

Top-Down and Bottom-Up

NCLB, Charter Schools, and the Public School Principalsip

[We] have only vague notions as to what constitutes an educated child or an adequate shelter. But we can learn rather easily whether we have satisfied people, for the essence of a market is the opportunity it affords clients to vote with their feet.

James Q. Wilson, Bureaucracy

Accountability systems based on cross-sectional test score results tell us much more about the race, ethnicity, and resource inequalities of students than about the underlying quality of the schooling. But it is also true that leadership can matter to academic achievement, even when measured with an instrument as blunt as aggregate test scores. In this chapter, I will flip the analysis around and look at the effects of No Child Left Behind on leadership rather than the effects of leadership on status under NCLB. To do so, however, I must complicate the picture a bit.

Looking thoroughly at NCLB's effects on leadership within the public schools requires acknowledging that we are simultaneously undertaking the centralized reforms of NCLB and decentralized or

consumer-oriented reforms in the form of school choice. The accountability approach underlying NCLB asserts that centralizing and controlling the establishment and enforcement of objective measures of educational quality will allow us to find underperforming schools, help them get better, and spur other schools to improve as a result of this threat. In contrast, school choice policies seek to allow customers to identify schools that are not producing high-quality educational services and to sanction these underperforming schools through the consequences of their departure.

The forms of choice—charter schools, vouchers, and systems of public choice—differ in many important ways, particularly in their effects on political participation;¹ however, they all share the assumption that devolving the power of sanction in educational production as closely as possible to the level of the consumer-client will lead to higher-quality educational services. Customers will choose better schools, and the threat of customer exit will assert a powerful motivational force on all involved in educational production.²

While allowing parents of failing schools to use taxpayer-funded vouchers to attend private schools had been part of the original bill, No Child Left Behind as enacted contained no such provisions.³ Giving parents in failing schools the option of choosing a successful public school, however, survived the law's negotiations and comes into play early in the sanctioning process. NCLB also incorporated a third type of choice, charter schools. These publicly funded but more autonomous schools aim to improve public education by leaving the sanctioning to parents and students in the form of deciding to leave (along with their tax dollars) a traditional public school for a more autonomous (though still public) charter institution. Their autonomy is incomplete, as charter schools are still subject to many regulations, particularly regarding nondiscrimination, health, and safety. They do, however, typically have more freedom in terms of curriculum selection and staff policy than their traditional public counterparts.

Charter schools occupy an interesting position as both targets and solutions under No Child Left Behind. They are subject to the same tests and sanctions as traditional public schools yet are also one of the options for reconstituting a failing school in the later stages of NCLB

implementation. In spite of charters' involvement with both top-down and bottom-up reforms, however, the empirical literature has largely ignored their placement as such.⁴

Although charter schools predate the passage of NCLB by a decade, no clear consensus exists about whether charter schools produce better educational quality for their students,⁵ though parents appear to be satisfied with their choices.⁶ Unfortunately, charter schools' prospects under No Child Left Behind do not appear very promising. Across the country, charter schools appear to be failing to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) at a higher rate than the traditional public schools. In spite of these concerns, the number of charter schools and students who attend them continue to grow, with roughly thirty-four hundred charter schools serving about 1 million students.⁷

Comparing test scores of charter schools and noncharter schools may not be particularly instructive, however, since the lack of demonstrated achievement gains may result mainly from the fact that charter schools often serve student populations with traditionally low academic performance. Given the close and positive relationship between student characteristics and AYP failure rates, it likely matters to charters' disproportionate AYP identification that 42 percent of charter schools are located in only three states—Arizona, California, and Florida—all of which land in the top ten in the United States in terms of percentage minority student enrollment; that roughly half of all charter schools are located in urban centers, compared to 29 percent of regular public schools;⁸ and that nearly 60 percent of charter school students are minorities, as opposed to 44 percent of the students in traditional public schools.⁹ These patterns are repeated in Minnesota's charter schools, with AYP failure rates more than twice those of traditional public schools but student populations that are much more diverse than those in Minnesota's typical public school (table 4).

The large increase in failure rates among both types of schools results from the growth in the number of grades tested between 2003 and 2004. AYP status in 2003 was based on the results of reading and math tests for grades three and five in elementary schools, attendance by total student population and by subgroups for middle

schools, and graduation for high schools. The 2004 AYP calculations also included the results of seventh-grade reading and math tests as well as the results of tenth-grade reading and eleventh-grade math tests.¹⁰ This increase in NCLB's scope will only continue as new grade-level tests are added each year.

Surprisingly, the question of how No Child Left Behind will interact with school choice reforms has received little attention in the literature. Proponents of government-based reforms and advocates of market-based reforms have generally not accounted for the possibility that their approach might not be the only one adopted, though there have been a few exceptions. Political scientist Terry Moe has argued that "a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches is likely to prove far more potent" than standards-based accountability alone.¹¹ Chester E. Finn Jr. also argues for the benefits of both approaches simultaneously, calling for a "public policy pluralism" involving standards and choice.¹² Tom Loveless is one of the few

TABLE 4. Minnesota's Charter Schools and No Child Left Behind

	Regular Public Schools (1)	Charter Schools (2)
Percentage of Minnesota schools <i>not making</i> adequate yearly progress		
2003	5%	19%
2004	21%	47%
Percentage of enrolled students classified as . . .		
Black	6%	24%
Hispanic	5%	7%
American Indian	3%	5%
Asian or Pacific Islander	4%	7%
Eligible for free or reduced-price lunch	24%	44%
LEP	6%	11%
Special education	13%	14%
Number of schools (2004)	1,589	108

Source: Author's analysis based on data from Minnesota Department of Education 2003b, 2003c, 2003d, 2004a.

Note: The slight discrepancy between some of these calculated percentages and totals and the official figures released by the Minnesota Department of Education results from the exclusion of schools that were missing data on other variables in my subsequent analysis (2.3 percent of the original cases). However, no internal discrepancies exist in subsequent analyses, so these data will be used throughout. Though these data are publicly available, they are used with the verbal permission of the Minnesota Department of Education.

researchers specifically to examine the position of charter schools under No Child Left Behind, noting that studies of their academic achievement gains are not yet conclusive but cautioning that “the number of charters brought under the scrutiny of state accountability systems is certain to increase dramatically” as more grades are brought into No Child Left Behind’s assessment system.¹³

Researchers have not yet sufficiently commented on the contradiction inherent in applying a top-down system of accountability to a unique set of public schools whose explicit purpose is to succeed by virtue of their relative freedom from regulation. In spite of their differences, both No Child Left Behind and school choice adopt an indirect approach to improving the quality of schooling. Both approaches are based on the hope that turning the screws, either from above (with NCLB’s threat of sanction) or below (with the departure of customers to greener pastures), will induce more quality-oriented behaviors on the part of teachers and administrators.

