

Introduction to School and District Leadership in an Era of Accountability: Chapter 1

Volume 4 in the Information Age Publishing Book Series *International Research on School Leadership*¹

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Our fourth book in the *International Research on School Leadership* series focuses on school leadership in an era of high-stakes accountability. Fueled by sweeping federal education accountability reforms, such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Race to the Top (RtT) in the United States and Australia's Performance Measurement and Reporting Task Force, school systems around the world are being forced to increase academic standards, participate in high-stakes testing, and raise evaluation standards for teachers and principals. These results-driven reforms are intended to hold educators "accountable for student learning and accountable to the public" (Anderson, 2005, p.2). While policymakers and the public debate the merits of student achievement accountability measures, P-12 educational leaders do not have the luxury to wait for clear guidance and resources to improve their schools and operating systems. Instead, successful leaders must balance the need to create learning communities, manage the organizational climate, and encourage community involvement with the consequences testing has on teacher morale and public scrutiny. The chapters in this volume clearly indicate that school leaders attending to these potentially competing forces affects their problem-solving strategies, their ability to facilitate change, and encourage community involvement.

In soliciting manuscripts for this volume, we encouraged authors to explore successful leadership being practiced by building and district level leaders as external pressures to improve student achievement have increased. Our goal was to create an edited book that examines successful school and district leadership during the accountability era from multiple perspectives. Our call for manuscripts asked potential authors to consider these important questions:

- How do educational leaders successfully manage the politics of accountability?
- To what degree are innovation and creativity affected as accountability increases?
- What are effective ways of maintaining staff morale and community involvement as the pressure to raise student achievement rises?
- Why do some schools thrive during times of increasing accountability?
- How has accountability shaped what schools and districts do to build leadership capacity, professional learning communities, and continuous improvement?
- During the accountability era, how have school leadership practices changed? Have these changes led to improved student achievement?
- How have school leaders used elements of accountability (e.g., transparency, testing, data disaggregation) to inform their practice?

We were delighted with the responses from colleagues around the world who were eager to share their research dealing with how leaders are functioning effectively within a high-accountability environment. The nine chapters in this volume provide empirical evidence of the strategies school leaders use to cope with problems and negotiate external demands while improving student performance. In particular, the voices and actions of principals, superintendents, and school board members are captured in a blend of quantitative and qualitative studies. The breadth of studies is impressive, ranging from case studies of individual principals to cross-district comparisons to national data from the National Center for Education Statistics. To highlight important findings, we have organized the book into five sections. The first section (Chapters 2, 3, and 4) highlights the problem-solving strategies used by principals and superintendents when pressured to turn around low-performing schools. In the second section (Chapters 5 and 6), attention is devoted to ways in which school leaders serve as "buffers" as they negotiate external demands within their local school contexts. Next, Chapters 7 and 8 explore creative ways in which financial analyses can be used to assess the cost effectiveness of programs and services. Chapters 9 and 10 examine how principals enact their instructional leadership roles in managing curriculum reforms and evaluating teachers. Finally, in the last section (Chapter 11), Kenneth Leithwood synthesizes the major themes and ideas emerging across these chapters, paying particular attention to practical issues influencing school leaders in this era of school reform and accountability as well as promising areas for future research.

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Section 1: Problem-Solving Strategies of School Leaders in Low-Performing Schools

Chapter 2, *Problem Solving Under Accountability: Perspectives of Principals in High and Low Achieving Schools*, by Steve Mayer and William Firestone examines the differences in leadership problem solving under accountability pressures between principals in four uniquely defined groups of schools: high SES - high performance, high SES - low performance, low SES - high performance, and low SES - low performance. They first identify each group of schools using a residual regression approach, and then interviewed 24 principals across these four types of schools, asking them about how they solve problems, and with whom. They present an important set of findings that detail the similar approaches that principals take in high performing schools versus low performing schools, regardless of context, while confirming that context for school leadership does matter. Principals in high performing schools had a broad conception of the problem, were inventive with an internal locus of control, set broad goals, and engaged their stakeholders in deep forms of collaboration, actions often associated with expert principals (Leithwood and Steinbach, 1992). Conversely, principals in low performing schools defined school problems narrowly, felt helpless with an external locus of control, set narrow non-systemic goals, and provided shallow engagement or no engagement at all.

