Leading for the Future:
Drivers, Measure, and Outcomes of Principal System Leadership

The work of school principals has become more complex and challenging than ever due to unprecedented uncertainties, rapid changes, and overwhelming digitalization in schools today (Fullan et al., 2024; Pettersson et al., 2024). This phenomenon calls for a new leadership paradigm involving system leadership for not only addressing the challenges, but also fostering school transformation and sustainability in the new era (Hopkins & Harris, 2023; Gurr et al., 2022). This call from academia specifically echoes the international initiatives highlighted in the UNESCO 2024 Global Education Monitoring Report on leadership in education. When examining the local context, system leadership is certainly in need as principals in Hong Kong are required to navigate universal and unique challenges stemming from political, social, and digital transformation (PI, 2023). However, the literature on system leadership reveals significant gaps, including conception fragmentation, lack of instrument development, and methodological imbalance (Cheah, 2023; PI & Xu, under review). In response to the aforementioned concerns, this project will aim at: (1) developing and validating a Principal System Leadership Instrument (PSLI); (2) identifying the salient personal, organizational, and contextual drivers of principal system leadership; (3) Investigating the sustainable outcomes of principal system leadership; and (4) exploring the relationships among drivers, principal system leadership, and outcomes of system leadership. To achieve the four aims, the project will employ an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design with qualitative and quantitative strands. The qualitative strand includes 2 interview studies with 24 principals and a panel of 3 experts. The quantitative strand involves 2 survey studies with 200 and 350~400 principals respectively in Hong Kong. This project will make several significant contributions. First, it will advance the theoretical understanding of principal system leadership by elucidating the 'black box' of its salient drivers and outcomes. Second, the project will produce a multidimensional PSLI, facilitating balanced and advanced quantitative investigations into system leadership and promoting international comparisons. Third, the findings will empower policymakers to craft effective policies that foster system leadership competencies among school principals, aligning with international and local educational initiatives on system leadership. Fourth, the project will provide a practical blueprint for supporting principal system leadership, with identified drivers being malleable to future solution-focused interventions on promoting system leadership. Ultimately, this project will establish a conceptual link between principal system leadership and its drivers and outcomes, fostering a culture of networking and knowledge sharing for transformation and sustainability of schools and wider communities.