



Managing the intersection of internal and external accountability

Challenge for urban school leadership in the United States

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to direct attention to the intersection of external and internal accountability systems within urban schools, and the role of school leadership, especially that of the principal, in managing this intersection. In particular, the paper explores how school leaders are able to strengthen and sustain the school's internal accountability system, in pursuit of school-defined learning improvement agenda, and at the same time respond productively to external accountability demands. The paper also seeks to identify consequences of these leaders' efforts to navigate an often problematic set of converging demands.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper draws on findings from a larger multi-case study of learning-focused leadership in 15 schools in four urban school districts in the USA. Schools were chosen to represent those that were “making progress” (by local measures). Data were collected over 18 months, spanning two school years, from Spring 2007 to Fall 2008. Data collection included multiple site visits, semi-structured interviews and observations of leadership activity across school and district settings, and a variety of documentary evidence.

Findings – Though working in substantially different contexts, these leaders found remarkably similar ways of crafting tools and creating occasions, from the array of external accountability demands and resources, to serve internal accountability purposes. They did so by internalizing external expectations and developing accountable practice within the school, leading through data, and modelling what it meant to learn to lead in a fully accountable way. As they did so, they reshaped the scope of instruction and the instructional improvement conversation, and also made teaching and leadership practice more public.

Originality/value – This paper extends discussions of school-level accountability in two ways. First, it updates scholarship on accountability by examining school-level responses at a time five years into the new accountability context in the USA defined by strict system-wide expectations and mechanisms. Second, the paper demonstrates ways in which the often onerous demands of external accountability systems can be treated as a resource by school leaders and used in ways that bolster the school's capacity for accountable professional practice.

Keywords United States of America, Schools, Urban areas, Leadership, Educational administration, Policy, Accountability

Paper type Research paper



In current policy discourse across national contexts, the term “accountability” is likely to conjure up images of system-wide arrangements for ensuring the proper expenditure of public funds and for encouraging or even compelling educators to improve their performance to acceptable levels. The term almost always concerns

systems of expectations, rewards, and sanctions that surround the school and originate outside of it. But in this discourse, we easily and often forget that the ultimate goal is to get accountable practice within the school and doing so inevitably means that school-based educators must themselves enact and adhere to a system of accountability internal to the school. In some fashion, they must hold themselves and each other to account for their contributions to students' learning and for their collective performance. Absent that, no external accountability arrangements can have any useful effect. Put another way, as recent scholarship has recognized (Abelmann *et al.*, 1999; Carnoy *et al.*, 2003), externally defined accountability arrangements can only work through the school's internal accountability system.

Currently in the USA, nearly a decade into an era of intensified, system-wide accountability pressures under the No Child Left Behind law, is an important time to consider the interaction of external and internal accountability systems in schools. The conditions set up by this nation-wide policy add to the external pressures on schools, and increase the temptation to see the problem of accountability in externalized terms.

This paper redirects attention to the intersection of external and internal accountability systems within urban schools, and the role of school leadership, especially that of the principal, in managing this intersection. To pursue this matter, we explore issues concerning the way system-wide, high-stakes accountability systems can contribute to the goal of developing internally accountable practice for high performance. In this regard, we are especially interested in the school leaders' response to external accountability expectations, directives, resources, and constraints, and how these responses work inside the school, especially inside the school-specific culture of accountability and professional work, which the leaders may have responsibility for forging. Of particular concern to us is the response of the school principal, though other school leaders are implicated – people in this position are likely to be held responsible for meeting external demands, are in position to translate this responsibility into expectations for their own staffs, not to mention themselves; they must also consider how external expectations can be reconciled with internal school priorities. We address these matters by reviewing findings from a recent study we have undertaken of urban school leadership and its relationship to learning improvement. Our work is located in lines of research that accumulate insights about external accountability systems, internal school accountability, and the relation between the two.

Accountability systems that surround the school

Strict, high-stakes accountability systems are a central feature of standards-based reform at local, state, and federal levels these days, and are sometimes thought of as a recent phenomenon. Yet schools have always been accountable to external actors and interests (Cuban, 2004; Beadie, 2004). External accountability systems can be understood as a complex arrangement of policies, created by actors and interests outside of schools, who are in position to reward and punish schools, aimed at impacting practices inside schools, and requiring reporting to diverse external audiences.

From the perspective of school leaders, the external accountability system is an array of political, bureaucratic, and market-driven supports and constraints aimed at defining what educators in the school should be doing and producing. Because multiple interests outside of the school have expectations of it, these supports and constraints may not be educationally coherent and may require activity that conflicts with the educational interests of the school (e.g. O'Day, 2002; Skrla and Scheurich, 2004; Firestone and Shipp, 2005). Orchestrating the ongoing instructional practices generated in this contentious

zone between external actors and interests, and internal school actors and interests is thus a central concern of school leadership (Leithwood, 2005).

Over time, the array of external expectations and mechanisms for encouraging or compelling educators to meet these expectations has shifted. Captured in the mid-1990's as "the new accountability" (e.g. Elmore *et al.*, 1996; Carnoy *et al.*, 2003; Elmore, 2004; Cohen *et al.*, 2007), these shifts include at least the following four developments. First, accountability systems paid more explicit attention and placed far greater emphasis on demonstrated results, generally through the vehicle of student test scores. In other words, rather than concentrating on whether the inputs to education were in place (Noguera, 2004), the system asked for evidence of outputs. Second, the system developed and put in place clear, and highly specified common reference points for performance (e.g. state learning standards). Third, the units of accountability broadened to include the whole school, the individual teacher (in any given school year), and school leader. While testing is not new to school leadership, testing individual students for the purpose of measuring the success of the whole school and particularly the success of the principal is a new arrangement for school leadership (e.g. Leithwood *et al.*, 1999; Elmore, 2000; O'Day, 2002). Fourth, the system increased the stakes in accountability, by attaching more stringent consequences to school, educator, or student performance.

Because external accountability systems make demands on school staff, individually and collectively, they necessarily, but not deterministically, intersect and interact with internal accountability systems. Leadership practice uses tools and resources available in the external environment to generate the instructional practices, assessments, and incentives for the work of school staff to align and exceed external expectations. While principals have always worked in this contentious zone, and they have always taken advantage of the external environment to conduct their work, the tools and resources now available through system-wide accountability arrangements (e.g. data warehouses and associated data displays, online testing, leadership coaching) shape their options and their actions in particular ways.

A growing body of research documents how educators and students experience external accountability systems. The research makes clear that these system demands can be experienced as onerous, punitive, intrusive, and de-skilling, and they have the potential to work these effects in inequitable ways that disproportionately punish schools serving historically underserved children (e.g. Sunderman *et al.*, 2005; Sirotnik, 2004; Diamond and Spillane, 2002; Darling-Hammond, 2007). While these concerns have prompted a major national policy debate, commitment to some version of strict accountability for producing results continues. There is no sign in the process of reauthorizing No Child Left Behind, for example, that authorities or the general public wish to back off of a strict and demanding accountability stance *vis-à-vis* the public schools, though specific requirements (such as the "adequate yearly progress" provision) may be loosened.

However, they are experienced in a high-stakes world, external accountability demands are hard for school-based educators to ignore. In other words, they are consequential.

Accountability systems within the school

Some researchers point to the school's own internal accountability system as the key factor that explains a school's capacity to meet external expectations. Described here by researchers focussed on high school reform:

[...] Schools actually have conceptions of accountability embedded in the patterns of their day-to-day operations, and [...] a school's conception of accountability significantly

influences how it delivers education [...] Schools must solve the problem of accountability in some way in order to function and [...] the way they solve this problem is reflected in the way teachers, administrators, students and parents talk about the fundamental issues of schooling (Carnoy *et al.*, 2003, pp. 3-4).

