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## Leading from the Middle: How Principals Rely on District Guidance and Organizational Conditions in Times of Crisis

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## Keywords

Leadership, Organization Theory/Change, Principals, Decision Making, Middle Management, Organizational Learning, COVID-19

## Disciplines

Education | Educational Leadership

## Comments

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**Leading from the Middle: How Principals Rely on District Guidance and Organizational  
Conditions in Times of Crisis**

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## **Abstract**

COVID-19 has presented unprecedented challenges to schools, leaving principals to lead rapid organizational change with limited guidance or support. Drawing on interviews from a larger, national interview study of principals at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, we analyzed the experiences of 20 principals in four large, urban school districts—Boston, Denver, New York, and San Diego. We found that principals relied on both district guidance and preexisting school structures and conditions as they led through crisis. Although no principals were satisfied with district guidance, principals responded to guidance on a spectrum—from abiding, to challenging, to subverting guidance. Principals' responses were associated with their perceptions of the internal capacities of their schools, as well as the district guidance. Our findings support an emergent typology of principals as middle managers during crisis, which sheds light on how principals act as middle managers and how districts can support their work.

**Substantive Keywords:** Leadership, Organization Theory/Change, Principals, Decision Making

**Methodology Keywords:** Qualitative Research

**Additional Keywords:** Middle Management, Organizational Learning, COVID-19

## **Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic has tested schools' abilities to rapidly pivot their modes of teaching and learning in an unprecedented way—revealing how resilient our school systems are to crisis, and to organizational change more generally. Operating between the often-competing demands of district guidance and their schools' growing needs, school leaders have been tasked with leading organizational change under historically challenging conditions. As middle managers, school leaders regularly depend both on their “subordinates” and their “superordinates” for their success (Spillane et al., 2002, p. 760). On the one hand, school leaders work in resource-constrained environments and are frequently tasked with competing demands, such as “maintaining stability while delivering change” and “operating through existing routines and processes while developing new ones” (McKenzie & Varney, 2018, p. 384). On the other hand, middle managers like school leaders are simultaneously proximate to the “frontline” and aware of the “big picture,” so they are uniquely positioned to identify problems within their schools (Huy, 2001, p. 73).

School leaders lead change within their schools by leveraging preexisting school structures and conditions, such as relationships, shared decision-making, and professional community (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Fink & Resnick, 2001; Fullan, 2002). Less is known, however, about how school leaders' reliance on these conditions varies as they lead through crisis and are pressed with rapidly shifting demands from both their districts and their school communities. During periods of crisis, school leadership looks fundamentally different; rather than being future-oriented, leaders must deal with surviving the present in order to minimize longer-term harm to individuals and their schools (Smith & Riley, 2012).

Drawing on interviews with 20 principals conducted at the onset of the pandemic in four large, urban districts—Boston Public Schools, Denver Public Schools, New York City Department of Education, San Diego Unified School District—we explore the role of district guidance and school conditions in shaping principals’ work. We build on organizational learning theory and scholarship on the role of school working conditions to examine how principals operate as middle managers during periods of organizational change. We find that district guidance at the onset of the pandemic varied in its timing, substance, and flexibility, and principals responded to guidance on a spectrum—from abiding to district mandates, to challenging district decisions to initiate change, to actively subverting guidance. These responses were shaped both by the nature of district supports and guidance principals received, as well as their schools’ preexisting structures and conditions. Importantly, the patterns we describe are not comprehensive nor causal; rather, they represent associations that speak to an emerging typology of ways in which school leaders can and do function as middle managers and the organizational resources they rely on to lead. Thus, we present these relationships as an emergent framework for how principals as middle managers conceptualize their work in relation to external guidance and their school communities.

School leadership scholarship has widely examined the role of school leaders as middle managers and as leaders of organizational learning. We build on this literature by additionally considering how school leaders conceptualize of themselves as middle managers and how they operationalize their roles in times of change. Our emergent typology reveals how school leaders conceptualize their roles as middle managers in the context of their district support, offering a framework for studying and understanding the middle manager role in times of urgent organizational change. Understanding the work of school leaders during crisis is important

because leadership stability is especially critical for schools in weathering periods of uncertainty (Smith & Riley, 2012). Given the massive disruptions COVID-19 has already presented to schools (Kraft et al., 2020; Kuhfeld et al., 2020), understanding the district and school conditions necessary to support school leaders' work may prove critical in retaining school leaders and positioning schools to learn and recover from the ongoing crisis.

### **Theoretical Framework and Prior Research**

Our analysis draws on organizational learning (OL) theory and scholarship on the role of school working conditions in shaping OL. Together, these lenses offer a means of understanding how school leaders—operating in the nested and overlapping organizational contexts of their schools, networks, and districts—act as middle managers.

#### *School Leader's Role in Organizational Learning*

Originating in management studies, OL theory posits that organizations like schools “learn” by integrating knowledge from their interactions and previous experiences into their policies and routines (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990; Levitt & March, 1988; Farrell et al., 2019). Although OL is parallel to individual learning, OL relies on the “systemic thinking” of the whole organization (Senge, 1990). Learning is triggered by a “stimulus” —oftentimes a dramatic experience, such as a crisis, that brings about a perceived need to seek a solution to some problem within the organization (Leithwood et al., 1998). Within schools, school leaders can be considered “chief learning officer[s],” as they play a key role in shaping the conditions for OL (Weiner et al., 2021, p. 2). Leaders can provide other members tangible supports and the freedom and resources to innovate (Amabile, 1997).