The underlying theoretical arguments about how these issues have been framed in the policy debate surrounding NCLB have two limitations. First, NCLB makes no effort to encourage principals and teachers to excel in their jobs rather than just shirk. As the discussion of agency in chapter 2 noted, the challenge was to induce the school principal to orient her behavior toward producing higher-quality education. Unfortunately, economists have a difficult time quantifying a person’s decision to go above and beyond the call of duty. Rather, school principals or teachers are generally viewed as having three choices: to do their jobs, to slack off (called shirking in the political science literature), or actively to undermine the organization’s goals.¹⁴ All else being equal, it is assumed that people will choose to slack off. No room is made for the possibility that a teacher or principal will put in long hours, often at the expense of their private lives, simply because it is the right thing to do.¹⁵

The second limitation of NCLB’s approach is that it fails to take into account the fact that school principals are “boundedly rational,” meaning that they make rational decisions but do so in the presence of inevitable limitations on their time and information.¹⁶ The public school principalship is characterized by a great deal of uncertainty and inevitable trade-offs. The problem is that any system of reform,

top-down or bottom-up, is likely to lead—for better or worse—to a reorientation of principals' and teachers' time and attention, a problem known in economics as multitasking: "compensation on any subset of tasks will result in a reallocation of activities toward those that are directly compensated and away from the uncompensated activities."¹⁷ While the literature has featured considerable discussion about whether No Child Left Behind will cause teachers to teach to the tests, not enough attention has been paid to the equal possibility that principals will lead to the tests.

Assessing either top-down or bottom-up reforms, economists might ask, "Does this reform keep teachers and principals from shirking?" While this kind of logic makes for nice, tidy economic models, it misses several aspects of educational leadership. Instead, we should be asking whether top-down or bottom-up reforms encourage teachers and principals to go above and beyond the call of duty or whether these reforms will inhibit their ability to do so. We also need to ask how either reform effort might impact the inevitable trade-offs in allocation of time and energy that these people must make every day.

A useful way to think about the decision to excel (rather than to just put in the time) is that of a decision tree. At any step, the possibility for teachers or principals to excel can vanish: only if they make it through all of the steps will they put in the kind of extraordinary effort that will make an impact on students' lives. The principal must care enough to want to try. She must have the autonomy to make meaningful changes. She must have the resources and support to do so. The principal must also have meaningful feedback on whether these efforts are working, and she must be operating under an accountability system that does not ignore or punish her efforts to excel.

This kind of thinking offers some additional context for comparing No Child Left Behind to charter schools and other forms of school choice by raising some important issues to guide further empirical exploration. Specifically, we need to examine whether these two accountability regimes "see" quality in the same way. In other words, customers may perceive schools with higher test scores as more desirable or may look instead for other qualities. In addition, it is important carefully to examine the incentive effects of top-down

and bottom-up reforms. The analyses in this chapter explore these questions and potential contradictions in some detail:

- What do public school principals think about No Child Left Behind?
- What effects does the law have on leadership within the public schools?
- What does it mean for the quality of the public school principalship of doing top-down accountability and bottom-up school choice at the same time? Do they reinforce each other, or do they get in each other's way?
- Is sanction better than competition?

No Child Left Behind: What Principals Think

Surprisingly, relatively little systematic evidence documents what school principals think about No Child Left Behind and how the law does or does not change the principalship. One of the most comprehensive surveys of leadership under No Child Left Behind was conducted by Public Agenda in 2003.¹⁸ The nearly one thousand public school principals and just over one thousand district superintendents surveyed in Public Agenda's national sample did not report a sense of panic or pessimism but did voice several concerns.¹⁹ In fact, the majority of these school and district leaders felt that insufficient funding, not No Child Left Behind, was their biggest challenge going forward, though NCLB ranked second. More than 80 percent of the superintendents and principals believed that "keeping up with the entire local, state, and federal mandates handed down to the schools takes up way too much time."²⁰ Nearly three-quarters of district superintendents but less than half of the principals in the study agreed that it is a "good idea to hold principals accountable for students' standardized test scores at the building level."²¹ Both sets of school leaders overwhelmingly agreed that "the push for standards, testing, and accountability . . . is something that is here to stay."²² Both principals and superintendents rejected the idea that No Child Left Behind was irretrievably broken, though they acknowledged that it would "require many adjustments before it can work."²³

Minnesota's public and charter school principals agreed with the cautious optimism of their counterparts in other states. Though a majority of Minnesota's principals believed that No Child Left Behind would ultimately improve academic achievement, their attitudes suggested some interesting differences (table A6). Principals in regular public schools with large percentages of minority students were more likely to believe that NCLB would improve achievement, and nearly as many principals in schools with large percentages of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch concurred in spite of the fact that their schools are being placed on the consequences track at a much higher rate than other schools. Principals in charter schools were much less optimistic about NCLB's likely effects, with just over a third believing that it would improve achievement.

Several possible explanations can account for why principals and superintendents have at least some hope for No Child Left Behind. These data do not permit any of these explanations to be completely ruled in or out, but the findings raise some important considerations in thinking about NCLB's prospects. The first possibility is that public school principals think No Child Left Behind is well designed and will work smoothly. Public Agenda's national survey results cast doubt on this assertion. Another possibility involves a question of agency. The threat of sanction can be useful in a principal's hands if it is based on good data and if it improves the ability of good leaders to shape the delivery of educational services in a useful way. Thinking about the law in terms of agency suggests the possibility that top-down accountability might work—alone or in combination with bottom-up reforms—but that the specific provisions and features of No Child Left Behind might provide the wrong mechanism or basis for these evaluations.²⁴ Finally, there exists the possibility of desperation or least a willingness to live with NCLB's imperfections if doing so will call attention to and perhaps improve the educational conditions in the poorest U.S. communities.

More pessimism generally existed among the small group of Minnesota's principals whom I interviewed about No Child Left Behind's prospects than the larger survey results would indicate. This finding is not surprising, given that those with strong beliefs probably had more incentive to respond to my interview requests, and should not

be taken as representative of any underlying distribution of opinions. The details of their concerns, however, are noteworthy. Feelings that NCLB's good intentions will flounder on its improper design centered on a now-familiar litany of concerns. The principal of a small rural elementary school that has been making AYP believed that NCLB was flawed in its foundational assumption of achieving 100 percent proficiency. His seventeen years of experience as a principal plus thirteen as a teacher led him to believe that NCLB was destined to fail:

The No Child Left Behind Act is one of the most poorly crafted pieces of legislation in the entire history of the U.S. Congress. Forget that it is an unfunded mandate. It attempts to create the impression that it is possible to have one standard for every child or school nationwide. Yet, as we well know, this is not the case.

