

Principal Leadership in “Beating the Odds” Schools... Advocates for Social Justice and Equity

Liderazgo de los Directores en Escuelas “Contra todo Pronóstico”... Defensores de la Justicia Social y la Equidad

Liderança de Directores nas Escolas "Contra todos os Prognósticos"... os Defensores para Justiça Social e Equidade

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To explore the role that principal leadership plays in shaping school performance, this article draws on data from eight high schools that are “beating the odds” (i.e., they are outperforming expectations and have done so consistently for five or more years). Beating the Odds (BTO) schools were chosen strategically for their ability to produce high rates of learning with challenging student populations. By cultivating the elements of will and capacity, the principals in these BTO schools worked actively to promote organizational commitment and to hold both individual teachers and groups of teachers responsible for learning outcomes. BTO principals effectively recruited, retained, and strengthened their faculties through supervision, professional development, and professional learning communities. Driven by a common commitment to the organization and its goals, and by administrative and professional accountability, teachers and principals created a disciplined environment for learning and implemented a distinctive set of curricular, instructional, and assessment practices.

Keywords: Leadership for social justice, Equity for all, Beating the odds schools, Principal leadership.

Este artículo se basa en datos de ocho escuelas secundarias “contra todo pronóstico” (BTO, según sus siglas en inglés), es decir, escuelas que superan sus expectativas y lo han hecho constantemente durante cinco o más años para explorar el papel que juega el liderazgo del director sobre el rendimiento escolar. Las escuelas fueron elegidas estratégicamente por su capacidad para producir altas tasas de aprendizaje con poblaciones desafiantes. Gracias a la voluntad y a su capacidad, los directores de las escuelas BTO trabajaron activamente para promover el compromiso organizacional y para que los profesores se sintieran responsables de los resultados de aprendizaje. Directores BTO seleccionados fortalecieron sus facultades a través de la supervisión, el desarrollo profesional, y las comunidades profesionales de aprendizaje. El compromiso común con la organización y sus objetivos, y la responsabilidad administrativa y profesional impulsó a los maestros y directores a crear un ambiente disciplinado para el aprendizaje donde implementar un conjunto distintivo de prácticas curriculares, de enseñanza y evaluación.

Descriptor: Liderazgo para la justicia social, Equidad para todos, Escuelas contra todo pronóstico, Liderazgo del director.

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Este artigo é baseado em dados de oito escolas secundárias "Contra todos os Prognósticos" (BTO, de acordo com sua sigla em Inglês), ou seja, escolas que excedam suas expectativas e têm feito de forma consistente durante cinco ou mais anos para explorar o papel da principais lideranças sobre o desempenho escolar. As escolas foram estrategicamente escolhidos pela sua capacidade de produzir altas taxas de aprender com as populações difíceis. Graças à vontade e capacidade, os diretores das escolas BTO trabalhou ativamente para promover o comprometimento com a organização e para os professores responsáveis pelos resultados da aprendizagem sentir. Diretores selecionados BTO reforçaram as suas facultades, através de supervisão, desenvolvimento profissional, e comunidades de aprendizagem profissional. O compromisso comum com a organização e os seus objectivos, a responsabilidade administrativa e profissional exortou os professores e diretores para criar um ambiente de aprendizagem disciplinado, onde a implementação de um conjunto distinto de práticas curriculares, ensino e avaliação.

Palavras-chave: Liderança para a justiça social, Igualdade para todos, Escolas Contra todos os Prognósticos, Liderança de directores.

Introduction

Variations in financial expenditures and teacher quality variables often explain statistically significant and important differences in student achievement (Henry, Fortner, & Thompson, 2010). However, even when such key variables are controlled for, it's the differences in the characteristics of student populations across schools that account for the preponderance of the differences in Performance Composites between schools (Porter, 2014). And yet, there are some that are "beating the odds." These schools are producing high rates of learning with challenging student populations — high percentages of students with low entering reading and math skills, high percentages of students from low-income families, and high percentages of students from traditionally disadvantaged racial/ethnic groups. What explains the exceptions?

Research indicates that school leadership is second only to teacher quality as an "educational asset" in assuring all students an equal opportunity to get a sound basic education (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2005). Principals can make significant contributions to student learning outcomes and are crucial to turning around low performing schools (Brown, 2014). Thus, because of its currency in policy discussions, judicial findings, and research, the extent to which principals' leadership and associated organizational characteristics help explain good but unanticipated learning outcomes produced in some "beating the odds" schools was examined. To structure the investigation, a set of eight high schools which produced higher levels of student performance than would be expected in light of the challenges their students posed were identified. These schools are called "Beating the Odds" (BTO) because they "beat the odds" against low performance. By interviewing the principals and teachers in these schools, the purpose of this study was to identify what the principals were doing differently, with what impact on the schools as organizations, and with what resulting impact on student learning outcomes.

1. Literature review

Despite conflicting views of social justice, of the sources of injustice in schools and society, and of educators' obligations to committed action, the evidence is clear and

alarming that various segments of our public school population continue to experience negative and inequitable treatment on a daily basis (Porter, 2014). When compared to their white and Asian middle-class counterparts, students of color, students of low socio-economic status, students who speak languages other than English, and students with disabilities consistently experience significantly lower achievement test scores, teacher expectations, and allocation of resources (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olsen, 2001). Haycock (2001) maintained that these gaps exist because “we take the students who have less to begin with and then systematically give them less in schools” (p.8). The differences show up in the curriculum taught, the resources spent, how teachers are assigned, and achievement expected.

Freire (1990) proposed that the purpose of our educational system is to make bold possibilities happen—as such, that it is the work, in fact the duty of public education to end the oppression of these students. Many agree, suggesting that educators today are actually the frontline civil rights workers in a long-term struggle to increase equity. And, although many schools are failing to fulfill this duty, others are meeting the challenge of serving each and every student really well —students from varied racial, socio-economic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Riester, Pursch, & Skrla, 2002). In striving for equity and excellence, virtually all students in these schools are learning at high academic levels. There are “no persistent patterns of differences in academic success or treatment among students grouped by race, ethnicity, culture, neighborhood, income of parents, or home language” (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003:2). The following literature review highlights the empirical research directly correlating principal leadership to student achievement, to social justice, and to issues of equity.

1.1. Principal leadership and student achievement

Although current school reform efforts use different approaches to improve teaching and learning, all depend for their success on the motivation and capacities of local leadership. According to Fullan (2005),

Leadership is to the current decade what standards were to the 1990s for those interested in large scale reform. Standards, even when well implemented, can take us only part way to successful large-scale reform. It is only leadership that can take us all the way. (p.32).

A review of the literature on school reform and restructuring confirms there are no documented instances of a school improving its student achievement record in the absence of talented leadership (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010).

For the past forty years, effective schools research has consistently identified strong instructional leadership as instrumental in creating a positive school climate and as a correlate of high-achieving schools (Edmonds, 1979). In schools where students performed better than expected based on poverty and other demographic characteristics, a “dynamic” principal was at the helm. Even though these studies suggested that specific actions by principals could directly influence student achievement, there was little evidence to support this idea. Current theory and research evidence instead points more toward principals affecting student achievement indirectly, through teachers and staff members. As with any manager or leader, principals influence performance through others, and the influence includes a broad spectrum of behaviors.

Given that the job of a school leader is multidimensional, many have identified areas in which school leaders must have skills: instructional leadership; management; communication, collaboration, and community building; and vision development, risk

taking, and change management. For example, in studies that document the importance of strong building leadership (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2005), principals worked to redirect people's time and energy, to develop a collective sense of responsibility for school improvement, to secure resources and training, to provide opportunities for collaboration, to create additional time for instruction, and to help the school staff persist in spite of difficulties. While their style and roles may be different, effective leaders create a culture for school improvement. They understand that "although leadership can be a powerful force toward school reform, the notion that an individual can effect change by sheer will and personality is simply not supported by research" (Marzano, 2003:174). As a result, successful principals promote the involvement of teachers and parents in the decision-making process and are not threatened by, but rather welcome, this empowerment.