This explanation of internal accountability is so broad it could be replaced with the term “school culture.” However, the authors add some specificity to this explanation, which helps to pinpoint features of the school that constitute its accountability system:

Internal accountability has three tiers: the individual’s sense of responsibility; parents’, teachers’, administrators’, and students’ collective sense of expectations; and the organizational rules, incentives, and implementation mechanisms that constitute the formal accountability system in schools (Carnoy *et al.*, 2003, p. 4).

What we take from these authors is the idea that an internal set of expectations permeate schools. Individuals in the school have expectations for themselves and often for others, and those expectations are demonstrated and discerned in the instructional decisions educators make, their descriptions of their work, and their interactions with each other. In varying degrees, the actors in a given school also allocate responsibility for meeting these expectations, and for demonstrating that they have been met. Nothing ensures that expectations are coherent, shared, or acted upon – the default, in fact, is for schools to rely on “atomistic” accountability arrangements, in which individual teachers are left to hold themselves to account for successfully educating the students in their charge (Elmore, 2006).

In this way, schools, as a professional collective, always have some kind of accountability system in place – generally more implicit than explicit, and generally (by default) placing most or all of the responsibility for accountable practice in the hands of individual teachers. Conducting the continuous transformation from atomistic and personally derived professional expectations to professional expectations defined collectively by the school as a whole implies a major step for school staff and leaders. The further step of anchoring collective internal expectations to those defined externally (and enacted internally) is likely to entail a redefinition of classroom teaching and school leadership.

The challenge for school leadership at the intersection of external and internal accountability

Accountable practice within the school includes that of school leaders, as well as those whose daily work is situated in classrooms. With standards, assessments, and public reporting required under current standards-based reform policies, school leaders – especially principals – face a practical shift from evaluating individual teachers as the measure of the school’s productivity, to themselves being evaluated based on the assessed academic productivity of their students and, by extension, their teachers as a whole. School leaders able to quickly align their teachers’ instruction to the annual tests are likely to be evaluated as successful, thus contributing to a new expression of school leadership. Under these conditions of highly specified, high-stakes expectations, school leadership requires tightly tying classroom activity to state standards and assessments rather than to teachers’ personal standards, repositioning historically personal and individualistic classroom activity as essentially interdependent.

Under conditions that put increasing pressure on the school as a whole, the natural tendency of schools to rely heavily on individualized atomistic accountability arrangements sets the stage for a major learning challenge for school staff – those exercising leadership as well as everyone else. In other words, school staff have a lot to learn together concerning how to be responsible to each other and to high expectations (their own and those of the larger system), and to meet new expectations for their work.

Education researchers studying the early efforts of school leaders to adjust their schools' practices to align to external expectations have found resistance (Mintrop, 2004b), confusion (Carnoy *et al.*, 2003), and denial (Ingram *et al.*, 2004). In these early years of standards and assessment expectations (beginning in 1989 with an education summit of state governors – see Goertz *et al.*, 2001; Phelps and Addonizio, 2006), leaders had few tools to use for internalizing these expectations.

Once standards and the associated assessments were established, these tools were certainly going to be used to evaluate their success, and school leaders could use these tools to reposition instructional practice in their schools to meet or exceed external expectations. Some school leaders were apparently able to align the work inside their school to meet the expectations of external audiences while other school leaders were not (Diamond and Spillane, 2002). Some school leaders who had been leading popular public schools suddenly found themselves leading “failing schools,” in which teachers who had seen themselves as successful suddenly found themselves with a new identity defined by external expectations.

So, on top of the enduring challenge to a school principal of ensuring and supporting productive work across the school while doing what needs to be done to manage the building, school leaders find themselves with new responsibilities – and potentially new tools – at the intersection of internal and external accountability. Under the current high-stakes environment in which they work, their schools' continuation in its current configuration, not to mention the current staff and their own jobs, depend in a basic way on their ability to manage a productive merger of what the outside world asks of the school and what the school staff ask of themselves and their students.

The puzzle for research on school leadership

Given their position as a central figure in the affairs of the school and simultaneously its chief point of connection with the larger educational system, school principals are positioned to notice, experience, and respond to the dynamic interactions between external and internal accountability systems. On the one hand, system leaders and community constituents for public education are likely to expect them to “make good things happen” in the school; and at the same time, they are best able to act as a chief architect and central participant in the school's own accountability system. The puzzle has to do with the management of multiple demands, internal and external, the potential for expectations to work at cross purposes, and the sheer multidimensionality of the accountability challenge. Looking ahead to the past decade of leadership research, a prominent review anticipated the need to study this point of intersection more closely:

[...] Internal-professional mechanisms [of accountability] substantially govern practice, and are more easily aligned with teaching and learning, and thus are more likely to improve student performance. The management question regarding school-based professional communities becomes how to support school-based modes of accountability while aligning them with demands from schools' bureaucratic or political superordinates (Adams and Kirst, 1999, p. 470).

This puzzle is made more salient in the current climate in the USA of federally driven standards-based reform, which creates for schools and their leaders ambitious and highly specified improvement targets, short timelines, and severe consequences for failing to meet them. Relatively little research has investigated the matter empirically five or more years into the No Child Left Behind era, in other words, at a point in time where an intensified multi-level external accountability system has been in place for enough years to alter the way school staffs configure and pursue their work. In this context, it is important to ask several questions, concerning schools that are making progress on learning improvement goals:

- (1) How do school leaders negotiate and navigate the intersection of internal and external accountability systems?
- (2) What consequences do their actions at this intersection have for efforts to improve teaching practice and student learning outcomes?

These questions matter because of the enormous investment in external accountability-driven reforms, and the hopes pinned to these strategies. In parallel, reformers hope for a professionalized and competent teaching workforce, and a quality of instructional practice that leads the full range of students served by public schools to new levels of performance and preparation for their future lives. Yet, the early signs are clear: standards-based accountability systems may be having counterproductive effects on practice, as much as productive impacts. The possibility remains that these effects may be distinctly inequitable. We need to understand where and how school leaders can make best use of the opportunities and constraints present in accountability dynamics both outside and inside their schools.

Framing ideas

A closer look at ideas related to accountability and leadership helps us to pinpoint what may be taking place at the intersection of internal and external accountability systems. These ideas emerge from research over the last decade focussed on the reform of elementary and secondary schools, often in the settings and circumstances that pose significant challenges to reformers.

Forms and logics of accountability

Researchers have distinguished different forms of accountability related to the work of educators in schools. Their logics differ in fundamental ways from each other, and each presumes a different way of diagnosing high or low school performance and locating the path to educational improvement. Each offers a different set of answers to the basic questions: accountable to whom? For what, in relation to what standards? On whose authority? Through what practices? With what metrics or ways of demonstrating that standards have been met? With what consequences, for whom?

The following typology (adapted from Adams and Kirst, 1999; Ranson, 2003; Leithwood, 2005; Firestone and Shipp, 2005) locates four main forms of accountability in different configurations of authority and approaches to ensuring high performance. The first positions accountability in decisions made by the managers of the educational system, through one of two arrangements (or combinations of the two):

- “management” (Leithwood, 2005), “bureaucratic” (Adams and Kirst, 1999; Firestone and Shipp, 2005), or “corporate” (Ranson, 2003) accountability: those in charge of the education system (e.g. district, state leaders) develop

mechanisms and measures for assuring that schools perform effectively, and through strategic planning and regular monitoring of performance, and rewards and sanctions based on performance, strive to motivate and achieve high performance; and

- “decentralized” accountability (Leithwood, 2005): those in charge of the system may also devolve authority for making decisions about program (e.g. curriculum, budget, hiring) and for ensuring high performance to the school level, thereby “empowering” school leaders and often school-based decision-making bodies that may include other stakeholders (e.g. community members, sometimes teaching staff).