In fact, there is not even unanimity among the 50 states as to a definition for Adequate Yearly Progress or what standards should be met; leaving both of those up to individual states to decide. But, worst of all, it creates the false impression that *all* students can meet some artificial level of achievement called "proficiency." Those of us in education know this to be patently absurd. A worthy aspiration, but an absolute impossibility. Not *every* child can meet such a level. If that were the case, there would be no 2nd chair clarinet players or students earning D's or F's. What the law fails to take into account is the human and socio-economic factors . . . (aside from measuring a school's worth based upon a one-shot, large-group test score by 3rd or 5th graders) in measuring a student or school's worth.²⁵

The principal of a school on one of Minnesota's Native American reservations was more optimistic about the law's intentions but was also very concerned about the academic proficiency targets, particularly in the connection between poverty and proficiency. Despite his worries about his school's prospects for the next year, particularly in light of a student population that made his school one of the poorest in the state, the school made AYP.

The school is a high risk school on an Indian Reservation, with high minority and high poverty. Although we made AYP last year, we will surely soon be a school identified as needing improvement. I have many thoughts on NCLB, but none of them are positive. It's great in theory, but unrealistic in practice to think that schools will achieve 100%. This year, we had a special ed. kid who refused to take the 7th grade . . . reading test. He was one-on-one with two teachers and they could not get him to pick up the pencil and attempt even one answer on the test. With our small numbers, this could put us on "needs improvement" status. Is this any fault of the school or my leadership, I think not. I also am not sure how the school can be responsible for student attendance. Are we supposed to go and drag the kids out of their homes if their parents decide they don't have to come to school? I could go on and on.

Other principals focused on some of the additional problems and uncertainties inherent in NCLB's exclusive focus on the results of one-day snapshots of only one aspect of the truly educated child, including worries about the consequences for the learning of the state's most gifted children:

I'm not sure our high ability students are benefiting because too much time and resources are going to the ones who are failing.

Will kids retain what they've been taught under the stress of test scores and student achievement, AYP, etc.? Or would they be better off making meaning and connections to real life rather than almost a "roteness" to the learning or teaching to the test [way] of educating?

I do not have a teacher (of 55) that is excited about NCLB. We will successfully "dummy-down" our curriculum . . . and ensure we have fewer National Merit scholars, etc.

One of the biggest areas of concern among this small group of Minnesota principals was the failure to address the fundamental

issue of resource inequalities between schools and students before trying to hold schools accountable to the challenge of success for all:

Students are more than numbers. They are unique individuals with thoughts, desires, dreams, talents and imaginations. These do not show up on multiple choice tests! No one wants to leave any child behind. We can provide visionary and effective leadership but the federal government needs to provide our families support for their children by helping to provide an economy where there is “No family left without a job or a home!” We can take it from there.

I support the idea of standards for student achievement and staff qualifications. I question the idea of putting so much pressure on states to achieve and compete against each other, that AYP is used in a punitive way. I fear that mandates create inequity as poor districts or districts with large numbers of students who have risk factors for low achievement work to overcome those built in obstacles. It takes proportionately larger amounts of resources that are always in short supply.

Any child who improves his/her skills is a benefit. But if students move to other schools because they perceive that other places achieve better scores, the funds that go with them will also move. That will make it more difficult to keep good staff and fund our system which is successful for many, many students.

Not all of the principals whom I interviewed, however, were pessimistic about No Child Left Behind’s prospects. The principal of one school that had achieved five-star status despite its relatively high population of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch saw NCLB’s focus on accountability as beneficial:

The accountability movement is something I believe in, as I know that many public schools in this country do a poor job of utilizing their resources to meet the needs of students. When I describe some of the things we have implemented at our

school to fellow principals, they look shocked. The model of continuous improvement, which is what I believe is the basic [tenet] of NCLB, has resulted in a positive impact on student achievement.

Others agreed or at least were willing to give No Child Left Behind the benefit of the doubt:

The actual testing is only a small part of what NCLB is all about. It is about great teaching and smart teaching. All aspects of my leadership go into working with staff to achieve student achievement. I have always believed that in order to lead we need to take an occasional leap of faith. So I actually feel energized by this legislation. My only regret is the lack of funding to [our] school. But without funding it will take a little more time and creative energy. These are challenging times. We can make them [worthwhile] or we can sink with the sinking ship. I personally prefer to face the challenge and make it fun.

I know that we will work on “test taking.” This will mean leaving other areas out of the mix. I believe we will see increase in achievement in some areas and a decrease in achievement in others. I know that we will take a serious look at how we do things. It is always good to reflect on what and why we do what we do. I know positive changes will come of this.

The patterns of cautious optimism about No Child Left Behind’s prospects, though often framed within specific concerns, observed in the empirical data could result from either agency concerns (in that these principals feel less powerful in relation to their teachers or other actors and welcome No Child Left Behind’s stick) or desperation and frustration (in that something needs to be done, even if it is a flawed strategy). The interview responses suggest that NCLB’s good intentions may be hampered by poor design. Support also appears to exist for the beneficial aspects of the law in terms of bureaucratic agency, in that the law—if properly designed—might give principals useful tools for motivating and guiding teachers.

No Child Left Behind and Principals' Influence

To disaggregate the relationship between NCLB's potential effects on influence and a principal's status from the many confounding influences on leadership and achievement, I constructed a series of regression models using the student, school, and principal characteristics discussed in chapter 3. In this case, however, I sought to determine whether being a principal of a regular public school that has achieved AYP status, of a regular public school that has failed, or of a charter school has any systematic relationship to that individual's view of NCLB's leadership consequences.

The key variables are principals' responses to the question, "During the 2003-4 academic year, to what extent will the No Child Left Behind Act limit or enhance your influence on the following policy areas at your school?" The policy areas were (1) setting performance standards, (2) guiding the curriculum, (3) setting discipline policy, (4) hiring and evaluating teachers, and (5) setting the budget. The responses were coded from one (limit very much) to five (enhance very much).

Most Minnesota principals anticipated that No Child Left Behind would enhance their ability to set performance standards in their schools, though nearly a third felt that the law would limit their influence in this area (table A7). In addition, a significant percentage of principals believed that NCLB would facilitate their ability to establish a curriculum. From this perspective, the law might allow principals to push for standards and curricular reform, since they would now be able to argue that the law was forcing these changes. Similarly, smaller but sizable percentages of principals expected that NCLB would make it easier for them to evaluate their teachers, lending some support to the agency view of NCLB's potential utility for those who assume that principals need more carrots with which to entice their teachers.

