New principals, accountability, and commitment in low-performing schools

Matthew Shirrell
School of Education and Social Policy, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, USA

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine first-year principals’ sense-making about two potentially conflicting demands as they take over low-performing urban schools: the demand to exert control over their teachers’ practice, and the need to build their teachers’ trust, collegiality, and commitment.

Design/methodology/approach – This study draws on a series of surveys and interviews with 12 first-year principals that took over some of the lowest-performing public schools in one large urban district.

Findings – Some principals begin their first year seeing their work to build accountability and commitment as complementary, while others see these two areas as in tension. Principals remain relatively consistent in these approaches over their first year on the job, although some principals change their views, generally coming to see these two areas as increasingly separate over time.

Research limitations/implications – Future work should examine principals’ work to balance the demands of accountability and commitment in a variety of organizational contexts.

Practical implications – Principal preparation may benefit from training principals on the particular challenges they may face as they work with teachers in low-performing schools. Accountability systems may also seek to alter the demands placed on novice principals.

Originality/value – Despite the centrality of principals to school improvement, the prevalence of high-stakes school accountability, and findings on the importance of commitment to school success, little empirical research has examined how principals make sense of the potentially conflicting demands of accountability and commitment in highly pressured circumstances.

Keywords Principals, Leadership, Accountability, Teachers, Administration

Paper type Research paper

Over the last two decades, the move toward standards-based accountability has been one of the prevailing trends in education, shifting the central focus of schools from managing inputs to improving student outcomes (Clotfelter and Ladd, 1996; Elmore, 2004). School leaders have responded to school accountability by altering organizational routines to increase their monitoring of teachers, promote standardization of instruction, and make teachers’ instruction more transparent (Hallett, 2010; Spillane et al., 2011). As standards-based accountability has promoted increased control over the core work of schools, another approach to school improvement has emphasized that relational trust and professional community among school staff are central aspects of effective schools, and particularly crucial to improving low-performing schools (Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Bryk et al., 2010; Louis et al., 1996; McLaughlin and Talbert, 2001).

The author would like to thank Jim Spillane, David Figlio, and Kirabo Jackson for their valuable input and support. This research was supported by funding from the National Academy of Education/Spencer Foundation; the P3 study was funded by Spencer Foundation Grant no. 200900092. The opinions expressed herein do not represent the views of the funders.
Principals are primary figures in the implementation of school accountability (Hallett, 2010; Spillane et al., 2002), and are similarly crucial to creating relational trust and professional communities in their schools (Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Bryk et al., 2010; Kruse et al., 1995; Weindling and Dimmock, 2006). In all schools – but particularly urgently in the lowest-performing schools – principals must respond to both imperatives simultaneously, meeting the demands of accountability by exerting increased control over their teachers while at the same time building their teachers’ sense of commitment and community.

This study examines how these potentially conflicting imperatives are made sense of by first-year principals[1] that take over low-performing and highly pressured urban schools. Building on theory about organizational designs centered on “control” and “commitment” (Rowan, 1990), as well as prior work on the importance of sense-making about policy (Hill, 2001; Louis, 1980; Spillane, 2004; Spillane et al., 2002), this study analyzes a series of interviews with 12 first-year principals that took over some of the lowest-performing and most highly pressured schools in Chicago. The analysis explores the ways that these new principals make sense of the demands of accountability and commitment, and examines how accountability threats focussed on low-performing schools create unique challenges for some new principals.

Theoretical framing

Accountability, control, and commitment

A central premise of school accountability is that increasing control over schools and teachers is an effective means to improve student learning. From an economic perspective, school accountability seeks to address a “principal-agent problem” that arises because of the traditional difficulty faced by school administrators in monitoring student outcomes, as well as the misalignment of administrators’ and teachers’ goals (Figlio and Ladd, 2008; Gibbons, 1998; Ladd and Zelli, 2002). Organizational theory suggests that school accountability seeks increased control over schools and teachers in an attempt to more closely “couple” their work to the broader demands of the educational system (Bryk et al., 2010; Cohen, 2011; Elmore, 2004; Hallett, 2010; Lortie, 1975; Meyer and Rowan, 1977, 1978; Rowan, 1990).

