

## **Fostering Professionalism in the Era of Accountability: How Principals' Best Practice Can Inform District Leadership**

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Across the nation, local school authorities have responded to the pressures of their communities and the government by centralizing curriculum, focusing on testing, and imposing irrational timelines for transformational change in underperforming schools (Adamowski, Therriault, & Cavanna, 2007; Burkhauser et al., 2012). Consequently, school principals have become inundated and preoccupied with management concerns rather than with the quality of instruction, hindered by structures and policies imposed from above (Adamowski & Petrilli, 2007; Mullen & Jones, 2008). Ultimately these structures will diminish rather than improve the effectiveness of schools to meet the needs of students (Daly, 2009; DiPaola & Hoy, 2008; Sahlberg, 2010). School authorities, therefore, must reevaluate their motivations and priorities by working as advocates for principals and teachers, rather than inspectors or overseers. They must support principals by enabling structures that research has shown will help principals be effective leaders within their schools: they must encourage principals to adopt a professional orientation in their schools, allow time for them to build trusting school climates, and support them to use accountability measures internally for improvement and growth rather than for sanctioning, punishing, or hindering the profession of teaching.

When public schooling was in its infancy in the United States, its primary purpose was to educate the youth of the new democratic nation to value and practice the principles so integral to maintaining the fledgling democracy. In fact, George Washington, James Madison, and Thomas Jefferson all spoke of education as the foundation on which democracy could be sustained (Alexander & Alexander, 2011). So essential was schooling for this purpose, and so beneficial the existence of an educated citizenry, that over time, all state

legislatures adopted compulsory attendance laws requiring that all children receive an education; and all state legislatures levied local and state taxes requiring that citizens pay for that education (Alexander & Alexander, 2011).

The purpose of education in its current state exists as a complex weaving of social values, much more complicated than it once was. Instead of a primary focus on values like democracy and citizenship, education has become a battlefield of competing social priorities from quality, order, and efficiency to equality, individualism, and liberty (Fowler, 2009). These colliding values stem from a variety of constituencies, putting pressure on school leaders and instructors to prioritize some of these values over others, while being held accountable to all (Fowler, 2009; Moos, 2005). The inevitable consequence is that some stakeholders are left unsatisfied by school outcomes that do not meet their expectations.

School teachers and administrators are left to bear the burden of choosing what matters most in schools. In an era where it seems that market-oriented, political, and bureaucratic values trump those of professional or ethical standards, educators are struggling to somehow blend the complex internal structures of schooling with the external structures of accountability (Fowler, 2009; Moos, 2005). Ironically, the research on what works in schools unequivocally shows that a professional orientation in principals and school leaders results in a better school climate and in higher student achievement (Chenoweth, 2010; DiPaola & Hoy, 2008; Tschannen-Moran, 2009).

External pressures from parents, state and federal governments, and general society, however, have contributed to the creation of regulations and standardization at the local level which undermine site-based leaders' ability to put in place the

structures that would lead to the most desirable results for all (Daly, 2009).

### **The Era of Accountability**

Principals are held to multiple standards of accountability. Unfortunately, the structures associated with each separate area of accountability are not always the most conducive for educational settings or the most valid for fulfilling the purposes of education. When the word “accountability” is used in discussions about education today, it can be an ambiguous term. The literature shows that historically there have been five major areas of accountability for schools in the public sector which can be present to differing degrees depending on societal and geographical contexts (Moos, 2005; Shipps & White, 2009). These five areas of accountability can be labeled as *managerial or bureaucratic, political or public, market-oriented, professional, and ethical* (Fowler, 2009; Moos, 2005; Shipps & White, 2009). Stakeholders in education may hold one of these views on what should be given priority in education more predominantly than another, and consequently, expectations for accountability and outcomes can look very different depending on the constituency and the context. Moos (2005) outlined these areas of accountability in terms of what stakeholders believe and value in schools. For instance, a stakeholder who holds a *managerial or bureaucratic orientation* of accountability believes the school should fulfill its obligation to follow standards and regulations set by superior agencies. A stakeholder holding a *political or public orientation* of accountability believes the school should fulfill its promises as a social and cultural institution to parents and the community. *Market-oriented* visions of accountability hold that schools should produce highly educated and skilled individuals who will subsequently contribute to the nation’s economy through acquiring jobs and producing effective and innovative products. *Professional orientations* of accountability involve the school fulfilling its responsibility to follow the standards of collegiality set by the teaching profession. Finally, *ethical orientations* of accountability perceive schools as places where

social justice is acted out through providing equal access, equal opportunity, fairness, and tolerance while modeling these same values to the nation’s youth (Moos, 2005, p. 323-324; Shipps & White, 2009).

