

# How strong principals succeed: improving student achievement in high-poverty urban schools

How strong  
principals  
succeed

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to provide concrete examples of what leadership behaviors and strategies look like in high-poverty urban schools in Chicago that are successful at improving student outcomes. The authors compared the strategies used by principals who were rated by their teachers on annual surveys as being strong instructional leaders but had varying success in improving student outcomes for comparison.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper is part of a larger mixed-methods study exploring the link between leadership and student learning. For the qualitative portion of the study, the authors utilized a contrasting case study design (Merriam, 1998) to distinguish leadership practices in schools with improvements in student achievement from practices in schools with stagnating or declining student achievement. The authors conducted case studies in a total of 12 schools—6 schools with improving student achievement and 6 schools with stagnating or declining student achievement. For brevity, the authors chose 4 schools to highlight in this manuscript that best illustrate the findings found across the full sample of 12 schools. The authors coded each interview using both inductive and deductive coding techniques.

**Findings** – The study findings indicate that there are subtle but important differences between the strategies principals in improving and contrast schools use to lead school improvement efforts. Principals in improving schools were able to create learning environments where staff were open to new ideas and work together towards goals. Principals in improving schools were also more likely to create structures that facilitated organizational learning than principals in contrast schools.

**Originality/value** – This study is unique because the authors provide concrete examples of what principals do in their schools to help create strong learning climates that foster organizational learning and improvement. The authors also identify differences in leader practices and structures in schools that are having a harder time making improvements for comparison. The study findings can be used by principals and other educators to better understand which of their various efforts may result in stronger school cultures conducive to organizational learning as outlined in Louis' and colleagues' work.

**Keywords** Principals, Case studies, Organizational learning, Improvement, Educational administration, Leadership

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Strong school leadership is essential to improving student achievement (Leithwood *et al.*, 2004; Louis *et al.*, 2010a, b; Grissom *et al.*, 2021). While school leaders' influence on student achievement is indirect, it is substantial. The effect of having a strong principal on student achievement is almost as large as the effect of having a strong teacher (Grissom *et al.*, 2021; Leithwood *et al.*, 2004; Louis *et al.*, 2010a, b). School leaders indirectly impact achievement

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through facilitating teachers' efforts to improve instruction (Hallinger and Heck, 1998; Mulford *et al.*, 2008; Supovitz *et al.*, 2010; Louis *et al.*, 2010a, b), by fostering strong, positive school learning climates (Sebastian and Allensworth, 2012; Coelli and Green, 2012; Lee and Louis, 2019), and by sharing leadership with teachers and parents (Louis *et al.*, 2010a, b; Gordon and Louis, 2009; Leithwood and Mascall, 2008). The influence of strong leadership is greater in schools that are in need of most reform (Leithwood *et al.*, 2004). Thus, strong school leadership is especially important for students living in disinvested communities struggling with high rates of poverty (Grissom and Loeb, 2011; Louis *et al.*, 2010a, b).

To help support leaders in thinking about where to focus their efforts, scholars have categorized empirically based leadership behaviors and practices into different domains. For example, Leithwood *et al.* (2004) argued that successful school leaders set directions, develop people, redesign the organization and manage the instructional program. Hitt and Tucker (2016) argued that effective school leaders influence student achievement by: (1) establishing and conveying the vision, (2) facilitating a high-quality learning experience for students, (3) building professional capacity, (4) creating a supportive organization for learning and (5) connecting with external partners. Similarly, in the most recent review of evidence, Grissom *et al.* (2021) identified four domains of principal behaviors linked to higher student outcomes. These include (1) engaging in instructionally focused interactions with teachers, (2) building a productive school climate, (3) facilitating productive collaboration and professional learning communities, and (4) managing personnel and resources strategically.

Decades of research have identified many practices through which leaders influence student achievement, but there are few empirically based examples of what successful school leaders' practice looks like in high-poverty urban schools, which makes it difficult to use the findings of these studies to guide practice in such settings. In spite of decades of research examining the ways in which school leaders influence learning, they are left with a complex picture of their role, a lack of clarity regarding priorities and few examples of what effective school leadership looks like in practice. The purpose of this paper is to provide concrete examples of what leadership behaviors and strategies look like in high-poverty urban schools that are successful at improving student outcomes. Using case studies, we illustrate what leaders are doing in their buildings to support teachers, improve organizational culture and ultimately student learning. While the main research question for the quantitative portion of our larger mixed methods study examined in what ways principals have the greatest impact on student achievement, the focus of this paper is: What does this look like in practice among successful principals in high-poverty urban schools? To help us better understand what it takes for leaders to succeed in high needs urban settings, we draw from Dr. Karen Seashore Louis' and colleagues' organizational learning theories and empirical research to contextualize our findings.