Building on research outside of education, another popular approach to school improvement stresses that building collegiality and “commitment” is the most direct path to school improvement (Lazega, 2001; Rowan, 1990). This approach is rooted in the belief that teaching is unpredictable and complex, and that teacher judgment and expertise are central to its success, requiring collaboration and collegiality across levels of the organization (Rowan, 1990). With the strict hierarchy diminished in importance, commitment to one another, and to the values and goals of the organization, becomes the key glue that unifies and maintains the organization (Lazega, 2001; Rowan, 1990). Work on school improvement has demonstrated that trust, cohesion, and professional community are key aspects of successful schools, and crucial to improving low-performing schools in particular (Bryk et al., 1993; Bryk and Schneider, 2002; Johnson, 1990; Kruse et al., 1995; Louis et al., 1996; Spillane et al., 2002).

Principals’ roles in highly pressured schools

Principals are central to both accountability- and commitment-based approaches to school improvement. School leaders, particularly principals, conduct much of the actual work of implementing accountability in individual schools in ways that shape
instructional practices (Spillane et al., 2002, 2011). Principals are also central to the development of a “viable collective” in low-performing schools (Bryk et al., 2010, p. 63). In schools that face accountability pressure, principals work to gain legitimacy in the eyes of teachers and build teacher cooperation (Spillane et al., 2002). We know little about how principals make sense of the relationship between these two demands, however, which is the focus of this paper.

The accountability and commitment approaches are not mutually exclusive, and often coexist, with the relative emphasis placed on each varying from school to school (Desimone, 2006). However, there is reason to believe that these two aspects of principals’ work might be in tension. As mid-level managers, principals face the challenge of shaping their work to demands from above, while at the same time relying on those below them for success (Lipsky, 1980; Spillane et al., 2002). Managers and street-level workers (such as teachers) are dependent on one another, but their relations are often marked by conflict, particularly in regards to autonomy (Lipsky, 1980). This conflict is particularly salient in education, where custom has long dictated that individual teachers have a great deal of privacy and autonomy, and principals’ power to alter teachers’ practice has been limited, making principals’ dependency on teachers even stronger (Elmore, 2004; Lortie, 1975). School accountability directly conflicts with these assumptions about the work of teaching, and this conflict can cause significant tensions and conflict (Elmore, 2004). Indeed, teachers often express dissatisfaction with various aspects of accountability policy, particularly limitations on teacher autonomy, increases in monitoring, and standardization of curriculum and teaching (Crocco and Costigan, 2007; Elmore, 2004). More generally, increased bureaucratic control over teaching can leave teachers dissatisfied with their work (McNeil, 1986), echoing findings that more mechanistic forms of management can diminish workers’ commitments to their organizations (Rowan, 1990).

Principals of low-performing, highly pressured schools face a particular tension between the demands of accountability and the demand to build commitment among their teachers. Low-performing schools require a great deal of change, often in a short time, and teachers’ commitment is paramount to making this change; however, these schools also face a great number of problems that principals must proactively and immediately confront, often forcing them to assert control over their teachers’ practice (Bryk et al., 2010). The challenge of reconciling these two demands is captured well by Parkay et al. (1992, p. 70), who note that principals must “communicate respect for the vision of others, even while encouraging others to subscribe to theirs.” This is a challenging task in all schools, let alone those whose performance has historically been poor.

The tension between accountability and commitment may also be particularly strong for principals during their first years on the job. Novice principals confront the challenge of both integrating themselves into the cultures of their schools and actively working to shape those cultures at the same time (Crow, 2006; Weindling and Dimmock, 2006). According to novice principals, improving social aspects of school life such as staff morale and communication is an important early priority (Weindling and Dimmock, 2006). Over the course of their first several years as principals, novices generally progress from asserting “positional power,” derived from the office of principal, to “personal power,” derived from their relationships with teachers and other stakeholders in their schools (Parkay et al., 1992). Yet first-year principals must also balance building trust and cooperation with establishing authority and accountability within their schools (Lee, 2015). The degree and kinds of difficulties new principals face
in these efforts may be dictated by whether or not they represent a continuity or discontinuity with the past, in terms of the magnitude of the changes they seek to make (Lee, 2015; Weindling and Dimmock, 2006).

**Novice principals’ sense-making about their work**

First-year principals’ sense-making efforts are crucial to addressing both accountability and commitment. The first year on the job is a time when new principals’ pre-conceived ideas about their roles, based largely on their professional socialization, may conflict with their organizational socialization into the realities of their schools (Crow, 2006; Weindling and Dimmock, 2006). These conflicts trigger “sense-making” processes for new principals, during which principals attempt to understand, interpret, and respond to their new realities (Louis, 1980; Weindling and Dimmock, 2006). Little prior research, however, examines principals’ sense-making about the demands of accountability and commitment. One recent study described the ways that one first-year principal’s efforts to “recouple” classroom practice to broader accountability mandates disrupted teacher autonomy and caused tensions and divisions within a school, which later had to be addressed through an increased focus on relationships (Hallett, 2010). These findings hint at one way that the tensions between accountability and commitment might play out in low-performing urban schools, but since this was the only school in the study where such a tension occurred, it is difficult to make generalizations based on the findings.

