Leading Change Under Pressure: An Examination of Principal Leadership in Low-Performing Schools

ABSTRACT: Through case studies of 10 elementary schools in Chicago, this article examines principal leadership in low-performing schools. The data include 331 interviews with teachers, administrators, external partners, and others over a 2-year period. Using transformational leadership as a lens, we found that principals in schools that moved off probation in a short period articulated the school vision, provided support and resources to teachers, established collaborative structures and norms, developed commitment to collective goals, and managed the school. Their leadership responses were closely linked to their interpretation of the accountability policy. All the principals centralized decision making. Our study suggests that districts should carefully assign to these schools leaders with appropriate knowledge and skills and reassign ineffective principals given the critical role that principals play in bringing about improvement under pressure.

In recent years, many urban schools have been designated as low-performing and placed under accountability sanctions under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). Before NCLB, punishing schools based on performance outcomes was an integral part of a number of state and district accountability policies across the country (Mintrop & Trujillo, 2005). Schools placed under sanctions have low proportions of students performing at grade level, and they serve high proportions of low-income and minority students (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). To make matters worse, some students spend their entire educational careers—from kindergarten through 12th grade—in low-performing schools.
The underlying theory of school accountability policies is that through a combination of sanctions and support, the school staff will redirect their efforts (O'Day, 2002). In essence, by reallocating resources and altering the curriculum and instruction, school staff will bring about improvement. With a provision of external support and a refocusing of attention, they will, in theory, overcome their histories of low performance. However, there is little attention to whether schools have the necessary internal capacity to improve, including organizational leadership. In fact, few schools have been removed from NCLB's accountability sanctions: In California alone, only 5% of the approximately 700 schools in the final stage of NCLB program improvement (restructuring) improved enough to exit sanctions (Center for Education Policy, 2008). Furthermore, few low-performing schools have received intensive assistance because of limited district and state capacity (Olson, 2004; Richard, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 2004).

Past research has found that the principal is a key player in school effectiveness (Brookover, 1978; Brookover & Lezotte, 1979; Edmonds, 1979) and school improvement (Cotton, 2003; Elmore, 2000; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004) in the everyday operation of the school and in school change (Fullan, 1991, 2008; Kelley, Heneman, & Milanowski, 2000). Principals influence school and student performance; they shape the school's internal processes, climate, and resources (Hallinger & Heck, 1996). School leadership has become even more critical over the last decades as the public school system responds to the changing conditions of the 21st century. In fact, in today's complex environment resulting from increasing requirements, student diversity,1 and technological developments, leadership is essential (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Perhaps most important to the current context is the increased accountability for results involving standards, assessments, and consequences for inadequate performance (Fuhrman, 1999), which has had a major impact on the work of principals (Ylimaki, Jacobson, & Drysdale, 2007).

Whereas leadership clearly matters to the current policy context, few studies have examined the leadership practices of schools targeted by these policies. Chapman and Harris (2004) argued that most of the research has focused on "effective" or "improving" schools rather than the most challenging or "failing" situations. However, the organizational literature has suggested that leadership operates differently under threat conditions (e.g., Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981), indicating a need to better understand leadership in schools under sanctions. If these accountability policies are to bring about school improvement, additional research on leadership in low-performing schools is critical.
Through case studies of 10 schools in Chicago, this study explored the leadership practices of principals in low-performing schools. The study adds to contemporary leadership research by examining the practices and behaviors of principals facing accountability policy pressures under the Chicago School Probation Policy (which preceded NCLB but has many of the same components). These are not just the general pressures of accountability but rather the more immediate pressures of being not only placed on probation but required to improve or face additional sanctions, such as reconstitution or school closure, as well as the stigma associated with this status. This in-depth examination of leadership in low-performing schools considered whether the current theoretical and empirical literature on school leadership is consistent with the realities of the crisis-oriented, high-stress context. Specifically, this study examined what happens as principals in probation schools respond to accountability policies to bring about school improvement and whether these principals exhibit the behaviors and practices of transformational leaders. These data are important to NCLB and future iterations of this legislation because although more and more schools have been placed under sanctions, little remains known about leadership in low-performing schools.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Myriad factors and definitions are associated with the concept of leadership (Vroom & Jago, 2007), and these have evolved over time. Leadership is critical in any organization; it is the first component in translating intention into action (Bennis, 1983). Burns (1978) is frequently credited with bringing together opposing views of leadership—namely, from those who view leadership as residing within an individual in a position of authority who is firmly in charge to those who conceptualize leadership as the interaction between leaders and followers (Evans, 1996; Owens, 2004). Burns contended that leadership should not be considered from these opposing perspectives; rather, the author argued that leadership involves two dimensions: transactional and transformative. Transactional leadership creates clear structures that support what is expected of followers, and it establishes a system of rewards or punishments. Transformational leadership appeals to followers' values and emotions, and it encourages the growth of individuals and, as a result, the growth of the organization (Yukl & Lepsinger, 2005).

Since Burns's time, the concept of transformational leadership has continued to evolve and is widely accepted in the field of education (Stewart,
A key aspect of transformational leadership is that of facilitating organizational change (Bennis & Nanus, 1985) and improving organizational performance (Bass, 1985) by inducing followers to act toward organizational goals (Owens, 2004). This type of leadership requires strong positive relationships between the leader and the organizational members—in essence, motivating these individuals to move beyond their self-interests and to work toward the collective good of the organization (Kotter, 1977, 1996; Northouse, 2004). According to Yukl (1994), the members of the organization "feel trust, admiration, loyalty, and respect toward the leader, and they are motivated to do more than they originally expected to do" (p. 351).

Our conceptualization of transformational leadership builds off the recent work by Leithwood and colleagues (see Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Leithwood et al., 2004; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003), who described transformational leadership in a nuanced and complex way. Their expanded conception of transformational leadership includes four areas: setting the direction, developing people, developing the organization, and managing the organization. These areas are not necessarily distinct aspects of leadership; rather, they are integrated or overlapping constructs, and the practices within each are contingent on individual school circumstances (Giles, 2006; Leithwood, 1994). Setting the direction of the school is often referred to as instructional leadership, and it encompasses the principal’s role in articulating a vision, setting high expectations for staff and students, and developing group goals. According to Owens (2004), the development of the vision unites the group around shared assumptions and beliefs, thus strengthening the organizational culture. Developing people involves the principal’s role in supporting change by encouraging teachers to take risks, to try new methods of teaching, and to challenge the status quo. Principals who develop teachers bring them into contact with new ideas (Goldring & Sullivan, 1996; Sebring & Bryk, 2000). Supporting teachers thus requires providing them with needed resources (including time and instructional materials), ensuring that they have access to professional development and training, and modeling key values and practices (Smith & Andrews, 1989). The principal’s role in developing the organization is to create a positive school climate or culture, as well as alter its structure to facilitate these cultural changes. In addition to creating professional communities (Dufour & Eaker, 1998), principals must develop relational trust among staff, which, according to Bryk and Schneider (2002), involves respect, competence, personal regard, and integrity. Furthermore, effective principals are strategic in their acquisition of resources—both money and ideas—from the external environment (Bryk, Sebring, Kerbow, Rollow, & Easton, 1998). Finally, principals must manage the organization,
monitoring all aspects of the school (from program implementation to performance), buffering teachers from external demands, and dealing with personnel issues such as staffing. This last area builds on Burns’s (1978) and Bass’s (1985) transactional dimension of leadership, providing depth to the management behaviors and practices of leaders.