Together, the findings from this study provide much-needed evidence for how leaders in different contexts engage in problem solving in their schools when faced with strong accountability pressures. Additionally, the insights from this study are an important contribution, especially in highlighting the similarities and differences in principal leadership and problem solving between low and high performance schools that also have high SES. Few studies have focused on low performing high SES schools, but Mayer and Firestone provide compelling evidence that shows that principals in low performing schools with either low or high SES have many similarities in their responses to accountability as principals in high performing schools.

In Chapter 3, *School Leadership Challenges Under No Child Left Behind: Lessons from UCEA's Project Voices from the Field: Phase 3*, Tony Townsend, Gary Ivory, Michele Acker-Hocevar, Julia Ballenger and William Place confront U.S. accountability policy of NCLB through the responses of 81 superintendents. Through analyzing the responses of superintendents to the question of what NCLB has meant for them as a leader in education, this chapter analyzes accountability policy through integration of complexity, problem solving, and leadership theory. Bringing together organizational theories such as scientific management, Theory X, and transactional leadership, the authors outline a typology of problems in schools. The first type of problem are problems with straightforward, recipe-like solutions, which are considered low complexity or "tame" problems that can be addressed through transactional styles of leadership. Superintendents feel the underlying assumption behind NCLB is that all problems in schools are tame. However, schools must confront problems that are complicated, complex, and unstructured where outcomes are unknown and stakeholder responses highly varied. These "wicked" types of problems in schools require complex solutions, which include flexibility, adaptability, networking, and attention to the context of the school and its community. The authors show through the voices of the superintendents, that much of the job of school leadership falls into the complicated and complex/wicked type of problem area, where

accountability policy assumes transactional, tame problems and ingredients-based solutions that do not, and cannot fit the complexities of schools.

Aligning with the findings throughout many of the other chapters throughout this volume, the authors show that these superintendents respond to their complex problems through engaging their stakeholders in problem-solving, which is embedded in their local context, as they attempt to respond to the rigid dictates of the policy. Because the policy focuses on transactions with sanctions for non-compliance, this undermines trust in the system and an ability to adapt to the local context. Of particular importance for this volume on international leadership responses to accountability policies, the authors provide guidance on how to address the shortcomings in the current U.S. policy, through providing international comparisons as an avenue for improvement through trust, and a more open and engaging policy system.

Chapter 4, *Exiting School Improvement Sanctions: Accountability, Morale, and the Successful School Turnaround Principal*, by Cindy Corcoran, Craig Peck, and Ulrich Reitzug examines how four principals of schools under threat of sanctions for low performance worked to turn around their schools and exit school improvement sanctions in two years. This chapter provides an in-depth account from school leaders on the ground not only how they went about turning around their schools to conform to the expectations of accountability policies, but also how they used accountability policy to inform their work and the work of teachers to improve student performance, teacher professional development, and school morale. As detailed in the chapter, schools that have continuously failed to meet student performance targets are a difficult environment for any newly-appointed principal. The stories captured in the chapter describe how the principals had only two years to make deep strategic changes, while motivating their staff and students in environments where low performance was the norm.

Rather than a roadmap for reform, the chapter chronicles the voices of these principals in such challenging circumstances, while detailing the commonalities through five main practices. First, one of their first acts was to fire many teachers who they saw as low performing, recalcitrant, or lacking the content knowledge required to teach their classes. Second, the principals then worked diligently to protect instructional time, increase professionalism in their schools through discouraging teacher socialization throughout the day and encouraging teaching "bell to bell," and reallocate instructional specialist time to target needed areas of instruction throughout their schools. Third, consistent with other studies in this volume, principals focused on engaging the teachers in conversations about how to improve instruction for their students by standardizing and collecting data on instruction and student performance, providing professional development around that data, and speaking individually with the teachers in their schools about their students and teaching. Fourth, these principals sought resources to help fund improvements through the creative use of Title I funds, use of personal funds, and active fundraising in their communities. Finally, due to the pressures from the accountability mandates to improve student performance within two years, these principals focused on increasing teacher and student morale, engaging the teachers in professional learning communities, openly disclosing the evaluation of their own performance, engaging the community and parents in conversations, and enthusiastically celebrating school success on both a daily small scale and at regular intervals with large-scale events and celebrations. Overall,

the chapter provides a wealth of information on the difficult and persistent work around improvement practices of the principals of these turnaround schools, a topic that is gaining widespread attention in the literature (e.g., Duke, 2012; Herman et al., 2008).

