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# Leadership for Learning Improvement in Urban Schools



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# The Study of Leadership for Learning Improvement

With support from The Wallace Foundation, a team of researchers from the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy at the University of Washington has undertaken an investigation of leadership in urban schools and districts that are seeking to improve both learning and leadership. The study explored the following overarching question: *What does it take for leaders to promote and support powerful, equitable learning in a school and in the district and state system that serves the school?* The study pursued this question through a set of coordinated investigations, each with an intensive qualitative or mixed-methods strategy and with overlapping samples, designed to offer images of what is possible in schools and districts that take learning improvement seriously. Study sites were chosen to reflect a focus on learning and leadership improvement and varying degrees of progress toward improvement goals.

- **School Leadership investigation:** The reconfiguration and exercise of leadership within elementary, middle, and high schools to enable more focused support for learning improvement
- **Resource Investment investigation:** The investment of staffing and other resources at multiple levels of the system, in alignment with learning improvement goals, to enhance equity and leadership capacity
- **Central Office Transformation investigation:** The reinvention of central office work practices and relationships with the schools to better support districtwide improvement of teaching and learning

Separate reports detail the findings of each investigation, and a synthesis report identifies themes connecting the three study strands.

## ***Learning-focused Leadership and Leadership Support: Meanings and Practice in Urban Systems***

By Michael S. Knapp, Michael A. Copland, Meredith I. Honig, Margaret L. Plecki, and Bradley S. Portin

## ***Leadership for Learning Improvement in Urban Schools***

By Bradley S. Portin, Michael S. Knapp, Scott Dareff, Sue Feldman, Felice A. Russell, Catherine Samuelson, and Theresa Ling Yeh, with the assistance of Chrysan Gallucci & Judy Swanson

## ***How Leaders Invest Staffing Resources for Learning Improvement***

By Margaret L. Plecki, Michael S. Knapp, Tino Castaneda, Tom Halverson, Robin LaSota, and Chad Lochmiller

## ***Central Office Transformation for District-wide Teaching and Learning Improvement***

By Meredith I. Honig, Michael A. Copland, Juli Ann Lorton, Lydia Rainey, and Morena Newton

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## Executive Summary

This report examines the results of a national study of urban school leaders' work. In 15 schools located in four contrasting districts, we pursued an intensive qualitative study of school leaders—both those with supervisory authority (principals, assistant principals, department heads) and their nonsupervisory counterparts (teacher leaders)—and their efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning. We selected schools for study that were finding ways to support progress among a diverse student clientele, share the leadership work among various staff members, and align resources with a shared agenda for improving learning across the school. Our goal was to discover lessons and images of possibility for schools, and for those who support the work of educators in schools, concerning the ways that leadership can be focused on the learning of students, staff, and the entire school community.

Our findings suggest several ways of thinking about and exercising learning-focused leadership in these schools that may help to explain why they are doing well, and how others could do so. In particular, our research sheds light on (1) what it means for leaders to work within a demanding environment; (2) what supervisory leaders do in these kinds of settings, and (3) what nonsupervisory leaders do. Though the school and district contexts differed from one another considerably, the following patterns are clear.

## Working Within a Demanding Environment

*The school leaders we studied fully acknowledged, and took advantage of, the larger environment surrounding their schools.*

- The schools had framed, and were pursuing, a learning improvement agenda that reflected the larger improvement agenda of their districts as well as school-specific priorities and values. In most respects, the district and school learning improvement agendas were aligned, and within the school, staff were generally aware of and largely in agreement with these agendas.
- School priorities for learning improvement emphasized high expectations for teaching and student performance; alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment; staff collaboration; and the development of robust instructional leadership capacity.

- School leaders had internalized the expectations embedded in the district’s (and state’s) accountability system, instructional guidance, and expectations for data-based practice, and they had wedded those to an internal set of expectations and responsibilities that represent the school’s internal accountability system. Related to this response, the schools were building and expanding their own systems for collecting and using data in daily practice, drawing on what the district or state provided, but often including other forms or representations of data concerning their students.
- The stance most of the school leaders took to the larger environment was to treat it as a source of opportunities, resources, and potentially helpful ideas, rather than a site of roadblocks, unhelpful advice, and unreachable requirements.

*The leaders’ response to the larger environment had identifiable consequences for instructional practice.*

- Leaders’ efforts were helping to focus and align instruction and, to some extent, narrow it.
- Leaders appeared to be developing a new language for talking about students that emphasizes “gaps,” “gains,” and “moving” students. The language underscores a view of student learning that emphasizes measurable progress, often with regular testing as the metric.
- Picking up a theme pushed by the districts and enabled by more regular use of data in instructional planning, instructional leadership in these schools was emphasizing the differentiation of instruction, to serve students’ differing needs, approaches to learning, and prior schooling histories.

## The Work of Principals and Other Supervisory Leaders

Within the school, the instructional leadership work was shared among administrators with supervisory authority (principals, assistant principals, and department heads) and a growing cadre of teacher leaders occupying a variety of full- or part-time positions in which they were expected to work directly and continually with teachers on improvement issues. Principals and other supervisory leaders have a central role in this work—as leaders of instructional leadership teams, as much as individual instructional leaders.



*To lay the groundwork for team-based leadership for learning improvement in the school, principals and other supervisory leaders concentrated effort on clarifying learning improvement priorities, building team-oriented cultures, and anchoring improvement work to data.*

- Though operating in different district systems and schools, supervisory leaders promoted certain priorities in common: high expectations for both teaching practice and student performance; alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessments; staff collaboration; and the development of a distributed instructional leadership capacity.
- To counter the tendencies toward teacher isolation, negative energy, and fragmented effort in the school, supervisory leaders were working to develop team-oriented cultures, where everyone was expected to do their part as members of one or more teams working together toward the same goals.
- In leading a learning improvement agenda, supervisory leaders used data extensively to focus and anchor the improvement work. In this regard, they had learned to ask useful questions of the data, display data in ways that told compelling stories, and use the data to both structure collaborative inquiry among teachers and provide feedback to students about their progress toward graduation goals.
- Developing data-based routines in the school that were comfortable and adhered to was a major task. To take on this work, school leaders were often developing and managing their own intra-school data systems and in-house expertise.

*Supervisory leaders spent energy connecting directly with teachers and classrooms, though they varied in how much they did this, reflecting differences in their expertise and conception of school leadership. Whatever their conception,*

- Supervisory leaders adapted their approach to supervision, moving beyond a relationship with teachers that was bound by a traditional annual evaluation cycle to one that featured regular informal interactions.
- The point of both the formal and informal interactions between supervisory leaders and teachers was to generate instructionally specific conversations that gave teachers a clear sense of what to work on and how.

In large measure, *principals (and to a lesser extent assistant principals, depending on their specific assignments) worked as leaders of instructional leadership teams* in their respective buildings.

- In creating and sustaining viable instructional leadership teams, principals managed the distribution of expertise, structured and hosted regular team dialogue about teaching and learning, and adjusted team members' roles to accommodate their experience and learning.
- To lead the instructional leadership team, principals needed to find their voice and find a way to participate in team affairs that reflected their expertise, their personal leadership style, and the current location in their careers.
- To grow instructional leadership teams, principals were inviting people within the school building into leadership roles, both formal and informal, and nurturing their development as leaders.

## The Work of Teacher Leaders and Instructional Leadership Teams

Nonsupervisory teacher leaders engaged in instructional support work were also exploring new territory and developing a niche that sits between the classroom and the school's administrators, and to some extent between the classroom and the district or state. From this niche, *learning-focused teacher leaders were providing a direct and continuous layer of support for a large number of the teachers in the school.*

The daily work of learning-focused teacher leaders entailed one or more of the following activities: direct instructional support with individual teachers, professional development of various kinds, instructionally focused data and inquiry work, coordination of assessment and related support, and curriculum coordination.

- Across the school year, learning-focused teacher leaders created the bulk of professional learning opportunities for the teachers in the school, and conducted most of the professional development work, though sometimes assisted by supervisory leaders or outsiders.
- Expertise in communicating and building relationships with teachers played a large role in how (and whether) teacher leaders were welcomed into classrooms, and what they were able to accomplish with teachers as a result.



- In parallel with supervisory leaders' use of data, teacher leaders found data about student achievement or other evidence of student learning offered a convenient and often productive entry point for building and sustaining a working relationship between teacher leaders and classroom teachers.

*Several conditions affected the ability of the teacher leaders to find a secure footing in the school, among them, role clarity, cultural norms, and the support of principals as well as peers engaged in teacher leadership work.* The accessibility of peer-alike colleagues, in particular, seemed to help learning-focused teacher leaders mitigate the tensions they experienced in their emergent roles.

Learning-focused teacher leaders occupied a middle ground in their respective schools, positioned between classrooms and individuals or entities at the school or district level with authority over multiple classrooms. The territory they occupied generated ambiguities concerning their work, the potential for conflict, and opportunities for furthering the learning improvement goals of school and district.

- The direct and regular interaction with the principal placed teacher leaders in a position to both shape and absorb the schoolwide agenda for learning improvement and then to transmit improvement messages to school staff.
- As part of their work, learning-focused teacher leaders could—and often did—act as a bridge or conduit between the classroom and district or state expectations for classroom practice.
- Whether in relation to the district's or school's learning improvement agenda, or both, learning-focused teacher leaders offered a direct and continual link between district or school reform intentions and daily practice.

These bridging activities and roles necessitated a continuing process of negotiation, as the teacher leaders carried forward their instructional support work.

## Learning to Lead for Learning Improvement

These findings have clear implications for what supervisory and nonsupervisory leaders need to learn to do if they are to pursue ambitious learning improvement agendas in contemporary urban settings. Principals and other supervisory leaders need to rethink and expand their conception of supervision so that it becomes one of regular, often informal conversation with teachers about instructional issues. They also need to create working partnerships with other staff around the building

as part of collective leadership work, and they need to establish the “space”—that is, the conditions of trust, openness to critique, and focus on instruction—for learning-focused teacher leaders to do their work. In addition, principals and other supervisory leaders need to manage school operations in such a way that they create an infrastructure for learning improvement, and across all their tasks, they need to exercise greater discretion and act more entrepreneurially in a context of high accountability. Finally, to facilitate all aspects of their work as learning-focused leaders, supervisory staff should be fluent in the use of data as a leadership tool.

For their part, teacher leaders who orient their work to teaching and learning need strong content-area expertise, but also the perspective to look beyond their subject matter boundaries so they can participate more broadly in schoolwide improvement work. Whatever their particular instructional expertise, they need to be able to “open up” instructional practice to reconsideration and improvement, across a range of teacher experience, from novice to veteran. Enabling this work, teacher leaders need to be skillful in relationship building, and at the same time be responsible communicators of learning priorities and learning improvement agendas. Finally, teacher leaders need to work effectively in differentiated instructional leadership teams, a context in which they are unlikely to have had extensive experience.

## Pathways for School Leaders’ Learning

School districts, state agencies, external organizations trying to support educational reform, and others can create various pathways for supporting these kinds of new learning. Some of the need can be met by better initial preparation programs. These districts created their own leadership development programs of several kinds, aimed primarily at preparing new principals. But as important or more, especially for teacher leaders, are three other sources of learning and support:

- *Central office support systems.* Especially where the central office had taken proactive steps to become more responsive and engaged with schools, school leaders gained much from a variety of officials and staff from the district. A companion report, *Central Office Transformation for District-wide Teaching and Learning Improvement* (Honig, Copland, Lorton, Rainey, & Newton, forthcoming), elaborates on what this can mean in the relationship of central office and schools.
- *Peer and professional networks.* School leaders relied on—and were sometimes helped to develop—connections with colleagues in similar roles and other pro-

professionals who could offer ideas, advice, comfort, and modeling of potentially useful practices.

- *Relationships with external organizations (e.g., nonprofit groups, universities).* Either by being prompted or through their own evolving relations, school leaders developed long-term relationships with various external organizations that offered instructionally specific expertise and occasions for school leaders to deepen their understanding of their work.

These sources in combination began to provide a web of support for the instructional leadership cadres at work in these kinds of schools. As the work of learning improvement moves forward in urban schools, policy makers, leaders, and others who care about the reform of public education can find ways to focus these support systems on the new learning that the instructional leadership cadre is doing.



## Introduction

# Leading for Learning Improvement in Urban Schools: The Challenge in Context

The challenge of ensuring that every student has an opportunity to succeed is a mandate that rests with all schools in the nation's urban centers, and indeed all schools, no matter what the district context. All educators feel this mandate intensely, especially school leaders, who are increasingly held to account for the presence of opportunities for powerful, equitable teaching and learning, and ultimately for student success. The work of ensuring high-quality teaching and learning is thus a leadership challenge.

The words of a new third grade teacher in October of 2007 at an elementary school in the South Bronx of New York City, two months into her first year of teaching, hint at what it might mean to meet this challenge. She was responding to a question about what she saw as the priorities for her work:

Okay, the priorities for learning. I believe that, well, first of all, in terms of subject, I believe reading, writing, and math are the utmost importance for the school. I believe that [the leadership team] speaks about differentiating our instruction to reach all kinds of learners, no matter what level they are at and no matter how they learn, what modality they learn by. We really want to collect data, make sure that everything is assessment-based so that we can see where they stand and what progress, if any, they are making. That is pretty much what I have been told by the school, which I think is exactly what we need to do.

Several things about this teacher's response are striking. She speaks confidently, yet she has been on the job long enough to have her confidence shaken. She has a clear sense of what is expected of her, as well as what aspects of the curriculum are to be given the greatest weight. She talks about these as priorities for the whole school. These expectations have been communicated to her explicitly by the school's leadership team and by her district—here, she is referring to more than the principal—and she has bought into these priorities. What is more, she has internalized the idea at this early, vulnerable time in her development as a teacher that children have different needs, and can best be approached in a *differentiated* way that tailors their learning environment to their needs, ways of learning, cultural backgrounds, and prior learning experiences. And in her efforts to successfully reach each child, she sees data as an essential tool. Armed with it, she is approach-

ing her new professional work as a set of activities informed by a clear and continuous picture of what students are learning, and where they can be helped to improve their learning. And she is being taught how to operationalize these ideas in her daily practice.

The teacher's response speaks volumes about the role and potential power of school leadership focused on improving learning for all students, within a policy context that demands a concerted effort to meet the mandate noted above. Her words are spoken in a local setting known for uneven support for, and high turnover of, novice teachers, often coupled with pervasive demoralization among veteran staff (Payne, 2008). She works in a setting for which few young teachers are adequately prepared, and that often fails to convert their energy into effective teaching. It is noteworthy that a school-based leadership team has already given her a clear image of how to approach her work.

The teacher's response raises important questions for urban educators, school systems, and policymakers. *What kinds of leadership practices within the school, exercised by whom, have helped this new teacher develop a clear, confident picture of the classroom work she is tackling? What helps these leaders develop the know-how and the working relationships to address this teacher's needs effectively? How do the direction, guidance, and support she receives from the leadership team reflect actions and conditions in the larger district, state, and federal environment in which she teaches? What does she bring to her teaching and her new professional learning in this school, and how does the school recognize and work with her strengths and weaknesses to help her become a capable teacher?*

The schools in which teachers like this one work, and the systems of which they are a part, are complex and continually changing to ensure that the goals of education are achieved. Much of this change, particularly in public expectations, has been in response to the historic difficulty that schools have faced in providing powerful and equitable opportunities to learn for all students. Public schools have many successes to point to in the modern era (Berliner & Biddle, 1996) and have served to educate a broader swath of the nation's student population over the decades. However, if the nation's schools are to meet the challenges of this century and truly level the playing field for all students, then further changes, adaptations, and courageous action are required (Loveless, 2009).

Of all of the school-based factors that can influence the learning for students in schools, an array of leadership actions that have been clearly linked to improve-



ment in student learning (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004) is second only to teachers and teaching. This report examines this critical activity by presenting what has been learned from a national study of urban school leaders' work. With generous support from The Wallace Foundation, and as part of a larger research project investigating leadership and learning improvement, this study set out to look carefully at a small number of urban schools in contrasting districts that are finding ways to support progress among a diverse student clientele, share the leadership work among various staff members, and align resources with a shared agenda for improving learning across the school. Our goal was to discover lessons and images of possibility for schools and for those who support the work of school-based educators concerning the ways that leadership can be focused on the learning of students, school staff, and the school community as a whole (Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003; Copland & Knapp, 2006).

To introduce our research in the remainder of this chapter, we briefly characterize the context for school leaders' work by noting issues that have generated a pressing "learning improvement agenda" guiding their efforts. Then we clarify how we define leaders and leadership, and how these concepts connect to the improvement of teaching and learning. Following that, we offer a framework for understanding the central influences in the policy environment surrounding urban school leadership. Finally, we review the study's design and the organization of the ensuing chapters.

## Issues Shaping a Learning Improvement Agenda in Urban Education

Learning, variously construed, lies at the center of public policy and societal concern for the quality of urban schools. At both federal and state levels, a wide array of programs, plans, and innovations have been instituted with the sole aim of increasing the quality of teaching and learning. Accountability systems in schools and school districts purport to ensure that learning is occurring and to demonstrate it through a variety of measures (Lingenfelter, 2003). The initiatives and systems raise critical questions around what successful student "learning" is and what metrics can assure that learning has occurred. How learning for students is conceived and measured is complex and contested. In recent years, learning is often publicly equated with student performance on standardized, state, and national tests.

Within the same timeframe, the provisions for performance contained in the renewed Elementary and Secondary Education Act—otherwise known as No Child Left Behind—have substantively shaped accountability practices through waves of testing and public accounting for those measures (Azzam, Perkins-Gough, & Thiers, 2006). Whether the outcome of these testing regimes has been a help or a hindrance to broad-based, high-quality learning is an argument that we will leave to others. However learning and evidence of it is conceived, learning is central to the enterprise of public schooling, and hence to the work of educational leaders. For this study, we put learning at the center and let our research be guided by the definitions and distinctions that our participants used, rather than a preconceived notion.

A related public debate concerns *what* students should be learning. What students learn in the nation's schools serves the multiple purposes of preparing students for meaningful participation in social life. Economic issues and international competitiveness have also been important drivers for policymakers and thus school attention. International comparisons abound, as do the questions about what students need and should know how to do to compete in a global economy and in an information-rich world.

While educators and the public are concerned about the general outcomes of schooling, of particular worry are the historic, persistent, and pervasive differences between groups of students by race, ethnicity, language, socioeconomic status, and special educational needs. Widely cited as “the achievement gap,” these disparities in the experiences of students in schools and the measure of what they have learned are both familiar and deeply troubling. The essential argument is that students are not finding equitable access to high-quality teaching and learning opportunities and, therefore, systematic differences in learning outcomes are magnified, especially in the nation's urban centers.

Historic issues rooted in racial segregation and urban poverty have shaped, and continue to shape, how each student experiences school, how resources are allocated, and what opportunities are present for student and professional learning (Noguera, 2005; Payne, 2008; Espinoza-Herold, 2003). This presents an enormous challenge for school and district leaders in ensuring that equity drives policy and practice, as well as the culture of education. Urban school districts often face scrutiny from political and business interests who look to districts and their leaders to initiate successful improvements in the quality of schools and educational opportu-

nity. The combination of enormous challenges and intense public scrutiny result in short-lived tenures for urban superintendents (Buchanan, 2006).

The expectations for clear evidence of high-quality teaching and learning, and for progress at a rapid rate, call for assertive and clear planning. *To deal with issues in urban education, districts and states (fueled by national debate) are formulating a set of coordinated directions and actions that is a learning improvement agenda.* As we look around the country—and in findings reported in two companion reports, *Central Office Transformation for District-wide Teaching and Learning Improvement* (Honig, Copland, Lorton, Rainey, & Newton, forthcoming) and *How Leaders Invest Staffing Resources for Learning Improvement* (Plecki, Knapp, Castaneda, Halverson, LaSota, & Lochmiller, 2009)—the reform theories and ensuing strategies that enact district-led reform efforts shape both the structure and deployment of system resources and change activities in schools.

As we review in detail in the next chapter for the districts we studied, the resulting system-wide learning improvement agendas have many elements, clustered around an urgent focus on school and student performance. In these instances, as elsewhere in the nation, district leaders are generally asking for more than increases in student achievement overall and decreases in systematic disparities among identified groups. These agendas seek systemwide improvement, whatever that means, and as part of it, significant professional learning and system changes.

## Leadership for Learning Improvement in Urban Schools

To gain insight into the way urban educators pursue this learning improvement agenda, we studied leadership and how the work and the activities of those who enact it contribute to learning for all of the young people who attend these schools. We need to clarify who and what are the foci of our investigation.

### Clarifying Terms

We use the term *urban* as a descriptor for the four districts in this study. While not monolithic, the settings of the schools we studied shared several features common to many urban areas across the land:

- *Poverty*: High concentrations of young people from low-income families.
- *Diversity*: A mixture of racial, ethnic, and linguistic groups in the school population.

- *Population density*: Many people living in close proximity, though not always easily accessible to one another.
- *Cultural and institutional resources*: An array of cultural institutions, though not necessarily easily or equitably accessed.
- *Social stress and dislocation*: Abundant signs of stress experienced by people living under less than optimal conditions (e.g., family dysfunction, mental health, crime, poor nutrition).

However, the issues of size, student diversity, poverty, population density, growth (or decline) transcend many communities. We make no claim that the issues and actions expressed in this report are, in some regard, urban only, rather that the sites we studied were *urban* in nature. Though their settings differ, schools and systems in exurban and rural contexts will find common matters of learning and school organization in the findings reported here.

The term *school leaders* refers to individuals who assume formal or informal positions of influence within the school, and who direct, guide, and support the work of others (as well as their own) in pursuit of some schoolwide learning improvement agenda. Thus we are not only concerned with individuals in traditional administrative and supervisory roles such as principal, assistant principal, or department head and instructional support roles, e.g., literacy coach, but also with others who act as teacher leaders or influential staff, sometimes with new position titles, e.g., instructional leadership specialist, assessment coordinator, curriculum coordinator, and sometimes not. Across all, we pay attention to their *roles* (that is, the shared expectations for their behavior and sphere of responsibility), but we do not assume that inhabiting a role is the same as exercising leadership, nor that individual actions constitute leadership. Leadership we define as the *shared work and commitments that shape the direction of school and the learning improvement agenda, and that engage effort and energy in pursuit of the agenda*. For this report, we attend particularly to those who have designated responsibilities for school outcomes and the collective actions of groups to shape and realize the learning improvement agenda.

We approach our examination of urban school leadership from a particular vantage point we have referred to as *learning-focused leadership*.<sup>1</sup> This set of ideas treats

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<sup>1</sup> These ideas build on others' work using similar terms, for example, *the learning-centered principal* (DuFour, 2002) and *leadership for learning* (Resnick & Glennan, 2002; Stoll, Fink, & Earl, 2003).

school and district leadership as concerned with promoting “powerful, equitable learning” simultaneously for students, professionals, and the system as a whole (Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003; Copland & Knapp, 2006). This framework further assumes that these three arenas of learning are interdependent, and that one cannot be maximized without the other two. In focusing effort on these learning targets, district and school leaders establish a persistent public focus on learning, build professional communities that concern themselves with learning improvement, engage external environments that matter for learning, mobilize effort along strategically identified pathways of activity, and create coherence across learning improvement efforts. As they focus attention and mobilize effort, learning-focused leaders at the school level are centrally concerned with the learning of students, the teaching staff, and themselves, if not their school as a *learning organization*.

As part of the school leaders’ focus on learning, we pay special attention to school-based *instructional leadership*, that is, the shared work and commitments involved in directing, guiding, and supporting teaching practice and efforts to improve it. In educational leadership literature in past decades, instructional leadership has been traditionally conceived in ways that are largely principal-centric, sometimes narrowly focusing on what amounts to “instructional coaching” or “clinical supervision” of individual teachers, and sometimes including a wider range of functions that promote instructional improvement across the school (Leithwood & Duke, 1999; Gordon, 1992; Rossow, 1990; Sergiovanni, 1987). We expand this notion to treat instructional leadership as *inherently distributed* among different staff in the building (Spillane, 2006), who bring attention to the shared—or contested—learning improvement agenda(s) of the school and district. Here, we approach the distribution of leadership as a fact of school life, not an administrative action (like the delegation or distribution of responsibilities), though administrators and others are able to shape the way participants engage in distributed instructional leadership.

Literature has long underscored the complex nature of instructional leadership in schools and the difficulty that single individuals such as principals have in fulfilling such expectations (Murphy, 1992): the work of instructional leadership has become more complex and too much for a single individual, both in terms of energy and expertise. Accordingly, recent work on the principalship (Portin, DeArmond, Gundlach, & Schneider, 2003) points to the principal as leader of an instructional leadership cadre, rather than as a sole, multipurpose, all-responsible instructional leader. Other recent work has added the dimension of leading instructional improvement so that it acknowledges and supports the considerable

demands of external accountability systems, at the same time that it prompts internal accountability for instructional improvement (Halverson, Grigg, Prichett, & Thomas, 2007).

While leadership has historically been associated with courageous action and compelling characters, that heroic image of leadership is not the model that guides this research. Instead, we view educational leadership as the responsible exercise of influence by multiple actors, who impart purpose to the school and mobilize effort toward fulfilling that purpose. Leadership inevitably implicates a range of activities, roles, commitments, and material and social resources, and it is best understood as collective work. If there is heroism in this work, it lies less in the actions of charismatic individuals (e.g., a turnaround principal), and more in the sustained engagement of multiple people around a shared learning improvement agenda.

## **Understanding Urban Leadership for Learning Improvement**

Leaders and leadership—and especially distributed instructional leadership—take on special meanings and urgency in urban schools. Consider the situation that faces principals in chronically low-performing schools such as this one in an inner-city setting, in which a new principal embarked upon a 15-year journey to substantially improve the quality of teaching and learning (as recounted by Payne, 2008, pp. 33-34):

Early on, [the new principal] tried to address the isolation and lack of teamwork among teachers. He tried to focus staff meetings on instruction, published a school newsletter that was largely about teaching, and revised the schedule so the teachers teaching the same grade level had the same preparation time, and, later, a weekly 90-minute team meeting. “But morale never seemed to get out of the basement. Staff meetings gravitated to student discipline problems.” In team meetings, “there was a strong tendency for the agendas to be dominated by field trips, war stories about troubled students, and other management issues, with little attention to using student work and data to fine-tune teaching” (Marshall, 2003, p.107)... Almost inevitably, teacher pessimism was a significant barrier. “Discouraged by the visible results of poverty and having never seen an urban school that produces very high student achievement, many teachers found it hard to believe that it could be done. They regarded themselves as hardworking martyrs in a hopeless cause” (p. 109).

In schools such as this, educators find themselves in a crucible of diverse and acute learning needs, often diminished resources, limited hope and expectations, and a



history of low performance on whatever measures matter in their respective district and state systems (e.g., Hess, 1999; Sanders, 1999; Payne, 2008). Though the specifics are likely to differ by school level and the nature of the student population, the challenges are remarkably similar across settings.

Existing research on urban school leadership and school improvement helps to identify some of what is involved in moving beyond this state of affairs. For example, research on high-performing, high-poverty schools has underscored attributes common to many schools that face these challenges (e.g., Charles A. Dana Center, 1999). These schools targeted attainable goals and refocused energies on service to children, at the same time building an environment in which students assumed responsibility for appropriate behavior. The schools created a collective sense of responsibility for improvement, and created opportunities for teachers to work, plan, and learn together. School leaders aligned instruction and standards, increased instructional leadership as best they could, and provided teachers with the resources and training necessary to teach. And these schools worked on winning the confidence and respect of parents, with whom they sought to build partnerships. Findings such as these, building on longer term lines of investigation into “effective schools,” school restructuring, and school improvement (Levine & Lezotte, 1990; Teddlie & Stringfield, 2006), begin to establish what meeting the urban school leadership challenge may entail. Further lines of investigation—for example, recent work on successful urban principals (e.g., Jacobson, Brooks, Giles, Johnson, & Ylimaki, 2007) and on principals as professional development leaders (Drago-Severtson, 2007)—extend understanding for particular aspects of the principal’s role.

*But the existing research base has yet to pay sufficient attention to the dynamics of distributed instructional leadership in a school—especially, as it involves others besides the principal in instructional leadership—and how it can be brought to bear in a coherent way on shared learning improvement priorities.* Similarly, we do not yet know enough about the changing nature of the principal’s work in keeping a school community productively focused on learning improvement, in the demanding, high-accountability environment surrounding virtually all urban schools. These are matters with which our study and this report are centrally concerned.