The second form locates accountability in professional consensus about good practice:

- “professional” accountability (Adams and Kirst, 1999; Ranson, 2003; Leithwood, 2005): here, the ultimate touchstone for good practice and high performance is consensus among professional teaching staff in a school – and more broadly, in the teaching profession. In this view, through norms and other more explicit mechanisms involving peer scrutiny, members of the profession hold each other accountable to standards for good practice that they have set for themselves.

The third source anchors accountability to non-professional interests and preferences, either as expressed by parents or within the political system in which public education sits:

- “market” (Adams and Kirst, 1999; Leithwood, 2005) or “consumer” (Ranson, 2003) accountability: here, the ultimate touchstones for good practice are the preferences and decisions of parents, conceived of as the “clients” or “consumers” of education, whose expressed desires for schooling and ultimate decisions about where their children are schooled motivate and guide educators’ work; and
- “political” accountability (Adams and Kirst, 1999; Firestone and Shippis, 2005): instead of parents’ preferences and decisions to enroll students in this or that school, the ultimate touchstone shifts to the established political process, whereby broader community interests are expressed through elected representatives, who make decisions about educational funding, programs, even educators’ job parameters and specifications. School performance resides in the eye of the electorate, and is judged as much in terms of constituents’ perceptions as any objective measures.

One other form anchors accountability to beliefs about the “right thing to do” for school children:

- “Moral accountability” (Adams and Kirst, 1999; Firestone and Shippis, 2005): identifies a different ultimate touchstone for good practice in the school. Here, compelling conceptions of what is right to do, as in many current notions of “social justice,” become the guiding light for educators and others to judge their work and what it produces.

These forms of accountability are not inherently incompatible, and the types can exist in combination, as in decentralized arrangements that offer school leaders considerable autonomy (a form of decentralized accountability) while insisting that

the school adhere to system-wide learning standards, submit to regular monitoring, and demonstrate performance on system-wide measures (a form of management accountability). At the same time, they can easily conflict (Firestone and Shipp, 2005), as when the political accountability system finds schools wanting, which professional educators see as solid and sound, or vice versa. That said, in a given school or district context and larger policy environment, one form of accountability is likely to dominate the others, as in present standards-based reform policies, in which a management accountability system overshadows the efforts of most school-based educators. And over time, one dominant mode of accountability may give way to another, dramatically demonstrated in the transition from a largely professional form of accountability during the 1970s in the UK to accountability forms that prioritize more corporate and consumer interests in the 1980s and beyond (Ranson, 2003).

Each form of accountability arises and operates in ways that are external to the school, though they may also manifest themselves internally. But the basic logic of external and internal accountability are likely to differ in predictable ways, with important ramifications for leaders' practice and for efforts within the school to improve teaching and learning.

The logic of external accountabilities lies in the notion that professional work is, or needs to be, extrinsically motivated, guided by a larger set of interests residing in the community served by public education, and compelled or enforced by the system-level leaders (located outside individual schools) who serve these interests. External accountabilities thus rely on actors, positioned at some distance from the actual interface between teachers and learners, to specify what needs to happen in that interaction, how the quality of that interaction will be known, and what consequences to attach to that interaction. From this relatively distant vantage point, management, market, and political accountabilities are likely to predominate.

Accountability located and exercised in schools sits within a set of ongoing relationships among professional people who work alongside each other and in ways that are, by degrees, interdependent with one another. The logic of internal school accountability typically assumes that those who work closest to teaching and learning interactions are in the best position to judge each others' work. Internal accountability is thus more likely to favor intrinsic motivation, as it often presumes a sense of mutual responsibility for the quality of work. Here, decentralized, professional, and moral accountabilities are likely to predominate, all other things being equal. That said, there is nothing to prevent a school's internal accountability system from being largely management-driven or "political," as an autocratic principal tries to "make things happen" to satisfy external constituencies.

Presiding over the intersection of external and internal accountabilities are school leaders, especially the principal, who is the official link between the school and the larger system in which the school sits, yet at the same time the person who takes responsibility for managing the affairs of the school. But to understand this individual's work at the intersection presumes a picture of leadership and its relation to professional and system learning, which we turn to next.

Learning-focussed school leadership

While there are many ways to construe what school leadership is all about (Portin *et al.*, 2003), a set of ideas we and others have been developing over the last decade directs attention toward its connections to learning, on the premise that learning and learning

improvement is ultimately the greatest concern of school leaders and, indeed, of all staff members in a school. Using the term “learning-focussed leadership,” this view relates school leaders’ work to student, professional, and system learning, and highlights the ways that particular kinds of actions forge strong connections among them (Knapp and Copland, 2006; Knapp *et al.*, 2003). This view of leadership further presumes that all three arenas of learning operate simultaneously and interdependently, and that to maximize the performance of the school means to maximize the learning of all three. These ideas build on others’ work using similar terms, for example, writings that have directed attention to “learning-centered leadership” (Murphy *et al.*, 2006), and “leadership for learning” (e.g. Resnick and Glennan, 2002; Stoll *et al.*, 2003; Swaffield and Macbeath, 2009). (Still others use the same or related terms, though not necessarily in the ways that we or these authors do[1].)

Notions of learning-focussed and learning-centered leadership direct attention to certain kinds of processes at work in the school among the various actors who do or can exercise leadership aimed at instructional improvement. With roots in theory and empirical findings concerning distributed leadership, instructional leadership, the urban principalship, and organizational learning, this lens puts a great deal of emphasis on the collective leadership work of the school, among which are steps leaders take to move the school beyond an atomistic accountability culture. Also central to this way of framing what goes on in the school is the development of a school-wide “learning improvement agenda” (Knapp and Copland, 2006; Portin *et al.*, 2009), which becomes a natural reference point for accountable practice. The agenda can help to anchor a set of relationships within teams and other collaborative structures that bring matters of instructional practice regularly into the view of peers or others who might help individuals feel responsibility for improving practice, and act accordingly.

This framing of leadership work in the school is particularly appropriate for examining questions about the way internal and external accountabilities intersect. For one thing, the framework highlights the focus of accountability expectations (the improvement of students’ learning) and also the means for meeting these expectations (new learning about how to meet these expectations as a professional collective). Furthermore, embedded within the idea set concerning learning-focussed leadership is the notion of shared accountability (Macbeath, 2008). Because this approach to school leadership assumes an active distribution of effort to guide and support practice aimed at the improvement of teaching and learning, it is only natural that the responsibility for improving learning (and for failures to do so) resides within the collective, and that schools will develop practices that make this the result. Furthermore, shared accountability can subsume the sharing of expectations by internal and external groups, if school staffs are able to internalize and/or adapt external expectations for their own purposes. Absent that, the work of leaders within the school takes on the burden of external accountability in such a way that they become “more concerned with accounting than learning, with control than with teaching, with compliance than risk-taking, and with public relations than student experiences” (Sackney and Mitchell, 2010, as cited in Macbeath, 2008, p. 139).

Finally, learning-focussed leadership frameworks emphasize the leaders’ treatment of the external environment as a resource (Knapp and Copland, 2006; Knapp *et al.*, 2013). As learning-focussed school leaders look inward to develop their professional communities and bring school staff’s best efforts to bear on instructional improvement,

they simultaneously “interact with the local community and other external environments in ways that define and create opportunities for learning improvement. [...]” while at the same time being “on the lookout for challenges such as external pressures, demands, crises, or other events that may preempt or constrain attempts to advance a learning improvement agenda” (Knapp and Copland, 2006, p. 56). In other words, leadership practice aimed at learning improvement is simultaneously internal and external work, with school leaders approaching the environment as a source of opportunities and resources as well as constraints.