This study builds on prior work by more fully exploring the ways that first-year principals make sense of the relationship between accountability and commitment, and how these conceptions change during their first year on the job. Drawing on a series of interviews with new principals in low-performing, highly pressured urban schools, this study investigates the following two research questions:

**RQ1.** How do new principals make sense of the relationship between accountability and commitment before the start of the school year?

**RQ2.** Do new principals’ conceptions of the relationship between accountability and commitment change during their first year as principals? If they change, how do they change?

This study sheds light on new principals’ sense-making around these important aspects of their work.

**Research methods**

**Data**

*Principal policy and practice (P3) study.* Data for this study comes from the P3 study, a mixed-methods investigation of the early career experiences of new elementary school principals in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS). The P3 study focussed on two cohorts of new CPS principals: the first began their first year as principals in the 2009-2010 school year, the second cohort in 2010-2011. This study focusses on the subset of principals who were interviewed each year. In 2009-2010, 23 new principals were selected to maximize variation in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, school type, school performance level, school size, school geographic location, and student demographics; 19 of these principals (83 percent) agreed to participate and remained in the final sample. In 2010-2011, 19 principals were randomly selected to be interviewed, 17 of whom (90 percent) agreed to participate.
Selected principals participated in a series of three semi-structured interviews that each lasted between 45 and 100 minutes. The first interview took place after the principal was hired but before the start of the school year (between July and September); the second interview took place in November or December of the principal's first year; and the final interview took place the summer following principals' first year, usually in July. Interviews were conducted in private, usually at the school where the principal worked, and principals were compensated with a $50 gift card for each interview. This study uses data from all three interviews to explore changes in principals' conceptions of accountability and commitment over time.

Each of the three interviews was based on a common protocol, although there were slight variations in the questions asked during each interview. The interviews focused on new principals’ transitions into the job, particularly the challenges and goals they faced or anticipated facing, their experiences during their first year, and the expectations and responses of various groups of stakeholders, including teachers. Particularly relevant to this study were questions that focused on the challenges that principals faced in their schools during their first year. Prior to their first year as principals, new principals were asked which challenges they anticipated facing during their first year on the job; in subsequent interviews, principals were asked to reflect on the challenges they had actually faced in their work. Other questions focused more specifically on new principals’ work with their teachers.

Sample selection. To select new principals who faced particularly strong accountability pressure, a theoretical sampling strategy (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was used to select principals who were entering schools that were previously poorly performing and under threat of sanction, where accountability pressure was theorized to be greatest. The sample was limited to principals whose schools, in the year before they took over the principalship, were rated at the lowest level of the district’s academic performance index, and were also under probation from the district. Chicago’s schools had long been held accountable for performance: in the mid-1990s, the district created an accountability system which placed schools on probation for low performance, and allowed schools to be reconstituted with new principals and teachers if they continued to fail to make gains (De la Torre et al., 2013; Spillane et al., 2011). In the late 2000s, the district’s focus on accountability for performance strengthened further, with an increasing emphasis on “school turnarounds” for underperforming schools (De la Torre et al., 2013).

In total, 12 principals in the P3 sample took over schools that were the district’s lowest level of academic performance and were also on probation from the district, six from the first cohort and six from the second. Most of these new principals were African American (seven of 12, or 58 percent) or white (three of 12, or 25 percent), but the principals were nearly evenly split in terms of gender (seven women, five men). All of the new principals had prior experience as teachers, and 11 of the 12 held master’s degrees, but there was a large range in their years of teaching experience, from a low of five years to a high of nearly 20. The principals also varied in terms of their prior experience in school administration, but generally had relatively little administrative experience. One principal had been co-principal of the school the prior year; one principal had previously been the school’s assistant principal; and one principal had taken over the school near the end of the prior school year.