Finally, the existing research has less to say than it might about how leaders learn to do the kind of work we are describing in this report. In this regard, we see leadership development (and the professional learning that enables individuals and

groups to exercise effective leadership) as a process, not an event. The complex work of leading a learning improvement agenda suggests different learning at different phases of one's career and in response to the expectations for action at the time. Across the country, districts and states are exploring continua of leadership development and more articulated opportunities. Among those are learning opportunities for teacher leaders as well as supervisory leaders in the work and tasks they undertake. There is much still to learn about how these approaches to leadership development can contribute to the challenges at hand.

## How the Policy Environment Frames Leadership and Learning Improvement in Urban Schools

The work of leading learning improvement in urban schools cannot be understood without close attention to the larger environment with which these schools interact on a daily basis. In brief, *urban districts—combining central office and school board actions with community conditions, and reflecting local interpretations of federal and state policy—present school leaders with demanding environments.* District reform literature highlights various reform initiatives in the district environment that converge on schools (e.g., Togneri & Anderson, 2003; Cawelti & Protheroe, 2001; Massell & Goertz, 2002; Hill & Celio, 1999; Knapp, Bamberg, Ferguson, & Hill, 1998). Together and separately, these aspects of the district environment provide *direction* (in essence, actions that tell school leaders what to do), *guidance* (advice that offers direction, but does not require it), and *support* (available assistance for pursuing what school leaders take as their priorities) that enable or inhibit school leaders' efforts to improve teaching and learning. These environmental influences may or may not be consistent or coherent, and they confront school leaders with complexity. As often as not, they create a puzzle for school leaders: what to pay attention to, how to interpret reform messages and resolve contradictions, and how to pursue relationships with the central office or other external entities.

At least four interrelated aspects of the reform environment in urban districts have direct and potentially powerful implications for school-level efforts at learning improvement, and figure prominently in many, if not most, of the published cases of district reform across the past three decades.

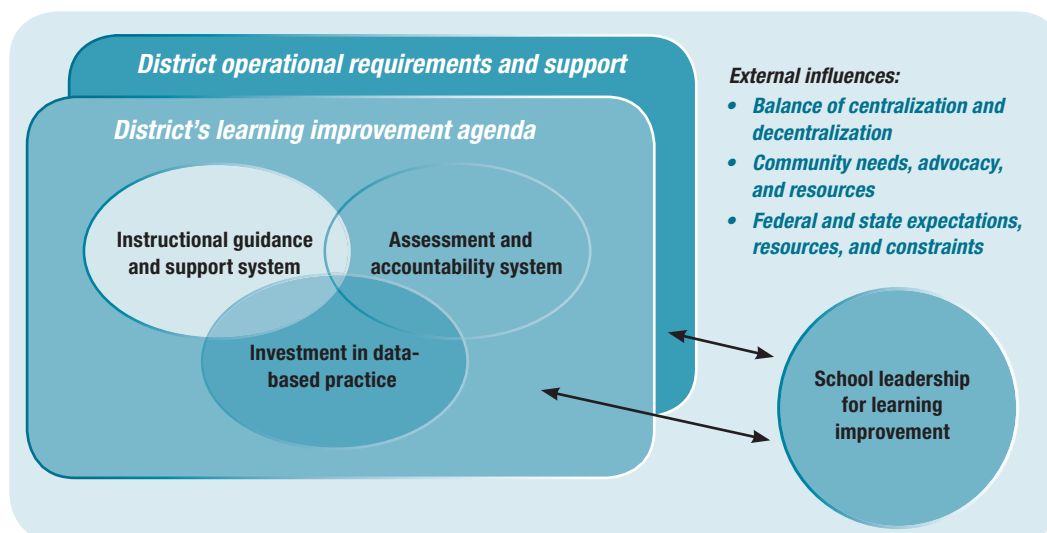
- ***The system of instructional guidance and support.*** Generally rooted in state learning standards, district central offices may offer (or require) schools to fol-

low a curriculum scope-and-sequence, use district-adopted textbooks, teach to benchmarks, or follow pacing guides, among other of the common instructional support tools. The district also provides a variety of professional development opportunities offered either in house or by other groups like university preparation programs and external resource organizations, once again, closely or distantly connected to learning standards and the assessment and accountability system.

- ***The assessment and accountability system.*** To measure state learning standards, government-sanctioned accountability systems establish assessment measures and attach consequences to the results (e.g., for teachers, administrators, schools, and students). The assessment system may be as limited as a single annual test, or as elaborate as a series of assessment tools that can be used in varying ways across the school year.
- ***The district's investment in data-based practice.*** Assisted by other groups (e.g., vendors, external resource organizations), the district may try to create an infrastructure for data use with one or more technologically-based systems (data warehouses, computer-based tools for querying data) and offer technical assistance to data users. Inevitably, whatever system and assistance are offered will include the data implied by accountability requirements, but may not be limited to these data. The district may accompany these efforts with messages that promote or require specific forms of data use (e.g., for school improvement planning) and also various efforts to enhance data literacy among a range of potential users.
- ***Non-instructional or operational requirements and supports.*** School administrators must manage many aspects of school operations (e.g., transportation, facility maintenance, compliance reporting, personnel management) that are not overtly or directly concerned with instruction, though their indirect effects can generally be felt in classrooms. Because the many details of running schools threaten to consume whatever time administrators might devote to instructional support, their configuration—and the means that districts create to streamline and facilitate operational management—have serious repercussions for school leaders' ability to engage in learning-focused leadership.

As Figure 1 implies, these features of the policy landscape are interconnected in various ways. In fact, they are hard to separate in practice, even though they may not have been conceived and implemented in a coordinated fashion.

Figure 1. District Learning Improvement Agendas, In Context



The figure also underscores that the district central office and school board are not the sole contextual influences on what happens in schools. State and federal contexts shape the exercise of leadership and the learning improvement work of the school. Communities also matter to leadership work, directly or indirectly—for example, through the support and participation of business partners, religious foundations, philanthropy; the all-important investment of the families and neighbors of the schools; and the reverberations of municipal politics.

One final feature of the district environment gives potentially different meanings to the elements just described, and may fundamentally alter their form. District leaders, with the support of school boards and school governance policy, allocate different degrees of autonomy and discretion to decision makers at each level of the system, specify the range of matters over which they have some (or complete) discretion, and offer greater or lesser resources to take action on these matters. In strategic terms, *these allocations may emphasize centralization of control, decentralization, or some combination*. A somewhat centralized stance towards leadership and reform in large urban districts has been a norm in recent years, apparent in many accounts of apparently promising district reform (e.g., Snipes, Doolittle, & Herlihy, 2002; Walsh, 2006; Hightower, Knapp, Marsh, & McLaughlin, 2002), especially under “managed instruction” arrangements. Alternatively, experiments in large urban districts with more decentralized arrangements—or more accurately, arrangements that combine the devolution of control to the schools in exchange for commitment to meeting stringent, externally

defined accountability standards—have also captured a lot of attention (e.g., Bryk, Sebring, Kerbow, Rollow, & Easton, 1998; Ouchi, 2006; Fruchter, 2008). These developments parallel a growing fascination over the last decade and more with the idea that schools with greater autonomy, especially newly established and smaller ones, may hold considerable promise for addressing the problems that plague urban schooling (see Honig, 2009).

The configuration of influences looks quite different to school leaders, depending on whether school districts assert more or less centralized control over accountability, data-based practice, and instructional renewal, as illustrated by Table 1.

**Table 1. Illustrative Environmental Influences on School Leaders' Work**

	Assessment and accountability system	Instructional guidance and support system	Investment in data-based practice
<b>Under centralizing strategies, districts (and sometimes states or the federal government)...</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>...Impose accountability standards</li> <li>...Require assessments to be administered annually or more often to document student progress</li> <li>...Establish “stakes” or consequences based on performance in relation to standards</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>...Set systemwide learning standards</li> <li>...Specify curriculum, require particular materials or approaches</li> <li>...Mount content-area improvement initiatives</li> <li>...Mandate district- initiated professional development</li> <li>...Require instructional leadership arrangements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>...Define data elements, reporting requirements</li> <li>...Require uses of data (e.g., in school planning, inquiry systems)</li> <li>...Construct required protocols and mandated data-use routines (e.g., walk-throughs)</li> </ul>
<b>Under decentralizing strategies, districts (and sometimes states or the federal government)...</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>...Provide voluntary or optional accountability tools</li> <li>...Make assistance available to school leaders, for adapting assessments and accountability arrangements to school needs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>...Offer curricular choices</li> <li>...Provide resources for school-determined professional development</li> <li>...Offer optional or flexible instructional support resources (e.g., coaches, instructional specialists)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>...Offer assistance with data use and the development of inquiry processes</li> <li>...Provide resources for developing in-school expertise, as requested</li> <li>...Make data-use tools available to schools</li> </ul>

As a practical matter, schools are likely to encounter a mixture of centralizing and decentralizing influences in these realms as districts fashion multi-faceted approaches to reform. Nonetheless, in a given district and time period, a predominant pattern is likely to exist.

## Sketch of the Study and This Report

To study learning-focused leadership at the school level, we examined emerging practice of school leaders seeking to create and shape equitable and powerful learning opportunities for students across a range of local contexts. We did not set out to look for programs that solve problems, but rather to examine decisions, commitments, and processes that were likely to move schools toward their learning ends.

Improving learning conditions and outcomes in schools implies reimagining and reconfiguring how leadership is exercised in schools. This means paying attention not only to what those in traditionally prescribed roles (such as principals) do, but also to new sets of skills, capacities, and supports for all who exercise learning-focused leadership in the school. This study explored how school leaders make sense of these new expectations in light of their own unique school characteristics and in response to salient influences in the districts and the larger policy environment. Four main areas of inquiry drive this study:

1. How the school defines and frames learning improvement challenges in the context of local concerns and larger policies.
2. How the school's unique characteristics shape the way learning-focused leadership is exercised within it.
3. How the district and state guide, support, and assess reconfigured and expanded leadership in schools.
4. How schools and their contexts resolve differing expectations for leaders' roles and ensure that individuals have the capacity and authority to take on these roles.

## Research Strategy and Sample

We pursued a multiple-case investigation of schools within four school districts: Atlanta Public Schools, Atlanta, GA; New York City/Empowerment Schools Organization;<sup>2</sup> Springfield Public Schools, Springfield, MA; and Norwalk-La

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<sup>2</sup> Under the current organization of the New York City Department of Education, all schools in the city choose to be part of one of 14 School Support Organizations (SSOs), the segment of the district central office that offers the most direct support to the school. We concentrated our research on the largest of these SSOs, currently called the Empowerment Schools Organization (ESO), which subsumes approximately 500 schools, or nearly a third of the city's schools. The great majority of our data collection came from schools within the ESO, and to a lesser extent, units in the central office with which they worked, though some background data came from other sources outside this SSO. In this sense, we never set out to study the whole of the New York City Department of Education reform, and NYC/ESO comprised the relevant district for most of our analyses.



Mirada Unified School District, Norwalk, CA. These district settings were chosen to represent a range of different kinds of urban settings (varying by size, region, reform theory, reform history, resource availability), yet all had focused considerable effort on the improvement of teaching, learning, and leadership, and had benefited from unusually stable leadership at the district level. In addition, all served student populations with a high degree of poverty and racial and linguistic diversity. All but one had an established relationship with The Wallace Foundation, as part of an effort to improve leadership development. (The selection of districts was done in coordination with two companion studies, which were investigating central office transformation and the investment of staffing resources, respectively; two of the study districts were shared among all three studies.<sup>3</sup>)

Within these districts, we selected 15 schools, in which we pursued case study research across a year and half (through the 2007–08 school year, and first semester of the 2008–09 year). The schools were selected to display three qualities: (1) students in the school were making progress (however the school or district defined that); (2) the leadership work of the school was consciously shared; and (3) the school had made an attempt to align its resources with its learning improvement agenda. The resulting sample of schools that met these criteria varied considerably in how high or low performing they were in absolute terms, though all were making progress. Thus, we were not attempting to capture typical schools or those that exemplify patterns of staff demoralization and chronic low performance that have been often detailed in research on urban education (e.g., Payne, 2008). That said, the schools we studied worked with a similar clientele and under conditions that are widespread among urban schools serving an impoverished student population.

Our research was largely qualitative, carried out through four cycles of field data collection. During each cycle, two or sometimes one fieldworker spent two to three days at the school, interviewing key informants (individuals in formal and informal leadership roles), a sample of classroom teachers, and others (e.g., parent coordinators) who were central to the unfolding learning improvement agenda of the school. We also observed leadership events and other improvement activities (e.g., professional development, coaching, collaborative planning, design team meetings, etc.) whenever these coincided with our visits. Additionally, we

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<sup>3</sup>See *Central Office Transformation for District-wide Teaching and Learning Improvement* (Honig et al., forthcoming), and *How Leaders Invest Staffing Resources for Learning Improvement* (Plecki et al., 2009).

assembled detailed documentary files on each school, drawing together newsletters, school improvement plans, pacing guides, budgets, staffing rosters, and other archival material that helped to illuminate the leadership work of the school. Further details on our design and approach to research appear in the appendix.

## Organization of This Report

In the ensuing chapters of this report, we describe the challenges confronting school leadership that is primarily focused on student learning and what multiple people in urban schools do to meet them. In this introductory chapter, we review the challenges that face most schools and the leaders within them, and that are especially apparent in many of the nation's urban centers. In Chapter 1, we show what it meant, in the four districts we studied, for school leaders to work in the larger environment of district, community, and state policy. The chapter explores the manner in which school leaders—both those with positional authority (e.g., principals, assistant principals) and their nonsupervisory counterparts (e.g., teacher leaders)—responded to and sometimes influenced those aspects of the larger environment that direct, guide, and support their work.

Chapters 2 and 3 then explore the work that two specific groups of individuals engage in to advance the learning agenda of the school. Chapter 2 concentrates on the work of principals and other supervisory leaders in schools, while Chapter 3 investigates the leadership work of teachers with extensive classroom expertise, whom we call “learning-focused teacher leaders.” This category subsumes a variety of staff positions, some with deep roots in the school (e.g., some math coaches), and others that have been newly created (e.g., a curriculum coordinator or assessment coordinator), who are being called upon to assume supportive, complex, and influential roles that provide wraparound support and expertise to the teaching and learning in classrooms.

The report concludes with what our analyses imply for school-based leadership practice and for the development of the leadership capacity of schools and districts, including how leaders might best be prepared to undertake this important work, as well as the decisions that schools—and, indeed, districts—may need to make in order to accomplish this work.

## Chapter 1

# Working Within a Larger Environment of Direction, Guidance, and Support

The four participating districts in this study—Atlanta Public Schools, Atlanta, GA; Springfield Public Schools, Springfield, MA; Norwalk-La Mirada Unified Schools, Norwalk, CA; and New York City/Empowerment Schools Organization, New York, NY—display many of the challenges to education described earlier. And they have each adopted proactive, multifaceted strategies for addressing these challenges. In doing so, they have created environments for the learning improvement work in schools that has a particular character and that projects a districtwide learning improvement agenda that school leaders cannot ignore. Other features of the larger environment enable or constrain school leaders from acting on this agenda.

School leaders work within these environments, responding to them proactively or reactively, engaging them or buffering them out, but never ignoring them. In this chapter, we examine the nature of that response. Specifically, we examine the ways they respond to, or make use of, the forces and conditions that surround them, in pursuit of whatever the school sets up as *its own* learning improvement agenda(s)—that is, whatever school leaders and staff take as *their* priorities for improving teaching and learning. Our particular concern is to determine, from the school's vantage point, how external direction, guidance, and support enable or inhibit the efforts of both supervisory and nonsupervisory leaders to improve teaching and learning, as will be explored more extensively in the next two chapters.

To introduce our analysis, we first review some commonalities in the districts' learning improvement agendas. Following that, we present the most prominent patterns of leadership response to these agendas, and describe consequences for instructional practice and instructional leadership.

## Common Features of the District Environment for Learning Improvement

Despite major differences in size, governance structure, reform history, and community makeup, the four districts projected strikingly similar learning improvement agendas to their schools. The core messages of these agendas stressed high expectations and accountability for the outcomes of teaching and learning;

urged increased scrutiny of educational practices in schools, along with support of various kinds for the schools' improvement work; and built expectations for renewing teaching practices that could reach diverse learners. Specifically, the four districts approached the three facets of the district learning improvement agenda, noted in the Introduction (see Figure 1), in six ways:

***System of instructional guidance and support:*** The districts...

1. *Aligned their learning improvement goals with state expectations*, especially as expressed in state learning standards and associated assessments.
2. *Emphasized differentiation of instruction and instructional support* on multiple levels (district, school, classroom) as a central means to achieving the learning improvement agenda goals.
3. *Sought to strengthen instructional leadership* and other ways of enhancing instructional support.

***Assessment and accountability system:*** The districts...

4. *Anchored the district's improvement work to multiple assessments connected to clear and demanding accountability systems* that reflect, but often go beyond, state and federal expectations.

***Press for data-based practice:*** The districts...

5. *Instituted a centralized data warehousing and instructional management system* to assist with the collection and analysis of student data.
6. *Encouraged and supported the use of this data*, by creating incentives and offered varying degrees of assistance to encourage the use of data in schools.

In promoting these features, the four districts were mirroring a pattern that has become apparent in accounts of high-performing districts over the past decade (e.g., Cawelti & Protheroe, 2001; Snipes et al., 2002; Hightower, Knapp, Marsh, & McLaughlin, 2002; Togneri & Anderson, 2003; Supovitz, 2005; Walsh, 2006). Though most of these accounts predate the current period of intensive, federally driven accountability, the district reforms they describe nonetheless place considerable emphasis on alignment, accountability, data systems, and data use. However, they do not explore in much detail, or at all, how school leaders have understood, internalized, or otherwise responded to the joint set of potential influences pre-

sented by the district environments. Nor do these accounts help us see what the most recent phase of standards-based reform, with the federal No Child Left Behind Act in full swing, means for the effort to lead schools in a learning-focused way. That is a task we take on in this report, but to give school-level activities and responses greater meaning, we elaborate on common features of the district environment in these sites.

## **Commonalities in Instructional Guidance and Support**

The districts were careful to align their learning improvement agendas with state expectations, as expressed in both statewide student learning standards and in the assessments that the state system required for demonstrating learning. A district leader in Norwalk-La Mirada, when speaking of that district's ambitious literacy initiative, said, "You can do all the literacy in the world, but if it isn't tied to the appropriate standards, you're not going to see a difference." In response to a question on the district's strategies for meeting its goals, the same leader mentioned that, through the intentional effort to align curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment,

There's more deliberateness about what we do. And it was [deliberate] before, but now there's a... deeper deliberateness. The principal's accountability is deeper. My work with the principals is deeper. We are also looking at the match with our assessment pieces to make sure that our [state] benchmark assessments are the benchmarks that had the highest payoff, and the questions in those benchmarks are going to give us the real information we need to make certain that [the students] can be successful on their state testing.

The pattern in this district and state resembled that in the others we studied. In the Atlanta Public Schools, for example, teacher leaders (the Instructional Liaison Specialists, described in more detail in Chapter 3) spent much time aligning district and school curriculum plans and resources with the Georgia Performance Standards. Similarly, in the Springfield Public Schools, teacher leaders (Instructional Leadership Specialists) took on a key role in district-led efforts to align curriculum through pacing guides and model lesson materials. In both districts, and in the other districts we studied school reviews and improvement planning prominently featured state standards and district curricular priorities.

In short, district leaders made the state (and federal) expectations for learning a centerpiece of their own expectations of schools. And they placed faith in the supposed alignment of the system elements, assuming that if they, too, aligned

curriculum, pedagogy, and assessments, then schools would receive and be able to respond to consistent reform messages.

### **Pervasive emphasis on differentiation of instruction and instructional support**

*The four districts, each in its own way, sent the message that, to reach standards, teachers, school leaders, and others who provided support to schools should differentiate their efforts to offer needed—and appropriately different—assistance or guidance to learners, teachers, or units in question.* Thus, the districts focused attention on individuals and subgroups to ascertain how to differentiate teaching practices, support, and goal setting for each school, based on evidence of progress toward standards.

The push for differentiation came in a variety of forms. Springfield district material defined a successful school as one that “has clear goals against which it measures progress in terms of both current status and growth over time.” These measures were meant to help school staff identify and contrast the progress of particular children, thereby laying the foundation for appropriate and different interventions. The New York City Department of Education’s *Cycle of Continuous Improvement* pursued the same goal through a far more elaborate system, combining school progress reports, periodic assessments, external reviews, and an internal school-based inquiry process that made it possible to “use student-level information to drive instructional interventions and align resources accordingly,” in an apparently continuous loop. The periodic assessments, happening every 6 weeks across the school year, for instance, were specifically designed to enable staff to “identify a student’s strengths and weaknesses on a timely basis” and “better target and differentiate classroom instruction.”

Driven by expectations from No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirements, Springfield Public Schools, for example, differentiated subgroups and specifically highlighted performance goals among its minority students. One of their progress indicators is that African-American and Hispanic students should have a greater rate of increase in the district’s Composite Performance Index scores over a 3-year period. Another goal is that the failure rate of these students on the state’s assessment exam should decline at a faster rate than that of other students during the same time period.

Central office arrangements in Atlanta and New York City encourage several forms of differentiation across the system; these arrangements and their implica-



tions for central office work practice are detailed in a companion report, *Central Office Transformation for District-wide Teaching and Learning Improvement* (Honig et al., forthcoming). In New York's Empowerment Schools Organization, for example, central office staff who work directly with networks of schools are meant to interact in a differentiated way with each school, in response to school requests and what they perceive each school to need. School principals are given increased discretionary resources and authority to enable them to direct attention and resources at those aspects of their schools that they feel need particular forms of help. The assumption is that, given this freedom, school leaders will be more able to figure out and provide what each teacher needs, as each teacher is meant to do vis-à-vis the students they teach.

### **The attempt to strengthen and expand instructional leadership**

Although differing in the best ways to improve teaching and learning, the four districts we studied espoused approaches to learning improvement that link student learning to the improvement of instructional practice and to the guidance and support of individuals and teams with instructional expertise. To that end, the districts have created investment strategies, structures, and other means to encourage a more robust instructional leadership cadre within and across schools. A companion report, *How Leaders Invest Staffing Resources for Learning Improvement* (Plecki et al., 2009), offers a more detailed look at these investment strategies, and later chapters of this report elaborate on what this could mean inside schools.

## **Commonalities in the Districts' Assessment and Accountability Systems**

Because the districts have been in a standards-based reform environment for years, it is not surprising that each district would anchor its improvement efforts to a demanding assessment and accountability system. Each in its own way, the districts have embraced the strict expectations embodied in state and federal systems, and have added to them incrementally to encourage the schools within their jurisdictions to maximum performance. Their assessment and accountability systems shared a number of features:

- The obligatory *annual state assessments* in literacy, mathematics, and sometimes other subjects.
- *Some form of interim assessments* across the school year (e.g., assessment every 6 weeks, periodic formative assessments).

- *Some form of school-by-school “report card” or other public display of performance indicators.*
- *Feedback loops* meant to embed accountability expectations in ongoing practice.
- *Consequences for school administrators* when schools fail to make sufficient (or any) progress.

In New York City, the district with the most elaborate accountability system, these elements were designed for educators to appraise and self-correct their practice, as an official communication from the chancellor in 2007 explained:

*Our new accountability initiative...creates a number of tools—including progress reports, periodic assessments, an advanced data management system, and school quality reviews—that will help educators recognize strengths and weaknesses of their students and themselves....Quality reviews, assessing how well schools are using information to track student performance and set goals for teaching and learning, were the first element of our accountability initiative to reach us and our colleagues at the school level.*

At the same time, the system projected and reinforced an image of differentiated instructional practice and opening up of practice to public scrutiny:

*The reviews help us to understand which of our schools are doing top-notch work and using data to tailor instruction to meet students’ individual needs and which schools need to make substantial improvements...but starting this year, we will publish results online so that parents and other members of the community can learn about school quality. This will help us, as a community, work to improve our schools.*

## **Commonalities in the Districts’ Press for Data-based Practice**

Naturally enough, assessment and accountability systems presume the ready availability of data (and not just test scores), expertise in understanding and using data, and support for data use. The four districts communicated a desire for teachers and administrators throughout the system to base their practice increasingly on systematic data. They did so by building or expanding data systems and by pursuing various means to encourage data use.

### Setting up data warehousing and instructional management systems

The districts used several prominent strategies to provide timely and repeated data feedback to the schools. In addition to developing formative assessments and other accountability tools, noted above, which could provide a quicker response to educators engaged in instructional decision making, the four districts developed or implemented data software packages designed to bring data to the desks of teachers and school leaders. Specifically, *the districts had set up centralized data warehousing systems designed to provide schools with information for making decisions that would address the achievement gap and maximize student potential, in a differentiated way.* But the intention behind these systems goes far beyond simply providing teachers and administrators with easy access to the most recent round of test scores. The goal was far more ambitious: to create systems that would enable and encourage informed instructional planning and classroom practice. The data system in Atlanta was conceptualized, according to the superintendent, as “a computerized instructional management system that will help schools and classroom teachers determine how their students are performing and adjust teaching strategies to meet their needs.” The superintendent further stated,

Closing the gap between the “as is” and the “to be” is the teacher’s new work.... Our instructional management system will then allow teachers to “mine” for resources right on their desktop computers. Quality schools will create the climate for learning and support teachers in their day-to-day planning and monitoring of student progress.

Springfield Public Schools in Massachusetts enhanced the SASI<sup>4</sup> data system with refinements and documentation as a progress indicator for supporting student learning (*Springfield Public Schools Mission & Goals, 2005–2008*). Norwalk-La Mirada and New York City had the DataDirector<sup>TM</sup><sup>5</sup> and ARIS<sup>6</sup> systems, respectively, which are similarly designed to provide district and school personnel with direct and timely access to student data and related instructional resources. Data, data access and display, and data dissemination were thus central elements to the learning improvement aims of these districts.

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<sup>4</sup> Owned by Pearson, SASI is a graphical, distributed student management system that can run on a variety of relational database platforms.

<sup>5</sup> DataDirector<sup>TM</sup> (Riverside Publishing) is an online data and assessment management system.

<sup>6</sup> Developed for New York City by IBM, the Achievement Reporting and Innovation System (ARIS) was designed to provide educators with a consolidated view of student learning-related data and tools to collaborate and share knowledge about how to accelerate student learning; <http://schools.nyc.gov/Accountability/SchoolReports/ARIS/default.htm>.

### Encouraging and supporting the use of data

To help educators use data for these accountability and instructional purposes, the districts offered tangible support for data use in the form of trainings, consulting staff, or even new roles embedded in schools (e.g., acting as a data manager) that would help administrators and teachers develop their capacity for data-based practice. An official in Norwalk-La Mirada explained how he fielded calls from teachers and principals directly:

I get calls from teachers saying how can I do this, how can I do that? I love it because that means there's somebody out there doing something with it. Others are afraid that they're gonna break something and so when I go out there they'll do it, and after that then they start calling—I get more calls. So it seems like the more training I do, the more calls I get.

This comment hinted at the ways that all the districts have committed additional resources to provide, interpret, and communicate the data their respective systems collect on an ongoing basis. Additional resources were targeted to professional development for school leaders in collecting and interpreting data.