### *Relevant literature*

Schools located in high poverty urban areas that have been successful in improving student achievement all have one thing in common: they have strong school leaders (Borko *et al.*, 2003; Bryk *et al.*, 2010; Chenoweth and Theokas, 2011; Mulford *et al.*, 2008). According to Bryk *et al.*'s (2010) five essential supports framework, which provided the basis for our larger mixed-method study, there are five key elements—or essential supports—that schools need to improve student outcomes, including strong school leadership, professional capacity of the faculty, a student-centered school learning climate, parent and community ties, and instructional guidance. Bryk *et al.* (2010) argued that leadership is “the driver for change” and that school improvement is highly unlikely without a strong principal to build and maintain the other essentials of the school organization. In their longitudinal study of elementary schools in Chicago, Bryk *et al.* (2010) found schools strong in leadership were typically four to five times more likely to demonstrate substantial improvement in student math and reading gains on standardized tests over a period of six years than schools weak in leadership.

They were also more likely to show improvements in attendance. Furthermore, leadership is strongly predictive of improvements over time in parent involvement, professional community and teacher work orientation. Subsequent studies of high schools in Chicago elicited similar results. For example, [Sebastian and Allensworth \(2012\)](#) found that high schools with stronger leaders have better school climate and teacher professional development, which are associated with better instruction and learning.

While not exclusively focused on high-poverty urban schools, [Louis \*et al.\* \(2010a, b\)](#) found similar results to [Bryk \*et al.\*](#)—schools with strong student achievement had collective and shared leadership structures. In other words, principals in these schools harnessed the influence of multiple people to help make strategic decisions aimed at improving the teaching and learning environment. When leadership is shared, it promotes stronger working relationships, higher levels of trust and a more supportive environment for improving instruction ([Louis and Murphy, 2017, 2018](#); [Louis, 2006](#); [Louis \*et al.\*, 1996, 2010a, b](#); [Wahlstrom and Louis, 2008](#); [Johnson \*et al.\*, 2014](#); [Kraft \*et al.\*, 2015](#)).

In the quantitative component of our larger mixed methods study, our colleagues explored the mechanisms through which principals drive school improvement, focusing on the five essential supports ([Bryk \*et al.\*, 2010](#)). Consistent with findings by [Louis \*et al.\* \(2010a, b\)](#), they found that principals primarily influence student achievement through the learning climate of the school—by creating an environment where students and teachers feel safe and where there are high academic expectations ([Sebastian \*et al.\*, 2016, 2017](#)). Principals can also influence student achievement indirectly through strong teacher leadership, which then leads to growth in outcomes ([Sebastian \*et al.\*, 2016, 2017](#)). To supplement these findings, in this paper, we uncover and illustrate what that influence looks like in practice in high poverty settings.

### *Conceptual framework*

Undergirding [Bryk \*et al.\*'s \(2010\)](#) five essentials framework, is the idea of organizational learning, which Louis called, “the key to change” (2016, p. 480). Organizational learning “emphasizes the benefits that accrue as a consequence of collective regular processes in which teachers and administrators work together around issues of practice” ([Louis, 2006](#), p. 480). The focus of organizational learning is “on continual improvement rather than “reengineering” or “restructuring” ([Louis, 2006](#), p. 480). Furthermore, organizational learning “requires that knowledge have a shared social construction common to all members of the school organization. . .and comes from many sources” ([Louis, 2006](#), p. 480). Organizational learning has other features that differentiate it from individual learning, including (1) a shared vocabulary and incentives to discuss new knowledge or findings; (2) protected time for small groups to plan; (3) larger faculty meetings devoted to discussing new information and knowledge; and (4) horizontal communication networks ([Louis, 2006](#)). Overall, organizational learning relies on sustained group conversations, grounded in new knowledge and data, to drive collective action toward improvement. A culture of organizational learning is especially important in high-poverty school settings, where greater student needs demand new ideas and innovations ([Louis and Murphy, 2017](#)).

School leaders have a strong impact on organization learning because they can help staff become open to new ideas, and create alignment, cohesiveness and integration among groups so they can learn together ([Louis and Murphy, 2017](#)). Furthermore, organizational learning is nurtured by the social architecture of schools, because strong positive and respectful relationships and trust are keys to continued learning and improvement ([Toole and Louis, 2002](#); [Louis and Murphy, 2017](#)).

### **Methods**

We utilized a contrasting case study design ([Merriam, 1998](#)) to distinguish leadership practices that led to improvement in student outcomes from practices that did not. Each of the

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principals in our study was designated by their teachers as being strong instructional (via an annual survey). However, some of these schools had improving growth on student test scores while others had stagnating or declining test scores. For this study, we sought to distinguish between leadership strategies in these two kinds of settings to uncover the obstacles or nuanced elements that may impede strong instructional leaders from attaining success.

