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ABSTRACT
                This study examined three inner-city public elementary
school principals whose schools had most significantly improved across a
2-year period as measured by a district-wide index of performance,
investigating their perceptions of organizational constraint and their
resulting practices. The performance index was obtained using students' SAT-9
standardized test scores, student and teacher attendance, retention rates,
and percentage of students who scored below basic on their SAT-9 tests.
Interviews were conducted with principals, school teacher leaders, and
subdistrict leaders. Results revealed several common themes among the
principals, their working partners, and the school district. However, there
was distinct variation among principals, lead teachers, and subdistrict
leaders in their reports of organizational constraint on principals'
autonomy. Recurring themes included the integral importance of the principal
to school success; constraints on resources, time, and communication; the
relationship between the school and its subdistrict; and the overall emphasis
on results as the prime determinant of principal and school success. The most
important variable in principal autonomy was the relation between the school
and the subdistrict office and, in particular, the relationship between the
principal and the subdistrict leader. Appended are principal profiles.
(Contains 31 references.) (SM)

Principal Success and Perceptions of Organizational Constraint in City Schools:

A Multi-Site Case Study

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Principal Success and Perceptions of Organizational Constraint in City Schools:

A Multi-Site Case Study

Introduction

Public schools in America's cities are by and large failing to properly educate the

nation's students. A recent survey of achievement test scores across the nation revealed the

existence of a significant performance gap between urban public school students and their non-

urban peers (Jerald & Curran, 1998; Olson & Jerald, 1998). Urban districts serve

disproportionate numbers of racial and ethnic minority children, many of whom live in

neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty (Jerald & Curran). Additionally, urban

schools tend to serve larger numbers of students, and demonstrate significantly lower graduation

rates (Olsen & Jerald). The documented failures of urban public education have, in part, been

responsible for a national resurgence in demands for educational reform.

Educational reforms seem to pass across our nation's urban public schools with minimal

if any evidence of long-lasting positive effects on the academic achievement of poor and

minority students. Reforms have targeted such areas as organizational structure, instructional

practice, socio-cultural issues, school-community relations, and parental participation in the

control of school operations (Bimber; 1993; Chubb & Moe, 1990). Though many recent reform

efforts have promoted and implemented decentralization policies whereby authority is shifted

down to the school level, most of these reforms have done little to significantly alter

organizational structure, and have provided schools with only limited areas of autonomy

(Bimber, 1993). Reforms have generally been selected, supported, mandated, and passed down

from administration external to the schools themselves (Bimber, 1993; Chubb & Moe, 1990;

Lawton, 1995). Our public school systems, like our departments of government, are

bureaucratically structured institutions which historically were built and maintained on the tradition of top-down management and control. The question of whether this bureaucratic structure hinders many public schools from discovering and implementing their own unique set of best practices, selecting their own instructional materials, and designing their own school environments is paramount.

Yet there do exist documented cases of schools in urban districts which demonstrate relative success given the many burdens and constraints with which they must contend on a daily basis (Berube, 1983; Edmonds, 1979; Scheurich, 1998). How is it that these schools succeed while others don't? What types of practices do principals of successful inner-city schools employ in order to improve their schools? What are the organizational constraints which these principals perceive to impede their efforts aimed at school improvement? How do these principals contend with organizational constraints on their autonomy? Do their actions diverge from organizational policies, rules, and regulations, and if so, how and why? What are the factors which determine whether "divergence" from official policy is overt or covert?

<div align="center">Literature Review</div>

Bureaucracy in Theory

Bureaucracy has generated much study, debate, and theory across the past century. Renowned German social theorist, Max Weber, attempted an analysis and explanation of bureaucracy as an institutional form. Weber (n.d.) described bureaucracy in terms of its rational organization and functional properties. He observed that increased specialization within an organization of great size led to the need for a depersonalized, bureaucratic hierarchy of positions which, in turn, made possible the efficient function of an expanded organization. Weber, in his examination of these bureaucratic structures, concluded that bureaucracy in human

organizations is functional, that the structure provides organizations with the capacity to carry out their objectives with maximum efficiency.

In more recent times, however, the concept of bureaucracy has come to be associated with large, ineffectual organizational structure, seen as cumbersome and inefficient in accomplishing stated objectives. Sociologist Robert Merton (1962) examined social organization and concluded that the effectiveness of an organization in achieving its goals is determined by the complex relationship between the different levels of specialization within the hierarchy of administration. Merton posited that in order to function effectively, not only must the goals of the organization be shared among its employees at all bureaucratic levels, but employees charged with carrying out policy must have sufficient resources to carry out the job. When individuals in the organization agree on the goals but are denied sufficient resources, individual innovation is the probable outcome. Innovation can take a variety of forms, including the manipulation or disregard of established organizational rules in order to achieve goals. In situations where either the goals are not shared by employees or are unclear, sufficient availability of resources often results in what Merton termed ritualism, the ritualistic following of bureaucratic rules and regulations to the neglect of the organization's goals. Organizations which possess poorly defined, multi-dimensional, or difficult-to-measure goals, as well as organizations which are under-resourced and overwhelmed by service demands are frequently characterized by rigid adherence to formal regulations among employees (Bimber, 1993).

Bureaucracy and Schools

Educational bureaucracies, like governmental bureaucracies, tend to reject competition, substituting in its place self-regulation geared towards the perpetuation of institutional existence (Lawton, 1995). Lawton argued that while centralized structure may be competent at managing

and coordinating certain large-scale programs, standards, and funding, it is generally

unresponsive and inefficient with regard to locally based needs which may be context-specific.

He described present day school bureaucracies as "choking on complexity" (p. 97), unable to

effectively address the needs of local schools and communities.

School organizational structure is based on institutional rules which have little to do with

the primary goal of educating children (Bimber, 1993; Meyer, Scott, & Deal, 1981). Meyer et al.

(1981) argued that schools have become relatively successful at responding to community and

political demands at the expense of educational goals. School administrative structure is

predominantly "decoupled" (p. 156), or disconnected from instructional goals and activities,

focusing mainly on compliance and conformity with a variety of institutional rules. This

bureaucratic structure is remarkably homogeneous in its appearance and function across

America's public schools. Meyer, Scott, and Deal attributed this similarity to the existence of

common institutional factors outside of education which have shaped the development of public

school systems nationwide. Schools continue to judge their success based largely on their degree

of compliance with institutional rules and their responsiveness to constituents' pressures.