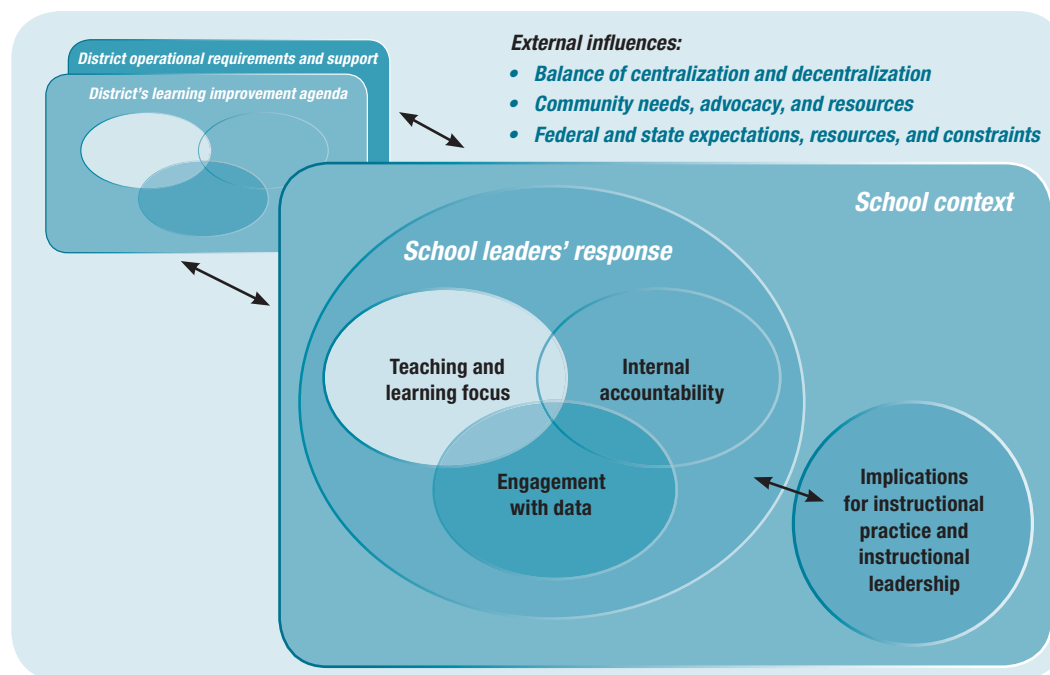
## How School Leaders Engaged and Responded to the Larger Environment

These common features of the district learning improvement agenda, couched in the larger context of state and federal actions and conditions, dominated school leaders' attention in the schools we studied. School leaders either accepted or resisted them, responded reactively to them, or engaged them proactively. With a careful eye on the district agenda, they undertook the work of pursuing a learning improvement agenda that served the specific needs of their schools.

As they did so, three other features of the larger environment, noted in Figure 2, shaped their leadership work. First, because the schools served communities with a distinctive character, the configuration of community needs, interests, and advocacy caught the school leaders' attention in various ways, as did the material, intellectual, and cultural resources within their respective communities. Second, as suggested in the Introduction, the management of these schools raised a number of operational issues—maintaining aging facilities, handling the placement of special needs students, taking care of personnel transactions, ordering supplies, and many more—that took on special complexity in these urban school systems. How their

environment made operational demands on them and how or whether it offered assistance in addressing the school's operational issues affected the school leaders' ability to pursue a learning improvement agenda. Third, the balance between centralization and decentralization struck by the district's approach to reform affected the discretion of school decision makers (not to mention the amount of discretionary resources available to them), further enabling or constraining their efforts to guide instructional improvement as they saw fit. Unlike the district's learning improvement agenda, these three elements—community influences, operational management system, and degree of school-level discretion—varied considerably across the districts we studied.

**Figure 2. School Leaders' Response to the Larger Environment**



Within this busy and demanding environment, school leaders looked for productive ways to pursue their work. Their responses to these influences can be categorized into four themes, each related not only to a major element of the larger environment, but also to the joint effect of these elements. The leaders (1) engaged the environment of instructional guidance and support by searching for coherent images of instructional practice and instructional leadership; (2) responded to the external assessment and accountability system by developing the school's *internal* accountability system and culture; (3) engaged the district's press for data-based practice by modeling and promoting engagement with data in their everyday work;

and (4) interacted with external operational demands and support systems by trying to keep their operational and instructional responsibilities in balance and constructively related to one another.

## Engaging the Environment of Instructional Guidance and Support

Whether in administrative positions or formal or informal teacher leadership roles, the school leaders relied on the larger environment to answer these questions: What are we to teach? How can we best teach it? How can we guide and support our teachers' efforts to teach effectively? The answers took different forms, depending on the state learning standards; the district's stance towards specific, prescriptive instructional guidance; and the availability of other groups (e.g., third-party organizations, universities) that could offer ideas and assistance. A default set of answers also lay in the assessment and accountability system.

**School leaders sought out external ideas about good instruction as a basic reference point for instructional improvement work in the school, not only from the district, but also from third-party reform support organizations, university-based sources, and peer networks.**

Either initiated by outside entities or sought out by the schools, instructionally focused directives, guidance, or support came from units within the district central office, from a wide range of external partners, peer and professional networks, and from wider collegial conversations about good instructional practice. Sometimes the messages from the environment were specific and directive; other times, more open ended.

On one end of a continuum, school leaders encountered a persistent and pervasive emphasis by the school district on a particular curriculum and how to teach it—for example, balanced literacy in Norwalk-La Mirada. On the other end, school leaders in New York City Empowerment Schools received no specific messages about what to teach or how, but rather a generalized insistence that student achievement improve, as measured by various systemwide assessments. New York's school leaders also had access to an array of resources for instructional guidance or assistance,<sup>7</sup> and responded accordingly. When the district,

<sup>7</sup> The prior regional arrangement in New York City had provided specific guidance about teaching mathematics and literacy, which school leaders may have continued to rely on for some ideas about what should be taught. In addition, the laissez-faire stance towards instructional improvement may be changing in the NYC/Empowerment Schools Organization (ESO): In the summer of 2008, the ESO created an Instructional Framework, whereby it sought to stimulate conversations with school leaders about the improvement of instruction.

quite literally, told school leaders what teachers should be teaching and how, as in Norwalk-La Mirada, leaders internalized the message and used the array of district-provided instructional supports (e.g., regular principal cadre meetings) to help them work with teachers on this externally directed agenda. When the district was less specific about the content to be taught or the manner in which to teach it, school leaders went looking for specificity elsewhere, as noted in Vignette 1.

## Vignette 1

### *Seeking Out External Instructional Guidance and Support*

Empowered by a new district arrangement that gave them increased discretion over instructional improvement activities, as well as some discretionary resources, two schools in New York City pursued different paths, each of which connected the school's learning improvement agenda with a specific set of intellectual resources and professional development experiences located outside the district central office.

**School A:** School leaders and staff in this small elementary school got interested in an approach to critical thinking as a new way to organize literacy instruction around characteristics of writing, and as an opportunity to learn how to increase the generation and use of student-level data. After teachers attended a summer institute, received training in a particular critical-thinking model, and implemented what they had learned, the leadership team noticed that students were still underperforming in math reasoning. After casting around for appropriate resources, the principal hired consultants from the Critical Thinking Foundation in the San Francisco Bay Area to work with her staff. A field-worker noted:

*Veteran teachers who participated in the Critical Thinking summer institute described it as “life changing.” This work focuses on teaching teachers analytic skills as it trains them to teach students to use these skills. It is a comprehensive model for how to think about what it means to learn something. It seemed intellectually challenging for the teach-*

*ers to fully understand the depth of what it has to offer: many of the teachers we observed participating in the professional development sessions were struggling to understand and organize the numerous elements in the thinking model.*

*Not uncommonly, many of the teachers participated in learning at the practical strategy level, focused on what they would do with children when they got back to their rooms that afternoon.*

**School B:** This small high school serving a linguistically diverse student population encountered numerous issues within the curriculum with the lack of connection across grades, as well as with state standards and the periodic assessments that the district requires of the school. The principal contracted with an external organization to do a series of “curriculum mapping” exercises in each subject area, to link an articulated picture of the curriculum with the school's efforts to differentiate instruction. The principal noted:

With the differentiated instruction and the curriculum mapping, teachers are talking, teachers are meeting more to see how they can do more of an integrated curriculum, but also they're able to have conversations about kids. If I tell you, okay, Johnny's really struggling in ESL and you're the native language arts teacher and I find out he's really struggling in his native language, too, [then] we know that it's not just because he's not ready to move forward in English; it's a literacy skill overall.



*Yet no matter how directive the district was concerning instructional improvement activities, school leaders turned to their peer networks (a resource that some districts actively encouraged) for ideas and assistance.* The transfer of ideas into action could be swift. The potential power of peer networks, well documented in the case of teacher networks (e.g., Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996) and more recently in situations of “lateral accountability” (Cobb & Rallis, 2008), appear to be operating for both school administrators and teacher leaders. One source of ideas for instructional improvement was visits to other, higher-performing schools. For example:

*Two administrators (principal and assistant principal) from a New York City elementary school visited a school across town to observe implementation of a literacy program. The quality of the work displayed on the walls of the school impressed them, and during this visit the school leaders learned new practices suggested by the principal, the coach, and teachers. Within minutes of returning to their school, they had called a grade-level meeting and had begun sharing what they had learned. By later the next day, there were conversations all around the school related to these new practices that teachers were excited to try out.*

The potential impact of these visits was echoed by a Norwalk-La Mirada teacher, who commented on a similar visit in her district to a high-performing school:

I couldn’t believe how advanced the students were there; no matter what classroom I went into, there was such a high level of achievement, high level of understanding, high level of engagement. I felt like the teachers and administration just have these high expectations and the students rose to [meet] those. So that encouraged me. I came away from there thinking I’m going to expect more of my students and I did—I raised the bar.

These visits were only one way in which the peer and professional network among school leaders across the district and even beyond it could communicate messages about the ways to improve learning.

*External messages about instructional improvement came with varying degrees of specificity and direction.* On the highly specific end of the continuum, school leaders tended to appreciate the clarity, while at the same time they or their staff might express resistance. The literacy initiative in Norwalk-La Mirada was a case in point, and is a classic example of the “pros and cons of telling teachers what to do” (Porter, 1989). On the one hand, the focus and clarity of the literacy initiative



objective (“Nine out of ten students reading at grade level”) proved quite helpful in both defining and communicating a school’s learning improvement goals. One teacher indicated her appreciation: “The district is very clear: this is important, this is what we value, and we’re going to put our money into it and provide you with supplies.” On the other hand, a number of other school staff viewed the literacy initiative as a constraint on professional learning and creativity, as another teacher explained:

With the whole literacy initiative thing and what we’re doing, I just really feel like that’s the only thing I’m being taught for the past 3 or 4 years rather than being given other opportunities to maybe go for professional development and to teaching seminars and things like that.

There were pockets of resistance to the initiative, which leaders spent time managing. One instructional coach noted that some teachers felt threatened by the initiative: “It’s just that idea that somehow they’re going to be invaded....”

In the absence of specificity from the larger environment about what to teach and how, the school leadership team might create it. Concerned about their teachers’ movement through the cycle of balanced literacy units across the year, the literacy coaching team in one New York City elementary school created a set of pacing guides that aligned with the annual assessments. In contrast, Instructional Leadership Specialists (ILSs) in Springfield were handed prescriptive curriculum pacing guides and lesson plans developed by the district with teacher participation, which these teacher leaders saw as a useful tool in some respects, though they felt that the prescriptive nature of the district’s scripted lesson plans could get in the way of good teaching by prompting a cookie-cutter approach to teaching. Rather than slavishly following what the scripted lessons called for, the ILSs adapted them or helped teachers do the same.

*Alongside the instructionally specific guidance and support, from whatever external sources, a continual default message about instructional improvement came from the district (and state) assessment and accountability system.* In short, the assessment results highlighted particular aspects of the literacy and math curricula, and sometimes other tested subjects that needed attention. Though unspecific about how to better teach fractions or the use of context clues in reading, the assessment results that counted in the accountability system directed the attention of the school’s instructional improvement activities, as school leaders responded to external expectations for performance.

## Engaging an Environment of Performance Expectations: The Development of Internal School Accountability

No matter what specific messages were sent them about instructional improvement, nor how much discretion they were given over improvement activities, school leaders were intensely aware of—and responsive to—the combination of district, state, and federal performance expectations, along with an assessment system and a set of consequences for students, staff, and schools tied to performance. Their simultaneous efforts to respond to outside expectations while creating or strengthening the school’s internal accountability are instructive. Unlike research prior to NCLB that has found these two unlikely to coexist productively (e.g., Ingram, Louis, & Schroeder, 2004; Neumann, King, & Rigdon, 1997), these schools seem to exemplify a productive integration of external and internal accountability systems.

**The school leaders we studied used the environment of high expectations to develop the internal accountability system within the school. They did so by (1) attending to and internalizing external performance expectations; (2) raising and spreading high expectations among teachers and students; (3) increasing professional exposure and feedback; and (4) building accountable cultures.**

As we show below, school leaders’ actions in response to their accountability environments moved their schools beyond the pattern of “atomistic accountability,” in which responsibility for student learning is largely the responsibility of individual teachers (Elmore, 2004), to one in which school staff understood they had a collective responsibility for student learning, and there were specific mechanisms to encourage them to meet that responsibility.

### Attending to and internalizing external expectations

In one sense, the accountability systems in the districts were having the desired effect. School leaders were paying close attention to student achievement expectations that were both established outside the school and largely focused on student’s annual test scores. *In no schools were external accountability expectations far from the center of school leaders’ learning improvement agendas, nor from their sense of how their own work as leaders would be assessed.*

In Atlanta, the school district established targets for each school, schools were compared to themselves from year to year, and principals understood that if they didn’t *move* students they were likely to be demoted. One principal put it this way:

The district has set even higher targets than the state. Your targets are based on your school and your school only, and they're designed so that you will show continuous progress. And so you're constantly being compared to yourself.... I can't quote exactly to you the number of students that we have to move into each area, but it's my understanding that since we made 76% of our targets, at least the targets will not be as difficult as they were last year when our percent was 82. The higher your percent, the harder the targets and the more difficult.

In New York City (NYC), where the school district had developed a value-added formula to calculate student achievement gains from year to year, schools were compared to groups of other schools with a similar student population profile. From 2007–08 on, the principals in NYC were graded on their students' progress, in both a School Quality Review and a Progress Report. The more telling grade appeared in the latter report; there, even if many aspects about the school were working effectively, lack of gains for any segment of the population could be the cause of a D or F grade, as two of our schools found to their consternation. A technology coach in one of the schools observed:

[Becoming an Empowerment School] puts more pressure on [the principal] because if we mess up, he messed up and then he's fired. So that's really the empowerment [system]—when we turned empowerment, we realized that the risk is all him actually, or us—if we don't work hard enough, we're going to lose him, but it's more pressure on him than it is on us.

Even in a system like Norwalk-La Mirada, which did not have an explicit student gains target to meet each year, there was a clear professional obligation to increase the school's API score (a state ranking that compares school performance to others of similar size, place, and population).

*While meeting school district accountability expectations could be challenging, in no case was meeting these external expectations the whole focus of the school's learning improvement agenda.* Principals and other leaders were remarkably able to attend to multiple dimensions of a learning agenda at the same time, as one literacy coach noted:

It's not just about the number 800, but it's about what it represents. It represents all students making achievement gains, our English learners and our students with needs. I don't want people to think that it's all about the test score; it's what's behind the test score.

That could even mean pursuing learning improvement priorities that were not closely aligned with what the accountability system captured, as in one New York City school that was developing a dual-language, bilingual program with the goal of getting all students academically fluent in two languages, or another that was restructuring into multiple small learning communities, each with a distinctive purpose built around different configurations of multiple intelligences. During a recent round of accountability testing, the principals in these schools received low or failing grades, suggesting there may be a cost, at least in the short term, to placing less priority on accountability expectations. In each case, the school made adjustments in its focus and priorities for the 2008–09 year to maximize attention to the measures that count, while not losing sight of the other school goals.

Bringing accountability expectations into the school started with the stance taken by the school principal toward these demands. Most often, *the school leaders clearly embraced the district's expectations and made them their own. In these schools, principals talked with dedication and commitment about raising student achievement as the central goal of their school.* Typically, what the district and the school principal expected were seamlessly connected, as a Norwalk-La Mirada principal noted:

[The district's expectation] is my expectation...and that's going to be a concerted effort by all of my administrative staff. We're going to have to start getting into those department meetings and actually sitting there and seeing if they're doing the collaboration. And not just as a department, but as a grade level within that department.

The generally high degree of ownership of district accountability expectations by the principals we studied probably reflects our selection process, outlined in the Introduction. That said, not all principals owned the accountability expectations to the same degree; some communicated clearly that the accountability system reflected someone else's expectation. But all accepted the goal of boosting student achievement as valid and important.

Having internalizing external expectations, some school leaders used them intentionally to accomplish other goals. In responding to district expectations that he focus instructional leadership on improving literacy instruction, one principal in Norwalk-La Mirada made a point of teaching teachers how to collaborate in their instructional planning and set up occasions for them to continue collaborative work in relation to literacy teaching. He thus used this mandated professional

development to leverage a larger goal of creating a schoolwide collaborative learning community for students and teachers.

### **Spreading high expectations among the school's teachers and students**

The fact that the school principals accepted, and even actively embraced, the larger system's expectations for school performance was no guarantee that these expectations would be shared by school staff or by students. Recognizing that their staffs varied in what they felt they could expect of themselves and their students, *the school leaders worked on raising expectations inside the school for what teachers should expect from students and what students should expect of their own academic performance, while aligning these expectations with external accountability requirements.* In one sense, these leaders were doing something that has long been established for “effective” or “high-performing” urban schools (Purkey & Smith, 1983; Levine & Lezotte, 1991), but they were doing so with explicit reference to an external set of expectations. This could take several forms:

- Clarifying expectations for student achievement in finer and finer detail, through the use of day-by-day pacing calendars, curriculum maps, grade-level benchmark documents, and classroom assessments, many of which were copied from the released items from the district and state summative assessments.
- Cultivating teachers' interest in meeting or exceeding expectations set for students and for the teachers themselves by the district or state.
- Drawing the community's attention to the urgent need to meet external expectations.
- Demonstrating what high, external expectations looked like in practice, and offering the means to learn how to reach them.

All these steps meant spreading the ownership of high expectations and engaging the staff on multiple fronts. To accomplish this, the principals nurtured a cadre of instructional leaders within the school, as described in Chapters 2 and 3. Often, this in-house leadership cadre emerged informally among staff who were already exceeding district (or state) expectations in their teaching. *By tapping these accomplished teaching staff, and orchestrating occasions that allowed teachers to influence each others' practice, the work of raising expectations could be both motivating and visible, in ways that helped other staff actually try out practices that embodied these expectations,* as one teacher put it:

Seeing the proof was really when you tried it on and it really did work. I think that for most people that's the way it is. You can try something on and then you say to the district, "This is stupid. This doesn't work. These kids aren't more engaged. You're wasting your money." But when you can see it actually work and kids are involved, then that's all you need.

Seeing was not always believing, and in some schools, certain staff approached the matter with well-entrenched beliefs that caused them to actively resist the press for high-standard, accountable practice. For example, in one high school the principal put some of the most resistant teachers on professional development teams where they met two full days a month with a professional developer to learn new instructional strategies, plan lessons together, and observe each other teaching the lessons. Including resistant teachers clearly made the work of the professional developer, literacy coach, and team more difficult, but it sent a clear message that *all* the teachers, no matter how negative or resistant, were expected to improve their instructional practice. At the close of the data collection period, even the most resistant teachers we had observed in this high school were softening their resistance and actually experimenting with some of the practices in their classrooms.

### **Increasing professional exposure and feedback**

At the core of these schools' internal accountability systems was the idea that teaching practice was public, subject to inspection by various people who could provide guidance and feedback, and a regular topic of collegial conversation. In short, *principals and others offering instructional leadership in the school multiplied the occasions when teaching practice was observed, discussed, and commented on*, a matter we will explore in greater detail in Chapters 2 and 3. The tone was set by the larger system of review and feedback, which encouraged the school to develop an internal accountability system, as illustrated in Vignette 2.

### **Building an accountable school culture, aligned with external expectations**

*Prompted in part by external accountability expectations and in part by their desire to realize a more effective form of school practice, school leaders worked on developing accountable cultures within their schools that aligned with the external systems.* Accountable school cultures took different forms. In the crudest version, the culture emphasized a kind of quid pro quo exchange between principal and staff—in which the principal was saying, in effect: "I hire the teachers and tell them, 'I will

## Vignette 2

### *Setting the Tone for Constructive Scrutiny of School Practices*

Evaluative activities that provided specific, practical, and immediate guidance or feedback, such as in the School Quality Review (SQR) process in New York City, was widely appreciated by the school leaders we studied. SQR offers schools multidimensional feedback on various aspects of instructional practice and leadership support. Modeled on the system of school inspections now in use in the United Kingdom, a three-person assessment team rates each school on five dimensions of school quality, and provides specific recommendations for improvement on: (1) data-based practice, (2) data-informed planning and goal setting, (3) alignment of instructional strategy and resources with goals, (4) alignment of school capacity building with goals, and (5) monitoring of individual student learning with appropriate adjustments to accelerate student learning, as needed. This principal's views of the ways he finds this process to be helpful reiterated the experience at other schools:

[The SQR] does a lot. I mean it's a one and a half day visit. So again, it's as bad as a test in the sense that it's a real snapshot. But I like the process of it

because really they're judging you against your own evaluation of the school. So I mean what a quality review judges in my opinion is, how well does the school know itself and how well does a school know what it needs to do next and is the school reflective of that? And so what the process did for me the last 2 years—it was very affirming in the sense of a lot of the stuff that I put down the reviewer saw... the review itself is thorough enough that you can't fake it totally and I'm proud that the last year's, both the reviewers, the feedback I got has been like, "You really know the school well, you've analyzed the problems," and a lot of the next steps that they're giving me are next steps that I've already thought of or already articulated. And so they're just—it gives me faith that I'm going in the right direction as a school leader and that I'm making the right decisions and that we are growing in the right way.

This principal and others confirmed that the thorough, onsite process, while nerve-racking, gets at what was really happening at the school, and both validates practice as well as highlights specific aspects that could be improved. As another principal put it, "You cannot put on a show for it."

give you everything you ask for to do your job, as long as you give me what I need, which is no Level 1s' [students performing at the lowest level of proficiency]."

Beyond providing for teachers' material needs, however, within-school accountability cultures could presume that the leader would help teachers meet their *professional learning* needs, in exchange for effective classroom practice. In so doing, they appeared to be establishing a form of collective "professional accountability" (Adams & Kirst, 1999; Leithwood, 2005), albeit one that was clearly influenced by a largely bureaucratic accountability system outside the school. We saw this set of mutual obligations around professional learning and classroom performance in various forms, but it was most thoroughly developed in one school district that, over the course of our observations, negotiated new language for the teachers' contract that held teachers accountable for demonstrating what the



district-sponsored professional development had taught them to do. School leaders could then use this part of the teachers' contract as part of their school accountability system.

A less formalized, more reciprocal accountable school culture placed greater emphasis on connecting individual responsibility to a shared *collective* responsibility. Such school cultures have been described in weak accountability systems (Elmore, 2004) and in settings in which no clear link to external accountability was discernible (Neumann et al., 1997); in the schools we studied, accountable school cultures were growing within a strong district accountability system. In one New York City Empowerment School, staff noted that high expectations, assessment-focused practice, and collaboration went hand in hand, a set of connections reinforced by the principal, who "pays attention to the grade meetings to see the collegiality that takes place there and the focus that takes place there." The mutual accountability relationships developing in this instance seemed to increase both leaders' and staff's capacities to pursue high expectations.

### **Engaging the District's Press for Data-based Practice**

The schools' attempts to improve instruction and develop accountable cultures were intimately connected to the use of data. While not all schools were equally immersed in data, school leaders—the principal, assistant principals, and teacher leaders—were at the center of a growing pattern of data use. We describe particular forms of data use later in the report. In Chapter 2, for example, we review how the school principal and other supervisory leaders used data to focus and anchor the school's improvement work, as well as to keep themselves tuned to what was happening in classrooms. In Chapter 3, we show how teacher leaders found data of several kinds (e.g., test scores, student work samples) to be a convenient and productive entry point for developing working relationships with teachers, not all of whom initially welcomed the teacher leaders' presence. Here, we offer several observations on the connections between data use and the district press for data-based practice.

First, *data provided by the district was a central part of the interaction between school leaders and other school staff.* The in-house, often informal data systems created within a number of the schools we studied set up ways for staff to track the assessment performance data on each child. A common device was a data book—a large binder containing a cumulative picture of each student's performance on all available measures (not only the annual state or city assessment, but also various



interim measures)—which was used by teachers, assessment coordinators, and others to check progress and plan ways to improve student’s learning. That said, the district-provided data was not always user friendly—in one instance, lengthy spreadsheets of item-by-item test scores for each child were tedious and hard to interpret, necessitating an elaborate reformatting by central office staff before the school principal and coaches in question could make use of them. In other instances, school staff created their own ways of charting ongoing performance (including immediately scanning in Op-scan sheets students had filled in during state assessments, before returning them to the district, so that the school had immediate access to assessment results).

Second, *school leaders participated in various forms of district-provided assistance to sharpen their data literacy and to assist with specific data-related matters*, sometimes at the school’s request, sometimes prompted by district central office staff. The most elaborate example of this occurred in New York City, where school-based “inquiry teams” (generally composed of teacher leaders plus one or more administrators) were trained in a yearlong “inquiry cycle” process, aimed at diagnosing and intervening in the educational programs of a designated group of struggling students.

**As they built accountable cultures and systems within their schools, principals and other leaders found data to be a convenient and versatile resource for instructional improvement work. What is more, regular use of data provided a vehicle for school leaders to link their own improvement visions with the larger improvement agenda of the district.**

Third, *school leaders frequently talked about data use in connection with their instructional improvement work* in ways that were clearly traceable to a larger system of expectations and support, in which data figured prominently. An Atlanta principal described her school this way:

We are a data-driven school....The data is used to drive the instruction, to make sure that students who are not performing are receiving remediation in order to get to where they should be. Now [the facilitator] and [the Instructional Liaison Specialist] look more at the “target tracker” and our “red alert” forms that are turned in weekly, which show student progress.... They’re assessment documents documenting where the children are, what interventions are being used to help move them, if they are performing [low], where they should be on certain standards....Red alerts alert

us to which students are having weaknesses, and as I stated, teachers are to provide interventions or strategies to help move them forward.

In this instance, the school had fully internalized the district's aspiration that data be regularly consulted to establish how well students were doing and to identify where they needed extra help. Though not all systems were as meticulous or continuous as the red alert system in this school, they had a similar motivation and comparable effects.

### **Engaging External Operational Demands and Support Systems Alongside Instructional Improvement Work**

As has long been recognized in the literature on the school principalship, a constant tension exists between what these leaders view as “operational” matters and their instructional leadership activities. Despite a goal of maximizing the latter, a Norwalk-La Mirada principal acknowledged that, while he and his assistant principal tried to average three to five classroom walk-throughs in a day,

I'm going to be realistic—that's not going to happen, because there's so much management that we have to do here. Once we get back to the office, it's like pulling teeth trying to get us back out into classrooms.

A representative array of such management matters from the schools we visited, displayed in Table 2, reflects the long-recognized daily urgencies of schooling in urban settings (Sanders, 1999; Payne, 2008). In combination, these matters contributed to a good deal of the complexity of leadership in the school.

School administrators often were involved in these tasks, even though the school might have built up a capacity to manage these matters—dedicated business managers in the school office (full or part time), technology coordinators, testing coordinators, assistant principals or deans who could handle disciplinary matters, parent coordinators who could handle many interactions with parents, office staff to do (some of) the compliance reporting, and in one instance, a School Administrative Manager (SAM), an additional administrator who was there to free up the principal for more instructional leadership work.

*Key elements of the larger environment—specifically, the district central office, as well as state and federal policies—were both a cause of the management complexity and a source of assistance for dealing with it.* Central office systems could be complex, with many people and departments responsible for different operational

Table 2. Operational Management Matters Consuming School Leaders' Time

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Budget</i>: Making sure to respect different requirements of government categorical versus other pots of money; maximizing the use of allocated funds.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Recruitment and hiring</i>: Locating suitable applicants, processing applicants, creating new positions.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Other personnel management</i>: Managing leaves, absences, and benefits.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Facility</i>: Fixing leaks, repairing faulty equipment or broken windows, exterminating pests, managing space, remodeling or repairing significant damage (e.g., a small fire in one school office), etc.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Procurement</i>: Finding approved vendors, accessing other contractors, purchasing supplies, getting purchase orders approved.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Legal advice</i>: Staying legal in staff discipline or firing; approaching student discipline legally, especially when serious consequences might ensue.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Student placement</i>: Negotiating the placement of special needs students assigned to the school, complying with special rules governing special education and English language learner services.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Other student support services</i>: Managing nutrition services, managing discipline issues.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Compliance reporting</i>: Filing appropriate and timely reports with the district, city, or state throughout the year (20 in October alone for one district), concerning roster verification, facility space utilization, immunization.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Community and parent connections</i>: Responding to irate parents, arranging translation services, maintaining adequate home communications.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Technology support</i>: Rewiring the building, repairing laptops, setting up appropriate software on laptops for classroom use.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Testing coordination</i>: Administering and overseeing testing in the building, verifying participation in testing, securing test booklets on time and in the right numbers.</li> </ul>

functions, as one New York City principal explained, concerning whom he goes to for operational assistance: “It depends on what the issue is. You tell me the elevator’s broken. There’s an elevator guy. If you tell me we need an exterminator, there’s an exterminator guy.” The multiplicity of departments could also mean proliferation of rules, requirements, and necessary communication links implied in dealing with operational matters, and the response time of the system could be very slow, as another principal noted who had had standing work orders to the district for over a decade to get the electricity fixed in her aging building. She welcomed the move to Empowerment School status, because now she could initiate her own outside contracts to get this service.

