

# CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE: URBAN PRINCIPALS' ATTEMPTS TO ACHIEVE SCHOOL AUTONOMY AND DEVOLVE DECISION-MAKING

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## ABSTRACT

Based on two years of extensive data collection in four urban elementary schools, this paper examines the role of principals in the implementation of the Together Initiative (TI), a school reform model for schools labeled low-performing per state accountability standards. The reform model aims to increase school autonomy from district mandates and devolve decision-making to include teachers, parents, and community members. The differences in the manner in which principals implemented TI appear to be influenced by the level of support at the district level, as well as principals' own commitment to the tenets of the initiative. Balancing devolved school leadership with district relationships requires reimagining the boundaries between responsibilities of the principalship, teaching, and administration.

**Keywords:** School reform models, Principal leadership, Together Initiative

## Introduction

Many formal teacher leadership roles that focus on instructional improvement have flourished in urban districts (York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Some teachers welcome the emergence of teacher leadership (Provasnik & Dorfman, 2005), and there is some evidence to suggest this leadership leverages student learning (Marsh et al., 2008). Despite its promise, teacher leadership must overcome numerous obstacles, including teaching's isolationist culture, competing reforms (Camburn, Kimball, & Lowenhaupt, 2008), and lack of teacher-leader knowledge and skills (Scribner & Bradley-Levine, 2010). Perhaps the most critical influence is the extent to which principals can define and support teachers' work and school change. Meta-analytic and case study research suggests that, within schools, principals' impact on student achievement as measured by standardized test scores is second only to that of teachers (Hallinger & Heck,

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1996; Supovitz, Sirinides, & May, 2010). In addition, researchers suggest that under many scenarios, principals are well positioned to generate the momentum to carry out school change (Sebring, Allensworth, Bryk, Easton, & Luppescu (2006).

While the role of the principal in school improvement efforts has received increased recognition, we still have much to learn about how principals effect change in teachers' behaviors and what distributed leadership looks like in schools forced to undergo dramatic change due to NCLB provisions. This paper examines the role of principals in the implementation of the Together Initiative (TI), a "turnaround" model introduced in several urban K-8 schools that had not successfully met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for at least two consecutive years in one northeastern state. TI is a reform model built on tenets of both distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006) and autonomy from unilateral district mandates (Honig, 2009). The model was introduced in one northeastern state as an alternative to charter schools—the original designers of the model hoped to create school contexts that were free from the bureaucratic constraints that limit innovative reform efforts.

Overall, we found a constellation of personal leadership attributes and district contextual factors play into principals' abilities to act as catalysts and as developers of teacher leadership and school autonomy. Principals who were strong catalysts for change believed that their teachers could become effective leaders—even if their leadership had to be developed across time. Principals also fostered positive communications within their schools and allowed teachers to see their own decision-making and struggles in order to model effective leadership and to build a sense of community. Strong developers of organizational changes were able to let go of their own power while, at the same time, convince district leaders to allow them latitude. These activities require that positive relationships with district administrators also be in place. Thus, leadership practice and policy implementation does not rest solely on the individual leader—but is also a product of the sociocultural context (Spillane, 2006) of where the implementation takes place (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004).

### **Context of the Together Initiative**

The Together Initiative (TI) is a locally developed, state-funded, "turnaround" model that aimed to raise academic achievement by increasing school autonomy from districts, expanding teachers' decision-making authority, and involving parents, students, and community members more centrally in schools. In this model, teachers self-identify areas in need of improvement and design their own improvement plans (e.g., professional development, curricular changes, intervention programs). In some cases, this approach called upon principals to adopt entirely different leadership roles.

### **Conceptual Framework**

According to the Consortium on Chicago Schools Research (CCSR) model, principals are critically important to implementing distributed leadership

models because they act both as the “catalysts” and ongoing “developers” of change efforts. Principals act as *catalysts* when they initiate a vision for change and work to maintain initiative alignment for the school as a whole. As catalysts, principals play a crucial role in helping teachers make sense of policies that originate at the federal, state, and district levels (see Yanow, 2000) thus influencing how teachers respond to these policies (Coburn, 2005).

