six phases organizations that commit to racial equity practice can anticipate moving through. The framework describes phase two, “Explicit Commitment,” as when the organization begins to state an explicit commitment to race equity shifting the equilibrium (dRworks, n.d. -a). In 2018, ESP drafted an equity statement that named the influence race has on education experiences and outcomes; however, there is an opportunity for the team to dive deeper into phase two racial equity practices to make a more explicit connection between equity and the team’s work.
Further work in phase two could include incorporating racial equity-focused learning experiences within the team’s onboarding process. Centering racial equity within the onboarding process will create a shared understanding of the team’s commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. As possible learning experiences, team members could review the team’s equity statement and engage in conversation with a leadership team member on the oral history of the team’s journey of racial equity practice. ESP could also partner with an organization like Racial Equity Institute to arrange for new team members to engage in a learning experience as a part of their onboarding experience. Having all new team members attend professional learning focused on racial equity will ensure a shared baseline of common language and will build the skill of all team members to “see” systemic inequities more clearly, internally and externally, in order to take collective responsibilities in addressing them.
Explore Competing Commitments

“To any citizen of this country who figures himself as responsible—and particularly those of you who deal with the minds and hearts of young people—must be prepared to “go for broke.” Or to put it another way, you must understand that in the attempt to correct so many generations of bad faith and cruelty, when it is operating not only in the classroom but in society, you will meet the most fantastic, the most brutal, and the most determined resistance. There is no point in pretending that this won’t happen.” - James Baldwin, A Talk to Teachers, October 1963

ESP’s fully leaning into their equity statement and progressing through the six phases of racial equity practice will require the team to “go for broke,” and as they do so, they must anticipate resistance at the individual, cultural, and institutional level. Kegan and Lahey (2001) explain that even as individuals and organizations hold a sincere commitment to change, many are unwittingly applying productive energy toward a hidden competing commitment. “The resulting dynamic equilibrium stalls the effort in what looks like resistance but is in fact a kind of personal immunity to change” (Kegan & Lahey, 2001, para. 2).

I observed some of ESP’s competing commitments during the course of my strategic project. One example is that the team’s commitment to evidence-based research and scholar expertise is at times privileged over a commitment to community expertise in service of racial equity. This competing commitment played out during a team debrief I led regarding the second advisory group meeting. The student panel during the second advisory group meeting went beyond the intended 45 minutes—at the request of advisory group members. During the debrief, team members suggested less time with students to allow more time with the experts on the advisory group.

Kegan and Lahey (2001) identify a series of questions that organizations can use to discover their competing commitments. I have edited the questions slightly to focus on discovering collective competing commitments related to racial equity:
● What would you like to see changed at work, so that the team could be more effective in leading for equity in your work?
● What equity commitments does your complaint imply?
● What is the team doing, or not doing, that is keeping our equity commitment from being more fully realized?
● If you imagine the team doing the opposite of the undermining behavior, do you detect in yourself any discomfort, worry, or vague fear?
● By engaging in this undermining behavior, what worrisome outcome are you committed to preventing?

ESP should consider discovering the collective competing commitments and the underlying big assumptions that stall the team’s racial equity efforts. We are each protecting ourselves from big assumptions, deeply rooted beliefs about ourselves and the world around us. To discover big assumptions, Kegan and Lahey (2001) suggest creating the beginning of a sentence by inverting the competing commitment, and then filling in the blank. For example, if ESP’s competing commitment is “We are committed to not developing public resources that aren’t evidence-based,” the big assumption could turn out to be, “We assume that if we did develop public resources that aren’t evidence-based, the field would not view our work as creditable.”

Once ESP has identified equity-focused competing commitments and the underlying big assumptions, the team should consider using existing team meeting times to take the steps identified by Kegan and Lahey (2009) to challenge big assumptions:

| Step #1 - Notice and record the current behavior.  
| Step #2 - Look for contrary evidence.  
| Step #3 - Explore history.  
| Step #4 - Test the assumption.  
| Step #5 - Evaluate the results. |

When we overcome our immunity to change when it comes to racial equity, we see how our cultural schemas are encoded with the concept of race, how these schemas create racialized structures as defined by Ray (2019), and opportunities to change them.
Policy and Practice Integration

The structural frame of ESP creates a division of labor between practice and policy. This leads to deep content expertise within the practice team staff and the policy team staff. This division of labor is so distinct that workstreams overlapping both teams require a high level of intentionality in order to integrate content. The grant proposal for “The Role of the Principal” learning agenda outlined a year of work on the practice team to redefine the role of the principal and the second year outlined a handoff of the learning agenda to the policy team to focus on policy implications for the role of the principals based upon the practice team’s work. Building systems of integration would allow for smoother transitions of such learning agenda work. Systems that consider fostering integration between the two teams will position ESP to acknowledge the relationships between practice and policy throughout a project rather than at the end.