**The school's ability to pursue a learning improvement agenda rested, in part, on how smoothly and responsively the district's operational support system took care of business, how well the school had developed its routines for attending to these matters, and how well the school leaders understood the instructional ramifications and dimensions of "operational" work.**

At the same time, the district central office offered an operational support system that touched on, or could touch on, virtually every item in Table 2. Someone or some procedure was there to help the school deal with the issues, if needed, or was required to be involved in order to address the issues (e.g., by approving a purchase or service request, sending out someone to do the work, by giving permission for a waiver, and so on). *From the school leaders' point of view, the keys to the success of the operational support systems were flexibility, responsiveness, and simplicity.* In addition to flexibility in the face of requirements, noted above, school leaders looked for and appreciated responsiveness where they encountered it.

Even when handled smoothly or responsively, these matters could distract greatly from the instructional improvement work of the school, at least the work that designated administrators could do. The school

leaders who understood this and found ways to treat operational matters as an instructionally related decision were able to provide an additional and welcome support for teaching and learning, as in one elementary school where the incoming principal prioritized facilities improvement matters—improving the auditorium stage to enable dance practice and performances; making it possible to subdivide the gymnasium into four separated sections to enable simultaneous physical education activities by four different classes; and converting an underutilized classroom into a well-equipped scientific laboratory space. Each of these actions addressed a shortcoming of an aging school building and involved complicated transactions with an operational support system, yet they were driven by the goal of enhancing the learning experiences of students across the academic curriculum.

## Implications for Instructional Practice and School-based Instructional Leadership

Leadership responses to accountability expectations, the press for data-based practice, and instructionally specific support had identifiable implications for instructional practice, and the school's attempts to guide or redirect it. In short, the act of responding to these external influences pushed school leaders to (1) focus and align the curriculum, and, in some respects, narrow it as well; (2) provide a language for thinking about student learning; and (3) adapt instruction to accommodate better the different needs of individual students.

### Focusing, Aligning, and Narrowing the Curriculum

Though states differed in the specificity and salience of their student learning standards, state content and accountability standards (or the district's interpretation of these standards) were a driving force behind the direction and form that instructional leadership—and hence instruction—took at the school and classroom level. *All schools had engaged in some attempts to align the instructional practices, content, and classroom assessment with the state standards and tests.* And the result was clearly felt at the classroom level. A teacher in Norwalk-La Mirada noted:

The whole shift has changed from teachers teaching whatever they want to. Now ... everything that you do has to be aligned with what the state says you have to teach and if it's not, you're not doing your job. So we now have to take a very close look at what the state says that we must be teaching in the classroom, and that's just not for [my] grade—we're talking from kindergarten all the way through 12th grade, and there's a progression that happens.

This sort of alignment of instruction with external expectations about what should be taught and with ways of measuring progress, as well as alignment across grades within the school, was supported or directed by school leaders in a variety of ways, among them:

- Study groups examining standards documents to determine more concretely what they might imply for instruction.
- Regular attention to benchmark documents and benchmark assessments.
- Reference to, and adaptation of, district scope-and-sequence guidelines.
- Construction of pacing guides, or use of ones created by the district.

- Engagement of staff in “curriculum mapping” activities, which charted the links between standards and curricular activities or emphases across grades.
- Periodic assessments keyed to annual city and state testing.
- Use of scripted lesson plans linked to districts and state learning targets.

In each instance, instructional leaders in the school were using tools created at the district level or elsewhere to draw attention in a more concrete, coherent way to what to teach, as an instructional coach in Atlanta explained:

We’d been teaching the objectives ...but not really knowing how to dissect what the standard means and what it actually is that the students are supposed to learn and bring back. That’s been our main focus this year—really understanding the standard and seeing how it’s aligned.

Alignment also meant connecting what teachers did across grades within the school, so that each year’s teaching built optimally on what preceded it and connected to the next grade level. The coach continued:

**Principals and others taking on leadership roles in the school were using externally defined content standards, assessments, accountability expectations, and associated curricular guidance or tools to focus instructional content and to draw teachers’ attention toward particular facets of instructional practice.**

We’ve been doing a lot of vertical planning this year. In years past, every grade level was pretty much doing what they needed to do according to their standards, and now we’ve aligned everything to where they come into the next grade level. So we’ll see by the time the sixth grade class makes it to eighth grade, they should be at a different point.

The alignment of curriculum across grades and to state and/or district standards and assessments had a focusing effect. Specifically, as one principal in New York City put it, efforts to orient instructional improvement activities around the district’s learning improvement agenda could enable teachers to focus on pedagogy rather than the development of curriculum content.

Because focusing always means making decisions about what *not* to teach as well as what to teach, valued aspects of the curriculum could be sacrificed or downplayed. In line with studies demonstrating that high-stakes standardized testing

tends to narrow the curriculum being taught (Herman, 2004), school leaders in these schools were often guiding such decisions in ways that limited the range of what was taught (sometimes with controversy), while connecting what was taught more closely with what would be tested. One instructional meeting we observed at a Norwalk-La Mirada school documented this kind of leadership intervention:

*The sixth-grade team wants to teach Huck Finn. The principal comes in to explain a decision made by the literacy leaders that sixth grade will not be teaching this novel. The concern is that the book is too complex to teach in a short period of time. Further, one of the main standards for sixth grade is to be able to identify the forms of fiction and describe the major characteristics of each form. The students will be tested on this standard in November on a districtwide writing prompt to assess narrative writing. The leaders feel that the team doesn't have enough time to master that standard if they do a whole class novel. Instead, they decide to develop 20 mini-lessons about how to read a novel.*

While acknowledging the difficult decisions that could arise, leaders in the schools we studied showed some concern about the narrowness of the curriculum that was being taught. *Understandably, in aligning and focusing the curriculum, the instructional strategies and content that directly addressed student test performance got top priority.* This pattern is more noticeable in districts in which schools have greater discretion over their instructional program, as in New York City Empowerment Schools. For example, one such school which was developing an arts-based “thinking” curriculum emphasizing activities keyed to the students’ “multiple intelligences,” had to pay greater attention to instruction that would most directly contribute to sustained gains in student test scores.

Focusing on improving test performance could mean “test prep” in the narrow sense of the term (getting students used to testing formats, having them practice test taking, concentrating on skills that most directly matched the form and content of likely test items). Doing so could pay off, as a principal of a New York City high school explained:

We have intervention plans in place such as our math tutoring right now, which is very intensive. We're trying to get the kids prepared for the state math test. When we were preparing the kids for the Regents, we had like a whole week of all-day studying and we had kids in study groups and all types of stuff, so it came out... they did well.

Other school leaders in New York have adjusted their course offerings and school schedules to increase activities that will raise test scores for all students, though they don't love the idea of test prep. One principal shares:

This year we have a test prep unit, so basically December, whatever books they were reading stopped and they did test prep and the kids hate it, and the teachers hate it....Next year, it's only going to be two periods of art because we're adding more writing periods....Right now the kids get 10 periods of English Language Arts (ELA) and that includes reading and writing. What we're noticing is that we need a distinct writing course for mechanics and really just the technical aspects of writing. We also need some periods for things like testing, interim assessments, test preparation that take away from the fun part of literacy instruction....So they went from 10 periods of ELA to [where] we're scaling that back to eight periods of ELA but then adding four periods of distinct writing/test prep into the curriculum.

The net effect in this school was to maximize curricular time for literacy (eight plus four periods per week) and math (10 periods a week), while limiting time for others, such as science and social studies (five periods each) or art (two periods). Atlanta schools offered a modified version of this strategy, by specifically targeting students who were struggling in curricular areas such as math and science that the district had identified for improvement, and offering them a double dose of the targeted subject in remedial periods that did not replace the regular instruction (but did replace something else deemed more expendable, such as art or physical education).

### **New Ways of Looking at Student Learning: The Language of “Gaps,” “Gains,” and “Moving” Students**

The language used in the case study schools to talk about student learning placed great emphasis on measurable *gaps* in knowledge (e.g., as indicated by missing particular items on a test), measurable *gains* (e.g., from one year's performance level to the next), and the goal of *moving* students from one level of performance to another. This language permeated school leaders' conversations about their work with teachers, regardless of the district context. A midlevel leader in Norwalk-La Mirada elementary school described her responsibilities this way:

So how do you get everybody to where they need to be to help us raise our test scores? I think that's another big challenge: getting those test scores up and making sure that all the students are learning and achieving and getting a quality education. I think those are the two big ones: the test scores and just making sure



everybody is getting to that point, and getting what they need...and that they feel supported.

Similarly, when asked about her school's learning priorities, a grade-level team leader in Atlanta answered,

The main focus, I think, is definitely just to move students. I mean even if they're in third grade, if they came to you reading at a second-grade level, by the end of the year, of course, you're trying to get them up to the level because they still have to take the third-grade test. But just being able to have data to document the fact that they are moving, whether or not it's at the pace that the next student is moving, just so long as you're able to show growth in the student.

**While the school leaders would be the first to acknowledge that there is a difference between test performance and learning, the language school leaders used to characterize instructional improvement focused attention on measurable progress, and at the same time, their efforts to support it often equated student learning with test performance.**

At the root of it, this language for talking about student learning is sustained not only by the larger framework of accountability expectations within which school leaders work, but also by the *metric* that test results offer school leaders for pinpointing what students have or have not mastered. This metric gave educators a more precise way to know their students, as another New York principal observed, in describing how she explains data usage to her staff:

You know your kids, but where's the data?  
Because you might know them—there's two ways of knowing them, knowing them socially and then academically. And sometimes in the classrooms there's so many kids especially, how do you know exactly what they know, so that you really *know* them...but [you do know them] if you have hard data in front of you with literacy and math, and you know this is specifically what they know.

A principal in Atlanta echoed the thought, as she described getting her teachers focused on a regular way of knowing who was meeting expectations and who was not—the “meets kids,” the “exceeds kids,” and the “needs improvement kids”—through frequent, quick appraisals of their progress.

## An Emphasis on Differentiating Instruction

A natural accompaniment to the language of data-based attention to gaps, gains, and moving students was the attention school leaders paid to the individual student. Here, they were systematically emphasizing that individual students within the same grade or classroom differ in what they have mastered, how they approach learning, and what supports they need to succeed at learning tasks. In various ways, the leaders were pushing the idea of differentiating instruction, in similar ways to (and often in alignment with) the district emphasis on differentiation, noted earlier in the chapter.

**As part of paying increased attention to data, school leaders were attempting to help teachers recognize the differences among students and to engage them in differentiated ways that optimally met each student's needs.**

In simplest form, the differentiation of instruction that school leaders sought to inculcate addressed low test scores by targeting instruction to measured gaps in particular students' knowledge, identified by test score item analysis or some in-class assessment. The approach was straightforward, as a teacher leader in one of the Atlanta schools explained:

Let's say we did a skill last week and some students didn't do well on the quiz—that would be their focus in their center activities. And then I kind of monitor and see...some teams are...reassessed the very next week, and some students I wait maybe 2 weeks to reassess them. So they're

working on the skills—that's what their homework is about, because every student doesn't have the same homework. So they may have that homework as practice and they get reassessed either the following week or the week after that. So it just depends on how they're grasping it.

Depending on what the student might respond best to, different approaches might be used to reteach the material, and then, by retesting the students, the results could be determined. In some schools, students were regrouped for interventions or given additional help (e.g., through after-school tutorial, extended-day enrichment classes), while in other schools differentiation was individualized within the classroom.

The effort to promote differentiated instruction could rest on a broader logic than simply helping each child reach proficiency on particular gaps in tested material. In one school in New York City, school leaders and staff spent a year in multiple

professional development sessions exploring the meaning of differentiated instruction, stimulated first by reading a book on this topic, and then by making the differentiation of classroom lesson plans and instructional activities a focus of supervisory visits to classrooms by assistant principals. One assistant principal gave this example of her feedback to a teacher in an informal classroom visit late in the school year:

There was a fourth-grade teacher who gave a lesson and I didn't see much differentiation in instruction and that's what we had focused on this year. So I said, well let's sit down and talk about how could you have made this lesson a little different for the high group or the low group? Could you have incorporated maybe some more hands-on activities? How could you have changed it for the kids who finish early? What could you have done for the lower-point group who couldn't quite get it?

All of this took place in the context of a larger set of conversations across the school about students' multiple intelligences and a move to restructure the school into separate academies defined by different configurations of these intelligences—thereby allowing instructors to adapt their teaching to these systematic differences in the way their students approached learning. This kind of structural response to enabling the differentiation of instruction through “academy” arrangements was mirrored in the efforts of elementary, middle, and high schools in three of our four districts.

In schools working to meet the same district expectations, different leaders chose different approaches to addressing gaps in students' knowledge in a differentiated way. For example, one school leader explained his choice to end homogeneous classroom grouping in his school, while another school in the same district determined that ability grouping (through homogeneous within-classroom groups) was exactly the tool they needed to meet external expectations. We found contrasting choices in many areas: scripted curriculum versus teacher-made units of study; co-teaching arrangements versus serial teacher arrangements; extended-day instruction versus interventions inside the school day; pullout interventions versus push-in interventions. The contrasts among these efforts to differentiate student learning experiences may reflect different theories of how to help a diverse student population learn, a casting about for alternatives that might work, or a lack of clarity about what differentiation might mean.

## Reflections on Working Within a Larger Environment of Direction, Guidance, and Support

The core of these leaders' ability to focus their energies and that of their school staffs on learning improvement reflected their singular treatment of the larger environment as a means to further their own improvement aims. Whether they were responding to accountability pressures, advice from a district staff member who was there to guide data-based practice, a worried parent concerned about a child's access to math or science knowledge, or an external resource group invited to help with professional development, their attention was mainly directed at the implications of these influences for learning and, specifically, for the learning of a diverse population of students.

Cumulatively, the forces and conditions of the larger environment had a focusing effect on leaders' efforts and, through their work, on the instructional practice of the schools. Performance of particular children mattered. How certain segments of the school population fared on a particular assessment instrument mattered. Mastery of particular demonstrable skills mattered. And tools (often rooted in data) were available for generating specific insights into these issues, at least for identifying where work needed to be done. By treating these matters as central and related aspects of the school's work, the leaders' response to these environmental forces and conditions appeared to have identifiable implications for instructional practice.

Ultimately, *the stance most of these leaders took was to treat the larger environment as a source of opportunities, resources, and potentially helpful ideas, more than as a site of roadblocks, unhelpful advice, and unreachable requirements.* In a similar vein, school leaders viewed the young people who walked in the door every morning as resources, challenges, and opportunities for learning and growth. And to enable that growth, they approached the human resources of the school staff in a comparable way: as a pool of leadership potential, and as capable professionals who could and would learn what they needed to learn to reach the next rung in the performance ladder.

Perhaps because of the stance they took toward the outside world, the school leaders we studied appeared to prosper, on balance, in remarkably different environments. *The sharply different configurations of authority, direction, and support in which they worked seemed to enable school leaders' efforts in often similar ways.* In short, there appears to be more than one way of supporting

learning-focused leadership in schools. There may also be more than one way to learn to do this work—therein lies a set of implications that we will take up in the report’s concluding chapter. But first, in the next two chapters, we take a closer look at the actual work of the schools’ leadership cadres.

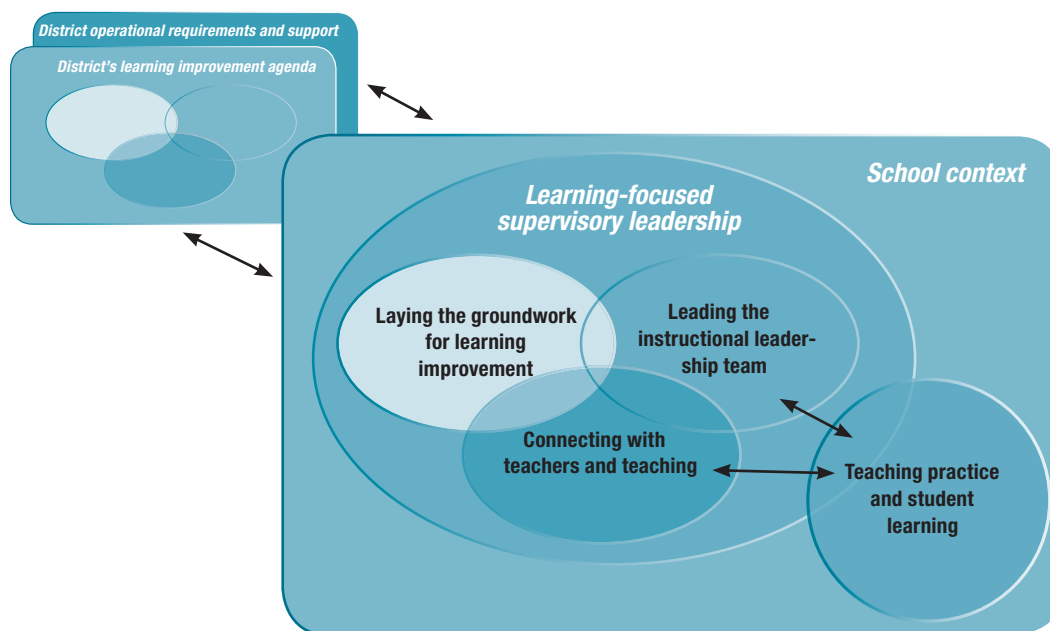
## Chapter 2

# Steering the School's Learning Improvement Agenda: The Work of Principals and Other Supervisory Leaders

The work of principals and other supervisory leaders in leading the learning improvement agenda has both historic roots and emerging characteristics. Principals have long been charged with both the managerial tasks of a safe and well-run facility while simultaneously being the chief instructional leader of the school. In this chapter, we outline the array of leadership activities that principals and others with supervisory responsibilities undertake to advance the learning improvement work of the school.

The leaders we studied were doing far more than responding to, or engaging, the larger environment, as described in the preceding chapter. They were guiding and participating in a process of creating *the school's own learning improvement agenda*, and then doing what they could, along with their colleagues, to realize that agenda. As they did so, the principals and other supervisory leaders were simultaneously engaged in three interrelated spheres of activity that together embodied the exercise of learning-focused leadership in their schools. These interrelated leadership actions are portrayed in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Supervisory Leadership in Pursuit of the School's Learning Improvement Agenda



First, they were *laying the groundwork for learning improvement* in the school and for their leadership work to pursue this goal, through goal setting, culture building, data use, and other means. Second, they were *connecting with teachers and classrooms directly and continuously* in a variety of ways, by shifting the pattern of the annual evaluation cycle to one of largely ongoing and informal interactions with teachers. But third, and more important perhaps, they were *forging and leading an instructional leadership team* rather than a collection of individuals, and finding a voice as principal in this collective work. Throughout the chapter, we explain each of these dimensions. Together, the net effect of all three of these areas of activity was a healthy *distribution of instructional leadership* of the school, as noted in the Introduction.

## Laying the Groundwork for Learning Improvement

As noted in Chapter 1, districts are holding schools, and ultimately principals, accountable. Not surprisingly, in the schools we studied, principals and other supervisory leaders placed great emphasis on teacher practice and the outcomes of student learning, as measured by district and state testing. One Atlanta principal often told the teachers at her school, “If the students are not succeeding, guess who’s failing? You are.” Echoing a “no excuses” interpretation of the goal of helping all children to succeed (Corbett, Wilson, & Williams, 2002), this message of teachers’ responsibility for learning outcomes was consistently expressed across schools, on district websites, and in other ways.

In response to district expectations and their own visions of what their schools needed, *principals and other supervisory leaders typically approached their work with a vision of themselves as leaders of a schoolwide and school-specific learning improvement agenda. This agenda involved many people and a range of activities that activated the school—and, in particular, the teacher leaders described in Chapter 3—in pursuit of learning improvement priorities.* Here the supervisory leaders’ work, especially that of the principal, features (1) assembling and developing a high-quality teaching staff; (2) establishing and legitimizing schoolwide learning priorities; (3) developing trust and a team-oriented culture among staff about learning improvement; and (4) using data to focus and anchor improvement work (Copland, 2003; Drago-Severson, 2007). In short, these leaders found ways to articulate and communicate compelling priorities for improvement work that all members of the school community could grasp and accept.

## Assembling and Developing a High-Quality Teaching Staff

As any good principal might do no matter what the setting, these principals were committed to assembling and developing a high-quality teaching staff, by whatever definition of “quality” they held and was supported by their district. But given the fact they were not often in a position to handpick their school staff, they invested a large amount of energy and time in growing their teaching staffs by finding suitable individuals to join them, nurturing them once they came, actively adjusting teaching assignments to give teachers the best chance to match their skills with their responsibilities, and at the same time, aggressively weeding out individuals who did not show the capacity to grow (within the limits of collective bargaining

**In seeking to assemble a high-quality staff, these principals used the hiring process to support teaching and learning that responded to the challenges of working with a high-poverty urban population and to the particular circumstances of their schools.**

and district personnel policies). Supervisory leaders in these schools concentrated effort on new teacher support, ensuring that new teachers had one or more teacher mentors. In addition, other instructional leaders generally gave priority to new teachers when determining whom they needed to work with and support. Many also spoke about differentiating support for teachers based on their particular needs.

Regarding qualities to look for when hiring new teachers, one principal emphasized the importance of teachers’ speaking languages spoken by students and families, knowing the community, and understanding poverty-related issues. Another principal, when asked what qualities he looks for in new teachers, stated:

Intelligence. Self-starter. High standards for themselves. Respect by their colleagues. Loyalty, absolutely, because if I’m going to give someone that type of authority, I have to know that they’re going to be doing things that they know—implicitly that I’m going to be satisfied with them and not somehow creating divisions in the school. You have to know your players.

A principal of a school in Springfield with a large Latino student population and predominantly white female teachers spoke about hiring more Latino teachers. A principal in Atlanta summed up what she avoided when hiring new teachers: “No slackers allowed.” In New York City, one principal communicated the following to new teacher candidates:



I [say to them]: “You’ll also hear people tell you I’ll do anything to support your teaching, and the minutiae and the other stuff stays away from your door, but you have to come in here understanding that I don’t want to hear that ‘they can’t’ or ‘I’ve done everything I can’ or ‘the kids can’t learn’ ... or ‘the family’s not doing their job,’ because there’s no room for [those ideas here].”

To find the “right” people, principals used various resources (Papa & Baxter, 2008). Some relied on people who have relationships with existing school staff. Others enlisted paraprofessionals, student teachers, or “proven” substitute teachers to be classroom teachers at their schools. For example, one middle school principal invested in “temporary” or long-term substitutes when the administrative team saw promise in them as potential teachers at the school, treating them as staff, providing them staff development, arranging for them to observe strong teachers, and providing coaching, even before they had a permanent position. In one middle school, at least six teachers over the last 2 years had specifically chosen the school after having substituted in other schools, both within and outside the district, based on the way they were treated at the school and their perception that the school leader had a clear and compelling vision for education. Alternatively, a principal and her administrative team might prefer to train or retrain their veteran teachers or grow their own teachers from the community, while others leaned more heavily on sources such as Teach for America, which provided generally energetic staff, albeit temporary and relatively inexperienced teachers. (One principal hosted Teach for America orientations at his summer school, enabling him to look over the incoming group and invite the most promising to join his staff.)

Principals strategically used retired teachers, substitutes, and support staff—such as paraprofessionals, school aides, coaches, intervention teachers, and specialist teachers (e.g., physical education)—to support professional development for other teachers in the building. For example, one elementary school principal in New York City moved specialist teachers into classrooms when the regular classroom teacher was out, and placed the substitute teachers in the specialists’ classes so that no group of students was with a substitute for more than about an hour a day. Specialist teachers, who knew all the children and the culture and traditions of the school, were better able to create a productive learning day for students when their teacher was out than substitutes, who often had difficulty controlling the class. Other principals were quick to note the low quality of teaching by some substitutes, which could be a deterrent to release teachers for work with a consultant, or to observe a master teacher at work. The presence of additional credentialed

teachers in the building, e.g., for teaching enrichment classes, could also give some flexibility for deploying teachers and enabling them to take advantage of professional learning opportunities.

*While constantly seeking to engage their staffs in opportunities for further developing their skills and capacities, principals kept a wary eye out for incompetence, and had a repertoire of strategies for dealing with teaching staff who showed little promise or inclination of improving.* In addition to hiring the kinds of teachers they want at their schools and using staffing strategies to support teacher learning and improvement, some principals also used various strategies to remove teachers with unsatisfactory performance or, in a few instances, to move the teacher to a position in which they could “do the least damage.” The process of watching for incompetence could be systematic, as one Atlanta principal noted:

That observation instrument has been key to my [decisions about] renewing [anyone] that I feel is a first-quintile teacher, because if I go in and I’m doing a formal observation I will have my assistant principal do an informal and then we switch back and forth so she’s doing a formal. And that’s how sometimes we’ll go in just to see what we’re both seeing. You do your notes, I do my notes, and then when we complete the document, it’ll pretty much show the same thing.... [A teacher might not] seem to have what it takes after we’ve done collegial observations [for the teacher], provided mentors, retired people—just a number of things and just no improvement.

**Though operating in different district systems and schools, supervisory leaders promoted certain priorities in common: high expectations for both teaching practice and student performance; alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessments; staff collaboration; and the development of a distributed instructional leadership capacity.**

## **Establishing and Legitimizing Schoolwide Learning Priorities**

A schoolwide learning improvement agenda presumes that staff share some priorities. The principals we studied actively articulated such an agenda—an agenda that bore close connections to the district’s learning improvement agenda, as explained in Chapter 1.

### **Prioritizing belief in student and staff capabilities**

We have already noted in the preceding chapter how school leaders internalized and spread the high expectations assumed by the district’s learning

improvement agenda. But in so doing, they were responding as much to deeply held core beliefs as to external expectations about student capabilities and the school's capacity to improve these capabilities. *The high expectations were rooted, first of all, in a persistent and publicly declared belief that all students can succeed, and to do so meant improving both academic performance and behavior.* A number of principals across our sites emphasized discipline and order at their schools in addition to prioritizing student support and academic rigor; others inserted “character education” or its equivalent into the curriculum as a means of teaching appropriate ways for students to manage their behavior. The combined message about students was powerful, and how it was heard by teachers echoes the conclusions of a long line of research on the role of beliefs in effective schools and schooling (e.g., Levine & Lezotte, 1990; Corbett et al., 2002; Zohar, Degani, & Vaaknin, 2001). A middle school teacher described how the administrative team's high expectations had translated into what she expected of herself and her students:

My expectations have increased every year. I've learned that as long as you support them, there is really nothing [the students] can't do, no matter what their language level is. I know the expectations in my class have changed. I think they've changed schoolwide. The conversations I now have with my colleagues are no longer resignation with low scores—instead of “They are still just writing summaries,” now it's “How do we get them to analyze?”

### **Prioritizing the alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment across grades and content areas**

The alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessments across grades and content areas held high priority as a means to improve instruction and test scores. Though teachers were playing the primary role in this work, at most schools administrators or other instructional leaders were working alongside teachers to guide and support them in achieving this alignment. One middle school teacher acknowledged that during her first 2 years of teaching, staff meetings and team meetings sometimes felt like a waste of time because “everyone was doing something different.” Once she and her colleagues developed grade-level “curriculum maps,” their team meetings had greater focus and teachers began asking for more team time.

### **Prioritizing collaboration**

The method for achieving alignment often meant working together to figure out where and how to coordinate effort. Principals and other supervisory leaders commonly expressed a desire or expectation for the school to work together as a team, a community, a family. A school administrator in Atlanta explained this emphasis on collaboration:

From what I have seen with collaborations...those teams that come together and they collaborate and plan and make those decisions and bring their problems or ideas to the table, I'm saying that they work like a well-oiled machine, and the result of that you can see that in student behavior, student conduct, and student achievement.

Specifically, principals expected teachers to collaborate with one other and with administrative staff on various activities geared towards improving instruction and student performance, such as developing and aligning curriculum, instructional practices, and assessments; problem solving; and participating in peer observations. Many schools also expected collaboration among administrators and across the school in general.