Although much of the literature on transformational leadership has not explicitly argued for shared leadership and has been criticized for this omission (Northouse, 2004), a parallel body of literature has contended that distributed or inclusive leadership is critical to organizational effectiveness (e.g., Fullan, 2008; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001). In an inclusive leadership environment “control is spread throughout the organization, all organizational members focus on organizational performance and contribute to strategy and direction, and employees are able to influence decisions that shape their expectancies” (Mohrman & Lawler, 1996, p. 126). Through this type of leadership, teachers theoretically develop a vested interest in the operation and performance of the school (Ellis, 1984) and acquire the power to make decisions that will support their efforts (Enderlin-Lampe, 1997; Lashway, 1999). Recent research found that transformational leadership is most effective when it is integrated with shared leadership (Marks & Prinny, 2003).

Transformational leadership is particularly well suited to complex changes that require organization building in the rapidly changing school environment (Carlson, 1996; Chapman & Harris, 2004; Leithwood, 1994). A few studies have examined principal leadership in schools under accountability policy sanctions, and they have found that principals increase teacher monitoring (Mintrop, 2003), increase the use of data to inform the educational program (Spillane et al., 2002), redirect funds toward policy goals, and focus on low-performing students (Ladd & Zelli, 2002). Chapman and Harris’s (2004) U.K. study of schools that had not met accountability targets found that these schools focused on eradicating a negative culture and low expectations, as well as improving teaching and learning through higher-quality professional development.

Leithwood (1994) argued that it is critical to focus on all components of transformational leadership in combination, stating that “perseverating on one or several dimensions of leadership and ignoring the remainder will not get the job done” (p. 514). However, a number of recent studies have suggested that leadership practices and behaviors may vary on the basis of school context and, perhaps, even the additional pressure of the high-stakes accountability policy sanctions. For example, Jacobson, Brooks, Giles, Johnson, and Ylimaki (2007), Giles (2006), Robinson, Lloyd, and
Rowe (2008), and Ylimaki and colleagues (2007) described principals who focused first on developing safe, secure, and orderly environments as they attempted to improve their low-performing schools. Although previous research has identified the importance of developing orderly environments (see Cotton, 2003), what these studies suggest is that leadership is situational or context driven. Similarly, Chapman and Harris (2004) found that principals focused first on the physical condition, such as leaky classrooms and broken windows, before conquering more substantial changes to bring about improvement. In combination, these studies suggested a prioritization of the more transactional, managerial leadership behaviors and activities in the accountability policy environment, given that principals are forced to diagnose and address problems under increased pressure. Although these scholarly contributions are important, more research is clearly warranted examining the distinct nature of principal leadership in schools facing accountability policy sanctions.

**POLICY CONTEXT**

Faced with low student performance in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS), the Illinois legislature passed the 1995 School Reform Act. As a result, the newly created Office of Accountability in the CPS developed a system of support and consequences to staff in the lowest-performing schools. The CPS established a cutoff point of 15%, meaning if less than 15% of students scored at or above national norms based on the school's aggregated test results on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, the school would be identified for remediation and probation. To move off sanctions, schools had to increase to 20% of students meeting national norms. The 15% cutoff was an arbitrary number selected by the district, in part because of the large number of schools that would be designated as low performing (Bennett, 2001; Hess, 1999). In the 1st year alone, nearly one quarter of Chicago's schools were put on probation—specifically, 109 schools, 71 of which were elementary schools. During this study, the probationary cutoff was raised from 15% to 20%, with schools required to reach 25% to move off probation.³

Beyond being identified and placed under probation, schools were provided with external support to assist them in their improvement efforts. For example, the schools were assigned probation managers charged with monitoring the school planning process and improving the leadership of the school. Schools were also required to work with external partners who provided curricular and instructional assistance. The role and practices
of these support providers are beyond the scope of this article but are discussed in reference to the leadership behaviors and practices of the principals (for details regarding the support component of this policy, see Finnigan, Bitter & O’Day, 2009; Finnigan & O’Day, 2003).

METHOD AND DATA SOURCES

The first author was project manager for a study of 10 low-performing elementary schools in Chicago that involved a team of researchers from the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and from the Consortium on Chicago School Research. The schools that participated in this study had been placed on probationary status during the 1st or 2nd year of implementation (1996–1997 or 1997–1998) and were selected to provide variation in regards to the population served, the external partners, the number of years on probation, and other school-level characteristics. All these schools served high-poverty, minority, and highly mobile populations, as seen in Table 1. Of the 10 low-performing schools, 5 were removed from probation (S2, S3, S4, S6, and S10) by the beginning of the study (1999–2000), with 2 (S2 and S10) moving off probation quickly (within 2 years). Four schools were on probation (S5, S7, S8, S9) through the 2nd year of the study, meaning that they had served 4 to 5 years on probationary status by the end of the study. Finally, one school (S1) moved off probation before the start of the study but was placed back on in just 1 year. See the appendix for details regarding the probationary status of the case study schools.