The failures observed in educational bureaucracy mirror that of other governmental

bureaucracies. Complex organizational structure obstructs communication and goals become

burdensome, allowing individual vested interests to intervene in policy and practice (Levine,

1971). Additionally, bureaucratic policies in most school districts restrict the implementation of

incentives which reward teachers and principals according to their performance (Bimber, 1993;

Chubb & Moe, 1990). Centrally made policies designed to promote higher-order values usually

attempt to ensure equal treatment across sites, often to the neglect of the needs specific to each

site (Chubb & Moe, 1990; Greer & Short, 1999; Sharan, Shachar, & Levine, 1999). These top-

down policies are less likely to gain ownership among professionals at the school level, and thus,

are less likely to be faithfully implemented (Cordeiro, 1999). In many large school districts,

schools which implement local innovations that deviate from expected institutional patterns are

either implicitly pressured or explicitly ordered to return to institutional compliance (Greer &

Short, 1999).

<u>Effective Schools/Effective Principals</u>

The "effective schools" movement in the 1970's and 1980's sought to identify public

schools in which students achieved at higher levels and to describe characteristics associated

with success common to these schools. In a review of the effective schools literature, Purkey

and Smith (1982) concluded that the two most dominant characteristics found across effective

schools were strong instructional leadership on the part of the principal and an atmosphere of

high expectations. Other important characteristics found in effective schools included clearly

defined goals, an orderly environment, regular staff training, frequent evaluation of progress,

local school control over instruction and decision-making, increased time on task, emphasis on

basic skills, rigorous academic programs, and high levels of parental support (Berube, 1983;

Edmonds, 1979; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Purkey & Smith, 1982). Other research has demonstrated

that many of these traits are characteristic of ineffective schools as well, and are rarely found

collectively in any one school (Purkey & Smith, 1982; Stedman, 1985).

School effectiveness is highly associated with effective leadership, usually on the part of

the school principal (Houlihan, 1988). Many of the characteristics identified in the effective

schools literature, as well as other research on successful schools, may be related to the degree

and quality of leadership within the school building. Hallinger and Heck (1996), in a

comprehensive review of effective schools studies, found that the leadership of the principal was

the most commonly cited factor, as both a direct and indirect influence upon the majority of internal school processes. Successful principals develop a vision for the school, design a strategy for adapting the school to its environment, determine educational goals, and coordinate the organization of the school to achieve these goals (Sashkin, 1988).

Organizational Structure and Principal Effectiveness

The daily regimen of the typical principal involves a multiplicity of brief interactions with numerous individuals (Sharan et al., 1999). The nature and quantity of daily demands in the school coupled with increasing bureaucratic demands from above can lead principals to define their jobs in purely management terms, resulting in a focus on constraints, inaction, and external blame (Fullan, 1997). School districts which profess to value autonomy but reward compliance and conformity often produce dependent managers and ineffective leaders (Fullan).

Chubb and Moe (1990) argued that bureaucratic constraints on school autonomy significantly impede the ability of the principal to lead. Principals, who are charged with leading and managing their schools, are limited in their control over many school resources, processes, and operations. They may have diminished control over areas such as educational goal setting, staffing, curriculum decisions, instructional strategies, and educational materials. Low levels of autonomy obstruct leadership and may effectively reduce the principal's role to that of a bureaucratic middle manager.

On the other hand, effective principals are able to find ways to accomplish routine organizational tasks efficiently, leaving significant time for their prioritized activities in the school (Blumberg & Greenfield, 1980). When operating under high levels of bureaucratic constraint, these principals often become adept at "working the system" in order to get what they need and achieve their goals (Hughes, 1999, p. 13). This "creative insubordination" (Brieschke,

1985, p. 158) allows successful principals to navigate organizational impediments and better

serve their schools.

Theoretical Framework

Bureaucracy and Organizational Structure

Max Weber (n.d.) described bureaucracy in terms of the following six attributes: (a) rule-

ordered official areas of jurisdiction, (b) a well-defined hierarchy of supervision, (c) the

utilization of and dependence on written documents, (d) management based upon expertise,

(e) exhaustive use of employee capacities, and (f) a learned system of rules which guide

management. Weber viewed bureaucracy as an optimal form of organization which maximized

functional efficiency. However, much of the debate as to the rationality and functionality of

bureaucratic structure has more recently focused on its perceived deficits, especially within

certain types of institutions (Bimber, 1993; Blau & Meyer, 1971; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Lawton,

1995; Merton, 1962).

Schools represent one such institution where the benefits of bureaucracy have been

questioned. The rigidity of structure and decision-making in combination with reward systems

for rule compliance characteristic of hierarchical organizational structure have been found to

diminish the autonomy of principals in individual schools, autonomy necessary for localized

innovations and school improvement (Bimber, 1993; Blau & Meyer, 1971; Chubb & Moe, 1990;

Lawton, 1995). Principals who are deprived of this autonomy may have difficulty producing

success in their schools.

Human Agency

Research has demonstrated, however, that formal organizational structure is not purely

determinant of human behavior (Wicks, 1998). In addition to prescribing individual actions,

organizational structure offers opportunities for resistance. Human agency plays a significant role both in terms of how individuals respond to organizational structure and how their responses subsequently shape the structure. Principals may have greater opportunities for resistance and additional freedom from organizational constraints due to their relative spatial separation from higher levels of administration.

Perception of Structure

Organizational structure is a socially constructed concept, and as such, is largely a function of human perception. The pattern of human interactions across an organization can affect individuals' perceptions of the structure (Heald, Contractor, Koehly, & Wasserman, 1998). Individuals who work interdependently in the same spatial divisions of an organization tend to perceive organizational structure in similar ways (Heald et al.). The existence of areas of perceptual congruence or incongruence within an organization has implications for the institution of large scale reform efforts which may not be universally suited to meet the perceived needs of different individuals working in separate divisions.

Perceptions of organizational constraint, therefore, are rooted in personal experiences, general organizational patterns of interaction, and formally codified rules. Principals who find ways to gain autonomy from perceived organizational constraints may be better able to introduce and implement innovative practices into their schools. The study of principals who achieve success in spite of perceived limitations to their autonomy presents an opportunity to identify areas in which organizational structural reform is appropriate and to aid in the development of a blueprint for planned corrective action.