There are three possible systems to integrate practice and policy work that ESP could consider. First, the team already has a practice of kickoff project meetings and midpoint project meetings. Kickoff project meetings take place at the beginning of the project and provide time for team input on project objectives, events, and the project management plan. Midpoint project meetings occur at the midterm of a project to share the current progress and get team input on the project’s next steps. Currently, kickoff meetings and midpoint meetings take place within practice and policy teams. There is an opportunity to integrate practice and policy by inviting both teams to each other’s kickoff and midpoint meetings.

The second opportunity for integration exists within the team’s practice of scoping calls. Both the practice and policy team conduct scoping calls to connect with stakeholders and identify attendees for upcoming events. Both teams could invite one another to their team’s scoping calls or share call notes to help build shared context.
The third and final opportunity for integration could be team debriefs of current events and education policies. As major events occur within the field of education—such as stimulus funding for schools, assessment waivers due to the pandemic, the release of reports on how schools can recover from the pandemic, etc.—the teams can create time to debrief these events together. Creating space for staff members with practice expertise and policy expertise to dialogue together can cultivate shared learning that will impact the team’s work. This would not be a new practice for the team, however there is an opportunity to make team debriefs a recurring practice.

**Sector**

*A Racial Equity Change Framework*

My strategic project revealed three implications for the American Pre-K-12 education system. The first implication is the need for a new change framework that centers the nuances of leading change focused on racial equity practices. Through my RKA, I reviewed change management literature and found very little literature that mentioned race or racial equity. I decided to use Kotter’s (2012) eight stages of change, supplemented by Han’s research on organizing and mobilizing. Leading my strategic project illuminated the nuances of racial equity work that aren’t captured within Kotter’s framework.

First, Kotter’s framework is a top-down change model. It assumes that the change must be led by those with positional authority, which can be a form of paternalism (a trait of white supremacy culture). This assumption creates tensions in leading for racial equity as Speer and Han (2018) named the importance of creating the conditions for the community to lead the work.

Secondly, Kotter’s framework does not consider the identity of the leader spearheading the change. Nuances such as the identity of the leader and the
demographics of the community they are leading must be considered when leading racial equity work. Leading racial equity work as a Black woman in a predominantly white community presents different nuances than a white male leader leading racial equity work in a predominantly white community.

Lastly, Kotter’s framework does not take into consideration the unique dynamics of change outlined in the Six Phases of Racial Equity Practice (Figure 11). Stage five of Kotter’s (2012) framework is to “Empower Others to Act.” Within this stage, he identifies the leadership action of “getting rid of the obstacles to change.” Phases three within the Six Phases of Racial Equity Practice is “Culture Shift/Not Knowing” and described as frustration building. Within this phase, people of color often read white people’s complacency as intentional and white people begin to take every challenge as one to prove they are “good” by intellectualizing or criticizing the process (dRworks, n.d. -a). Kotter’s framework would view this as an obstacle to be removed; however, this is a part of the racial equity change process to be worked through.

As the field continues to normalize racial equity as a priority and grows in its understanding of the leadership actions needed to drive racial equity work, a racial equity change framework will help leaders make meaning of the inevitable resistance and understand the leadership actions needed to navigate the predictable complexity.

**Coherence For Racial Equity**

The second implication is the need for coherence between school systems and principal preparation and licensure programs. Both must have a shared racial equity theory of action. Given our current national context, racial equity leadership needs to be viewed as a requirement for successful principals. The reality is that few principal preparation and licensure programs have yet to center racial equity leadership in their programming. One advisory group member named, “if you’re occupying this space
[training principals] you need to be focused on advancing racial equity, and you need to be doing this well." Principal licensure and training programs must be held accountable for demonstrating evidence that their curriculum supports principals on their racial equity journeys. One advisory group member pointed out that principal training and licensure programs may be limited by their own understanding of racism; therefore, a consideration for principal licensure and training programs is to seek outside partnerships to audit their theory and practice for supporting principals to advance racial equity. Principal development programs can create the conditions for principals to examine their own identities, build their lens for seeing systems and structures that perpetuate inequities, and cultivate a leadership value of centering community voice in leadership decision-making.

