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# School administration in a changing education sector: the US experience

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541

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Research, spanning half a century, points to the critical role of school administration and to the successful implementation of US government policies and programs. In part these findings reflect the times and a US educational governance system characterized by local control, a constitutionally-constrained federal government, resource-poor state governments, and an overall system of segment arrangements for governing education. However, the US education policy environment has changed dramatically over the past several decades, with standards and high stakes accountability becoming commonplace. The purpose of this paper is to examine the entailments of shifts in the policy environment for school administrative practice, focusing on how school leaders manage in the middle between this shifting external policy environment and classroom teachers.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The paper's focus is on how school administration manages the dual organizational imperatives of legitimacy and integrity in a changing institutional environment. This paper is an essay in which the authors reflect on the entailments of shifts in the education sector for school administration over the past quarter century in the USA.

**Findings** – While considerable change for school administrative practice is suggested, the authors argue that organizational legitimacy and organizational integrity are still central concerns for school leaders.

**Originality/value** – Although the paper's account is based entirely on the US education sector, several aspects of the framing may be relevant in other countries.

**Keywords** United States of America, Educational administration, Schools, Government policy, Leadership, Administration

**Paper type** Research paper

Over several decades, local, state, and federal policy makers in the USA have directed their attention and policy initiatives on classroom teaching, specifying what teachers should teach, in some cases how they should teach, and acceptable levels of student achievement. They have done so by mobilizing policy instruments – rewards and sanctions – for compliance with externally imposed performance standards. As a result of the dramatic change in the institutional environment of US schools over the last 25 years, curriculum standards and test-based accountability have become staples, perhaps even taken for granted, in the educational sector. Policy makers are not the only ones implicated in this transformation. Extra-system agents and agencies (e.g. comprehensive school reform designs, charter school networks, philanthropic institutions) have also played a prominent role, albeit with government support and incentives, in transforming the American education sector. These shifts in the institutional environment of America's schools represent a considerable departure for business as usual inside schools.

Though commentators often associated the transformation with the federal “No Child Left Behind” (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), 2001) legislation, these institutional shifts pre-date NCLB, as several state and local governments



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introduced standards and accountability mechanisms prior to NCLB. Careful, empirical, analysis suggests that the press for standardization and accountability in US education dates back at least to 1983, and more than likely earlier, with the publication of “A Nation at Risk” (Mehta, revise and resubmit, under review; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). These shifts in the education sector in the USA are not historically novel, nor are they unique to the education sector. As Jal Mehta points out, there were two other periods of rationalization efforts in the USA, one in the early 1900s and again in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Mehta, revise and resubmit, under review). The emergence of minimum competency testing in several US states in the 1970s might be seen as a precursor for the standards and accountability movement at the local, state, and federal levels in the 1980s and 1990s (Fuhrman and Elmore, 2004; Piphoo, 1978). Federal or national policy making in the USA often builds on, extends, and galvanizes local and state policy making initiatives (Fuhrman and Elmore, 2004). Further, these institutional shifts are not unique to education, more broadly reflecting the emergence of an “audit culture” across institutional sectors in the USA and indeed globally (Strathern, 2000, p. 2). In fields from health care to human service and higher education, we see a press for standardization, efficiency, and accountability (Colyvas, 2012; Espeland and Sauder, 2007; Power, 1994).

Though our paper focusses on the USA, the shifts in the educational sector we describe are not unique to the USA – these are global trends. For a quarter century, educational reform initiatives have spanned national boundaries as several countries, despite different political arrangements, borrow reform ideas from one another (Ball, 1999; Davies and Guppy, 1997; Whitty and Power, 2003). Some combination of standards, high-stakes accountability, and school performance metrics based on student achievement can be found in education policy making and more broadly in educational reform discourses in several countries spanning several continents over the past several decades. These reform themes and policy levers are part of policy discourses, and policy texts, that are transnational. In Singapore, for example, an accountability system implemented in the 1990s uses national rankings and rewards for high-performing schools (Ng, 2010). Since the Education Reform Act of 1988, school accountability based on student performance has been part of the education system in the UK enabling cross-school comparisons through “league tables” (Burgess *et al.*, 2010; Ranson, 1994; Tomlinson, 2001). In New Zealand, the early 1990s saw the emergence of national standards for school practice, curriculum content, student examination, and teacher qualification, as well as the publication of national “league tables” similar to those in the UK. These national standards were accompanied with the creation of new agencies to monitor performance and compliance and to grant accreditation to compliant institutions (Broadbent *et al.*, 1999). Policy initiatives in New Zealand also forced primary schools to create Boards of Trustees consisting mainly of elected parent representatives to monitor student progress against the national curriculum, though standards and targets were not widely used for student evaluation (Robinson and Timperley, 2000).