The student populations of the schools these principals entered were all made up entirely of non-white students, and greater than 95 percent of the students in every...
school were low income. Most schools (nine of 12) served predominantly African American students (the remaining three served Hispanic students or a mix of African American and Hispanic students). The schools were also quite large, with an average size of approximately 400 students, although several schools had fewer than 250 students, while others had more than 600. There was also variation in the number of years that schools had been on probation from the district, with one school previously on probation for only a single year, and another school previously on probation for more than ten. Four schools were “turnaround” schools, three of which had previously been “reconstituted” as part of their turnaround, meaning that their entire faculties, as well as their administrators, had been removed, and a new faculty and principal had been hired in their place (De la Torre et al., 2013). None of the principals in the sample, however, was the first principal of that turnaround.

Data analysis
Coding for this study alternated between rounds of closed and open coding. The first round of analysis focussed on data reduction (Miles and Huberman, 1994). In this round of coding, NVivo 10 was used to extract all portions of the interview transcripts where principals discussed their teachers; subsequent rounds of coding were performed entirely on these excerpts. A priori codes for accountability and commitment were then applied to the transcripts, as well as a code for “other,” to capture related aspects of principals’ discussions of their work with teachers that did not fit neatly into either of these two codes. Definitions of these codes were purposefully broad, and designed to capture a variety of aspects of accountability, including principals’ efforts to shape teacher autonomy, standardization, and transparency, as well as aspects of commitment discussed by Rowan (1990) such as trust, cohesion, motivation, and community.

To examine principals’ conceptions of the relationship between accountability and commitment, an open coding strategy (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) was first used on several interview transcripts, focussing on those portions where principals discussed both accountability and commitment. Integrating and separating accountability and commitment, as well as the degree of tension or complementarity between these two areas, emerged as themes from this round of coding. A series of memos and charts were then created that explored the degree to which each principal integrated or separated accountability and commitment in their work with their teachers, as well as whether each principal viewed these two areas as in tension or complementary. To examine changes and consistencies in principals’ conceptions of the relationship between accountability and commitment, an analytic memo was created for each principal that described their overall conception of these two areas at each of the three points in the school year (before, during, and after). Finally, conflicting or disconfirming evidence was examined to explore the tensions in principals’ accounts of the relationship between accountability and commitment over time.

Findings
This remainder of this study develops and supports two assertions. The first assertion is that, prior to the school year, principals’ conceptions of the relationship between accountability and commitment varied in two dimensions: first, on the degree of opposition they saw between the two areas, and second, on the degree of separation they saw between them. The second assertion is that during their first year as principals, most principals’ conceptions of the relationship between accountability and
commitment did not change; however, some principals’ conceptions of the relationships between these two areas did change, generally moving toward an increased separation of accountability and commitment over time.

**Principals’ early conceptions of accountability and commitment**

Principals’ initial conceptions of the relationship between accountability and commitment varied along two key dimensions, which are outlined in Figure 1. One dimension of variation (the horizontal axis in Figure 1) concerned how complementary or opposed principals saw these two areas. While some principals saw accountability and commitment as complementing and supporting one another, others saw an explicit tension between the two. Principals’ conceptions of accountability and commitment also varied in the degree of separation they saw between the two areas, which is represented by the vertical axis in Figure 1. Some principals believed accountability and commitment had to be separate, with one occurring before the other, while other principals believed that the two areas could be focussed on simultaneously. These two dimensions created four quadrants into which principals were placed based on their initial sense-making, as shown in Figure 2: integrated, but in tension (upper left quadrant); integrated and complementary (upper right quadrant); separate and opposed (lower left); and separate and complementary (lower right)[2]. The remainder of this section explores each of these initial conceptions in more detail.

**Integrated and in tension.** Before their first year as principals began, five principals saw accountability and commitment as integrated parts of their approach to their work with their teachers, but also conceived of these two areas as in tension with one another. These five principals’ conceptions of this tension, however, differed in important ways from one another. Angela conceived of commitment as an important buffer against the disruption and turmoil that she anticipated accountability would cause in her school. Without building commitment, Angela believed that her attempts at asserting control over her teachers would be much more challenging. As Angela explained, “you have to deposit what you wanna withdraw […] sometimes people can take the little criticisms or the corrective actions as long as you’re depositing those...
positive things.” Angela anticipated that accountability would be painful for her teachers, since it would require her to assert more control over her teachers’ practice through “criticisms” and “corrective actions.” To make those changes without too much disruption and turmoil, Angela felt she had to make the “deposit” of building relational trust with her teachers. Accountability and commitment thus complemented one another, with one buffering the negative effects of the other. Damien, Rich, and Steve similarly viewed commitment as a means of balancing the challenges caused by accountability.