These data have a few important limitations, and other considerations must be taken into account. First, these analyses are based on self-reports, though the perceptual side of the equation may very well be important in its own right. Second, the 2004 data set lacks a sufficiently large number of charter school principals whose schools

failed to make AYP in the previous year. These models present only the probabilities conditional on holding the other indicator variable at zero. In other words, these data do not permit an examination of the specific effects of AYP failure on the charter school principalship beyond its effects on the public school principalship in general, because only four charter schools in the sample had failed to make AYP in 2003. Nevertheless, I believe that much useful information can be gained from the analysis.

Finally, any observed relationship between being a principal in a failing or charter school and that principal's leadership may result from aspects of their leadership and the type of school in which they teach, and this relationship may not be random but may instead be based on unobservable factors. This issue, however, is less of a concern here. The leadership patterns that I observed in chapter 3 showed that principals in schools that were more likely to fail based on the demographic makeup of their student populations spent more, not less, time on the things that translate into higher achievement.

For charter school principals, however, the story is more complicated. Because of their unique nature and greater autonomy, charter schools may attract different kinds of principals. Any observed leadership patterns might result from these inherent differences in the principals rather than in the structure of the charter school principalship itself. In terms of demographic characteristics of principals, some notable differences exist. While only 38 percent of Minnesota's regular public school principals are female, 60 percent of the charter schools in my study were led by women principals. Charter school principals are also less likely to have doctorates and averaged about five years' total experience as a principal versus ten for their regular public school counterparts.

I have, therefore, taken two steps to account for these possible endogeneity effects. The first is to use more complicated statistical techniques to see if my original findings hold up when confronting possible bias.²⁶ The second step was to include a principal's age, gender, race, and ethnicity in all of the analyses in this chapter.²⁷ I am somewhat agnostic regarding the question of whether charter school leaders act differently because charter schools attract different types

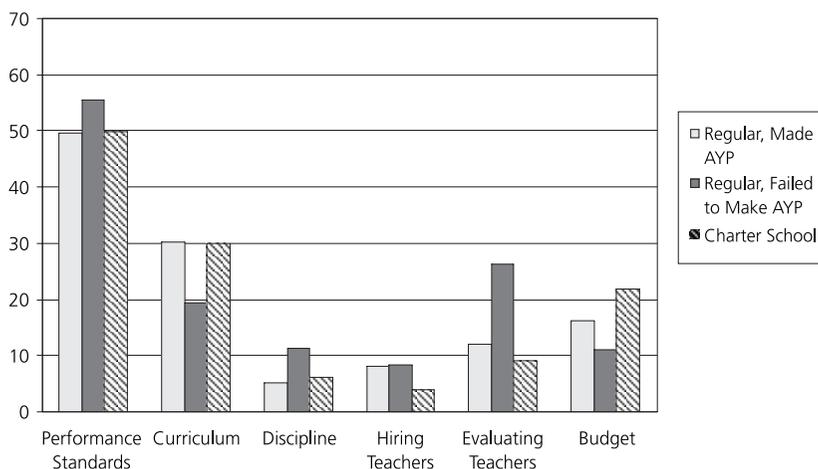
of leaders or because they allow principals to act differently. No doubt, the answer probably includes some of both factors. Unless a state has so many charter schools that the drain of the best principals from the regular public schools becomes an issue (which Minnesota does not), however, we should focus on the possibility that charter schools' advantage may result at least in part from their ability to facilitate a different kind of principalship.

With these considerations in mind, I now turn to the empirical results of my study of the effects of No Child Left Behind on principalship in Minnesota, beginning with a more systematic look at how principals expect their influence to change under No Child Left Behind. The underlying regressions suggest a few important results. First, looking at the relationship between charter school status and the mean expected consequences of NCLB shows that charter school principals have much lower expectations about the law's effects on their influence in general (table A9). In contrast, there is no clear indication that principals facing AYP identification generally expect to have more or less influence, possibly either because AYP failure has no impact on principals' expectations or because failure is associated with expected gains in influence in some areas and loss of influence in others.

Figure 11 presents the predicted percentages of principals who think that NCLB will enhance their influence across the six school policy areas, broken down by whether the principal's school is a regular public school that made AYP, a regular school that failed to do so, or a charter school. Again, these analyses separate the relationships among NCLB, charter schools, and leadership from all of the other possibly correlated factors, especially student and school characteristics.

Of all of the areas of leadership about which they were asked, only in setting performance standards did a majority of principals feel that No Child Left Behind would enhance their influence. This finding indicates that top-down accountability might be useful if it provides principals with the tools to guide their schools to higher levels of performance. In addition, principals of traditional public schools that failed to make AYP were more optimistic about their ability to set performance standards and evaluate their teachers than those whose

Predicted Percentages of Principals Reporting That NCLB Will Enhance Their Influence



Question:

“During the 2003–2004 academic year, to what extent will the No Child Left Behind Act limit or enhance your influence on the following policy areas at your school?”

Coded 1 = “Limit very much,” 2 = “Limit somewhat,” 3 = “No effect,” 4 = “Enhance somewhat,” 5 = “Enhance very much.”

Fig. 11. Expected consequences of NCLB on principal’s influence. (Probabilities obtained using Clarify [see King, Tomz, and Wittenberg 2000]. Source: Minnesota Schools Survey 2003. Demographic and AYP data from Minnesota Department of Education 2003c, 2003d, 2004a.)

schools made AYP according to the lists published three months earlier but were less optimistic about their ability to establish the curriculum and spend the school’s budget. Principals in schools that failed to make AYP were more than twice as likely as either of the other groups to report that No Child Left Behind would enhance their influence in evaluating their teachers.

These findings lend more support to the idea that at least some of the perceived benefits of No Child Left Behind are explained by the agency view of the principalship. NCLB involves a trade-off of influence, but principals might be willing to make this deal if they

believe that it will allow them to get closer to their goal of improving academic achievement. The threat of sanction can be beneficial if strategically used, a logic similar to that of the president drawing a hard line with a foreign power and claiming that an intransigent Congress has tied his hands.

Charter school principals generally displayed patterns of expected influence that closely resembled those of their counterparts in traditional public schools that made AYP. The principals of charter schools were, however, more skeptical than their colleagues at regular public schools about NCLB's likely effects on their influence in hiring and evaluating teachers, a finding that is not surprising given the greater autonomy that charter school principals enjoy in these areas (although it is not possible to rule out the possibility that these differences in expectations result from chance). That charter school principals felt more optimistic about NCLB's effects on their budget-setting abilities is surprising, though the underlying coefficient estimates are not significant. Further study of this finding might be warranted.