School leaders' ability to orchestrate OL is shaped by their position within nested organizational contexts (Marsh et al., 2017). Thus, they are responsive to external policy and district leadership and also face demands *internally* from their own school sites, which “pull [them] in two directions” (Spillane et al., 2002, p. 734). Given school leaders' role in serving as brokers between their schools and districts, one way of conceptualizing their work is as middle managers (Spillane, et al., 2002). As middle managers, school leaders determine which demands to attend to with any given decision: when they judge external guidance as illegitimate (Huy et al., 2014) or at odds with their self-interest (Guth & MacMillan, 1986), they can actively resist and even subvert organizational change efforts. In the context of schools, principals can “buffer teachers from less aligned initiatives, allowing them to focus on a few key priorities” (Yurkofsky, 2020, p. 457), and filter messages based on their own sense-making (Coburn, 2005; Reinhorn et al., 2017). Donaldson and Woulfin (2018) propose a useful typology for understanding principals' agency in policy implementation—suggesting that principals can go from “tinkering” with policy to “going rogue.” In this way, school leaders' roles may differ from more traditional middle management roles in business, in that they can exercise greater agency over their school sites, depending on their district contexts. To better understand how principals see themselves as middle managers—and which conditions enable them to exercise more or less autonomy over leadership of their individual school sites—it is also necessary to understand how principals' responses to external guidance are associated with the organizational capacities of their schools.

### *Preexisting School Structures and Conditions*

A central mechanism by which school leaders facilitate OL is through shaping the organizational structures and conditions in schools (Burkhauser, 2017; Johnson et al., 2012; Leithwood et al., 2008). At the heart of their work, school leaders shape the climate for learning (e.g., level of trust and collaboration) within their schools (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). School leaders can foster a shared purpose for their schools (Myung et al., 2020), shape professional culture (Habbeger, 2008; Harris et al., 2013; Reinhorn et al., 2017), and reallocate resources (Enomoto & Conley, 2008). Additionally, they can establish structures which enable OL, such as collaboration structures which foster teacher autonomy (e.g., teacher teams, professional learning communities) (Bowen et al., 2007; Johnson et al., 2018; Weiner, 2016).

Schools' "internal capacity" for learning is shaped by preexisting school conditions and structures (Stoll, 1999). Organizational conditions can trump other environmental factors, such as the level of economic disadvantage within a school community, in shaping schools' capacity (Kraft et al., 2015; Simon & Johnson, 2015; Weiner et al., 2021). In particular, Bryk and Schneider (2002) posit that relational trust—i.e., the strength of relational quality among school leaders, staff, and the broader school community—is the bedrock of organizational change. Relational trust provides the safety and reduces the vulnerability of members of the organization to take risks and innovate (Seashore Louis & Lee, 2016). Weiner et al. (2021) find that several key organizational conditions—namely, "the nature of accountability, the degree of principal autonomy, the professional culture, and the teacher decision-making infrastructure"—have shaped schools' abilities to learn through the COVID-19 pandemic (p. 14). These findings build off a rich body of scholarship finding that organizational *structures*, such as collaborative decision-making, work alongside organizational *conditions*, such as trust, in shaping schools' abilities to learn (Leithwood et al., 1998).

## **Conceptual Framework**

Together, OL theory and scholarship on school working conditions provide a lens to understand how school leaders are constrained or empowered by their roles as middle managers between their districts and schools. The focus of our study is on how principals perceived preexisting organizational structures and conditions to influence their work and their ability to guide OL in their schools. The four key structures and conditions we focus on—decision-making, teacher human capital, teacher collaboration, and relationships—all emerged from our findings as being the key school features which shaped principals’ responses. Our findings represent principals’ own conceptions of their roles as middle managers and the resources that support their work in response to urgent demands for organizational change.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

## **Methods**

This article is based on qualitative data drawn from a larger study conducted between April to August 2020. The study examined principals’ experiences leading their schools through the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this study, we focus on the principals’ approaches to responding to and enacting district guidance and leveraging preexisting structures and conditions in their schools. We address the following research questions:

1. What guidance did districts provide to principals in response to the COVID-19 pandemic?

2. How did principals describe the role of district guidance in their work? Which factors shaped principals' responses to district guidance?
3. How did principals describe their reliance on preexisting school structures and conditions in responding the COVID-19 pandemic?

### **Sample & Data Collection**

*Interviews.* During the spring and summer of 2020, we were part of a cross-institution team of 18 education researchers which interviewed 115 principals across 19 states. Each researcher purposively recruited principals working in traditional public schools through their personal network and then employed a snowball method to recruit additional principals recommended by participants. The result was a large and heterogeneous sample of principals who varied in experience, personal background, and training—leading schools which varied by grade level, size, demographics, geography, and performance level.

Interviews were conducted via phone or Zoom and lasted between 60-90 minutes. We assured participants confidentiality and used semi-structured protocols to guide our interviews and elicit comparable data within and across sites (Maxwell, 1996). Prior to conducting each interview, we asked principals to complete a brief survey about their background. We asked principals to describe their school's transition to distance learning—to identify district policies and directives during this period and to describe the role of preexisting school structures and conditions during the transition. We also asked principals to explain how they interacted with district officials, the teachers' union, their staff, and students and families. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

For this paper, we created a sub-sample of interviews with 20 principals—those leading schools across four large, urban school districts across the United States: Boston Public Schools (BPS), Denver Public Schools (DPS), New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE), and San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) (Table 1). (We assigned pseudonyms to each principal beginning with the same first letter as their district). Eighteen of the 20 principals served a majority of students of color living in low-income communities. (Table 2). It is important to note that, in NYC in particular, the threat of COVID-19 was already visceral at the time of our study. By March 16, 2020, the date that NYCDOE shut down, there were 714 reported cases of COVID in NYC. When other districts shut down, their cities had a fraction of that case count (Table 1).

