

# Leading With Heart: Urban Elementary Principals as Advocates for Students

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Principals in urban settings serve elementary schools often densely populated with highly mobile, ethnically diverse, and economically disadvantaged students (Dworkin, Toenjes, Purser, & Sheikh-Hussin, 2000). Due to the changing landscape of increasing accountability issues required by the *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)* (2001), principals must adjust the mission of the school community to meet legislative demands (Johnson, 2004). Elementary principals are now heavily invested in strategies to meet the increased expectations of raising students' academic performance. It is important to understand how urban elementary school principals reconcile the tensions between accountability and equality for all students.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore how urban elementary school principals reconcile the challenges of educational accountability within the constraints of standardized testing policies required by *NCLB*. We were interested in developing a conceptualization of principals as student advocates within today's contentious era of accountability and mandated school reform. Principals play a key role in defining the contexts of their schools. Although there is a plethora of information about school change, accountability, and *NCLB* (Darling-Hammond, 2004; Fuller, Wright, Gesicki,

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& Kang, 2007; Kim & Sunderman, 2005; Spillane, Diamond, Burch, Hallett, Jita, & Zoltners, 2002; Spillane, Hallett, & Diamond, 2003), there are gaps in our understanding regarding how urban elementary principals define these terms within the context of their schools and communities. Understanding how principals develop and maintain definitions about what constitutes student success through the accountability movement within the specific context of their schools is essential to consistently improve the capacity of schools as environments where student academic needs are nurtured and supported.

This study therefore sought to contribute to an understanding of specific characteristics of urban elementary principals who demonstrated advocacy for students within a context of accountability as mandated under *NCLB*. The findings of this study indicated that as mandated accountability measures evolved, inclusive social justice leadership practices were not pushed aside (Oliva & Anderson, 2006), but rather were integrated into the daily professional practices of some urban elementary school principals.

## **The Changing Role of Urban Elementary Principals**

Urban schools' patterns include characteristics such as being large in size with a highly mobile and diverse student body (Weiner, 2003). Principals in urban elementary schools face challenges intrinsic to urban settings, such as diverse social, economic, and political factors (Cistone & Stevenson, 2000; Cooley & Shen, 2000; Zaragoza-Mitchell, 2000). Socioeconomic issues, most particularly, influence the way in which principals lead such diverse school settings (Lyman & Villani, 2004; Riehl, 2000). Nichols, Glass, and Berliner (2006) discussed the pressures presented by accountability that could contribute to decisions principals make regarding curricular programs for students. Sometimes the overwhelming pressure for principals to demonstrate student achievement on standardized tests influences results in their pressuring teachers to teach to the test and help students pass at all costs (McGhee & Nelson, 2005).

Elementary principals are expected to perform in increasingly complex roles (Mullen & Patrick, 2000; Ruff & Shoho, 2005), especially when immersed in urban environments (Portin, 2000). Given the nature of educating students at an early age, these principals focus more on school-community connections and experience higher parental involvement than secondary school administrators. This close connection to the community results in expectations that are complicated by student achievement and accountability narrowly defined by standardized testing results.

The education of elementary students often involves the education of parents as to how to best assist their children academically. Many urban elementary principals are dedicated advocates for students (Elmore, 2005; Chrisman, 2005), and families and the larger community (Hale & Rollins, 2006). Principals in urban elementary schools face additional challenges such as first generation students, many with language limitations. These principals strive to fulfill campus and community expectations in the areas of instruction, curriculum, management, and staff development (Osher & Fleischman, 2005).

The beginning of the 21st century is characterized by unprecedented expectations for elementary school principals. Included in these expectations are long working hours (50-70 hours a week); more public scrutiny; higher accountability; less appreciation; increased district demands; constricted budgets; less competitive salaries; and highly competitive funding based on performance (Prince, 2000). These expectations unfortunately do not make the position

attractive for new candidates (Cooley & Shen, 2000; Howley, Andrianaivo & Perry, 2005; Norton, 2004). Thus, elementary principals are divided between the demands of accountability based on government mandates as well as community values. This situation is particularly difficult for principals in urban elementary schools since the school may be the only place for students to be emotionally and spiritually nurtured in preparation for life's challenges.