### *Sample*

We selected both elementary and high schools with the strongest instructional leadership scores, based on the predicted 2013 Instructional Leadership measure scores on the *My Voice, My School* (MVMS) survey. The MVMS survey is administered annually to all Chicago Public School (CPS) teachers, and items on the survey examine teachers' perceptions of their administrators' instructional leadership [1]. We then separated the pool of schools with strong instructional leaders into quartiles (elementary) or terciles (high school) based on predicted state test score gains [2] and created two groups:

- (1) "Improving" schools that had high test score gains (top quartile for elementary and top tercile for high school) and
- (2) "Contrast" schools that had low test score gains (bottom quartile for elementary and bottom tercile for high school).

We then chose schools with varying locations across the city and racial/ethnic makeup of the school population. Lastly, we limited our sample to schools that had the same principal for at least two years. Our final sample consisted of six neighborhood elementary and six neighborhood high schools with the characteristics found in [Table 1](#).

To ensure that we selected cases that were considered strong or improving by the district and that schools showed strong performance on multiple metrics (not just on our models of improving test score gains), we cross-checked our top selections with CPS's online school progress reports which contain scores for each school based on the district's *Performance, Remediation and Probation Policy*. For the sample with improving student achievement scores, we selected those that were in "good" or "excellent" standing based on the district's performance policy rating index [3].

For brevity, we selected a total of 4 schools to highlight in this manuscript that we thought best illustrated the findings we found across all 12 cases. While we are only highlighting 4 of the 12 cases, the themes presented in the 4 cases are consistent with the themes that emerged across the full sample of 12 cases. Our 4 cases include 2 elementary schools—1 improving (Ivy) and 1 contrasting (Foxglove), and 2 high schools—1 improving (Oak) and 1 contrasting (Elm).

### *Data*

The data for this study come from structured in-person interviews, which we conducted in the full sample of 12 traditional neighborhood (not charter or magnet) CPS schools during the 2013–14 school year. In 10 schools, we interviewed 10 staff members, including administrators (principal and assistant principal) and teacher leaders. In 2 schools, we interviewed a total of 9 staff members, including the principal and teacher leaders. In total, we conducted 118 interviews across the 12 schools. As mentioned above, because of space constraints, we picked 4 cases to highlight our findings, but in our cross-case analysis and discussion sections, we present the themes and patterns we found across the full sample. We utilize the 4 highlighted schools in these sections to provide examples to illustrate our findings. In the 4 highlighted schools, we interviewed 10 staff members per school.

We designed the administrator and teacher interview instruments to elicit conversation around the major goals of the school, how staff worked together, and the types of structures

	School name <sup>1</sup>	Student achievement <sup>2</sup>	Years principal in school	Student race/Ethnicity 2013 <sup>3</sup>	Free and reduced lunch % 2013	Special education % 2013
Elementary schools	1 [Ivy]	Improving	4–9	Majority Latinx	≥95	10–15
	2	Improving	4–9	Majority Black	≥95	10–15
	3	Improving	≥10	Majority Black	85–89	15–20
	4	Contrast	≥10	Majority Latinx	≥95	10–15
	5	Contrast	4–9	Majority Black	≥95	10–15
	[Foxglove]					
High schools	6	Contrast	4–9	Majority Latinx	85–89	10–15
	7 [Oak]	Improving	4–9	Mixed Latinx and Black	85–89	15–20
	8	Improving	4–9	Majority Latinx	≥95	15–20
	9	Improving	4–9	Majority Black	90–94	15–20
	10 [Elm]	Contrast	<4	Mixed Latinx and Black	≥95	15–20
	11	Contrast	<4	Majority Latinx	90–94	15–20
	12	Contrast	<4	Majority Black	≥95	20–25

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**Note(s):** <sup>1</sup>The names of all schools and staff members in this manuscript are pseudonyms

<sup>2</sup>Improving = continuously strong or improving student achievement; Contrast = continuously weak or declining student achievement

<sup>3</sup>Majority Latinx = ≥80% Latinx students; Majority Black = ≥80% Black students; Mixed = ≥70% Latinx and Black students

**Table 1.**  
Demographic characteristics of all case study schools

and systems in place to help support teacher instructional improvement, student learning and school climate. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 min and were transcribed.

### Analysis

We coded each interview using both indicative and deductive coding techniques (Patton, 2002). Using NVivo software, we began with an inductive approach, using open coding to code a few of the same interview transcripts and subsequently crosschecking with one another to determine inter-coder reliability (Thomas, 2006). Next, we did a second level of deductive coding, using constructs derived from the literature and organizational learning theory. We then looked for emergent themes and patterns both within-case and cross-case.