In sum, understanding changing expectations and emerging practices requires learning for all school staff, and especially for school leaders. Principals are naturally positioned as a “lead learner,” in the sense that they need to know what their teachers and students will need to be learning, at the same time they may wish to cultivate a learning stance among their staff. As they do so, they are in a good position to engage the external environment and all its demands as a resource for the learning improvement work of the school (Knapp *et al.*, 2013).

Framework for our research

Our study draws together ideas from these bodies of work in ways that focus attention on leadership work at the intersection of external and internal accountability. In broad strokes, we assume, in line with research described earlier, that the practice of internal school accountability reflects three overlapping spheres – the individual staff members’ sense of responsibility for their own performance as professionals (and the performance of the students they teach); a collective set of expectations held by parents, teachers, administrators, and students about performance; and a set of rules, mechanisms, and incentives for improving, and ultimately attaining high levels of, performance. These three may not be coherently aligned with each other, or even well established. By default, schools are likely to rely most heavily on individuals’ sense of responsibility, thereby relegating the school to a fairly atomistic accountability pattern.

The challenge to a school staff, then, and hence to its leaders, is to develop practices that maximize the overlap between the three spheres of activity. There, at this intersection, collective understandings of the work of the school increasingly shape, and are shaped by, individuals’ sense of responsibility for high-quality teaching and learning; and both are reinforced by various mechanisms and incentives which encourage and reward the collective work and what results from it. What happens here is a central feature of learning-focussed leadership work, as suggested schematically in Figure 1. Maximizing the interconnections among school accountability elements is unlikely to come about by accident. Rather, it calls on what leadership is always about – the nurturing of collective purpose in the organization and the mobilization of effort in pursuit of that purpose. And because the dominant purpose of concern is the improvement of teaching and learning, this task calls for leadership work that is persistently and publicly focussed on learning and learning improvement.

The school’s internal accountability patterns and routines – and hence, school leadership work – occur within a larger system of accountability, in fact, within an environment of multiple accountabilities (e.g. bureaucratic, political, market, and moral accountabilities, as noted earlier). This fact highlights a second intersection for school leaders, especially the principal. As signaled by Figure 2, the principal manages not only the intersection among the three spheres of activity that comprise the school’s internal system of accountability, but also the intersection between internal and external accountability systems. Each requires artful navigation and negotiation; each

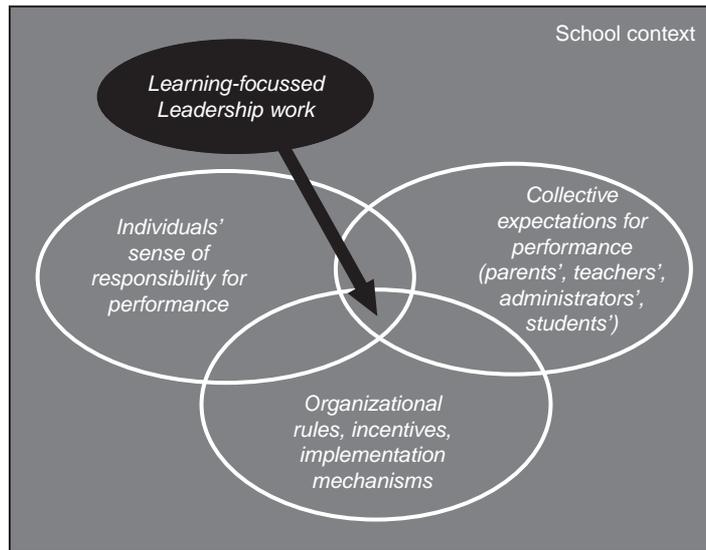


Figure 1.
Leadership and the
internal school
accountability system



Figure 2.
The dual accountability
challenge for school
leaders

offers opportunities as well as constraints. Taken together, the two pose a many-faceted accountability challenge for the principal and other school leaders.

Navigating these intersections can take many forms. Obvious default pathways can be taken at either intersection. Within the school, for example, school leaders can follow lines of least resistance by allowing the school staff to slip into an atomistic accountability pattern, while insisting that staff simply comply straightforwardly with external dictates about test score improvement. But doing so is likely to be counterproductive, and school leaders who care about serving students well, and are

willing to be held accountable for this, are likely to explore various other avenues that: expand and strengthen collective expectations for performance in the school, heighten individuals' sense of personal responsibility for outcomes, and establish reinforcing mechanisms and incentives for doing so. Their efforts are likely to be both informed and shaped by what the external accountability system asks for. Our research was intended to capture in some detail what was taking place at these intersections, and especially how school principals viewed and managed the possibilities and pressures that existed in this crucial aspect of their roles.

Design and methods

To pursue these and other facets of learning-focussed leadership, we undertook in 2006-2008, with support from The Wallace Foundation, a multiple-site case study investigation of four moderate-to-large-sized urban school districts undertaking district-wide learning-improvement initiatives that involved active, though different attempts to realize substantial improvements in teaching and learning within the four districts (Atlanta public schools, Atlanta, GA; New York City Department of Education/Empowerment Schools Organization; public schools, Springfield, MA,; and Unified School District, Norwalk-La Mirada, CA). We used a purposive sampling strategy (Patton, 2002) to identify 15 schools in which to study learning-focussed leadership. Schools were selected that were:

- (1) making progress (by whatever local metrics school staff used to demonstrate progress) on improving student learning across the full range of diverse students;
- (2) sharing leadership work in ways that maximized leaders' attention to learning; and
- (3) experimenting with the allocation of staffing resources, to facilitate more equitable student learning.

Within this boundary, we used a "maximum variation" strategy, to include large and small schools, non-traditional and traditional school structures, and schools at each level of the K-12 system (elementary, middle, and high schools). We also chose schools to reflect a range of experience among the school leaders, with some having long-standing principals (in one case more than 15 years) and others with relatively new leaders (e.g. having come to the principalship the year before our study began).

The schools we studied were accomplishing ambitious learning goals, under demanding conditions. At the time of this study, under the definition of district achievement in the federal No Child Left Behind policy, all four urban districts were emerging as "failing" at the district level – a new classification for school districts. The schools in our study, however, were all outperforming the district average for school achievement. Table I provides state report card data for the schools. Keeping in mind that each state and district organizes their achievement data and goals differently, these schools' achievement cannot be compared to each other.