The study involved semistructured interviews and focus groups conducted during three multiday site visits to each school during the 1999–2000 and 2000–2001 school years. Two-person teams conducted the visits, with each visit lasting from 3 to 4 days, for a total of 18 to 24 researcher days in each school. In total, the data include 331 interviews. To understand the organizational response to probation in these schools (including the leadership response), the study team interviewed teachers at all grade levels but focused on teachers at the benchmark grades—Grades 3, 6, and 8 (relating to the student promotion policy in Chicago)—by interviewing them over multiple periods. A total of 199 teacher interviews were conducted over the 2-year period. In addition, interviews were conducted with external partners and probation managers (n = 26 interviews), principals and assistant principals (n = 62 interviews), and other members of the school community, including parents, Local School Council members, and special education coordinators (n = 44 interviews). During school visits,
Table 1. Case Study School Demographics

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Note: Rounding has occurred throughout to protect confidentiality (as such, percentages may not add to 100).

the research team interviewed individuals (or, in a few cases, groups of teachers), observed classrooms, and collected relevant documents. Note that this article focuses on perceptions of principal leadership with an emphasis on the teachers’ views of their principals as drawn from the interview data. We used documents, observations, and interviews with other members of the school community to provide additional context and to triangulate the findings. All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

We conducted data analysis using QSR International’s NVivo7 software (Cambridge, MA) to examine principal leadership. The coding process was iterative and involved codes that were derived from the theoretical framework and those that emerged from the data during analysis. For example, a priori codes included broad transformational leadership areas (e.g., setting direction) as well as subcategories within these areas (e.g., vision). However, a number of themes emerged during analysis, ranging from additional subcategories of leadership areas (e.g., instructional coherence) to areas related more directly to the school and to accountability policy contexts (e.g., turnover in staff, sense making as principals interpreted
the accountability policies). This approach allowed our use of transformational leadership as a lens, but it also ensured that additional themes were not overlooked as they related to school leadership under accountability policy sanctions.

Analysis involved examination of the data with a priori and emerging codes to understand leadership across 10 schools and through a process of checking and rechecking of themes as discussed by Miles and Huberman (1994). We analyzed data thematically across sites to understand relationships between thematic areas. Based on the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), analysis involved additional examination through our grouping the data by school (e.g., all the interviews with multiple stakeholders from S1 across the 2 years were analyzed in combination to understand the emerging themes for S1). This analysis step provided us with a better understanding of the leadership behaviors and practices case by case (school by school); it facilitated the identification of cross-cutting themes across sites; and it led to the further grouping of data by probationary status to explore any additional patterns in the data (i.e., schools that remained on probation were compared with those that had moved off).

RESULTS

The study uncovered an important and critical finding: Transformational leadership behaviors were rare in these low-performing schools. An examination of the rich data across the 10 schools identified distinct patterns among three groups of schools: those that moved off probation quickly, those that reached accountability targets at a slower pace, and those that remained on probation. Principals in the schools that moved off probation quickly (S2 and S10), demonstrating much sharper gains in improvement than the other schools, most closely resembled transformational leaders as defined in the literature, with some important distinctions. Their two schools were different from each other in many ways: different enrollments (approximately 800 versus 1,300 students), different staffing (the smaller school had two assistant principals and the larger school had one), different leadership histories (one school had a principal who had been the school administrator for many years before probation; the other school had a principal put into place immediately after probation who was promoted from within), and different external partners. What set these two schools apart (besides their increased scores) was that their leaders operated quite differently from the leaders of the schools that were slower or unable to move off probation (as discussed later). Three schools moved
off probation after a few years (S3, S4, and S6). Although these schools had successfully met accountability policy targets, they would inevitably have difficulty sustaining this response given the principals’ limited vision for school improvement as well as their inadequate attention to developing the people or organization. According to one of the teachers, the school had moved off probation only because of the “statistical rises and falls,” not because of deep and lasting changes. Finally, principal leadership in the four schools that were on probation throughout the course of the study (S5, S7, S8, and S9) and in the one school that moved off and then back on (S1) was similar in that they shared an overemphasis on management practices and a lack of attention to the other components of leadership. The study findings are organized by key thematic areas, as discussed in the theoretical framework: setting the direction, developing people, developing the organization, managing the organization, and distributing leadership.

SETTING THE DIRECTION

Leadership related to setting the direction of the school involves developing a vision for improvement, articulating expectations for staff and students, and developing collective goals for the organization (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Leithwood et al., 2004; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). The schools that moved off probation quickly (S2 and S10) showed evidence of these components of instructional leadership that were not apparent at the other case study schools. Although these principals had targeted their reforms toward reading (even before being placed on probation) through the adoption of a new reading program, probation appeared to accelerate the progress toward reform. The reading programs likely had a direct influence on the reading scores. However, the study data suggest that leadership had an indirect influence on these student outcomes through a number of transformational leadership behaviors and practices. For example, in both schools the principals articulated a vision that involved reading as a core component. Additionally, both principals strengthened their vision and direction through a clear articulation of their high expectations for school staff. Finally, the principals targeted attention and resources not just on meeting the accountability requirements—moving above the probation cutoff—but on improving the school organization. The principals created a dialogue based on improvement that focused on changing organizational structures and norms; they did not limit their focus to short-term strategies aimed at boosting achievement scores over the probationary hurdle. This focus on improvement as a larger, collective goal was a consistent message that
primarily occurred through schoolwide and grade-level meetings and led to common goals and expectations. Their ongoing commitment to authentic school improvement was different from that of the principals in the other schools, who focused narrowly on the accountability policy requirements (simply getting above the probation cutoff).

At one of these schools (S2), setting the direction of the school meant eliminating "extras"—anything that did not seem central to the vision of school improvement. Similarly, the principal and staff at S10 began examining the data from different programs to determine which should remain. After examining the data around the in-school suspension program, for example, and finding that students were not changing their behaviors after participation in this program, they discontinued it and instead identified ways to better serve these students within their classrooms. Along with challenging existing practices, the principals in S2 and S10 implemented additional testing and the subsequent review of test results with teachers, to target weaknesses and identify strategies for improvement.

In two schools that moved off probation but at a slower pace (S3 and S6), the principal set clear expectations regarding reading instruction that led to coherence and consistency across each school. Perhaps the biggest distinction between these leaders and the ones in the schools that moved off probation quickly is that beyond focusing their efforts on reading, they had no clear vision for school improvement; that is, they did not articulate ways in which the structures, norms, and instructional practices would change to accommodate this new focus on reading improvement. Although one principal discussed a plan for moving off probation, she adopted the goals and language of the external partner, thus indicating a limited understanding of what strategies or approaches to implement. In essence, these leaders were not able to articulate a vision for school improvement that would allow their schools to undergo true organizational learning and change.

Few teachers had positive things to say about the leadership at the schools that remained on probation. According to one, they were like "a tribe with no king." In these schools, the external partners often filled a leadership void left by the principals, shaping the direction and collective goals in a narrow way as aligned with their own programs. Interestingly, the external partners were usually selected because of the director's personal reputation, rather than the program philosophy or emphasis; thus, the program did not necessarily match the philosophy and ongoing reforms of school staff (and, at times, was contradictory to these). In one of these schools (S1), the external partner not only directed teachers' planning meetings but also observed
the teachers to determine who needed assistance and to suggest a different course of action to the principal (e.g., removal), even though the external partner had no formal authority at the school site.