### Study limitations

Our sampling plan was limited by the short length of tenure of some of the principals in the selected contrasting high schools—three of them (including the principal at Elm HS) were in their third year as principal. Our purpose was to examine what happens in schools with strong and stable leadership. When selecting high schools, however, we found that it was rare to have strong ratings from teachers about leadership, have lower test score gains *and* have stable leadership. Our theory is that CPS is quick to replace high school principals who are unable to improve outcomes over a couple of years. Therefore, our contrast high schools had relatively newer principals who had been in the building for less than four years. Because of this, our multi-year sampling strategy captured aspects of the previous school leader's tenure in these three schools. We did not find the same pattern of principal turnover at the elementary level — all of the principals had been at their schools for four or more years. Due to increased accountability, schools that have not been successful may be more likely to experience changes in leadership and student achievement over time compared to successful

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schools. This complicates the comparison of successful and contrasting schools because it adds an additional element of difference between the two types of schools; however, there may be no way to avoid this complication.

The second limitation of our study is that we only conducted interviews at these schools in one school year (2013–14 school year), but we based our sampling strategy on trends over the three years prior to the data collection year (2011–2013). Because of this, there is a possibility that we collected data during an “off year” or a year when the school may have been experiencing abnormal or unusual circumstances at the time of data collection. Furthermore, school classifications must be based on student performance that has already occurred. Thus, a school on our contrast list may have been, during the time of data collection, starting to make progress in improving test scores and survey measures since the prior school year. It should also be noted that these two limitations are inherent to conducting this type of study. Ideally, when constructing case studies in schools, one would like to select schools that have stable leadership and similar patterns of achievement during the study year(s), compared to prior years used for selection. However, schools are always changing, particularly those that are under pressure to improve quickly.

The third limitation of our study is that the data were collected nearly seven years ago. Much has changed in the district and in these schools since that time. However, we believe the findings of our cases are still valid given they reflect and are aligned with more recent evidence about leadership behaviors that are linked to higher student learning outcomes (i.e. [Grissom et al., 2021](#)).

## Findings

We present each of the four illustrative cases below. Afterward, we summarize our findings across cases and then discuss implications for practice and research.

### *Case 1. Ivy Elementary School – Improving*

Ivy Elementary is a large, neighborhood public K-8 school located on the southwest side of the city [4]. The school-wide vision at Ivy Elementary is that *all* students will achieve at high academic levels. The school is organized around this vision and staff work together to examine student data and come up with strategies to support students to reach their academic goals. Staff meet in grade-level teams at the beginning of the year to set very specific targets for academic attainment and growth. One of the teachers at Ivy, said, “We’re very goal oriented so each grade level team creates our academic goals for the year.” After teachers create these goals, “then the whole school reviews those goals and then we talk about how we’re going to get there.” Thus, teachers not only take the lead in creating their specific grade-level goals, but they also provide feedback on the goal-setting of other teams of teachers. The principal at Ivy said that because he has such a strong staff, he can “empower them to be the ones that set goals.”

The staff also believe in the importance of having students personalize their learning as much as possible. As the principal explains, “If students set personalized learning goals, and we can target instruction with a blend of tech-enabled and small-group direct instruction by teachers, then we think we can have 100% of them reach their goals.” This ensures that every student is aware of and understands their own achievement levels and what they need to work towards to achieve their goals. When students meet their benchmarks, they get recognized by the whole school. The principal sends out weekly memos in which he discusses the progress made toward NWEA growth and attainment goals. The school also has a data wall where they display students’ Rasch UnIT (RIT) scores by student ID, so that students are able to see and keep track of their own progress.

The school staff collectively monitor progress towards goals throughout the year. They regularly meet in grade-level and vertical planning teams to examine data and discuss their

progress. A first-grade teacher explained, “During [the vertical planning meetings], we revisit the goals that we planned from the last visit. . . We talk about how we can implement those school-wide. . . how we can adjust our teaching.” If students are not making progress, teachers discuss what they collectively could do to help them improve. The school has a range of tutoring as well as additional learning opportunities for students who need extra supports, including individualized counseling for students with attendance issues, and extra weekend programs and tutoring sessions to challenge top-level students.

Shared leadership is a key component of how Ivy functions and staff members play a large role in influencing school-level decisions. As the principal explained, “whenever there are decisions to be made about the school improvement plan, or about adopting instructional materials, I make sure that teachers are involved and included in that, and I’m not making decisions in secret.” One of the teachers said of the principal, “He’s one of those principals that trusts you. He values us as professionals, and I feel that he lets us make those decisions. . . I think that’s extremely important and makes us feel empowered.”