In order to foster coherence between school districts and principal preparation programs, both systems must design for justice. “Racism and inequity are products of design. They can be redesigned” (equityxdesign, 2016, para. 3). One way to design for justice is designing a theory of action grounded in racial equity. Psychologist Beverly Daniels Tatum (1997) makes the analogy that the ongoing cycle of racism is “like the moving walkway at an airport”:

Active racist behavior is equivalent to walking fast on the conveyor belt. The person engaged in active racist behavior has identified with the ideology of White supremacy culture and is moving with it. Passive racist behavior is equivalent to standing still on the walkway. No overt effort is being made, but the conveyor belt moves the bystander along to the same destination as those who are actively walking...unless they are actively walking in the opposite direction at a speed faster than the conveyor belt—unless they are actively anti-racist—they will find themselves carried along with the others (p. 11).

Developing a theory of action that does not explicitly address racial equity is equivalent to standing still on the moving walkway of racism. Leading for racial equity is dependent upon the ability of actors within a system to see the racist system at play and “actively walk in the opposite direction at a speed faster than the conveyor belt.” By designing a
theory of action grounded in racial equity, school districts institutionalize an anti-racist stance and a bias toward seeing the system at play in order to address it.

A second strategy in designing for justice is to “center the voices of those who are directly impacted by the outcomes of the design process” (Design Justice Network, n.d., para. 4). During the second advisory group meeting, one of the student panelists said “Nothing about us without us.” This means that as school systems design they must create full inclusion of and be accountable to principals, students, and families by positioning them as organizers of the change and designers of the solutions. Principals, students, and families have direct lived experience of the conditions school systems are trying to change, thus experiential knowledge of community members is sure to produce ideas, approaches, and innovations that no one else would be able to create (Costanza-Chock, 2020). Centering the voices of those directly impacted by the design process requires organizations to give up power, and instead of viewing this surrender as a loss, viewing it as an act of justice and collective gain.

History Matters

My third and final implication for the education sector is using history as a guide for racial equity leadership. Exploring the history of the role of the principal reminded me that we can’t fully make sense of the present if we don’t know the historical context. Our country’s history is a legacy of racism and oppression as evident by the paternalistic and exclusionary origins of the role of the principal. Marginalized communities also possess a rich history of perseverance, innovation, and survival as evident by the history of Black principals in segregated schools. Leaders can make the common misstep of beginning to problem-solve from what is seen on the surface, however, education systems must explore history, which allows us to see the roots of a problem to create a systemic solution.
History is long, deep, and uniquely nuanced depending on the community. It is for this reason that I cannot offer a “one size fits all” roadmap to exploring history, but I instead offer the following guiding questions for education leaders to help identify entry points to exploring the historical context of their community:

- What systems and structures within your school district and community-at-large are producing equitable outcomes? What is the history behind how these systems and structures came to be? What community leaders played a significant role in the inception of said systems and structures?
- What systems and structures within your school district and community-at-large are producing present-day inequities? What is the history behind how these systems and structures came to be? What community leaders played a significant role in the inception of said systems and structures?
- What is the historical experience of school for marginalized people within your community?
- If there are schools and buildings within your building named after individuals, what’s the story of their namesake?

Civil rights leader Coretta Scott King said, “Freedom is never really won, you earn it and win it in every generation.” Beginning with history also allows the sector to learn of the struggle and victories of those who fought before us. We must honor their leadership and acknowledge that we aren’t the first to see the problem or attempt to solve it. Knowing our history gives us the blueprint for oppression, but it also provides us a blueprint from those before us on how to overcome it.

**Self**

*Agitate toward justice.*

Battilana and Kimsey (2017), researchers who study social change, identify three distinct roles in social movements; the agitator who “brings the grievances of specific individuals or groups to the forefront of public awareness,” the innovator who “creates an
actionable solution to address these grievances,” and the orchestrator who “coordinates action across groups, organizations, and sectors to scale the proposed solution” (para. 3). My strategic project made me realize my history of serving as an agitator.