### **Prioritizing instructional leadership as a normal feature of school life**

To legitimize the efforts of teacher leaders (Watson & Scribner, 2007) and others who offered instructional support, supervisory leaders also placed priority on normalizing instructional leadership at their schools. To accomplish this goal, principals created and supported teacher leadership positions (see Chapter 3), as well as recasted supervisory positions themselves, as one middle school principal noted:

A big part of the reason I'm doing this structure is I'm trying to think of the future—you know [one of the assistant principals is] retiring at the end of next year and so what kind of structure do I want to put into place when a new assistant principal [AP] comes in...the next AP I want to bring in, I don't want them to be a person who does lunch duty. I need them to be really pushing instruction and focusing on that. I need them to be seen in that role, not in the disciplinary role.... I don't think we support the teachers as much as they necessarily need to be supported all the time.

### **Melding priorities into a school-specific learning agenda**

Though there were remarkable similarities across schools (and districts) in what the leaders prioritized for improvement work, *the combination of priorities in a given school took on a unique character, and often reflected specific goals, interests, or theories of improvement held by the staff.* Thus, the New York City school that had committed itself to developing different academies, each adapting curriculum and instruction to accommodate different configurations of multiple intelligences, brought expectations, alignment, collaboration, and instructional leadership to bear on this locally important goal.

### **Developing Trust and Community**

Along with assembling a staff and establishing learning improvement priorities, laying the groundwork for learning improvement meant persistently communicating the priorities, while at the same time developing trust and a more cohesive community among members of the school staff. In this regard, specific conversations with individual teachers were accompanied by broader communications that helped to set the tone, establish expectations, and communicate the school's mission and goals, both schoolwide goals and those specific to particular grades, teachers, and students. For example, an Atlanta principal who worked very closely with her staff placed high priority on clearly communicating the purpose and rationale behind the work she asked them to do. She understood that they needed to understand and believe in the work themselves to perform their jobs to the best of their ability, as she explained:

I did a presentation with my staff last week about why it's so important for you to understand your pedagogy and your area of specialization...because if you don't know how to organize your own thoughts, you're not going to be able to do it for children....I'm just a lead teacher in the building and that's what teaching is all about, helping others—you are taking what you know and imparting it to others. And how effectively you do that will determine the quality of teacher that you are, and I never lose sight of that.

#### **Trust building**

*Taking specific steps to build trust—between leaders and other staff, among staff more generally, and with other stakeholders—was one key to achieving a sense of community in support of schoolwide learning improvement work.* The efforts to emphasize informal connections in the classroom, described later in this chapter,

were among the ways that leaders with a supervisory role worked on building trust (Orr, Byrne-Jimenez, McFarlane, & Brown, 2005). In many of the schools, leaders espoused the idea that “everyone is a teacher,” and that understanding the work and experiences of teaching and bringing the teacher’s perspective into instructional leadership work can be very powerful for the development of trust and credibility between instructional leaders and teachers.

Having or creating open-door policies across their schools could also enhance the leaders’ prospects for engendering a sense of trust. Leaders were continually accessible to staff, students, and families, and teachers opened their doors to other teachers and instructional leaders. One middle school principal in New York City described his open-door approach to his own leadership and its connection to fostering leadership across the building:

I try to model, and I really do use feedback in all its forms to make my decisions as a school leader. So in that sense, the idea is that there’s access, pretty much open access to me. And the fact that I listen to the staff and I take what they say pretty seriously means that anybody who is willing to open their mouth can be a faculty leader of the school and be in an influential position. You know if I don’t hear you, it’s hard for me to know that, but if I do, then your concerns are definitely going to be heard and probably acted upon, in the sense that it will affect school policy.

**To counter the tendencies toward teacher isolation, negative energy, and fragmented effort in the school, school leaders worked to develop team-oriented cultures, where everyone was expected to do their part as members of one or more teams and work together toward the same goals.**

Other principals and supervisory leaders described communicating attention to teachers’ needs and respect for their concerns through regular hallway conversations, casual interactions, invitations to accompany them to a meeting out of the building, and other means of maximizing the communication between supervisory leaders and staff. The net effect appeared to be more connected and trustful staff.

### **Building team-oriented cultures**

Building trust among school staff depended on the school leaders’ efforts to realize the schoolwide priority placed on collaboration. The idea or value of working collaboratively—on teams, working groups, standing or ad hoc committees—had not

always been well established in the schools we studied. The reasons for dysfunctional working cultures in urban schools are understandable and have been well documented (e.g., Payne, 2008). Alongside their efforts to prioritize collaboration and address trust in the building, the principals, aided by other administrative staff, made improvement of the work culture a central target of their efforts to lead a learning improvement agenda. Some had arrived at their job feeling that they needed to change a toxic culture at the school to do what they needed to do. Others spoke of “building a culture,” “moving toward a culture,” or “leading a culture change.”

Some schools had already made significant cultural changes, while others continued to be a work in progress. Some of the cultural challenges, or what they identified as needing to change, included teacher isolation and closed doors, “negative teachers,” “maverick teachers,” uncommitted teachers, and teacher resistance.

To foster this kind of culture, supervisory leaders focused on both creating a positive school climate and building a sense of community in the school. At schools where teamwork across the school was evident, principals were deliberate about creating a positive environment and encouraging school staff to work together and help each other. One teacher noted that her principal “cares about the climate of the whole school,” a comment that could have been made about most the principals we studied. Key aspects of positive school climates included a sense of student and staff safety; respect for all members of the school community, without regard to the professional status or position; an upbeat, welcoming, solution-oriented, no-blame, professional environment; an effort to invite and involve staff in various schoolwide functions; and a parallel outreach to students that engaged and involved them in a variety of activities.

Principals consistently expressed the desire to see teachers working with, learning from, and supporting one another. To create opportunities for teacher collaboration and learning, supervisory leaders across school sites turned to the school schedule to create the time and endorsement for this kind of work to occur. Some principals moved to a block schedule, others gave up administrative meeting time to create more planning time for teachers, while others used the master schedule as a tool to create opportunities and accommodate for various teacher professional development activities, such as “lab sites,” peer observations, grade-level meetings, and professional development sessions.



## Using Data to Focus and Anchor Improvement Work

It was natural enough for principals to be a central figure in the school's use of data, as literature on school-level data use has pointed out (e.g., Supovitz & Klein, 2003; Wayman, Brewer, & Stringfield, 2009). Administrators and teachers consistently alluded to this focus on data, often the testing data on which accountability rested, but also other forms of data that the school staff found meaningful.

**In leading learning improvement, supervisory leaders used data extensively to focus and anchor the improvement work.**

### How supervisory leaders used data

In the schools we studied, *supervisory leaders appeared to be using data in two ways: first, as a means of understanding what was happening in classrooms, both schoolwide and in particular rooms, as a basis for decisions about instructional improvement activities; and second, as a tool to assist teachers (and instructional leaders) in their own teaching (or leadership) practice.*

Of particular use to supervisory leaders was the way data helped them connect to and understand what was happening in classrooms. In the kind of accountability environment these leaders are working in, student progress is measured primarily through tests—state tests, local or periodic assessments, and chapter or other in-house tests—and principals, administrative staff, and teachers spoke consistently about their use of test scores to guide their own teaching or instructional support work. One principal in New York City talked about grade-level supervisors' engagement with standardized test data:

Every person who's in charge of a grade takes the test scores so to heart that the day the scores came in—they came in alphabetically—the people were... Think of it in a school this size: you get the scores back alphabetically without the class, so here [grade-level supervisors] were sitting, taking each kid, [seeing] which class is he in, and then making the lists. So everyone is very much involved, the people in charge of the grades who take it as a referendum on their success, and the individual classroom teacher who takes it as a referendum on what they're doing.

In addition to using data to inform their decisions, supervisory leaders found various ways of encouraging or expecting teachers to use data as a means for informing their practice. One principal in Norwalk-La Mirada explained how she and teachers are using certain types of data at their school:

I have modeled the value of having test data, and also in demonstrating for the teachers and modeling how we're keeping track of our attendance, our suspension, even if it is not achievement data, having that. I have been very pleased with it. ... I believe that there are teachers in grade levels that are using and talking about pre and post [assessment] more on their own initiative than I thought they would. When I spoke to them in December about their benchmark assessments and I met with each of them for about 45 minutes, I was surprised to see what assessments they were using. They will not call it pre and post, but they're calling it assessment. I can tell you that out of 36 teachers, 30 are doing pre and post assessment using the benchmarks.

In various ways, the principals and other supervisory leaders we were studying meant for data to become a medium of instructional practice, and they took steps to encourage its use through specific requirements and tools, as shown in Vignette 3.

### **A pervasive belief in and engagement with data**

Given the district's press for data-based practice and (in most instances) the school leaders' use of data to anchor improvement work, assessment data was a constant topic of conversation in schools, as recent work on instructional leadership

## **Vignette 3**

### ***A Principal Embeds Data Use in Teaching Practice***

A teacher in Atlanta confirmed how her regular use of data had been prompted by her principal:

We have to show data for everything. The principal wants to make sure that you're constantly looking at student data....Every Monday we actually turn in a report of—like for me it would be for math. I would have to write down how many students met the standards and got a certain score, and then I have to also make a separate list of all those students that did not meet the standard because then those students will need to be reassessed and that would need to be recorded. So definitely on a weekly basis.

Her principal explained how she connects student performance goals with teacher use of data:

So they list those students that we look at, and what I've been so pleased about now is that when

they come for these one-on-one conferences, they're bringing their own data that they analyze... the goal is for them to start looking at their data and even on their weekly assessments and seeing what they need to do in order to help all students to be successful....My conversations always center around "Okay, well what's going on with such and such?" And in addition to this, they create hot lists of those critical students at a grade level, but that was where I realized there was the need to drill it [down] to an individual teacher basis, because if you create your grade-level hot list, then I will have problems pinpointing what are you doing for each of these children that are on this list. And so this makes every teacher account for the children who are struggling in their classes and what strategies that they are consistently providing or scaffolding systems that are in place.

is increasingly documenting (Halverson, Grigg, Prichett, & Thomas, 2007). Most school leaders seemed confident that the assessment tools they were using—which typically were provided by the district or state—would help increase student performance. They also seemed confident that if the tools they had now were not the right ones, they would either find or develop something better. In no schools did we find a disregard for data. At worst, we heard school leaders lamenting the limited supply of data or the limited amount of time to work with the data they had. A principal in Springfield listed different kinds of data on which her school depends:

[There are the] district formative assessments, so we have that data. We use the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA)—actually right through fifth grade with our at-risk kids. One of the reasons we push for the literacy and math instructional blocks as much as we do is that those reader and writer workshops really provide ongoing data on the go, that real assessment on the go that helps you to know what your groups are going to be, what your interventions groups look like. Our younger grades have begun to use the Stanford test, but that's about as useful as [the annual state assessment], because it's old and outdated by the time that you get it.

The wealth of available data these systems generated could be both more and less than school leaders wished for. On the one hand, it was a huge challenge to attend to all the information that was available, as one assistant principal in New York City lamented:

We have an overwhelming amount of data now here in the city, and a lot of the teachers don't really know what to do with it, and sometimes it's not very easily accessible, like these periodics and these predictors are supposed to be accessible online, but then the site's down and people get frustrated.

On the other hand, the information that was wanted might not be there when one wanted it (or missing altogether).<sup>8</sup>

Active engagement with data of various kinds seemed to prompt a more focused, improvement-oriented conversation, as exemplified by the following event in a

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<sup>8</sup> For example, appropriate assessment tools for schools interested in supporting academically challenging bilingual instruction were difficult to find and appeared to be difficult to manage, as were periodic assessment instruments for English language learners who were struggling with English-only instruction. Given that federal failure status in each of the districts was tied tightly to the success of these students, principals were seriously concerned about this challenge.

New York City school, set in motion by the principal's insistence that specific plans be laid to address learning improvement needs of particular children:

*We are observing a grade-level teacher meeting in which the teachers each have spreadsheets in front of them to track the progress they and their students are making on a unit of study they had planned together. Conversation quickly moves to what they are going to do next to bring struggling students up to the proficiency level of the rest of the class. Being all on the same page with common measures, this team of teachers decides to assemble a small group of struggling students into an intensified weekly "learning hour" with one of the teachers before the gap in understanding continues to grow.*

*It isn't clear whether or not the data they are considering accurately represents the students' learning issues, but the presence of the data is clearly structuring a different kind of conversation among these teachers than would have been likely or even possible without it. When a teacher strays into the territory of blaming a student for their lack of learning, the group leader redirects the teacher back to the data, asking the teacher what the data tell them their next instructional move should be to support that student.*

This sort of conversation in which teachers were taking responsibility for moving each student along the grade-level expectations was common among the schools we studied.

**School leaders in all the districts had learned to ask useful questions of the data, display data in ways that told compelling stories, and use the data to both structure collaborative inquiry among teachers and provide feedback to students about their progress toward graduation goals.**

In these ways, school leaders and other school staff were using data to ask and answer questions about problems of practice in the school. In one high school, the leadership team members were trying to understand the dropout rate in their school, prompted by a federal expectation that had changed the definition of *dropout* to any student who did not graduate in 4 years of starting as a freshman, a change which appeared to increase the dropout rate substantially. Using data to inquire into the school's "new" dropouts, the leadership team was able to pinpoint particular groups whose early performance in the school (attaining one or more Fs as freshmen) increased their risk of dropping out. This analysis led to a targeted intervention to discontinue the use

of F grades in ninth grade, coupled with activities to ensure that no ninth grader entered 10th grade credit-deficient. Patterns of data use could even transfer from one activity to another, as shown in Vignette 4.

### **Developing in-school capacity for data-based practice**

At the same time that they made use of data in their leadership work, principals and other supervisory leaders were at the center of the development of in-school

## **Vignette 4**

### ***School Leaders' Engagement with Inquiry, Prompted by System Expectations and Accountability Routines***

In one district, school leaders and other staff engaged in inquiry as part of their response to a formal system expectation. In New York City, a mandate in 2007–08 designed to “increase the sphere of success in the school” asked each school to assemble an Inquiry Team which was to collect data on an identified group of struggling students and then to develop and assess a targeted intervention designed to improve these students’ achievement. In all the New York schools we studied, Inquiry Teams formed and took on their task of inquiring into the learners’ struggles, using a variety of inquiry tools—e.g., low-inference observations, teacher and student interviews, review of student work—that heretofore they had not used extensively or at all. The teams varied in their ability to complete the full inquiry and intervention cycle across the school year. Nonetheless, assured by the early evidence, the district called for an expansion of such inquiry activities in the schools during the following school year.

The expansion took different forms: in one school, a low grade on the summer Progress Report prompted the principal and other school leaders to intensify efforts to target and bring up the performance of a group of formerly high performing students who had not made a year’s worth of academic growth in the preceding 12 months. In brief, the principal charged

the school’s Professional Development Team (consisting of literacy and math coaches, assessment coordinators, and assistant principals) to engage in a small-scale inquiry cycle with all the students identified, a replication of the routine established under the school’s Inquiry Team during the preceding year (some of the Professional Development Team members had also been on the Inquiry Team). He said:

I took all the students in the fourth grade English/Language Arts to start with, that lost five or more points and there turned out to be 62 of them. And I divided them among the Professional Development Team and each of us took on five students, looked at their Item Skills Analysis on the test, looked at their Developmental Reading Assessment scores, looked at their classwork, looked at their work folders, interviewed the kids, did some classroom observations, and are coming up with individual plans for each one of those kids. Strategically, I think those are going to be the easiest ones to bring back to where they were. I jokingly refer to it as a little bit of test CPR. Just get in there—they’ve been there already, so getting them back to where they were shouldn’t be that difficult.

Alongside this effort, the school’s Inquiry Team divided themselves among third- and fourth-grade teacher groups to initiate new inquiry activities aimed at the full range of students in each of these grades.

capacity to use data in ways that supported instructional improvement, as contemporary accounts of data-based practice in schools have acknowledged (e.g., Steele & Boudett, 2009; Supovitz & Klein, 2003). The school's data-use capacity could be as simple as purchasing Scantron™ machines (as two schools in New York City did), so that the school could generate immediate results from any round of testing without having to wait for the inevitable delays in receiving data back from the district or elsewhere. But the systems could be much more elaborate, as in one school where the school's data specialist developed the Student Achievement Management System, initially a spreadsheet for the leadership team to consider all the data generated for each student, which translated into a data binder for each teacher. Teachers were trained to track each student's data and to anticipate the next testing cycle through a school assessment calendar. This student data record followed

**Developing data-based routines in the school that were comfortable and adhered to was a major task. To take on this work, school leaders were often developing and managing their own data systems and in-house expertise.**

students through their years in the school to help with vertical grade-to-grade articulation. In schools such as these, the school's data system naturally linked to the school's system of internalized collective accountability. Such homegrown data systems are a step short of the fully visualized models that are being advocated for schoolwide use of data on a sustained basis (e.g., Boudett, City, & Murnane, 2006; Supovitz & Klein, 2003), but they nonetheless stimulated improvement-oriented conversations on a continuing basis across the school and provided a reference point for particular improvement efforts.

School data systems could also offer information of a more formative sort about teachers' practice and accomplishments that informed professional development, and even provide a range of stakeholders—instructional leaders, parents, and the students themselves—a specific reference point for considering what had been, and was yet to be, accomplished, as a Springfield principal shared:

Just before you came [I] met with the math Instructional Leadership Specialist and we kind of went over some of the general trends that we saw in the September results, and she's got some sense of where she needs to be next. I don't know if the kids pointed it out to you, but we actually post the results. We have a data board that's very public, which has been great, because the kids are kind of involved in it, and it gets parents involved. We do that graphically. We break it down both

by content area and by kind of question, so we report out the open-response and multiple-choice differently.

By developing their own in-house staff expertise—e.g., by hiring a teacher to manage the data work, or adding this work to the assignment of an already employed teacher—school leaders took steps to make data more useful and interpretable to teachers. A certain core of expertise was necessary for raw data to be converted into useful insights, and that expertise, as well as the time it took to access, assemble, and interpret data, led to specialized roles within the school, a pattern noted in recent accounts of data-based practice in schools (e.g., Young, 2006). But schools rarely had sufficient internal expertise to begin with, and hence *the development of school data systems and in-school expertise reflected, in part, the availability of expertise outside the school*. In short, external sources of advice, support, or intervention allowed or helped schools make data use a more regular part of practice and address the issues that the data highlighted. With much of the district-provided data, significant new learning could be involved, as not all school leaders were equally literate in the use of data, nor were the districts' systems for making data available equally user friendly.<sup>9</sup> The learning process could simply mean gradually introducing teachers to systems in use at the district level, as noted by one Atlanta principal: “Most of the [district] administration uses [an interactive software system] and they’re getting around to training teams of teachers, and then it’s filtering down to the teachers. And that [system] provides valuable information.” Or it could mean a more active engagement with central office staff who could help school leaders create data systems, ask questions of them, and develop efficient ways of finding answers.

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<sup>9</sup> Elaborate data warehouse systems—designed for classroom use by teachers, schoolwide use by principals, and district-level use—being introduced in two districts (Atlanta, New York City) offered possibilities, but had yet to prove their usefulness or usability in the eyes of school leaders, in part because of the unfamiliar formats and steep learning curve involved.



## Connecting With Teachers and Classrooms Beyond the Annual Evaluation Cycle

**Principals and other supervisory leaders worked on staying connected to instructional practice in both formal and informal ways that moved beyond the annual evaluation cycle that supervisory relationships usually entail.**

In addition to communicating expectations and goals to teachers, supervisory leaders engaged in different kinds of conversations with teachers at their schools, ranging from brief impromptu hallway conversations about a student to official post-observation feedback meetings. As one would expect, principals and assistant principals participated in formal, summative processes (as directed by their respective districts), but they were also using various, more formative practices to give substantive feedback to teachers and retain a connection with what was happening in classrooms. These practices

included informal classroom observations, targeted “learning walks,” and leading and participating in professional development during grade-level and content area meetings, whole staff meetings, or in classrooms with teachers.

### Seeking Formal and Informal Occasions for an Instructional Conversation

In a manner that is common practice in many schools nationwide, the formal teacher evaluation process in these schools typically involved both a pre- and post-observation meeting to discuss the lesson and observation. During the post-observation meeting the supervisory leader usually reviewed the school or district’s evaluation form with the teacher. But the formal observation process could and sometimes did communicate a more supportive stance than is typically the case: in one New York City school, teachers who acted in a nonsupervisory position nevertheless known as “grade supervisors,” along with assistant principals who had supervisory responsibilities, conducted formal classroom observations that communicated a different purpose, as one grade supervisor explained:

The observation is not so much to evaluate them but more to support them... which usually, for tenured teachers, is once a year. We go in and they know what time I’m coming in and we have a pre-observation meeting before, where they let me know what the lesson’s going to be and students that they want me to zoom in on, and so on and so forth; then I come in and they have the lesson and observe them. [When] we meet for a post observation, it’s more—it’s not evaluating



them—it's a more friendly process where they talk about what they think worked, what didn't work, and I give them some suggestions—recommendations, suggestions, and accommodations, and that's it.

Formal observation processes such as these can support capacity-building efforts in a number of ways. Having identified teacher or grade-level and content area team strengths and weaknesses, supervisory leaders were able to address areas of weakness in follow-up conversations and support activities as a means for improving teacher practice. They also could tap areas of strength to direct peer support to other teachers, grade levels, or content areas. Further, school leaders could identify staff members with particular leadership qualities to further develop instructional leadership capacity in the school.

Outside any formal evaluation process, principals and other supervisory leaders observed in classrooms on a regular basis, often through informal classroom observations, which occurred somewhat spontaneously and lasted a few minutes, though sometimes these occasions were more structured. One assistant principal in Atlanta offered an example of the former:

If I'm only in the classroom for 5 minutes—that's observation by walking around. It doesn't have to be 20 minutes or 30 minutes. You can go in and just scan the room and see what you need to see or what you're looking for....I try to organize it such that I'm touching on a little bit of everything daily.

Informal observations were often treated as part of the leaders' daily or weekly routines, in response to identified needs or staff requests or as follow-up to professional development, as a New York elementary principal put it:

Every day we're in classrooms, not teaching, but it's part of our culture that we just walk in all the time so they're used to us....I will sit and I just take notes and the times—see, 3:02; 8:55—so I just walk in and I just sit and see, and then they don't get intimidated because they already know.

An elementary school principal in Norwalk-La Mirada reviewed the different reasons she might observe a classroom—just to stay in touch (“pop in to classrooms”), respond to requests (teacher says “I’m doing this today...can you come in?”), or to check on a particular practice (“I haven’t seen you do a shared reading for a while. Can I? When are you doing one?”). Regular “learning walks” following a preset observation-and-debriefing protocol were used in some instances to check more systematically across classrooms for a particular practice, such as objectives

**The point of both the formal and informal interactions between supervisory leaders and teachers was to generate instructionally specific conversations that gave teachers a clear sense of what to work on and how.**

written on the board or particular instructional strategies leaders wanted teachers to be using.

In one Atlanta school, supervisory leaders used a districtwide evaluation tool for their observations that evaluated teachers on a 4-point scale. The principal explained how she uses this observation tool with teachers:

I met with this teacher last week whom I had observed in her classroom... [with this] new 26 best-practices form that all teachers in the district are evaluated by....I usually just write down everything

I'm seeing, and so when I had the conference with her, this was the feedback that I gave because the whole goal of all of this is ... so that I'm making sure that I'm capturing things and I'm just writing what I see in here only. But then the teacher walks away with this sheet because these are the specific areas where improvement is needed.... And so this document helps you to pinpoint with that teacher because you're telling them what the best practices [are] that you are basically citing them on.

The formality of the instrument could be a problem, and elsewhere principals modified their forms or even chose more informal means to prompt instructional improvement conversations. In one instance, an elementary school principal invited a different teacher each day to send him four students—any four, though preferably not all “star performers”—each bringing something they were working on (often a piece of writing). He spent a half an hour with the students talking over their work, then sought out the teacher at lunch hour and used what he had learned from the students as a way to discuss what they were doing. This activity was scheduled across the year, such that he was able to repeat the cycle three or four times with each classroom.

### **Assuming a Role in Support of Ongoing Professional Learning**

*Supervisory leaders also connected with classroom teachers through professional development, both as leaders and participants.* One principal explained how he works with new teachers through study groups in the fall and spring. During each series of sessions, he and the teachers read a book focused on a particular content area, e.g., writing in the fall and math in the spring, then met regularly and

discussed the book together. A teacher from another school described monthly professional development led by an assistant principal intern:

I think it's once a month we have a morning session—and they do it by subject area—so we have a group of all the math teachers, and it's led by [our intern assistant principal], so he leads our professional development and basically talks about different strategies of differentiation and then has us take our lesson plans and insert or alter them so that they include those strategies, and we kind of practice doing that. Then we bring them in and teach them in our own classes, and then, in the next session, we'll talk about how it went or how we've been able to work those strategies into our teaching on a more consistent basis.

The supervisory leaders' professional development work could happen in classrooms as well, though their time was typically limited to observing teachers. Some of these leaders modeled instruction or coached teachers, working with small groups of students or teaching lessons, as an assistant principal recounted:

And so I provide teachers with support, and that support could be in the form of doing professional development or one on one. It could be in the form of having a workshop or an eighth-grade and Special Education team meeting. It could be in the form of modeling for a teacher, co-teaching with a teacher—really whatever the teacher's needs are in order for him or her to work with students. I'm here to make sure they get whatever they need.

While most supervisory leaders described these kinds of practices as professional development for teachers, one principal highlighted the kind of professional learning she experienced through her work with teachers and students in classrooms:

For example, when we had the reading and writing workshop, in order for me to supervise anybody, I had to understand what the teachers were going through. They were learning it, I was learning it. So, I taught because I wanted them also to see, because I knew [they would be thinking], “You don't know how to teach it; you don't know what we're going through.” So the assistant principal and I both taught lessons. And also when I've seen in the past teachers struggling maybe in testing grades, and I'll go there ...and I start teaching the class.

This principal also attended professional development sessions with teachers to ensure they were up to speed instructionally and could provide effective modeling and coaching in classrooms.

Not all the principals were equally adept at guiding professional development or modeling effective instruction. In such instances, they tended to delegate this work to others in the building who had these skills. As such, they could still exercise a measure of instructional leadership.

## Principals as Leaders of Instructional Leadership Teams

Whatever their skills at and propensity for working directly with teachers, in and out of the classroom, the principals and other supervisory leaders understood the limits of their own capacity to serve the instructional improvement needs of the entire school, as established by research on the principalship (Portin, DeArmond, Gundlach, & Schneider, 2003). As one assistant principal in an elementary school put it:

My intention for the day is always to be in classrooms. The reality of my day, most of the time, is dealing with discipline problems or going to meetings, or like today, I'm meeting with you and this afternoon I have the [arts organization meeting].... As far as my informal [interaction] or the walk-throughs that I plan, a lot of times those are disrupted by discipline problems, a parent's here, or we have to do this meeting, or this has to go out today—those kinds of things.

The size and complexity of the school, not to mention limitations on the principal's base of instructional expertise, prohibited the principal from providing direct instructional support to all teachers who needed it. Furthermore, the sharing of a learning improvement agenda presumed and was nurtured by a team-oriented culture, which principals were fostering, as noted earlier. The kinds of conversations that would help school staff focus on instructional improvement were, and needed to be, mediated by whatever team structures were in place or could be developed.

**Leading a learning improvement agenda meant working with—and through—a team of individuals, all of whom were engaged in instructional leadership.**

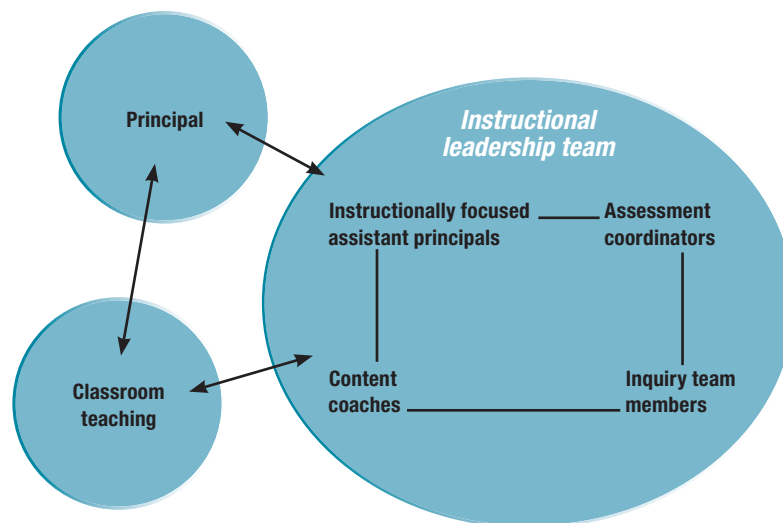
For all these things to happen productively and in a mutually reinforcing way, *principals needed to act, and see themselves, as leaders of an instructional leadership team as much as, or more than, the sole or chief instructional leader of the school.* Our data point to three facets of this important responsibility: (1) forging one or more teams with instructional leadership as their central responsibility; (2) finding

the principal's own role and voice in this team configuration; and (3) explicitly inviting and nurturing leadership skills and capacity.