One of the principal’s main leadership responsibilities, he said, is to establish and maintain a strong school culture. He explained:

It’s like each year that I’m a principal, I realize that more and more, that the culture of the place, the interactions between adults, interactions between students and adults, the way kids see themselves, and the way they see their school, it’s kind of an invisible thing to influence. And I think it’s hard to directly know how to do it, but your signs, your displays, the way you interact with people, all of that, it has a really big impact.

When asked what he would tell a new principal about what it takes to help students learn and succeed academically, the principal said that relationships are key:

The principal job is relationships. There’s so much involved with relationships. You can be really smart; you can be able to analyze things really well, but it’s a people job. You’re constantly involved with building relationships with kids, with teachers, with the community, with everybody. And so, having those relationship skills and being able to know how to get along with a wide array of constituents and working with them productively to get them onboard with your vision is – that’s number one.

### *Case 2. Foxglove Elementary – Contrast*

Foxglove Elementary is a medium-sized neighborhood public K-8 school located on the southwest side of the city. When asked about the school vision, the principal at Foxglove explained that her number one goal was to better understand grading practices and how teachers are or are not aligned when it comes to grading. While one teacher we interviewed said that aligning grading practices was a top priority, most teachers mentioned different primary goals for the school, such as improving test scores, meeting growth targets, looking at data to improve instruction, increasing student responsibility for their own learning and increasing parent involvement.

At Foxglove, the principal believes in distributed leadership and described her leadership philosophy as “putting the right people in the right place.” Because of this, she delegates almost all leadership tasks. For example, she put the assistant principal in charge of discipline, improving the culture and climate of the school, financial and budgetary decisions, as well as operations tasks. She put two instructional coaches in charge of overseeing teacher lesson plans, conducting classroom visits, facilitating teacher meetings, supporting data analysis and helping to improve the academic program. A child–family advocate and school counselor oversee attendance and social-emotional programs, and a group of teachers at the school do all of the staff hiring. In deciding to delegate hiring to teachers, the principal explained, “The teachers hire their own peers and they get to set up their own little

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department.” While leadership at Foxglove is distributed and staff members have ownership over various pieces of the work, it is entirely decentralized and therefore there are few mechanisms in place to coordinate this work within and across groups and individuals.

The principal sees her role as high level monitoring—examining student progress and providing feedback to teachers on what they are doing in their classroom. She said she looks at student data every five weeks, reviewing student progress reports and report cards to look for trends. In addition, in grade-level meetings, she asks teachers to pull up their assignments so she can understand what they did in class and asks them why they did it that way. Coaches also look at teacher assignments, and teachers are given feedback on every assignment they hand in to the principal and coaches. Some of the teachers said that the assignment review felt more like compliance rather than a way to help them improve their practice.

Teachers at Foxglove work together in grade-level and subject matter teams, which meet every 2–4 weeks, but most teachers said that they do not have a lot of time to collaborate. As one teacher explained, “The way the schedule is set up now, does not leave a lot of time for us to meet during the day so teachers are meeting with administration and with each other before school, after school, so forth.” However, when teachers see a student struggling, they do work together with coaches to identify which students need extra support and then some take turns offering tutoring. Because tutoring is voluntary, it is up to the students to take advantage of the opportunities.

### *Case 3. Oak High School – Improving*

Oak High is a medium-sized neighborhood public high school located on the northwest site of the city. While Oak High School is not a formal college prep high school, the entire staff is organized around the vision of college enrollment and persistence. This vision is articulated in a consistent manner by administrators and staff across the school. When asked about the school’s goals, the principal said, “We always emphasize college enrollment, because we are a school that’s all about getting kids into college and getting kids to persist in college. . . We talk about college all the time. . . everything else trickles from that.”

The staff recognize that the school’s vision is extremely ambitious and not easy to achieve. To help streamline their efforts, all of Oak High School’s goals align with their vision. As the assistant principal explained, the college-going culture is “what we live. Everything we do is geared towards making sure students are prepared to have some post-secondary education.” To do this, administrators talked about producing a culture of learning. Students participate in college-focused seminars every year, with each grade-level learning about different aspect of the college-going process. The teachers align all the coursework and assignments to college readiness standards. The school also provides college-going support to students through a full-time college counselor who works with current students and recent graduates who are in their first year of college. In addition, parents and students are given college-going information tailored to the students’ grade point averages and ACT scores to help them find a good match based on the selectivity of colleges.