At times, Nelson shared this view, referring to the “team concept” as “medicine” that could ease the pain of the changes he sought to make in his school. At other times, however, Nelson reversed these roles, instead noting that accountability, in the form of clear goals and boundaries, would lay the groundwork for building his teachers’ commitment. Nelson noted that, “you just wanna be stable and identify clear goals and identify clear expectations. And if you do that then people come; they trust you.” Nelson thus described commitment as emerging from the limits of accountability, in contrast to Damien, Joyce, Rich, and Steve, who generally saw commitment as a buffer against the negative aspects of accountability.

Despite the fact that these principals saw accountability and commitment as integral to one another, they also saw tensions between the two. One way they made sense of this tension was by separating “professional” from “personal” relationships, focussing the former on accountability, the latter on commitment. Damien, for example, described his plan to assert increased control over his teachers’ practice by implementing a uniform lesson plan format, while at the same time supporting his teachers’ autonomy in other matters, in order to maintain their buy-in and commitment. As Damien noted, “you have to give teachers an opportunity to be a professional.” To Damien, asserting control had its place, but had to be balanced with respect for teachers’ voices in order to ensure their motivation. Commitment was, therefore, a means to motivate teachers, in order to drive the kinds of efforts that were demanded by accountability. Angela, Nelson, and Rich similarly distinguished between professional and personal relationships as they made sense of the demands of accountability and commitment in their work with their teachers.
Principals’ predecessors were prominent figures in their initial sense-making about the relationship between accountability and commitment. Angela, for example, perceived a tension between accountability and commitment in large part because of the contrast between her approach to these two areas and that of her predecessor. Where Angela’s predecessor had focussed largely on maintaining control, Angela worked hard to create trusting and supportive relationships with her teachers. Yet Angela saw some danger in her focus on commitment; recalling her teachers’ reaction to her when she first arrived in her school the prior spring, Angela said:

I was such a polar opposite of what they had been like experiencing. You know I was all about the doughnuts on Monday and the cars in the lots and the thank you for allowing me and blah-blah-blah. So they were like whew, ding-dong the witch is dead, the wicked witch […]. But then they had to figure out that you know I’m still Glenda; you know Glenda’s good, she’s also a witch (laughs).

Angela was more focussed on building commitment than her predecessor, but she was concerned that her teachers would take her emphasis on commitment to mean that she was not going to enforce limits on their autonomy. Angela, therefore, felt she had to show her teachers that although she wanted to build trusting relationships with them, she was also a “witch,” capable of enforcing boundaries and limits. Although Angela saw accountability and commitment as important aspects of her work, she also saw them as in tension with one another, in large part because of her predecessor’s influence. For Rich, Steve, and Damien, their predecessor’s approach to accountability and commitment also figured into their initial sense-making about these two aspects of their work.

Integrated and complementary. Another set of five principals began the school year conceiving of accountability and commitment as not only integrated, but also complementary. Joyce, for example, saw building commitment as a means of motivating her teachers to make the improvements demanded by accountability. As she explained her conception of the principal’s work, Joyce said:

I think of it as being a coach so I’m on the sideline and as the players are out there in the game. I’m coaching them along – either telling them hey, move over, you know do something this way or how about we think about doing it this way or that was a great job, we really gained a lot of leverage.

Joyce’s view of herself as a coach encompassed building a team of teachers, motivating them, and pushing them toward improvement. To Joyce, commitment was central to improvement because it provided motivation. Commitment could not be extracted from the push for accountability; instead, Joyce saw commitment as an integral part of her attempts to make the improvements in her school that accountability required.

Like Joyce, Emily, George, Kara, and Sally believed accountability and commitment were both integral parts of their work with teachers. These principals differed from Joyce, however, in their sense-making about what could be accomplished by this integration. Emily and Sally, for example, described how commitment would promote their teachers’ investment and motivation, and eventually provide an important lever for school improvement. George described commitment as central to school improvement, but saw commitment not as a means of promoting ownership and motivation, but as a buffer against the turmoil that accountability could bring to his school. George explained that part of his role was “managing loss, managing grief, managing resistance […] really acting as […] a cheerleader or a motivator, driving
force to push people [...] into places that they’re uncomfortable.” George anticipated that he would bring a great deal of change to his school, and he felt that a sense of commitment would help his teachers manage that change and its consequences.

Separate and complementary. A single principal, Yvonne, saw accountability and commitment as separate but complementary aspects of her work with teachers. Yvonne believed that building commitment was the key first step that must come before establishing any form of change in her school. Yvonne believed that commitment – which she called “relationships” – must come before accountability; she summed up her general approach when she said, “when you build a relationship with your students and staff and parents [...] that just opens the door to everything.” Yvonne believed that building relationships was what “opened the door” to everything else, including accountability. She viewed these two aspects of her work with her teachers as distinct, yet complementary.