While the press for standardization, performance metrics, and accountability in the education sector can differ in terms of form, focus, and function between countries, there are many similarities. Indeed, supra-national organizations, such as Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and its PISA project, promote such standardization and the use of performance metrics tied to external tests (OECD, 2004). Though organizational and governance arrangements differ between countries, as do the broader societal culture and social arrangements in which schools operate,

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careful cross-country comparisons can inform how school administration operates in a radically changing institutional sector. We leave the comparative work in this paper to the reader, though we do offer a particular framing to guide and focus that work with respect to relations among school administration and the institutional environment.

With respect to the USA, the evidence suggests that these shifts in the educational sector, especially in government policy, increasingly make it beyond the schoolhouse door and even inside classrooms (Au, 2007; Clotfelter and Ladd, 1996; Herman, 2004; Mintrop and Sunderman, 2009; Valli and Buese, 2007). Research suggests, among other things, that these educational policy pressures influence what teachers teach – thereby marginalizing low-stakes subjects, diverting resources to students based on their likelihood of passing the test, and increasing the time devoted to teaching test-taking skills (Amrien and Berliner, 2002; Booher-Jennings, 2006; Darling-Hammond, 2004; Diamond and Spillane, 2004; Firestone *et al.*, 1998; Jacob, 2005; McNeil, 2002; Nichols and Berliner, 2007; Smith, 1998; Valenzuela, 2004; Wilson and Floden, 2001). At the same time, there is some evidence that high-stakes testing has increased student achievement, though variation between states is tremendous and the evidence with respect to narrowing the achievement gap is weak (Jacob, 2005; Lee, 2007; Mintrop and Sunderman, 2009; Neal and Schanzenbach, 2007; Wong *et al.*, 2009).

Much of the research attention has focussed on policy effects, typically student learning outcomes, as measured by standardized tests. There is also a growing literature on how this shifting policy environment is influencing, for worse and for better, classroom instruction. While these foci make sense, they often ignore other aspects of the school organization, potentially critical to understanding the implementation process of this new genre of education policy. In this paper we focus on one such aspect – school administration. For a half century, research on policy implementation has consistently identified the critical role of school-level leadership in the successful implementation of externally and internally initiated policies (Berman and McLaughlin, 1977; McLaughlin, 1990). There is good reason then to consider school administration in this shifting policy environment. Our focus in this manuscript is on how school administration manages the dual organizational imperatives of legitimacy and integrity in a changing institutional environment.

This paper is an essay in which we reflect on the entailments of shifts in the education sector for school administration over the past quarter century in the USA. While we draw selectively on the extant literature and use examples from empirical work, including our own research, to develop our argument, the paper is neither a literature review nor a report on the findings from an empirical study. Our essay is organized as follows: we begin with a retrospective, briefly and broadly considering how things once were by focussing on popular portrayals in the research literature of school administrative practice. By administrative practice we mean more than the school principal's work; though, consistent with several decades of research, we afford the principal a prominent place in school administration. Next, we consider the shifting policy discourses and policy texts in the USA over the past several decades identifying several central tendencies. We then consider the entailments of these shifts in the policy environment for school administrative practice. Specifically, we examine how school administration manages in a shifting US policy environment – how it manages external policy pressures that increasingly target classroom instruction. Exploring school administrative practice in a shifting policy environment, we look at how school leaders' respond in their day-to-day work. Getting inside the black box of the schoolhouse to look at school administrative practice up-close, we uncover how school

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leaders manage in the middle between external policy and classroom teachers as they work to increase cooperation with external policy. We conclude by pondering changes in school administrative practice in response to a changing institutional environment and suggesting some directions for cross-national work.

### **Educational policy and school administrative practice: retrospective**

Most consumers of the US education literature will be familiar with popular portrayals of the role of school administration in education policy implementation, where school administration is mostly though not always equated with the work of the school principal. The literature often depicts a system in which policy, school administration, and classroom instruction are loosely coupled or decoupled from one another on matters of the core technical work – instruction. School administrators, for example, are depicted as responding to environmental pressures by making symbolic or ceremonial changes to their schools' formal organizational structure, preserving the organization's legitimacy by conforming to institutional pressures, but avoiding any close internal coordination or external scrutiny of classroom instruction. Classroom instruction is portrayed as loosely coupled or decoupled from both the institutional environment (e.g. government policy) and from the school's administrative structure (Deal and Celotti, 1980; Firestone, 1985; Gamoran and Dreeben, 1986; Malen and Ogawa, 1988; Malen *et al.*, 1990). In this way, institutional conformity can take precedence over technical efficiency as schools strive for legitimacy and resources from their institutional environment. Consistent with these decoupled or loosely coupled portrayals, scholars also present the public schoolhouse, based on empirical research, as an "egg carton structure" where teachers practice mainly as isolates (Lortie, 1975). School leaders' work, despite their best intentions to focus on instruction, is shaped by a managerial imperative constraining their time on instructional matters (Cuban, 1988)[1].