Most of my career has been working in professional settings where there is not yet public consciousness of the inequities. In order to lead change, I had to bring the grievances of my students, families, or staff to the forefront of public awareness. During my strategic project, I viewed my work as a social movement relying on Christiansen’s (2009) research of the four phases of social movements. The first phrase “emergence” requires agitators to raise the public consciousness of the issue and develop a broader sense of discontent. My strategic project required me to raise the public consciousness of the discriminatory history of the role of the principal, while also raising the consciousness of ESP to see the ways that not having structures to center voices of those closest to the problem was creating obstacles within a learning agenda focused on racial equity. Leading for racial equity requires agitators. The work of an agitator is what the late Congressman John Lewis would call “good trouble.”

Battilana and Kimsey identify that any pathway to social change requires all three roles. “Agitation without innovation means complaints without ways forward, and innovation without orchestration means ideas without impact” (Battilana & Kimsey, 2017, para. 3). There were moments during my strategic project that I would name an equity “grievance” but would hesitate to name a solution because I was still learning the context of my residency site. There were other times I would name an equity innovation but had not yet “orchestrated” the resources needed to implement. As I am agitating, I must strategically sequence my leadership moves to orchestrate and innovate, and bring others along with me.

_Hope in history._
Being an agitator is risky. You take on the burden of creating open conflict and the risk of being viewed as a “troublemaker.” The history of marginalized communities is filled with agitators, however, their stories are often suppressed. Preserving the legacy of those who challenged the status quo is of little interest to the dominant culture (Tatum, 1997). Oppression feeds off the suppression of this history because past victories serve as present-day hope for marginalized communities.

Learning about the leadership of Black principals during pre-Brown v. Board gave me strength. Through my strategic project, I was continuing the racial equity work that they had begun. As mentioned in the sector implication section, history is not only important for systems to accurately diagnose the root cause, but it is also a critical source of hope and empowering reflection for those leading racial equity work.

Redefining power.

My transition to Harvard reflected back to me how much of my identity was intertwined in my role as a principal. My days were driven by the needs of over a thousand students and over a hundred adults. All of a sudden there were no more emails, no more walkie-talkies, no more fires to put out. It was now just me. Leaving the principalship to go back to school meant, in the words of Audre Lorde, I had to “define myself for myself” (1982, para. 15).

My residency gave me the opportunity to explore my leadership through the lens of influence. Working in a school district, I was accustomed to an orientation toward action. Working at Aspen required a different leadership disposition. I had to take on an orientation of influence because ESP’s theory of action is one of influence, and as a resident, my position required influence as I did not have the same positional power that I was used to as a principal. The unique position of influence forced me to explore my sources of power.
My residency provided me the opportunity to acknowledge my sources of personal power and lean into them. Being clear on my personal power was also necessary when navigating the invisible forces of power and inequity. Audre Lorde (1982) goes on to say, "If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive" (para. 15). Oppression depends on me playing small. If I only define who I am by my positional power, in the absence of it, I will become small. I must define myself outside of my positional power, which requires a commitment to self-love, self-discovery, and self-reflection, and that is a revolutionary act.

The bridge I must be
Is the bridge to my own power
I must translate
My own fears
Mediate
My own weaknesses
I must be the bridge to nowhere
But my true self
And then
I will be useful

Except of “The Bridge Poem” by Donna Kate Rushin (1981)

Conclusion

The role of the principal is the lynchpin within any school district, but the role is endangered by drastic turnover as a result of the workload which continues to grow. The Education and Society Program (ESP) Team at the Aspen Institute recognized the power in the role of the principal and took on a learning agenda focused on “Evolving The Role of the Principal” to make the role more sustainable. The racial reckonings during the summer of 2020 paired with the inequitable impacts of COVID-19 sparked a national “fire” for racial equity leadership that is undeniable and led to yet another shift in the role of the principal.
As ESP’s resident, I was charged with leading their learning agenda focused on the role of the principal. This capstone makes it apparent that redesigning the role of the principal for sustainability and in service of racial equity requires an acknowledgment of the role’s oppressive origins that modeled paternalism, power hoarding, and individualism, and pushed out Black principals. It is critical that ESP continues to approach the redesign of the role of the principal as a social movement by mobilizing and organizing those closest to the problem as the designers of the solutions, while building their own racial equity practices in the process. Given ESP’s theory of action grounded in an approach of influence, ESP must guide the field away from focusing on a technical fix and instead use its position of influence to support school districts in exploring their own histories for the systemic root causes, and to design for justice by developing a racial equity theory of action in partnership with those most impacted by the outcomes of the design process.