Yvonne felt she had to build commitment before exerting control over her teachers because commitment would prevent resistance when she later tried to exert more control. As she said:

You know you bring up any type of change whether or not it’s changing a textbook or changing the way the kids line up in the hallway to changing a teacher’s classroom – if you don’t build that relationship first it’s always gonna be some resistance. And that’s something right now we’re not gonna need, we don’t need here. This community, they don’t need any resistance. I don’t need any resistance to coming in here and wanting to change things. I think it’s important that they [...] trust me and respect me enough so that they know that what I’m doing is going to better our school community.

Yvonne likened her role as a principal to that of a teacher: just as a teacher must first build relational trust with her students, so a principal must first build relational trust with her teachers. Yet Yvonne’s conception went beyond trust; she also sought to build teams of teachers to address key challenges in her school. Building commitment, Yvonne believed, would help her teachers trust that what she was doing was in the best interests of the school. So although Yvonne separated commitment from accountability and believed that commitment had to come first, she also saw them as complementary, with one building on the other.

Separate and in tension. One principal, Adriana, saw accountability and commitment as separate, and in opposition. Adriana’s prospective sense-making about accountability and commitment centered strongly around Adriana’s perception of her predecessor. Adriana felt that a major reason why her school had performed so poorly was that the prior principal had prioritized adult relationships over children’s learning, and thus failed to exert any control over her teachers. In Adriana’s view, her predecessor’s lack of control showed itself in the significant autonomy her teachers were allowed, the lack of transparency of their instruction and its results, and the lack of monitoring of that instruction. As Adriana said of her teachers’ expectations:

The problem is that they also want that friendship that they had with the last principal, which I can’t be. Because for me that’s part of the reason why it fell apart. I can’t be your friend. I’m not here to be your friend. I’m here to be the person that despite everything advocates for the kids.

To Adriana, the fact that the previous principal exerted no control over the teachers was a central reason why things had gone so disastrously wrong in her school. To correct this problem, at the outset of the year Adriana explicitly rejected focussing
Continuity and change in principals’ sense-making about accountability and commitment

Over the course of their first year as principals, seven of the 12 principals did not change their conceptions of the relationship between accountability and commitment, while the other five principals changed their conceptions. Figure 3 illustrates this continuity and change. The remainder of this section describes the changes in the sense-making of principals that changed their conceptions of the relationship between accountability and commitment during their first year on the job. The final section contrasts their sense-making with that of the seven principals that did not change their conceptions of the relationship between these two areas.

Moving toward opposition. During her first year as principal, Kara came to see a tension between accountability and commitment. Kara’s struggle to confront the active resistance of a few teachers whose attitudes Kara characterized as “toxic and very challenging” figured prominently in her sense-making. These “toxic” teachers resisted Kara’s efforts to curtail their autonomy and standardize their practice by refusing to participate in staff meetings, not making any efforts to improve their instruction, and filing grievances against Kara with their union. Kara blamed her predecessor in part for her challenges with these teachers, since her predecessor, according to Kara, had never held teachers accountable to data or standards, or required them to plan their instruction based on anything other than their interests.

Kara felt a tension between the need to build the commitment of the majority of her teachers by motivating them, while at the same time asserting control over her challenging teachers by addressing their poor instruction and lack of professionalism. This tension arose particularly around staff meetings, where despite her best efforts to
engage them, Kara found that her more challenging teachers continued to refuse to participate. Kara sought to engage these teachers, building the participation and commitment of all her staff, but found that to do so, she was forced to hold her more challenging teachers accountable. As she imagined herself telling these teachers:

“Hey, we are all here to learn and participate. And if you’re not going to […] it won’t be tolerated.” […] Not causing conflict or anything, but to say, “Hey, this is […] the expectation.”

Kara imagined herself holding her teachers accountable for their behavior, while at the same time building the commitment of her staff, but the tension between the two was clear as Kara noted that she did not want conflict as part of this process. As she struggled to reconcile her desire to focus on both areas with the reality that often pulled her toward focussing on accountability, Kara “made sense” of this reality and adjusted her views of accountability and commitment accordingly. Instead of seeing the two as working together, Kara came to see them as in tension with one another.