### **Conceptual Lens and Methodology**

The authors approached this study through the lenses of inclusive social justice leadership as conceptualized by Frattura and Capper (2007) and Riehl (2000). Implications for social justice come to the forefront in urban areas with large numbers of low socioeconomic students. The needs of these students are personal and social as well as academic. Elementary school principals try to meet these collective needs by playing an "affirmative role in creating schools that are more inclusive and that serve diverse students more effectively" (Riehl, 2000, p. 58). It is only through inclusive leadership strategies such as advocacy for students that moral obligations to meet student needs will be accomplished. Leaders who practice inclusive strategies support the needs of students instead of bowing down to restrictive legislative mandates. These are leaders who value their students, their backgrounds and experiences, and the strengths that they bring to school.

In order to support diverse learners, school leaders who place student needs at the center of their decision-making are perceived as valuing inclusive leadership practices (Frattura & Capper, 2007). Examples of inclusive leadership practices that demonstrate a nurturing attitude include maintaining high expectations for all students, treating all students with respect, and supporting school-community relationships (Eilers & Camacho, 2007; Theoharis, 2008). Inclusive leadership practices encompass assistance to different groups of students. Gardiner and Enomoto (2006), for example, highlighted effective practices that supported minority urban students. Helping to socialize immigrant students to U.S. schools, providing culturally-relevant instruction, and providing early intervention strategies were also some of the practices used by inclusive urban school principals in their study. Such inclusive practices support the academic and emotional growth of all learners (Salisbury, 2006).

### *Participants*

Sixteen urban elementary principals (n=16) from two southwestern states were selected to take part in two focus groups conducted in 2005 and 2006. In selecting focus group members, experience with and expertise in historically underserved contexts played an important role. Principals with experience ranging from 5 to 20 years in urban settings were recruited to participate. Expertise included regular interactions with students and families experiencing poverty, first generation students, immigrants, and English-language learners.

With regard to demographic factors, nine participants were male and seven female. Eight participants were white, six Hispanic, and one African American. One participant checked other to describe race and ethnicity. All participants were licensed as principals and had Master's degrees. One individual had a doctorate. Seven principals led schools with fewer than 500 students, and nine served in schools with 500 to 999 students.

### *Procedures*

Principals were purposefully selected from a public school directory based on the demographic features of their school and recruited for the focus group based on the length of their experience as principal. During recruitment, the authors explained to principals the purpose of the focus group and informed them of similar focus groups being conducted in other states. The focus groups took place after the school day. Discussions were recorded on audio tape and transcribed for analysis. Each participant was provided with a copy of the transcript to ensure it accurately conveyed the thoughts being expressed. No corrections were made to the transcripts by any participant beyond improving the grammar of some statements—a common event when spoken language is converted to written language.

### *Mode of Analysis*

Researchers used the constant-comparative method to develop themes and categories from the focus group transcripts. Two researchers coded the transcripts independently and then compared codes to establish a level of trustworthiness and replicability. A third researcher critiqued the transcripts in search of any statement that might contradict a theme or category established by the other two researchers. No contradictions were found. In addition to the triangulation of analysis procedures, the responses were analyzed thematically (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and included considerations of cultural and contextual components in urban elementary schools as raised by the participants.