Some more recent empirical literature offers another image of how schools might organize, portraying the school as a "professional community" in which teachers engage in instructionally focussed conversations, collaborate to develop and refine collective norms of work practice, and where classroom practice is de-privatized (Bryk and Schneider, 1996; Lewicki and Bunker, 1996; Louis *et al.*, 1995; McLaughlin and Talbert, 2001; Mishra, 1996). Related work points to the critical role of school leaders as instructional leaders in bringing about improvement in instruction (Bullard and Taylor, 1994; Darling-Hammond and Wise, 1985; Eubanks and Levine, 1983; Hallinger and Murphy, 1986; Purkey and Smith, 1985). While the available evidence suggested that "strong" professional communities were the exception rather than the norm, and that instructional leadership was weak at best, among American public schools, this literature did offer an alternative image of school administration and its relation to classroom instruction.

### **Changing policy discourses and texts**

Framing policy as both "text" and "discourse" assists with thinking analytically about the term (Ball, 1994, 2006, p. 44). When identified as text, policy involves both the policy makers' encoding of representations of ideas and the actors across the system then decoding these representations (Ball, 1994; Coburn, 2001; Cohen, 1990; Cohen and Weiss, 1993; Spillane, 2006). Policy discourses create the frameworks in which policy texts are situated. Based on the work of Foucault, Stephen Ball (2006) argues that policy discourses "produce frameworks of sense and obviousness with which policy is

thought, talked, and written about” (p. 44). Thus, policy discourses are systems of practice, beliefs, and values outlining what is acceptable, “obvious, common sense, and ‘true’” (Ball, 2008, p. 5). In and through these discourses, policy is developed, worked out, made sense of, negotiated, and disputed. Meanwhile, policy discourses in education systems are both enabled and sometimes constrained by policy texts as instantiated in practice. Personnel in education sector government agencies and extra-system agencies use policy texts to negotiate for resources, jockey for status, argue for a particular prognosis or solution to a problem and so on. Hence, policy texts both reflect policy discourses and contribute to the definition of those discourses by validating some ideas at the expense of others. It is important to remember that these policy discourses pertain not just to education practice in schools but also to education policy making practice at all levels of the system – local, state, and federal, and to educational research funding.

Over the past several decades, government agencies at all levels in the USA have become increasingly confident about flexing their policy muscles with respect to education. More important still, government agencies have gradually concerned themselves more with influencing the core work of schools, classroom teaching, and student learning, albeit in often very narrow ways. For example, a few subjects – typically English language arts and mathematics – have consumed most of policy makers’ attention. These developments can be traced back beyond key federal legislation such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001), to state and indeed local government policy initiatives (Lipman, 2004).

Most of these key themes in the US policy discourse were popular in state and local government policy texts prior to playing on the national stage (Smith and O’Day, 1990). Before NCLB, for example, Chicago and other school districts held schools accountable for student performance using sanctions (Lipman, 2004). Regardless of origins, these are discourses that have become more established over the past several decades, gaining prominence and conspicuousness (Fuhrman *et al.*, 2007):

- articulating student learning and performance standards centrally;
- aligning standards with state assessments of student learning;
- holding schools accountable for student performance on state assessments through sanctions and rewards;
- evidence-based practice using rigorous research and better testing data; and
- using markets to improve schools through competition.

While these ideas figure prominently in the current policy discourses in the USA, other themes feature less prominently or increasingly at the fringes (e.g. teacher professionalism, decentralization or local control, democratic goal of schooling).

Of course, while the federal government in the USA remains constitutionally constrained in matters of education, as well as administratively segmented and resource poor, neither the Bush nor Obama administrations have shied away from trying to influence education policy and practice with respect to America’s schools. This federal optimism is admirable considering the constraints they work under; however, history suggests caution is in order. The successful Soviet launch of Sputnik, at the height of the Cold War, prompted increasing attention to and more investment in education by a federal government fearful about American pre-eminence in the international arena. More federal education policy making activity ensued and over