Since the publication of *A Nation at Risk*, and even more recently with the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act and state accountability legislation, educators have been increasingly pressured to meet the demands of external stakeholders from bureaucratic, market-oriented, and political realms in lieu of focusing on the internal needs of teaching professionals and students, or on consistency, fairness, and justice (Farkas, Johnson, & Duffett, 2003; Shipps & White, 2009). In an effort to make what goes on in schools more transparent and to hold educators accountable for outcomes and achievement, state and federal governments have prescribed regulations and mandates which have consumed the education environment and process, burdening schools and school districts with threats of sanctions should standards not be met. The risk of being labeled as a “failing” school or school system has put pressure on local districts and superintendents to prevent or quickly fix whatever problems may exist in order to meet state requirements and remain in the good graces of policymakers and education agencies (Farkas et al., 2003).

Superintendents rely on principals, their site-based leaders, to accomplish these feats. Principals, however, feel less confident in their power to influence student achievement. In a Wallace Foundation survey of almost 2,000 superintendents and principals conducted in 2003, 73% of superintendents surveyed believed that principals should be held accountable for students’ standardized test scores at the building level, while only 41% of principals thought holding principals accountable in this way was a good idea (Farkas et al., 2003, p.38). These findings are informed by findings from Daly’s study (2009) of “schools-in-improvement”. In his study, Daly found that “principals tended to feel the same towards the district as teachers feel toward the climate at the building level...enduring an erosion of their

professional judgment, ability to support innovation, and lack of involvement in decisions in a trusting climate” (p. 204). Principals are the “middle-managers” in this complex dynamic of pressure between schools and the outside world (Adamowski & Petrilli, 2007). While entities external to education generally appear more partial to bureaucratic, market-oriented and political accountability structures in order to illicit change, principals who attempt to apply the same structures and orientations within their schools have been far less successful in satisfying stakeholders and improving schools than those who adopt professional and ethical orientations (Chenoweth, 2010; DiPaola & Hoy, 2008; Tschannen-Moran, 2009).

### **Adopting a Professional Orientation**

Professional orientations, as mentioned previously, involve a commitment to the collegiality of teaching. The term “professional orientation” refers to prioritizing or respecting the “specialized knowledge” and the shared responsibility to a common code of conduct that are characteristic of a profession (Tschannen-Moran, 2009). Professional structures tend to be horizontal, supporting members’ collective goals and responsibilities to clients’ well-being, rather than hierarchical vertical structures like individual specialization and isolation which are indicative of authoritarian or bureaucratic models of organization (Corwin, 1970; Hoy & Sweetland, 2001; Tschannen-Moran, 2009). Bureaucratic or managerial structures emphasize compliance with rules and regulations and loyalty to the administration (Rao & Sridhar, 2003). Professional structures, in contrast, emphasize autonomy and allegiance to one’s craft or practice rather than to the organization itself (Rao & Sridhar, 2003).

The practices of professionally-oriented principals can improve school climate and positively impact student achievement (Chenoweth, 2010; DiPaola & Hoy, 2008; Tschannen-Moran, 2009). These practices include involving teachers in the development of the school’s mission and goals, extending teacher involvement in school problem

solving through shared decision-making structures, and building capacity in teachers through developing professional learning communities.

Research shows that when groups have shared goals and commitments, they are more likely to build meaningful relationships, experience less internal conflict, and achieve those goals (Sherif, 1966; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Involving teachers in developing the school’s mission allows for clear communication about the school’s purpose and increases collective responsibility for student learning and achievement (Furman, 2002). Teacher involvement in school decision-making may expand far beyond establishing the school’s overall goals. Principals can also reach higher quality and acceptance of decisions by collaborating with teachers and specialists who may have expertise around a certain issue, and through including stakeholders in making decisions which have relevance to them (Hoy & Tarter, 2007). Finally, providing opportunities for teachers to collaborate, share lessons, and engage in reflective dialogue leads to stronger relationships between colleagues and respect for best practices—all essential components in professional learning communities (Furman, 2002; Tschannen-Moran, 2009).