Research conducted by Fullan (2006) and many others found that high-performing schools that demonstrate better student achievement possess a climate that focuses on student learning. Principals in these schools provide clarity to the school's mission, which influences everyone's expectations, have a vision that they allow staff and parents to shape, hold teachers and themselves to high standards, recognize student achievement, communicate academic achievements to the community, and encourage teachers to take risks in trying new methods and programs. They also found that schools with effective principals exhibit a sense of teamwork and inclusiveness in planning, enabling, and assessing instruction. Principals in these schools involve teachers in instructional decisions, provide opportunities for staff members and parents to assume leadership roles in charting instructional improvement, protect staff members from the community and central office, act as facilitators for the instruction staff, helping staff members succeed, serve as an instructional resource for staff members, create a feeling of trust through cooperative working relationships among the staff in the school. They get things done, provide staff development to support the staff's efforts to improve, are visible in classrooms and grade-level meetings, and facilitate the social support needed by students so that class time is devoted to learning (Brown, 2014).

1.2. Leadership for social justice, equity and excellence

Therefore, leadership not only matters, but according to Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom (2005), leadership's demonstrated impact tends to be considerably greater in schools where the learning needs are most acute. In essence, the greater the challenge, the greater the impact of leaders' actions on learning. Principals advocating for social justice and equity are facing these challenges everyday and despite countervailing pressures, they resist, survive, and transform schools (Causton & Theoharis, 2014; Riester, Pursch, & Skrla, 2002). They enact resistance against the historic marginalization of particular students and resist the pressures pushing schools toward a deceptive caring versus academic culture, or possibly a defeatist apathetic culture. These leaders, according to Rapp (2002), are willing and able to "leave the comforts and confines of professional codes and state mandates for the riskier waters of higher moral callings" (p.233). They understand that leadership depends upon relationships and shared values between leaders and followers. They also understand that not reflecting on, discussing, and/or addressing issues of race, poverty and disability only further perpetuates the safeguarding of power and the status quo (Larson & Murtadha, 2002). In response, researchers strongly advocate for ethical leadership. For example, Foster (2004) specifically called leaders to serve as change agents that

analyze the cultural aspects that have permitted long-standing social inequalities to, not only proliferate but, become institutional ideological belief systems. The question of how to accomplish this remains unanswered.

Given the strong connection between quality principals and high-performing schools, Scheurich and Skrla (2003) claim that “good leadership, the bodies and spirits of our leadership, is crucial to the justice of our cause for equity and excellence in schooling” (p.99). Effective leaders are reflective, proactive and seek the help that is needed. They nurture an instructional program and school culture conducive to learning and professional growth. They model the values and beliefs important to the institution, hire compatible staff, and face conflict rather than avoid it. They make the shift from personal awareness to social action (Freire, 1973), realizing that respect for diversity entails advocacy, solidarity, an awareness of societal structures of oppression, and critical social consciousness. Leaders committed to this agenda decide they can create both equitable and excellent schools and then use their time and energy to figure out how to do so.. In their schools, there is no discernable difference in academic success and treatment among different groups of students. They believe that equity and excellence are the same and, as a result, “beat the odds.”

1.3. Theoretical frame: instructional leadership

Although studies have examined schools that make a difference in the lives of marginalized children (Riester, Pursch, & Skrla, 2002), there is an absence of literature regarding principals as the unit of analysis and the process of actually leading for social justice. Related to this is an absence of documented strategies that principals who are leading for equity and excellence use to advance their work in the face of countervailing pressures of public schools. Most assertions about the centrality of principal leadership are vague about just what principals actually do that affects student learning. Hallinger’s Principal’s Instructional Management Rating Scale (PIMRS) provided much greater specificity. Drawing on much of the best available research regarding principal leadership and student learning outcomes, Hallinger developed and validated the PIMRS in 1982 as the first instrument designed specifically to measure instructional leadership. Thirty years later, the PIMRS has been employed as a research tool in more than 200 empirical studies conducted in 22 different countries (Hallinger, 2011). As the most widely used instrument of choice among scholars studying principal leadership, the PIMRS has proven highly valid and reliable and is cited by leading experts as still the best-grounded instrument for use in the field (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2005)

The PIMRS instrument assesses three dimensions of the instructional leadership construct: Defining the School’s Mission, Managing the Instructional Program, and Promoting a Positive School Learning Climate (Hallinger & Murphy, 1985). These dimensions are further delineated into 10 specific instructional leadership functions. Two functions, Framing the School’s Goals and Communicating the School’s Goals, comprise the dimension, Defining the School’s Mission. Managing the Instructional Program incorporates three leadership functions: Supervising and Evaluating Instruction, Coordinating the Curriculum, Monitoring Student Progress. The third dimension, Promoting a Positive School Learning Climate includes several functions: Protecting Instructional Time, Promoting Professional Development, Maintaining High Visibility, Providing Incentives for Teachers, Providing Incentives for Learning. The following Methods section describes how the dimensions and functions of the

PIMRS (not the actual instrument) were used in development of the data collection protocols for this study.

2. Methodology

2.1. Study design

This study was designed to answer the following research question: What are principals in Beating the Odds (BTO) schools actually doing to produce high rates of learning with challenging student populations? In Phase One of the study, quantitative data were collected regarding student background characteristics, teacher quality variables, resource allocations, and student achievement indicators used to identify and distinguish schools as “beating the odds” versus “low performing.” In Phase Two of the study, qualitative data were gathered to provide insight into the leadership practices and subsequent organizational procedures in the “beating the odds” schools.

Through purposeful sampling, eight “beating the odds” high schools were selected from a list of 345 traditional 9-12 high schools in one southeastern state using the following criteria: (a) the school had a performance composite greater than 70% and close to the state average; (b) incoming students’ mean 8th grade reading and mathematics exam scores were well below the state average; (c) the school demonstrated consistent high growth for more than five years; (d) the principal had been in place for at least three years; and (e) a critical mass of student diversity existed (at least 66% of the total student population was considered high poverty, high minority). For this study, “minority” was defined as those students who fall under the United States subgroups of African American students, Hispanic American students, Native American students, and multiracial students.

2.1.1. Phase one: quantitative equity audits

In Phase One, through the use of equity audits, quantitative data were collected regarding student demographics, teacher quality variables, programmatic expenditures, and student achievement indicators. Prior research has shown that all of these variables affect students’ achievement scores, and, as a leadership tool, equity auditing is a proven concept with a respected history in civil rights activism (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003). Using ranked standardized residuals from a multiple regression procedure; several schools with high proportions of minority and low-income students that performed well above the expected level were identified. Data on these schools’ mean scores on all state tests for the previous five-year period were then assembled. Eliminated from the list were any schools whose performance proved to be an anomaly, including those whose performance had dropped significantly at any point during the five-year time frame. Schools that showed steadily higher than expected performance and whose performance had risen over the five years were preferred. This procedure yielded a set of eight schools in one southeastern state with challenging populations that were “beating the odds” on a regular basis.