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time contributed to more education policy activity at the state and local government levels (Spillane, 1996). New federal programs, such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) and the NCLB, defined new responsibilities and provided new resources for state and local government agencies, enabling them to expand (Cohen, 1982; Meyer *et al.*, 1987; Rowan, 1982). The federal government depends on state and local governments to develop policies and programs that support the goals and requirements of NCLB. State governments, for example, hold responsibility for student assessment, a key element of the NCLB legislation. Indeed, while some states in response to NCLB implemented assessments that measured more ambitious student learning goals, other states developed assessments that centered on more basic learning goals (Wong *et al.*, 2009). In this way, while state policy makers for the most part complied with “the letter of the law” in terms of assessing students annually in core subjects and reporting student achievement for different student groups, between-state differences in state assessments suggests considerable variability in compliance at the state level with the “spirit of the law.” Local school districts and schoolhouses, despite the ramped up federal and state incentives and sanctions, continue to be where the rubber of education policy meets the road of school improvement, though incentives and support do vary by state. Moreover, despite increased federal policy making on matters of instruction, there has been no decline in state and local district instructional policy making – policy making is not a zero-sum game, at least not in a fragmented federal system such as the USA (Fuhrman and Elmore, 1990; Spillane, 1996).

But, government instructional policy must be analyzed not simply in terms of its instrumental goals but also in terms of its broader entailments for the education system and extra-system. In the USA, government education policy making has contributed to the development of a sprawling and mostly unregulated extra-system of non-governmental agencies, including publishers, testing companies, professional associations, and private consultants (Burch, 2009; Cohen, 1982; Hill, 2007). Recent federal policies such as NCLB have opened up access to local education markets for firms in the for-profit and non-profit sectors (Burch, 2009; Hill, 2007). Lacking the administrative capacity, state and federal government agencies relied on these extra-system actors to provide many of the services required under their policies.

So while federal, state, and local government policy makers have gone to considerable lengths over the past several decades to target their policies at the technical core of schooling – specifying what teachers should teach, at times how they should teach, and acceptable levels of mastery for students – their initiatives, which represent a considerable shift in the policy environment of schools, ultimately depend on school administration for their successful implementation. These instructionally focussed policies are also transforming educational governance arrangements by changing the relations among existing agencies and creating opportunities for new providers to emerge (Burch, 2009; Cohen, 1982). Increasing federal, state, and local government policy activity does not always result in more streamlined arrangements for governing classroom instruction, but often more segmented and unwieldy arrangements (Fuhrman *et al.*, 2007; Spillane, 2004; Tyack and Tobin, 1994).

Still, local schools are left to figure out the entailments of policy makers’ externally imposed measures of success for school and classroom practice, and they are left to do so in a fragmented education system where instructional guidance is often weak and inconsistent. Though schools are held accountable for student learning outcomes as measured by state standardized tests in selected subjects, and these tests vary

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tremendously between states, they are left to a great extent to their own devices to figure out the particulars, albeit with more or less support from district and state depending on their situation (Wong *et al.*, 2009). Moreover, NCLB and state policy requirements place differential pressures on school districts and schools depending on their student populations. As a result, the institutional environment is experienced differently by school administrators and teachers depending on how they are positioned *vis-à-vis* the broader institutional sector. Again, these circumstances may be especially pronounced in the USA due to the fragmented infrastructure to support instruction (Cohen and Moffitt, 2009).

### **Organizational legitimacy and organizational integrity in a changing institutional environment**

Even in the face of tremendous change in the institutional environment of America's schools, school leaders still have to deal with the dual organizational imperatives of legitimacy and integrity. Schools, like some other institutions such as universities, are situated in a "pluralistic" institutional environment, marked by "persistent internal tensions" that arise in response to potentially "contending logics" and the tendencies among diverse stakeholders to "project different identities and purposes upon it" (Kraatz, 2009, p. 71). In the USA, market, bureaucratic, and professional logics increasingly compete in policy discourses often creating tensions within schools as teachers and administrators struggle to manage these competing logics (Hallett, 2007; Spillane *et al.*, 2011).

The demands placed on US schools by external stakeholders may be more diverse than in most other countries, especially countries where the education system developed as part of the nation state or was imposed by a colonial power (Cohen and Spillane, 1994). In contrast, the US education system grew up from below as part of a common school movement resulting in a system, and vast extra-system, where matters of authority and jurisdiction over education have been unsettled (Cohen and Spillane, 1994; Confrey and Stohl, 2004). While state governments have the constitutional authority on educational matters in the USA, they have delegated a large part of the administrative responsibility for schooling to local government and for much of the last century federal involvement was confined to specialized categorical programs. Educational governance and instructional guidance in the US education system is both vertical and horizontally segmented and in a constant state of flux. To complicate matters, there is considerable disagreement among Americans on the means and ends of schooling. Under these organizational, political, and cultural arrangements, US schools are left to "manage" diverse and sometimes competing demands on their attention, demands that in other educational systems are "managed" at the national level.