Data collection

Each school was visited at least four times during the study by one or two researchers, across a year and a half, including the spring of the 2006-2007 school year, the 2007-2008 school year, and the first three months of the following year. Across our visits, we interviewed repeatedly all staff within each school who were identified as exercising leadership, and selected others (teachers, support staff) who could reflect on

School levels	School size	Predominant demographic groups	School achievement
<i>NYC Department of Education/Empowerment schools organization</i>			
Elementary schools (3)	650-1700	82-96% Latino 85-98% FRL	Met AYP in all subject areas in all grades
Middle school (1)	512 students grades 6-8	59% Latino 40% African-American 81% FRL	Made AYP in math, language arts, and science
Middle-High school (gr 6-12) (1)	386	100% Latino 86% FRL	Made AYP in math and science, not in English language arts
<i>Atlanta public schools</i>			
Elementary school (1)	475 students	90% African-American 81% FRL	Met AYP in all years
Middle school (1)	950 students	97% African-American 78% FRL	Met AYP in all years
High school (2)	155 students 950 students	94-97% African-American 81-82% FRL	Both high schools made AYP
<i>Norwalk-La Mirada unified school district</i>			
Elementary school (1)	Approximately 550 students	81% Latino 71% FRL 34% ELL	Made AYP in 17 of 17 categories
Middle school (1)	Approximately 1,050 students	86% Latino 73% FRL	Made AYP in all areas except ELL and special education students
High school (1)	Approximately 2,300 students	52% Latino 32% white 25% gifted and talented	Made AYP in the all categories, except in Latino, white, or low socioeconomic advantage
<i>Springfield (MA) Public schools</i>			
Elementary school (1)	650 students	48% Latino 21% African-American 14% white 84% FRL	School made AYP in all areas, except in English on aggregate in 2006
Middle school (1)	1,200 students	77.6% Latino	2006 made AYP in language arts in all areas; 2007, whites made AYP in language arts In math, African-Americans made AYP in 2007
High school (1)	2,000 students	53% FRL 36% Latino 29% African-American	School made AYP in all areas except Special Education students

Table I.
School environments, by district, 2006-2008

Notes: FRL, participates in the Free-or-Reduced Price Lunch program; ELL, English language learners; AYP, Adequate Yearly Progress

the nature and consequences of this leadership work. The purpose of these semi-structured interviews was to gather detailed descriptions of how different people in the school: brought attention to particular learning problems; generated and over time reconsidered particular definitions of the problems to be solved; identified courses of action that would guide and support the improvement of teaching and learning; carried out these courses of action; and learned from and about the results of these improvement efforts.

We coupled interview data with evidence from actual interactions between leaders and others. Specifically, researchers shadowed school leaders doing their work and observed instruction in order to learn more about leadership practice in relation to the context of the school, the learning climate, and the community the school served.

Data analysis

This nested, multi-case study of 15 schools and their school districts (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2005) utilized a grounded theory analysis approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1997), married to a two-stage, within-case and cross-case analytic process (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Debriefing reports were written on each school case from two researchers' perspectives throughout site visits and revised at the end of each site visit. A formal, iterative analysis of interviews and observations was on-going during data collection. Interviews and observations were transcribed and uploaded in qualitative research software (Nvivo). Code sets were developed before coding began, and free codes were added in some cases, through a modified "open" coding process, as productive themes emerged from the coding process. All documents were base-coded for state, school district, school type, and participant. An additional set of codes were developed to reflect overall research questions and analytic categories that were built into an emerging conceptual framework guiding the research. Axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1997) was used to explore relationships between codes.

As explained in greater detail in Portin *et al.* (2009), the coding phase set in motion an analytic process resulting in lengthy (60-80 pages) analytic memos concerning each school. These memos offer a detailed description and analysis of each school case with special emphasis on the nature of leadership work in the school along with the main conditions and events associated with it. Site visitor pairs who had been assigned to the schools in question created these accounts to reflect that state of the school as accurately as possible. Following this within-site analytic work, we undertook a cross-site analysis (as described in Miles and Huberman, 1994) by reading all the school site memos by analytic category; this analysis produced emerging patterns, possible hunches, and new categories or relationships that needed deeper exploration.

Accountability was one such category. We did not go into this study with a primary focus on accountability dynamics in or around the schools under study. But accountability emerged as a central and unmistakable theme across study sites that signaled a central pre-occupation of school leaders. Although these schools were situated in different districts, working at different levels of the K-12 system, the external accountability environment was remarkably similar across districts. The attention to accountability prompted us to look more close at internal accountability arrangements. Likewise, through a wide variety of learning agendas, leadership configurations, and school and district arrangements of discretion and support, we found strikingly similar internal accountability themes that linked external accountability expectations with internal accountability

practices, often quite tightly. In the following two sections, we detail the findings that emerged from these accountability-focussed analyses, first, to create a portrait of the convergence of external and internal accountability in leaders' practice, and second, to identify key consequences of this convergence for instruction and instructional improvement.

Before laying out our findings, several limitations of this study design for the analytic purposes undertaken here deserve mention. First, because we did not enter the study with a well-developed framing of accountability dynamics, the framework in the preceding pages and related findings emerged more inductively, and through continued exploration of related literature as the study proceeded. Second, given the study's primary focus on leadership practice, we spent relatively little time in classrooms, and cannot offer a definitive rendering of actual effects on classroom instruction, though our findings are suggestive of impacts on the ways teachers and administrators approached their instructional improvement work.

How external and internal accountabilities converged in leadership practice within the study schools

Our analytic work revealed a common theme across a disparate set of elementary, middle, and high schools and in districts that were strikingly different from one another: external and internal accountability systems and logics converged in remarkable ways. This convergence was managed and even prompted by school leaders, especially the principal. Internally, the schools largely exhibited collective forms of internal accountability, anchored to a school-wide learning improvement agenda that school staff had for the most part bought into (and often helped to develop), or were in the process of accepting and owning, though sometimes with significant resistance. At the same time, the internal accountability system was aligned in numerous ways with the expectations, procedures, and tools of the external system, and in certain respects made good use of what the external system provided and required.

We unfold this theme in several stages, showing, first, what school principals and other leaders did to internalize external expectations while they were developing practices that were more internally accountable within the school. Second, we show how they made extensive use of the information and tools that the external accountability system provided, to further the school's own learning improvement agenda. In so doing, they were leading through and with data. Finally, we underscore the extensive and difficult learning that school leaders themselves needed to undertake, often publicly, as they guided their schools and their colleagues toward a more powerful outcome.

Internalizing accountability and developing accountable practice within the school

The school principals and some other key leaders in these schools saw in the external systems ways to realize goals they had already committed to, or were developing. Both rhetorically and in their own thinking about their work, school leaders took up the main principles and expectations that external accountability systems asked of them.

Leaders and school staff have to internalize external expectations for performance – and the notion that their practice is accountable – in order to produce the results that are expected by their environment. This meant two things at least: first, the school principal needed to own the expectations and make them his or her own (with or without modifications). And then, these expectations needed to become

expectations that guide the school as a whole so that, as a collective, the school staff internalized both the expectations and a sense of responsibility for meeting them in a demonstrable way.

Owning external expectations. Our study has relatively little light to shed on how school principals came to see accountability expectations as reasonable and compatible with their own deepest commitments in education – or whether the external expectations were instrumental in shaping those convictions. But some kind of matching process appeared to be at work. School leaders who believed that students should be able to perform well on annual assessments of math and literacy and who saw the paramount importance of these academic skills to the students' long-term prospects were willing to work in the environments we were studying. Over time, those who were not so willing were likely to leave or be removed.

We commonly heard from principals that, while this work was hard, it was the right work to be doing, an expression of a moral accountability anchor. Some of the principals had been waiting a long time for an official mandate that all students must learn. One principal in New York City, who had worked her way up through the school system from a lunch room para-professional to a classroom para-professional, then to a teacher, a coach, assistant principal, and now a principal, deeply believed in the capacity of every child to learn and to lead. One of her assistant principals had been a student in her school and the other had followed a similar trajectory as she had working her way up through the system. Her parent coordinator had been a parent in the school and had begun learning to work in the school as a volunteer, eventually working into a paid position on the school leadership team, with significant influence on the school community. This sort of direct experience had taught this principal that every student had the potential to be the next school leader, community leader, community doctor, or community lawyer, and that the community needed every student to be successful if it was going to realize its potential. For this principal, internalizing high expectations had come long before the external accountability system promoted them. As she had no doubt that all her students could meet high expectations, her focus was on making sure her teachers were not creating obstacles for students by expecting anything less than she expected. In this sense, she and other principals in our data set were less driven by external demands, but rather married their own convictions (and those of many of their staff) to the external demands.