Research Design

The Cases

This qualitative multi-site case study was conducted in a public school district located in a large city on the east coast of the United States. Purposeful sampling (Maxwell, 1996; Merriam, 1998) was employed to select principals whose schools had most significantly improved across a two year period as measured by a district-wide index of performance (Spring, 1996 to Spring, 1998). This performance index was obtained using students' SAT-9 standardized test scores (Math, Language Arts, and Science), student and teacher attendance, retention rates, and the percentage of students who scored "Below Basic" (below the acceptable level for their grade) on their SAT-9 tests. The utilization of purposeful sampling to select principals is supported by past research on effective schools and successful principals which has repeatedly identified the leadership of the principal as a primary factor in school success (Berube, 1983; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Edmonds, 1979; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Purkey & Smith, 1982) . Therefore, an underlying assumption of this study was that principals of successful schools within large bureaucratic districts have something important to contribute to the research in this area.

The three elementary schools in which the sample of principals presided--Wilma School, Kanter School, and Martinez School (pseudonyms)--were listed among the top five most improved schools in the district, having performed well above district expectations for the 1996-1998 measurement cycle (Their exact ranks are not specified to better preserve anonymity). Additionally, all three schools were and continue to be federally designated Title I schools located in poor inner-city communities, and serve predominantly poor, minority students.

<u>Data Collection and Analysis</u>

A total of seven semi-structured interviews were conducted across a two-week period in October and November of 1999 with three inner-city public elementary school principals, two of their school teacher-leaders, and two of their subdistrict leaders (subdistrict head administrators). One of the three principals had left the district and was working as a principal in a suburban elementary school. Because of this, access to this principal's previous school was not requested and no teacher-leader there was interviewed. This principal's previous subdistrict leader was also not available to participate in the study. Additionally, one of the two subdistrict leaders included in the case study had left his position with the school district at the end of the previous school year and was interviewed by telephone. Since the topic of study is controversial and participants' responses could represent a source of future career endangerment, full anonymity was promised to all respondents and was provided through the assignment of pseudonyms. Therefore, all the names of the participants, the schools, the subdistricts, and the district have been changed.

All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed in full. These interviews were coded and compared within and across the cases for analysis. Official school district documents were coded and analyzed for comparison with interview data. The data were sorted into categories, or themes, based upon recursive readings of transcriptions and institutional documents (Merriam, 1998). Data were analyzed continuously throughout the period of data collection in search of emerging themes within and across cases (Merriam). Brief profiles of the principals (see Appendix) were constructed based primarily on their responses to a self-reported professional history questionnaire and researcher observation of the activities of two of the three principals in their respective schools.

<u>Methods of Verification</u>

Internal validity was strengthened through the use of principal member checks and peer reviews (by two other successful principals in the district, one current and one prior) and through triangulation of data from interviews, documents, and observations (Maxwell, 1996; Merriam, 1998). External validity, though not the purpose or strength of such a qualitative study, was minimally increased by the utilization of a multiple case design (Herriott & Firestone, 1983). Reliability was strengthened through the use of a set number and sequence of interview questions and through the use of a single researcher/data collector. Finally, an audit trail was prepared, as recommended by Guba and Lincoln (1981), in order to enable other researchers to examine the steps and processes involved in data analysis.

<div align="center">The Larger Context of Reform</div>

The urban school district in which the three principals and schools examined in this study reside serves a predominantly racial and ethnic minority population of students, many of whom come from low socioeconomic status backgrounds. The city, like many in the "rust belt," has seen a large proportion of its tax base disappear across the last few decades as factories have closed down, businesses have relocated, and a significant number of middle-class residents have moved to the suburbs. Funding issues are a continual dilemma for the school district, and per-pupil funding is considerably less in comparison to surrounding suburban districts.

The district is currently in the midst of an extensive reform effort aimed at decentralizing authority and resources from central administration to local administration in the subdistricts and schools. The decentralization of much of the administrative authority, formerly seated in central administration, is now located in the subdistrict offices which were created under the reform plan to facilitate better coordination and communication between schools and administration.

Principals have been given the authority to manage their own budgets within the limits of

existing law and the teachers' union contractual regulations. They are able to manipulate the

number of personnel in certain content and specialty areas within the limits of their budget

allotments in order to prioritize the particular needs of their respective schools. The actual

allotment of school funds, however, is still decided centrally, based upon a number of factors,

including the number of students enrolled, the poverty level of the student body, the number of

"special needs" students, and the age and physical condition of the school building. Principals

are not involved in the hiring process, and as such, are unable to interview incoming staff or

decide which teachers come to teach in their schools.

<div align="center">Analysis</div>

Analysis of the data revealed a number of common themes which cut across the

responses of the three principals, their working partners, and the school district. However, what

became distinctly evident was the variation among principals, lead-teachers, and subdistrict

leaders in their reports of organizational constraint on principals' autonomy. Some saw a great

deal of constraint while others saw very little. The data made it very clear that structural

constraint is not a discrete, objectively verifiable construct. It instead is highly subjective social

construct which differs from person to person.

Heald et al.(1998) found that individuals who work in the same department within a

larger organization tend to have similar perceptions of organizational structure. They also

discovered that supervisors and their subordinates within a given department tend to develop

similar perceptions of the social structure of the organization. Thus, spatial location and

hierarchical relationships within that space appear to be related to individuals' perceptions of

organizational structure. If workers' perceptions of social structure converge under conditions of

spatial proximity and within supervisor-subordinate relationships, it follows that perceptions of structural constraint should also converge within these settings and work relationships. In fact, the findings of this study indicate that perceptions of organizational constraint among teacher-leaders and their principals were relatively congruent within the two schools where these data were collected. Perceptions of constraint across positions at each hierarchical level, however, varied greatly. That is to say, principals' perceptions of constraint varied substantially from one school to the next, as did the perceptions of subdistrict leaders and teacher-leaders. The great variation in participants' responses regarding the degree and types of organizational constraints existent in their school district suggests that organizational structure and constraint are constructed perceptually and are not fixed, determinate entities.