### **Emerging Themes of Inclusive Leadership**

We used a grounded theory design in developing the themes that emerged from two focus groups of urban elementary principals. Grounded theory is a method of theory development that stems from the data that are being analyzed (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). Theory is developed through the process of analysis conducted by the researchers based on the specific data collected. Some of the pressures that urban elementary principals faced included: meeting adequate yearly progress as defined by state and federal mandates; high stakes testing; district mandates stemming from *NCLB*; meeting the needs of English language learners; and getting parents more actively involved in schools. Their comments provided a deeper understanding of how urban elementary principals defined and described their challenges; how they enacted their commitment to social justice; and their perception of the transformative social power needed to change their communities' status quo. These concerns clustered within three themes: (1) Interpretations of the accountability system; (2) ethical considerations for special programs; and (3) building community through authentic actions.

### *Interpretations of the Accountability System*

"[*NCLB*] doesn't measure the growth of a child," began Principal 53 (2006). When communicating with teachers about instruction, Principal 43 (2005) asked, "Tell me how you're going to make this work to be in the best interest of the kids." He continued:

We're here for kids and that's the way it's got to be, and that's the way it's going to continue to be, and if you can't join in the program about what's in the best interest of kids and why we're here, then—see you.

Principal 43 also commented:

We've taken potshots but we have to look at what is the best interest of the kids, being able to go out and run around at lunchtime, being able to sit in the cafeteria and talk with your friends and having some responsibility and control as to what is going on in our building and to know what is happening. That's got to be in the best interest of the kids and it is important that we look at what is happening.

The principals perceived that in the process of fulfilling *NCLB* requirements, remarkable improvements were evident in what students were learning from year to year. Nevertheless, they perceived deeper social justice issues associated in the pressure to prepare students to pass the state-mandated test (Diamond & Spillane, 2004; Gerstl-Pepin, 2006).<sup>1</sup>

"I saw a tremendous improvement in what kids were learning from year to year," attested principal 52 (2006), "But then," he added:

I saw a little bit decline...because the teachers felt a little stifled in their creativity. And—and quit, I guess, the rigor of higher-order thinking and started just going for the kids to pass. And I think some of the kids that were close to passing—we use to call them the bubble kids—almost there—the teachers worked so hard with those kids. And the kids that were at the bottom of the barrel got left behind....They are probably the kids that need the most help... if you are looking at the social justice aspect of education. The kids we're supposed to look out for—the low—are probably going to be the ones that are going to be retained.

The principals in the study highlighted the fact that the current accountability requirements were not allowing for accurate measures of student success due to the restrictive nature of the mandates focusing on student performance on a single standardized assessment. Principal 41 (2005) offered this example:

Our test scores are never going to be the best in the state but, you know, I don't care because we are going to do what is best for kids and that means that we have before-school programs, after-school programs, and we teach a rich curriculum....I do believe that the philosophy of *No Child Left Behind* is what we believed in anyway. Yet I think our legislators have done a terrible disservice and injustice for our children. And, I worry about what our country is going to look like 10, 15, 20 years from now.

Another poignant story was of a student "who came to us abused, beat up, neglected; had been in several foster homes—[earned commended performance] this year. Three years of hard work, that will never be reflected in *NCLB*" (Principal 50, 2006). Experiences such as this one captured the feelings of the elementary principals. Another leader shared that his teachers work very hard and have helped students achieve. However, bound by the rigid rules of the accountability system, student progress is usually discounted if it does not take place within a year. Principal 50 (2006) mentioned that teachers have cried when these children are labeled as failures. "We know that child is not a failure. That child has worked!"

Several principals concluded that *NCLB*, in Principal 50's words, "has taken the heart and soul out of schools" because of the pressure of student performance on standardized tests. The principals felt that the succumbing to performance pressures focused not on what students accomplished, but rather on what they failed to accomplish.

Synthesizing the discussion, Principal 50 (2006) exclaimed, "The very same population you are trying to help is the one that is under the most pressure." He continued:

I am in a Title I school, with 86% of students with reduced-[price] lunch. The challenges are massive, and if you succumb to the "academic yearly progress" pressure, and all the other elements that go along with it, we are doing a disservice to the students.