2.1.2. Phase two: qualitative interviews and site visits

Through random sampling, semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 90 minutes each were conducted at the eight BTO high schools: with each school’s principal, an assistant principal, and then seven to ten teachers (n=82). The principal was selected as a participant because he or she served as the unit of analysis, while the

other members of the school community offered valuable information regarding the impact of the principal's leadership on excellence and equity in the school. As a retrospective study interested in knowing what accounted for the better than expected performance in the BTO high schools over a five year period of time, data on the instructional management behavior of these schools' principals during those years was not collected. As such, asking the principals and teachers of the selected schools to complete Hallinger's (1985) PIMRS questionnaire would be asking for a false precision. However, the PIMRS did provide a reasonable guide for what might be asked and interviewing them about current and former leadership practices seemed more appropriate to a retrospective inquiry. Interviews offered more opportunities to follow up on responses with probing questions, to look people in the eye, to get a sense of what people seemed relatively sure about and what seemed shaky and also to pose open-ended questions designed to uncover aspects of the principal's leadership or other aspects of the school's functioning that might help explain the differences in student performance across schools. Thus the PIMRS categories of questions were adopted but grouped and modified to create protocols for interviews of both principals and teachers (see Appendix A for template of high school summary tables, including categories).

Interview write-ups were composed using a template constructed from the protocol and summarized in a bulleted table for each school. The individual school summary tables then became the basis for summary tables distilling the findings for each set of schools, and a further round of debriefings resulted in a single comparative table, which formed the primary basis for article writing. A final step in the analysis involved returning to the interview write-ups to select quotations and examples to illustrate and help elaborate each of the main points in the tables. This step also served to assure that adequate interview evidence existed to support each point made in the Findings section below.

3. Findings

3.1. Results from phase one: equity audits

Demographically speaking, the eight BTO schools served approximately the same percentages of minority students (73%), economically disadvantaged students (64.2% eligible for free or reduced lunch), students with limited English proficiency (7%), and students with disabilities (12.5%) as the low-performing schools (see Table 1). The striking similarity of the schools (even class size of 21) countered one hypothesis that the BTO schools would differ from the low-performing schools with regard to student demographics. Similarly, total per pupil expenditures in the low-performing schools averaged about \$8,275, some \$450 per pupil higher than in the BTO schools. So the performance advantage in the BTO schools did not result from higher levels of expenditures (see table 1). It is worth commenting that the higher average level of total per pupil expenditure in both the BTO and low-performing schools probably stemmed from the demographic differences noted above. Higher percentages of free and reduced price lunch students carry with them additional categorical funding for compensatory educational purposes.

Turning now to teacher quality (another possible hypothesis for the differences in achievement) the BTO schools had similar numbers on five indicators related to teacher quality (Average Mean Praxis Scores expressed in standard deviations above or below

the state mean, the percentage of National Board Certified Teachers, the percentage of teachers in their first year of teaching, the percentage of teachers with more than three years of experience, and class size, which is actually an indicator of the conditions under which teachers teach but may also affect the demand for teachers).

Table 1. Demographic composition of state high school student state testing population

	All State High Schools (n=345)	Low Performing High Schools (n=42)	Beating the Odds High Schools (n=8)
Poverty % free and reduced lunch	37.2	64.4	64.2
Race/ Ethnicity % Minority	33.9	76.1	72.8
Prior achievement average Grade 8 Math score	273.6	265.3	267.2
Prior achievement average Grade 8 Reading score	220.3	215.6	215.3
Expenditures average total per pupil spending	\$7,066.90	\$8,274.76	\$7,827.44
Average class size	22	21	21
Performance Composite	75.1	51.2	72.8

Note: Prepared by the author.

The BTO schools enjoyed a small to modest advantage over the low-performing schools with respect to five indicators (the percentage with at least a master's degree, the percentage with a continuing license, the percentage with Provisional, Emergency, or Temporary licenses, the percentage entering via Lateral Entry routes, and turnover), but came out slightly worse in one (the percentage with bachelors' degrees from the nation's most competitive or highly competitive undergraduate institutions, an indirect indicators of general academic ability). So teacher quality variables may have accounted for some of the outcome differences between the BTO and low-performing schools. As indicated below, both principals and teachers in BTO schools attributed their performance in part to high quality teachers and reported little difficulty in either recruiting or retaining good teachers. In contrast, principals and teachers in low-performing schools often report persistent problems in finding high quality teachers to fill vacancies and in keeping them from year to year (CITE). Thus, findings from the qualitative study help to illuminate how BTO schools get and keep high quality teachers.

Although demographic, teacher quality, and expenditure analyses all indicated a fair amount of equity between the BTO high schools and the low performing high schools studied, a more in-depth audit of achievement between both types of schools indicated great disparities when academic data were disaggregated and analyzed. Even though there were similarities in the blow average mean Reading and math scores for their incoming students, across the board, at-risk students in the BTO schools outperformed their low-performing school counterparts. By controlling for and/or eliminating some of the external reasons (e.g., demographics) and internal factors (e.g., teacher quality and expenditures) often cited for the achievement gaps between White/Asian, middle-class children and children of color or children from low-income families, the findings from Phase One of this study raised some interesting issues. The better than anticipated results in the BTO schools warrant a deeper examination inside for more subtle causes (e.g., principal leadership).

3.2. Results from phase two: advocates for social justice and equity

The Beating the Odds (BTO) high schools shared a distinctive common profile that combined well-defined elements of both the will and the capacity to succeed with

challenging student populations. In all of the BTO schools, it was the principal who seemed to drive this development. The will-related elements included organizational commitment, authoritative accountability leading to internalize and collective responsibility, and resilience. Capacity entailed provision of adequate opportunities and incentives for all students to learn, assured by high quality teachers using certain curricular, instructional, and assessment practices within an orderly and disciplined environment. In the sections that follow, these elements are explained and illustrated with examples and quotations from the interviewees.

Before proceeding, however, it is crucial to emphasize that the profile of BTO schools and leaders does not constitute a checklist of independent items, but an integrated whole with dynamic relationships among the elements. For example, the bonds of trust and attachment that link teachers with principals in BTO schools make it possible for principals to assert strong accountability pressures on teachers both individually and collectively without alienating them, depressing morale, or increasing undesirable turnover. In turn, the combination of organizational commitment and internalized responsibility seems to make for resilience in the face of adversity. Further, the resulting will to produce high student outcomes drives the implementation of key curricular, instructional, and assessment practices. Because incentives are focused primarily on student learning outcomes, curricular, instructional, and assessment practices are carried out not in a pro forma, compliance-oriented manner, but are employed mindfully and deliberately as tools in order to get results. The spirit is not, “Well I guess we gotta do these things because the state department or the principal said so,” but “We do these things because we are determined that these kids will learn, and doing these things in this way will produce better outcomes.” Just as the elements of will drive the way elements of capacity are built and employed, elements of capacity also strengthen the will to excel. For example, the professional learning communities that improve teacher quality and teaching also strengthen accountability. Teachers hold each other as well as themselves accountable for teaching the standard course of study and producing high outcomes —so “professional accountability” reinforces the administrative accountability asserted by the principal. Table 2 captures the joint action of the BTO schools’ success.

Table 2. How elements of will and capacity shape learning outcomes in BTO schools

ELEMENTS OF WILL	ELEMENTS OF CAPACITY
Organizational Commitment • Persona & Presence • Principal-Teacher Trust & Bonds • Teacher-Teacher Bonds • Positive School Identity	Teacher Quality •Teacher Recruitment •Teacher Retention •Professional Development •Professional Learning Community •Teacher Assignment •Pressure to Improve or Leave
Authoritative Accountability • Setting & Communicating Goals • Monitoring Student Progress • Monitoring & Evaluating Instruction • Providing Incentives for Performance • Internalizing Individual & Collective Responsibility	Curricular, Instructional, & Assessment Practices •Freshman Academies or Other Transition Support •Standard Course of Study, Pacing Guides, & Common Lessons •Rigorous Curriculum Standards with Pressure & Accountability to Learn •Cross-grade Curriculum Articulation •“Stairstep Curricula” and Curricular Re-Sequencing •Smaller Classes for Low-Performing Students •Interim or Benchmark Assessments •Protection of Instructional Time •Tutoring •Inventive Preparation for End of Course Testing
Resilience	Disciplined and Caring Environment for Learning

Note: Prepared by the author.