Section 2: How School Leaders Buffer External Demands

In Chapter 5, *Extending the Leadership Role from Policy Broker to Sense-Maker: Emerging Evidence from Charter Schools*, Marytza Gawlik examines the ways in which charter school principals, as a unique type of school leader, frame and confront accountability policies through sense-making in their schools. Through in-depth interviews with two charter school principals, Gawlik advances a theory of charter school principal as policy broker and central sense-maker when it comes to accountability policy implementation. She discovered these principals interpret and inform policy requirements by highlighting or downplaying specific accountability implementation issues. Charter school principals have a unique perspective due to their dual accountability reporting structures to the state and to the charter authorizer, both of which may interpret policies in different ways for implementation in the schools. The principals reported that the degree of implementation and adaptation of accountability policies was mediated through their own experiences, as well as the experiences of the teachers in their schools, and that the principal's understandings of accountability policy implementation were informed through formal meetings and professional development interactions with teachers. Mirroring the findings of the other studies in this volume, Gawlik reports principals emphasized that a central aspect of how the schools encounter accountability policies is by engaging teachers in consensus building around decoding the meaning of policies as they relate to student achievement, which was noted as a "shift in mindset" for teachers in the schools.

Chapter 6, *Negotiating the Downward Rush: An Exploration of School Leaders' Strategic Implementation of Accountability Policies*, by William Black and Barbara Shircliffe explores how 10 school administrators "make do" while negotiating state and federal mandates. The key finding is how administrators act as filters to protect their teachers and students from the "downward rush" of accountability policies, many that are counterproductive to effective teaching and learning. The study highlights three negotiations that school administrators engage in throughout the accountability movement. The first is the negotiation of changing school demographics as the district shifted from desegregation policies to performance accountability and school choice mandates. The second negotiation entails the management of Adequately Yearly Progress (AYP) measures to increase student achievement across all designated subgroups. And the third negotiation involves the press for schools and teachers to expand Advance Placement (AP) enrollment to underserved students.

Using qualitative interviews as their primary data source, Black and Shircliffe interviewed 10 school administrators and school board members to address two research questions: (1) How do district and school leaders successfully leverage accountability mandates they deemed helpful amid changing demographics and an economic downturn? and (2) What leadership narratives emerge as district and school leaders describe the strategies and tactics to minimize policy mandates they deemed harmful? Applying an inductive data analysis process, they discovered: (a) school leaders' understanding of accountability policies varies by position and responsibilities, (b) information typically has difficulty

flowing upstream and specific concerns at the school level may go unanswered, (c) leaders skillfully act as *bricoleurs*, pointing to the contradictions and limitations of the policies, while appropriating these policies to leverage resources to target lower performing students in a manner consistent with locally held ideas and experiences, and (d) leaders experience dual and often contradicting feelings about AP enrollment and learning.

Black and Shircliffe found that on occasion school leaders support the intent of such policies even when they understand the collateral effects of implementation of the policies. This may lead to lose/lose situations where damaging, albeit well-intended, policies are creating emotional angst and dilemmas requiring skillful political negotiation in order to protect the equilibrium and commitment to public schools.

Section 3: Financial Analyses for Program Improvement

In Chapter 7, *A Cost Effectiveness Analysis of Third Grade Reading Diagnostic Tools*, by Kyle Ingle and Todd Cramer explore the cost effectiveness of several diagnostic reading measurement tools being used in a suburban Ohio school district. As districts and schools determine how best to diagnose students' literacy and reading needs, implementing a sound decision-making approach for selecting assessment instruments and materials is essential. Consequently, educational administrators are bombarded with choices of possible assessment instruments from which to choose, raising the fundamental question: What data should be used to decide which resources to purchase? As budgets tighten and accountability for improving student performance increases, this will become a critical question for decision makers to answer.