Table 1. Characteristics of Sampled Districts

Table 2. Principal and School Characteristics

***Document collection.*** In preparation for interviews, and as we analyzed transcripts, we reviewed school and district websites to better understand the schools and districts studied. We collected descriptive information about the schools and districts from NCES, including demographic information about students and the school, and analyzed relevant documents, including guidance memorandums issued by district officials, memorandums of understanding between the teachers and principals’ unions and the district, news articles, communiques to families, etc.

***Analysis.*** We summarized each participant’s interview responses using a common template based on our research questions for this paper. We developed and calibrated our use of

a set of thematic codes (Appendix A)—etic codes drawn from the literature and emic codes that emerged from our initial analysis—and coded transcripts using *Dedoose*. Then, we wrote district-level memos synthesizing findings from across the key codes at the district-level and looked across memos to identify the preexisting structures and conditions which principals reported relying on the most across the districts (collaboration, decision-making, teacher human capital, and relationships). We created data-analytic matrices in order to compare responses within and across schools and districts and to identify emerging themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and to cross-check with data from relevant documents. We addressed risks to validity by returning often to the data to review coding decisions, check our emerging conclusions, and consider rival explanations or disconfirming data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We then modeled our case analysis after Marsh et al. (2017)'s organizational study of teacher evaluation systems and considered: the nature of district guidance in each of the four districts, the preexisting organizational school conditions which principals leveraged in their responses, and the relationship between principals' responses to guidance and their reliance on preexisting school conditions.

### **Study Limitations**

Interviews for this study were conducted in the spring of 2020, as the pandemic was rapidly unfolding across the United States—during a notoriously difficult time for school leaders and teachers. Consequently, our research team recruited a convenience sample of principals with whom we had existing connections; however, principals who have relationships with education researchers may be more likely to lead especially strong schools. Additionally, the percentage of principals interviewed in a single district differed widely. Thus, it is important to note that the

sample is not, nor intends to be, representative of schools in the district. Although our recommendations cannot be transferred directly to other settings, our findings deepen the discussion of the role of principals as middle managers and provide considerations for district and school leaders about how they can establish the conditions that support middle managers in times of urgent change.

## **Findings**

We organize our findings into three sections. Drawing on public reports and principals' direct accounts, we identify that the three key sources of variation in guidance across the four districts in our study—the amount and timing of guidance, the substance of guidance, and the flexibility of guidance—accounted for distinct policy environments for principals' work. We then classify each principal by how they described responding to district guidance—as Abiders, Challengers, or Subverters—and analyze the organizational structures and conditions associated with principals' responses. We find that no principals felt adequately supported by the guidance they received. All principals relied on teacher collaboration, but principals' reliance on decision-making structures, human capital, and relationships varied, based on how they described responding to guidance.

### ***Variation in District Guidance***

The principals in our study were operating within four distinct district contexts, and each adopted a different approach to providing guidance at the onset of the pandemic. Across the

districts, there was variation in the amount/timing, substance, and flexibility of guidance. Notably, we observe that all districts were pressured to make rapid decisions without providing much advance notice to principals or teachers. Although all four districts engaged in collective bargaining with their teachers' unions to establish work rules for their teachers, the nature of these agreements varied across districts.

**San Diego.** On Friday, March 13, 2020, SDUSD Superintendent Marten announced the cancellation of in-person instruction effective the following week (Sevilla, 2020). Marten said that the district would continue offering school food to students and students could access enrichment activities on the district website in lieu of formal instruction for the first few weeks (Washburn & Hong, 2020). At the end of this period, the district initiated a "soft launch" of distance learning in which the district focused on distributing technology to students, students completed work for credit but no grade, and teachers were offered professional development on remote instruction (SDUSD, 2020). Most of the formal guidance to schools came from a series of MOUs between the district and the teachers' union. For example, an April MOU called for students to be "held harmless" with their grades, and noted that teachers could not be expected to provide more than 240 minutes of direct instruction and flex time (SDUSD & SDEA, 2020). As per the MOUs, principals were restricted from observing virtual classrooms without permission from teachers, and were not allowed to consult with teachers over the summer in order to plan for the Fall 2020 semester.

**Boston.** On Friday, March 13, 2020, Mayor Walsh of Boston and BPS Superintendent Cassellius announced that the district would transition to remote instruction by March 17, 2020 (BPS, 2020). Families were provided guidance on picking up instructional materials from schools, access to internet and technology, and school food (Cassellius, 2020). The district did

not issue formal guidance related to instruction, teacher work hours, or state assessments, however, until mid-April when state assessments were cancelled and the Boston Teachers Union (BTU) and BPS signed an MOU (Linksi, 2020; Vaznis, 2020). The MOU prescribed specific regulations regarding teachers' work—limiting instructional hours, and requiring teachers and other staff to work at least 20 hours of week and attend at least 5 hours of professional development focused on virtual instruction (BPS & BTU, 2020).