One challenge the school faces is that not all students buy-into the notion that college is the right path for them, especially if they are struggling academically. To support these students, the school implemented two different school-wide programs. First, all students who are in ninth or tenth grade and have a D or F and/or are missing assignments are required to attend mandatory tutoring sessions during their lunch hour. Second, the school has a daily, school-wide study hall period during which pairs of teachers switch off supervising study hall and working with individual students who need attention. Each teacher has the opportunity to meet with and provide support for struggling students at least two times a week.

Teachers meet in department teams weekly to collaborate, look at data to monitor how their students are doing, and talk about how to help students meet their goals. One teacher at Oak said

that the principal's focus on monitoring data pushes the teachers to have conversations that they may not have had without the system in place. He stated that the principal is very "*results-oriented*." One Oak teacher described departmental team collaboration this way, "At the end of the day, we have focus, we have goals, but we individually sort of drive them and collaborate together, and we share a lot." Teachers are given guidelines during these collaborative meetings but are also given considerable autonomy in determining how to move their work forward. According to the assistant principal, "The teachers are really stepping up this year in regard to collaboration with one another . . . video-taping each other, observing each other in the classroom. This is the first time for us . . . where multiple departments are engaging in that type of collaboration and discussion." Thus, teachers are given both freedom and a structure to collaboratively drive the work forward.

#### *Case 4. Elm High School – Contrast*

Elm High is a small neighborhood school located on the southwest side of the city. The Elm principal has several school-wide goals, including (1) creating a college going culture, (2) helping students manage internal social-emotional issues and (3) celebrating successes. The principal said that creating a college-going culture is one of her top priorities but is a newer focus for the staff. This vision, she explained, stems from a long history of low expectations at the school and her efforts to shift that culture. She now believes all staff share, "the same drive toward wanting to see kids do better."

While many of the teachers agreed with the principal's vision, a few questioned the exclusive focus on college entrance and persistence. One teacher said, "Sometimes I feel like [the principal's] goals are unrealistic because it's really hard to say that we're going to get every single student into college when we have kids who really cannot read." Another Elm teacher said he believes there should be more of a focus on valuing and providing students with training for alternative postsecondary pathways, saying, "We do not provide adequate education for the kids who [make] other choices." Some teachers felt that it will take time for all staff to raise their expectations to meet the principal's vision.

Even though not all teachers buy into college readiness for all, Elm has different initiatives in place to help students to become college ready, including teacher- and school-led service-learning projects. In addition, the school has various external organizations implementing college-focused initiatives, including peer mentoring for ninth graders, support to help teachers integrate technology into their teaching, and student support to encourage college and career readiness. However, some of the teachers said it was difficult because these outside organizations introduced too many ideas and were not coordinated. One said, "when there are [organizations] coming in a lot of different directions, teachers are not used to all these new organizations, new strategies, new ideas. I think it gets frustrating with some of the teachers, and they begin to . . . tune out some of the voices."

One challenge is that the faculty are all relatively young, so administrators spend a lot of time working on building staff capacity. They do this by "checking adult work" and providing feedback. For example, the principal often asks to see teachers' lesson plans or examples of student work, to help them "work more intentionally" and "take more ownership when students do not do well." Administrators said this was a challenge because it meant making "philosophical shifts" for many staff. The principal and assistant principal described their duties as shared, but because the staff is so young, administrators were less inclined to shared leadership responsibilities with teachers or involve them in decision-making.

The school schedule makes it difficult for staff to collaborate across departments, but some teachers meet in grade-level teams. However, collaboration within departments is not consistent and that upsets some teachers. For some teachers that do meet regularly, they said they monitor student data and identify students in need of extra support. However, not all

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teachers believe in the usefulness of chasing down students who are repeatedly absent from class. One teacher said, “there’s been some pushback with teachers, too, because. . . if a student does not show up for two weeks and then is just given a packet to do the work, and then their grade [improves]. . . is that really benefiting the students?” Furthermore, most teachers only provide this kind of extra support to students at the end of a grading period.

### *Cross-case analysis*

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The four cases highlighted above are good examples of the kinds of leadership practices and behaviors found across our larger sample of 12 schools. In this section, we analyze the findings and themes we found across all of our case study schools. However, we use examples from the four cases we highlight in this paper to help illustrate these larger themes. Our findings show there are subtle but important differences between the strategies and approaches that leaders use in improving schools and those in contrast schools. Leaders in improving schools (1) establish an ambitious school vision with corresponding goals that are operationalized through collective effort; (2) share leadership and empower teachers to create supports and structures to meet goals, (3) continually monitor student progress and provide supports that are opt-out rather than opt-in, and (4) foster strong relationships focused on trust. Overall, we found leaders in improving schools fostered many facets of organizational learning via the above mechanisms, including reviewing information and data in small groups and with the full staff, and providing protective time for staff to communicate and collectively plan, and focusing on relationship and trust building. In our contrast schools, while some of the leaders were beginning to build the foundations for organizational learning, they struggled in a number of areas.