The principals of the schools that remained on probationary status tried new things to get off probation. They used a number of approaches to this end: piloting a reading program in a few grades, implementing a pullout program for students, requiring mandatory reading or writing blocks, recruiting new teachers (e.g., Teach for Chicago interns), hiring a reading coordinator, lowering class sizes, creating incentives for teachers to improve test scores (e.g., gift card for the teacher with the highest growth in scores), targeting students near the accountability cutoff for extra support, meeting with teachers to discuss performance data, instituting all-day kindergarten, implementing schoolwide literacy themes, and requiring ongoing test prep. The piecemeal efforts of these leaders were not part of a coherent or strategic attempt to facilitate organizational change or an explicit vision for improvement. This was especially true with regard to the planning process required by the district, which was clearly developed to comply with district mandates rather than be used as a mechanism for whole-school improvement. In several schools, those involved in the process reported "cutting and pasting" things from the previous years’ document rather than conducting an intensive study of what was or was not working in their school based on data. As mentioned earlier, the reforms adopted in the five schools that remained on probation were directed solely toward probation (moving off this status) rather than toward instructional improvement. In one instance (S7), the principal disaggregated the school’s data to the point that he knew how many students missed one or two questions, complaining that had they answered these correctly, the school would have been removed from probation. His complaint suggests that he was focusing almost exclusively on the measure used in the policy (the test score cutoff) and not whether the students were learning. One of the pitfalls of this narrow response to the policy was that the target kept increasing, and as a result, sustainable improvements were unlikely without a vision for organizational change.

DEVELOPING PEOPLE

Principals who develop people bring teachers into contact with new ideas; they develop their knowledge and skills; and they encourage them to try new practices (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Leithwood et al., 2004; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). The principals in the schools that moved off
probation quickly (S2 and S10) targeted resources (including instructional resources) toward their vision and provided support to teachers in their efforts to improve. Although we found evidence of this in both schools, the teachers at S2 were in stronger agreement that they received the support they needed from their principal to improve their students’ academic performance. Many teachers at S2 reported that their principal provided them with the necessary resources and supported them in their work. For example, one teacher told us,

I mean [the principal] might have to listen to our ideas and she might say, “Oh, I don’t really think that is a good idea,” but we might try it again another time and she might be more receptive [laughs]. But she does listen. She does listen, which I think helps a lot. (Teacher 3, S2)

Here the principal was viewed as someone who not only listened to the complaints of parents and teachers but also identified solutions to their problems. At S10 the principal focused on reallocating resources to support teachers, including having only one assistant principal, to pay for two more teachers and thus create smaller class sizes in the primary grades. This decision may have exacerbated some of the divisions between the primary-grade teachers and upper-grade teachers. Finally, in both schools, the principal had given leadership responsibilities to designated administrators regarding the development of teachers (as discussed later, regarding the distribution of leadership). These individuals modeled lessons and helped teachers examine student data and consider alternative instructional approaches to address students’ needs more appropriately.

The principal at one of the schools that moved off probation slowly (S3) appeared more successful than the other two at developing the people within the organization and, thus, was more similar to the schools that moved off probation quickly. Several teachers at this school reported increased professional development and opportunities to be heard, as illustrated by one teacher’s comments:

She allowed us to collaborate and voice our opinions. And basically, that’s what she was—a facilitator—guiding and suggesting, as opposed to being authoritative. And she allows us to bring what we have to the table. We create the school atmosphere, the school environment and needs and wants together. So I don’t think there’s ever been a time that I’ve heard her say, “No, we won’t do this.” I mean, we always sit down and talk about it and discuss. She’ll say, “Do you think this is what’s best for our children?” And a lot of times we come together and maybe she already knows it’s not right. But instead of just you know, just knocking us down and saying, “No, we’re not going to do that,” she gives [us] an opportunity to collaborate and come to our own decisions or realize [for ourselves] and we do. (Teacher 7, S3)
Furthermore, teachers at this school reported positive communication and feeling supported through the evaluation process because they were given feedback about how to improve curriculum and instruction. In contrast, 27 of 28 teachers at one of the other schools that moved off probation slowly (S6) reported that they received minimal professional development and a lack of principal support—all while under the leadership of a principal who was later removed from the school. One teacher summed up the views of many when she said,

I think, quite frankly, that the current administrator or administration is not either capable or willing to do the things necessary to get us off probation, such as really pushing the staff to be innovative...I don’t think the administration understands what it is that in the long run gets kids to become better readers, better students, better thinkers. And doesn’t understand and her heart is not into all aspects of being a leader. I don’t see leadership. And you know that includes good relations with parents, good relations with teachers, good relations with kids. (Teacher 5, S6)

Similarly, a primary strategy of the principal of the third school to move off probation slowly (S4) was to increase the monitoring of teacher practices—for example, by reviewing the 10-week assessments given by teachers and observing classrooms to see “if instruction is happening.” However, the principal did not discuss how she would build the capacity or develop the knowledge and skills of teachers when she uncovered problems. In fact, teachers complained that she was most focused on student behavior rather than on developing or strengthening their instructional practices. Professional development or additional training was limited at the five schools that remained on probation.

DEVELOPING THE ORGANIZATION

When principals develop the organization, they create a positive school culture with high levels of relational trust; they strategically acquire resources; and they alter the organizational structures to facilitate these changes (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Leithwood et al., 2004; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). The principals in the schools that moved off probation quickly appeared to be successful at not only developing a positive and collaborative school climate and culture but also providing teachers with the resources they needed. Again, the principal at S2 appeared somewhat more successful than S10 in these areas. At S10 most teachers reported that they received the supplies and resources they needed—particularly, instructional materials relating to the literacy program. As one teacher told us, “you have a lot of resources. I mean, any material that you need
they'll give it to you. All your ideas people listen to and will be willing to implement.” However, in this one area of our findings, we found less consistent perspectives within a school; namely, a group of teachers in the upper grades thought that they did not have the same access to resources as the lower-grade teachers did. This finding appeared closely linked to the process of implementing the reading program, which the principal and external partner had initially focused on implementing in the primary grades and slowly expanding to the upper grades. At S2 we found stronger evidence demonstrating high levels of respect for the principal and high levels of relational trust among the staff.