**New York City.** On Sunday, March 15, 2020, Mayor de Blasio announced that in-person instruction would be cancelled beginning the following day (Shapiro, 2020)—effectively asking school leaders and staff in the largest school district in the US to begin to transition their modes of instruction immediately. School staff were instructed to return to campus for the duration of the following week for training on remote instruction before remote instruction began on March 23, 2020. The mayoral-appointed schools Chancellor Carranza announced that students would be invited later in the week back to campus to pick up learning materials (NYCDOE, 2020a), and later provided additional guidance on what virtual learning would entail, noting that each school would use its own online platform (NYCDOE, 2020b).

The district did not issue further guidance on how to make the transition to remote instruction. However, in our sample, 7 principals were supervised through a common superintendency, the Affinity network. Composed of 164 schools across the district, the Affinity network is supported by nonprofit and university partners, including New Visions for Public Schools, Outward Bound, Urban Assembly, and CUNY, and serves as a source of professional community, as well as logistical support for principals. Whereas the rest of the district is governed by geographically-based superintendents, Affinity schools retain a separate set of centralized superintendents and are associated based on their shared substantive interests, rather

than geography. Support networks like Affinity were first introduced to NYCDOE in 2006 by Bloomberg as a district-wide strategy for supporting principals; however, all of the networks other than Affinity were dissolved in a restructuring plan in 2015 (Wall, 2015). As such, principals who belonged to the Affinity network were able to access unique resources and informal advice from other school and network leaders in a way that non-Affinity principals were not.

**Denver.** On Wednesday, March 18, 2020, DPS announced that the district would transition to remote instruction after an extended spring break, following an executive order from the governor suspending in-person instruction (Hernandez, 2020). The Colorado Department of Education also announced that the state test for the year was cancelled, and the district provided guidance to families regarding the distribution of school food (DPS, 2020a). Shortly thereafter, the district published a Remote Learning Plan, which provided schools with the flexibility to choose from one of three options for instruction: (1) use district-provided digital instructional materials with teacher support, (2) teacher-led hybrid instruction, or (3) full teacher-led digital instruction (DPS, 2020b). Schools had the flexibility to decide which option would best meet the needs of their schools, but the district suggested that schools with lower levels of teacher proficiency with technology chose the first option, schools with some teacher proficiency using technology choose the second option, and schools with 1:1 devices and high teacher proficiency using technology choose the third option (DPS, 2020b).

### ***Principal Perceptions of District Guidance***

Despite the variation in guidance across districts, no principal we interviewed felt adequately supported by the guidance they received. Notably, the MOUs signed between

SDUSD and BPS with their respective teachers' unions in response to COVID-19 were expansive—covering a wide range of topics concerning teachers' workloads (e.g., work hours, grading, support staff, SPED staff, substitutes) as well as teachers' nonteaching duties (Hemphill & Marianno, 2021). For SDUSD, the inflexible nature of the MOU constrained principals' work—preventing them from consulting within their staff over the summer of 2020 to plan for the fall. Boston principals similarly shared that the delayed timing of this guidance constrained their ability to respond, as they were left waiting for key decisions at the state- and district-levels to pan out. As Principal Beale shared, “By Friday the 13th, I was honestly upset that I was in school, and I had trouble getting answers from central office.” When guidance was finally announced, Boston principals saw it as highly inflexible, particularly given that they had already settled on alternative ways of operating at their schools by that time. Although Denver principals appreciated the flexibility in guidance, the lack of consistency across schools created some issues in their work, as families became concerned by how their school's approach compared to that of others in the district. On this point, Principal Day reflected: “It really felt that schools were pinned against each other a bit and not set up for success, and so that was hard.” Finally, the principals in New York saw the lack of guidance they received as unsupportive, rather than flexible. As Principal Noble reflected, the extent of district guidance was: “Get ready for remote learning.” Given the size and organization of NYCDOE, principals were often unable to clarify the vagueness of guidance when they reached out to representatives from the district.

### ***Organizational Structures and Conditions Related to Principal Responses to District Guidance***

In response to their perception of inadequate, and even constraining, district guidance, principals needed to decide how to respond in ways that would be most productive to their

schools. Within and across the four districts we studied, principals varied in their reliance on preexisting school structures and conditions. To make sense of this variation, we classify principals' responses to district guidance on a continuum—from abiding to district mandates, to challenging the district decisions, to turning inwards to their schools to subvert guidance (Figure 2). No principal's response was consistent across all areas of their decision-making; rather, we characterize principals based on how they described responding to the majority of district guidance. To do so, we pulled all excerpts in which principals discussed district guidance. For each area of district guidance (e.g., instruction, teacher work hours, food distribution), we coded the excerpt based on principals' response type. We then determined each principal's primary response type by considering how they responded to the majority of areas of guidance. To place principals on the spectrum relative to one another, we put principals who described abiding to more guidance further left on the spectrum, and those who described subverting more guidance further right on the spectrum.

### Figure 2. Principals by District and Response Type

Based on principals' response types, we then describe how principals leveraged preexisting structures and conditions during their efforts to transition their school in response to the pandemic. We focus on four key preexisting structures and conditions that emerged in our analysis as salient across principals:

- decision-making (established norms for decision-making)
- teacher human capital (principals' perceptions of the experience and skills of their teaching staff)

- teacher collaboration structures (preexisting organizational structures, such as grade-level and department teams)
- relationships (preexisting relationships that principals reported having an influence on their efforts)

We observed key patterns within principal response types as well as themes that cut across all response types. Table 3 provides an overview of the patterns we observed.