Organizational structure and constraint, however, can not be solely defined in terms of perception. Wicks (1998) defined organizational structure as "an organization's patterns of regularly occurring activities" (p. 370). This structure not only constrains individual actions but also provides opportunities for resistance. Human agency is both constrained by and formative of organizational structure. Wicks described human agency within an organization as falling into four broad categories: behaviors which comply with structural constraints and are beneficial to the organization (*responsive-beneficial*), behaviors which comply but are organizationally detrimental (*responsive-detrimental*), behaviors which do not fully comply but are beneficial (*formative-beneficial*), and behaviors which do not comply and are detrimental to the organization (*formative-detrimental*).

The principals who were selected for this multi-case study were all judged by an independent school district measure to be successful. Therefore, it is assumed that all three principals generally exhibit behaviors which are *responsively* or *formatively beneficial* to school

district goals, i.e., the achievement of children in a safe, instructionally conducive environment. *Responsive-beneficial* behaviors would include altruistic practices, or "prosocial acts toward other organizational members" (Wicks, 1998, p.377). These types of behaviors arise out of agreement and compliance with organizational structure, promoting organizational goals generally without regard for the individual benefits of doing so. *Formative-beneficial* behaviors, in contrast, are those which are defiant and non-compliant with structural constraints, but seek to benefit the organization and help attain its stated goals (Wicks). Wicks describes one such behavioral pattern as "subtle subversion," generally small, less noticeable acts of defiance intended to increase individual autonomy and efficacy within the organization (p. 382). Official dissent is another form of *formative-beneficial* behavior within an organization, though riskier than subtle subversion in that it exposes the individual's behavior to higher levels of the organization making him or her vulnerable to administrative sanctions. Formative behaviors, especially when successful and consistent over time, may result in changes to organizational structure.

Though the notion of structural constraint as a function of perception may explain variation in principals' reporting of organizational constraint, it would not sufficiently explain common perceptions of constraint found across different individuals in separate spatial divisions (individual schools) within a larger organization (the district). Analysis of the data in this cross-case study revealed a number of common themes, or perceptual congruence, across spatial divisions, in this case, across the schools and the subdistrict offices. The themes which emerged revolved around the integral importance of the principal, constraints on resources, time, and communication, the effects of school-to-subdistrict relations, and the overwhelming emphasis on results. Although these themes recurred in interviews with principals, each principal tended to

perceive varying degrees of constraint within the organizational structure of the school district.

The types of behaviors and organizationally beneficial practices in which principals engaged

appear to be related to the degree of constraint which principals perceived.

Of Principal Importance

Principals of successful urban public schools were the focus of this study, and as such,

were assumed to occupy an important role in creating the success found in each of their

respective schools. Past research on principal effectiveness and school success generally

supports this assumption (Blumberg & Greenfield, 1980; Brieschke, 1985; Hallinger & Heck,

1996; Houlihan, 1988; Purkey & Smith, 1982). The findings of this study support the notion that

the principal is an extremely important factor in school performance and improvement. The

significance of the principal to school success represents the overriding theme of this study,

permeating all other themes which emerged from the data..

The importance of the principal in the process of school improvement and student

achievement was repeatedly and directly emphasized by subdistrict leaders. Principals were

viewed as necessary catalysts for the development of a conducive learning and teaching

environment:

> Kanter Subdistrict Leader: In my experience, you have to have a good principal. But a
> good principal can't do it by himself. You have to have other leadership in the school,
> and usually the principal is someone who fosters and helps create that ... the principal has
> to set a tone, has to set a focus, has to create a vision for where the school should go, has
> to be able to organize people into productive collaborative units that aim in the same
> direction...They have to create a broadening buy-in, broadening space and ownership in
> what needs to happen...
>
> Wilma Subdistrict Leader: I really believe that the principal of the school is what makes
> the difference...when communicating a clear vision about what the school is supposed to
> be doing and then making sure that they follow through and see that what they have
> communicated is being done.

Teacher-leaders in the Kanter and Wilma Schools also viewed their principals as integral to the success of their schools. Principals were credited with finding, designing, and implementing various academic and non-academic programs and policies which benefited their schools. The following teacher-leaders' comments provide evidence of the integral part principals play in the success of their respective schools.

> Wilma Teacher Leader: I think it's absolutely [Mr. Addison]....they [teachers] might not always agree with everything he says and they might not get along with him in certain instances, but I think he sets the tone. This is what we expect. He has extremely high expectations for this school, for these children...And I think what's happened is that attitude, that expectation, is passed on to a lot of teachers...

> Kanter Teacher Leader: She's involved in everything...When a decision is made, she is a part of every decision. She has the final say so, but I also think that she's open and really, she hears all sides...She knows exactly what's going on, knows her faculty, knows their high points, knows their low points...So I think that she's...she's a very important part of the process.

The three principals both implicitly and explicitly implicated themselves as integral to the success of their schools. Principal Sutton offered a summative position on the importance of principals to school success:

> Principal Sutton: Very important [referring to the principal's job] because we're managers, we're instructional leaders, we're psychologists, we're social workers, we're planners, we have to deal with the school plant, the custodians. We're just about everything...And the district needs strong principals to guide their schools and their staffs...We wear many different hats...

The district's posted job description also supports this "many hats" view of the principal, describing the variety of functions for which principals are responsible: director, leader, overseer, decision-maker, facilitator, planner, developer, coordinator, implementer, collaborator, evaluator, and member.

<u>Constraints on Resources</u>

Principals perceived a great deal of organizational constraint in the administration's provision and allocation of resources. Regarding the provision of teaching personnel, the principals viewed detrimental district policies on hiring and firing procedures and attributed them to contractual obligations agreed to by district administration and the teachers' union.

> Principal Addison: I think the fact that you can't hire a person or interview your own personnel negates in many cases having effective schools. Seniority is an issue that in many cases negates having effective schools.

> Principal Sutton: ... it would be nice if down the line we could interview and have a little more say as to who we can select as our staff members, teachers, because there are certain philosophies that I look for in a teacher, and uh, certain skills, and if I could, you know, have those people come right in and just buy into my programs.

Responses to this constraint varied across principals. The following represents an example of a principal who demonstrates *responsive-beneficial* practices which seek to remedy staff selection limitations through the provision of teacher assistance and support:

> Principal Sutton: Well, I work with whoever I have. We work extensively with a marginal teacher to see how well we can get them up to the level that they need to be. We have a lot of staff development, we have a lot of outside personnel from the subdistrict that will come in, facilitators to work with them. They observe other teachers. We have mentors that come in and help too. So we try to give them as much help as we can.