#### *Ethical Considerations for Special Programs*

The principals in one of the states focused on the ways students with exceptionalities were not being adequately served due to restrictions within *NCLB* mandates. The principals perceived that the conflict between the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA)* and *NCLB* exacerbated some of the ethical challenges they faced. Principal 53 (2006) stated:

It just seems like you have two pieces of federal legislation: *IDEA* and *No Child Left Behind* that are in conflict with each other, because really at the heart of *No Child Left Behind*, if you really look at it—it's unmapped—it's trying to legislate out special education. Because there [are] no accommodations for them; everyone has to take the test; everyone has to be on grade level.

She told us, "Until it's going to take a big lawsuit—it's going to take something between *IDEA* and *No Child Left Behind* and—scissors, paper, rock; who's gonna win? Because right now in between we're caught." When discussing students receiving special education services, Principal 53 (2006) continued:

Historically elementary schools used to hide the students that wouldn't pass the [state] test under special ed because they did not have to take the test—and not every elementary school, but some. Same in my district. But you have, I feel, an ethical responsibility to all of your students because as soon as you say they don't have to take the test then what you find in a lot of schools is that they are not teaching those children at the—that they need to be taught.

She elaborated on the tension between *IDEA* and *NCLB*:

We have a 2% exemption rate. We have [not including the children with learning disabilities]—we have 14 kids in my home school. And even of the 14, I think eight of them took the [state test] last year. And this year, my special ed students, I have—oh, it makes me cry. I have four of them that were [rated] commended performance, which, you know, that's—you have to make those decisions for kids and it means you have to be really willing to take what happens...if it doesn't work your way. But it's a scary road you go down....You know, we won't have like the stellar top 100%—you know—scores. But I think that's the right way you know, the direction. And that's, I believe, making the decision with the child—with the student in mind.

In many instances, the principals evidenced concern for students who worked hard but missed the passing grade because of an incorrect answer to one question. Students who did not meet the mark were considered failing, even if there was demonstrated growth over time.

### *Building Community through Authentic Actions*

The principals in this study perceived accountability to the stakeholders in the communities they served to be incongruent with the accountability focus on student achievement scores. For example, Principal 51 (2006) explained, "It's that once test scores come out, that is the only conversations that we have—is what we did on our test scores." Especially at the elementary level, the principals valued their role and involvement in students' enthusiasm for learning, and recognition from parents. The principals perceived they were evaluated by parents who wondered, "Does the school care about my child?" Some of the principals agreed that if parents did not know what the principal stood for, then they seemed less willing to trust and support the principal with decisions regarding their children. Principal 50 (2006) offered an example of how some principals in the district who play up their students' achievements are also the principals who are least likely to have genuine relationships with parents. He stated:

You can talk a big game; you can make presentations; you can become a star in that way. But really, when you get back and people don't really know who you are, what your goals are, and what your mission is—doesn't mean a thing.

In fact, the principal noted that during one of the school celebrations, none of the parents would thank him for technology or curriculum initiatives, but would say instead, "Thank you for taking care of my child. We feel so welcome here." He added: "They do not remember any of the institutional values on which we are rated."

In order to be leaders focused on social justice and attentive to democratic practices, the principals perceived the importance of building trusting relationships in their communities (Kochan & Reed, 2006; Sanders & Harvey, 2002). Examples included connecting with students and their families by greeting every child and parent at the drop-off curb every morning. The principals seized these opportunities to initiate contact with parents and to maintain previously established connections. These administrators saw this as time to "develop a positive rapport" and to "take that opportunity to try to bond with kids." All of the elementary principals agreed that the visibility of a school's leader was foremost in sustaining positive relationships with the entire school community (Harris & Lowery, 2002; Portin, 2004).

The majority of the respondents favored direct involvement with parents and students on a daily basis. They explained that staying connected served as an effective means of staying attuned to what was happening in the lives of their students.. As Principal 52 (2006) explained:

[Accountability] makes me look at a child individually as an administrator to make sure I know each one of them, and make sure no one falls between the cracks. And so, every six weeks, I meet with every teacher about every child and, you know, track their progress, and make recommendations, you know, for more interventions or other things the kids need. So, I try to make sure that you know that every single child gets what they need.