Principals enact a *developer* role when they support core organizational elements, such as teacher leadership skills and a student-centered school culture (Sebring et al., 2006). As developers, principals must orchestrate organizational changes that support the goals of a given policy. Effective principal developers engender both informal and formal teacher leadership roles that enable teachers to lead both inside and outside the classroom (Childs-Bowen, Moller, & Scrivner, 2000). Increased teacher leadership that is promoted by the principal can lead to an increase in teacher investment and buy-in (Weiss, Cambone, & Wyeth, 1992), an improvement in organizational culture (Silva, Gimbert, & Nolan, 2000), and an increase in the principals’ own leadership capacities.

Given this theoretical context, our research question is: What leadership characteristics and contextual factors explain variations in the principals’ enactment of developer and catalyst roles as they attempted to implement the TI school reform?

## **Methods**

We used a comparative case study approach (Merriam, 1998) to examine the role of principals in four urban K-8 schools. Our study began as the schools were beginning to implement the TI model and continued for the first two years of the initiative<sup>1</sup>. By employing a comparative case study method we focused on processes and role enactment, rather than outcomes (see, e.g., Merriam, 1998).

### **Data Sources**

The data that informed these analyses derived from interviews and site observations conducted by researchers from the local state university. In the first year of the study, we conducted 97 semi-structured interviews with representative samples of teachers and principals across the four schools in four different mid-size urban districts; an additional 83 interviews were conducted in the second year. We conducted more than 100 hours of observations at school sites, then created thematic summaries of field notes after each site visit. Observations typically lasted for a full school day plus any after-school meetings of teachers and/or administrators. In addition to interviews and observations, we administered school climate surveys to teachers in the TI schools annually and received 95% response rates. Surveys included questions about teacher autonomy and teacher-principal relationships.

## Analytical Procedures

We used open, axial, and selective coding strategies (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to code interview transcripts, thematic summaries of observations, and document artifacts. We used the constant comparative method to identify emerging themes across sites. Throughout this process, our group of researchers—eight scholars with diverse academic and personal backgrounds—provided a vital check on each other’s interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation of interpretations such as the extent of teacher decision-making at a particular site or the relationship between a principal and teachers was made possible through checking patterns across interviews against school climate surveys. (Mertens, 1998).

## Findings

Teachers at the four schools we examined experienced very different guidance from their principals as they attempted to implement TI’s core tenets. Table 1 summarizes the degree to which the roles of catalyst and developer were assumed by principals of TI schools.

**Table 1**

### *Leadership Typologies of TI Principals*

Principal Leadership Typology	Relationship with Teachers	Relationship with District
High Catalyst/ High Developer	Pre-existing trust in teachers and their ability to make decisions. Willing to give up decision-making authority.	Able to mediate and compromise with district administrators.
High Catalyst/ Low Developer	Lack of trust in teachers’ abilities to make decisions. Unwilling to give up power because of district pressure.	Unsupportive district hinders principal attempts to make organizational changes at the school level.

We found all of the principals in this study most easily assumed the *catalyst* role in their schools. In this study, principals who most often exhibited the role of catalyst espoused the vision of TI and clearly articulated the goals of the TI model to teachers. At all four schools, teachers were able to express a basic understanding of the initiative and were excited about changes in teacher decision-making, suggesting principals had effectively communicated TI’s vision to their teachers.

Our analyses suggest that the role of *developer* was much more challenging for principals to assume. In the case of TI, the key *developer* role for principals related to their efforts to increase teachers’ leadership roles in schools. Two principals were unable to develop the TI tenets in their schools after catalyzing the reform. These principals struggled with mediating pressures from

their districts to raise test scores and quickly turn around their schools, while at the same time, allowing teachers to make the decisions about how to do so. Substantial difference across *high catalyst/high developer principals* and *high catalyst/low developer principals* emerged within two primary themes: principals' leadership styles, including the extent to which they trusted their teachers to make good decisions for the school; and principals' management position between districts and schools, particularly in mediating accountability pressures and district-wide mandates.

### **High Catalyst, High Developer Principals**

Two of the schools implementing TI, Harkness School and Pinkerton Elementary School<sup>9</sup>, were led by principals who were skilled catalysts for change and persistent developers of teacher leadership. These schools realized increased autonomy from the district, as envisioned for the reform model, in part through the skill of the principals and in part due to broader supportive district contexts. These schools also instituted a high degree of teacher leadership practices, with principals able and willing to devolve decision-making to teachers who, in large part, embraced this new role.