Dealing with pluralistic institutional environments requires institutional work that falls, broadly, into two main categories (Kraatz, 2009). First, there is organizational legitimacy as school leaders strive to gain the support of diverse stakeholders by demonstrating to those stakeholders their school's "cultural fitness." In pluralistic organizations such as schools, school leaders have to convince diverse stakeholders that the organization is legitimate – a "real" school – as stakeholders expect it to be. As policy makers work increasingly to define this cultural fitness in terms of student learning in a few core school subjects and as measured by state mandated standardized achievement tests, it shifts the metric for legitimacy. Indeed, the core work of schools, long buffered from external scrutiny by school administrators, is now

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exposed to such scrutiny. To the extent that various stakeholders, not just policy makers, take to these new metrics, school administrators have to attend to them in order to preserve the legitimacy of their school. Moreover, under NCLB, schools in the most challenging circumstances, charged with educating students who traditionally have been disenfranchised by the system, have more opportunities not to meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) as defined by NCLB and states. In the era of high-stakes accountability tied to student performance, the threats to legitimacy are greatest in schools enrolling poor students, students of color, and students for whom English is not a first language. Other policy developments such as the emergence of charter schools and turnaround schools may also threaten a school's organizational legitimacy if enrollment declines as the school being to lose students to a neighboring charter school.

"Organizational integrity" is also important. School leaders must work at knitting together the expectations of diverse stakeholders in order to create an "organizational self" that is minimally coherent, integrated, and self-consistent (Kraatz, 2009; Mead, 1934; Selznick, 1992). Addressing organizational functions such as setting direction for the school and developing short and long terms goals to realize this direction are critical when it comes to organizational integrity. The appearance of self-consistency, integration, coherence, and reliability are critical for school leaders as they strive for organizational integrity. School leaders play an important role in helping their schools manage the dual imperatives of legitimacy and integrity (Kraatz and Block, 2008).

The shifting policy environment in the USA puts pressure on school administrators to attend to instructional matters as measured by student performance metrics in core school subjects and to engage in efforts at recoupling the external policy environment with administrative practice and with classroom instruction. Indeed, scholars argue that as the institutional environment of schools "becomes more unitary and as rules about work in the technical core become more specific" and "get attached to outcomes or other inspection systems," they would have a stronger effect on work activity in schools (Rowan and Miskel, 1999, p. 373). These scholars hypothesized that the emergence of a more elaborate technical environment in the education sector (e.g. standards and high-stakes testing) would lead to schools facing much stronger environmental pressures on their core technical work – teaching and learning. As discussed in the introduction, there is some empirical evidence to support this hypothesis, with several studies documenting that government policies influence school leaders and classroom teachers for good and bad (Booher-Jennings, 2006; Diamond and Spillane, 2004; Firestone *et al.*, 1998; Jacob, 2005; Lee, 2007; McNeil, 2002; Mintrop and Sunderman, 2009; Neal and Schanzenbach, 2007; Wong *et al.*, 2009). We discuss this more as follows.

Though the institutional environment of schools has changed in dramatic ways, most notably with a very definite focus on the technical core of schooling, the dual imperatives of organization legitimacy and integrity remain – though the challenge of meeting them has likely changed with student achievement on state tests now being the key performance metric. How do school administrators manage organizational integrity and legitimacy in this changing institutional environment?

### **Managing in the middle: administrative practice in a shifting policy environment**

High-stakes accountability levers that are directly tied to instruction, if they are to work, operate in and through particular school administrative arrangements.

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Of course, school leaders are not passive receptors of their environments. Rather, they enact their environments; that is, they “construct, rearrange, single out, and demolish many objective features of their surroundings” (Weick, 1979, p. 164). School leaders as mid-level managers (Harris, 2002; Hatch, 2001; Leithwood *et al.*, 2004; Louis *et al.*, 2010; Spillane *et al.*, 2002) occupy a somewhat unique situation: their work focusses in at least two directions in the organizational hierarchy. On the one hand, school leaders are dependent on their institutional environment for the legitimacy of their organization – local school council, school district, state, parents, and local community. On the other hand, they are also dependent on classroom teachers and students for the organizational integrity of their buildings. Without the cooperation of teachers and students, the coherence, integration, and self-consistency of their school is likely to fall apart. Moreover, organizational integrity and organizational legitimacy are interdependent: in a changing institutional environment, legitimacy is increasingly tied to student achievement as measured by standardized tests aligned, more or less, with district and state standards. The standardization advances by these policy initiatives demand a particular sort of organizational integrity that is tied to externally imposed standards. This externally imposed standardization of instruction flies in the face of business as usual for most US schools where isolated teacher practitioners with considerable professional autonomy over instructional matters was the dominant operating procedure (Lortie, 1975).