Another reaction to personnel constraints can be seen as a combination of creative *responsive* and *formative-beneficial* behaviors which seek to manipulate the acquisition of personnel through alternative methods, neither approved nor prohibited under district policy:

> Principal Zeller: But what happened was when I started to put this team together, the staff together that I wanted to have, some people just left because they didn't agree with me and didn't want to do what I wanted them to do. So they put in for transfers and went to other schools. So what happened is we started getting people in who had friends, and what we were finding is people were, on the transfer,...were listing [Martinez] School as the number one school because their friend worked in the building, knew what was going on in the school...If they were hiring somebody new from outside [the district], I would

go downtown when they brought the people in the groups. A lot of principals didn't know you could do that.

Finally, one principal reported a pattern of *formative-beneficial* behavior designed to get rid of "bad" teachers as expediently as possible through the construction of his own strict staff attendance policy which did not conform to district policy:

> Principal Addison: I judge absence in a kind of reasoned number of sequence. You're fired at seven. Three days, you're going to have a warning letter, five days you're getting a 204 [official reprimand sent to personnel administration] with it, a request for suspension without pay, seven absences, a request for termination.

This principal was willing to go through the official steps of reprimand and termination to get poor teachers out of his building. The process of termination involves due process and can take up to two years.

The provision and use of funds was also seen as a constraining factor by two of the principals, as well as by teacher-leaders and subdistrict leaders, though in different ways. Some saw the problems as local to their respective school functions and others view funding as a larger problem affecting the district as a whole:

> Principal Sutton: ...the budget, you know, it's never enough money, but we have to deal with that.

> Principal Addison: Again, I think you have to be able to compete to attract teachers to deal with much more difficult population, and those who are teaching other places are paid a lot more, and are in some cases given a lot more supports.

> Wilma Teacher-Leader: ...we can't even get supplies because all of our creditors have not been, all of the people we get stuff from have not been paid. We've had no paper, mimeograph paper, because the bills....

Other funding issues reported revolved around the use of budgeted money. The Kanter subdistrict leader reported a situation in which a principal had been arranging staff breakfast meetings at a local restaurant:

Kanter Subdistrict Leader: ...However, district policy said that you can't be reimbursed for money spent at a restaurant, which is ridiculous. This was a great situation. The teachers came without being paid. He just bought them breakfast, which you know is a lot cheaper than if he had to pay them for staff development time after school or before school.

Principals contended with funding constraints in a variety of ways. All three principals were involved in getting outside grants to assist with funding deficits in their schools. Some had worked out relationships with local businesses and community agencies which from time to time provided certain material resources. None reported to engage in any behaviors which were obviously non-compliant.

Constraints on Time

Time constraints were perceived by most school district personnel interviewed in the study. Among the issues of time were insufficiency in time provided for teacher training and school planning, the time required to terminate a poor employee, time delays in the material requisition process, and general time constraints posed by administrative demands and deadlines.

Principal Zeller: There were just requirements that they were making us do that made us spend more time doing administrative work than doing educational work...Just the stuff that things want, that the people wanted, and would send it to you today saying it has to be in by tomorrow afternoon, or calling a meeting and saying you have to be down here at ten o'clock in the morning. Scheduling meetings all over the place.

Principal Addison: ...time, both the identification of it and the effective use of it...Training opportunities for teachers. The requisitioning process: Why does it take so long to get resources you need? The physical plant: why it takes so long to make repairs that are needed to have a conducive environment to students and staff.

Principal Sutton: [Referring to process of terminating employees] They do give you the ability to rate someone unsatisfactory, and then they go through a process where you have to give them like ten steps of additional help, and different people that will come in to help from the union, but it's a long process, and I wish there were some shorter way we could get through having somebody leave this school...

Kanter Subdistrict Leader: What has been difficult are the timelines used for implementing that [district policies]. Often things come down real fast, real rushed, and

people are pressed absolutely to the limit to get things done in the time frame given.
That's very stressful.

Principals responded to time constraints in a variety of ways. Skipping certain procedural

steps which were perceived to be unnecessary represented one coping response to time

constraints. Budgeting time either during the school day or during the hours before and after

school was another. Finally, assigning whole staff positions to deal with administrative

responsibilities or the delegation of select administrative duties comprised another response to

overwhelming demands on time. All three principals emphasized the importance of being

involved in instructional matters and being visible in the schools. All found ways to free up

significant time for attention to these responsibilities. Below is an example of a *formative-

beneficial* response to a perceived time constraint. Principal Addison here comments on his

early dismissal policy during shortened days for report card conferences:

> Principal Addison: ...Dismissal for a half day, where no one can be dismissed until noon,
> and I dismiss at 11:30 am. I provide more instructional time than most schools who
> dismiss at noon by eliminating all preps [teacher preparation periods] on those days,
> eliminating recess periods and lunch periods those days. I order cold lunches, give it to
> kids to take home instead of feeding them in school, which is a violation of that policy.

Below, Principal Zeller refers to length of the official district procedure which permits a

principal to allow a child to remain in school despite committing an act requiring expulsion

according to district policy:

> Principal Zeller: ...But eventually, they [the district] did come out and say extenuating
> circumstances [could be petitioned by a principal in order to prevent removal from the
> school], so I had to do a process, and then write a letter to let him stay. I figure if you're
> going to do that, and write a letter to let him stay, I just sort of abandoned the process [of
> reporting the incident in the first place].

Kanter School's subdistrict leader reported non-compliant time-saving practices of principals

who accept outside contributions to their schools:

Kanter Subdistrict Leader: ...you're supposed to have a board resolution for accepting money from adopters and things, sometimes, sometimes [principals] just accept it and use the money for the school, and don't go through the very complicated process of having the board resolution to acknowledge it officially.

Interestingly enough, both Kanter's Principal, Mrs. Sutton, and her teacher-leader both reported

minimal issues of time constraint. Kanter's teacher-leader recounted one incident of a time

constraint in which the subdistrict leader assisted the school in resolving the issue:

Kanter Teacher-Leader: We had an instance a couple of weeks ago where there was a little bit of paper work that involved one of our programs, and our teachers felt that they were being "papered" to death. It's this form, it's that form. And she [Principal Sutton] went to the subdistrict leader and came back the next day, and we had a meeting, and she said that we're not going to do it that way, and it's asking teachers a lot, and so we're going to run the program, but less paper work. Because, you know, when you have paper work, we just got Title I, it's testing here, it's SAT-9. They have a lot of deadlines and testing that they have to do.