Although principals must give up control by micromanaging less and delegating more decision-making and authority to colleagues, the successful implementation of these professionally-oriented practices has invaluable benefits for teachers and principals. Principals have more time to focus on instructional improvement (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Teachers feel more committed to school goals and decisions which they were involved in creating. Improved communication and collaboration helps to build a climate of trust (Tschannen-Moran, 2009). More focus on improving instruction and improving school climate can lead to higher student achievement (Chenoweth, 2010; DiPaola & Hoy, 2008; Tschannen-Moran, 2009).

## **Building Trusting Climates**

Trust is the essential link between school leaders and members of the school community. Without trust, the successful implementation of professionally-oriented practices would prove impossible. Trust, as defined by Tschannen-Moran (2009) is “one party’s willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the confidence that the latter party is benevolent, honest, open, reliable, and competent” (p. 10). In other words, trusting relationships are built on the belief that both parties involved are looking out for each other’s well-being, have integrity and authenticity, share information and control with each other, consistently behave in predictable ways, and are knowledgeable and skilled at performing the tasks expected of each other (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). Trust is fundamentally tied to professional learning communities because professionally-oriented practice requires that teachers are competent enough to make important decisions, that school members are honest about problems that must be addressed, and that they openly share information with each other in order to improve their own practice (Tschannen-Moran, 2009). Similarly, in relinquishing control to them, principals must trust that their faculty will make the right decisions; they must do so while enforcing high expectations for teacher behavior in a credible and consistent manner (Tschannen-Moran, 2009). Since trust is likely the most important element in developing the learning community, and learning communities have been shown to foster professional growth and instructional improvement leading to student achievement, school leaders should work towards building trusting school climates in their schools (Tschannen-Moran, 2009; Vodicka, 2006).

Principals cannot build relationships and trusting climates in their schools if they are charged with enacting change immediately. Therefore, local school authorities must provide a substantial time period for principals to become acquainted with their school communities before expecting to see substantial changes in school structures or achievement outcomes. At least two of the five facets of trust mentioned earlier, integrity and

reliability, by definition cannot be present at the commencement of a new principal’s responsibilities in a school because they require time to establish. As Mullen and Jones (2008) explained in their case study of three high performing elementary schools in Florida:

The value of building collegial relationships among teachers, and between teachers and administrators, is extremely powerful. Principals must strive to establish trust with their teachers before they can begin to extend leadership responsibilities as a strategy for supporting the professional development of teacher leaders and leadership teams within their schools. (p. 337)

Nowhere does the building of trusting climates appear to matter more than in the most vulnerable districts. In a study of schools labeled “in improvement” for failure to meet annual growth targets under No Child Left Behind, Daly (2009) found that where factors like trust, empowerment, and involvement of teachers in school administration and leadership were present, a school was much better able to navigate the challenges of accountability sanctions. Chenoweth (2010) found that principals in over a dozen high-poverty, high-minority, yet high-performing schools were able to “defy the odds” of being successful in the era of accountability by developing professional learning communities and sharing leadership by establishing an “everyone runs the school mentality.” Chenoweth (2010) also found that successful principals build teacher capacity by showing them how to work with data to evaluate instructional practices and plan for improvement accordingly. Through building trusting climates, teachers can adjust norms of feeling “under attack” when test scores are scrutinized or when they are asked to partake in professional development, to norms of participating in professional learning communities where they can engage in professional dialogue to understand data and collaborate with each other to improve teaching practices (Chenoweth, 2010). Providing the structures of professional learning communities within trusting school climates is

largely dependent upon the principal's adoption of a professional orientation of accountability. However, in many cases, external structures of accountability pressure principals into adopting different approaches which are not as successful. School district leaders who wish to meet the demands of external stakeholders must provide support and encouragement to principals who adopt professional orientations within their schools.