While expected consequences are interesting, it is more instructive to compare patterns of influence among principals whose schools have made or failed to make AYP. Observers have extensively discussed whether teachers teach to the tests but have given much less thought to the question of whether principals lead to the tests and to whether this would be a desirable outcome. The next set of simulations is based on a set of regression models that examines principals' perceptions of their influence in these six school policy areas. In the Minnesota survey, principals were asked to respond to the question, "How much actual influence do you think you as principal have regarding the following policy areas at your school?" for six school policy areas: setting performance standards, establishing the curriculum, hiring teachers, evaluating teachers, setting discipline policy, and spending the budget. While the basic regression models underlying these simulations resembled those in figure 11, these models also included principals' views on the influence of parents, teachers, and the Minnesota Department of Education as a means of capturing the fact that principals are embedded in a complex web of agency relationships that affect the exercise of the others' power.²⁸

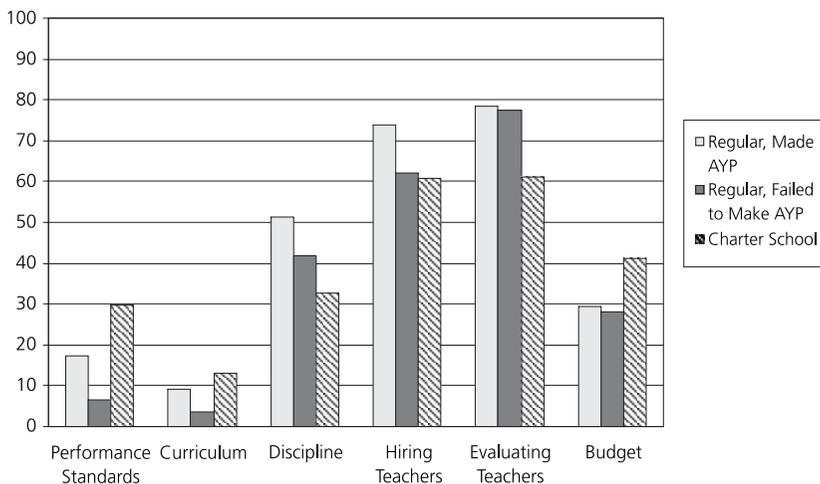
Some clear patterns emerge from the underlying regressions. In contrast to predictions that principal and teacher power exist in opposition to each other—a view that most scholars of agency in educational production have asserted—principals in my study felt that their influence was positively tied to that of their teachers across all six of the school policy areas examined (table A10). All of these relationships were statistically significant. The notion of educational production as a zero-sum administrative game in which principals are constantly at war with their teachers is much too simplistic in the framework of experiential organizations, where school principals try to assemble the best team that they can and lead by fighting with and for their teachers. This of course does not mean that no conflict arises, only that principals are most effective when they do not have to constantly monitor their teachers.

Interestingly, principals felt that their influence was positively tied to the influence of parents and of the Minnesota Department of Education, but only in those areas where one actor's contributions might offset the power of another. The principals in my study felt that their influence was positively related to that of their parents when setting performance standards and guiding the curriculum and was positively related to that of the Minnesota Department of Education in enforcing discipline policy and to a lesser extent in setting performance standards and hiring teachers.

The simulation results derived from a look at principals' views of their influence challenge the most optimistic expectations of the bureaucratic consequences of No Child Left Behind, both on the part of policymakers and on the part of the principals (figure 12). AYP failure (announced during the summer) is associated with lower levels of influence across all six areas of school policy during the following fall. These differences were statistically significant in two critical areas: setting performance standards and guiding the development of the curriculum.²⁹ Principals of schools that have failed to make AYP were 63 percent less likely to report that they had a great deal of influence in setting performance standards in the school and 59 percent less likely to report that they had a great deal of influence in guiding the curriculum within the school.

The two areas where Minnesota's principals expected the greatest

Predicted Percentages of Principals Reporting a Great Deal of Influence



Question:

"How much actual influence do you think you as principal have regarding the following policy areas at your school?" Coded: from 1 = "No influence" to 5 = "A great deal of influence."

Fig. 12. Influence of principal in policy areas. (Probabilities obtained using Clarify [see King, Tomz, and Wittenberg 2000]. Source: Minnesota Schools Survey 2003. Demographic and AYP data from Minnesota Department of Education 2003c, 2003d, 2004a.)

benefit from No Child Left Behind in the previous analysis—setting performance standards and establishing the curriculum—were also the two areas where they felt the least influential. The two areas where they felt the most influential—hiring and evaluating teachers—were also two of the three areas where they perceived the least benefit from NCLB.

These patterns are entirely consistent with what James Q. Wilson predicted about top-down reforms in coping organizations. Of course, one might counter that we want these principals in failing schools to be less influential since whatever they were doing was not working. This conclusion, however, rests on the assumption that AYP

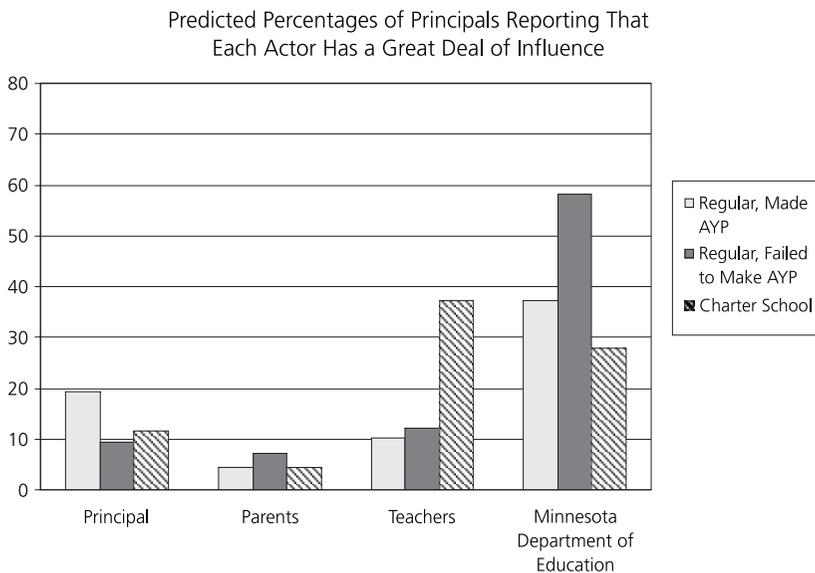
failure results only from leadership, not from things beyond the control of principals and teachers, which I have established is not the case. This assertion also rests on the assumption that the law bases its confiscation of principal autonomy on a true measure of the quality of the principal's efforts in developing and implementing the school's curriculum.

Charter school principals, in contrast, perceive themselves as less influential in setting discipline policy (possibly as a consequence of greater influence by their customers) and hiring and evaluating their teachers but more influential in setting performance standards, guiding the curriculum, and spending the budget. These patterns are consistent with the expected findings, given these principals' greater autonomy in these areas. The differences for charter schools are statistically significant in setting performance standards and discipline policy as well as in evaluating teachers.