Moving toward separation. During their first year on the job, three principals came to see accountability and commitment as increasingly separate. These principals began the year conceiving of accountability and commitment as in tension, but as part of a single approach to their work with teachers. During the year, however, these three principals separated the two aspects of their work with their teachers as they made sense of the two imperatives.

Damien, who began the year wanting to respect teachers’ “professionalism,” separated accountability and commitment as the year went on, focussing primarily on accountability in his work with his teachers. He likened his approach to that he took as a young teacher, when he learned that in order to control his classes he had to achieve control before focussing on building his students’ commitment. During the course of the year, Damien’s conception of commitment became more individualized; he did not focus on expanding teacher authority, building collegial patterns of interaction, or encouraging teamwork in his school, all of which are central aspects of the commitment approach (Rowan, 1990). Instead, Damien focussed on the basic attributes of fairness, professionalism, and individual growth, and expressed suspicion of efforts to build larger levels of relational trust and community, which he felt might undermine his attempts at implementing authority and accountability. Nelson’s sense-making about accountability and commitment similarly moved toward accountability as the year progressed. Steve also reflected on how he had succeeded in implementing some structure and expectations for his teachers during his first year as principal, but that a deeper level of commitment and buy-in would have to wait, reflecting his increased separation of these two areas.

For all three principals, the movement to separate accountability and commitment was linked to their assessments of the lack of professional capacity in their schools. Steve, for example, linked his increased emphasis on control to what he saw as his teachers’ inability to take advantage of the freedom he had initially provided them. Steve found that even simple requests like asking his teachers to inventory their rooms required a great deal of guidance. Damien also noted that his teachers “look to you [the principal] for everything.” In response to this lack of capacity, Steve noted that he was going to have to reduce his expectations of his teachers. Finding that his teachers were unable to take advantage of the autonomy he gave them, Steve separated accountability from commitment and focussed on the former. Damien and Nelson took a similar approach.
Moving toward integration. Adriana came to see accountability and commitment as more integrated as the year progressed. Adriana eased her focus on accountability and allowed for a role – albeit a limited one – for building commitment among her teachers. In her second and third interviews, Adriana expressed a concern that her assertion of control had led her teachers to feel she did not value them, and to feel overly discouraged. In response, Adriana described how she had instituted staff meetings where teachers could air their concerns, and had given out cards and candy to teachers to tell them they were valued. Adriana also described her plans to rebuild working relationships with several teachers who had previously run an important leadership team that Adriana had disbanded. As Adriana noted:

I knew that I’d be the bad guy. But at a certain point you have to say ok, I’ve been the bad guy and everybody knows this isn’t gonna fly and now how do I start to rebuild some of those relationships?

At the outset of her first year, Adriana was more concerned with establishing accountability than with alienating her teachers; at the end of the school year, however, Adriana reflected that in the long run she knew she would need to get those teachers involved in leadership once more. After working during her first year as principal to clear away the dysfunction of the prior administration, Adriana realized she now had to turn her attention to building professional capacity in her school, which would require an approach to working with her teachers that integrated accountability and commitment. As Adriana said:

A lot of this year was getting rid of things; getting rid of people, getting rid of attitudes, getting rid of these ideas that the building was for this or that or the other. And so next year is really about rebuilding […] this year was tear it down and next year is build it back up.

Removing what was wrong with her school had occupied Adriana’s energies during her first year as principal, and given the importance of limit setting and accountability, Adriana felt she could afford to sideline any efforts to build commitment among her teachers. As the year progressed, however, Adriana realized that she now had to build something new to replace what she had torn down, and those efforts would require building the commitment of at least some of her teachers.

Discussion
This study finds that the tension between accountability and commitment is an important concern for new principals that take over low-performing urban schools. This should perhaps not be surprising, given prior findings on the disruptions that sometimes result when accountability is implemented by school principals (Hallett, 2010), as well as research establishing the importance of commitment, particularly for new principals in low-performing urban schools (Bryk et al., 2010). This study is the first, however, to explore new principals’ sense-making about the relationship between these two aspects of their work with their teachers, as well as the ways that new principals’ sense-making about their work in these two areas changes during their first year on the job.

One key finding of this study is that new principals begin the school year with quite different views of the relationship between accountability and commitment. Before the year begins, some principals see accountability and commitment as integral and complementary, while others see these areas as separate and opposed. Explaining this
variation is challenging, as these differences in principals’ sense-making do not map readily onto any school or principal characteristics. Adriana and Yvonne both saw accountability and commitment as separate, but had quite different backgrounds, and took over very different schools. Although both women had lengthy careers as teachers before becoming principals, several other principals had teaching careers that were nearly as long, and did not hold similar viewpoints about accountability and commitment. School characteristics also did not map readily onto principals’ initial approaches to these two aspects of their work. For example, two of the principals of “turnaround” schools saw accountability and commitment as complementary, while two others saw these aspects of their work with their teachers as in opposition. Instead, it seems that the unique interaction of principal approaches and their perceptions of school histories (particularly of their predecessors) determined principals’ initial sense-making about accountability and commitment.