3.2.1. The elements of will

As noted above, it was the principal's leadership that seemed to account in large measure for the success characteristics of BTO Schools. Of course, teachers brought motivations and strengths of their own to the schools. But it was the especially high levels of organizational commitment, sense of individual and collective responsibility for student learning outcomes, and resilience in the face of setbacks and adversity that distinguished the BTO schools from similar low performing schools. And by teachers' as well as the principals' accounts, BTO school principals deliberately cultivated these qualities through readily described behavior. Thus, in the sub-sections that follow, both what principals were reported to have done as well as the resulting organizational characteristics that teachers and principals highlighted are described.

a) Organizational Commitment

Creating and maintaining the will to succeed with at-risk students in the BTO schools seems to have involved developing bonds of interpersonal as well as professional attachment between the principal and teachers and among the teachers themselves. Nearly all of the principals had established a strong positive persona and pervasive presence in their schools. They were admired and often even well-loved figures in the school. They commanded respect partly by articulating goals and a vision for the school and by maintaining high visibility in and around the school, but even more so by "walking the talk." They were trusted in several senses. Teachers believed them to be motivated by the best interests of students and the school, not their own glory or careers; found them candid and true to their word; and pictured them as competent to deliver on commitments, the exceptions being due to circumstances beyond their control. But teachers' relationships with their principals generally went beyond admiration and trust to include a personal bond. They liked their principals personally, enjoyed working with them, and even in the largest high schools, conveyed a real sense of connection with them. "Organizational attachment" was the characteristic emphasizing that teachers were attached to their principals, each other, and the school as an organization. They were attached not only in the sense that they expressed a devotion to the school as a place to work and a determination to remain there for the foreseeable future, but they were also attached or committed to the mission and goals of the school.

Persona and Presence. Speaking about the principal's persona and presence in their BTO schools, teachers told us, "He's everywhere." Teachers often recounted what organizational researchers call "hero stories" about their principals. They told of their principals' energetic efforts to greet and talk with every staff member at opening picnics, their inspiring and entertaining daily announcements, their frequent "drop-ins" during classes, their avid attendance at athletic, musical, and theater events, their participation in departmental meetings, their early morning arrivals and into-the-night work habits, and their concern for teachers as well as students throughout these ubiquitous appearances. And, teachers often credited the principal for the school's success: "He's taken us from the bottom where we were when he first came here." Or, "After [the principal] arrived, the whole tone just seem to change. Maybe it's the coach in her. She's a natural cheerleader."

Principal-teacher trust and bonds. The BTO school principals seemed to inspire trust in teachers in part by communicating their own trust of teachers: "The teachers think that

I think they are geniuses. I want them to think that I have this unbelievable faith and trust in their ability to get kids to learn. I tell them over and over that they are the best to be found anywhere.” The flip side of this praise and trust, however, is a strong sense that good performance is expected, which carries a certain amount of pressure. One of her lead teachers later said that she is determined “*not* to let [the principal] down.” Another BTO principal recalled how she responded when her English I teachers pronounced the district’s pacing guide was poorly sequenced. She decided to “take a chance and just believe them,” and let them develop their own pacing guide. All year long, students performed badly on the district’s benchmark tests, which were keyed to the district pacing guide, and she had to endure repeated district level meetings where the school’s poor results were highlighted. But she stuck with her teachers’ judgment, and at the end of the year, students did very well on the state assessment. “That really built trust with my English I teachers,” she said. It is worth emphasizing that this principal was also a strong practitioner of data-based accountability, often laying out the assessment results for all teachers in a given team and asking what accounts for the differences in outcomes. Candor also seems to count. Asked if teachers trust the principal, a teacher from another BTO replied, “Highly. She calls a spade a spade. If we are not doing well, she tells us. If she does something wrong, she admits it.” Teachers in several schools likewise pointed to the principal’s open door policy as contributing to the development of this trust.

Teacher-teacher bonds. Teachers in the BTO schools also generally respected, liked, and enjoyed working with most of their peers. We heard virtually nothing about factions, cliques, or divisions within their faculties. They communicated a sense of camaraderie and pleasure in each other’s company as well as collegiality, albeit with some sense of rivalry or competitiveness between individual teachers or among departments. Our interviewer remarked, “Math wants to beat science and vice versa.” As noted, strong expectations for high performance go with the bonds between teachers and principals. A similar sense of obligation seems to go with bonds among teachers. As one teacher at a BTO school put it, “I don’t want to be the short leg on the stool.” In this as in other BTO schools, the principal’s deliberate efforts to build “professional learning communities” had clearly created or enhanced these teacher-teacher bonds. Principals in BTO schools not only arranged departments’ or EOC teacher teams’ schedules to permit common planning periods but also required regular data analysis and problem-solving sessions in which teachers helped each other improve each other’s instruction. The collegial support relationships that developed from these sessions plus the fact that BTO school principals also held departments and teams jointly responsible for student outcomes appeared to foster an all-for-one and one-for-all sense of solidarity among teachers.

Positive school identity. Principals also deliberately cultivated a distinctive, positive identity for their schools in ways that might seem trivial if they were not clearly so important to teachers, students, and the community. The schools’ identity was cultivated and symbolized by celebrating winning sports or other teams, featuring school mascots and slogans in murals, posters, and the like, and wearing school insignias on shirts in school colors. Teachers and students seemed proud to be associated with their schools and unembarrassed to show it. Bound up with these symbolic elements of the school’s identity was a sense that it is a disciplined social and academic environment where good teachers produce high rates of student learning. To

exemplify deliberate identity-building one BTO urban high school that had been known for years as a football powerhouse serves as an example. Yet its principals had abolished pep rallies, fearing that students would get out of hand. The new principal responsible for improving the school's academic performance saw the football team's reputation as a resource for strengthening students' pride in their school, something she could then appeal to in getting students to cooperate both in maintaining discipline and improving academic performance. She could tell them, "We are the [school mascots]. So let's don't have stories in the paper about fights or low performance at this school." The principal of another relatively new, very high-performing, high-minority school used athletic success to build morale, student loyalty, and active student cooperation in disciplinary and academic terms. Teachers at the school said, "We're winners, period." The kids buy into that and understand it. "They have to behave and perform in the classroom or they don't play. It's not a right; it's a privilege." In a few BTO schools, the positive identity was built around past academic performance, which imposed expectations for continued success: "This school has been a high growth school for 9 straight years." To gain broad buy-in to school goals, another principal appealed not simply to teachers' self-interests but also to community and ethnic pride. "I told them, 'We want [school name] to be seen in a positive light, and we want to dispel the myth that this predominantly Black school is just out here doing nothing.'"

b) Authoritative Accountability

In BTO schools, teachers' admiration for and personal-professional ties with principals positioned the principals to assert accountability in a forceful way without alienating teachers. These principals did not simply articulate goals and plans and then explain them in a general way but held teachers specifically accountable for achieving the goals, sometimes in candid, direct, face-to-face exchanges. Both principals and teachers monitored students' progress on a regular basis, drawing on state test scores, scores on benchmark or other interim assessments, and data on attendance, discipline, and the like. Principals' bonds with teachers provided a context in which they could lay out data on student performance, often teacher by teacher, and ask what accounted for the failures as well as the successes. The data and questions seemed to come across to teachers not as attacks but as part of an ongoing effort to build a common understanding of what was working and what was not, and to promote wider adoption of effective practices. Principals of BTO schools also made it clear to departments, teams, and sometimes the entire school that they were collectively responsible for students' learning. Teachers were credited for success in team, department, or school-wide meetings, but they were also called to account when outcomes fell short of expectations or failed to improve. Together with their assistant principals, principals of BTO schools also regularly visited classrooms to observe and evaluate instruction, and they followed through with very specific, detailed feedback to teachers, including individual student results.