## Forging One or More Instructional Leadership Teams

It is not a foregone conclusion that multiple people in the building exercising some form of instructional leadership will be a net benefit to the school. In fact, given the ambiguities and tensions that frequently accompany emerging teacher leadership roles, it would be easy for different individuals to work at cross-purposes, fail to take advantage of each others' expertise, or simply miss the opportunity to be a *team*—that is, more than the sum of the parts. Figure 4 illustrates the question confronting the principal of a large New York City elementary school: with four different kinds of instructional leaders at work in his building, how were they to understand the work that each other was doing, and meld their efforts so that teachers were receiving consistent and coherent guidance and support across the building?

Figure 4. How Well Does the Instructional Leadership Team Function?



While the figure hints at the challenges in forging a leadership team in this situation, it also suggests the enormous potential that resides in a well-functioning instructional leadership team. In this case, more than a dozen individuals devoting full or part time to instructional leadership activities could substantially magnify the principal's influence on instructional improvement.

Most of the principals we studied were well aware of these possibilities and took steps to create and sustain viable instructional leadership teams. Of particular importance were the following:

- *Setting the stage for work as a team*, by building schoolwide culture and establishing priorities that explicitly called for collaborative work. Principals could make it clear that working together was the name of the game in their school buildings.
- *Managing the distribution of expertise*. By recognizing and formalizing complementary strengths and expertise, members of the instructional leadership team could develop interdependence. In the case above, particular individuals had extensive experience working with data, while others did not; some were steeped in balanced literacy instruction, while others were not; and so on. The team structure created regular occasions for the members to tap each others' expertise and to bring their collective expertise to bear on central problems of instructional improvement practice.
- *Structuring and hosting regular team dialogue about teaching and learning*. While the members of the team participated on different team structures across the building, all were members of a cross-cutting Professional Development Team that met weekly, convened by the principal. He saw this team as his primary vehicle for guiding the instructional improvement work of the school, and used it as a teaching opportunity on numerous occasions.
- *Adjusting team members' roles to accommodate their experience and learning*. In part as a way of managing the ambiguities in learning-focused teacher leadership roles and in part as a response to unanticipated developments in the school's improvement work, the principal was in a position to reconfigure the team members' roles as needed. Two such reconfigurations were necessary moving into the 2008–09 year: a redefinition of the Assessment Coordinator position so that it could assume a greater staff development function, and the creation of a Curriculum Coordinator position to help manage some of the cross-cutting improvement work that the content coaches were unable to handle.

*A useful strategy for leading the learning improvement agenda was communicating through the instructional leadership team.* Particularly when principals did not work directly with teachers or take a lead role in schoolwide professional development, they depended on their instructional leadership team(s) to communicate important information to teachers. For example, at one New York City school, where the assistant principals and nonsupervisory administrative staff provided most of the instructional leadership and support to teachers, the principal tended to converse with teachers when they came to his office with resource-related

issues, major parent or discipline issues, complaints, or personal issues. In addition, although he made daily rounds, primarily to observe what is going on in classrooms, if teachers expressed a need while he was in their classroom or in the hallway, he would respond to that need. In other words, principal conversations with teachers at this school tended to focus on matters related to, but not specifically focused on, improving instructional practices, while those between assistant principals and teachers often had more of an instructional bent. Principals found various ways of working *through* their instructional leadership teams to generate and sustain the kinds of conversations that guided and supported instructional improvement.

Through these kinds of steps, principals could bring staff members with different talents and experience together into a functional working relationship with one another and with the overarching learning improvement agenda to which they were—or could become—committed. But the principals' own place in such an arrangement could vary. They needed to find roles that enabled them to exercise leadership, while taking full advantage of what they could bring to the arrangement.

### **Finding the Principal's Role and Voice as Leader of the Instructional Leadership Team**

The roles that principals played on the schools' instructional leadership team(s) depended on their experiences and expertise, the point at which they were in their career, and their personal leadership style. Some principals opted to take a more engaged approach, participating as an active member of the instructional leadership team, while others chose a more hands-off approach, leading and managing the team, while participating less directly in instructional leadership activities, in ways that are well established in the literature on the principalship (Portin et al., 2003). That could mean setting the tone for the school, holding high expectations for everyone, creating the culture, and overseeing the instructional leaders' work. Or it could mean more active participation in the guidance of the instructional leadership team, and also in its daily work with teachers. By positioning themselves in the middle of the instructional leadership work, these principals found opportunities for reshaping how their teams thought about and approached this work with teachers. In this regard, these principals saw themselves as *teachers* of the instructional leadership team, as noted in Vignette 5.

## Vignette 5

### *The Principal as Teacher of Instructional Leadership Team Members*

The principal can create a systematic way of teaching team members a certain approach to instructional leadership, as in one secondary school whose principal, an experienced teacher, shares instructional leadership responsibilities (beyond formal supervision) with his assistant principals [APs] and guides their interaction with classrooms:

*Well, the first week I walked through [classrooms] with each one of my APs. I took one AP with me and we walked through and I asked them what they saw to see if they were looking at the same [thing as me]—plus we have a little guide that was kind of developed by a couple of administrators and throughout the district. It's just a check-off list, and these are the things that we're looking for, and then we make little comments down at the bottom—what we saw the teacher doing and what we observed the students doing, and we leave it in their box. And the reason we don't ....photocopy it, because we shared with them that we were not going use this as an evaluative tool.*

*I've already started visiting—I split the staff in fourths, so everybody that's on my list I'm visiting for the next 4 weeks, and as you see I was in the first week, now I'm in the second and third, and now I've got to start documenting what I did today.... And then in about 3 more weeks we'll switch—I'll take somebody else's list, they'll take mine. So these teachers get to see a different administrator throughout the year.*

This case provides another instance of school administrators who have formal supervisory responsibility using that position as a platform for a more informal, nonevaluative support to teachers. Here, and elsewhere, the principal is doing this work in the context of an instructional leadership team, and using the opportunity to meld the efforts of different instructional leaders into a more cohesive influence on instructional practice than they might otherwise be.

## Inviting and Nurturing Leadership Skills and Capacity

*In setting up and working through an instructional leadership team, principals were inviting people within the school building into leadership roles, both formal and informal, and nurturing their development as leaders.* In this sense they were building leadership in the school, and not always focused solely on instructional matters. Leadership capacity-building efforts included cultivating teacher leaders, providing new teachers with leadership opportunities, assigning teachers administrative responsibilities to empower them and provide them administrative experience, encouraging teachers to apply or aim for administrative positions, empowering learning-focused teacher leaders to help orchestrate teacher teamwork, and preparing staff for specific instructional leadership positions. By identifying different strengths in staff members, principals could work with them to develop these strengths and groom all kinds of new leaders for the school. One principal in Atlanta described how he supported and encouraged his assistant principals:



I said, “Both of you will be principals” and I believe that, and they’re getting wonderful experience, they will be better interviewers because they will have the practical experience, when they do it they will have the soundness of the pedagogy of what you really need to do to move the school academically, because in Atlanta—yeah, they still hire a few coaches—I mean athletic coaches, but the days of hiring coaches and managing schools have long gone.

Another principal was grooming both members of her administrative team. At the beginning of our study, the current interim assistant principal was the math coach and data specialist, but he was preparing to be an administrator and the principal supported him by sharing all aspects of the administration with him except evaluating teachers. The principal was also working with the current assistant principal to prepare her to take over the principalship when she retired. Another principal in Atlanta explained how she had managed to empower staff members:

I started this process as I began to go throughout the building and I saw the kinds of things, strategies, or activities or whatever it was, that I wanted duplicated throughout the building. I would tell that person, “I need you to present this at the next faculty meeting.” And so it started like one by one, and as they would go up to present this information that I wanted everybody to own, so to speak, they felt the support and then they became empowered.

## Learning the Work of Leading Leaders

*The shift in the last decade from the principal as instructional leader to the principal as leader of a learning improvement agenda pursued by a team of school-based instructional leaders represents a major change in the practice of these school principals.* The same is true where assistant principals are making the transition from managing schoolwide discipline and other administrative matters to assuming a central position in the school’s instructional leadership cadre. These changes properly recognize that the work of guiding and support learning improvement is more than supervisory leaders can handle by themselves, and it is work that needs to be nurtured and shared more widely across school staff. How supervisory leaders learn to make this shift is a matter of central importance to the long-term success of learning improvement efforts; and we take up this matter in more detail in the final chapter of the report.

But first, we turn, in Chapter 3, to the other members of the school’s instructional leadership team—the subject-matter coaches, teacher leaders, assessment coordina-

tors, data specialists, and others who exercise leadership among their colleagues regarding instructional practice. There, in the nature and dynamics of these staff's work, are the other dimensions of successful support for learning improvement.

## Chapter 3

# Growing and Supporting the School's Instructional Leadership Cadre: The Work of Learning-focused Teacher Leaders

As the discussion of district learning environments in Chapter 1 made clear, the districts we studied were explicit in their commitment to improving learning outcomes for students. And so were the schools. Sometimes closely approximating the district's expectations, sometimes departing in significant ways from them, the school's "learning improvement agenda" was a central reference point for the work of leaders in the school. The daily work of pursuing this agenda fell not only to those who traditionally took on this task—the individuals with supervisory authority over teaching, including principal, assistant principal, and department heads—but also, increasingly, to a cadre of nonsupervisory staff who offered teachers direction, guidance, and support in close proximity to their classrooms. These individuals were almost always experienced teachers, and though they took on full-time or part-time roles outside the classroom, they generally remained on teacher contracts.

Given their close relationship to the school's, and often the district's, learning improvement agendas, and in light of their identity and deep roots in classroom teaching, we refer to these staff as *learning-focused teacher leaders*. And, because they generally offered the most immediate and pervasive direction, guidance, and support to classroom teachers, we turn our analysis to them and their work.

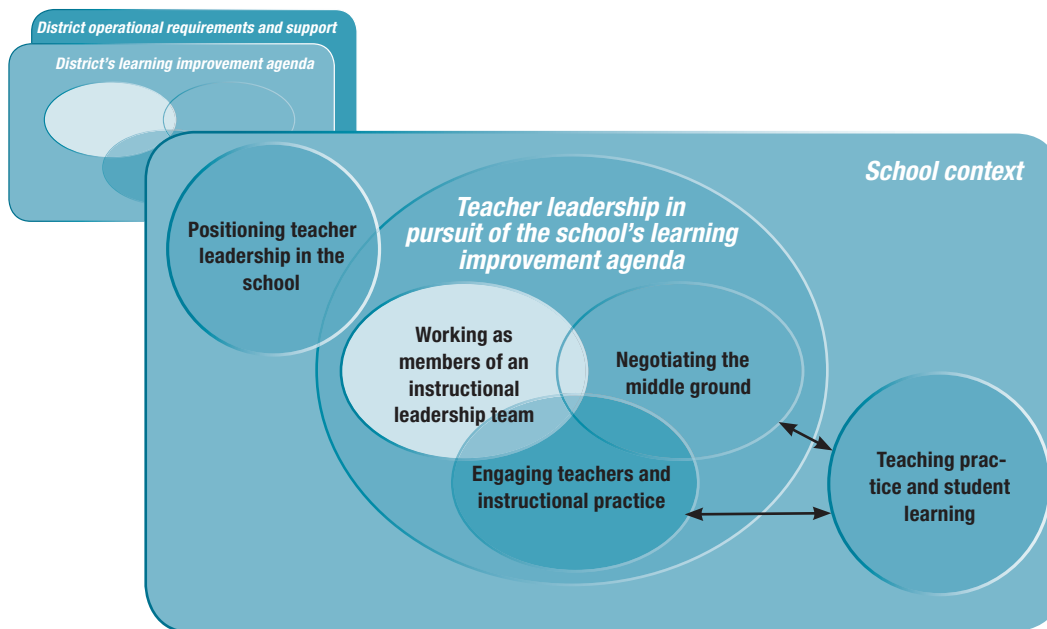
Learning-focused teacher leaders are unique in at least two ways: first, the focus of their work is primarily or solely instructional improvement at the classroom level—their primary connection is to teachers. Therefore, they are unlikely to take on the expanded, quasi-administrative roles that have been noted in the "redesign" of teachers' work (Smylie, 1994). Second, they differ from principals and other supervisory administrators in terms of their authority and scope of responsibility. They do not work from traditional supervisory positions, but instead use their own expertise and relational trust to gain entry to classrooms and to influence instructional change.

Research over the past decade and more has established that this kind of support for instructional improvement is no small task: ambitious content standards and accountability pressures in the current reform environment require substantial pro-

professional learning on the part of teachers (e.g., Thompson & Zeuli, 1999; Cohen & Hill, 2000; Desimone, Porter, Birman, Garet, & Yoon, 2002; Hubbard, Mehan, & Stein, 2006). In an effort to address these learning needs, school and district leaders have sought to extend their reach through various individuals who act as coaches, in-house staff developers, model or “studio” teachers, and others who can provide help to individual teachers or small groups in a job-embedded manner. The result has been a more thoroughly *distributed* arrangement, in which leadership for professional learning is “stretched” across multiple roles including both supervisory leaders and variously designated teacher leaders (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2004).

Certain teachers in the schools we studied are a perfect example of this trend. In the following sections, we describe the work of these teacher leaders, with special emphasis on how they engaged teachers and instructional practice; how their work is positioned, clarified, normalized, and supported within the school; how they negotiated the often ambiguous terrain of their new roles and ways of working together; and how this leadership work connected with a school and district learning improvement agenda. We represent these different facets of the learning-focused teacher leaders’ presence in the school in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Teaching Leadership in Pursuit of the School’s Learning Improvement Agenda



## Learning-focused Teacher Leadership: Multiple Roles, Varied Work

Our analysis of the roles that these teacher leaders take on shows that there is no single model, role, or set of activities that describes them. As would be expected, context critically shaped how learning-focused teacher leaders defined and did their work. For one thing, unions and collective bargaining agreements (or lack of a union, in the case of Georgia) influenced the scope of what these staff were able to tackle, and how learning-focused teacher leaders undertook their work. There were also big differences in how the district or the school determined their roles, reflecting the degree to which the district had adopted a centralizing or decentralizing approach to addressing learning improvement. Though clear precedents and models for this work are well established in some instances—as in New York City schools, where there have been school-based math or literacy coaches for years—learning-focused teacher leader roles were often experimental, a space where new ideas were being tried out, particularly in relation to the district’s theory of action for addressing the learning improvement agenda. In the case of Springfield, the role of Instructional Leadership Specialist (ILS) was negotiated with the union over several years and during the period of this study was in the process of being both initiated and modified. The kind of work a Springfield ILS undertook grew as the role, preparation, and experimental aspects were worked out. In these cases, these positions had limited history in the school or district, and there was work still to do to figure out and “normalize” the pattern of daily work and the contractual or organizational niches the teachers were to occupy.

Although some learning-focused teacher leaders were hired by the district and were responsible for working with teachers at one or more schools, most commonly they worked within a single school, either hired by that school or placed there by the district office. Often these leaders had been teachers in the school they now served and were selected or encouraged by the principal to take on a particular leadership role such as instructional coach, teacher leader, or grade-level leader. In some cases, these individuals were still responsible for teaching students (individually, or in groups) in addition to their work with teachers; in other schools they no longer worked with students directly.

The specific positions that these teacher leaders held varied considerably across our sites and across elementary, middle, and high school. In some cases these individuals were instructional specialists located in the school; others were positioned as

team leaders, grade-level coordinators, or academy leaders; some were regular classroom teachers who had taken on a demonstration or “model classroom” role. Most commonly, learning-focused teacher leaders acted as full- or part-time content or instructional coaches or specialists based at a specific school site. These professionals had a wide range of titles—some new, some in use for a period of time—such as:

- Literacy Coach, Math Coach, or Technology Coach
- Assessment Coordinator
- Data Specialist
- Instructional Leadership Specialist
- Instructional Liaison Specialist
- Demonstration Teacher
- Inquiry Team Member

**The daily work of learning-focused teacher leaders entailed one or more of the following activities: direct instructional support with individual teachers, professional development of various kinds, instructionally focused data and inquiry work, coordination of assessment and related support, and curriculum coordination.**

*The number and variety of these positions within, as well as across, schools was striking: two or three such people might be found in an average-sized elementary school (e.g., serving approximately 400 to 500 students); in some of the larger elementary schools we visited, serving upward of 1,000 students, the school’s teacher leadership cadre might contain eight or more staff in several different roles.*

The specific activities of these professionals depended on where they were placed in the organization and by whom. They often participated on schoolwide leadership teams, analyzed student assessment data to prepare it for teacher use, and prepared professional development sessions for classroom teachers. Most commonly, the teacher leaders conducted one-on-one instructional coaching with classroom teachers. The nonsupervisory

nature of the role seemed to enable them to “get into” classrooms and do the work of instructional improvement in a less intrusive manner than that which accompa-

nies formal evaluation by supervisory leaders, despite the efforts by such leaders to move beyond a typical evaluative relationship.

A few learning-focused teacher leaders took on more traditional administrative or (very occasionally) evaluative functions as part of their work. For example, one Instructional Leadership Specialist in Springfield was also a department head. In Atlanta, the Instructional Liaison Specialists at both an elementary school and a middle school did not have formal supervisory roles; however, they were often responsible for administrative tasks that the principal asked them to take on. In these instances, there was tension between the teacher leaders' administrative work and their responsibilities for furthering the school's learning improvement agenda, a matter we take up in more detail later in the chapter.

Learning-focused teacher leaders spent their time in schools in a number of ways. Several facets of their work stood out. First, they rarely worked alone, but rather were members of a schoolwide instructional leadership team. As such, they both helped to develop and jointly pursue a schoolwide strategy for improving teaching and learning. Second, they engaged teachers and instructional practice by doing the bulk of the professional development work in the school, mostly with individuals and smaller groups, as well as occasionally the whole school. To connect with teachers, they invested considerable energy in building relationships and commu-

**As instructional leadership team members, learning-focused teacher leaders shared responsibility for instructional leadership with principals and other supervisory leaders, and often with other individuals like themselves, though also with people with different position titles and scopes of responsibility.**

nunicating to teachers what instructional improvement work was all about. Finally, they connected with teachers through data, and in turn, connected teachers with school and district improvement agendas in the process.

### **Working as Members of an Instructional Leadership Team**

Enacting the school's learning improvement agenda implied teaming on a number of different levels. Across our sample, the majority of learning-focused teacher leaders worked alongside principals as members of instructionally focused leadership teams. While many were not fully integrated into the supervisory leadership teams, most were members of some sort of identifiable instructional leadership cadre. In most cases, these teams met on a regular, often

weekly, basis. As a member of an instructional team, learning-focused teacher leaders were thus embedded in, and participated in, the leadership decisions made around instructional improvement at the school.

Instructional leadership teams commonly comprised the principals and assistant principals of the school and the teacher leaders. For instance, at one elementary school in New York City, the instructional coaches were major participants in the schools' professional development team, along with the principal, assistant principals, assessment coordinators, and mentors. This team met weekly to discuss the professional learning needs and strategies for the school. At a different school in the same districts serving grades 7–12, the learning-focused teacher leaders were part of what the principal called the “extended cabinet,” comprising the principal, two assistant principals, the lead math teacher, the literacy coach, and the department teacher leaders. In other schools, the arrangement was slightly different, often dependent on who was acting as a learning-focused leader. For example, in Norwalk-La Mirada, an elementary principal planned building-level professional development activities in literacy with her administrative TOSA (Teacher on Special Assignment) and the district literacy coach, but involved teacher leaders in the building to develop particular professional development sessions that occurred several times per school year.

## Engaging Teachers and Instructional Practice in Classrooms

**Across the school year, learning-focused teacher leaders created the bulk of professional learning opportunities for the teachers in the school, and conducted most of the professional development work, though sometimes assisted by supervisory leaders or outsiders.**

Positioned on teams that took schoolwide instructional leadership as their primary task and served by their relationships with teachers, learning-focused teacher leaders were in a good position to help teachers improve their instructional practice, thereby taking on one of the central school leadership functions—developing people—that has been linked to improvement in student learning (Leithwood et al., 2004).

Opportunities for supporting teachers' professional learning included professional development activities that involve individual teachers, groups of teachers, or whole-school professional development. In all cases, these professional learning activities were centered on a set of goals related to the school's (or district's)



learning improvement agenda. Although some learning-focused teacher leaders engaged groups of teachers in more traditional organizational structures, such as content area, department, or grade-level teams, they also worked with groups of teachers in newly conceived structures focused on specific aspects of the school or district learning improvement agenda. These groups included inquiry teams, literacy teams, numeracy teams, professional development teams, academy design teams, school improvement teams, and student support teams. *Groupings of teachers such as these provided opportunities for discussion and dialogue, thus encouraging professional learning; in these settings, teacher leaders were especially well situated to prompt and guide that discussion*, as noted in recent research on instructional coaching (Gallucci, 2008). Vignette 6 below illustrates how teacher leaders can engage colleagues.

While most of their professional development work was with individual teachers and small groups or teams, teacher leaders sometimes conducted or guided whole-

## Vignette 6

### *Teacher Leaders Engaging Colleagues on a Literacy Team*

In one Norwalk-La Mirada elementary school, three demonstration teachers lead a literacy team (one of three such groups of teachers in the school). All schools in Norwalk-La Mirada have building-based literacy teams—groupings of classroom teachers—that meet for professional learning related to the district literacy initiative several times a year; most of these teams are led by a literacy coach designated by the district. But for this team, the three demonstration teachers plan the activities for the daylong “Lit Team” meetings. These full-time teachers also implement literacy strategies in their own classrooms so they can model best practices for other teachers. A district literacy coach assigned to their school has provided the support necessary for the demonstration teachers to develop confidence in their role as leaders. One demonstration teacher describes the support of the literacy coach:

It's been good...[the district coach] has been a really good coach for us. She's just really easy to work with and she has really great ideas and she

just has a way about her personally. She's really good about sharing her thinking and how we can use these strategies to fit our classroom. She has come in and worked with me, coaching me, and I think that's been really, really helpful for me. I guess she's made it seem like a more safe environment for us, and even being videotaped and having it in front of the staff—she just made it feel really safe and comfortable.

In their role as demonstration teachers, the teacher leaders in this school developed the capacity to assume the Lit Team leadership role. Their principal recognized their potential to reach other teachers beyond the modeling of practice in their rooms, by having them take on the leadership of the literacy team. The demonstration teachers have rapport with teachers, in part, because they remain full-time teachers, and also because they have the trust of their peers on the literacy team, as they were members of the team for 2 years prior to assuming its leadership.

school professional development sessions that contributed to the professional learning of teachers and related to the learning improvement agenda of the school. In a Springfield secondary school, an ILS led whole-school professional development around topics related to the School Improvement Plan. These sessions were not offered frequently, but typically were held when there was a whole day designated in the contract for professional development.

### **Building relationships and communicating the work**

To enable their professional development activities to engage teachers productively, teacher leaders needed to get the attention, time, and trust of classroom teachers. In this regard, the work of learning-focused teacher leaders was heavily influenced by their skill in communication and ability to build collegial relationships with classroom teachers. When teachers take on leadership roles, they are positioned in complex ways between their own and others' frameworks, beliefs, and understandings about instructional work (Leander & Osborn, 2008). Assuming a teacher leadership role, for the most part, challenges traditional norms of school life, such as norms of privacy and noninterference that exist among many teachers (Lortie, 1975; Murphy, 2005), which can be a source of tension between teacher leaders and their classroom-based colleagues. What the teacher leaders we were studying encountered

**Expertise in communicating and building relationships with teachers plays a large role in how (and whether) teacher leaders are welcomed into classrooms, and what they are able to accomplish with teachers as a result.**

mirrors the findings of descriptive studies of instructional coaching: to be effective in their role, coaches need skills in communication and relationship building (Gibson, 2006; Knight, 2006) and their learning is mediated by the relationships that they are able to establish on the job (Lowenhaupt & McKinney, 2007).

Building such relationships hinged on establishing trust and providing supportive conditions for teachers' professional learning, and helped to mitigate the tension that arises in the learning-focused teacher leaders' work. A teacher leader in an Atlanta elementary school noted:

The main thing is to give support and instruction so that we can have student achievement...whatever it takes.... If it's resources you say you need, we try to get that. If you want an idea or suggestion, [you can ask], "What do you want me to do with ...this comment on my lesson plan? What do you mean by that and give

me an example?” As I said, the thing that gives me the most joy is when I can get into that, because...[then we’re] making a difference. I really think that’s what the district wants us to do and I think that’s where we’re trying to go with all of our many, many other tasks.... That’s what we’re here for—to support the teachers.

Providing support for teachers—“whatever it takes, whatever you need”—facilitated the relationships and trust that the teacher leaders sought to foster with the teaching staff. Even so, by acting as a source of support, teacher leaders could be seen as more of a supervisory administrator; in such instances, helping teachers to understand that they played a supportive rather than supervisory role was a challenging part of the teacher leaders’ work. In Springfield, an ILS in an elementary school noted this tension, “Some of [the teachers] think that I am [the principal], but I’m not; I am a teacher like them.”

Understandably, the ability to connect with teachers on a teacher-to-teacher level and form comfortable relationships where evaluation was not a factor seemed to contribute to the ability of teacher leaders to have an impact on teaching and learning at the classroom level. Developing these relationships took time, and trust needed to be established, as a math instructional leadership specialist in the same Springfield elementary school noted:

I think a lot of that has to do with they had to know me as a person. They had to see what I did in professional development, they had to see that I carry through things. When they asked for something, I gave it to them almost immediately, so that they knew I was there to support them. I am not an evaluator and I had to say that—“I am not an evaluator; I am here as your colleague.” And I had to gain their trust...I do feel like I’m very well respected in this building and I do feel like if I say something, it’s because I truly mean it and I understand it and I know it.

Not all teacher leaders had been as successful at striking this balance and gaining entry in teachers’ classrooms, particularly at the secondary level, where teachers sometimes find working in isolation more conducive to their content expertise (Huberman, 1993; Lortie, 1975). A literacy coach in a New York secondary school had been a teacher in the building the year before and had established relationships with teachers but as a teaching peer. Once this individual moved into a literacy coaching role, the relationship dynamics seemed to shift. The literacy coach described this experience:

I approached one of the teachers that I'm going to be working with, whom I have a really good personal relationship with—I mean she and I are cool—and I asked her when we could meet and she immediately became very standoffish, and she said, “Well, why are we going to meet?” I said, “Well, you know, because I'm going to be working with you in this marking period and trying to help you out if you need help with stuff.” I was trying to really not pressure her or anything. And she was like, “Well, what are you going to teach me?” Automatically very defensive.

The resistance this teacher leader encountered suggests that, *as teachers moved into a teacher leadership role in the same school where they had been teaching, they might need to reestablish relationships with colleagues that they had known on a personal or professional level quite well.* The two parties were forging a new relationship, even though they knew each other well. In this respect, they were not unlike teacher leaders who, coming to a school without any prior relationships with teachers, need to invest much time and energy into building relationships.

**Data about student achievement or other evidence of student learning offered a convenient and often productive entry point for building and sustaining a working relationship between teacher leaders and classroom teachers.**

### **Connecting with teachers through data**

The presence of data and the expectation that it be used with teachers to assist them in the improvement of teaching and learning was ubiquitous across our study sites. In this respect and analogous to what supervisory leaders experienced, data could act as a communicative tool in teacher leaders' work with teachers. As in teachers' work with students, the data could redirect teachers' attention from a self-conscious worry about their inadequacies as a teacher and toward a problem-solving process they engaged in with the teacher leader. For example, in an Atlanta middle school, data were used by

teacher leaders as a way of focusing the instructional improvement work. The data provided something that learning-focused teacher leaders could work from and decipher for teachers.

The use of data provided an especially useful starting point for working with teachers who were skeptical.