Through my strategic project, I learned that I am not alone as I continue leading the charge for racial equity. Famed poet Maya Angelou said, “I come as one but I stand as ten thousand.” There are tens of thousands of agitators for justice that laid the blueprint for racial equity work. I must actively look to their stories for sources of guidance and hope as I write my own.
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Appendices

Appendix A - Original definition of the problem and overview of the learning agenda for 2020 Summer Workshop

The job description of most principals in American schools might best be summarized as: “Unicorn.” The mythic profile requires a leader who is instructionally expert, visionary, culturally responsive, data-driven, persuasive, fiscally adroit, creative, community-engaged, and current in research, and a strong manager. It may be reasonable to expect that the CEO of a unit as complex as a school possesses diverse skills and superior stamina. The research is clear that principals are achievement drivers, but we are not currently creating conditions that enable their success. It is critical, then, that we clearly define the role of the principal to allow districts to craft a spectrum of expectations and experiences, supports and supervision, and essential functions for viable, impactful school leadership.

This confounding current state has clear origins. For the past thirty years, high-impact initiatives and policies—standards and assessments, teacher evaluation, innovation and choice, and personalized learning—led to positive changes and some success for students. Accordingly, the role of the school leader evolved rapidly from building leader and community liaison, to human-capital manager and instructional leader. Simultaneously, many school systems identified the school as a powerful locus of change -- especially adaptive change that undergirds adult learning and continuous improvement, and that is essential to equity -- and thus shifted budgetary, programmatic, and community engagement decisions to principals. These varied strategic paths are not mutually exclusive and are often bolstered by robust central investments, each with distinct timelines, vocabularies, budgets, and “supports.” Schools find themselves managing multiple pilots and pivots, each demanding new adult knowledge, behaviors, and skillsets. Principals are situated as stewards of condensed versions of the district, expected to: ensure quality implementation; guide and support the faculty; align building resources to the district plan; enlist the whole school community…they are to make it work, and work well.

On a broader basis, we also have emergent discussion of the role of education in the American social contract. If we believe schooling should enable the pursuit of the highest ideals in our society, then what does that suggest about the nature of schools themselves? This question has seeded contentious debate about cultural literacy and cultural responsiveness, about community schools and accountability metrics, and about expectations of education professionals. Principals will again find themselves implicated at the end of this expansive discourse.

Meanwhile, in a more immediate sphere, the promising practices multiply. Excellent pedagogy and high-quality instructional materials have verified value. We have evidence that we can improve further by orienting adults to the science of learning and development and a
whole-child vision of success, grounding ourselves in research on the relationship between school climate and achievement, and attending to social capital as an asset for adult efficacy. Yet we’re not at the point of liberating principals from the prior proliferation of demands so they can focus on integrating these more recent priorities. We may unintentionally synthesize nearly all that we want to be true for the school into what we require from the leader. It’s an epic character we’ve conceived, and it begs fundamental questions of the system—who do we want principals to be, and how do we expect them to operate? Within that frame, school systems tackle related inquiries like those delineated below.

In the tradition of the Aspen Institute, Aspen Education work in 2020 and 2021 will engage leaders to address the complex problems of our communities, with a drive toward equitable, accessible solutions for those who need it most. To help inform responses to these questions and begin to surface opportunities, we will initiate four high-level inquiries through a series of convenings, public events, papers, research reviews, and network-based explorations:

The principal as a driver for SEAD and achievement

- What does it require of a leader to drive SEAD to its full potential, where it is not simply the coexistence of SEL and academic rigor, but a fully integrated, dynamic experience?
- What does the science of learning and brain development (SoLD) suggest about variations on the role in different grade levels and settings?
- How do the principals address adult and student climate as a driver SEAD and SoLD? How is the school leader to do this within, and sometimes in spite of, accountability structures?
- What have we learned from iterations of the principalship in various school sectors and school designs?

The principal as a leader for equity

- As we consider the nuanced and distinct threads of equity discourse—not limited to diversity, inclusion, differentiation, and culturally responsive practice—how must principals grow in their personal and professional identities to lead this engagement?
- What is the leadership posture of a principal who is committed to equity by fostering a sense of agency, voice, and ownership among students and their school communities?