A critical aspect of the improvement process at both these schools was that the principals had created solid blocks of time for teachers to collaborate. Although it runs counter to the literature on developing professional communities, which emphasizes building a collaborative culture interdependently (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002), the principals in S2 and S10 mandated that teachers meet. Through this requirement, these principals demonstrated their commitment to changing the norm within these schools from one in which teachers worked in isolation to one in which teachers worked collaboratively toward collective goals. At S2 the school had implemented block scheduling and reorganized the weekly schedule—with four regular student days followed by one preparation day (during the 1st year, they had a half day of preparation, but it was changed to a full day in the 2nd year). One teacher described,

And meeting the grade level. I never thought I would like that. I kind of liked being isolated before, having my own prep time, doing my work. And then we first started with a half-a-day a week the 1st year. And at first we're kind of like “Why do we have to talk to these other people? I just want to do what's in my room and that's it.” It took awhile. It was hard to share information with other teachers... Before, you were in your room, you were like another country, you did your own thing. And God knows what was going on in the next third-grade classroom. But now it's easier. Every year we share more. And it's not an easy thing. So teachers in other schools, if they have [mandated collaboration time], it's a drastic change. But you have to reassure them, “You're going to like it.” And [the principal] told us, “You're going to like it.” (Teacher 3, S2)

The teachers believed that this scheduling change made a difference in their efforts to improve performance, giving teachers time to plan and collaborate. Similarly, at S10 the principal had instituted common planning time 5 days a week for teachers, requiring them to meet as a group with
the reading coordinator during one of those times. As one primary grade teacher described,

this year we have five preps and two of those preps are spent with other colleagues learning, discussing, sharing. And last year really the only time we did that is if we took a class through [the reading coordinator]. And now this year it is mandatory. On Mondays, I go and I meet with the second-grade teachers with [the reading coordinator] who is my literacy coordinator now. . . . She shows us new things. We watch videos of other teachers who we might want to learn something from. And then on Wednesdays, we meet with our grade level to discuss the same type of issues. . . . So now we are even getting stronger with our working together and trying to move the kids. (Teacher 20, S10)

We found some disagreement in S10 between upper and primary teachers: Primary-grade teachers reported that probation had caused them to work together more as they attempted to improve their school’s performance, but upper-grades teachers demonstrated that they were in only the beginning stages of changing the norms from isolation to collaboration. As one sixth-grade teacher stated,

well, basically, we are supposed to be working together doing the same thing at the same time. However, I doubt that it is actually happening because as of this point we haven’t been able to meet as often as we need to get those things to fly. (Teacher 1, S10)

The schools that moved off probation more slowly had a long way to go in terms of developing a positive culture and climate, yet the principals at two of these schools (S3 and S6) discussed culture and climate as priorities, and teachers began to see improvements. One principal brought in an external organization (not their external partners through probation) to help build the internal community and develop trust among staff. The other principal rearranged the schedule to allow common planning time for teachers at the same grade level and required teachers to meet once a week during this time. Although this step was similar to that of the schools that moved off probation status quickly, it was not as intensive or targeted—for example, S2 had an entire day of common planning time, and S10 required that the grade-level teachers meet with the reading coordinator on reading instruction. Perhaps more important, the S6 teachers had not changed their norms around collaborating; they did so out of compliance, as demonstrated by the following quote:

That’s why we decided to just meet with our grade level and share the information at our grade-level meetings because those are definite, once a week. The form has to go to the principal, so by God we’re meeting. If you don’t meet, she’ll get you. (Teacher 9, S6)
As indicated by this response and other teachers’ responses, teacher collaboration was still in its infancy. In essence, these schools had moved away from dysfunction but had not truly developed into supportive and collaborative environments or professional learning communities (see Dufour & Eaker, 1998; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993). In addition, teacher turnover had occurred at both schools. When asked about the number of people leaving and whether the result was a positive or a negative, one teacher at S6 noted,

Oh, a positive, because some of the people that left were a little isolating and nitpicky and out-and-out mean sometimes. And it just makes for a better school when there are nice people and everyone gets along and everyone likes each other. (Teacher 14, S6)

As her words imply, this turnover may have contributed to the development of a more positive school culture.

At the other school that moved off probation slowly (S4), discipline was a major issue, with teachers and administrators placing the blame on one another, thereby indicating a lack of relational trust. One reason stood out among those that teachers gave explaining why the school did not have a positive climate: The principal had been a teacher at the school and was perceived as showing favoritism to her former colleagues. However, at all three schools that moved off probation slowly, teachers indicated that the climate of the school showed signs of improving and that collaboration was starting to occur at some grade levels.

In the schools that remained on probationary status, this area of leadership appeared to be particularly weak, with negative school climates and a pervasive lack of trust within these schools, resulting in low levels of motivation. For example, at S8 a teacher said,

Staff morale seems to be down. People seem to be scared. First of all, they don’t know the situation with the school being closed up and what’s going to happen with the school. . . . That’s an ongoing concern. Morale seems to be very low. I mean quite a few people seem like “Oh, I can’t say this. I’m scared to say this.” . . . We like each other, but [they think], “If I have something to say, I can’t say it because of repercussions.” And sometimes I feel that way, too. (Teacher 3, S8)

In one of the schools that remained on probation (S8), teachers reported that they received the resources they needed; in the other four schools, teachers repeatedly reported their need for additional resources and training. These views about the lack of resources and the indications of low levels of trust were most widespread at S9. As one teacher commented, “you know that this school could be off probation right now. It
really could, I'm serious. But nobody gets any supplies. They don't get any books. They don't get any support” (Teacher 12, S9). Another teacher said, “There are no new materials. We can say that right now. . . . If a kid has not moved, then he's reading somewhat the same materials over.” When asked whether they worked together, a teacher at S9 stated, “No, because we don't have the time, and that's one of the things we brought up. We need time to collaborate, to plan together, and we really don't have the time.”

Although some principals in the schools that remained on probation implemented the same types of structures found in the more successful schools (such as grade-level meetings and leadership teams), they did not do so with the same commitment toward developing a professional community and collaborative culture. In these schools, the teachers either did not meet at all or met but did not focus substantively on student learning or instructional strategies during this time.

MANAGING THE ORGANIZATION

The principals at the two schools that moved off probation quickly (S2 and S10) showed clear signs of managing the organization, demonstrating the more transactional aspects of leadership (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Leithwood et al., 2004; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Most managerial aspects of leading under pressure, as identified through the data, were related to problems when leaders did not successfully buffer teachers from external demands or stabilize personnel. Furthermore, the principals in the five schools that remained on probation focused most of their attention on the transactional, managerial aspects of leadership to the detriment of the other, transformational leadership areas.