Spreading the word and spreading responsibility. Spreading this marriage of external and internal expectations and the sense of responsibility for meeting them among a school staff was done in various ways. Beyond the bully pulpit – simply using positional authority to declare and reinforce the importance of meeting accountability targets – the following three were common avenues for principals in the schools we studied to communicate expectations and encourage staff to own them:

- (1) creating incentives for assuming and demonstrating desirable practice;
- (2) using professional development events as a mechanism for internalizing expectations, among other agendas; and
- (3) communicating clear and ambitious performance expectations through supervision and other one-on-one interactions with teaching staff.

First, the school leaders created tangible and intangible incentives for assuming and demonstrating desirable practice. School principals had various resources to offer their school staffs, as an enticement or reward for improving practice in ways that conform

to accountability expectations. These resources were varied, and were likely to have local meaning and potency in relation to the particular staff members' needs: time, teaching assignments, funds, access to desired equipment, trips to other sites engaged in related work, scheduling adjustments, and team configurations were among the tools that the school principals in our study were using to encourage their staffs to orient their work toward accountability expectations. But beyond these fairly straightforward steps, the leaders generated more intangible incentives through peer pressure, by creating numerous occasions in which staff talked about and shared their work in ways that others could see and react to. Over time, these less "private" dimensions of practice could have the effect of motivating staff to reconsider their practice and display their progress toward improvement goals.

Second, school leaders used professional development as a mechanism for internalizing the idea of being accountable. Recognizing that being accountable for progress toward improvement targets set by the larger system – or being accountable for realizing the school's own, internalized learning improvement agenda – generally means learning better ways of teaching (and leading), school leaders were naturally likely to use various forms of school-based professional development to communicate the relevant reform messages. All of the principals we studied, for example, seemed to believe that their teachers needed to learn new ways to meet higher instructional expectations. These leaders' operative theory of action was: teach the staff what you want them to know and do, and then expect them to demonstrate what they have learned. Whether the principals encouraged staff to participate in district-wide professional development (where this function was centralized), created school-specific professional development events (in more decentralized settings), or took on the professional development role themselves, their intention was similar: engage their staffs in a continuing conversation about instructional practice that was more likely to produce the desired results, along with developing more specific pictures of what those results looked like in practice. One Atlanta principal did it through one-on-one coaching, using video technology:

The most important thing that I do is I go inside the classrooms constantly, every day – every day – and assess what's going on. And what I find is that some teachers don't really realize

built a culture in the school in which teachers welcomed the data and the clear message it conveyed about the work to be done. The principal noted: “[...] they look forward to this data. It’s like even though your name is going to be up on the board [...]. you’re not going to look at your data in isolation. And I think that is the biggest thing to help [...] Everybody says, ‘Oh wow – I can’t hide.’” The ensuing year’s supervisory work took the board display as a reference point.

Observing, coaching, documenting, and evaluating teacher performance is time consuming work for principals that take this approach to helping the school internalize the aspiration for accountable practice, but it was often done through other members of the school’s instructional leadership team. However, a “bottom line” accountability rested with the principal and other staff who had supervisory authority; they needed to make a judgment regarding whether staff were meeting expectations sufficiently well to remain at the school. One principal in New York City described her work “evaluating-out” ineffective teachers as a distraction from the work she wished she could be doing supporting excellent teachers, yet the fact that she did so sent a broader message to all staff that accountability was serious business and the consequences were real. Principals who took this approach were able to improve their staff effectiveness especially when they had discretion over the new hires.

In summary, an important step in meeting external expectations, and at the same time developing school-wide collective expectations, is finding a way to internalize those expectations among the staff. While principals in our study were primarily responsible for meeting accountability expectations, all three of the approaches above, in effect, spread responsibility for accountability across all the staff. There is not one way to accomplish this internalization process, and whichever approach a principal takes will consume much time and attention, but not necessarily new or additional resources.

Leading through data and accountability tools

Data of various kinds became a central part of the way the school leaders we studied merged external and internal accountability. In short, data were a constant accompaniment to leadership work, and a medium for conversation about instructional improvement, if not for thinking about the improvement work to begin with. To this end, the leaders themselves paid regular attention to data of all kinds, helped establish formal or informal “data systems” within the school, and made regular use of externally provided data, as well as external assistance for data use, where available.

The variety of data within play in the schools we studied was striking. In addition to the ever-present student test score data (e.g. from last year’s annual assessment, from periodic formative assessments undertaken across the year), the school leaders were considering environmental survey results, observational data generated by themselves (e.g. through walk-throughs) or other staff (e.g. from external visitations), students’ work of various kinds, and the results of local school-based inquiry into particular problems of practice (e.g. from interviewing teachers and students about what they were doing in this or that subject, looking at grade trends or patterns of attendance and other school-based measures).

All of these practices for generating and interpreting data were mechanisms for staff to internalize both school-wide and external expectations for their work, and provided a way to make these expectations concrete. On the less formal end of the spectrum of data use, feedback of various kinds pinpointed specific aspects of practice to work on, while reinforcing a sense of responsibility for addressing

these improvement targets, as in the video feedback example noted above. On the more formal end, fairly elaborate accountability systems, generally set up outside the school, became useful tools for leadership work within the school. Consider, for example, the set of accountability tools developed in New York City and required of all schools: annual assessments, periodic assessments (testing every six weeks to see how and whether students were making progress), an annual environmental survey (of parents, teachers, students), a school quality review by an external visiting team, and the findings of a school-based “inquiry-team” process. All of these data were simultaneously available to the school for its own improvement work, and fed into the school’s annual progress report, a public document that characterized the quality of the school’s work and gave it a grade (from A to F). A high school principal in this system described how the school quality review process fed her own sense of progress:

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

This principal and others confirmed that the thorough, on-site process, while nerve-racking, got at what was really happening at the school, and both validated practice as well as highlighting specific aspects that could be improved. As another principal put it, “You cannot put on a show for it.”

Data have the potential to significantly enhance accountability of both teaching and leadership practice. Implied or explicitly required by most school district’s accountability systems is regular use of data in the school by teachers and others who are helping them improve their practice. To this end, school leaders found they needed to lead through data – that is, in ways that made data a medium of the daily transactions between them and other staff. This meant finding new ways to generate data, collecting various forms of data and evidence more regularly, analyzing data periodically and referencing the analysis in interactions with teachers and other staff, and using data routinely to make a wide variety of decisions (e.g. regarding resource allocation, student grouping, staff configurations, instructional strategies, and strategic goal setting). In effect, data and its regular use by teachers and administrators provided a basis for professional forms of accountability within the school, at the same time that some of the data (e.g. annual test scores) figured prominently in the more bureaucratic forms of accountability set up by the district and state.

The districts in which the school leaders worked varied in the comprehensiveness, timeliness, accessibility, and “user friendliness” of data available for school use, and the district central office was more or less helpful in building school capacity to make use of the data. Accordingly, whatever their initial levels of comfort and expertise with data, school leaders operating in these demanding accountability environments often sought out assistance in whatever way they could find it – among them, through coursework, strategic hiring of staff who were data-savvy, designating more expert

staff as “data specialists” for the school, or regular interaction with available experts from the central office or in outside organizations.

Across the variation in data practices one thing was clear: these principals appreciated having data to point objectively to the gaps in achievement between different groups within their schools, or between their student populations and other more advantaged ones in the larger community. Even if the data reflected poorly on their own practice, it was important to have it. Data were the tools that allowed principals to say Yes, there is a problem and, Yes, we can and will solve this problem, if we pay attention to it.