One area that was frequently important to principals’ sense-making about the relationship between accountability and commitment was the relative emphasis that the prior principal placed on each of these two areas. Principals such as Adriana, that took over schools where they perceived there to have been little accountability under their predecessor, often anticipated a tension between their efforts to implement such accountability and their efforts to build commitment with their teachers. At the same time, principals such as Angela, who took over schools where the prior principal had set very strict limits on teacher autonomy, often felt they had to ease those limits, and they anticipated that these efforts would also result in tension. A third group of principals lacked strong opinions about their predecessors’ work with their teachers; for these principals, other aspects of the schools they inherited, such as their teachers’ professional capacities, were more important to their initial sense-making. The transition between principals is complicated, and new principals’ sense-making about the circumstances they inherit is influenced in important ways by their predecessors’ approaches.

Five principals’ conceptions of the relationship between accountability and commitment changed during their first year as principals, but another seven new principals did not change their conception of these two areas. Several of these principals inherited school circumstances quite similar to those of the principals whose conceptions did change, again making it difficult to determine exactly why these principals remained consistent in their approaches. Subtle differences existed, however, between principals that changed and those that did not change their conceptions of the relationship between accountability and commitment. In some cases, such as Emily’s, the high degree of resistance faced by principals, combined with principals’ own views about (and comfort with) exerting control over teachers, appeared to be significant. In other cases, the degree to which principals were embedded in a larger structure that provided guidance for their work with teachers appeared to make a difference. And in yet other cases, principals’ prior experience in the school helped guide efforts at integrating or separating their work in these two areas. Findings of this study point to the importance of both personal and larger organizational factors in shaping the ways that new principals make sense of important tensions in their work.

Of the five principals whose conceptions of the relationship between accountability and commitment changed during the school year, there was a general movement toward separating these two areas, and toward seeing them as in opposition. This suggests that these principals’ prospective sense-making about accountability and commitment may have been optimistic, and not held up to the realities they
encountered in their schools. Only one principal moved in the opposite direction, seeing accountability and commitment as more integrated over time. Early experiences as principals more often pushed these new principals to separate accountability from commitment so they could more fully focus on the former.

Implications
Taking over a low-performing, highly pressured school is challenging work for any principal, let alone a novice. Trust, cohesion, and professional community are crucial to long-term school improvement, but accountability pressures are often urgent and demand immediate attention. The findings of this study suggest that although the tension between accountability and commitment may be inherent to principals’ work in low-performing schools, not all principals experience this tension to the same degree. Findings also suggest that some remedies may exist that could decrease the tension between accountability and commitment for at least some new principals. One possible remedy is to ease the accountability pressures on new principals, at least for a time, in order to allow them the space to build the commitment of their teachers (at least of those they plan to retain). Such a change to accountability systems, however, might delay much-needed change in some schools. Another approach is to use principal preparation, induction, and mentoring to help preservice and novice principals reflect on the tensions between accountability and commitment, and make plans to address them, a particularly important task for the principals that work in (or plan to work in) low-performing schools. Helping principals understand and plan for these tensions may ease some of the challenges new principals encounter in their early efforts with their teachers under highly pressured circumstances. With urban school districts increasingly relying on new principals (Stoelinga et al., 2008), helping novices think through these tensions may be a worthy task in preparing principals to take over the lowest-performing, most highly pressured schools.

Notes
1. The terms “first-year” and “new” are here used interchangeably when referring to principals; the term “novice” is used more generally to refer to principals in their first several years on the job.
2. All principal names in this figure and throughout this study are pseudonyms.

References


## About the author

Matthew Shirrell is a Postdoctoral Fellow with the Distributed Leadership Study at Northwestern University. His work focuses on the school workplace, with a particular interest in teachers’ advice-seeking behavior, as well as the policy-, school-, and classroom-level factors that drive teacher turnover and attrition. He is a National Board-Certified Teacher with nearly ten years of experience in urban public schools. Matthew Shirrell can be contacted at: mshirrell@u.northwestern.edu

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website: [www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm](http://www.emeraldgrouppublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm)

Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com