**Relationship with Teachers.** Both of the principals who enacted high catalyst and high developer roles during the school reform process espoused leadership styles that put faith in their teachers' ability to make decisions. The principal at Harkness School stated she always desired shared leadership in her school: "I've always wanted to engage the staff in being part of the decision-making process – I've tried to get as much feedback and input in advance of making decisions as possible. I guess what this does now is it provides more input, more structure, more research behind the decisions." Because the principal already agreed that teacher leadership was a viable means of running a school, she was readily able to develop this aspect of the TI model.

At Pinkerton, the principal not only allowed her teachers to be involved in the decision-making process, but she also recognized the value of permitting them to make mistakes: "I mean there are often times when –it's like, I know they're doing it wrong but this is like helping a child, you've got to let them develop, make their own mistakes and find it." She acknowledged that allowing the teachers to grapple with difficult decisions would allow her teachers to grow in a way that top-down decision-making would not. Illustrated by the quote from one teacher, the teachers felt her support and many expressed a comfort with trying new ways of doing things as a result: "There has never been a project I've taken to the principal that she's ever said no. She always said, give it a try and if it fails, well that's okay. But if it succeeds, that's wonderful." This leadership development approach fostered innovation among the teaching staff as they figured out which strategies best fit their needs.

**Relationship with District.** Teachers at both Harkness School and

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<sup>9</sup> All schools, districts, and principals have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities.

Pinkerton Elementary discussed their principals' abilities to mediate the relationship between the school and the district to obtain a substantial amount of autonomy. These were not principals who strictly enacted district policies within their schools—they were willing to push back at times. While acknowledging that the school did still have to meet certain district expectations—such as increasing student reading scores—a teacher at Pinkerton Elementary stated that they were given some leeway in how to do so: “Through [the Together Initiative] we’re able to still adhere to what the district wants, but do it in a different way. And as long as success is the end result, it doesn’t matter how you get there.” In part, this flexibility relied on support for the TI model from the superintendent. In the example given by this teacher, a different reading curriculum from the rest of the district was put in place only because the superintendent approved the deviation from district policy.

In order to gain some autonomy from the district, teachers at both schools described their principals as mediators of compromise. One teacher at Harkness School described his principal as someone who knew when to pick his battles. Instead of simply demanding that the teachers take part in a district-wide accountability mandate, the principal took the time to talk with teachers about using compromise as a strategy to gain autonomy over other decisions. “He said, ‘Listen, just bear with me here. It’s like – you know what? The board is requiring it. There’s nothing else I can do about it. Everything else, I’m trying to – I protected you from this and this and this. Let’s just give on this one.’” Other teachers echoed similar sentiments about the principal’s transparency: teachers knew that the principal shielded the school from district mandates when he could, which made them more willing to compromise with him when he asked them to do so.

### **High Catalyst, Low Developer Principals**

The other two schools, Newmar School and Swinton School, had principals who were catalysts for implementing TI, but were not strong developers after the initial push for the reform. Teachers in these schools clearly articulated the goals of TI, saying that they are “trying to work smarter instead of harder” by listening to what works and what is not working. Descriptions of valuing teachers’ perspectives and sharing responsibility were typical in teacher interviews and teachers displayed a clear understanding of the theory of action behind devolving leadership within schools.

The principals and assistant principals in these two schools clearly acted as conduits for establishing the purpose of changing the way the schools’ power structures worked. However, they did less to make sure there were deep organizational changes to support and sustain the devolution of decision-making. At Newmar Elementary, teachers described the solicitation for teacher opinions as superficial and inconsistent, as illustrated by one teacher’s comment: “I feel like of the times that we could be utilized, we are – but I still feel like there’s that, core go-to group. Our principal really has the final say on what goes on. So sometimes we’re asked for our input, but it doesn’t really change anything.” Similar

sentiments were echoed in interviews with teachers at Swinton School, with one teacher making the distinction between having the freedom to *look at* many issues, but not to *make changes* in many issues. Tension between the initial encouragement of autonomy and lack of follow-through characterized these principals as high catalysts and low developers.