Relations between school administrators and teachers are characterized by interdependency and conflict (Lipsky, 1980). The objectives of school administrators and teachers, despite the rhetoric of what is best for students, are often in conflict with teachers having a strong desire to maintain their professional autonomy over instructional matters (Hallett, 2007; Spillane *et al.*, 2011). School leaders seek to achieve results that they see as consistent with federal, state, and school district objectives and thus have to work to constrain teachers’ autonomy and discretion. Still, teachers have resources critical to student achievement with which they can resist school leaders’ desires, even in the era of high-stakes accountability policy. Teachers’ expertise, their willingness to change, and to engage seriously in the work of instructional improvement are all critical resources. At the same time, teachers are to some extent dependent on school leaders who allocate resources including funding, curricular materials, and class assignments. The nature of teaching as a practice also contributes to this interdependency between school administrators and teachers (Cohen, 1988; Lipsky, 1980). Overall, while teachers depend on administrators, administrators also depend on teachers. And of course, school administrators depend on district administrators who evaluate their performance and decide if they are to continue in their positions.

How do school leaders manage in such circumstances? How do they juggle the dual demands of organizational integrity and legitimacy, especially in an institutional environment that challenges norms of classroom privacy and teachers autonomy?

As one might expect considering the threat to organizational legitimacy posed by external performance metrics tied to student achievement on state tests, school leaders appear to have paid attention to standards and test-based accountability and responded in strategic ways that often involved gaming the system, though this varies across schools and school systems depending at least in part on the student population. Among other things, school leaders emphasize tested subjects and instruction in test-taking strategies as well as reclassifying students and not actively preventing students from dropping out (Anagnostopoulos and Rutledge, 2007;

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Diamond and Spillane, 2004; Figlio and Getzler, 2002; Ladd and Zelli, 2002). Further, school administrators targeted low-performing students, particularly Hispanic and black students, through expanding exemption rates by classifying more students as special needs, encouraging absences, and aiming instruction toward these subgroups (Cullen and Reback, 2006; Lauen and Gaddis, 2012). Still, school leaders also worked to try and create conditions that might contribute substantively to improvement in teaching and learning. Such efforts included transforming the organizational infrastructure, including initiating weekly staff meetings, department-wide curriculum development, designing organizational routines that were tied directly to instruction and its improvement in tested subjects, meeting with teachers, and creating leadership teams to supervise their schools (Anagnostopoulos and Rutledge, 2007; Ladd and Zelli, 2002; Mintrop, 2003; Spillane *et al.*, 2004). These efforts not only focussed on organizational legitimacy but also organization integrity as they strove to create a more coherent instructional program, at least in tested subjects. Of course, schools, depending in important measure on their student populations, experience state, federal, and local government accountability policies differently. For schools that enroll mostly students of color and students living in poverty, for example, there are more ways to fail to meet AYP under NCLB requirements.

These accounts, though we are not questioning their empirical accuracy in any way, fail to capture the dilemmas US school administrators must manage in light of recent shifts in the institutional environment. Moreover, we believe that many accounts may underplay the “good faith” efforts of school administrators in the USA to manage organizational legitimacy and integrity in a changed institutional sector where externally imposed performance metrics – student achievement on standardized test – has become the coin of the realm. Specifically, we want to examine efforts by school leaders to transform their schools’ administrative infrastructure. What follows is an attempt to articulate a series of hypotheses about the school administrative response to high-stakes accountability in the USA that goes beyond gaming the system, though fully acknowledging that this happens, based on empirical work in a handful of schools. Future empirical work will have to test these hypotheses though in some respects it may be too late if the institutional environment becomes more settled, though that remains to be seen.

New government instructional policy did not walk into schools and invoke itself. Federal, state, and local policy makers depended on school leaders to invoke and frame the new policy directives and their entailments for local practice especially with respect to the school’s instructional program – including what content to teach and how to teach it (Spillane *et al.*, 2011). Our ongoing work across several empirical studies (Spillane and Anderson, under review; Spillane and Hunt, 2010; Spillane and Kim, under review; Spillane *et al.*, 2011) suggests several ways in which school administrators manage in the middle in these changing times.

Our work in schools, early in these recent institutional shifts and prior to NCLB, suggests that school leaders engaged in elaborate efforts to design the formal structure of their schools in an effort to transform school administrative practice so it was more responsive to and less distinctive from external policy directives and classroom instruction (Spillane *et al.*, 2011). More specifically, they engaged in extensive efforts to build local school infrastructures that supported tighter connections between external policy and classroom instruction, facilitated by the school’s formal organizational structure. These efforts were not mere fiddling with the existing structure, but represented extensive redesign efforts. By formal structure or infrastructure here we

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mean aspect of the formal organization including but not limited to formally designated leadership positions and their responsibilities, formal organizational routines (e.g. grade-level meetings, leadership team meetings) and tools (classroom observation protocols). Formal structure or infrastructure is both constitutive of and constituted in practice – without structure there is no practice. Thus, to understand administrative practice and changes in that practice attention to formal structure or infrastructure is critical. School leaders, for example, designed organizational routines to standardize their instructional program both vertically and horizontally, working to align classroom practice with the content covered in state and district standards and student assessments. School leaders intended these organizational routines to standardize curricula, monitor student and teacher performance, and make classroom practice more transparent.