Setting and Communicating Goals. Speaking about her efforts to establish an overarching goal for the school, the principal of one BTO school said, "They have got to understand that the school has a goal, and whether that conflicts with their moral belief about testing doesn't really matter. The goal is that every student is going to achieve to the point that they are proficient and we can [accomplish that] as a whole." A teacher at a BTO school rolled her eyes about the nebulous goals she heard about from friends at some other schools. "It's not about 'global competition' or a '21st century workforce,'"

she groaned. “It’s, ‘Here are the kids we are getting. We want to see them improve this much. And everybody be focused on that.’ The focus is narrow and clear.” In a separate interview, her principal specified targeted goals by subject area. For example, “Our writing scores were terrible last year – 36% proficient. This year we are trying to double that by emphasizing writing across the curriculum.”

The BTO school principals involved representative teachers not only in developing plans but also in communicating them school-wide: “Department chairs present all of their data at the first School Improvement Team meeting, and then we disseminate out to the whole school what our achievement levels were for last year, what our goals are for this year, and what specific steps we plan to meet the goals for this year.” Pressure was a common theme: “Our principal focuses on one thing ... student achievement! The academic focus is a constant focus. It’s push, push, push ... it influences all decisions.” Yet teachers did not seem to find the pressure oppressive. As one explained, “You want to be a part of it the success.”

Monitoring Student Progress. Beyond the establishment and communication of goals, BTO school principals and teachers monitored students’ progress toward the goals from the time they enter the school—or even before that. The principal of one small BTO school explained, “We take a look at what the incoming 9th grade students did in reading and math last year, and our goal is to make sure that all of the students have shown some growth.” Puzzled by test score data revealing the persistence of a Black-White achievement gap in the school, one principal used other student data to pinpoint the causes. “I looked at all kinds of data about every single kid who had scored below proficient to where he went to school last year, discipline history, test scores, attendance, and so on. The problem turned out to be attendance.” So he brought all of his counselors and assistant principals together, and they interviewed every student to determine what was behind the poor attendance and encouraged all of them to attend more regularly, told students they would be keeping an eye on them in the future, and continued to follow up. The principal of a smaller BTO school requires progress reports every three weeks, as did some other BTO principals. “I require the teachers to print spreadsheets for me ... on Friday, based on students’ grades for that three weeks ... gauging mastery based on the tally marks.” He takes the spreadsheets home for the weekend, looking for classes with a high failure rate. Teachers are required to identify new strategies to use with each failing student, as well as to notify their parents. A teacher at another BTO school said, “We’re taking [reviewing] data the whole year — it’s kind of how we do things here.”

Monitoring and Evaluating Instruction. In addition to monitoring instructional *outcomes*, BTO school principals were also directly engaged in monitoring instructional *processes*. They reported spending a major percentage of their time observing in classrooms. One BTO principal conceded that on some days he is out of the school most or all day, but claimed that, “I get into some classrooms whether I am here 5 minutes or all day.” Like other principals of BTO schools, he gave more attention and more detailed feedback to new or struggling teachers than to experienced ones. Asked what he was looking for during these observations, he replied, “Something meaningful in the first 5 minutes,” clear goals and objectives, some activities involving writing, EOC review items, and instructional strategies other than lecturing or seatwork. Teachers generally confirmed principals’ claims about the frequency and nature of classroom observations. But, “they

are not out to get you. It's not a gotcha thing." Instead, they reported, the focus is on how to help teachers "fix things" in their instruction.

Providing Incentives for Performance. Beyond accountability pressures, the main positive incentive for teachers to produce better outcomes are the state funded bonuses for student performance and growth. In two BTO schools, the school district supplemented these with local funds. "Monetary rewards do help," one young teacher noted. "Before this, I had to have a second job. We also get paid extra for tutoring after school or Saturday for two or three hours." Other incentives were also at work. Principals and teachers both noted, sometimes with a touch of embarrassment or self-amusement, that competition among teachers was also a force. Teachers often added with a quick smile that the competition is a friendly one. Another teacher added, "The teachers are competitive, and the students are getting to be competitive." "I'm not upset at the other person because their scores are better than mine. It's about me getting better."

Internalizing Individual and Collective Responsibility. In BTO schools, teacher-principal and teacher-teacher bonds combined with accountability pressures seemed to lead teachers to accept responsibility for overcoming the challenges their students presented. Both as individuals and collectively, teachers in BTO schools seemed to be animated by a sense of responsibility for their students' learning. As one teacher put it, "Failure is not an option... if a student fails, it's on us [teachers]." In another school a teacher told us earnestly, "You've got to have the guts to do the job. We want it [success] and we'll do what it takes to get it." In a third BTO school: "The teachers in this school do not accept excuses. Hard work is required. You may not sit quietly and just not be disruptive. A critical mass of the staff shares this attitude. You must work and try your best to achieve. Whether or not their parents allow excuses, we will not. It can be exhausting, but we do not accept excuses." Their students' weak incoming skills, insufficient motivation, impoverished fund of prior experiences to draw on in learning, lack of parental support, involvement in gangs or destructive cliques, or dim sense of the importance of education to their economic futures were facts of life or spurs to action, not excuses for failure. They communicated a conviction that students can and must learn to the students themselves in a variety of ways. They did not simply expect students to learn, but demanded that they do so, and supported their learning by using the practices described below. As teachers told us at the highest-scoring BTO school, "One thing that is made clear to every new teacher that comes in is that test scores are the responsibility of the entire school, not just certain teachers." This type of accountability seems to demand improvements in instruction, the improvements in instruction produce better outcomes, better outcomes elevate expectations, and so on in a slow upward spiral. Small initial successes set off a spiral of rising expectations and changes in teachers' behavior.

c) Resilience

In BTO schools, principals' and teachers' attachment to each other and to their schools along with their acceptance of responsibility for meeting the challenges that students brought to the school seemed to engender a certain resilience in the face of discouraging circumstances and setbacks. At times, BTO schools lost high-performing teachers, underwent a change in student population, experienced state test scores drop when a new version of an assessment was adopted, or suffered other setbacks, but they did so without losing hope. They acknowledged and bemoaned the loss, but soon pulled up their socks and got back to work.