Table 3. Organizational Structures and Conditions by Principal Response Type

**Abiders: Strictly adhering to district guidance.** The largest proportion of principals—half of the principals in our sample (including 2 Denver principals, all 5 San Diego principals, 1 Boston principal, and 2 New York principals)—were Abiders. These principals described waiting for district guidance before acting—even when they disagreed with the guidance. Abiders fell into one of two categories: (1) they felt that they had sufficient autonomy to carry out their work within the district, or (2) they were forced into compliance with the district by the collectively bargained agreement with the union. In both cases, Abiders worked within the existing system to enact and respond to guidance. In order to meet the demands of abiding to district guidance, there was wide variation across Abiders in their reliance on preexisting school structures and conditions.

*Finding pockets of support within the district.* The principals who most strongly abided were those who found support within the district (2 Denver principals, 1 Boston principal, and 2 New York principals). Typically, Abiders “waite[d] on [the] system to tell them what to do” before making key decisions. Abiders largely credited this to the pockets of support within their districts to flexibly adapt guidance to fit their local needs. For example, Principal Newhart—a

New York principal with 10 years of experience at his school site—shared that he had an “amazing superintendent” who created structures of support for principals. Although Principal Newhart saw the central district office’s guidance as largely logistical in nature, his superintendent supplemented that guidance with supportive instructions on how to lead through crisis:

There was the adaptive guidance of like, “how to lead through a moment like this?” that was coming from my superintendent. [He] basically reads all day and night, and so he was just finding resources for us, [...] for leaders in uncertain times—readers or resources for incidents, you know, post 9/11, post-Katrina.

As such, some Abiders were able to find sufficient supports from within their districts, such that they did not express the need to challenge guidance.

*Pressure to abide to inflexible district guidance.* The others Abiders (all 5 San Diego principals) expressed that, as one said, their “hands were tied” by their districts collective bargaining agreement—not because they had sufficient supports within the existing system. As high school Principal Stewart said: “I was leading under the construct of the MOU between the district and teachers’ union. And so, we were [...] kind of limited.” Because the agreement prevented principals from making any demands on teachers’ time during the summer months of 2020, San Diego principals expressed being constrained in their ability to plan for the next academic year. For these Abiders, it was not strong district supports that influenced their responses; rather, they lacked channels to challenge or subvert guidance without facing legal repercussions.

*Reliance on preexisting structures & conditions.* Abiders’ responses were primarily dictated by the relationship between their schools and their districts and the intra-organizational routines that shaped those relationships, rather than their schools’ internal capacities. As such, Abiders had the most varied reliance on preexisting structures and conditions across the three

groups of principals: there were no clear patterns among Abiders except variation itself. Regarding decision-making, there were instances of stakeholder input, delegation, sole decision-making, and collaborative decision-making. Abiders were also unique in that two put in place new processes, rather than relying solely on preexisting structures, for making decisions: one principal established a remote leadership team to carry out decision-making throughout the crisis, while the other became the sole decision-maker on many decisions out of necessity to make many quick decisions. Abiders also characterized variation in teacher human capital in their schools. For instance, several Abiders noted a range of experience among their staff with technology use, including many strong committed teachers, as well as teachers who were less engaged or who needed to “step up.” Further, some Abiders experienced challenges with relationships at their schools. Principal Stewart explained that some teachers were “very compassionate” and others weren't, which had implications on English learners and special education students' access to supports. This variation suggests that Abiders' responses were primarily shaped by their adherence to district guidance.

**Challengers: Networked Delegators.** Six of the 20 principals in our sample (5 New York principals and 1 Denver principal)—were Challengers. All challengers discussed leveraging their connections to resources and decision-making bodies *outside* of their schools. The ways in which Challengers described themselves did not stop as leaders of their schools; rather, they also described themselves as mediators or middle managers between their districts and their school sites. Challengers were highly critical of district guidance but proactive in working beyond their individual schools to improve district guidance and supports. As Principal Davis shared, “Instead of complaining wondering what's going to happen, we need to organize to see what we can make happen.” Challengers identified channels of support within their districts,

e.g., district representatives and/or networks, which buffered them from challenging guidance. They also felt that they had the internal school capacity to challenge guidance.

*Seeing value in changing the system.* Challengers were highly critical of their district guidance, but saw value in working alongside the existing systems to ensure coherence across their districts. Notably, Challengers were able to work within the existing system because they had existing intra-organizational routines and structures with the district which enabled them to share their voice in decision-making beyond their school site. Principal Davis, a veteran Denver principal who had led a school in the New Orleans post-Katrina, articulated the need to challenge from within the system in order to streamline decision-making and ensure coherence during moments of crisis:

What I learned in Katrina [is that the] thing that happens is you got 15 people trying to make decisions and that just didn't work. [...] We need to organize to see what we can make happen with that resources. [...] our internal systems, and then we reached out to make sure those systems were consistent with the district and the government policies.

Challengers saw value of aligning their school operations with district guidance, even despite their dissatisfaction with that guidance. As Principal Davis reflected: “We’re trying to make this systematic, uniform, and consistent message in a time of organized chaos.”