Learning to lead for learning improvement in a fully accountable way

It is a challenge for a principal to both lead – and at the same time learn to lead – in accountable ways, and yet that is what we found happening in the schools we studied. The demands of the external accountability environment, coupled with the internal impulse to engage in improvement conversations, had direct implications for these principals’ learning – in particular, their capacity to lead in ways that model and embody accountable practice.

In some districts we found principals learning fairly simple things, such as how to use Excel, how to file new reports, how to engage with a new school review process, or how to work with a new central office network design. In other cases, we found principals:

- learning complicated new instructional strategies alongside their teachers, and more sophisticated ways of viewing instruction, guided by instructional frameworks and other tools;
- learning to work more collaboratively where they had worked in isolation, and especially learning to coach instructional teams; and
- learning to interact with new data systems, and to some extent to construct data systems of their own that would serve the purposes of learning improvement in the school.

Across these instances, they were learning in greater depth what the school was being held accountable for, how they and the school staff would be held accountable (to each other or to outside audiences), and how they might seek to promote more accountable practice (see Portin *et al.*, 2009, for a more extended discussion of the new learning these leaders were doing). As they did so, they were internalizing a way of working that embedded a more explicit form of accountability into their daily work, and by extension into the practice of others around them. And they did so publicly, in full view of their staffs, often intentionally modeling their learning to help others embrace a focus on learning improvement.

The process hinged, in part, on the facts of employment for these principals: their jobs often depended on their performance. In several systems, this matter was enshrined in their contracts. Absent evidence in two to three years’ time of the school’s progress, they were at serious risk of losing their jobs. School staff were aware of this, and often assumed a kind of mutual responsibility for the leader’s and their collective performance, as one technology coach in a New York City elementary school put it:

[Becoming an Empowerment School] puts more pressure on [the principal] because if we mess up, he messed up and then he’s fired. So that’s really the empowerment [system]. When

we turned empowerment, we realized that the risk is all him actually – or us. If we don't work hard enough, we're going to lose him, but it's more pressure on him than it is on us.

But it would be a mistake to assume that principals' learning to lead in accountable ways was mainly a matter of extrinsic motivation. They generally welcomed the circumstances they found themselves in, and assumed they would and should be able to show results, as a matter of good practice.

And by making their learning public among their staffs, the principals we studied were modeling what it meant to strive for a more professionally accountable practice. In New York City, for example, the district-wide reform required that principals develop inquiry teams in their schools to continuously examine the instructional practices that were creating obstacles to student learning for groups of struggling students that the school staff identified as targets for improvement. Learning to lead this work and, through it, attempting to transform their schools into inquiring communities meant that the teacher leaders and administrators who were part of the inquiry team had to open up their own practice and the instructional practices in the classroom to inquiry. In Norwalk-La Mirada, we found principals collaboratively learning to observe instruction and give specific and constructive feedback to a teacher. This was highly revealing of both the current instructional practices in the schools and their own expertise as an instructional leader. Principals worked with skilled coaches who helped them improve their instructional leadership skills, while collectively learning about their weaknesses in this area and how to address them.

The principals we studied were not isolated. We found them in classrooms, in various staff gatherings leading teams of other school leaders, and in other sessions working with principals from other schools. The majority of this work was public learning. In Norwalk-La Mirada, principals met in job-alike cadres facilitated by a leadership coach, to experience facilitation strategies they were then expected to introduce to their own leadership teams in their schools. The coach and often other cadre members observed as they attempted to use the new strategies, making their learning public to their staff, other principals in the districts, and the leadership coach. A principal in New York explained that, while she could have participated in a professional development session specially designed for busy principals to quickly become familiar with what their teachers were learning, she choose instead to participate alongside her teachers:

When I took the summer institutes, I took them as a teacher, not as a principal, because what they give you as a principal is not as useful for me [...]. I think that's more helpful for me, when I go and observe someone, if I haven't done it, I'm not really going to know what I'm looking for. I'm also not giving the teacher the opportunity to say, "You didn't do it, so how do you know that I'm not doing it right?" They know I know how to teach the writing and the reading [...], so that's not a problem because I've done it in the classroom before. That's another thing that you have to show teachers that you can do – teach the same lessons.

This approach highlights multiple uses of learning as a source of accountability: both principal and teachers learned together new pedagogical practices; teachers learned that their principal knew what they had learned and what changes to expect in their practice; and together they were learning what instruction should be able to accomplish with students. In these ways, this leadership work was strengthening the school's internal accountability system – by bolstering collective expectations and installing a mechanism for exposing practice to scrutiny – while at the same time aligning practice with external expectations.

While it could be argued that principals and other school leaders have always learned on the job, the difference in the case of learning-focussed leadership within strict accountability environments such as those we studied is that the work is often uncharted and unfamiliar. In this context, significant stakes are attached to one's capacity to grasp and actualize this work, and the effort to lead in an explicitly accountable way can be turned into a teachable moment, an opportunity to model accountable (leadership) practice in ways that help solidify the school's internal accountability system, if not the larger system as well.

Consequences of leadership in the “convergence zone”

School leaders' efforts to facilitate and shape the convergence of external and internal accountability in the schools we studied had identifiable consequences for teaching practice and for efforts to improve it. Two stand out – first, the reshaping of the scope of instruction itself and the conversation about improving it, and, second, the idea that both teaching and leadership practices are, and need to be, public.

Reshaping the scope of instruction and instructional improvement conversation

By positioning leadership work within the intersection of external and internal accountability, school leaders were participating in and contributing to a different conception of teaching itself and, therefore, of the discourse within the school about improving practice. We have discussed these changes more extensively elsewhere (see Knapp *et al.*, 2013; Portin *et al.*, 2009), but, in brief, they concerned the language for talking about student learning and student progress; the scope of the curriculum; and the ways in which instruction could be productively differentiated to meet the needs of a diverse student population. Each of these changes was anchored simultaneously to external accountability pressures (as interpreted and internalized by school leaders), and to the school's internal accountability system.

Across the sites in this study there was a striking similarity in the way principals talked about the teaching and learning work in their schools. They were “finding and filling gaps,” “making gains,” “hitting or missing targets,” or “monitoring progress to the benchmarks,” and pegging students (e.g. as “level ones” and “level twos”) to the levels of proficiency set up by state and local assessments. The deep concern was to “move” students, as a grade-level team leader in Atlanta commented:

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

A thousand miles away, in New York City, the director of a district-wide school leadership preparation program had similar words for talking about the essential work facing school principals in that system:

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

standards] map back from the student learning needs to the adult learning needs, and then they're organized for those adult learning needs [...]:

This language was not common ten years ago, and it seems to reflect a commitment to assessment as a source for understanding student progress and school success, and even as a redefinition of student learning goals. In obvious ways, this commitment was formalized in the design of external accountability systems to which these schools were responding, but in less obvious ways, the idea of helping students progress through defined stages of mastery in essential subjects was a deeply held value among the professional staff of the schools, and one that they felt some responsibility for mastering.

In their single-minded attempt to “move” student learning, the combined efforts of principals and other members of each school’s instructional leadership cadre were simultaneously focussing and narrowing the curriculum that students were taught. In some instances, if it was not on the test, it was not taught. In other instances, learning to take the tests became almost a content area itself: various forms of preparation for tests appeared in all the schools we studied, in before- and after-school programs, on Saturdays, and in a variety of ways integrated into instruction itself. To be sure, this meant de-emphasizing important things in the curriculum, or leaving them out altogether, as many prominent critics of high-stakes accountability have asserted (e.g. McNeil, 2000; Kohn, 2000; Amrein and Berliner, 2002; Sirotnik, 2004), but there was little question across the schools we studied about the paramount importance of helping students master those subjects that were tested. If there were doubts, they lay in the worry, articulated by one principal, that the tested curriculum would somehow not capture the “thinking curriculum” that his students desperately needed to further their lives, educational options, and careers.