Veteran staff in the schools in our studies reported that these transformations of the formal structure represented a dramatic shift in ways of doing business at their schools. Our analysis of these formal organizational routines in practice showed that, rather than buffering instruction from external regulation, these routines in practice promoted recoupling of government regulation and classroom teaching (Spillane *et al.*, 2011). These routines promoted recoupling because school leaders used state and district regulation as templates and rubrics in performing key technical efficiency functions including standardizing the instructional program, setting and maintaining direction, identifying and addressing needs including professional development, and monitoring instruction. Formal school organizational routines facilitated recoupling of government regulation with the technical core by making classroom instruction more transparent, albeit some aspects of instruction and some school subjects more than others. Moreover, these formal organizational routines focussed almost exclusively on those school subjects tested by external agencies – mathematics and language arts. Further, our analysis suggests that the implementation of these changes to the formal organizational structure of schools met with considerable resistance from school staff as they contended with a taken for granted professional logic (e.g. teacher autonomy) that many veteran teachers cherished (Hallett, 2007; Spillane *et al.*, 2011).

These local infrastructure-building initiatives may be uniquely American in that most US schools reside in a system where the infrastructure to support instruction is impoverished and underdeveloped (Cohen and Moffitt, 2009). As a result, school administrators are left to design the infrastructure to support the sort of instructional changes pressed by the external policy environment. This is a huge undertaking – one that we suspect is not delegated to school administrators in other education systems. Many observers of the system fail to recognize this, assuming that all that it takes to implement high-stakes accountability policies is for individual school leaders, typically the school principal, to change their behavior *vis-à-vis* teachers. In reality, school administrators are left, in this changing institutional environment, to design entirely new formal organizational structures in their schools that support tighter coupling between policy, administration, and instruction. And, they design these structures for a few selected tested subjects. This is a departure from a time when school administration buffered classroom instruction from external scrutiny with myth and ceremony (Meyer and Rowan, 1978).

In implementing this new formal organizational structure and in performing organizational routines, school leaders did not rely solely on their own positional authority or on the authority of government agencies to get teachers to cooperate in performing the new routines and with their sense of policy makers' directives

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(Spillane and Anderson, under review). Instead, school leaders worked at framing policy so as to appeal to teachers' interests, values, goals, and norms, reflecting their position in the middle between an increasingly demanding external institutional environment on matters of instruction on the one hand, and teachers accustomed to professional autonomy and discretion on the other. In their efforts to convince teachers to comply with external government policy related to instruction, school administrators relied on various persuasion tactics, reflecting their positions in the middle between external stakeholders (e.g. policy makers) and internal stakeholders (e.g. teachers). School leaders deployed persuasion tactics (Lindblom, 1977): to persuade teachers and compel their cooperation with external policy, school leaders worked to frame policy in ways that would appeal to teachers' interests, values, goals, and norms using agenda-setting, aligning, asserting their in-group identity as teachers, other-oriented dispositions, and brokering of information and policy framing (Spillane and Anderson, under review).

These infrastructure redesign efforts were not the only action that school leaders took. As discussed above, school leaders also promoted tested subjects, the teaching of test-taking strategies, the reclassification of students to improve their school's performance, and targeting students who they thought could perform better on the test (Anagnostopoulos and Rutledge, 2007; Cullen and Reback, 2006; Diamond and Spillane, 2004; Figlio and Getzler, 2002; Ladd and Zelli, 2002; Lauen and Gaddis, 2012). School leaders also sought out programs and professional development that would help teachers improve their teaching in tested subjects.