3.2.2. The elements of capacity

Before plunging into a discussion of the specific elements of capacity of distinguished BTO schools, three points need to be emphasized. First, that principals generally played a central role in cultivating the elements of both will and capacity in these schools. It goes without saying that they could have accomplished nothing without the active engagement of talented teachers, and we found impressive teachers in all schools, but the distinctive edge that BTO schools showed in terms of academic performance owed a great deal to active interventions by their principals. Secondly, that it was the dynamic interactions of the elements of will and capacity that appeared to result in better results, not simply the presence of the elements as individual items in a checklist. For example, teachers in BTO schools seemed to carry out the curricular, instructional, and assessment practices described below with a determination to get results that stemmed in part from principals' authoritative assertion of accountability for academic outcomes. Similarly, professional learning communities gave rise to professional accountability — teachers holding themselves and their colleagues accountable— which complemented the administrative accountability asserted by the principal. A third point concerns the distinction between what might be called potential teacher quality and effective teacher quality, or between *teacher* quality and *teaching* quality. Ultimately, it is the quality of the actual instruction that students get in the classroom that shapes what they learn. BTO schools appear to recruit and retain qualified teachers, strengthen their skills via formal and informal professional development, and motivate them to translate more of their potential into high quality teaching than do low performing schools.

a) Teacher Quality

When asked about specific rises or drops in the percentage of students proficient in particular state tested subjects, the most common explanation was the gain or loss of an outstanding teacher. Not surprisingly, then, principals of BTO schools were active, selective, and persuasive recruiters. They did not simply accept the teachers they were sent, but sought out good candidates on the web, at job fairs, and —it seemed— everywhere they went. In some cases, bonuses helped them recruit, but principals said and teachers confirmed that it was the image of the school as a work environment and the quality of their prospective colleagues that clinched the deal. Once the principal had primed the recruiting pump, the school's reputation and teachers' word-of-mouth networks seemed to attract many good candidates, thus allowing principals to be more and more selective in hiring teachers —and in keeping them. The principals were reluctant to give up on teachers performing below par and worked actively to help them improve, but if a teacher continued to be ineffective, the principals put him on an action plan and suggested that he might be happier in another school. Turnover rates in these schools were generally low, but the principals held that some teacher turnover was desirable.

Teacher Recruitment. For BTO schools, bonuses and pay supplements were not negligible factors in teacher recruitment. One principal told us that he used supplemental funds not only for signing and retention bonuses but also to pay for small rewards, such as snacks at meetings, jackets in school colors for all faculty, or flowers. “Little things mean a lot to teachers,” he explained. Yet explaining that “somebody can always outbid you,” one principal said that in recruiting teachers, he appeals to “missionary zeal.” It was clear that many teachers in BTO schools were motivated primarily by a drive to see that low income and minority students get a better education.

Explaining how he gets a competitive edge despite the small size and remote location of his BTO school, the principal shared, “Basically, it’s about timing. Whenever I have an opening, I check [the state’s online application website] multiple times during the day, and I try to be the first person to call.... I describe the school, and I talk about my leadership style.... I tell them we are 90% minority, 79% free or reduced lunch, and if you don’t have some experience working with these populations or a strong desire to work with these populations, then this is not the place for you. I tell them that I reserve the right to make all decisions, but 9 times out of 10 I am gonna give you that decision making power.” [Then,] I don’t do telephone interviews. You have to come in person. I don’t care where you live. Especially in small towns and rural areas, BTO principals often preferred hiring teachers from the local area, on the theory that they would understand the students’ culture better and be more likely to stay in the school. The principal of one large BTO school brought in a dozen teachers from a high school that she had turned around earlier. Although they were only 12 teachers out of a faculty of about 170, “they made a huge impact. I only brought the best. People that I knew would help change the climate.” Another BTO principal reported that she interviews all prospective hires individually, but they are also interviewed by groups of teachers within each department who actually do a lot of the recruiting for her. Because the district has screened candidates’ qualifications, she can look more for personal qualities. “The first thing I look for is energy and eagerness. People who really believe that the kids can do well. Not just people who are looking for a job.” She also looks for people with deep curriculum knowledge who can work in teams.

Teacher Retention. A factor that seems to help keep good teachers is the degree to which they feel supported in concrete ways. As one principal explained, “I tell them I don’t care what you need in order to teach—I don’t care if it is some kind of wild-striped pencil—we are getting it.” In another large BTO school, the principal spoke about the teachers whom each of his assistant principals were responsible for “taking care of.” This included supervising instruction in their classrooms, but also prominently included helping them to handle student discipline and other problems, as well. BTO school principals all took active steps to “do everything I can to take away all of the nonsense that makes teaching not fun.” Another type of “support” that was important to teachers was permission to restructure the curriculum. Mathematics teachers at one BTO school proposed re-sequencing courses from Algebra I-Geometry-Algebra II to Algebra I-Algebra II-Geometry to improve curricular continuity and thus improve student outcomes. Their principal approved the change, and the teachers cited this development as evidence that “she gives us a lot of freedom and trust.” They went on to note, “But she holds us responsible for results,” and they experienced the combination of trust and accountability as indicating that the principal “treats us with respect as professionals.”

Professional Development. In addition to recruiting and keeping good teachers, BTO principals also worked to strengthen the teachers they had. Some principals were selective, restricting the range of PD to a few activities keyed to their improvement priorities. Others brought teachers “who are doing it right” into the school for PD sessions while another BTO school principal singled out two specific Reading professional development offerings that contributed to rising performance. She described the strategies as “very, very prescriptive,” meaning that the strategies are specified in great detail, so that teachers in all curricular areas—teachers with little or no background in reading instruction— can grasp the strategies with only modest

training and use them to improve students' ability to read texts in their subject areas. The instructional strategies helped teachers engage a broader range of students more actively in learning course content. Several principals of BTO schools likewise viewed mentorship as a form of one-on-one professional development. The principal of our highest-performing BTO school hired an outstanding retired teacher to observe and coach struggling teachers —mainly but not exclusively initially licensed and lateral entry teachers.

Professional Learning Community (PLC). Teachers were much more enthusiastic about advice from other teachers than about advice or critiques from administrators. Principals of BTO schools may not have used the term “professional learning community,” but they promoted the development of (PLCs)—often quite aggressively. A few simply arranged common planning times for teachers of a given course, but most went well beyond this to charge content area teams or departments with collective responsibility for improving student outcomes. They made it plain that if one teacher fell down on the job, all would be held responsible. Some principals named a lead teacher to organize meetings, submit reports, observe in others' classrooms, and take other steps to pinpoint problems and help their colleagues address them. Some also met with the teams on a periodic basis to review data on students' progress—sometimes at the individual student level. Professional learning communities did not simply spring up in these schools, but were virtually mandated. Within PLCs, norms of good practice arose and were enforced. In this sense, collegial accountability reinforced the administrative accountability discussed above. But by helping teachers deal with knotty problems of classroom practice, PLCs helped to build capacity as well as to enhance motivation. Principals in BTO schools held teachers responsible for outcomes, but worked with them and allowed them considerable flexibility to develop and implement more effective approaches and materials. “Because I *require* some strict planning together, all teachers of a state tested content course have planning time together,” and are required to meet, develop common lesson plans for each week, and submit minutes of each meeting. “If you don't monitor it [planning], it's not done.” She went on to say that, “The most important PD is the PD we do here—what we do to make a difference in kids' learning and test scores.” As one lead teacher put it, “[The principal] has high expectations for all of us. She meets with our team. She will ask, ‘What are you *not* doing that so-and-so *is* doing, and why are your scores not as high?’” But this is a genuinely analytical question. “It's not just to put you on the spot. It does put you on the spot.” Forthright comparisons of scores of teachers teaching similar students followed by questions about “what is going on here” and efforts to help were common practice for principals of BTO schools. According to teachers, the interchanges are motivating, but they also elicit colleagues' suggestions about specific techniques to improve instruction.

Teacher Assignment. In addition to recruiting strong teachers and promoting further development through formal PD and professional learning communities, principals in BTO schools also assigned teachers strategically, often asking and providing incentives for strong, experienced teachers to teach some “regular” or lower-ability classes, not all Honors and Advanced Placement classes. They gave some play to teachers' preferences in an effort to maintain motivation and commitment, but did not hesitate to press teachers to take some classes with more challenging students. They also tended to assign their most effective teachers to teach state tested subjects. “If I am held accountable,” one principal explained, “I am going to have my best people teaching

them.” Offsetting the pressures was the strong sense that, as teachers in another BTO school told us, “Getting the bigger classes or the state tested content classes is compliment. You have to prove yourself if you want to teach those classes.” A relatively new principal at one small BTO school told us, “I had to move teachers out of their comfort zones. Some people had been teaching the same thing at the same level for years. I had to take a look at the data and see what teachers were doing the best with what group of students and move those teachers around according to those statistics.” He cited as an example a teacher who had been teaching virtually all seniors for many years, but seemed to have the firmness and fairness to push less motivated students to succeed. So he assigned her to teach a 9th grade state tested course. She was reluctant at first, but succeeded beyond her own expectations. “So she came to me this year and said, ‘I’m willing to do whatever you need for me to do.’” The principal of one large BTO school also spoke of “putting the teachers that are really powerful people where it matters most.” She stressed that she does not believe in assigning teachers based on seniority —“the best teachers are in the state tested courses ... you are not gonna be the leader if you can’t produce the results.”