We're struggling—every day we're trying to get everybody to buy in to the different strategies that we're trying to implement. We've got some teachers that understand

and support us and we've got some that don't, and when you have a staff that's divided like that, that creates a challenge in itself... The only thing that we can do is try to talk to them and let them know what's going on in our classroom—what's going on with our students, showing them what the data looks like.

A discussion of student learning outcomes and the specific use of student data by teacher leaders goes beyond the scope of this report; however, our data confirm others' findings that data about teaching and learning can serve as a useful entry point for conversations with teachers around instructional practices (e.g., Supovitz & Klein, 2003; Bulkley, Christman, & Nield, 2009). The success of teachers in using student data to inform instructional practices in the classroom depends on the ability of the teacher leaders to present the data in a way that is accessible to teachers (Timperley, 2005).

## Positioning Teacher Leadership in the School: Clarifying, Normalizing, and Supporting the Work

The work of learning-focused teacher leaders was in the process of unfolding in the schools we studied. Previous research suggests that such teacher leader roles are likely to be emergent, multifaceted, and often ambiguous (Blachowicz, Obrochta, & Fogelberg, 2005; Coggins, Stoddard, & Culter, 2003). Accordingly, what learning-focused teacher leaders were actually doing, what they thought they should be doing, and what they would like to be doing varied both across the schools and across time. Subtle dynamics were at work in positioning their work within the school, and establishing what it entailed: schools leaders sought to

**Several conditions affected the ability of the teacher leaders to find a secure footing in the school—among them, role clarity, cultural norms, and the support of the principal as well as peers engaged in teacher leadership work.**

*clarify* what that work can and should be; *“normalize”* it—developing among school staff a widespread understanding of the work and expectation that it belongs there; and *support* it, helping the teacher leaders establish themselves and refine their own practice.

Positioning teacher leaders' work within the school and clarifying their role was heavily influenced by the principal. In some of the schools, the principals had a clear vision for these roles, whereas in other cases the principals seemed unsure how they might take advantage of the roles and the individu-

als in them to ensure their efforts were part of a coherent reform plan. We know from previous research that successful school leaders articulate a vision for shared organizational purpose and shared authority and that the ability of principals to envision new ways to do this is critical to the work of teacher leaders (Donaldson, 2007; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). The work of learning-focused teacher leaders was clearest in instances where the school principal held such a vision and, based on it, took steps to grow staff into these roles.

Principals with such a vision noticed teaching staff who had potential and took steps to invite them into leadership roles, while legitimizing them in the eyes of their colleagues. One principal in New York City had a habit of taking promising classroom teachers with him whenever he left the building to visit other buildings, resource organizations, or the district central office, and then had the teachers report back to their colleagues. Over time, these informal experiences were sometimes parlayed into more formalized roles (e.g., an assessment coordinator position, an advocate for a new student support system). Sometimes the process worked in reverse, with individuals who were already in a formalized leadership role, as in a middle school in which the principal and the math coach decided that it would be best for the coach to take on some teaching responsibilities to better legitimize her work in the face of some teacher resistance. The principal noted:

She's even talked to me about ... teachers who really wouldn't really take advice or talk to her beforehand, because they see the coaches more as part of administration rather than purely supportive. [They would think] someone's coming in my classroom to check on me, as opposed to help with my stuff. And so that's something we're trying to [change]. Once she became a teacher again in people's eyes [it helped]—and also she even says to me that it helps because she knows what works and what doesn't in the curriculum. So she could give advice better if she was actually doing it.

Rather than, or in addition to, growing one leader at a time, principals could create a schoolwide expectation and norm that supported the exercise of leadership in many forms and by many individuals. For example, in a very large elementary school in New York City, the principal communicated the idea that a large number of teachers could and should become involved in the leadership of the school. The whole staff of teachers was invited to a leadership meeting in the spring of his first year as principal to discuss an ambitious new academy plan for the school; half showed up, and many took on roles in the ensuing academy development effort.

**The accessibility of peer-alike colleagues seemed to help learning-focused teacher leaders mitigate the tensions they experienced in their emergent roles.**

The math coach summed up a widespread feeling among staff at this school: “He’s big on leadership. They want us to have as many leaders as possible in every role that’s possible, which is a great thing, I think.”

But even with clear support from the principal and affirmative steps toward normalizing the exercise of learning-focused leadership in the school, the process of establishing secure working relationships between teacher leaders and school staff that served

the school’s learning improvement agenda was still marked by ongoing ambiguity and tension. Teacher leaders who were part of peer-alike teams seemed especially able to navigate the emergent and ambiguous nature of their work. When they were able to connect regularly with peer-alike colleagues, they became more confident in their work and less isolated in their role.

Those teacher leaders who were teamed with others performing the same or similar roles within the same school seemed to have the least ambiguity in their work or, at least, a more developed set of routines for addressing the ambiguities that did arise. Such teams of learning-focused teacher leaders enabled a sense of camaraderie that was beneficial to the school, as suggested in Vignette 7.

Peer-alike colleagues need not be working in the same building to provide some ongoing sense of support to each other. A number of the learning-focused leaders in New York City schools participated actively in professional peer networks that spanned a number of schools (for example, in the 25-school Networks that were the basic organizing unit of the Empowerment Schools system in the city). Here, greater autonomy granted to schools, along with facilitation by network leaders, enabled this kind of cross-school connection, though there was no guarantee that such relationships would form or be productive. One math coach, who lamented the lack of a mandated professional development structure in the Empowerment Schools system, said he had not found as many occasions to meet with other math coaches to learn what they were doing as he had in the past (when required to go to regional coach meetings).



## Vignette 7

### *Peer Support System for Instructional Leadership Specialists: Our Space, Our Work*

In a Springfield elementary school, the Instructional Leadership Specialists (ILSs) share a large work-space that contributes to their sense of camaraderie, as one of them notes:

*Well, as you see, we have a “dorm room” here—it’s all four of us sticking together, and actually when [one ILS] was across the hallway at the beginning of the year, that made no sense... because we spent our time in the hallway trying to find each other...but I can just [call my colleague’s name] across the room versus being lazy and have to get up and walk across the hall... We all meet once a week for Leadership Team, which is tomorrow. It’s definitely a working team, and the whole cliché of there’s no “I”—there really is no “I” in team. [The principal] has a clear vision, but it’s a vision that we all share, so it’s okay. It’s easy for us because, there are bumps, but we talk through the bumps, if it doesn’t work.*

Proximity seemed to enable this group of teacher leaders to share the ongoing work and to bounce off one another ideas and issues that come up. Another

one of this group describes what enables her professional learning:

*I think the collaboration of the team, for one. Sharing with Megan, Carter, and Jeannie [pseudonyms] as well. Although Megan is math, there is a lot of collaboration in this room, a lot of expertise in this room. People I so value working with. We read, we talk about what we read, we share ideas, we support one another. We certainly don’t leave anyone out.*

The presence of peer-alike colleagues in teacher leadership roles in this school seems to impact positively the professional learning and development of the individuals in these emerging roles. By working in a common space, in which they continually interact informally, as well as by design, these learning-focused teacher leaders are able to understand their own work through the lens of their peers’ experiences, in ways that help buffer the inherent tensions in their roles.

## Negotiating the Middle Ground in Learning-focused Teacher Leadership

As the discussion of positioning above makes clear, learning-focused teacher leaders occupy a kind of “middle ground” between supervisory staff and the classroom. In a related sense, they often sit—sometimes uncomfortably—between traditional levels of the educational system, in particular, between the district central office and the teaching ranks. Their roles thus extend beyond traditional teacher responsibilities, even though they are often working on teacher contracts. In many cases, these roles have proliferated ahead of the development of formal procedures for supervision and evaluation of those who hold them. This lack of formalization of the roles can add to the tensions learning-focused leaders and their supervisors experience. So, at the same time that teachers are unclear about whether such teacher leaders are in an evaluative position, the teacher leaders themselves are unclear about how their work will be guided and evaluated.



Sometimes districts tried to overcome this ambiguity by creating role descriptions (in some cases, after negotiation with the teachers' unions). But given the nature of the work and the lack of clarity about the new roles, tensions still arose. In these and other instances, the system had yet to work out how staff occupying the middle ground would be fully integrated into a multilevel educational system. The tensions differed somewhat depending on the specific middle ground the teacher leaders occupied.

### **Building Bridges Between the Classroom and the School's Supervisory Leaders**

As described earlier, teacher leaders in our sample, for the most part, sat on school-level leadership teams that included the principal and often assistant principals as well. In a secondary school in New York City, the principal had established an “extended cabinet” that met weekly and included all instructional coaches and department teacher leaders. During these meetings the principal was able to share her vision and goals, which the teacher leaders took back to their respective departments. In turn, they brought any concerns from the teachers in their departments to these cabinet meetings. A teacher leader described his role as a conduit between the leadership team and the teachers:

It's a balance. I have to be a messenger from the principal in certain ways....I disseminate the information that [the principal] wants me to tell the science teachers. And also I get feedback both ways. If there's a concern that teachers have, then they voice it to me and I relay it back to the principal. So, it goes both ways.

In this school, teacher leaders were expected to take what they gleaned from extended cabinet meetings with all of the instructional leaders in the school and relay the information to their departments. The idea was that the learning improvement goals and ways to reach them discussed at these instructional leadership meetings would trickle down to the classroom level by way of the teacher leaders through their specific activities (coaching, professional development of teachers, analysis of student data). Another teacher leader described how this process worked:

[I] attend meetings...create professional development for the...department, I am to create curriculum maps, I am to create the assessments that we do in the department...create a link between what is being taught in this classroom with what is expected in the curriculum, what the different teachers are teaching. For example,

**The direct and regular interaction with the principal placed teacher leaders in a position to both shape and absorb the schoolwide agenda for learning improvement and then to transmit improvement messages to school staff.**

there are teachers teaching ninth grade, so they are teaching the same class, and one of them is behind and the other is so far ahead. So [I am] trying to get in to align the curriculum to the different levels, and have those conversations with the different teachers in the department.

Here and elsewhere, the teacher leaders were expected to—and did—help to keep teachers on track with the principal’s improvement priorities but, reciprocally, they could also shape those priorities.

Teacher leaders’ position of two-way influence took various forms:

- In a New York City elementary school, the instructional leadership cadre—comprising coaches, mentors, and assessment coordinators—reported directly to the principal, and his weekly meetings with them as a Professional Development Team gave him a continuing and influential voice in shaping their thinking about their work, while at the same time giving him a way to “listen to the building.”
- In a Norwalk-La Mirada high school, key teacher leaders (such as the literacy coach) participated on the school’s leadership team in formal decision-making processes and shared responsibilities for planning and managing professional development activities, in many of which they regularly engaged teachers.
- Teacher leaders in a Springfield high school worked continuously with teachers, while also contributing to decision making with the principal around the professional development activities that would be offered to teachers specifically as they related to the school’s learning improvement goals.

Clearly, this ongoing relationship with the supervisory leadership and continuing interaction with teachers positioned teacher leaders to transmit information and leverage influence around issues of teaching and learning in both directions.

### **Acting as Conduits for the District’s Learning Improvement Agenda**

Occupying the middle ground between district and classroom carried with it another set of dynamics. Research on district-based instructional coaches has

already documented a similar dynamic, whereby coaching staff who are “caught in the middle” between central office and school can be the conveyor of messages between the two levels (Swinerton, 2007). Whether or not the district promoted a specific instructional improvement tack, as in Norwalk-La Mirada’s literacy initiative, or gave the school wide latitude to fashion its instructional program as it saw fit, as in New York City’s Empowerment Schools model, the district’s learning improvement agenda was nonetheless clear, and in all cases reflected expectations for performance on state assessments. Almost inescapably, the teacher leaders’ work concerned the teachers’ capacity to help students succeed on these assessments, and in this sense, they acted as bridge between district and classroom.

**As part of their work, learning-focused teacher leaders could—and often did—act as a bridge or conduit between the classroom and district or state expectations for classroom practice.**

As in accounts of boundary spanning (Timperley, 2005; Wenger, 1998), the learning-focused teacher leaders we studied mediated between the district and the school, through the *personalization* of their efforts in working with teachers (Firestone & Martinez, 2007). How this bridging work unfolded depended on the particulars of the teacher leader’s role and the district and school(s) in which they did their work. In some cases, as in Norwalk-La Mirada, literacy coaches were hired by the district and placed at schools. While the assistant superintendent at the district level supervised the coaches, their work was with the principals and in the schools. By leading professional development for literacy teams at their schools, they helped teachers acquire facility with balanced literacy, and in so doing provided a link between the district’s literacy reform and instructional improvement at the classroom level. A related situation pertained in Atlanta, where Instructional Liaison Specialists at each school acted as an important link between the school and a school reform team, a subunit of the district central office offering front-line support and supervision to a grouping of schools, while also engaging in daily instructional support work with particular teachers in the school. The link between district and classroom was understandably less strong in cases where the teacher leaders had no direct organizational connection with the district central office, yet still their work typically embodied much of what the district leaders sought, especially in the form of data-based work with teachers, as described in Chapter 1.

Acting as a bridge between the district learning improvement agenda and the classroom could put teacher leaders in an uncomfortable position, when the district and school learning improvement agendas diverged, as in one school in Springfield. This school, long a showcase for literacy teaching as part of an external project, used its teacher leaders primarily to continue this work rather than implement a district-developed literacy system. This arrangement prevailed, with the district's blessing, until the school failed to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as required under No Child Left Behind. Then the principal and teacher leaders compromised and pursued a different course that hewed more closely to the district's curricular initiatives, while still retaining some elements of its former approach. The result was an uneasy balance of school and district priorities in the teacher leaders' work. While retaining the external initiative's emphasis on reading comprehension and a more "balanced literacy" approach, the teacher leaders' work also pushed teachers to emphasize phonics and other basic reading skills that the district had prioritized.

### **Teacher Leaders' Work in Relation to the School and District Learning Improvement Agendas**

The teacher leaders' bridging work underscores an essential idea concerning their presence in the schools we studied. Despite several decades of research asserting that the school was the relevant unit of change (e.g., see Teddlie & Stringfield, 2006; Lieberman, 1995; Berends, Kirby, Naftel, & McKelvey, 2001), the work of these leadership staff cannot be understood solely in relation to the school, as if this were the only reference point for change. The coaching, professional develop-

**Whether in relation to the district's or school's learning improvement agenda, or both, learning-focused teacher leaders offered a direct and continuous connecting link between district or school reform intentions and daily practice.**

ment activities, and other forms of instructional support offered by learning-focused teacher leaders were tied to both school and district learning improvement agendas, which they were uniquely positioned to pursue.

Learning-focused teacher leaders were linked to the district's learning improvement agendas in several ways. First, the analysis of student data—much of it developed or prompted by the district—informed teacher leaders about the next steps they might take with particular teachers, and could inform the choice of specific instructional strategies or for curriculum planning with teachers. The districts each

had clear, public statements of the direction and aims for improving student learning. While many means were used to communicate these aims, learning-focused teacher leaders offered a personalized link in that communication process.

Simultaneously, the teacher leaders helped the school pursue whatever it took to be its main improvement work. Through participation on school instructional leadership teams, they helped focus teachers' energy and attention on the overarching learning improvement goals set out by the school. And given the typical convergence between school and district goals for learning improvement, they could do so without sending mixed messages.

That said, this cadre of instructional leaders linked district or school improvement agendas with the classroom through means other than acting as a direct agent of the administrative leaders. Learning-focused teacher leaders sit squarely in what has been referred to as a "netherworld that is neither that of administrators nor that of the teacher" (Datnow & Castellano, 2002, p. 204). That positioning is a source of both the ambiguities in the role, discussed earlier, and the potential to work with teachers in ways that differ from—and may powerfully complement—the instructional support offered by supervisory administrators. Generally, the teacher leaders did not have formal responsibility for the evaluation of teachers. At the same time they inhabit a space with limited history—often new in both contractual provisions and as a means of working with teachers. They are commonly on teacher contracts and often continue as members of teachers' unions—making them "teachers" in the minds of other classroom instructors. Many learning-focused teacher leaders maintain some classroom responsibilities and continue to work directly with students.

Principals noted that learning-focused teacher leaders were able to support this work in unique ways, working as they do from a nonsupervisory position. For example, in Norwalk-La Mirada, an elementary school principal described their work as support she was unable to provide on her own. She said that although she plans with her teacher leaders, she also intentionally holds back in order to facilitate their ability to accomplish particular work with teachers:

And we sit and plan together as to what kinds of things I want covered, but they've really taken off with the planning on their own and I support them and I go in on the days we focus on literacy improvement issues, but I kind of hold back so that they do feel empowered because I think that's what is necessary because it should be coming from them. I think my intention is to establish that community

of professional learners and I feel that if I empower them then that is more likely to happen.

Principals in other schools commented or alluded to a similar thing—by maximizing their teacher leaders' responsibility and room for exercising leadership, they saw that their own reach could be significantly extended.

## Elaborating Our Understanding of Learning-focused Teacher Leadership

This analysis of the work and situation of learning-focused teacher leaders within the school helps to elaborate the picture of school leadership for learning improvement with which we began this research. *In conjunction with efforts by the school principal and other supervisory leaders, the teacher leadership cadre offered an immediate layer of support to teachers who were often struggling to make good on the ambitious demands of the school systems in which they worked.* In schools where care was taken to position these staff appropriately, to make their work legitimate in the eyes of staff, and to offer them continuing support, there was evidence that their promise could be realized.

The work of learning-focused teacher leaders is inherently ambiguous and needs the support of the principal, some measure of role clarity, and the support of peer-alike staff to be viable over time. These conditions enabled the work itself, which focuses on the development of instructional capacity in teachers, but which involves efforts to engage in teamwork with other teacher leaders, build relationships with teachers (some of whom were former colleagues), and communicate the work in compelling ways to teachers. In this regard, data can be a ready point of connection. As they engage in the work, however, these teacher leaders occupy a middle ground between principal and the classroom, on the one hand, and often between district learning agenda and classroom, on the other. As such, they are in a position to convey messages or otherwise bridge the interests of all parties. The work is difficult to do, however; over time, this work may succeed to the extent that a sufficient support system is built to clarify and normalize the role within the school.

## *Chapter 4*

# **Growing Into Learning-focused Leadership in Urban Schools**

The previous chapters outlined a broad set of leadership activities taken by a number of key actors in a diverse set of urban schools. The work we followed concerned learning improvement, defined by whatever improvement agenda each school took on. As our previous analyses underscored, there is more than one way to lead a school-based learning improvement agenda and, by implication, more than one way to learn how to do this work. In this concluding chapter, we focus on what our findings say about the work of leading for learning improvement in urban schools, what learning these leaders are doing to carry out this work, and how this learning is and can be supported.

## **Insights Into Leading for Learning Improvement in Urban Schools**

The research we have reported in the preceding chapters offers images of possibility for the leadership of urban schools operating under high-accountability conditions. The patterns we have described and analyzed reflect intentional efforts by school leaders and their colleagues, in the context of focused support by the district office, to address the supremely difficult learning improvement challenges that their schools present them. And their efforts appear to be paying off: in these schools, measures of student learning show progress over the past few years, and other measures such as attendance, completion, and disciplinary referrals are improving.

We did not study typical cases, nor did we analyze the most struggling schools in their respective districts—schools characterized by low performance, weak leadership, and a generally lower quality of teaching practice—even though the student populations in the schools we studied were no different from many such schools. Rather, our goal was to learn from schools that had begun the journey, or were well on the way, to marshaling leadership and teaching resources to address the difficult learning challenges that face so many schools in urban centers. Similarly, we searched for such schools in districts that had themselves embarked on a similar journey, guided by generally stable leadership, aligning resources with learning improvement goals, projecting relatively coherent instructional reform messages,

and creating more robust forms of support for leaders' work in schools. We felt that all urban schools, from the most struggling to their stronger counterparts, had the most to gain from the experiences of the kinds of cases and district settings we identified.

## School Leaders' Response to the Larger Environment

A first and central insight from the schools we studied was that school leaders paid close attention to the larger district, state, and federal environment in which they worked, and took full advantage of it for advancing the school's learning improvement agenda. As described in Chapter 1, this environment made heavy demands on the school—most noticeably, in issuing instructional guidance, imposing a strict accountability system, and pressing the school to assume more data-based forms of leadership and teaching practice. The external environment sent other messages as well, for example, on operational requirements and ways these might be supported.

In response to their environments, the school leaders fashioned a school-specific learning improvement agenda that reflected the larger improvement agenda of their districts, as well as school-specific priorities and values. In most respects, the district and school learning improvement agendas aligned with each other, and within the school, staff were generally aware of, and largely in agreement with, these agendas. These agendas emphasized high expectations for teaching and student performance; alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment; staff collaboration; and the development of robust instructional leadership capacity.

In large measure, the school leaders had generally internalized—and often leveraged—external expectations for school practice and performance and wedded those to a set of expectations and responsibilities that represented the school's *internal* accountability system. Related to this response, the schools were building and expanding their own systems for collecting and using data in daily practice, drawing on what the district or state provided, but often including other forms or representations of data concerning their students. *The stance most of the school leaders took to the larger environment was to treat it as a source of opportunities, resources, and potentially helpful ideas, rather than a site of roadblocks, unhelpful advice, and unreachable requirements.*

The leaders' response to the larger environment had identifiable consequences for instructional practice:



- The leaders' efforts were focusing and aligning instruction, and to some extent narrowing it.
- Leaders appeared to be developing a new language for talking about students that emphasized “gaps,” “gains,” and “moving” students. The language underscores a view of student learning that emphasizes measurable progress, often with regular testing as the metric.
- Picking up a theme pushed by the districts and enabled by more regular use of data in instructional planning, instructional leadership was emphasizing the differentiation of instruction to serve students' differing needs, approaches to learning, and prior schooling histories.

### Supervisory Leaders' Work

As they worked within demanding environments, *supervisory leaders—principals and assistant principals, for the most part—took on instructional leadership and support roles that went well beyond traditional supervisory activities implied by the formal staff evaluation cycle.* In addition to their own direct work in guiding and supporting teacher practice, we also found them leveraging their influence on teaching and learning through the practice and influence of an instructional leadership team. As we noted, they laid the groundwork for learning improvement work in the school by (1) assembling and developing a high-quality teaching staff; (2) establishing and legitimizing schoolwide learning priorities; (3) developing trust and a team-oriented culture among staff directed at learning improvement; and (4) using data to focus and anchor improvement work.

Principals combined a message of individual expectation and accountability with a further message that classroom practice and learning improvement depend on a team culture. The expectations for individual performance and collaborative work were not only part of the message, but were also a key element of the structures and process that principals put in place to support the learning work of classrooms.

This study revealed that *principal's instructional leadership was largely a leveraged activity with and through the expertise of the other instructional teacher leaders (and, in some cases, in alignment with district colleagues).* The idea that a principal can have both the content and pedagogical expertise to work directly with teachers, or model practice, in all subject areas is something many principals aspired to, but it became increasingly difficult to keep up with different curriculum reforms, not to mention the wide range of subject-matter expertise implied by the

secondary school curriculum. The principals were held to expectations for knowing high-quality practice and sought ways to improve their expertise, but were also keenly invested in knowing that their influence over instructional improvement was also exercised through the instructional leadership teams they developed. Akin to the symphony conductor (Portin et al., 2003), they usually knew *an* instrument, but they relied on many who knew other instruments to make the symphony complete. The active participation of some principals and assistant principals in professional development as a colleague-learner provided a further avenue for them to influence instructional improvement.

As noted in Chapter 2, an important part of learning-focused leadership exercised by principals was to secure and allocate human resources, a matter explored in more detail in a companion report, *How Leaders Invest Staffing Resources for Learning Improvement* (Plecki et al., 2009). Principals' leadership—as well as their accountability for the outcomes of learning—motivated their efforts to put the right teaching staff in place, to ensure the continuous improvement in the school's learning goals (often a requirement of Adequate Yearly Progress).

### **Learning-focused Teacher Leaders' Work**

Teacher leadership is not a new idea, and teachers have been exercising leadership in schools for a long time. A typical pattern has been for well-respected veteran teachers who are listened to, and thereby already exercising an informal kind of leadership in the school, to be asked by the principal to assume a wider sphere of responsibility as part of the organizational infrastructure of the school, and given a stipend that enhances their base salaries, e.g., compensating them for their work heading up departments, assuming coaching assignments, or advising student activities. In contrast, within these schools, teacher leaders were assuming different and varied roles—less managerial and more intricately connected to learning improvement work. As noted in Chapter 3, there was no single model for this—the teacher leaders' daily work combined in varying ways leadership for professional development and curriculum, student instruction, assessment, model teaching, coaching and mentoring, data work and assistance with understanding data, and organizational activities.

In addition, much of the work of these teacher leaders reflected their positioning in a middle ground not only between the classroom and the school's supervisory leadership, but also in some respects between the classroom and district or state environment. In this position, learning-focused teacher leaders communicated

and mediated the messages from all parties to the others—sometimes transmitting, sometimes translating or interpreting, what the learning improvement agenda implied for the daily work of teachers in classrooms. In this sense, they were a communication conduit between system goals and what teachers are called upon to provide for the students in their classrooms.

Almost without exception, the work of these teacher leaders was explicitly non-evaluative. While the firewall between formal evaluation and nonsupervisory support for teaching practice was not always as clearly established, generally these leaders exercised their influence through official endorsement, instructional expertise, and skill at building trusting relationships with their colleagues.

Similar to their supervisory colleagues, the learning-focused teacher leaders we studied were keenly connected to data and data interpretation for the purposes of setting direction, promoting conversations about instructional improvement, and establishing both internal and external accountability. These leaders lived and worked with data, often on a daily basis. But their work with data was not solo work: they did their work as a participant on teams and in team-based planning for instructional improvement, in an array of team configurations across the schools—school instructional leadership teams, grade levels and departments, academies, professional learning communities, and other configurations.

## **Implications for What School Leaders Need to Learn How to Do**

The nature of the work undertaken by these school leaders meant that they were in the process of developing anew, or augmenting and adapting, their expertise and skills in certain areas of the broad domain of school leadership. The new skills were unlikely to have been emphasized in their prior work experience or in any formal preparation for their current roles. The implications for their learning differ somewhat by the two categories of leaders.

### **Implications for Supervisory Leaders' Learning**

Given this array of work for principals, assistant principals, and others who may act in supervisory roles, we see six implications for what supervisory leaders needed to learn to do their jobs well.

First, *principals need to rethink and expand their concept of supervision. Formal supervision of staff performance is only a small part of a larger instructional leadership domain, but it is often a useful entry point for engaging staff in reconsidering and improving their practice.* As leaders with formal authority for supervising staff performance, principals can easily see this function as their main or sole contribution to instructional leadership. But the work of the principals we studied suggested that formal supervision needed to be reinterpreted as one component of a larger vision of instructional leadership and support. That said, this component can afford various openings for principals to engage teachers in improvement work, on the one hand, while helping teacher leaders as well in the development of their own leadership capacity.

Second, leading an instructional leadership team is more than the sum of the parts. In short, *leading instructional leadership teams asks more of principals than overseeing the division of labor among instructional support staff. Rather, their team leadership work means creating working partnerships with various staff in the building, all of whom do—or can—exercise leadership to some degree.* These staff may or may not see themselves as leaders and may need to be invited to exercise their leadership potential. (Alternatively, the principal may need to hire staff who are not presently at the school, but often the instructional leadership cadre can be productively grown from within.) What principals do to enable the work of teacher leaders who have critical—and different—responsibilities for the learning agenda thus implies more than just allocating responsibility. This suggests an active teaching partnership whereby principals help emerging instructional leaders assume and own a new framework for approaching their work with a new set of skills, while developing an unfamiliar and sometimes problematic set of relationships with their teaching colleagues. The partnerships were still evolving and may lead to a blurring of the boundaries between supervision and nonsupervisory leadership. Supervisory leaders had to learn how to operate in partnership with nonsupervisory staff to pursue a collective learning improvement agenda.

Third, *principals need to find ways to establish the “space”—that is, conditions of trust, openness to critique, and focus on instruction—for learning-focused teacher leaders to do their work.* We found many instances where teacher leaders were a key to high-quality teaching practice, or more precisely, to the school staff’s reach for a higher quality of practice. Sometimes the teacher leaders’ work was in support of a novice or struggling teacher, but just as often teacher leaders were engaging more experienced staff who might be reluctant to change or who

were feeling unprepared to undertake the responsibilities asked of them. Making inroads in all these instances required special skills of the teacher leaders, not only in pedagogy, but also in relationship building (see below). But without the cultural conditions that encourage shared practices in classrooms and the space for collegial coaching, these teacher leaders could find their work sitting at the margins of classroom practice, rather than closely connected to the challenges teachers face. And putting those cultural conditions in place was a major responsibility of supervisory leaders, thereby implying that cultural leadership was as important as what they did to manage their schools.