The principal’s conditions for success

- How are the role and profile of a principal defined amid evolving theories of action in school systems? What is the role of the district office in crafting an impactful, viable, and sustainable principal role?
· What is the profile of the principal as an individual? How is this manifest from pipelines, through training, recruitment, development, all the way through to evaluative structures?
· What are the implications for the principal-supervisor relationship, and for supervision of schools beyond that tandem?

**Policy for the principalship**
· What are the policy incentives and guardrails that can augment the pipeline and performance for school leaders? What skills or endorsements should be codified?
· What are the resources, metrics, and corrective measures from SEAs and the Federal government that set a baseline for sound practice around this singular role?
· How should policy address authority, autonomy, systemic equity, and site-based control?

These are questions have ranging implications for schooling in America. To inform our own learning and effectively advance this agenda, we’re hoping to hear your perspective on:

1.) Overall reactions (positive and negative) to the frame
2.) What do you see as challenges? Where are there promising practices?
3.) What should we be reading and who else should we be talking to—to learn more and refine our thinking and to challenge us and to push our thinking?

**Appendix B - Scoping Call Questions**

1. Tell us about yourself - what’s your background and experience?
2. How do field leaders currently define the role of the principal?
   a. What do field leaders cite as the #1 and #2 priorities for principals to spend time on?
   b. What’s similar and different across stakeholders?
   c. What has changed the principal most in the last 10 years (ask specifically about teacher evaluation, push for HQIM+PL, SEAD and “whole child” what else?)
3. What research findings/scholarship do field leaders cite as the most important in informing their “theory of the principalship?”
4. What are the biggest gaps in knowledge/research priorities relative to the principal?
5. What, beyond working in high-need communities, does it mean for a principal to be an equity leader?
   a. Developing agency among all stakeholders
   b. How is equity leadership, SEAD, and/or CRE similar or different to “instructional leadership,” just new content?
6. What new questions or strategies have arisen since Spring 2020?
7. How do systems distinguish between the role of the school in the community and the role of the school leader?
   a. Drawing on the contexts you know best, what are roles/responsibilities principals need to spend more time and attention on? What
Appendix C - New definition of the problem and overview of the learning agenda for the advisory group

In March 2020, the Aspen Education & Program Society Team designed a new learning agenda to help the field focus on the vital role that principals play in virtually every school and/or district context across the country. Our learning agenda set out to define the role of the principal by exploring the following four high-level inquiries:

- The principal as a leader for social-emotional and academic development (SEAD)
- The principal as a leader for equity
- District conditions for principal success
- Policy for the principalship

Since March, the context in which principals are leading continues to drastically shift. Due to the global health pandemic of COVID-19, principals are navigating new school models of virtual and hybrid learning, managing the resource inequities that have multiplied, and responding to the social and emotional well-being of their school communities living through a pandemic. Simultaneously, our country faces a reckoning: we can no longer ignore ways in which the legacy of over 400 years of racism and oppression impacts our students and communities today. The global pandemic has shed a light on the ways racism is structural and institutionalized. Our urgency around anti-racism must be greater than ever before.

Our learning agenda must follow suit. We have revised our learning agenda to guide the way the field identifies and frames vital challenges and opportunities, develops goals and outputs, and explores the themes and tensions regarding the role of the principal. Informed by over thirty 1-on-1 learning conversations with various education leaders and practitioners, we are now clearer on the central question at the heart of our learning agenda:
"What does it mean for the principal to be a leader for racial equity?"

The roots of American education are intertwined with our country’s history of racism and oppression. The role of the principal is baked into the foundation of American education. Consequently, we find it critical to (a) identify the ways the history of racism and oppression in American education influences the role of the principal today, and (b) design solutions that position principals and district systems to lead for racial equity. Our learning conversations affirmed that it is critical and necessary that we do not view racial equity leadership as a separate and isolated competency for the principal, but rather a personal leadership stance to take as principals lead in areas of instruction, operations, community relations, etc.

These are the themes and tensions that emerged through our 1-on-1 learning conversations:

Our education system was not built to deliver the results we expect today, and must be rewired with racial equity as the current that runs through it.
Leaders, reflecting the desire of their educational communities, envision schools where all students thrive. Yet inconsistently woven (or missing) into high-profile reform efforts has been the focus on racial equity. Accountability systems exist for measuring student growth but not for ensuring districts design and translate anti-racist policies into practice. Commonly used principal leadership frameworks only recently have introduced explicit focuses on racial equity, if at all. Professional development for educators may focus on key elements of teaching and learning, such as culture and curriculum, but fall short of supporting teacher learning about racial equity. Superintendents and principals are not regularly engaging in learning alongside one another on issues of equity and anti-racism. The absence of racial equity from core aspects of leadership, teaching and learning reflect a system designed for someone else in another time.