Ingle and Cramer's approach is noteworthy because it not only accounts for the costs associated with various assessment instruments, but also considers how these formative instruments predict students' achievement on standardized tests. As the authors acknowledge, this study provides an empirically-tested approach for the economic evaluation of education programs, which is rarely conducted in the field of education. Their study was guided by several questions: (1) What are the relationships between different reading diagnostic instruments and reading assessment scores for subgroups of students? (2) What are the costs associated with selecting, delivering, and analyzing different reading diagnostic instruments? and (3) Which reading diagnostic instrument is the most cost effective? Five reading diagnostic measurement tools being used in the district were examined, including kindergarten readiness assessments, district-developed second-grade standards-based report cards, and second-grade standardized reading assessments.

In analyzing total costs associated with the five diagnostic instruments, monetary expenditures were calculated as well as other "opportunity" costs: (a) time spent by teachers and administrators to select, train, deliver, and analyze reading diagnostic test results, (b) licensing fees for using assessments, and (c) supplies. To answer the third research question, the authors calculated cost effectiveness ratios for the five diagnostic reading assessments in two different ways, providing options for decision makers. The results of their analysis revealed sizeable differences in the total costs associated with various assessments, their relative ability to predict standardized achievement scores, and their cost effectiveness ratios. However, two of the five diagnostic reading

assessments emerged as being more favorable on all of these measures.

Ingle and Cramer suggest several implications of this type of cost effectiveness analysis for practitioners and policymakers. This analysis strategy can arm educational leaders with information to purchase fewer reading diagnostic assessment instruments, freeing up resources for other educational needs. Because certain instruments were better at predicting student achievement for under-represented groups, districts can make better-informed decisions about serving these high-need populations. External mandates for educational accountability are certain to continue in the coming years. Therefore, policies that account for this type of cost effective analysis have the potential to allow districts to build their long-term instructional capabilities while being good stewards of public money, a definite win-win situation for our communities, states, and nation.

Chapter 8, *Effect of State LEA Policy on Special Education Enrollment in Charter Schools*, by Timothy Salazar and Randy Raphael focuses on the effects of state local education agency policies on special education student enrollment in charter schools. Their study provides data to support a longstanding accusation that charter schools tend to ignore students with disabilities. In this insightful study, Salazar and Raphael utilize a financial incentive theory to explain why charter schools that operate as local education agencies engage in selective enrollment practices that exclude students with disabilities.

Using National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data, Salazar and Raphael tested three hypotheses around their financial incentive theory and found strong support for its operation. Despite the results of their study being correlational and not causal, they provide a useful starting point for examining this issue in greater depth. Their study provides strong evidence that by “following the money” it becomes more apparent why charter schools have lower special education enrollments than other schools. Given their findings and the popularity of the charter school movement, one has to wonder if our nation is backing away from its moral obligations as outlined in the Individual with Disabilities Education Act. Is the current trend towards encouraging more charter schools, in essence, creating a re-segregation of students with and without disabilities? We hope Salazar and Raphael will continue this line of inquiry to tease out the nuances underlying their initial findings.

Section 4: Instructional Leadership for Curriculum Reform and Teacher Evaluation

In Chapter 9, *Say it Again Sam: Curriculum Leadership Matters*, Evelyn Browne and Gini Doolittle address important questions critical to effective instructional leadership and improving student learning: (1) What is the role of school leaders with regard to curriculum as the core technology of the classroom? and (2) What is the relationship between curriculum quality, curriculum implementation, and student achievement? Using a cross-case district-level analysis of 15 school districts in New Jersey, Browne and Doolittle discovered several themes pertaining to curriculum leadership: (a) ensuring curriculum quality and consistency, (b) engaging teachers in curriculum development, and (c) focusing on student mastery. They argue that the core technology of schools must be supported and sustained by leaders who understand the essence of what school is – a learning organization. Without a

learning organization culture, instructional leadership is unlikely to be embedded deeply and impact student achievement.

Consistent with the literature on school reform and instructional leadership, this study provides supporting evidence that external, one size fits all reform packages are unlikely to be as powerful as locally-developed curriculum. By using a bottom-up approach to increase student achievement through curriculum leadership, this study underscores the adverse consequences of substituting an externally-developed curriculum. Using the medical philosophy of the Hippocratic Oath, Browne and Doolittle claim administrators should “do no harm.” In other words, if current and aspiring school leaders are unwilling to confront the challenges of instructional leadership, they should step aside and allow others who are willing to take on this crucial role.