Pressure to Improve or Leave. Finally, principals at BTO schools were willing, if necessary, to put strong pressure on poor performers to improve sharply or find another job: “You try not to have too many teachers that are bad, but if they are bad, I put ‘em on an action plan and try to make ‘em get better.” One principal explained that his school’s high turnover rate in the previous year was the result of his deliberate effort to “push out some bad teachers.” Another recalled, “I had some teachers who decided this [environment of pressure for performance] was not for them.” Yet the principals in these schools were not quick to judge teachers. A typical BTO principal said that he insists on knowing the details of Assistant Principals’ work with struggling teachers before taking action to force them out: “What exactly have you done to correct the problem? What have you done to help Mr. Smith get better? Do not just give up on a teacher. Do everything you can to help.”

Disciplined and Caring Environment for Learning. The principal and teachers in BTO schools take a proactive approach to establishing norms of order and discipline in the school. The culture of many high schools is the product of a tacit bargain or balance between the preferences of adults and students, but in these schools it is clearly the adults who set boundaries on behavior and control the culture of the school. Yet the environments do not feel hostile or punitive. The teachers claim to know and profess to like their students, and limited observation bore this out. The principal and teachers at the highest-scoring BTO high school stressed the importance of being visible, actively engaging, and setting norms for behavior from the moment students enter the school each day. They stand at the door and in the halls, greet as many students as possible as they enter, watch closely for infractions of the rules on dress and behavior, and politely address them. According to one teacher, “Visible, Vigilant, and Vocal” is the motto, and when rules are set down, “They are enforced. Without question.” Speaking about the need to combine strong discipline with caring relationships with students, one young African-American principal told us, “This may come as a surprise, but I am very tough. But the students know that I love them to death. I get on the bus, and I ride with them to every game ... I go to the churches, go to a different church every Sunday. I live in [nearby town], but I come to [this area] to WalMart ... because I see my kids [here].”

The school is small enough to have a “family oriented atmosphere,” and that is “the major reason why we have done as well as we have.”

b) Curricular, Instructional, and Assessment Practices

The BTO schools implemented a signature set of curricular, instructional, and assessment practices designed to assure all students appropriate and adequate opportunities to learn—and, indeed, to demand or insist that they learn. No school implemented all of these practices thoroughly, but each implemented most of them. There were variations in the particulars from one BTO school to another, but the same sense of results-oriented mindfulness in the use of the practices was evident across all these schools.

Freshman Academies or Other Transition Support. To manage the transition from middle to high school, personalize the environment and reduce dropout rates, and address incoming skill deficits, most BTO schools had established Freshman Academies. Academies and similar programs were regarded as essential because so many ninth graders enter high school with grossly inadequate reading and math skills. The Academies generally housed ninth graders and teachers of their core academic courses in a separate building or wing, and those large enough to warrant it were subdivided into teams. BTO schools which had not organized Freshman Academies had created special seminars or other programs to support 9th graders. For example, in one of the large BTO high schools without a Freshman Academy, all 9th graders take an intensive freshman seminar in grammar, reading, and writing in the Fall. Data on incoming students are also reviewed in detail, and students with low skills are assigned to special courses designed to prepare them for state tested courses. One BTO school had also organized a program for “Freshmores,” students who are in their second year of high school but have not passed the courses required for sophomore status. “Freshmores” were offered the opportunity to take double blocks of key courses, such as English I, in order to get back in step with their grade-level friends —reportedly a strong incentive for many students.

Standard Course of Study, Pacing Guides, and Common Lessons. Principals of BTO schools insisted that teachers follow the state’s standard course of study. While allowing some flexibility, they promoted the use of district or school-constructed pacing guides, and in some cases, common lesson formats and lesson plans. When we asked how teachers decide what to teach, a typical response came from the principal of one small BTO school: “The standard course of study of course dictates what is taught in classrooms.” Principals and teachers in BTO schools seemed keenly aware of the tension between (a) legitimate efforts to assure that students get some exposure to everything they will be tested on and (b) assuring that the numerous topics in the standard course of study do not whiz by before students have an opportunity to grasp them. The principal of a huge BTO urban school was equally insistent on the standard course of study: “We gotta really teach and review and re-teach and re-loop. That’s been the reason that we have had some growth in test scores.” In a few BTO schools, members of a department or a team responsible for a state tested subject went so far as to develop and teach a common set of lesson plans on a week by week basis —plans keyed to pacing guides they had developed, themselves.

Rigorous Curricular Standards with Pressure and Incentives to Learn. In one very small school in a primarily African-American community, the principal told us, “When I came

in, I had to take a look at the course offerings. Were they rigorous enough? In some cases, we had said, ‘Our kids can’t do this and so let’s not expose them to this, this, and this. I had to fine tune that master schedule and put in some more rigorous course offerings. We didn’t have honors level courses in some subject areas.’ Describing his grading standards, an ex-military teacher of History told us, “Major tests, 80%. Other tests, 20%. No retesting, no extra credit for homework, no open book tests, no grades for class participation. That’s my grading policy, and I’m not changing it. I grew up in a housing project myself, and I don’t care who they are or what they are. [Potentially] they are all A students.” In light of this, one BTO school organizes what the principal called a “celebration-motivation program” before the state exams are given—a pep rally with a big banner celebrating the facts that the school is the only high school in the district to make high growth the previous year, cheerleaders, gift items donated by local merchants, and a dance with a DJ. Another BTO school had an extensive program of incentives for students to learn. For example, for passing state assessments, students received free passes to athletic, theater, music, and other school events. And, at several schools, teachers told of using iPods or less expensive prizes as incentives to get low performing students to after school and Saturday sessions.

Cross-grade Curriculum Articulation. One might assume that if all teachers follow the standard course of study and pacing guides keyed to it, then articulation of the curriculum across grades would take care of itself. If so, teachers told us, one would be incorrect. As a mathematics teacher explained, “I have done assessments to determine the preparation of students I am getting in Pre-Calc, and I feed that back to the teachers who are sending them to me. Where we are working and where we are not working. This led to conversations about “vertical teaming,” because for example, to get to Advanced Placement courses in the senior year, that starts way back with the teachers in the middle school. The guidance from the standard course of study is not enough. It leaves a lot of room for interpretation and different emphases within it.