Our national context demonstrates why racial equity leadership must be central to the work of principals and school districts; however, the field is far from consensus on what it means for principals and school districts to lead for racial equity.
While education leaders, policymakers, researchers, and practitioners may be making similar calls to advance equity, the field as a whole remains inconsistent on just what advancing equity means (let alone racial equity). Some view the principal’s role to advance equity as building student agency. Others point to a principal’s role as to promote “culturally responsive instructional leadership,” “distributive leadership” (to all—including youth, community and parents), “the need to model vulnerability” (given “principals are trained not to do that in a misogynistic world of school leadership”) and “to dismantle systemic racism.” In addition to developing a shared understanding of racial equity, the field also has yet to fully realize ways in which racial equity can be integrated into all aspects of practice, policy, and research at state-, district- and school- levels. Whereas some systems might be approaching racial equity as a one-off competency or initiative, others are weaving it into social- and emotional learning, academic development and other existing focal points for high-quality teaching and learning.
This lack of clarity also exists among principal preparation programs, regional services centers that provide professional development to leads, and other principal support spaces.

**Principals are stretched thin when districts do not effectively eliminate old priorities, adjust responsibilities for existing or new priorities, or successfully integrate priorities when change of direction is needed.**

Principals are the instructional leader, the head of culture and climate, and the chief strategy officer (e.g., politics navigator, resource allocator, entrepreneur, needs analyst). They are also the organizational leader, the community leader, and the model learner for their staff. While principal roles may vary across districts, there should at least be clarity within each district around what principals are and are not expected to do. And in defining the principal role, districts must also seek to understand what that means for how principals spend their time. For example, in recent years many have argued that a principal’s primary role is to be the instructional leader. As many districts have adopted that mantra, what has that meant in terms of how principals devote time, attention, and professional development to other critical impact areas? Some interviewees suggested that over dialing on any one role or spreading principals too thin limits their ability to lead for racial equity—such as helping to address biases among staff and across their school procedures, instructional programs and other systems, or developing and leading ways to design solutions for those historically at the margins.

Given these themes and tensions, we look forward to exploring the following questions:

- How has the COVID-19 crisis exposed gaps/strengths in the organizational design of education and leadership models? What impacts of the immediate moment create opportunities/challenges that can/must change the role?
- If racial equity is the starting point, how can principals be developed to serve and improve schools for racial equity?
- How would a district need to reorganize to center racial equity?
- In what ways are established professional standards for principals in line with racial equity leadership? In what ways do they undermine?
- How does a principal’s own racial identity and school demographics influence their racial equity leadership posture?
- What are the habits, mindsets, knowledge, and skills of a racial equity-oriented principal?
- How can district conditions and policy embolden a principal’s racial equity leadership? How are current district conditions and policies constraining a principal’s racial equity leadership?
- In what ways does a focus on racial equity complement and compete with a focus on social-emotional and academic development (SEAD)?

Our best work occurs in partnership with students, practitioners, and education leaders who bring diverse perspectives. Over the months ahead, we look forward to exploring the above
questions through principal focus groups, student focus groups, and an advisory group of education leaders with the goal of developing resources to support and influence the field.

**Appendix D- Principal Focus Group Questions**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tell me what it’s like to be a principal right now</td>
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<tr>
<td>Describe what it means to be a principal for racial equity. What do you do?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ways in which you could be that and can’t right now?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What is racial equity? What does it look like?</td>
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<td>Does the system enable you to lead for racial equity?</td>
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<tr>
<td>○ How does the system enable you to lead for racial equity?</td>
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<td>○ How does the system constraint your racial equity leadership?</td>
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<td>On a scale from 1-5, 5 being the highest, how prepared did you feel you were to lead at the moment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>○ What preparation held you lead for racial equity to in the moment?</td>
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<td>○ What preparation would have been helpful training for this moment?</td>
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<td>What are some of the best practices you have found in leading for racial equity</td>
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<td>Is there anything else you’d like to share?</td>
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