### **Mismatches in Accountability Structures**

Areas of accountability by nature do not always align with each other. As we have shown, professional accountability can conflict easily with bureaucratic or managerial accountability. The setting of centralized standards or prescribed regulations is inherently in opposition to a self-regulating notion of a professional code of conduct because the perceived "need" for such regulation implies that the professional standards are superficial or trivial. Furthermore, for teaching professionals who were trained by professional teaching standards and who find intrinsic rewards in following these standards, the hindering structures of bureaucratic accountability suggest a serious lack of trust in their abilities to adhere to the standards of their own profession. Examples of bureaucratic approaches to decision-making, instruction, and communication illustrate how hindering structures are inherently contradictory to professional orientations. For example, one second-grade teacher from the Daly's study (2009) of the impact of leadership and trust on schools "in improvement" explained how one principal's unilateral approach to decision-making, characteristic of a bureaucratic orientation, tended to leave teachers feeling distrusted as professionals:

The novelty is to actually be given a choice. It seems like we are not given choices. It's being dictated to us: "You will do this, then you will do this," same as always. We feel like we don't have a say, that our opinion is unimportant. (Daly, 2009, p. 197)

Highly structured curricular programs that are scripted for "one-size-fits-all" or "teacher-proof"

instruction are also characteristic of district responses to the pressures of external accountability. In the same study, a special education teacher explained how these programs "minimize the professional judgment" of teachers: "At our meetings now, we look at what is 'research based,' and so we just go for what is 'proved,' and my experience doesn't count any more" (Daly, 2009, p. 197). The use of such programs by leadership implies a lack of trust in teacher competency and capacity for professional growth.

Finally, Cloke and Goldsmith (2002) explained how bureaucratic hierarchies lead to distorted communication between decision-makers and implementers (as cited in Tschannen-Moran, 2009). The earlier study by Daly (2009) again provided examples of how this type of communication can impede trust by creating confusion and fear in teachers. A fourth-grade teacher commented about her experiences with principal feedback on her performance:

I've sat down with the principal, and we've had a one-on-one, and within the same conversation I will get a direct message, "You are doing a great job; your test scores are high," and in the same conversation, "But you need to change this, this, and this as that is what is important." What am I supposed to do?" (p. 195).

Sending mixed-messages to teachers about their performance causes teachers to feel suspicious about the accuracy of the information and the motivations of the principal. Such evasiveness has a detrimental effect on a teacher's ability to trust the principal (Tschannen-Moran, 2009). When principals adopt a professional orientation, trusting teachers to be a part of decision-making processes, chances for mixed messages like these decreases because expectations are clear.

Principals find it more difficult to adopt professional orientations in situations where they are constrained by district approaches to meet the demands of political or market-oriented pressures. Professional orientations can exist in a bureaucracy,

however, if principals are encouraged by superintendents and district officials to create professional atmospheres and trusting climates in their schools.

### **District Leadership and the Right Approach to Accountability**

The type and magnitude of accountability pressure depends on the context in which the principal works. In situations where schools have been labeled “in improvement” by government standards for lack of adequate yearly progress, district leaders face political pressures of accountability to the local community. Whether the label is justified or not, districts, principals, and school faculty and staff will inevitably incur the formal and informal sanctions that come with that label; and district leaders will feel pressured to take action towards removing it (Daly, 2009). In much the same way as teachers, however, principals are sometimes charged by district leaders to carry out tasks that they are not trusted to perform. For example, in union states, principals report feeling they have much less authority when it comes to district actions such as hiring and firing than do principals in right to work states (Adamowski, Therriault, & Cavanna, 2007). Their accountability to higher-ups can be strained by lack of ability to choose teachers who will be committed to school goals, or to dismiss those who are not. In instances where principals lack the authority or autonomy to create professional environments, it appears the district responses to political accountability pressures have been bureaucratic in nature. New principals are often expected to come into schools and transform them in very short amounts of time (Burkhauser et al., 2012). Yet without the autonomy to make significant changes in staffing immediately or the time to build relationships and trust necessary for the meaningful building of teacher capacity, principals are facing a task they clearly are not trusted to perform. An article in *Principal Magazine* reporting on a study of autonomy of principals in highly bureaucratized school environments quotes Steve Jobs as saying “What kind of person could you get to run a small business if you told them that they couldn’t get rid of people that they thought

weren’t any good?” (Adamowski & Petrilli, 2007). District leaders in environments like these must work, like principals, to understand the benefits of fostering professional orientations in schools rather than bureaucratic ones.