NCLB and the Influence of Other Actors in Education

Principals are only one of many sets of actors in education, and it is useful to relate what they think about the influence of these players in the educational policy space to the top-down and bottom-up reforms in place. Figure 13 breaks down the predicted percentages of principals who feel that each of four actors in the educational policy space has a great deal of influence in making decisions that affect their schools by the same status variables as before: whether the principal is leading a school that made AYP, whether she is leading a failing school, or whether she is the principal of a charter school. This set of models, similar in all other ways to those in figure 12, examines principals' responses to the question, "How much actual influence do you think each of the following has regarding making decisions that affect your school?" for four actors in the educational policy space: principals, teachers, parents, and the Minnesota Department of Education. Both of these sets of responses were coded on a five-point scale, where zero equals no influence and five equals a great deal of influence.³⁰

Minnesota's public school principals were much more likely to report that officials with the Department of Education had a great



Question:

“How much actual influence do you think each of the following has regarding making decisions that affect your school?” Coded: from 1 = “No influence” to 5 = “A great deal of influence.”

Fig. 13. Influence of actors in education. (Probabilities obtained using Clarify [see King, Tomz, and Wittenberg 2000]. Source: Minnesota Schools Survey 2003. Demographic and AYP data from Minnesota Department of Education 2003c, 2003d, 2004a.)

deal of influence than any of the other three sets of actors and were much less likely to report that parents had a great deal of influence in their schools. This pattern echoes a long-standing criticism of public education in the United States: that the inevitable product of democratic control over education results in the ossification of control over schooling and undue influence by bureaucrats far removed from the actual production of education.³¹

Some notable differences in influence also exist among these groups of principals. Charter school principals were more than three times as likely to report that their teachers had a great deal of

influence than either group of regular public school principals and the least likely of the three groups to report that the Minnesota Department of Education had a great deal of influence.³² Principals in regular public schools that failed to make AYP, however, were more than 50 percent more likely than those whose schools made AYP to report that the Minnesota Department of Education had a great deal of influence in setting policy in their schools. These principals, however, were less than half as likely to perceive themselves as very influential than their counterparts in schools that had not been so labeled. As noted in chapter 3, these results cannot prove that AYP sanction causes the Minnesota Department of Education to become more powerful and principals less powerful. However, these correlations are entirely consistent with such an explanation and concur with my theoretical predictions. If one believes that AYP identification is based on a true measure of the quality of the principalship and that the answer to this failure is to increase the power of state officials, then No Child Left Behind appears to be a bureaucratic success. Both of these assumptions are questionable at best and misguided at worst.

These patterns of influence are entirely consistent with the predictions of chapter 2 (and those made by Wilson) about the contrast between top-down and bottom-up reforms. If policymakers evaluate schools from the top down, they end up increasing their influence and decreasing that of those closer to educational production. If, however, policymakers pass the ultimate evaluations of quality to the consumers of the services, they increase the power of those close to the real action and decrease the power of those farther away from it.

The complex relationships among expectations, influence, and agency observed in the survey results were echoed in the open-ended comments that principals provided in the follow-up interviews. Those principals who were optimistic about NCLB's potential consequences for Minnesota's public schools tended to locate the benefits within the agency relationships in which the schools are embedded because such relationships give the principals either additional tools for evaluating their leadership or additional levers with which to bring along teachers and staff. For the principal of a five-star school, the benefits of No Child Left Behind derived from having more information with

which to assess his school's progress toward his goals. Though potentially at a disadvantage given his school's high proportion of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, he welcomed the focus on students in all subgroups:

From my perspective NCLB has been a driving force behind several positive changes in my school. Our desire as a staff is to do our best for kids, and I have been able to use the NCLB legislation to promote the need to work smarter and focus more on moving all students forward academically. I believe that my teachers have always strived to do their best, and NCLB is just one more program that is assisting us in defining what we do on a daily basis.

I am very concerned with the rhetoric I hear from many of my principal colleagues regarding NCLB. They view this as a Bush mandate, and therefore it is all bad. My approach has been to focus on the positives of the legislation, including the training of paraprofessionals, using research based curriculum, measuring student growth from year to year, and addressing the various subgroups that need a more specialized approach to helping them catch up. I believe that my leadership and how I have responded to NCLB has actually improved the working conditions for teachers. We have developed better systems to help students, monitor achievement, etc. which has resulted in a smarter working environment.

An elementary school principal in another part of the state framed the benefits of No Child Left Behind directly in terms of agency relationships. With twenty-four years of teaching under her belt, she welcomed the chance to encourage her staff to do more:

My leadership has been affected positively by NCLB. The staff at this school are very resistant to change. The changes that have been needed can be moved forward better because we have a goal and expectation. I speak of NCLB as a goal that is good, and it can help us focus what we do. My philosophy is that if we are addressing the needs of students and focusing

our energy, then communicating this to students and parents and are able to give specific information about how students are doing in relation to the goal each year, we will get more involvement from parents and more motivation from students.

A high school principal with an equally long record of teaching agreed:

NCLB encourages accountability and focus in a district. I believe very much that educators need to be held more accountable for student learning. In this light, my leadership is reinforced by NCLB. I would guess that roughly 20% of my time now is spent trying to insure our school makes AYP. Much of the increase is due to testing, increased demands for documentation, and developing and implementing changes in policies and procedures. I now have less time for other duties, like teacher observation and associated staff development.

As his comments reveal, however, the added focus on excellence and the added ability to motivate and encourage teachers and students do not come without cost. Refocusing efforts invariably means time taken away from other tasks, and having a bigger stick with which to motivate teachers has the very real potential to erode the consensus-building aspects of the public school principalship, a comment echoed by several of his colleagues:

NCLB is just one small aspect of my leadership. However, it has challenged me to move mountains in short order. It has challenged me to become an expert in best practices in curriculum and instruction. It has challenged me to provide learning opportunities for all staff to increase student achievement. These challenges are very exciting; . . . however, they are also very time consuming and draining. . . . The day-to-day operations, being in the hallways with kids, etc., suffer.

I've been more directive—top-down decisions, even though I have a site team. The pressure is on me from my superinten-

dent to produce higher achievement too. It trickles down to teachers and students and parents. I feel that it puts me in a position to “enforce” rather than “support” good teaching. The mandate of NCLB has become a “do it or I’ll hurt you” model. . . . [M]ake the progress or you’ll end up on the dreaded list.

The principal of one Minnesota’s charter schools agreed. With a student population nearly 100 percent nonwhite, a student population eligible for free or reduced-price lunch nearly as high, and having made AYP the year before, the principal felt that No Child Left Behind must be carefully examined for its effects on the broader community that she believes defines what a school is supposed to be about:

If we are to embrace the beliefs of intrinsic motivation and that success is its own reward for our students, we should then set an example of a balanced life, strong work ethic and [acknowledgment] of differences. Too much focus on external rewards turns even the best people into poor citizens. [NCLB’s] approach can have some benefits but must be examined very carefully.