An important leadership story from these data has to do with the response of the principals themselves to probation, or their sense making as they interpreted probation and made decisions in response to this accountability policy (Louis, Febey, & Schroeder, 2005; Spillane et al., 2002). This was important because it distinguished the principals at the two schools that moved off probation quickly from the other principals such that the former buffered teachers from the district administrators and the accountability policy in general. At S10 the principal told teachers that they could succeed and that they did not need to worry about losing their jobs, which served to decrease teachers' anxiety about probation. In addition, the S10 principal viewed probation in a positive light—both in the external assistance that the school received and in the additional power that she was given as part of this policy. The principal at S2 interpreted probation in a similar way and focused on and planned for school improvement.
while buffering teachers from the negative aspects of the policy (such as the threat of job loss or school closure). In many ways, these principals were leveraging accountability to their benefit, as described by Jacobson and colleagues (2007), in their efforts to garner support from staff and bring about improvements. They conducted ongoing monitoring of implementation and performance outcomes and thus focused the attention of the school staff on student achievement and other types of data. These responses are in contrast to how the principals in the other schools interpreted the policy and related it to the narrow focus on the probationary cutoff. For example, in S7 rather than buffer teachers from the sanctions and reduce anxiety and concerns relating to these external threats, the principal threatened the teachers, saying that they would lose their jobs if they did not improve because the school would be reconstituted.

Although this aspect of managing the organization was similar in both schools, a few related problems were evident at S10 that did not emerge at S2—namely, discipline issues, substitute shortages, and teacher turnover. At S10 several teachers thought that the administration did not support them when they were having difficulty with students, although the principal had hired three disciplinarians in an effort to alleviate this problem during the course of the study. In addition, S10 struggled with the staffing of substitutes. In fact, one day while the research team was visiting, seven teachers were absent and no substitutes had arrived, so administrators were scrambling to cover these classes. Typical strategies to address this shortage involved assigning resource teachers to cover classes or dividing a class of kids in half and sending each group to another teacher for the day. In the rare case when substitutes did show up later in the day, students and teachers would reorganize once again. The chaos associated with this substitute problem lent an air of uncertainty to each day. Finally, nearly half the teachers left S10 after it went on probation. Although some of these changes were voluntary, others were part of a “weeding out” process that the assistant principal described as a way to ensure that teachers had high levels of commitment to the school in general and the new reading program in particular. Two schools that moved off probation slowly (S3 and S6) experienced these same high levels of teacher turnover—in each school, approximately half the teachers left, some voluntarily, whereas others were removed by the new principal. Interestingly, only one of the principals in the schools that remained on probation (S1) directed her attention toward personnel issues, “encouraging” six teachers to leave the school. This strategy to remove a few ineffective teachers is similar to the strategy of several schools that moved off probationary status. In contrast, principals at two schools that remained on probation (S5 and S7) tried re-
cruting new teachers, with the hope that they would infuse positive energy into the school. Unfortunately, these principals did not consider the effects of placing new and, in a few cases, uncertified teachers in the benchmark grades, which were used to determine probationary status (Grades 3, 6, and 8), and no supports had been put in place to help them succeed. One teacher who had an emergency certification required 22 of 24 students to attend summer school because none of them had successfully completed the class! Beyond accountability pressures, or perhaps linked to these, several schools that remained on probation were facing closure because of declining enrollments. As an S5 teacher said, "they're tearing down all of the projects around us, and the school population is decreasing. I think for the last 3 years we lost a position every year." This uncertainty about the fate of their schools caused teachers anxiety about their positions and likely contributed to some of the high turnover.

Two schools that moved off of probation at a slower pace (S3 and S6) experienced changes in leadership after being put on probation (one immediately, the other after a few years on probation). Similarly, three of the five probation schools that were stuck (Rosenholtz, 1989; Stoll & Fink, 1996) on probation experienced high turnover in leadership as mandated by the district or, in one case, because of the serious illness of the principal. One of these schools experienced four leaders in 2 years. The perpetual turnover of leaders—who should have been setting the direction for schoolwide improvement but were not there long enough to do so—created challenges because the leadership kept changing and because the mutual understanding and trust that true collaboration requires were never realized. As one teacher at S5 stated, "you know, people taking over and coming in with different attitudes and changing this. And you get used to one thing and they try to straighten, so you didn't know if you were coming or going." There was no clear attempt at the district level to provide these schools with a seasoned administrator; in some cases, the replacement had little to no experience in a leadership role.

Many of the principals in the schools that remained on probation (with advice from the probation managers who mentored them) began their improvement efforts by ensuring that the physical environment was more pleasant (e.g., improving the lighting, replacing windows). At S10, one of the schools that moved off probation quickly, the principal recognized the need to attend to the physical structure of the school, including painting the interior for the first time in 20 years and replacing broken windows. In the schools that remained on probation where these tasks were left unattended, the environments tended to be somewhat depressing. One member of the research team noted that a stench came from one of the school's
bathrooms and that a child was urinating in the entranceway because there were no lights inside the bathroom. The changes to these facilities were more than symbolic gestures; they were necessary changes to neglected physical structures.

The principals of the schools that remained on probation focused almost exclusively on monitoring for compliance rather than improvement. Using observations as part of the supervision process to make changes or increase reporting requirements was as rare as providing constructive feedback to teachers. Furthermore, this monitoring was oriented toward procedural issues, ensuring that lesson plans were completed or reading program components were visible in the classroom. At S9 a teacher told us, “It’s so micromanaged here. They pick on you. Like if you didn’t put how you’re going to group your kids in your lesson plans. Not what you are doing. They pick on the stupidest things.” At S7 a teacher said, “I think that it is unclear what the priorities are. I feel like [administrators] missed them or they spend a lot of their energy and focus and time on probably about the fifth thing down the food chain of priorities.” When asked for an example, this teacher responded, “Do you have your character education poster up?” At S9 a teacher described it as administrators’ always looking for negatives:

Now, you know, I think I expect the worst so I’m not surprised anymore and I’ve come to think of it as being very amusing . . . and this school is falling apart here and no one cares because they’re so busy trying to do little nasty things to certain teachers. They concentrate more on little vindictive cruel things. Sometimes this place reminds you of Nazi Germany. It’s just stupid stuff. But I just come in my room and shut my door. So I don’t even care anymore what they do out there. I know she’s going to say there is something I didn’t do, and I’m prepared for it.

She continued, “The only thing she ever looks for is something negative. She comes to your room and everything in it can be perfect except for one [thing] and she won’t see anything but that one little thing.” Another S9 teacher told us that the message from the principal was “If you were a superior teacher, we wouldn’t be on probation.”