When describing how they connected with students and their families, several principals agreed on the value of being visible and approachable. Principal 50 explained his morning ritual:

Every morning I am at the bus loop to receive the buses. Cold, wet, cold rain, hot days, whatever. In the afternoon, I

put every kid in every car that drives up in front of the school. And I say hello to everybody, "Hey, how you doing?" you know, and beer cans are falling out of the cars... you know, and other things like that and that's fine. I never judge. I say, "Hey! Here's your cans."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"Hey. No problem."

And then they take off. But we—that right there has done more to connect with what we are trying to do with school and the parents [than] anything else.

Principal 49 (2006) confirmed the value of this exchange by stating, "I think that is more powerful than anything else that you do," and "You begin to build that relationship with the community out there, and I think that's just so powerful because anytime there is an issue they do come back and they do realize he [the principal] is a person." Principal 53 (2006) added an example of how visibility and parent connections have worked for her:

I remember one of the hardest parent conferences I knew I was going to have. And the parent—and what happened was the parent was saying something happened because there was probably not enough supervision in the cafeterias. And I look at the parent and I said, "I open your car door every morning and every afternoon and I load your son up." And I said, "Don't you think if I do that, I watch what is happening in the cafeteria?"

She went, "You're right, Miss [name]. I'm sorry." But it buys you so much...capital, just the visibility.

The examples shared above demonstrated that these urban elementary school principals used their leadership roles to enable and empower teachers, staff, and parents to support effective and inclusive learning communities (Kelley, Thornton, & Daugherty, 2005). As Principal 50 (2006) described it, "What's more important is the interaction, the understanding, the trust, that you have in your community that's going to make your school—you know—move and progress where you have success. People trust you." The examples shared by these principals represent individuals who serve as advocates for students and who possess an commitment to social justice.

### **Conclusions**

The evolution of accountability reform and its narrow definition of student achievement have created a tension that challenges urban elementary school principals to attempt to achieve compliance with mandated accountability standards while remaining true to meeting goals for student success. This study demonstrated that the urban elementary principals participating in the focus groups did not view mandated student achievement and social justice as mutually exclusive dimensions of their role. On the contrary, these principals were mindful of both sets of expectations and explained how they worked hard to reconcile the two into an integrated daily practice. The fact that the corpus of data came from participants in two different states suggests that it is worthy of further investigation as to how urban elementary principals have wrestled with integrating *NCLB* requirements with notions of social justice and community building.

In spite of a growing pressure to focus resources, time, and attention to maximizing the number of students passing state and federal mandated tests, the principals participating in the focus groups

espoused a priority for maintaining a child-focused environment. They placed a high value on getting to know each child individually and using their knowledge of the child's individuality to facilitate teachers' efforts and effectiveness, and to establish and maintain interpersonal communications with parents.

Members of the school community need to support principals who are genuinely committed to lead with their hearts. A deep commitment to students struggling to succeed is particularly relevant in urban areas. A strong commitment, much like a plant, however, must be nurtured. A principal's commitment and advocacy can be encouraged through continuous involvement from all educators on campus, the parents and larger community, and especially the district.

This study focused on urban elementary school principals in two southwest states in order to provide information that may be significant to the examination of schools serving historically underserved populations and challenged by cultural and contextual factors unique to urban settings. The principals capitalized on opportunities to connect with students and parents to cooperatively build a strong foundation for the future academic success of all children. Such demonstrations of advocacy for students exemplified inclusive leadership practices that all principals can take to heart.

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## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Note that although some states required and administered academic achievement tests prior to 2001, with the passage of *NCLB* all states were required to administer such tests. States with pre-existing tests had to gain federal approval to continue these tests or modify them to meet federal requirements. States without such tests were required to develop them and secure federal approval.