“Stairstep Curricula” and Curricular Re-Sequencing. The principal of one small BTO school described a “pre-English” course for students who arrived at the high school without having demonstrated proficiency on the 8th grade state Reading examination. “We were doing a disservice to these students by throwing them in with students who had already met that bar.” He also noted the addition of a similar “pre-Algebra” mathematics course and the use of “Progressive Algebra,” a modular mastery-based course. He and other principals of BTO schools explained that the 4x4 block schedule enabled them to work such courses into a student’s course of study without delaying graduation. Intermediate courses permitting students to progress in smaller increments are referred to as “stairstep” courses. Similarly, at a very large urban high school, the principal described working with subject matter teams of teachers to review all of the available data on incoming students. She said the school gets “hundreds of kids who are not ready for high school, kids who slide through the [end of grade 8] gateway.” Students in this category are assigned to a “foundations” course in mathematics, then to Algebra 1a, then Algebra 1b. “We do [something like] this in every single subject.” Before students can take Biology, they get a yearlong course in Earth and Environmental Science that is designed to “get them to love science” through a rich diet of field trips, hands-on activities, visits to museums, and the like. For low-skilled students, History is also split into a two-semester, yearlong course. For students with low but passing scores on the English I test, 10th grade English is a year-long, double-blocked course. To make these

classes small enough to be effective for marginal students (about 20 students), Honors level courses are made larger (about 35 students). BTO schools also rearranged the traditional sequence and timing of courses to improve continuity or match them up better with students' maturity and experience levels. For example, one BTO principal made Civics and Economics a 12th grade subject on the premise that many more 12th graders than 8th graders would have experience with work and managing their own money.

Smaller Classes for Lower-Performing Students. It is not only class sizes in "stairstep" courses that BTO schools are reducing sharply. At the highest-performing BTO school, teachers made a point of the small size of classes for "regular" classes: "Our class sizes [for non-Honors classes] are very, very manageable. They are generally 10 to 17 in English I." Another chimed in that she has 32 students in an Honors section of a non-state tested course. Smaller class sizes not only make it easier to teach challenging students, but also serve as an incentive to teach them. One highly qualified teacher at the same school noted that largely because of the smaller size of classes for them, she teaches "regular" classes only.

Interim or Benchmark Assessments. As a component of BTO schools' capacity to promote student learning, principals and teachers in several BTO schools preferred to develop their own pacing guides and interim assessments, engendering "higher ownership" and correspondingly more widespread implementation." A teacher in one BTO school described her team's use of results from a common midterm examination in English I. "We went over the questions on the three goals that were lowest. We just didn't worry about cases where just one kid may have missed an item. We used the results on the three goals that all of our kids struggled with and discussed ways that we could re-teach that information."

Protection of Instructional Time. Perhaps the most impressive example of protecting instructional time is the meticulous and intensive approach to developing individual student class schedules at one BTO school. Each summer, the principal and assistant principals review every single student's schedule request to assure that it will produce appropriate progress toward graduation and that required courses with presumably heavier demands and electives with lighter ones are balanced across the two semesters. According to the principal, it is "unacceptable" for even one student to be miss-assigned to even one class on the opening day of school. Teachers confirmed his claim. The result is that they can get started teaching the very first day without time lost to reworking faulty schedules. This gets the year under way in a crisp fashion and sends a message that the school is well-organized and means business about teaching and learning from the very first day of school. In addition to this, the principals of several BTO schools forbade any whole school announcements without their explicit approval. They also limited early departure for athletic events to the minimum necessary time. "The coaches know that they are not going to leave 30 or 40 minutes earlier than they really need to."

Tutoring. In some BTO schools, district or state funds are used to provide teachers extra pay for tutoring after school and on Saturdays, but in most, such work is simply an assumed part of their regular responsibilities. As a teacher in a large regional BTO school told us, "We find the problem and we keep going after it and after it until they come in. There is no giving up." One BTO school hired back a retired to certified teacher to provide small group remediation to students struggling in Biology. The principal noted that when he arrived at the school, "We were just teaching to the middle

in our classes. We weren't remediating nor were we accelerating." But now, all teachers do tutoring. "That is a requirement and an expectation" for at least one day a week, and teachers are encouraged to go beyond the requirement.

Incentive Preparation for End of Course Testing. The principal at one very large urban BTO school described her school-wide plan to involve the entire faculty in preparing students for state examinations. She assembled the faculty and, to make the point that they are all educated people capable of helping in some area, she asked any teacher without a college degree to raise her hand. This was, of course, greeted only by laughter. Then she listed all of the state tested courses on the whiteboard. She told all teachers that they had to sign up to help with one of the courses and asked them to think about which they were most suited for. Then for a 12-day period, she rearranged the schedule to create an extra period in the day when students would meet with their assigned teacher in small groups—small, because now all students who were about to take a state test were distributed across a much larger set of teachers. To assign students to teachers, all students were reviewed individually. She told the students, "These 12 days are going to make you great." The students went nuts. I don't know whether the review really raised the test scores, or the kids finally believed there was hope for them." The teachers got similarly excited "because they got to work with people they never worked with before." Those who do not normally teach state tested courses come to appreciate what the exams are really all about. "The lead teachers prepped them to lead these reviews. They got to see how creative and smart these people are." There was some variation from school to school in which of these incentive practices were implemented, but all of the BTO schools reported implementing a substantial subset of them. Further, it seemed clear that their commitment to the schools' central goal—high student outcomes for all students—led teachers to carry out the practices with determination to assure learning, not simply to implement them in a pro forma manner.

4. Conclusion

In summary, in BTO high schools, principals had worked actively to cultivate organizational commitment, hold both individual teachers and groups of teachers responsible for learning outcomes, and thus to strengthen the school's ability to withstand the inevitable reverses and disappointments. Enlisting active cooperation from teachers, BTO school principals also effectively recruited, retained, and strengthened their faculties through supervision, professional development, and professional learning communities. Driven by a common commitment to the organization and its goals, and by a combination of administrative and professional accountability, teachers and principals created a disciplined environment for learning and implemented a distinctive set of curricular, instructional, and assessment practices. They did so with an evident determination to assure high levels of learning by all of their students.

In contrast, in low performing high schools studied (Hallinger, 2011; Henry, Fortner, & Thompson, 2010; Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010), principals have generally not been as effective in building the same levels of organizational commitment, individual and collective responsibility, and resilience. Morale and reputational problems have made it difficult to recruit, train, and retain faculties of

similar quality. As environments, low performing schools seem to lack the powerful combination of discipline and caring observed in BTO schools. And finally, they have not implemented nearly so fully or forcefully the effective curricular, instructional, and assessment practices observed in BTO schools.

Beating the Odds schools were chosen strategically for their ability to produce high rates of learning with challenging student populations—high percentages of students with low entering reading and math skills, high percentages of students from low income families, and high percentages of students from traditionally disadvantaged ethnic groups. By cultivating the elements of will and capacity outlined above, all eight BTO schools were able to produce high growth for several years in a row. But despite extraordinary leadership, will, and capacity, only one of the eight schools was able to produce a Performance Composite that would entitle it to designation as a School of Distinction or School of Excellence.

One cannot generalize from small samples of schools, nor project beyond the limits of the data actually collected. We cannot say that with less challenging demographics, more of the BTO schools could have produced a better performance composite. But the contrast does suggest that concentrating high percentages of students with low entering skills, students from low income families, and students from traditionally disadvantaged ethnic groups in certain high schools makes it difficult to break through an invisible ceiling on performance.

Performance composites in the 70s are certainly not consistent with the obligation to ensure that all of the state's children have an equal opportunity to get a sound basic education. But neither are the data consistent with the assertion that it is these and other lower performing high schools alone that are failing to make good on that constitutional obligation. The data clearly indicate that the problems in our education system begin earlier and are more widely distributed. As such, future research needs to dig deeper into the root causes of low performance in addition to the subsequent effects.

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Appendix A: HSRA School Summary Table

School Name: _____ **Report:** _____

By: _____

1) Overall Story?	
2) Goal Setting and Communication of Goals?	
3) Coordination of Curriculum?	
4) Supervision and Evaluation of Instruction	
5) Monitoring Student Progress and Providing Incentives for Learning?	
6) Promoting Professional Development and Building Community?	
7) Maintaining Visibility?	
8) Creating Trust?	
9) Protecting Instructional Time?	
10) Providing Incentives for Teachers?	
11) Others?	
12) Specific Variables based on Quan Data?	