Kanter's Principal was able to go directly to her subdistrict leader for assistance with the

problem, and the problems was quickly remedied.

Constraints on Communication

Constraints on communication were evident in two of the three schools. The principal of

the Kanter School, her teacher-leader, and subdistrict leader all reported no significant

organizational constraints on communication. This may in part be related to the subdistrict-to-

school relationship found within this particular subdistrict. The relationships between schools

and their respective subdistricts will be explored in the following section. Communicative

constraint was perceived in both the Wilma and Martinez Schools, though not at the subdistrict

level. Forms of communicative constraint reported by principals and staff included replication

and contradiction in higher administrative requests, poor communication of information

necessary to effectively carry out policy-related tasks, and a lack of administrative

responsiveness to the needs of the schools. The following comments refer to

intercommunication problems between departments of higher administration and the schools:

> Principal Zeller: The bureaucracy was just tremendous...with basically 22 subdistrict leaders, that's little superintendents, secretaries, and assistants. So what was happening, we were getting requests from the central office at [street address] for items, we were getting requests from the [administrative division name] Center for other things, in come cases contradictory things. One wanted one thing and the other wanted the complete opposite.

> Principal Addison: I think that one also one division needs to be able to talk to another so we don't have duplication of services. Many of our, much or our time is spent on--, again if one division only had access to information that was stored somewhere else already in this bureaucracy, we would not need to duplicate or replicate services at the school level. We'd get the same information.

Central office administration was often perceived to be unresponsive and unconcerned with the

immediate needs of individual schools:

> Principal Zeller: And you don't know how aggravating it is that no matter what office you call downtown, you don't get a human being to answer. And even more frustrating is you get a voice that says "The mailbox is full, you can't leave a message, call back later."...I really think they just stopped answering their telephones once they got this voice mail. It was almost universal that you would not get anybody to answer the telephone.

> Principal Addison: Central administration is horrible, not being able to get people on the phones, not having people who truly understand what the schools are all about. They exist to provide support to the schools...Central administration in more cases than not are very arrogant, ineffective, unreachable, unknowledgeable, and again, just create more obstacles than they do assistance.

This poor communication also affects the schools' ability to properly implement district policies

due to insufficient provision of training and follow-up for school staff:

> Principal Addison: Example, take our [newly instituted] curriculum standards, or frameworks. They were delivered to the school in boxes one morning. Again, the facilitator from the subdistrict may have come in on the school improvement day and provided two hours of staff development, basically just took people through an index or appendices of the book, and then all of the sudden the next day, we're expecting people to be experts in understanding what the curriculum is...

Wilma Teacher-Leader: Well I just feel that there is a lot—there's just so much confusion downtown [central administration], and you spend more time trying to figure out what you're supposed to be doing, that I feel we're surviving in spite of the system...Nobody—the right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing.

These successful principals tended not to rely on upper administration for assistance and guidance in leading and managing their schools. They generally managed their schools independent of administration. Principal Addison implemented his own "academy" of professional development to address the weaknesses of that provided by the district and subdistrict:

Principal Addison: Basically we put together a staff development academy based on the teachers' level of need to help their professional growth, and that need is determined by their own personal assessment...and again, a needs assessment is done each year to also help us in determining what teachers see as those needs so that we can try to arrange the facilitators, to make sure that they can address those needs...

Most principal responses to communicative constraint were indirect in that they seemed to have created semi-insular environments within their schools which were more impervious to confusing, contradictory, and duplicative administrative requests and demands. These environments seemed to provide them with a certain degree of autonomy, or independence, from upper level administration. All three principals emphasized the importance of communication within their schools, between the principal and staff, to the success of their schools.

Principal Addison: ..I think that the main thing is, is a clear identification of what the expectations are, no matter what area of the school, no matter what constituent of the school, making sure people understand exactly what the program or policy or expectation is, and what their role is in that expectation...

Principal Sutton: I have to have everybody buy into something before I initiate it. So I really have a discussion with my group, and we go over the pros and cons, and sometimes they tend to open my eyes up to some consequences that might occur...And I'll listen to people, and um, I don't force things down anybody's throat that I feel they're not comfortable with.

School-To-Subdistrict Relations

Under the reformed organizational hierarchy, subdistrict offices sit above the individual schools, providing guidance, assistance, and oversight to the local principals. Though some subdistrict offices in the district are physically housed in a school which falls within their purview, none of the subdistrict offices relevant to this study were housed in the three schools which were examined. All three schools were located within different subdistricts, and as such, had different relations with their respective subdistricts. The reasons for the variation reported in school-to-subdistrict relations is unclear. However, there are some indications which point to individual personalities or work styles which may factor into this relationship.

Principals' responses provided evidence that the level of subdistrict support to a school may in fact be associated with the types and extent of constraint that the principals perceived in the system. In the Kanter School, the subdistrict was viewed as an asset, assisting the school with problems and providing ongoing support.

> Principal Sutton: ...when I'm in a bind lots of times, I go to my subdistrict leader for advice. And he'll let me know—like I had a situation where I wanted a teacher to be moved into another grade level, but again, it's not the school district's policy that's restricting me. It's the teacher contract that would not allow me to do it. But discussing it with him, he tried to go over some different strategies that we could focus on, different alternatives that we could look into to try to remedy the problem I was having.
>
> Kanter Teacher-Leader: So the subdistrict is a very good place. Our subdistrict leader is visible, our coordinators are visible. So I think that they help with, with some programs, with moneys, with support.

Principal Zeller of the Martinez School reported a less positive relationship with his subdistrict, though he perceived his subdistrict leader to be more reasonable in her demands than many other subdistrict leaders in the district.

> Principal Zeller: Plus the fact that I think the subdistrict leaders, uh [long pause], ours was better than most. She left us alone. We didn't have a lot of leeway with what she wanted us to do, but she didn't hound us. A lot of subdistrict leaders gave principals

reading assignments, they had to report when they went back to the subdistrict meetings.
Uh, just extra nonsense that...

Principal Addison of the Wilma School saw the subdistrict in a more negative light. He

perceived the organization of the subdistricts as another layer of bureaucracy and an impediment

to school functioning.