Another Minnesota principal perceived it to be part of his job to actively shield his teachers from the stresses and consequences of No Child Left Behind. In terms of bureaucratic agency, he thus sabotages the law’s intent. With seventeen years of experience as a principal plus thirteen as a teacher, he felt, however, that part of his professionalism was to act as a counterweight to the power of the Minnesota Department of Education, which his survey responses indicated he believed surpassed that of any of the other actors in the state’s educational environment:

As principal, I have made it a point to downplay the importance of the results of tests to my students, staff, and parents. I simply tell the teachers to follow our curriculum scope and sequence and not teach to the test or set aside special test prep

times. We encourage our students to be here and do their best; and we encourage the parents to make sure their children are here so we don't get "dunced" for the simple lack of test takers. By putting a priority on good teaching practices, supporting staff development activities to improve those practices, and making school a positive, nurturing environment for students and staff, we hope to create an atmosphere where students are able to do their best . . . no matter what that "best" is.

When reflecting on the effects of NCLB on the influence of their teachers, the small group of Minnesota's principals in my follow-up interviews worried about the reallocation of teachers' time and energy and the prospect of risk aversion in their approach to their jobs. Mostly, however, they focused on the stress that the law causes their teachers, a group without which—as the survey results show—principals do not feel that they can effectively do their jobs.

We have wonderful teachers. They work hard and do a great job of meeting needs. My concern is the extra, unnecessary pressure added to them due to NCLB. They work hard and care. . . . [T]hey should be given credit for that.

My teachers are very stressed out. While we have taken great steps to provide them with a positive attitude and excellent staff development and resources to support students and learning, teachers typically don't move this quickly. This has been a very overwhelming year for many. Also, recognizing that they have to teach all children with the expectation that they all perform at or above grade level is a new concept for the middle schools.

They are stressed. . . . [T]est scores drive teaching now, more than ever, and [NCLB is] increasing the amount of pressure for teachers and principals.

Many principals also felt that the added stress placed on teachers would lead not to increased academic achievement but to risk aversion and a narrowing of the curriculum, just as the theoretical framework in chapter 2 predicts:

The teachers prepare for the tests. They are accountable for test scores. This makes the teachers more irritable and less willing to try new things in class.

Teachers are more nervous about how students do on tests and spend more time on test related items and less on creative mind expanding activities. They have less time to help develop the total student emotionally, physically, and academically. [The] staff has been less inclined to look at new and different things. I encourage their taking risks but not as many are willing or have the time to try new things at this point.

When our school scores are being measured against the other scores of schools around us, I believe people feel they need to concentrate on the things that are measured. In some ways this is good, but it has decreased the willingness on teachers' parts to try to [do] new things or approaches.

Teachers are spending less time on social skills, art, music, science, academic survival skills, and social studies and more time on math and reading. Teachers are spending less time on gifted and talented students, the best readers and mathematicians.

A few principals saw the stress of NCLB's potential consequences as forcing a change in the character of the principalship itself, as they found themselves engaged in activities that they had not imagined as traditional roles, such as providing damage control and protection for their students and staff:

Last year one of the elementary buildings was identified early on as a school [in need of] improvement. Later it was determined that it was a clerical error which had placed the school on the list. Even in this situation the hours of time that it required to deal with this situation was a tremendous amount of lost resources and very little educational value. I had conducted numerous interviews with the media over this period of time as well as drafting responses to the school board, community, and state department.

I have staff members who tell me that NCLB has taken the fun out of teaching and learning. Kids can't just be kids anymore. Teachers in grades 3 and 5 feel added stress. There is so much to teach and not enough time to do it. I know I am not alone in my beliefs, many elementary principals are just too nice (or diplomatic) to say it.

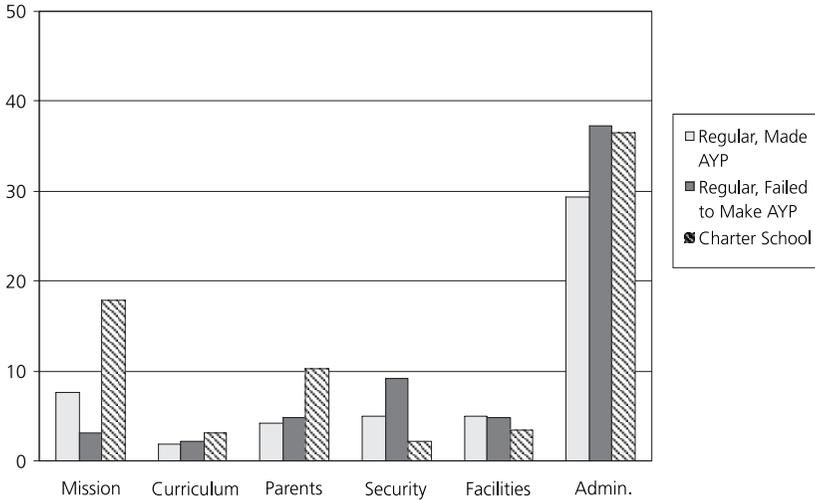
The challenge to my leadership is to protect the staff from the outside impacting agencies and policies and to allow them the freedom to engage their students to become the citizens for future generations of leaders.

These responses raise a critical concern, again brought up in the theoretical discussions of chapter 2: that No Child Left Behind's peculiar method of top-down accountability may lead to an ultimately counterproductive reallocation of principals' limited time and energy toward fulfilling the narrow vision of educational quality embodied in the law's one-size-fits-all approach to identification and sanction.

NCLB and Principals' Allocation of Time

This chapter's final analysis involves a closer empirical look at how No Child Left Behind affects how principals spend their time, which is probably their scarcest and easily their most valuable asset. Figure 14 presents the relationship between status as a target of AYP identification, status as an example of bottom-up charter school reforms, and the way in which principals allocate their time.³³ One of the foundational assumptions of this analysis is that principals allocate this scarce resource as best they can in response to the continually arising demands on their energy and efforts. As figure 14 shows, principals in all three groups were much more likely to have spent a great deal of time on administrative activities than any of the other policy areas about which they were asked. That charter school principals spent a great deal of time on administration is not surprising, given the enormous challenges of finding a home for, organizing, and leading a brand-new school, but it does cast a bit of doubt on the most optimistic claims that charter school principals will be free of all

Predicted Percentages of Principals Reporting a Great Deal of Time Spent



Question:

"During the past month, about how much of your time was spent on the following activities?" Coded: 1 = "None or almost none," 2 = "Slightly less time than on other activities," 3 = "About as much time as other activities," 4 = "Slightly more time than other activities," 5 = "A great deal of time."