Additionally, a common interest in “differentiated instruction” across the schools was a natural part of efforts to realize a more accountable practice, in which the goal was to move students – all students – as fast and as far as they could go in pursuit of ambitious learning standards ensconced in the external accountability system as well as the school’s own learning improvement agenda. What this meant varied across the schools, but the common idea was that in order to get all students to the same place by the end-of-the-year test, teachers would need to do different things for different students. In one school district, differentiation went as far as not promoting a student to the next grade to give them more time to meet the grade-level expectations in their current grade. In another school, differentiation was created by tracking students into different classes so the students who were ahead of grade-level expectations could accelerate their instruction and the students who were below grade level could have intensified instruction. Some schools offered “double doses” of reading or math to struggling students, arranged either to pre-teach them the material that was coming up in the following week or to review with them what had been taught in the previous week. While schools varied in their approach to differentiation, the variation seemed to revolve around a limited set of possibilities, such as homogeneous v. heterogeneous grouping of students; pacing of instruction; and intensification of instruction.

Making teaching and leadership practice more public

Inevitably, leadership practices that merged external and internal accountability systems brought the daily practice of teachers and school leaders more squarely into view of others in the school and even beyond it. We have already noted the leadership

strategy of assuming a public learning stance, and various ways in which leaders' efforts to guide, direct, and support school staff were inherently more open to scrutiny in a high-stakes accountability environment.

But in a more basic way, internalizing external accountability expectations, in alignment with an increased and more collective internal accountability, meant that daily practice was not left up to individual professionals behind closed doors (e.g. of the classroom, school office, or school building). A veteran high school teacher in Norwalk-La Mirada spoke for many as he described how things were different at present:

[...] Now times have changed. Anybody can come in at any time. Your classroom should be open – you should be in a fishbowl, basically, and showing what you're doing at all times. And kids should be monitored for whether or not they're actually getting the information. So I think it's just a different time. And I think accountability is – can be – a negative word. But we are accountable, just like somebody in an office [...].

He and a number of his colleagues had been somewhat resistant to the changes introduced by the current principal and the district-wide literacy improvement initiative, which touched all classes and subject areas in the school, but he had come to a new view of his teaching as accountable practice. A similar sentiment was voiced by school principals, as they embraced what it meant to be regularly scrutinized through various forms of data about the school, as in the School Quality Review case noted above. Their practice had changed, and they were embracing the changes.

Conclusions and interpretations

Stepping back from our findings, several observations and continuing questions are in order. First of all, in these schools, internal accountability systems were in place that asserted a strong and reinforced sense of collective responsibility for the school's performance. Second, school leaders, especially the principal, were actively internalizing (or had already internalized) external expectations for the school and were spreading the word among school staff, though often with adjustments to the accountability messages from the larger system, to make them fit with the school's own learning improvement agenda. The net effect was a merger of external and internal accountability systems, in ways that have often been thought to be unlikely (Adams and Kirst, 1999).

It is instructive to return to the findings and framing of the seminal research on internal school accountability, which drew on data that preceded the No Child Left Behind era and in contexts with relatively weak external accountability controls (Abelmann *et al.*, 1999; Elmore, 2006). Across this sample of schools, the dominant pattern was that:

Teachers and principals often dealt with the demands of formal external accountability structures (curriculum guidance, testing, and the like) either by incorporating them in superficial ways – claiming, for example, that they were consistent with existing practice when they clearly were not – or by rejecting them as unrealistic for the type of students they served [...] (Elmore, 2006, p. 196).

While noting that some schools which had a more collective approach to internal accountability had deliberated about how they might align with external accountability systems, or had even done so:

[...] in most cases teachers and principals viewed external accountability systems like the weather – something that might affect their daily lives in some way, something they could protect themselves against, but not something they could or should do much about (Elmore, 2006, p. 196).

Our research paints a different picture, and the picture sits in a backdrop that has substantially changed the conditions of schooling and is exerting more consequential demands on the schools. Under such conditions, the schools we studied appear to demonstrate in various ways a merger of different logics of accountability, as well as the specific routines, tools, and expectations that are associated with each. In specific terms, they appear to have found a way to merge an externally driven logic, reflecting management, bureaucratic, and political accountabilities, with one that is more professionally driven, and anchored to patterns of professional and moral accountability. Doing so means embracing somewhat contradictory forces and conditions, and it is noteworthy, even remarkable, that this appears to be happening in a productive fashion.

Our findings in no way suggest that the convergence of external and internal accountability is happening in large numbers of schools, or is even possible in all. The schools we studied, after all, were not typical of urban schools in the USA, nor were they struggling in ways that so many of their counterparts in urban systems in this country or elsewhere are, under what is experienced as a “yoke” of high-stakes accountability. They were not “schools on probation” (Mintrop, 2004a, b) or otherwise designated as cases of “persistent failure.” But as schools that were making progress in difficult circumstances, they do offer images of possibility – ways to visualize what it might mean to reconcile what the larger educational system is asking for and what school-based professionals want and need, to make their work fulfilling and productive. These images have special relevance given the fact that most of the schools in our sample had been, in recent years (e.g. from two to six years back), a “struggling school,” some on the usual lists of needing improvement or at risk of more serious interventions. Therefore, the way they appeared at the time of our study was a stage in an evolutionary process that placed them squarely within the mainstream of conditions, challenges, and constraints that most urban schools face.

What we have described and concluded about the leadership work in these schools and its consequences leave open various questions which deserve mention and further exploration. First, in these schools, progress was already being demonstrated, by the time we arrived; in other words, they were already meeting accountability expectations, and would therefore be receiving the approval of system leaders. What if they were not? How would schools start to make progress in situations of chronic low performance combined with the pervasive demoralization of staff in many urban schools? (Payne, 2008). Second, at what cost do leaders in the kinds of schools we studied embrace the accountability processes we are describing? Are the consequences for instructional practice encouraged by these approaches to leadership the right or best consequences for young people’s learning? Put another way, do the benefits of increased focus outweigh the narrowing of the curriculum on which so many critics have concentrated? Third, what does it mean to model accountable leadership practice, and what images can we develop of how this can be done successfully, across a range of school settings beyond what we were able to study? Fourth, what sorts of school leadership preparation programs and experiences are most likely to push aspiring leaders to engage accountability environments productively and proactively, rather than reactively and defensively? Fifth, what kinds of ongoing leadership support systems will enhance the accountability of leadership practice, while at the same time enhancing the learning that must accompany such practice? Finally, are there alternative accountability designs at the system level that would strike a better balance between pressure for performance and support for improvement?

These questions deserve continuing inquiry of various kinds, as the field tries to maintain the benefits of increasing the accountability of educators' work, while minimizing the counterproductive or dysfunctional aspects of demanding accountability systems. These questions would also benefit from cross-national evidence and theorizing, drawing on the now substantial array of cases across the world in which national policies address the persistent failure of a subset of the nation's schools through high-stakes accountability measures. The ultimate goal is more accountable practice at the level of student learning, and we have much still to learn about how to accomplish this goal, across a wide range of educational settings.

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Note

1. For example, see Glickman's *Leadership for Learning* (2002), that focuses primarily on the direct guidance that school principals (or others) offer their teaching staff; Schlechty's *Leading for Learning* (2009), which concentrates instead on how schools can be transformed into learning organizations; and *Learner-centered Leadership* (A.B. Danzig, K.M. Bormann, B.A. Jones, and W.F. Wright, Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2009), which emphasizes leadership training approaches that foster learning communities. While these latter works do share some resemblances with our own, they were not central to the development of our thinking.

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