*District networks as a platform and buffer to challenge the system.* In other cases, principals’ key source of support and platform for challenging the system was through their district networks, such as the Affinity network in New York. For these principals, their networks ended up being more important than central office leadership. Principals saw these networks as distinct from the central district offices, in part because the networks had some autonomy to deviate from central district guidance. Principal Nott, a New York principal who quit her role at the end of the 19-20 academic year due to the lack of district supports throughout the pandemic, reflected: “I think that [the district] induced a lot of trauma on school leaders. [...] I would say

our network was great. I think our superintendent is very supportive, but I think that his hands were tied.” Similarly, Principal Nelson, a high school principal in New York, shared that “the central [district] was in over their head with a lot of stuff,” but “it helped to be a part of that community [i.e., the network] of other like-minded schools” to fill the gaps in district supports. When districts had access to a network, it was often their lifeline. As Principal Nott expanded, “Without [my] network, I don’t know what it would like be a principal in New York City.”

*Reliance on preexisting structures & conditions.* Challengers emphasized their reliance on preexisting delegation or collaborative strategies for decision-making in their schools that facilitated buy-in. For those who delegated, they relied heavily on other administrators and teacher leaders to take the lead on various decisions. As one principal summarized, “sometimes you have to lead, and sometimes you have to follow.” In other cases, Challengers’ decision-making processes were highly collaborative, relying on input from across the school. Across cases, Challengers emphasized leveraging their delegation-based or collaborative decision-making structures as a way to generate buy-in and “ownership” of their collective decisions. Challengers did not discuss their teacher human capital as a key component to their transition. Importantly, we do not suggest that teacher human capital was not important to these principals; rather, when discussing the key organizational structures and conditions that influenced their efforts to respond to the crisis, Challengers focused primarily on their delegation strategies, engagement with their networks, and strong relationships in their schools. In doing so, these principals revealed that they relied on strong collaborative relationships and delegation of leadership responsibilities in their schools while they reached outward to gather support from their networks and to influence decisions outside their schools.

**Subverters: Self-sustaining islands.** The remaining principals in our sample—4 of the 20 principals (3 New York principals and 1 Boston principal)—were Subverters. Subverters were the most critical of district guidance, but reported that they lacked effective channels to voice their concerns to their districts. In the absence of these channels for challenging guidance, these principals took the risk of both pre-empting and actively ignoring district guidance because they trusted that they had the capacity as a school to respond. Subverters responded first by identifying the inadequacies of district guidance, and then turning *inwards* to focus on leading change within their own schools, rather than seeking to enact change in the system at large.

*Strong opposition to district guidance.* Subverters were highly critical of district guidance. Principal Nasir, a New York principal with previous experience in health care, described on the shortcomings of the guidance she received:

The directives I was getting from the DOE about how to handle situations were completely inadequate. And I was like, "Wait a minute, if this is supposed to be how you are going to contain an epidemic, this is inappropriate and impossible." They even told me to assign a person to sit with a kid who might potentially be infectious. And I was like, "This is ridiculous." And I refused to do it.

Some Subverters responding by attempting to voice their concerns to the district; however, they saw preexisting intra-organizational district-school routines as solely performative. Principal Nash, the founding principal at her high school in NYC, poignantly shared her experience trying to engage with the district at a meeting for principals:

[The district has] these [Zoom] meetings where everyone's on and there's a chat. Everyone is muted. No one can take themselves off mute. There's a chat that you can type into, but you can't see what anyone else is saying. You can type in questions, but no one ever responds to your questions.

When principals identified that the structures to influence decision-making beyond their schools were futile, they often stopped attempting to engage in change at that level.

*Turning inwards.* Because they saw district guidance as inadequate, Subverters turned inwards to their schools and leaned on other school staff to make decisions that they felt best met the needs of their school. Principal Norman in New York synthesized this approach as: “Stay out of my way. Let me do what I need to do and let me get the job done.” Subverters were experienced (with nearly 10 years of experience at their schools on average) and had the foresight to anticipate the needs of their community. On this point, Principal Norman, a seasoned leader with 15 years of experience leading his school, reflected:

I knew on March 1 that March 13th was gonna be the last day of school. I was really clear about that, so I was ignoring everything that the politicians were saying and I was getting busy getting my community.

When Subverters felt that district guidance would prevent them from meeting the needs of their school community, they did not hesitate to pursue any means necessary to support their community. In order to “get the job done,” Subverters guided their school staff to similarly ignore guidance. For example, when Principal Beale in Boston felt that asking her teachers to prepare students for the state test (the “MCAS”) was the wrong priority, but the district has not yet provided guidance on whether or not the test would be administered, she did not hesitate in telling her staff to ignore the test:

When I said I was distributing Chromebooks, [my teachers] all looked at me and said, “What about MCAS?” [...] “I said, “F\*\*\* the MCAS.” And I don't normally talk like that to people, and they actually all cheered. I was like, “I don't even care. I don't care about MCAS anymore. I care about people being safe and kids learning.”

Subverters responded to inflexible and, in the case of Boston, delayed district guidance by both actively pre-empting and disregarding the guidance they received.

*Reliance on preexisting structures & conditions.* Subverters emphasized that they were able to subvert guidance due to their reliance on stakeholder input or collaborative structures for decision-making, strong school-family relations, and a school staff whom they viewed as highly

competent. Related to decision-making, Subverters relied heavily on internal structures for soliciting input from educators. One principal summarized:

You cannot do things alone. The teamwork really matters, and I'm lucky enough to be [at a] big enough school that I have a leadership team, and that without their support or their willingness to do whatever it takes with me, I personally probably would have quit.