These changes in infrastructure also highlight the role of other school leaders, in addition to the school principal, in school administrative practice. While the literature often portrays the school principal as a "lone ranger" who operates as a solo practitioner in the schoolhouse, increasingly scholarship points to the principal as one of several individuals involved in the work of leading and managing (Camburn *et al.*, 2003; Copland, 2001; Gronn, 2000; Hargreaves and Fink, 2004; Harris, 2005; Leithwood *et al.*, 2007; MacBeath *et al.*, 2004; Portin *et al.*, 2003; Spillane *et al.*, 2007; Spillane and Diamond, 2007; Timperley, 2005). Moreover, principals and these other school leaders, such as assistant principals and part-time and full-time administrators and specialists, are especially central to leading and managing instruction. In one study, for example, of 30 elementary schools in a mid-sized urban school district we found that, while the principal's day is largely spent performing administrative duties, principals nonetheless devote between 20 and 30 percent of their time to instruction and curriculum work (Spillane and Hunt, 2010). In this same district, we found that part-time formally designated school leaders (e.g. coaches, mentor teachers) were key advice givers and brokers in the English language arts and mathematics instructional advice networks (Spillane and Kim, under review). This is not a US phenomenon; empirical work in several countries captures the distribution of responsibility for school leadership and management over administrators and teachers leaders (Bennett *et al.*, 2003; Day, 2005; Gronn, 2000; Harris, 2005; Leithwood *et al.*, 1999, 2007; MacBeath *et al.*, 2004; Moolenaar *et al.*, 2011; Notman and Henry, 2011; Slegers *et al.*, 2002; Timperley, 2005), though there are likely important differences between countries in the distribution of leadership and management responsibilities that have yet to be explored by sound empirical work. Though policy makers tend to focus their attention mostly on the school principal, our account suggests that the work of leading and managing the schoolhouse, especially with respect to the core technical work of instruction involves an array of other full-time and part-time leaders. Further, the

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design and redesign of the school's infrastructure is a core component of school-level efforts to transform school administrative practice.

### Conclusion

Federal, state, and local government policy makers' desire to regulate instruction in US public schools, albeit in select school subjects, has steadily grown over recent decades. These policy initiatives have increasingly put pressure on school leaders to adapt their organization to meet new demands from the institutional environment in order to maintain their schools' organizational integrity and legitimacy. School leaders manage these dual imperatives in this changing institutional environment on a day-to-day basis by working to transform the school's infrastructure so that administrative practice is more tightly coupled with policy and with classroom instruction. This design and redesign work is intended to make the school's technical core less private and more transparent. Further, rather than rely solely on political authority, school leaders also use persuasion in an effort to convince teachers to heed and respond to a shifting policy environment.

While our account is based entirely on the US education sector, we suspect that several aspects of our framing may be relevant in other countries. As noted in the introduction, the US education sector does not have a monopoly on standards and high-stakes accountability based on common metrics – typically student achievement on standardized tests; these policy levers are relatively commonplace in policy discourses in several countries. Of course, the particulars of these policy levers and their deployment vary by country. Moreover, government arrangements, political culture, and social arrangements also differ across countries and these in turn have implications for how standards and accountability are played out in schools (Cohen and Spillane, 1994).

Still, organizational integrity and organizational legitimacy are likely to be concerns for schools cross-nationally, though their relative import will depend in some measure on the pluralism of the institutional environment and the prevalence of tensions as diverse stakeholders make different and often conflicting demands on schools. For example, in some respects the legitimacy imperative may be especially pronounced in the USA due to the education system's local origins (as distinct from an arm of the nation state) and the sprawling and continually shifting school governance system that spans locally elected school boards, a state government apparatus, and the federal government. Add to this a vast and ever expanding extra-system of textbook publishers, lobbyists, testing agencies, charter school networks, professional development providers and so on, that operate at each level of the system, and the diversity of demands placed on schools is not at all surprising. In countries where the education systems are a product of the nation state (e.g. France) or former colonial powers (e.g. India, Ireland), stakeholders' demands may be less diverse or their influence confined by law or tradition to one level of the system (e.g. collective bargaining among the various partners at the national level). Under these arrangements, school leaders may be less susceptible to the demands of diverse stakeholders. At the same time, it is probable that both the legitimacy and integrity imperatives become more pronounced at times of major change in the institutional environment as new ideas and institutional logics become prevalent in both policy discourses and texts. Such has been the case in the USA and several other countries over the past few decades.

The organizational legitimacy and organizational integrity imperatives provide a potentially powerful framework for cross-national work on school administrative

practice for a few reasons. First, the framework situates the work of school leadership and management firmly in the institutional sector pressing scholars to systematically examine how school leaders make sense of, notice, and respond to their institutional environment, in both settled and unsettled times, as they work to lead and manage schools. As a result, researchers are pressed to not give accounts of autonomous school leaders working in an institutional vacuum but to take account of the broader institutional environment that informs and infuses their work is both constituted of and constitutive in school administrative practice. Second, systematic attention to both organizational legitimacy and integrity imperatives in studies across several countries would enable the field to understand how differences in educational governance arrangements, social arrangements, and culture interact with school administrative practice.

### Note

1. Our focus on the school level should not be construed as negating the role of other levels of the school system including the Local Education Agency or school district, as well state and federal agencies. School district offices, for example, are critical in understanding the implementation of state and federal policies and programs (Anderson, 2003; Anderson and Togneri, 2005; Firestone, 1989; Honig, 2003, 2006; Spillane, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2004). Still, school leaders and teachers are the final brokers of education policy, especially in a federal system where authority is still segmented vertically and horizontally.

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