> Principal Addison: ...even though we've been thrown into subdistricts to try to—with the belief that smaller is better than larger, and that might be the case, but in no way do I believe that subdistricts in any way have aided the achievement of schools. They just add more layers of bureaucracy. The fact that they don't do anything differently than they did during the—when they were in districts [prior to current reforms]...I don't think the subdistrict leaders visit the schools at all, very rarely, unless they have to. I don't think that they always know that much about the schools and what schools are doing.

The relationship between the subdistrict and the school appeared to correspond with the

degree and types of organizational constraint perceived by the principals. Wilma School

principal, Mr. Addison, tended to see the most organizational constraint of the three principals

interviewed, and also tended to report the worst relationship, or lack of relationship, with the

subdistrict and subdistrict leader. Additionally, Mr. Addison admitted to the greatest number of

district policy violations in his school, *formative-beneficial* behaviors which he viewed to be

corrective of weaknesses in currently instituted district policies.

> Principal Addison: Well, I lead and manage in spite of any district policies or whatever. I think basically I do whatever it's going to take, period, to try to make my school effective, and I try to—and I guess it's realized that any rule that's made, there's a way to break it, so I guess that I try to do the same thing. I believe that, I guess that a good administrator needs to be a risk taker and do what it takes and kind of be willing to stretch the parameters of the bureaucratic framework to make the school effective.

This overt policy violation was less common among the other two principals. Neither Kanter

School principal, Mrs. Sutton, nor Martinez School principal, Mr. Zeller, reported having

purposefully violated district-wide policies, though both admitted to engaging in policy

reinterpretation or unintentional violations on occasion.

Principal Zeller: I don't think I ever outright disobeyed them [district policies]. Some of them I didn't follow to the full extent like with the Act [number which specifies a district expulsion policy] kind of thing... I can't tell you I knew every single policy that was in the book...I pretty much did what I though was best for the school. So in some cases if that violated one [policy], it wasn't an intentional violation. I did what I thought I had to do.

Principal Sutton: ...maybe the policy is general, but you could put in your own interpretations, and it could be done intentionally so that it could meet your needs within your own school...It's a general statement that I can interpret a little bit differently than maybe another person can.

The two subdistrict leaders disagreed as to whether rules were being broken or

reinterpreted. Interestingly enough, the Wilma subdistrict leader, Mr. Colon, though

acknowledging the existence of policy disagreement among school principals, saw no evidence

of deviance from policy among principals under his supervision. This was in spite of the fact

that Wilma's principal was the most overt rule breaker and open dissenter of the three principals

studied.

Wilma Subdistrict Leader: The people that I worked with I had established a trust level that we could discuss things. That doesn't mean that they don't do them [follow district policies]...If I had [witnessed non-compliance], then I would have had to take disciplinary action against them.

The Kanter subdistrict leader, Mr. Zampisi, in contrast, not only reported awareness of policy

reinterpretation and rule breaking, but also suggested that he implicitly approved of such

behavior as long as it proved to be successful and non-injurious.

Kanter Subdistrict Leader: Well, every good principal, every good leader of any organization, has to know how to get around the rules, when to bend the rules, when to ignore the rules, when to get things done despite the limitations that the rules apply...there are different ways to manipulate things so you can get what you need and what the kids want, and that doesn't always follow policy exactly, but it certainly follows the spirit of the law, and you're doing the best for your students.

Whether or not principals' perceptions of organizational constraint were related to their

relations with the subdistricts is not entirely clear, but the data presented here does point in that

direction. Individual personalities and competencies, both in the schools and the subdistrict

offices, may have also factored in to these perceptions. However, the degree of *formative-*

beneficial behavioral patterns reported by each of these successful principals did appear to be

related to the relative degree of organizational constraint perceived by each.

<u>Results Equal Autonomy</u>

All of the principals selected for this study had achieved positive results in their schools

across time. Their schools had become fairly well respected and gained quite a bit of positive

attention within the school district. When schools succeed in an environment in which many

schools are not succeeding, they tend to be lauded and promoted as proof that urban schools

serving low-income, minority populations can succeed. This success, in turn, reflects well on

their respective subdistricts, whether or not the subdistricts are perceived by the school to have

had a part in their success. This shared success may act to discourage higher level administrators

from putting limits on the autonomy of their successful principals. The data from both school

district documents and principal interviews suggest that academic results are valued at a

premium. Therefore, principals who produce successful outcomes in their schools may not come

under such close scrutiny and oversight by their subdistrict leaders.

> Kanter Subdistrict Leader: My response depends on what's going on. If it's a reasonable response to a ridiculous situation, I usually applaud it. If it's creative and effective and not too egregious an offense, it's all right.

> Wilma Subdistrict Leader: There's an evaluation process that affects all principals, those who are performing at high levels and those who do not. There are consequences and rewards in the policy and in the evaluation process as it stands.

Although Wilma Subdistrict leader, Mr. Colon, did not report any incidences of rule breaking or

policy reinterpretation in principals, he did emphasize the importance of results in judging

principal effectiveness. It is of importance to note that Mr. Colon did report knowledge of

principals' disagreement with certain policies. He did not however report knowledge of any non-compliance.

Two of the three principals, Principal Addison and Principal Zeller, generally agreed that performance results represent the most important factor in maintaining their current levels of autonomy in the system. Each professed to believe that his level of autonomy in the system was only as long-lived as his record of positive results.

> Principal Zeller: I think that it comes down to the principal, and if you're doing it, you have more freedom to continue doing it. If you're not doing it, I think there's a lot of pressure. So I was pretty much left alone because we were being successful...I think that you were given autonomy to do within reason what you wanted to do as long as it was successful...if you do it, they're going to be supportive and more supportive of you the more successful you are.

> Principal Addison: ...I think that as long as they [administration] see success and see it in a fairly humane way without, you know, torturing somebody to get there, or killing somebody, I think that generally they're going to kind of turn their back, as I would, as long as you have success. If your way might be more effective than their way, then who's going to argue that. More, it's the effectiveness that's important, not maybe the way you go about doing it.

Principal Sutton of the Kanter School viewed her autonomy as important, but primarily as a function of the large size of the district and their inability to effectively oversee the goings-on in her school. However, she also tended to view her subdistrict in a positive light, not as a source of constraint or a limiting factor on her autonomy.