The reliance on teachers for decision-making aligned with Subverters' perceptions of their teacher human capital. Subverters consistently emphasized the high levels of teacher human capital in their schools, often referring to their teachers as "savvy" and "dedicated." Confidence in their school staff's capacity was a key preexisting condition that these principals described as important for shifting their norms and routines in response to COVID-19. In addition to relying on strong capacity within their schools, Subverters leveraged strong school-family relations to move through the crisis. Prioritization of school-family relationships fostered a sense of trust that may have been especially necessary during this time of transition. As Principal Nash in New York explained:

We do things like that a lot where we say like, "This is what DOE says, and this is what I think. This is what I'd doing with my kids." There's a high level of trust even though our families have a lot of reasons not to trust systems like the DOE.

Nash believed that her teachers had the space to experiment and had been supported in high-quality professional learning opportunities for years leading up to the pandemic, which facilitated the transition in response to COVID-19. These preexisting structures and conditions ultimately supported Subverters' ability to turn inwards. Principals perceived their staff to be highly skilled and were bolstered by the support and input from their students' families.

**Crosscutting themes: Teacher collaboration and strong relationships.** While principals varied by response type, two key themes cut across all principals. First, across the board, principals heavily relied on preexisting team collaborative structures during the transition

to support shifts in instruction and ongoing instructional planning. As Principal Newcombe, an Abider in New York, described, teachers could fall back on to these structures “work through” the issues that COVID-19 presented:

What happens a lot of times too, when there's a crisis is you're like, “Okay, throw it all out the window. We have to start from scratch.” And when in reality, we had structures in place: the crew system, our professional learning is an instructional rounds model... so [teachers] knew how to [use] the structures and the protocols to sort of work through that.

Teachers typically met in content area and/or grade level teams each week to plan for instruction, share “best practices,” discuss student needs, “make sure they were on the same page,” and support each other with tech use. Teacher teams served as a way in which teachers contributed to ongoing decision-making through the COVID-19 transition, as well as a way to support ongoing instructional efforts.

Second, nearly all principals described the importance of high-quality relationships to their work—especially relationships among staff and between staff and students. This was true even among Abiders; despite describing some uneven relationships in their schools, these principals emphasized the vast importance of having strong relationships among staff as a key condition to rely on during times of crisis. Consistent with Bryk and Schneider (2002)’s notion of relational trust, principals reflected that relational quality and trust was a key condition for enabling effective use of organizational structures. As Principal Daniels, an Abider in Denver, explained:

To be able to move through crisis and move through the unknown, you have to rely on the relationships that you have built with the team, and I'm so thankful that we had really built relationships we could rely on so that we were in this crisis, we were able to jump into the crisis as a team.

Likewise, Principal Nott, a Challenger in New York explained, “I can't underscore that enough that having a really stable school environment when you're in a moment of crisis is incredibly important.” As Principal Nash, a Subverter in New York, elaborated:

There's a lot of staff cohesion. So, I think going into this situation, all of that meant that we were in the best possible position to figure out what we could do to help, and where the opportunities were, and create consensus among the staff about what the best way forward was.

Principals explained that strong relationships made their schools a safe space for teachers to bring their concerns to the table to brainstorm and attributed strong relationships in schools with high teacher morale, empowerment, and persistence to work through the time of crisis.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Consistent with prior research, our findings highlight the importance of both district guidance and school conditions in shaping principals' work. Building off of Spillane et al. (2002)'s notion of school leaders as middle managers, we find that how principals conceptualize their work is shaped by the nature of district guidance, as well as their perceptions of their schools' internal capacities. When guidance was highly inflexible and legally binding, as was the case in San Diego, principals did not see any option but to abide by district guidance. Guidance alone does not determine principals' responses, however. Notably, we categorize principals' response types statically (i.e., based on how they responded in the majority of cases of district guidance), but all principals we studied fell on different places on that continuum for different decisions, likely due to the relative autonomy, resources, etc. they had to leverage in each area of decision-making. This suggests that principals' roles as middle managers may look different based on the demands they are responding to and principals' relative autonomy and level of district support may vary by area of decision-making. We observed the greatest variation in

principals' responses in New York, where there was equivalent variation in how supported principals reported feeling by their district. Whereas some principals believed they had channels to voice their concerns to the district, others did not, and instead relies solely on the preexisting conditions at their schools. When district guidance was both inflexible and delayed, as was the case in Boston, principals were forced to either wait for guidance to arrive, or to pre-empt it. Even where the guidance was most flexible in Denver, however, one principal still challenged the guidance—suggesting that the substance of guidance, as well as its flexibility, matters to principals. Principals have been tasked with delivering on rapid organizational change, with oftentimes vague guidance that was uncoupled from supports. As such, ensuring that district guidance is both flexible *and* supportive of principals' work is critical.

These findings also support well-established findings that schools' organizational conditions matter (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Johnson et al., 2012). We expand on this scholarship by exploring the ways in which principals frame their reliance on organizational conditions vis-à-vis their enactment of district guidance. Although strong relationships and teacher collaboration mattered for all principals, certain conditions were associated with particular principal response types. For example, because Subverters depended on their school community to follow alongside of them in rejecting district guidance, they benefited from collaborative school structures and strong family-school relations to back up their leadership. On the other hand, Abiders' responses were primarily dictated by their adherence to district mandates, and their preexisting conditions were more varied. In some cases, schools had the internal capacity to respond effectively; however, this was not always the case.