DISTRIBUTING LEADERSHIP

Principals who employ distributed leadership share decision making and authority with other school staff (Spillane et al., 2001). Principals in the schools that moved off probation quickly (S2 and S10) fostered a supportive environment that involved distributed leadership, albeit in
a controlled manner. In each case, the principal had given leadership responsibilities to designated administrators regarding the development of and, to some extent, the monitoring of teachers. These individuals worked closely with teachers on an ongoing basis, which included modeling lessons and jointly examining students' data to help teachers both understand the effectiveness of their instructional approaches and consider different strategies to help students master their work. In the case of S2, these administrators were called facilitators, whereas at S10 they were reading coordinators. In fact, much of the instructional guidance and support at these school sites came from these other administrators, although the principals in both cases clearly exhibited their strength as instructional leaders, as emphasized by Smith and Andrews (1989), in prioritizing these positions and altering the structures and practices to support their work with teachers. In both cases, the principals had strong instructional backgrounds that guided the work of the administrators. Interestingly, a few teachers at one of these schools (S2) mentioned that communication had improved across the school because of the ongoing access to the facilitators, who served a critical role in sharing teachers' thoughts and concerns with the principal. One teacher described the important role of the facilitators:

Well, obviously the principal is the dominant figure. But the facilitators are very, very important to all of us because we wouldn't know any of this stuff unless they related it to us. . . . The facilitators are probably the most important people in the buildings because they really are in the classrooms . . . and I'm very lucky to have [a facilitator] helping me. (Teacher 6, S2)

The principals in both schools that quickly moved off probation had a top-down, centralized decision-making approach and made all major decisions with little input from teachers (with the exception of the school planning process at S10 and the decision to change external partners at S2—in these cases teachers had more substantive input, although the principal made the final decision). The principals made it clear that the direction of the school was going to change, that tough decisions had to be made, and that they would make these calls. Similarly, in the schools that moved off probation more slowly, the principals made decisions without input from teachers. In S4, this type of centralized decision making was evident in all aspects of schoolwide decision making, as is evident in the following exchange with a teacher:

INTERVIEWER: So you feel like decisions are made with . . . ?

TEACHER: . . . without our knowledge.
INTERVIEWER: Without your knowledge or without your consent?
TEACHER: Definitely without our knowledge. That's the only thing I am sure of.
INTERVIEWER: Can you give me an example?
TEACHER: Staff input is never... there's never time. They don't want to listen to us. It's as simple as that. They don't give us time to have staff input. (Teacher 27, S4)

Although these findings point to limited distribution of leadership, more work needs to be done to better understand the extent or ways in which leadership is distributed in low-performing schools facing accountability sanctions, given the limited evidence of this element in the case study schools.

DISCUSSION

Although the behaviors and practices associated with transformational leadership were not widespread among the schools in our study, the principals in the two schools that exited probation quickly exhibited a number of these, suggesting the importance of this theoretical lens in understanding leadership in an accountability context. The principals of S2 and S10 provided direction, set goals, and articulated high expectations for student and teacher performance. They implemented coherent instructional programs, which ensured that teachers developed their knowledge and skills and collaborated around instruction. These principals also effectively reallocated resources toward their improvement strategies. Additionally, they focused on a number of management practices, monitoring program implementation and removing ineffective teachers. In this section, we discuss the ways in which these leaders brought about school change under pressure.

The leadership behaviors and practices of the principals in the schools that moved off probation quickly were closely linked to their interpretation of the probation policy. In these schools (and even in a few that were slower to move off), the principals interpreted probation as a necessary step and, as a result, were more flexible and reflective in an effort to try different strategies (or discontinue what was not working). In addition, they were less likely to blame the teachers collectively for low student performance (even though they may have blamed some individuals, whom they forced to leave). Finally, and perhaps most important, these leaders were more likely to buffer teachers and the overall organization from external demands—particularly, those of the central office. The principals in
these schools were less concerned about district policies and mandates and more concerned with finding ways to allow flexibility within any restrictions or requirements (or disregard them completely) if they thought that it was in the best interest of the school. These principals were not as threatened by school closure as some of the other leaders were, so they may have felt additional flexibility in terms of meeting district mandates. In contrast, principals in the schools that remained on probation viewed it as being unfair or misguided and were more rigid in their responses to sanctions. In the schools that moved off probation quickly, the principals found ways to use accountability to their benefit—for example, to acquire additional resources or remove ineffective teachers, thus leveraging this policy to their advantage, as discussed by Jacobson and colleagues (2007).

All the support provided to teachers, the reallocation of resources, and the monitoring of results closely aligned with the overall vision of the leaders in the schools that moved off probation quickly, a vision that focused on student growth and overall learning, not merely sanctions or cutoff scores. Through a strong emphasis on their organizational goals as well as their attempts to align all programs toward "what's good for students," these principals made great headway on changing not only the internal structures and norms but, ultimately, student learning. Furthermore, the structural and instructional changes that led to improved performance in these two schools were not quick fixes but rather higher-order changes, some of which had begun before their schools were put onto probation. Instructional coherence and teacher collaboration (through creative scheduling) were key aspects of the leadership in the schools that moved off quickly. In fact, these two schools placed a heavy emphasis on developing teachers, but these "mandated" changes would not have worked had the principals not also changed the culture and climate. In the schools that remained on probation and in those that were slower to move off, the principals narrowly focused on the accountability targets and displayed a lack of understanding about how to change the school culture. In addition, these leaders overemphasized the transactional aspects of transformational leadership—namely, the monitoring of performance with a focus on procedural changes. In the schools that moved off probation quickly, the monitoring was diagnostic; these leaders examined student data to identify problems or weaknesses and considered strategies in collaboration with instructional leaders to bring about improvements.

The principals in schools that quickly moved off probation created a collective sense of responsibility for the performance of students and a sense of urgency, not just because of the pressures of the accountability
policy, but because of a moral responsibility to improve. Teachers in these schools shared a sense based on their interactions with administrators, one of "We're all in this together" and one of rallying together to "prove everyone wrong," rather than a feeling of being blamed by their principals. This climate was clearly linked to the relational trust among teachers and administrators in these schools. In contrast, in the schools that remained on probation or were slow to move off, teachers thought that administrators were acting in ways that ran counter to their belief systems and believed that these principals were responding to external pressures from the central office.