> Principal Sutton: Where here, we're so large, we're not really scrutinized that much. We are getting a little bit of freedom because it's such a big system. Now we have a subdistrict leader that watches over us because now it's a smaller organization, but still it's not [the superintendent] or [another highly ranked administrator], or any of the higher echelon looking down and scrutinizing everything that we do.

Principal Sutton did not comment on any administrative pressures to maintain current levels of success, nor did she express any concerns regarding the maintenance of her present level of

autonomy within the school district. She generally reported less irritation and frustration with

"the system" than did the other principals.

<div align="center">Concluding Discussion</div>

This multi-site case study sought to generate greater understanding of principals'

perceptions of organizational constraint and resulting practices in a large urban school district. A

wide variety of organizational constraints were identified by the three principals under study.

However, the particular types of constraints differed from school to school and across principals

and subdistrict leaders. Recurring themes included the integral importance of the principal to

school success; constraints on resources, time, and communication; the relationship between the

school and its subdistrict; and the overall emphasis on results as the prime determinate of

principal and school success.

The data suggest that principal autonomy from organizational constraint is an important

factor in school success. However, a number of factors appear to affect the degree of autonomy

a principal enjoys. The most important variable in principal autonomy in this particular district

appears to be the relations between the school and the subdistrict office, in particular, the

relations between the school principal and the subdistrict leader. In the Kanter School, both the

principal and the teacher-leader perceived the subdistrict leader and subdistrict personnel to be

supportive. Perceptions of organizational constraint were less evident in Principal Sutton's

responses, perhaps as a result of this supportive relationship. Both principal Sutton and her

teacher-leader reported subdistrict responsiveness and positive involvement in their school, and

tended to welcome this involvement.

In contrast, Principal Addison of the Wilma School reported the absence of any real

relationship between the subdistrict and his school, though he suggested that this lack of

relationship was common across the entire district. Principal Addison also perceived a great

degree of organizational constraint, and felt the need to create his own autonomy, manipulating

and ignoring certain district-wide policies which he saw as a hindrance to his effectiveness and

his school's success. Principal Zeller of the Martinez School reported more moderate

perceptions of constraint. Although he perceived the system to be constraining in a significant

number of ways, he reported only minimal deviance from official policy. He perceived his

subdistrict to be both supportive and constraining, dictating certain elements of his school's

operation while simultaneously allowing him the freedom to operate as he wished in the majority

of school-related areas.

Perceptions of organizational constraint were fairly congruent across the teacher-leaders

and principals within the Wilma and Kanter Schools. Kanter School's principal and teacher-

leader tended to report similar perceptions of organizational constraint, or the lack of it. Both

individuals' perceptions of subdistrict relations were also in agreement. Wilma School's

principal and teacher-leader also tended to report similar perceptions of organizational constraint,

though the teacher-leader made no specific references to constraints rooted in the subdistrict.

Autonomy from perceived organizational constraint appears to be an essential part of

principal success. However, that autonomy is gained in different ways. Human agency appears

to be a significant factor in how principals contend with perceived organizational constraint.

Principal Sutton gained autonomy from the positive relationship she shared with her subdistrict,

and subdistrict leader in particular. Principal Zeller's autonomy resulted from a combination of

subdistrict policies and personal strategies which he utilized within his school. Principal

Addison gained autonomy through an assortment of personal strategies which sometimes

involved the "subtle subversion" of district policy.

As a result of their individual perceptions of organizational constraint, these principals attacked school problems and instituted innovative programs and practices in different ways. Common to all, however, was success. All created school environments in which the students were able to achieve at higher levels than most schools operating in similar neighborhoods and serving similar populations of students. This success freed principals from administrative scrutiny, and thus, provided them with the additional autonomy to continue to improve their schools.

The findings of this study appear to reconfirm the importance of an effective principal to the success of the school. They also appear to substantiate the significance of organizational autonomy in creating the conditions under which principals can be effective. A substantial degree of autonomy is provided to all school principals in the urban school district which formed the backdrop for this study. District decentralization has placed a greater degree of authority and responsibility in the hands of principals. However, many organizational constraints to principals' autonomy continue to limit the potential achievement of successful principals.

Of significance in the context of these constraints is the importance of the quality of relations between the principal and the subdistrict, the next level of administration external to the school. The quality and character of these relations may shape the behaviors in which successful principals engage in order to gain autonomy and institute innovative practices which effectively address the needs of their schools. This does not imply that ineffective principals exist in the district due to the absence of a sufficient degree of organizational autonomy. Effective principals are talented individuals who seem to find ways to succeed in spite of obstacles to success which might otherwise hinder them.

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Appendix

Principal Profiles

Principal Elisa Sutton of the Kanter School

Principal Elisa Sutton is a Euro-American woman in her mid-40's who has been principal of the Kanter School for the past six years. Prior to this position, Mrs. Sutton taught elementary school in the same urban school district for ten years and served as an assistant principal in two different schools for a total of five years. She is soft spoken and tends to treat staff and students with the same gentle touch. Her pleasant and positive demeanor seem to make her a generally likable person. She is courteous and patient with both parents and students who come in or call to speak with her. Her presence is felt throughout the school manifesting itself as a combination of positive attitudes and high expectations, attributes which appear to have rubbed off on both students and faculty at Kanter. Mrs. Sutton appears to have mastered the necessary dual skills of leadership and management, and as a result, has in large part engineered the improvement and general success which now characterizes the Kanter School.

Principal Stuart Addison of the Wilma School

Stuart Addison is a Euro-American male in his mid-50's who has been Principal at Wilma School for the past 12 years. Prior to this position, he served for six years as the principal of another school in the district. His career spans a total of 32 years in the education profession, as a teacher of various grade levels and in administrative positions both within and outside of the district where he currently serves as principal. He is a relatively serious man who comes across as straightforward and at times, even abrupt. He has full control of his school and self-admittedly runs it with an autocratic style. His staff seems to have mixed feelings about him

personally, but there appears to be little question of his professional competence as an administrator and instructional leader.

Principal Sam Zeller of the Martinez School

Principal Zeller is a Euro-American male in his mid-50's who served as principal of Martinez School for eight years until his recent departure this past summer (1999). He has a total of 28 years of experience in the field of education, working for many years as a teacher and assistant administrator, both within the district examined in this study and in a nearby suburban district.

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