Principals in improving schools communicated a clear and ambitious vision for their staff and utilized the vision as an organizing principle from which all the work in the school flowed. The work was results-oriented and coordinated within and across teams; helping to sustain organizational learning via networks of staff. For example, at Oak the vision that all students would enroll and persist in college was clear and ambitious, and school goals and student support structures branched from the vision. While Elm had a similar focus on college readiness, the principal had a hard time getting staff to buy into the vision due to a long history of low expectations. Because many Elm students had significant learning needs, the newer principal had a hard time convincing staff that all students could achieve some type of postsecondary education. The Oak principal, on the other hand, had been in the building longer and so had more time to establish that vision and organize the learning climate to align with the vision. The Elm principal, however, had not yet set up clear goals, a road map or structures that would help teachers visualize and plan for supporting students, especially those they deemed off track. We acknowledge that it takes time to increase staff expectations and change the culture of school. It is even harder during the first few years of a principalship, as was the case with the Elm principal.

In improving schools, principals empowered teachers so that they collectively took ownership for improvement. In other words, they created a learning-focused culture. For example, all teachers at Ivy met regularly to look at data—both in small groups and across the whole school—and then brainstormed ideas to help students meet goals. At Oak, teachers also met regularly to look at data to identify where extra student supports were needed. They also observed each other’s classrooms and supported one another in improving instruction. These kinds of peer sharing and professional learning community (PLC) structures helped create a shared learning space where teachers could be creative and strategize. In our contrast schools, principals often did not provide protected time and space for teachers to meet to talk about data and learn. When teachers did have common planning times, leaders did not provide directions for teachers to effectively utilize that time to learn and plan. It is difficult, if not impossible, to create a learning-focused school culture without providing space and time for staff to meet regularly to look at data and talk about how students are doing. Having those

sustained conversations may have helped staff surface their concerns in a more supportive environment so that they could work together to create solutions.

In improving schools, principals shared leadership. For example, at Ivy, the principal involved teachers in all decisions and teachers said they felt valued as professionals. In the contrast schools, while principals distributed or delegated some leadership responsibilities to teachers, they did not share leadership with them. At Foxglove, for example, the task of finding solutions and supports rested with the principal and then she delegated tasks to different staff members without coordination. Teachers did not know what their colleagues were working on or which staff members oversaw different tasks. Similarly at Elm, the principal was hesitant to have teachers take on leadership roles because there were more inexperienced staff.

Principals in improving schools implemented school-wide student monitoring and accountability systems that were not punitive. Staff used data to identify struggling students and to create school-wide systems to address the needs of struggling students. For example, at Ivy, the staff mandated extra supports, making students opt-out rather than opt-in. In contrast schools, we did not find a consistent structure for diagnosing student need or for treatment. At both Foxglove and Elm, student support was dependent on teacher discretion and capacity.

Lastly, principals in improving schools prioritized relationships and attended to the social architecture necessary to develop trusting and collaborative networks of colleagues. For example, at Ivy, the principal said that the role of the leader *is* relationships and relationship building. Leaders in improving schools created PLCs and provided supportive structures conducive to collaboration and trust building such as peer sharing and learning. These leaders also gave teachers ownership over their collective learning process. At Oak, for example, teachers trusted one another enough to regularly observe one other's' classrooms and provide peer feedback. In contrast schools, protecting time for staff to work together, which would help build relationships and a more cohesive school culture, was not a priority. Both contrast principals spent much of their time individually checking teachers' work and providing feedback rather than creating collaborative learning spaces where teachers and administrators could together build trust and drive improvements.

## Summary and discussion

In what ways do principals have the greatest impact on student achievement and what does it look like in practice in high poverty urban schools? While the quantitative portion of our larger mixed methods study answered the first question—primarily through influencing the learning climate—in this paper, we illustrate what this looks like in practice among successful principals in high-poverty urban schools. We identify several ways that principals influenced their learning climates by creating a culture of shared organizational learning and by prioritizing relationships. Each of these findings has implications for practice. First, our analysis suggests it is important for principals to identify a compelling vision and use that vision to organize all the work happening in the school. This helps to create a shared vocabulary and focus for staff. Our findings mirror previous studies showing that principals in improving schools organize around an ambitious and focused vision (Louis *et al.*, 2010a, b; Leithwood *et al.*, 2004; Hallinger and Heck, 1998; Supovitz *et al.*, 2010; Hitt and Tucker, 2016). However, having a strong vision did not distinguish our improving and contrast schools. To apply a metaphor to our cases, our improving school's vision mirrored a tree with the goals branching from the trunk. In our contrast schools, the vision resembled less a tree and more a field of many flowers—where goals were scattered without anything tying them together. The “tree” or “through line” helps staff understand how their individual and collective efforts ultimately contribute to the larger purpose. It also serves as an organizing principle for structuring the school schedule and for weeding out competing tasks that may not align with the larger vision. In high poverty schools with varied competing needs or “fields of flowers”,

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it can be extremely difficult to focus efforts when staff feel like they are constantly putting out fires and attending to crises.