**Relationship with Teachers.** The high catalyst/low developer principals displayed different leadership styles compared to the strong developers in the study. High catalyst/low developer principals had trouble giving up their authority and did not express the belief that teachers could learn to work effectively as decision-makers. Swinton School's principal shared, "Part of my weaknesses is – being narcissistic: I believe I can fix all these problems. I'm a psychologist. I'm a Special Ed teacher, all that...Okay, so I believe that I have the skills to do all this." At Newmar Elementary, the principal stated that she was trying to become more flexible in her decision-making process, but admitted that "I'm much more comfortable in telling people what to do. Especially when I think I'm right and they're wrong."

The leadership styles of the principals at these schools seemed to stem partially from a lack of faith in the teachers. At Swinton, the principal expressed frustration at not being able to "phase out" certain teachers: "They shouldn't be here. If they don't buy into [reform strategies] and they're not willing to work 110 percent on it, then they need to go." Principals reported feeling that it was easier to remove dissenters rather than build teachers' capacity to participate in devolved decision-making. Such a perspective suggests a lack of commitment to implementing shared leadership with teachers.

**Relationship with District.** While the principals at these two schools did not report that they understood the full value of developing *teacher* autonomy, both were motivated to achieve some independence from their district in order to pursue their own agendas. At Newmar the principal cited the needs of his school as being unique within the district as his reason for joining TI; "I think that it's very difficult for good decisions to be made downtown when they don't know our school. And so, to put more site-based kind of stuff in – I felt that that could be a really, really good thing." Both principals said that they agreed to become TI schools with the expectation that they would be released from some, if not all, district mandates, provided they proposed reasonable alternatives.

However, both the low developer principals were at schools located within relatively inflexible districts. As a teacher leader at Swinton explained, "I don't think district office fully wanted the [TI reform] nor the school board fully went into it, despite what was on paper." Teachers at these schools also talked about the district as being fairly controlling and their principal as having little, if any power, to mitigate district mandates. When asked whether teachers have seen any changes in how the school is run, one teacher at Newmar said, "I think because everything is so driven by the district, what they tell us, we have to do. I don't feel like [the school administrators] have total control." Overall, our findings suggest

that rigid school-district relationships also prevented these principals from taking on the role of *developer*.

### **Implications**

This paper informs policy and practice on the original charter concept—autonomous, innovative schools where teachers and school leaders can influence all aspects of the organization. While efforts to decentralize school districts continue to be implemented in cities such as post-Katrina New Orleans, New York, and Chicago (see Saltman, 2010), there is little research that examines the role that principals play in efforts to devolve decision-making to teachers at the school site. We know that good leadership matters in the effective operation of schools (Mayer, Donaldson, LeChasseur, Welton, & Cobb, 2013; Webb, Neumann, & Jones, 2004); we know far less about how principals can foster teacher leadership in the midst of heightened accountability pressures and the “invisible hand” of state and federal mandates.

Balancing devolved school leadership with district relationships requires reimagining the responsibilities of the principalship and the boundaries of their relationships with their districts. Thus, principals are caught in the middle when they attempt to involve teachers in district-level politics in ways that preserve shared leadership. While individual principals may want to distribute leadership to teachers, district pressures often make this difficult to realize. The principals in this study all took on a catalyst role, bringing the TI reform to their schools. They explained the tenets of the model and communicated their visions for distributing leadership within the school and obtaining autonomy from the district. This ability to see the possibilities for radical change and get teachers on board is certainly a critical part of school leadership during reform implementation. However, it was more difficult for principals to sustain these visions and only two of the four principals successfully enacted a developer role. Two principals struggled to trust their staff to make decisions and were not successful at finding ways to mediate district mandates that ultimately overrode the school autonomy afforded by TI.

This study begins to delve into the possibilities for understanding the role of the principal as it shifts from more traditional positions at the top of the school and at the bottom of district mandates to the tenuous position in the middle of both. Our findings indicate that school leadership in decentralized, autonomous schools requires not only enough trust in teachers to allow them to try new things (and perhaps learn from their own mistakes), but also the skill to protect the school from district pressures. Articulating a vision for school change is not enough—these principals must avoid getting caught in the middle between teachers taking on new school leadership roles and district officials continuing to demand outcomes at any cost.<sup>10</sup>

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