Fourth, *principals' management of school operations and resources is vital to creating a school-based infrastructure for learning improvement.* In much of the leadership literature, the managerial work of principals is seen as distinct from true “leadership” work—and specifically, instructional leadership—or, at best, is a necessary but annoying distraction. However, in the schools we studied, the managerial work of allocating resources, managing time for the school, improving facilities, managing discipline and safety, and managing personnel processes were vital to ensuring that an infrastructure for learning improvement was in place. This infrastructure put the right kind of resources at the disposal of school staff, teachers, teacher leaders, and other support staff alike. In some respects this managerial work was shaped extensively by external requirements and constraints, but it could also be facilitated by operational support systems set up by the district.

Fifth, *principals need to be comfortable exercising greater discretion and acting more entrepreneurially in a context of accountability.* As we saw in the Empowerment Schools model in New York City—and in other locations to lesser degrees—principals were being invited or compelled to make decisions regarding the direction, operation, and resources of the school within a context of increasing accountability for school performance. This situation, across all the districts we studied, called on school leaders to develop strategic decision-making and entrepreneurial skills more than in times past, when more of the decision-making authority resided at the district central office or with the school board.

Sixth, *principals need to be fluent in the use of data as a leadership tool.* Perhaps no other skill was more apparent in their work than an approach to data as a leadership tool—used to plan, diagnose, monitor, and professionally develop staff. They needed to know what data could answer key questions the school (or district) posed, how to use and array those data to stimulate conversation and encourage

action toward valued ends, and how to help others acquire the orientation and facility to engage with data in powerful ways.

## Implications for Teacher Leaders' Learning

What teacher leaders need to know—like their role—is still evolving. However, based on teacher leadership in these four districts, a few observations can be made about the nature of their work and what it implies for what they need to learn to do.

First, *learning-focused teacher leader expertise arises from a particular content area, but often needs to transcend it*. While their work was located most often in relation to a particular content area, teacher leaders also worked across content areas when the need arose, or according to the resources and provisions of the school and district. The most common content areas were those most closely associated with high-stakes testing, especially in the core areas of literacy and numeracy. Expertise in these areas often served as a bridge to the accountability system, and their intimate knowledge of the territory that would be tested enabled them to help teachers respond to targeted areas of performance. These teacher leaders' content knowledge was also useful in efforts to reinvent or reconfigure the school's curriculum by helping teachers or the school with alignment, pacing, etc.

Second, *learning-focused teacher leaders need to be able to open up instructional practice to reconsideration and improvement, across a range of teacher experience, from novice to veteran*. Building on their knowledge of what good instruction looks like (in their respective content areas primarily), the teacher leaders had to engage a variety of staff—especially novices in their first year or two of teaching and reluctant veterans who are in need of fresh perspectives on their practice. They did so in such a way that details of teaching and student learning became open to scrutiny and critique by teacher and teacher leader, and sometimes by the teachers' peers, at the same time that possible alternatives were vividly demonstrated, e.g., by the teacher leader or other accomplished teachers. Their ability to help teachers see their own instruction with fresh eyes through data and to use their nonsupervisory status to create a helper presence among teachers were necessary tools in this pursuit.

Third, *relational trust is a powerful currency for learning-focused teacher leadership, putting a premium on these leaders' skills in relationship building*. Because these teacher leaders worked in a nonsupervisory capacity, their entry point into the classroom fell along a continuum from invitation only to gentle persuasion. In

few situations could they “require” staff to interact with them. Also, as many of their roles were new, these teacher leaders were developing a rationale and warrant for their work in the eyes of their peers, with help from the principal and even the district to position their work in the school and normalize it. Among other things, this could mean finding ways to *reestablish* relationships on a somewhat different footing with colleagues they had known for years. Even with the enabling conditions noted in Chapter 3 (principal support, role clarity, and a peer-alike support system), many tensions arose in the middle ground these leaders occupied, and they had to be adept at navigating these tensions and also learn how to develop the trust of their colleagues so that other teachers would seek to access their expertise.

Fourth, *learning-focused teacher leaders need to be responsible communicators as well as translators of learning improvement agendas*. Sometimes complicating the task of developing trusting relationships, these teacher leaders often sat at an interface between classroom work and various parts of the system. As Chapter 3 detailed, their positioning in the school between classrooms and supervisory leaders’ priorities, and also between classrooms and the district’s expectations for performance and instructional improvement, meant that they inescapably became a kind of conduit for reform messages. In this capacity, they needed to deliver reform messages responsibly with appropriate translation and without becoming the accessories of a larger system so that the larger reform messages were tailored to the unique circumstances and capabilities of the teacher(s) they were dealing with. This is complicated work, and requires new learning that teacher leaders are unlikely to have experienced in their prior work.

Fifth, *learning-focused teacher leaders need to learn to work in differentiated instructional leadership teams*. So much of this leadership work grows out of a shared image of how teaching and learning can be improved, and it is often done by more than one individual in the building. What is more, instructional leadership teams tend to bring together staff with different kinds of expertise, not to mention different positions in the building. The accomplished teaching staff who are invited to exercise instructional leadership are not necessarily well versed in team-based collaborative work. They will need to hone these skills, if they are to deliver on their promise.



## Pathways for School Leaders' Learning

The nature of the leaders' work and implications for learning noted above represent a substantial amount of new learning for most supervisory and non-supervisory leaders in the kinds of schools we studied. Other than the school of hard knocks—the time-honored, default approach to leaders' learning in urban schools—what might support these leaders' attempts to imagine and inhabit different, more learning-focused roles in their respective schools? While we did not set out to specifically examine the preparatory experiences or ongoing learning of supervisory or nonsupervisory leaders, we did pay attention to what they described as the sources of their ideas and expertise, and we did take note of the approaches that the districts were taking to support the preparation and ongoing learning of these leaders.

Three sources of support for leaders' ongoing professional learning were obvious: central office support systems, peer and professional networks, and relationships with external organizations:

- **Central office support systems.** Detailed more fully in a companion report, *Central Office Transformation for District-wide Teaching and Learning Improvement* (Honig, Copland, Lorton, Rainey, & Newton, forthcoming), the districts had established some different structures for offering direct support to school leaders, especially principals. For example, network arrangements in one district and school reform team arrangements in another provided ready access to expertise in leadership, management, and instructional support expertise of various kinds. The school leaders took advantage of these resources to varying degrees.
- **Peer and professional networks.** Our research made it clear that school leaders leaned on, and learned from, respected peers, both those they had come to know over the years and others with whom they were organizationally linked, e.g., through networked arrangements that linked groups of schools together, or role-alike colleagues together within or across schools. The power of these lateral peer relationships were apparent in the support systems of both teacher leaders and school principals.
- **Relationships with external organizations (e.g., nonprofit groups, universities).** Reflecting the fact that the districts encouraged, to varying degrees, connections between schools and external groups or organizations that could offer



instructional expertise or other improvement resources, the school leaders made extensive use of the training, advice, or mentorship these organizations offered. In particular, nonprofit groups with a long track record of work in school improvement, student support, or instruction in particular content areas (e.g., literacy, the arts) were a major source of learning support for school leaders who were trying to see where and how to mobilize effort for learning improvement.

The initial preparation of individuals for supervisory administrative positions was also a prominent feature of the landscape. Three of the four districts had constructed their own principal preparation programs (the Superintendent's Academy for Building Leaders in Education Program in Atlanta, the Springfield Leadership Institute, and the New York City Leadership Academy) or encouraged other innovative program alternatives, e.g., New Leaders for New Schools and a Wallace Foundation–funded leadership development continuum for administrators in one of the former regions in New York City. Less elaborate, but nonetheless formal, training was mounted in several instances for individuals about to assume particular new teacher leader roles, as in the case of Springfield, which offered Instructional Leadership Specialist training for staff who would take on the new ILS positions in the district's schools. All these routes afforded a pathway to the kinds of learning-focused work that this report has described.

Underlying these preparation pathways are new images of the nature of the school leaders' work that articulate powerfully what our school leaders were reaching for. The director of one district's homegrown leadership program described a good school leader this way:

We have a very specific vision [of good school leadership.] At its essence, it's the focus on moving student learning. And so if the outcome is moving student learning, then what... does a leader of the school need to be able to understand, [to know] how to assess a student and where their learning gaps are, in order to help teachers do that work?

So [our leadership standards] map back from the student learning needs to the adult learning needs, and then they're organized for those adult learning needs. Now that sits in a context of other skills and competency. Our first one is around personal behavior. How do you carry yourself as an individual, as a leader, your resilience, which is incredibly important in [this district's] schools, and most public organizations. And most schools are incredibly complex—have a set of incredibly complex dynamics, and the whole thing's booby-trapped.

So [the school leader] needs to understand how that all works. You need to be able to look at data and help other people understand what the different types of data could possibly tell them, and then what they actually tell them and how they would be indications of what somebody's next step is. You have to understand learning in very deep ways—adult and child learning, understand different learning styles, be very clear about your own. You need to be a solid communicator—in oral and written communication. You have to understand systems thinking, which is incredibly important—how the different pieces interrelate within a complex organization, so you know if I try something over here, I might get a reaction over there and see how all the different pieces are connected.

You need to have a stance as a public learner, which means that you are constantly pushing against the limits of your own knowledge base and you're doing so in a public way. So that work is collective work: you need to know how to build a team. You need the organizational theories around particularly systems thinking and systems theory. And how to articulate all of this and communicate it for various constituents and how important it is—I mean, part of the systems thinking is mental models work, and habits of mind, and trying to understand, to see the work and yourself from behind other people's eyes in order to advance the actual work of moving student learning.

Systems of support for this new kind of leadership work are emerging and our research has begun to document what these systems can look like. Their further development will take the collaborative efforts of many players, especially central office leaders, universities, and unions, not to mention the school leaders themselves, who are both the targets of leadership support and providers of it to their respective instructional leadership teams. The evidence from the schools we studied suggests that progress is being made on this leadership learning agenda. But there is much more work to do.

## Methodological Appendix

By carefully examining the configuration of designed and enacted leadership roles in urban schools at all three levels (elementary, middle, and high) serving diverse communities, this study has developed a specific, grounded picture of the role shifts that are implied by the notion of learning-focused leadership, while demonstrating a range of ways that school staffs are able to make those shifts. We paid particular attention to the way that leadership responsibilities are meaningfully distributed and connected across individuals who occupy different formal and informal positions within the school, rather than simply dispersed, so that the exercise of leadership across the school reflects effort toward a common learning improvement agenda. To explain why school leadership roles are created and enacted as they are, the study also considered the way that external messages, forces, and conditions—from the district central office, local community, or state—enabled or inhibited school leaders’ attempts to address learning improvement goals.

Because this kind of research requires intensive description and analysis of leadership roles and actions undertaken within individual schools, we created a design that focused our attention on a small number of schools (between three and five per district) that we could visit repeatedly over a period of a year and a half. The schools were in a set of districts chosen because each, in its own way, was encouraging and supporting the development of a more robust leadership capacity and practice in its schools focused on the improvement of learning. The nested, multiple-case design (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2003) afforded the opportunity to explore study issues in 15 schools in four urban districts.

### Study District Criteria and Selection Process

This kind of research study lends itself well to a multiple-case design of selected schools nested within contrasting district and state contexts. The school, rather than the state or district, was the primary sampling unit. To do a good job of capturing school phenomena and also relating them to the district or state actions that might influence them, we limited the study to a relatively small number of schools. Our purposive sample (Patton, 2003) included at least three schools per district, one at each level (e.g., elementary, middle, and high school), to maximize our ability to detect subtle features of the leadership role configurations that reflected the level and size of the school. The final sample included three schools in each of two

districts (Norwalk–La Mirada Unified Schools, a moderate-sized urban district in the Los Angeles basin, and Springfield (MA) Public Schools), four schools in another district (Atlanta Public Schools), and five schools in the largest district (New York City/Empowerment Schools Organization<sup>10</sup>).

In general, schools were chosen to maximize three primary criteria:

- *Progress on improving student learning for the full range of a diverse student population*, in whatever terms the school (or district) defined progress, so long as this definition considered progress of all identified subgroups as well as the school's population in aggregate. Of the schools that met this criterion, we invited a range of possibilities, from those that were performing relatively low in an absolute sense to others that were performing relatively high, on whatever measures were considered locally meaningful.
- *Reconfigured leadership arrangements within the school designed to share the leadership work and maximize leaders' attention to teaching and learning*. Schools were identified that had set up their leadership assignments, team structures, and roles so that considerable attention was directed to teaching and learning issues.
- *Experimentation with the allocation of staffing resources, to maximize attention to the equitable improvement of student learning*. Schools were also considered for the study that had directed their staffing resources (all categories of staff) to address school needs for serving a diverse student clientele equitably.

By locating schools that fit these criteria, we purposely sought study sites that would be likely to display the focus of the study in sufficient detail to allow us to capture it in relatively well-established forms. To make sure we saw learning-focused leadership in action in a sufficient variety of schools, we chose schools from all three levels, as noted above, and also sought some variation on the following secondary criteria:

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<sup>10</sup> Under the current organization of the New York City Department of Education, all schools in the city choose to be part of one of 14 "School Support Organizations" (SSOs), the segment of the District Central Office that offers the most direct support to the school. We concentrated our research on the largest of these SSOs, currently called the "Empowerment Schools Organization" (ESO), which subsumes approximately 500 schools, or nearly a third of the City's schools. Most of our collected data came from schools within the ESO, and to a lesser extent portions of the central office with which they worked, although some data providing background to our analyses came from other sources outside this SSO. In this sense, we never set out to study the whole of the New York City Department of Education reform; NYC/ESO comprised the relevant "district" for most of our analyses.

- *School size and structure.* An attempt was made to include, across the full sample, both large and small and both more- and less-traditionally organized schools (nontraditionally structured schools are often small). This would enable us to assess the interaction of leadership role configurations and structures that encouraged collaborative work.
- *Leadership turnover and stability.* Having schools in the sample in which the formal leadership team was quite recent, and others where it had long established roots into the school, helped to bring forward the dynamics associated with trust on the one hand, which can enhance the school's ability to attempt changes and, with complacency on the other hand, which can enhance resistance to change.

We assembled candidates in each district site after consultation with district officials and other knowledgeable observers through a networking process that surfaced approximately double the number of possible sites. We then contacted prospective school sites, briefly visited them to verify their fit with the criteria and their willingness to be included in the study, and chose the set that maximized the fit across all four study sites. Not all criteria could be met equally at a single site.

## District (and State) Sampling Plan

The sample for this investigation included four districts and their corresponding state settings, each of which had made the revitalization of school leadership a major priority, though they had sought different means to do it. Two other attributes of the district setting were important:

- *Poverty and diversity (racial, ethnic, and linguistic).* We aimed to study sites that were primarily urban in nature, serving student populations that are racially diverse and poor. Our focus on sites of this sort stemmed from a desire to understand central office administrators' participation in learning-focused leadership within school districts facing the most daunting system-wide learning challenges. Such sites are typically large (all of our candidate sites served enrollments of 25,000 students or more), which adds to the complexity of the learning processes we were investigating.
- *Wallace Foundation connection.* To the extent possible, we wished to work with sites that had active relationships with The Wallace Foundation, either through participation in the Foundation's Leadership Issue Group (LIG) activ-

ity between 2005 and 2008, or via involvement in grant-supported leadership development as part of several foundation-initiated grant programs between 2002 and 2009.<sup>11</sup>

The resulting district sample included three districts that had an established relationship with The Wallace Foundation, as well as with other key external partners (e.g., NYC Leadership Academy, or in the case of Springfield, MA, the Institute for Learning at the University of Pittsburgh); the fourth had a long-term relation with the Panasonic Foundation and with the University of Washington's Center for Educational Leadership, which had helped the district bring concentrated energy to bear on the quality and deployment of school leadership, among other reform targets.<sup>12</sup>

This set of districts offered a variety of contexts in which to study the reconfiguration of school leadership, varying in student populations, regional context, and district size, from modest-sized urban centers like Springfield, MA, to megacity settings, as in New York. The number of district settings was sufficient to generate school sites at each level without overwhelming the resources for the research. A brief capsule of what each district/state site offered appears below:

1. *Atlanta Public Schools, Atlanta, GA*.<sup>13</sup> A district of this size offered a number of school site possibilities in which school leaders had seized the opportunity to redefine their collective approach to guiding learning improvement in the school. District office leaders were interested in the role of the district in improving school-based learning and in supporting school leaders, and had taken various steps to transform the structure, orientation, and work practice of the central office. Furthermore, the central office was using the state-initiated *Balanced Scorecard* as a tool for defining the district's trajectory and measuring improvement.

<sup>11</sup> The Leadership for Educational Achievement in Districts (LEAD) grant program and grants to states under the State Action for Educational Leadership Project (SAELP) offered selected districts and states around the country resources for experimenting with improvements to the development and support for leadership in relation to learning improvement.

<sup>12</sup> One other criterion was at play: as part of a coordinated set of studies within the Study of Leadership for Learning Improvement, at least two of the sites needed to overlap with the other two companion studies and therefore had to meet their sampling criteria as well: (1) intentional efforts to reform the district central office, inquiry focus, and conditions supportive of district-level transformation efforts and (2) focus on human resource development as a central strategy in learning improvement (Honig et al., forthcoming; Plecki et al., 2009).

<sup>13</sup> These sites were also used in the two other substudies. See corresponding discussions in the Methodological Appendixes of the companion reports.

**2. *New York City Department of Education/the Empowerment Schools***

**Organization:**<sup>14</sup> Two related, yet distinct developments set the stage for an interesting set of school leadership role transformations. First, Region One, an amalgamation of several of the city's former community school districts, had instituted a new leadership structure in 2003 that put in place a layer of Local Instructional Superintendents, each with responsibility for supporting 10 schools; the Region was also the site of an elaborate leadership development continuum supported by external grant funds. The creation of the Empowerment Schools option enabled many schools in this Region to establish a wholly different relationship with the central office that was nonsupervisory and reflected school choice. These layers of potential and different leadership support provided a useful laboratory for exploring learning-focused leadership efforts in schools.

**3. *Springfield Public Schools, Springfield, MA:*** The third largest district in the state, Springfield Public Schools, serves a demographically and culturally diverse population in 43 schools. Springfield's grant-funded activities focused on differentiating roles for the leadership continuum. The state of Massachusetts had also been supporting school leadership development initiatives, again with external funding. Springfield provided a large site that was conducive to studying how school and district leaders get feedback about their practice across a system and how leadership assessment data were used to inform professional development practices in the system and in individual leader's practice.

**4. *Norwalk-La Mirada Unified Schools, CA:*** This district was involved in a concerted initiative pertaining to professional learning of leaders (at both district and school levels), in partnership with an external support provider (the Center for Educational Leadership at the University of Washington) that was helping the district mount a sustained literacy improvement initiative. This work built on years of activity supported by the Panasonic Foundation, in which the district sought to build a better basis for system-wide reform and improvement, though not specifically aimed at instruction. Extensive attention to the quality

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<sup>14</sup> At the time of sample selection, the New York City Department of Education was still organized into 10 regions (this arrangement was soon thereafter disbanded), and the 500 or more schools associated with the Empowerment Schools Organization (the subset of the City system we were treating as "the district") were dispersed among all the regions. We chose to concentrate on Empowerment schools in one of the 10 regions, in part because it had engaged in aggressive leadership development work under a grant from The Wallace Foundation, and in part because that positioning would allow us to explore lateral connections among geographically proximate schools.

and intensity of leaders' learning about instructional improvement provided an important context for the reconfiguration of school leaders' roles.

Finally, the four states in this sample offered useful contrasts as well as the fact that all were paying serious attention to the quality and support of school leadership. Their regional diversity and other differences offered a helpful way to capture alternate ways of construing a system of supports for the exercise of school leadership.

## Data Sources and Data Collection Procedures

Studying the reconfiguration of leadership roles in the school entailed several kinds of investigative work. The data sources outlined below were all designed to develop a cumulative picture of the exercise of leadership in each school under study, along with the forces and conditions in the larger district and state system that shaped the leaders' daily work. Therefore, the data we collected came from sources both inside and outside the school. We collected data through interviews with school administrators, instructional support staff (e.g., teacher leaders), teachers, and other administrators, some in central office roles that worked with the schools; observation of school-based leadership processes and events; and the examination of artifacts of several kinds. Each source served as a vantage point from which to explore the research questions, and together allowed us to develop a convergent picture of school leadership at work.

### Interviews

Through four waves of field visits, we gathered intensive semi-structured interview data concerning the configuration of leadership roles and how individuals acting in these roles brought collective effort to bear on learning issues in the school. The interviews captured the activities and perspectives of several different kinds of individuals:

- *Principals and other titular leaders* (e.g., assistant principals, department heads) who spent most of their time with designated administrative responsibilities, including instructional leadership activities.
- *Leadership team members* (the composition varied by school). This source included formally appointed teams with representation from administrators, teacher groups, even parents and students; or leadership teams that were sometimes more *ad hoc* and even informal. In any event, we looked for such groups



that came together for the purpose of exploring and planning in relation to learning issues in the school.

- *Individuals in instructional leadership roles* (e.g., teacher leaders, instructional coaches, or other staff) whose task it was to guide and support classroom teaching. They were often members of leadership teams as well. These staff offered an additional layer of insight into the exercise of learning-focused leadership in the school.
- *A sample of other school staff*, including teachers from across the school, classified personnel, and instructional aides. The main purpose of interviewing individuals from this group was to triangulate espoused practice and directions with actual practice and shared directions. Here we sought to interview in each school three to six “rank-and-file” teachers, a centrally positioned staff person, and instructional aides, if there were such positions.

As this interviewee list implies, conversations with different kinds of people were needed to get an accurate picture of the exercise of leadership and its relation to learning improvement in the school building. Not all of these interviews happened in a single visit of 2 to 3 days. Rather, across the full range of visits, we touched base with all of these individuals at least once, and with selected ones among them who acted as key informants each time we visited.

A central task of these interviews was to yield detailed descriptions of how the efforts of various people among the school staff (1) brought attention to focus on particular learning problems; (2) generated and, over time, reconsidered particular definitions of the problem to be solved; (3) identified courses of action that would guide and support teaching and learning; (4) carried out these courses of action; and (5) learned from and about the results of these improvement efforts. Alongside these foci of data collection, we also learned from interviews about the context of the school, its learning climate, and its relation to the community it served. Drawing on these information sources, we were able to render a first approximation of the way the school had configured its leadership roles and the conditions within the school that enabled that role configuration.

### **Iterative Field Observations in the Schools**

The successive waves of field visiting allowed us to carry out observational work on a limited scale to assess key processes within the school that revealed the exercise of leadership in action. Observational work was limited to events in which

leadership was likely to be exercised (such as staff meetings, team meetings, school improvement planning sessions, or professional development events), when these coincided with the timing of field visits. We also observed classroom teaching, mainly to yield data on the nature of the learning challenges targeted by the school and the response of teaching staff to instructional leadership initiatives. Then, primarily through triangulation of these observations with what we learned from interviews within the school, we were able to assess both the designed and enacted roles of school leaders, in relation to learning agendas, as these were defined within the school.

### **School Artifact Analysis**

Relevant artifacts collected from the school offered us a final source for developing a nuanced, triangulated picture of school leadership roles in action and the results of this leadership activity. In particular, we paid attention to organizational representations of the school and its work (e.g., Web-based or paper descriptions of its mission, programs, or recent events), strategic planning documents, rosters of staff and descriptions of their roles, and information about how resources were distributed in the school. We also collected documents sent to the school by the district central office.

### **District Interviews and Artifact Analysis**

The same kinds of sources were solicited more selectively at the central office level—with emphasis on those units and individuals in the central office who interacted most directly with the schools. These data sources yielded a picture of relevant features of the district environment and intentional actions by district officials designed to guide and support school leadership. Here our particular focus was on (1) the local accountability and data systems, as these impinged on school leaders' work; (2) the aspects of the instructional guidance system that had most direct implications for case study schools; (3) the leadership supervision system, reporting relationships, oversight, and mentoring (if any); (4) the parameters and guidance for leaders' work offered by contracts and hiring expectations; (5) the local provision of professional development support for school leaders and any differentiation that occurred according to their level or experience; and (6) the arrangements for assessing school leaders' performance, including how both formative and summative processes were used to direct attention to specific activities and learning issues.

## Site Visiting Strategy

The design called for a two-phase strategy for data collection. In the first phase, we concentrated on identifying school learning improvement priorities and describing school leadership practice, while the second went deeper to further describe, understand, and explain how leadership was deployed and supported to ensure high-quality learning opportunities for students. In phase one, taking place in the first half of the 2007–08 school year, we identified the local (school-based) descriptions of the learning challenges, aims, and strategies in the school; described the way the school had organized itself to meet the learning challenges it had established, including how it had configured its leadership roles; characterized the main influences on the exercise of leadership in the school, including forces and conditions inside and outside the school; and noted any innovative practices and arrangements in the way the school approached its leadership work.

Phase two, largely occurring in the latter half of the 2007–08 school year and first few months of the 2008–09 year, deepened the descriptions of leadership roles in action, taking advantage of a new school year in which to see leadership activity enacted all over again, and explored more specifically the relation of role enactment to learning improvement agendas and to various internal and external influences. Here the research team watched leadership in action, connected with teachers and other school staff to find out how they experienced school leadership, mapped the supports that enabled leaders within the school to carry on their work, and explored further how environmental influences (especially embedded in the accountability, data, and instructional guidance systems) might be affecting school leadership practice.

## Analysis Process

Our overall approach to data analysis reflected an adapted form of “grounded theory” analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, 1997), situated in two waves of analytic work that took advantage of the situated “within-site” meanings of the data from each case school, while enabling “cross-site” claims to be developed and substantiated (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The first wave, interspersed with and immediately following field visits, carried out within-site analyses of leadership arrangements and practice in each case study school. The second wave, drawing on the results of the first, developed cross-site insights and patterns based on the common patterns and divergences between the within-site patterns. Across all, we treated the school

as the primary unit of analysis, and within that organizational unit, leadership practice (e.g., of principals, teacher leaders) as a frequent analytic unit.

The whole process differed from classical grounded theory work in that we did less systematic category identification and elaboration between site visits and reserved more of our analytic work until a later stage. Like typical grounded theory, however, we approached the data with a largely inductive frame and without firm commitments to an *a priori* conceptual framework, preferring to evolve and refine analytic categories and relationships in the course of the analysis process. The resulting “theory” offered “local empirical models surrounding the phenomenon under study” (Hughes, 2009) rather than the grander vision of “theory” that some other traditions of social science seek. We went into the work with various conceptual ideas about the nature of learning-focused leadership and the conditions and action surrounding it that might influence it, rooted in our assessment of relevant literature at the outset of the study (Portin et al., 2006).

The formal analysis of our interview, observations, and documentary data began with a coding process, in which we developed a broad open-coding scheme linked to an analytic school site case outline that offered large analytic bins for capturing what we were learning from each school site. The resulting coded versions of interview transcripts, entered in an NVIVO database, allowed us to efficiently search for data that pertained to the major analytic targets.

The coding process fed a process of constructing lengthy (60–80 pages) analytic memos on each school case that portrayed descriptively and with only low levels of inference the nature of leadership work in the school as well as the main conditions and events associated with it. These accounts were developed by site visitor pairs who had been assigned to the schools in question, with one site visitor drafting the case report and the other elaborating, refining, and corroborating (or correcting) it, to reflect the state of the school as accurately as possible. Detailed district context memos were also developed to characterize descriptively, in broad strokes, the nature of the environment in which school leaders worked, and its possible influences on school leaders’ work. These were reviewed and refined by all site visitors who had spent time in the district in question.

Having completed this phase of within-site analytic work, we embarked on a cross-site process of reading across the school site memos by analytic category to spot emerging patterns, possible hunches, and new categories or relationships that needed deeper exploration. This process yielded a cross-site analytic outline—

subsequently refined into the outline for the study report—that clustered cross-site patterns around central themes related to the study’s main research questions. The work then proceeded in analytic subgroups which developed chapter-length analyses of each major theme, drawing on material from the school case memos, the original coded data runs, and additional data runs developed around new codes. The chapter drafts were subsequently merged into an overall report draft and then cross-checked for accurate representation of each site, possible disconfirming evidence, and the existence of triangulating evidence.

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