Second, our findings show that it is important for leaders to set aside protected time for staff to work together regularly and with a clear purpose. As Louis and colleagues pointed out, simply providing the time for meeting is insufficient (Louis *et al.*, 1999). Improvement conversations need to be grounded in data, fueled by new knowledge and information, and sustained over time. It is also important for leaders to hold staff accountable for using that time productively, while also providing support and resources. The emphasis on collective sense-making is what helps propel improvements. Without providing secured time for staff to meet regularly or clear directions for how staff should use that time, the work ends up fragmented and disjointed. It is difficult to achieve ambitious goals without a collective effort or protected time for innovation and planning.

Third, our analysis reveals the importance of leaders attending to the social architecture of their schools. This is consistent with a long line of research showing how critical school leaders are in fostering trust and relationships in schools (Louis, 2006; Tschannen-Moran and Hoy, 2000). It is also consistent with empirical studies showing that relationships between principals and teachers are more predictive of the ability to foster a culture of learning and improvement than the characteristics of the school or of the student body (Louis and Murphy, 2017).

Lastly, our findings suggest that principals should be sharing leadership and empowering teachers to drive improvements. Our findings suggest that to share leadership successfully, administrators need to provide teachers with a balance of autonomy, accountability and support. This is consistent with Marks and Louis's (1999) finding that there is a strong and enduring link between organizational learning and teacher empowerment. Sharing leadership is different than distributing leadership. While distributed leadership has a lot of support in the research literature, it must be coordinated and planned for it to be successful (Leithwood *et al.*, 2008; Anderson *et al.*, 2009). Delegating or distributing responsibilities is not the same as involving staff in critical decision-making or empowering them to collectively build innovative solutions to address student needs.

In addition to the implications for practice above, our study reveals a number of implications for further research. More research is needed to better understand *how* improvements happen over time and what steps leaders need to take to get there. Some of our contrast schools were just beginning to build the foundations for organizational learning, but their ideas were not yet operationalized during our period of data collection. More information is needed about the critical steps, and missteps, that principals encounter while working on improving each of the areas identified in our study. In addition, we need to learn more about what it takes to move a school that is stuck in a cycle of crises into a space that is more conducive to learning and growth.

It is important to note that organizational learning is a process and not an end. All the schools in our study faced challenges and had to work continuously on creating and maintaining an open and nurturing learning environment. Our hope is that the cases we present in this paper provide some clear ideas and examples for school leaders to try out and apply in their own school settings. School leaders may recognize themselves, their school practices, and challenges in both our improving and contrast schools' stories. We hope that by providing these examples, leaders can better identify where they may need to spend more time and what strategies they could try out and use to help support their improvement journeys.

## Notes

1. CPS annually administers the *My Voice, My School survey* to all teachers and all grade levels, which measures the 5Essential supports in schools. To sample, we used a measure of teachers' perceptions of their administrators' instructional leadership (INST): The principal at this school...

Makes clear to the staff his or her expectations for meeting instructional goals  
 Communicates a clear vision for our school  
 Understands how children learn  
 Sets high standards for student learning  
 Presses teachers to implement what they have learned in professional development  
 Carefully tracks student academic progress  
 Knows what's going on in my classroom  
 Participates in instructional planning with teams of teachers  
 We calculated teacher's individual scores on INST using Rasch analysis.

2. We used standardized test scores from 2011–2013, using the Illinois Standards Assessment Test (ISAT) for elementary schools and the Educational Planning and Assessment System scores (EPAS) for high schools.
3. CPS's *Performance, Remediation and Probation Policy* measures yearly school performance, based on students' performance trends and growth on standardized tests and student attendance. Schools earn points for each metric and the district assigns them one of three ratings: "Excellent" or Level 1, "good" or Level 2, and "probation" or Level 3. The district changed the accountability policy in 2014–15, the year after we collected our data, to include more metrics in the overall performance rating and is now called the *School Quality Rating Policy* (SQRP).
4. Small = <400 students; Medium = 400 to 600 students; Large = >600 to ≤1,000 students; Extra Large = >1,000 students.

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