Fig. 14. Principals' allocation of time. (Probabilities obtained using Clarify [see King, Tomz, and Wittenberg 2000]. Source: Minnesota Schools Survey 2003. Demographic and AYP data from Minnesota Department of Education 2003c, 2003d, 2004a.)

administrative duties to focus on parents and curriculum. This question will be more easily addressed when there are large numbers of charter schools that have existed for longer periods of time.

The results show that charter school principals differed substantially from their counterparts in traditional public schools in spending much more time facilitating their school's mission and reaching out to their parent communities. Both of these differences are statistically significant and are consonant with what the effective schools researchers called good leadership. Charter school principals also spent less time supervising their faculty, a difference that was statisti-

cally significant. The probabilities that either group would spend a great deal of time on this activity, however, were so small that I did not include it in figure 14. Wilson suggests that coping organizations will be characterized by adversarial manager-operator relationships: charter school principals may supervise their faculty less because they feel that they can do so.

With principals in regular public schools that failed to make AYP, the important story is partly what we see but mostly what we do not see. Failure is not associated with a corresponding rededication to those aspects of the principalship that increase test scores and decrease the probability of future failure and sanction under No Child Left Behind. Principals in regular public schools that failed to make AYP are less focused on the school mission than those not identified, a statistically significant difference. Neither the variable for having failed to make AYP nor the variable indicating status as principal of charter school were significant in a regression on the mean amount of time spent on all activities, indicating that differences really exist in the patterns of time allocation; the findings do not show merely that principals feel more overwhelmed by the demands of their jobs because of AYP failure or by the stresses associated with starting and operating a charter school.

Even the principals who expressed support for No Child Left Behind in the follow-up interviews generally agreed that the law led to a reallocation of their time and energy toward meeting the law's requirements and away from other, perhaps more fundamental, aspects of their leadership. Again, such a change could be beneficial, if the law is measuring true quality. Given the finite nature of the resource, some of this reallocation of time came at the expense of other leadership areas, and while some came from the principals' personal lives. The principal of a metro-area middle school that failed to make AYP found the demands overwhelming:

NCLB has had a direct impact on my leadership at school. I spend significant time out of the building, working with district office personnel, understanding all the ramifications, interventions, data, etc. . . . I also spend 12–14 hour days. . . . [I]t is after 5:00 P.M. even as I write and I will be here for at least a 12

hour day. . . . [T]here is much to do with little support. I spend a significant amount of time ensuring that my school is making AYP. . . . I realize that in principle this is a wonderful thing . . . every child at grade level. However, I need a partner to take on some of the “regular” principal business while I take this on.

Others—even those who favored the law—concurred with the sense of increased demands:

I am all for school improvement, using research based methodology, and analyzing test data. Schools are not factories. When I hear the phrase “No Child Left Behind,” my staff and I cringe. For those of us from Minnesota, NCLB is a step backwards. We spend way too much time testing, doing paperwork, and trying to figure out what we are suppose[d] to do. It has created more work for secretaries, business managers, paraprofessionals, teachers, and administrators. I’m talking hours.

I spend more time with data and accountability, yet have to pull from my family to do it. The only way to keep up is to work longer and longer. If this would lead to higher achievement, it may be worthwhile. However, we need to have time working with the instructional aspects, too. We simply don’t have time to hold teachers accountable for instruction.

Many of the things I already did as we have always strived to be a high performing school and embrace educational reform. I would estimate that exploring data takes at least extra 5 days each year. Testing takes about 10 days out of my year. Staff development issues consume another 3 days. [The] service time I spend and additional time writing the district Title grant add another 10 days. Add additional state reports all in one way or another tying into AYP it adds about 30 days time in total taken away from other duties I used to perform. Some do not get done, some are shortchanged, and some I do by adding on to my day or year.

I am much more in tune with data about school performance.

I spend a lot of time sharing information about standards with my staff and curriculum groups. It seems that I am always looking for explanations for what I consider or others could consider low performance, but trying not to use excuses. Public relations is a big deal.

The first thing the students hear on the radio and television on testing days is “how are the students in your child’s school measuring up?” This year on one of the testing days I was bombarded 5 times from the media about the day’s testing and how well our school was doing before I got to school, and I live across the street from building. Now we have school report cards handed out at the state fair!

Time is a finite and scarce commodity. If we can be sure that a high-stakes testing policy is forcing this reallocation on the basis of accurate measures of the quality of educational production, then we can be more optimistic. As I have shown, however, this is a highly doubtful proposition.

Conclusions

Nothing in these analyses suggests that No Child Left Behind cannot work, only that given its current assessment regime, it does not yet appear to be producing the kinds of positive leadership responses that it is designed to create. Principals in traditional public schools that are not making AYP present very different patterns of leadership and influence than their nonidentified counterparts, patterns that suggest effects on leadership that will make it less rather than more likely for principals in identified schools to improve their performance. Of course, these findings do not mean that innovative schools are doomed to fail under NCLB—good leaders will always try to find ways to lead—only that the incentives structures currently in place run counter to the goal of educational innovation.³⁴

Principals in charter schools, also subject to the quality assessments of their parent communities, appear to be more focused on those aspects of leadership that the effective schools literature has

shown to be associated with producing better quality in education. I have not been able to comment on the charter-school-specific leadership consequences of No Child Left Behind. NCLB may produce a different, better bureaucratic response in charter schools than appears to be the case in traditional public schools. The data from Minnesota are not sufficient to refute this possibility. Given the high probability of sanction for charter schools, however, NCLB would need to induce or reinforce in charter school principals enough of an increase in customer, curricular, and mission orientation to overcome the destructive implications of sanction—an unlikely prospect. Either time-series studies or well-chosen microlevel work will be needed to confirm or refute the findings of these preliminary studies.

There is nothing inherently incompatible with top-down and bottom-up reforms in education; however, NCLB's current requirements do not properly align incentives and behaviors in the best way possible. If being accountable to parents and having bureaucratic autonomy are beneficial, then there is no reason to withhold these benefits from the regular public schools and give them only to the charter schools. This is where NCLB, properly conceived and executed, could be a powerful and positive force in educational reform. If we can incorporate assessments that motivate traditional public school principals to listen to their parent communities and if we can design incentives to reward these principals for excellence with autonomy as well as resources, then we have the chance of making a system that not only is top-down and bottom-up driven but also self-reinforcing rather than self-contradictory.

Charter schools represent only one means of creating a more autonomous and responsive principalship, and they may not even be the most promising way given the extraordinary challenges inherent in creating a new set of financially sound, stable, and excellent schools. As part of a state's implementation of NCLB, a system could be created to identify outstanding public school principals, to better align their interests with those of their customers, and to provide them with the support needed to fulfill the critical ambitions of No Child Left Behind.