A few ways in which district leaders can act to support principals to take professional orientations is by allowing them time for building trusting climates and professional learning communities, providing them the necessary autonomy in decision-making, and ensuring support of their decisions and efforts to build teacher capacity. Tschannen-Moran (2004) describes the period of cultivating trust as similar to a courtship during which first impressions and relationship “testing” occur before relationship expectations become stable (p. 54). Gabarro (1978) explained that this period of relationship stabilization can last up to 18 months (as cited in Tschannen-Moran, 2004). However, in school systems all over the nation, many principals are under pressure to enact change quickly; in many underperforming urban schools, principals are removed if scores do not improve within their first year in the administrative role (Burkhauser et al., 2012). A seven-year study conducted by the RAND Corporation on retention of first-year principals in six urban school districts found that 11.8% of principals left within their first year and one-fifth of new principals left their positions within two years (Burkhauser et al., 2012). In examining the reasons behind this attrition, the study concluded that principals who had declining scores after their first year were often replaced with someone new, likely because of concerns by district stakeholders that the principal was not performing to expectations (p. 27). Successful implementation and staff buy-in were indicative of principals who remained in their positions (p. 37). Practices and behaviors of principals who were able to successfully implement changes in their schools included building strong relationships with teachers, recruiting strong staff, setting high expectations, and respecting the prior traditions and culture of the school (p. 42). As might be expected, principals who perceived they had support from the district to make decisions with regards to instruction, personnel issues, scheduling, and budgets were

more likely to stay in their positions (Burkhauser et al., 2012).

Local school district authorities must allow for principals to be supported as instructional leaders within their schools. In the RAND study, a principal's successful implementation of strategies was associated with building teacher capacity. In order to do so, principals needed to have time to build relationships, and also time to engage in meaningful supervision processes involving observation, coaching, and "targeted professional development" (Burkhauser et al., 2012, p.43; DiPaola & Hoy, 2008). This requires that school district authorities afford principals the time to cultivate an atmosphere of trust and professionalism within their buildings, and ensure that principals have the autonomy to make critical decisions within their schools. Setting precedents of removing principals every year for lack of achievement test score gains creates a sense of threat or urgency within the school and pressure for whoever subsequently takes the previous principal's place; it also increases the likelihood that the next principal will also fail since achievement tends to decline with high rates of principal turnover (Burkhauser et al., 2012).

### **Conclusions**

Ironically, the answer to meeting the demands of external pressures is to increase focus on accountability to those within. While internal stakeholders may appear less threatening than external stakeholders, forgetting or marginalizing accountability to the professionals within the school and to the ethical purpose of schooling only hinders a leader's ability to meet external demands. Focusing on internal stakeholders creates a climate of trust, of shared-leadership and professionalism, and of academic press—the very environment needed to produce the satisfactory results desired by many stakeholders, internal and external (DiPaola & Hoy, 2008). School district authorities, however, must understand this relationship between internal and external accountability environments in order to foster the professional environments principals need to be effective. In fact, school district authorities

and superintendents would likely benefit from taking the very approach to their school systems that has been shown to work for principals in schools. Rather than making demands of them to appease external parties, school district authorities should respect school leaders as professionals, build their capacity through including them in district level decision-making, and create a district-wide atmosphere of trust and support—in other words, they must model the effective practices of professionally-oriented principals.

School district authorities can reorient their priorities and efforts towards educating policymakers, the community, and additional external stakeholders about the complexities of schooling. As we have demonstrated, many of the orientations and structures of accountability taken towards business, manufacturing, and government are not aligned with internal structures and systems of schooling. Positive coverage in the media, political lobbying, and promotion of community involvement would be approaches school district leaders could take to create mutual understanding and rebuild trusting relationships between external stakeholders and public schools. Ideally, steps like these might help restore society's faith in schools as foundational pillars of sustained democracy.

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