Chapter 10, *The Changing Conditions of Instructional Leadership: Principals’ Perceptions of Teacher Evaluation Accountability Mandates*, by Mary Lynne Derrington and John Campbell reveals how principals in a southeastern state are dealing with new higher stakes accountability measures of teacher evaluation included in the federal government’s Race to the Top (RTTT) initiative. One of the major changes in the guidelines requires principals to conduct an evaluation cycle with all teachers annually, consisting of four to six 60-minute observations per teacher. In addition, teachers’ evaluations are made public and can affect their tenure and employment status. Because of the rapid implementation of this policy and its potential effects on principals’ and teachers’ working relationships, this study sheds light on principals’ perceptions of the benefits and problems associated with the new evaluation system as well as how their relationships with teachers have been affected. Fourteen principals across four suburban and rural districts participated in the interview study. All levels – elementary, middle, and secondary schools – were represented. Most of the schools served high-poverty student populations, ranging from 26% to 85% of students receiving free and reduced lunch.

Despite the rapid implementation of the teacher evaluation system, principals felt the rubric enriched their collaboration with teachers. In particular, they noted improvements in their collegial conversations with teachers and increased collaboration between teachers as they sought to understand the meaning and intent of the evaluation rubric. Predictably, many principals voiced concern about the amount of time observing teachers and providing feedback, causing high stress and preventing them from engaging in other important duties and responsibilities. The instruments and rating scales were sometimes difficult to interpret, they questioned their ability to accurately reflect teachers’ expertise, and felt the scales inhibited the potential for teacher growth and development. Overall, principals sensed the new evaluation process compromised their day-to-day interactions with teachers by reducing their opportunities to regularly visit classrooms and meet informally with teachers and students, factors they felt negatively influenced their ability to monitor the school’s climate, classroom management, and student safety.

Several lessons are important for policymakers intent on overhauling evaluation systems to raise standards and expectations. For instance, because principals are intent on maintaining collegial and productive relationships with teachers, they may well circumvent new stringent policies to meet the norms of collegiality and a growth-oriented culture. In addition, if student learning outcomes are the ultimate goal of heightened teacher evaluation systems, little credible evidence exists demonstrating students

benefit as principals increase the time they observe teachers. As the education field gains increased understanding of how principals affect student learning outcomes (e.g., Leithwood, Anderson, Mascal, & Strauss, 2009; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008), policymakers would be wise to examine the results of these studies to reinforce where principals can best spend their time and efforts.

Section 5: Emerging Trends and Future Directions

We asked a noted expert in education policy, reform, and school leadership, Kenneth Leithwood, to review the book and provide his reactions, which appear in Chapter 11, Concluding Synthesis and Commentary. Using a conceptual framework to organize his comments, he examines how the empirical findings of the authors reflect the NCLB policy context and its influence on how leaders think about and respond to various aspects of this complex reform. Beginning with a description of key aspects of the NCLB policy environment (i.e., narrow curricular goals, hierarchical decision making, and harsh sanctions), he examines the internal processes and sense-making strategies employed by school leaders in coping with various aspects of large-scale educational reform. He bolsters our contention that these findings reinforce previous research regarding the cognitive and affective processes used by expert and nonexpert school leaders. Although many of the chapters capture the external behaviors or practices leaders utilize in a high-accountability environment, he notes that these studies provide very little, if any, evidence of how student learning is affected by these actions, a fruitful area for future research. In concluding his comments, Leithwood contends that critics of the U.S. public education system tend to overlook many positive trends in student performance revealed in various international comparisons, suggesting “the glass may be half full” when examining how school systems, leaders, and teachers have risen to the challenge of high-stakes accountability.

In the face of mounting criticism of public or government schools, these studies clearly demonstrate that many school leaders have embraced, not rejected, school reform, a message often overlooked in the literature. We hope readers find as much value in the information included in this book as we did in working with these authors to allow their studies come to light. In that vein, we dedicate this book to school leaders around the world who work tirelessly and without praise or recognition to improve the life chances of the students who enter their schools and the societies that ultimately reap the benefits of their efforts.

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