The principals of all 10 schools were described as top-down leaders with centralized authority. The unwillingness to decentralize authority or control may stem from the threat conditions resulting from the high stakes associated with accountability policies. Jacobson and colleagues (2007) contended that in unstable environments, strong and more formal leadership behaviors may be necessary to "reestablish coherence and direction" (p. 293). In the schools that moved off probation quickly, this design not only instilled a sense of coherence across the school but also exerted a form of control. Although it runs against the literature on distributed leadership and shared decision making, this centralized response of principals in low-performing schools is not surprising given that the organizations were under threat (Mellahi, Jackson, & Sparks, 2002; Staw et al., 1981). The schools that quickly moved off probation provided opportunities for teachers to offer input into decisions, and the principals shared instructional leadership with key administrators yet retained tight control over organizational decisions.

Finally, the principals that quickly moved off probation followed a sequential ordering of leadership. Upon being placed under sanctions, the principals began by clearly articulating the vision and the expectations for all students to succeed and that, as an organization, they could improve. The principals focused next on staffing arrangements and buffering (managing the organization), followed by ensuring that the school had a trusting and collaborative environment that was focused on instructional improvement (developing the organization). In essence, leadership was more dynamic than what many of the theories would suggest as the principals attempted to bring about school improvement under pressure. Unfortunately, the majority of schools did not appear poised to move past these initial leadership stages given their narrow focus on accountability targets (versus improvement), inadequate support to teachers, lack of attention to organizational development, and overreliance on monitoring.
Although it is informative to examine the two principals whose schools moved off probation quickly, perhaps it is even more critical to more closely consider the other eight principals to understand why transformational leadership was rare in these low-performing schools. Identifying the factors that hinder or facilitate strong leadership in low-performing schools is distinct from uncovering the characteristics of leaders in high-performing or “effective” schools. First, the findings suggest that the accountability pressures appear to be too strong for many leaders, resulting in an unintended consequence of focusing on the measure (the cutoff) rather than student learning or organizational performance. Second, these schools required changes to underlying norms and expectations that proved difficult with the current staff. Whereas some principals weeded out those teachers who were not committed to the difficult process of school improvement under sanctions, there was no formal mechanism or process for this. Third, the accountability policy itself led to a sense of urgency for improvement that resulted in greater centralization of decision making and that may have in fact undercut some of the important processes necessary to develop a strong organizational culture with high levels of trust and shared norms. The two principals that quickly moved off probation mandated certain changes, such as collaborative meetings with a reading specialist, in an effort to hasten improvement. Why they were successful in causing these to be authentic experiences for most teachers speaks to the greater relational trust in these schools, as well as the firm alignment of these structures with the shared vision and expectations of the staff.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study informs the research on transformational leadership and low-performing schools in several ways. First, in these settings, focus and coherence appeared to be a critical aspect of setting the direction for school improvement. Less effective leaders focused narrowly on the accountability targets as the goal versus student learning and school improvement. Second, principals who did not pay sufficient attention to any of these four areas of leadership were less likely to show signs of improvement. Having a vision was not enough: The more effective principals in this study also provided the support and resources necessary to develop the knowledge and skills of teachers; they established collaborative structures and norms; and they developed a culture of and commitment to collective goals. Finally, transactional, or management, aspects of transformational
leadership were evident in the low-performing schools that moved off probationary status quickly, including attention to staffing, instructional support, monitoring of performance, and buffering from external demands. These were not done in isolation but were part of the overall improvement process and were viewed positively by teachers because of the relational trust among staff and administrators.

This study has important implications for research in this area. First, future research should address some of the present limitations, including its limited focus on elementary schools, by broadening the examination to all school levels and comparing differences in leadership responses across these levels. In addition, future research could expand to additional accountability policy contexts, given that NCLB accountability sanctions are affecting a growing number of schools. Another limitation that future research could address is the present study's emphasis on perceptions of leadership, by including observations of leadership behaviors and practices or some type of measurement of principal leadership. Finally, future research could more closely attend to the challenge of obtaining perceptions of leadership behaviors and practices in schools with high levels of teacher and principal turnover. Future research could include a larger number of study sites and more closely examine the differences in findings for schools with greater turnover and those with more stable environments.

The study also has important implications for policy. As more and more schools fall under NCLB sanctions, a key question becomes, what should states and districts do to intervene? The most challenging schools were stuck (Rosenholtz, 1989; Stoll & Fink, 1996) under accountability sanctions and thus seemed unlikely to change their patterns of low performance and move off probationary status; as such, the findings from this study suggest that renewed attention must be paid to educational policies that address the leadership of these schools. States and districts should focus on the assignment of experienced and transformational principals to the low-performing schools under accountability policy sanctions, providing additional incentives to encourage seasoned principals who have proven their effectiveness in more challenging environments to work in these schools. However, these policies may require a commitment of several years to reduce the leadership instability that plagues these schools. The study also suggests that states would benefit from targeting educational policies (and resources) toward the mentoring of principals in low-performing schools. Although many states have implemented teacher-mentoring policies, little attention has been paid to the mentoring of principals—particularly, those who work under the pressure of sanctions.
Finally, the study has important implications for practice as it relates to the ongoing professional development of principals in these schools and the district support of these leaders. Although many of the principals in this study could have used additional support in strengthening their transactional leadership behaviors, their ability to set the direction, develop people, and develop the organization was even more critical. To truly bring about organizational improvement, districts must begin by building the leadership capacity within schools under accountability policy sanctions. Without this attention to the internal leadership capacity, there is little likelihood that these schools will overcome their histories of low performance.

**APPENDIX: CASE STUDY SCHOOLS AND PROBATIONARY STATUS AS OF 2000–2001**

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<th>School</th>
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**NOTES**

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1. Note that many urban districts, including the focus of this study (Chicago Public Schools; CPS), have been majority “minority” for many years. In fact, the current demographics of Chicago, 85% low income and 8% White (figures based on the CPS website), are similar to what Hess (1994) found 20 years ago: During 1987–1988, the elementary schools in CPS were 80% low income and 12% White.

2. Although these studies informed our study, not all of them involved schools facing sanctions.
3. Over time, the bar was raised even higher. In addition, after this study the CPS began using more performance indicators, examining growth, and focusing on all schools. The accountability system for elementary schools also began using the Illinois Standards Achievement Test in addition to the Iowa Test of Basic Skills and including reading, writing, math, science, and social science (rather than just reading scores as it did during this study).

4. Interview and focus group questions focused on a variety of areas over the three visits, including instructional goals and practices, schoolwide expectations and accountability, professional development, leadership, organizational culture, school improvement planning, decision making, resources, use of data, and external and internal support for change.

5. This announcement occurred during a faculty meeting at the school. Although some teachers told us it was encouraging, many teachers were subsequently “weeded out” by this same principal.

6. Since this study, S5 and S8 were closed because of declining enrollments and low academic performance, and S9 was ultimately consolidated with another building (although the school retained its identity).

REFERENCES


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