Additionally, we find that district networks can serve as a key district-level structure that supports principals work. According to Challengers, it was not a function of central district

offices to provide the support and spaces for shared-decision making that their networks afforded them; their primary function was to create new rules. Networks served as a buffer to challenge guidance, within otherwise large and highly bureaucratic working environments. This supports earlier findings that district networks support schools' capacities for improvement (Cohen et al., 2014; Rowan et al., 2009). Our results are consistent with findings that such networks enable collaboration, knowledge and cost-sharing, and work with external partners (Smith & Wohlstetter, 2001), and are particularly influential when they create distributed structures for leadership and resource allocation amongst network members (Wohlstetter et al., 2003). We find that networks' support is especially critical to principals when they are tasked with leading through periods of great organizational uncertainty.

Our emergent typology of principal responses to district guidance contributes to scholarship on school leadership by providing a conceptual lens to better understand the ways that principals conceptualize their roles as middle managers, and how district and school conditions shape those conceptions. This builds on existing conceptions of how principals exert agency when enacting policy (Donaldson & Woulfin, 2018). We extend this work by drawing attention to the role of school conditions in shaping how principals employ agency in response to district policy. Together, this offers a deeper understanding of principals both as agentic sense-makers of district policies, as well as leaders of their own organizations. Several principals additionally reflected on how their personal identities shapes their leadership; however, we had insufficient data to make definitive claims about the role of leader orientation and decision-making. Future studies might build on our work to investigate which conditions and personal factors provide some principals the confidence to deviate from district guidance and which factors force others to comply—e.g., what resources were at play, and how their personal

identities tie in. Understanding how these roles intersect in principals' work is key to better conceptualizing the nature of school leadership and middle manager roles more broadly.

These findings suggest several implications for policy and practice. For one, these findings highlight the need for district leaders to consider principals' roles as middle managers when creating guidance and policy. Designing guidance to be flexible enough for principals to adapt to their contexts, while coupling that guidance with supports, is critical. This flexibility represents a need for districts to see themselves as learning organizations, too (Honig, 2012; Rusch, 2005). At every level of the system, organizational routines and policies need to be flexible enough to leverage the expertise of those closest to the work. Given principals' role as middle managers, districts should leverage principals' expertise in district decision-making and consider the ways that principals need to be responsive to their school communities when enacting policy. However, given that all but one of the superintendents in the districts we studied have left their roles since the onset of the pandemic (Table 1), the lack of leadership continuity at the district-level may create an additional hurdle for districts to learn—in a parallel way to how principal turnover affects schools' capacities to learn (Useem et al., 1997).

Second, our findings highlight the importance of districts networks for principals—particularly when they offer a space for role-alike networking and collaboration. Given the new terrain COVID-19 has forced principals to navigate, having formal forums to learn alongside one's peers was a key support to principals. Given that principal turnover is driven by poor working conditions (Levin et al., 2020) and professional isolation (Stephenson & Bauer, 2010), developing such spaces to support principals is critical to retaining principals and ensuring organizational stability in schools.

The COVID-19 pandemic has put tremendous stress on school leadership and provided schools with an impetus for learning. The extent to which principals are able to effectively lead organizational change in this moment depends on the broader district and organizational conditions which shape their work. As such, building schools which are resilient enough to not only survive, but even learn from crises such as COVID-19, requires more effectively supporting principals' work.

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Table 1. Characteristics of Sampled Districts (2019-2020)

| <b>District</b> | <b>Superintendent (Term)</b> | <b>Student Enrollment</b> | <b>Student Demographics</b>   | <b>Date of School Closures</b> | <b>COVID Index at time of School Closures</b> |
|-----------------|------------------------------|---------------------------|---|--------------------------------|---|
| Boston          | Brenda Cassellius (2019- )   | 51,433                    | 20% Hispanic/Latino<br>23% Black<br>10% Asian<br>45% White<br>2% Multiracial<br><br>29.2% English learners<br>29.5% Students<br>Qualifying for FRPL                 | March 23, 2020                 | 35 cases                                      |
| Denver          | Susan Cordova (2018-2020)    | 92,039                    | 30% Hispanic/Latino<br>9% Black<br>4% Asian<br>1% American Indian/Alaska Native<br>54% White<br><br>27.4% English learners<br>18.2% Students<br>Qualifying for FRPL | March 17, 2020                 | 93.1 cases                                    |
| New York City   | Richard Carranza (2018-2021) | 1,126,501                 | 40.6% Hispanic/Latino<br>25.5% Black<br>16.2% Asian<br>15.1% White<br><br>13.2% English learners<br>72.8% Students<br>Qualifying for FRPL                           | March 16, 2020                 | 714 cases                                     |
| San Diego       | Cindy Marten (2013-2021)     | 103,194                   | 29% Hispanic/Latino<br>7% Black<br>16% Asian<br>44% White<br>4% Multiracial<br><br>20.9% English learners<br>19% Students<br>Qualifying for FRPL                    | March 16, 2020                 | 13 cases                                      |

*Notes.* (1) COVID-19 Index is based on the 7-day case average in the city each district is located within, reported on the date of school closures in each district respectively. (2) We employ the racial/ethnic categories for the student demographics directly as they are classified by NCES. (3) FRPL is free and/or reduced-price lunch.

Table 2. Principal and School Characteristics

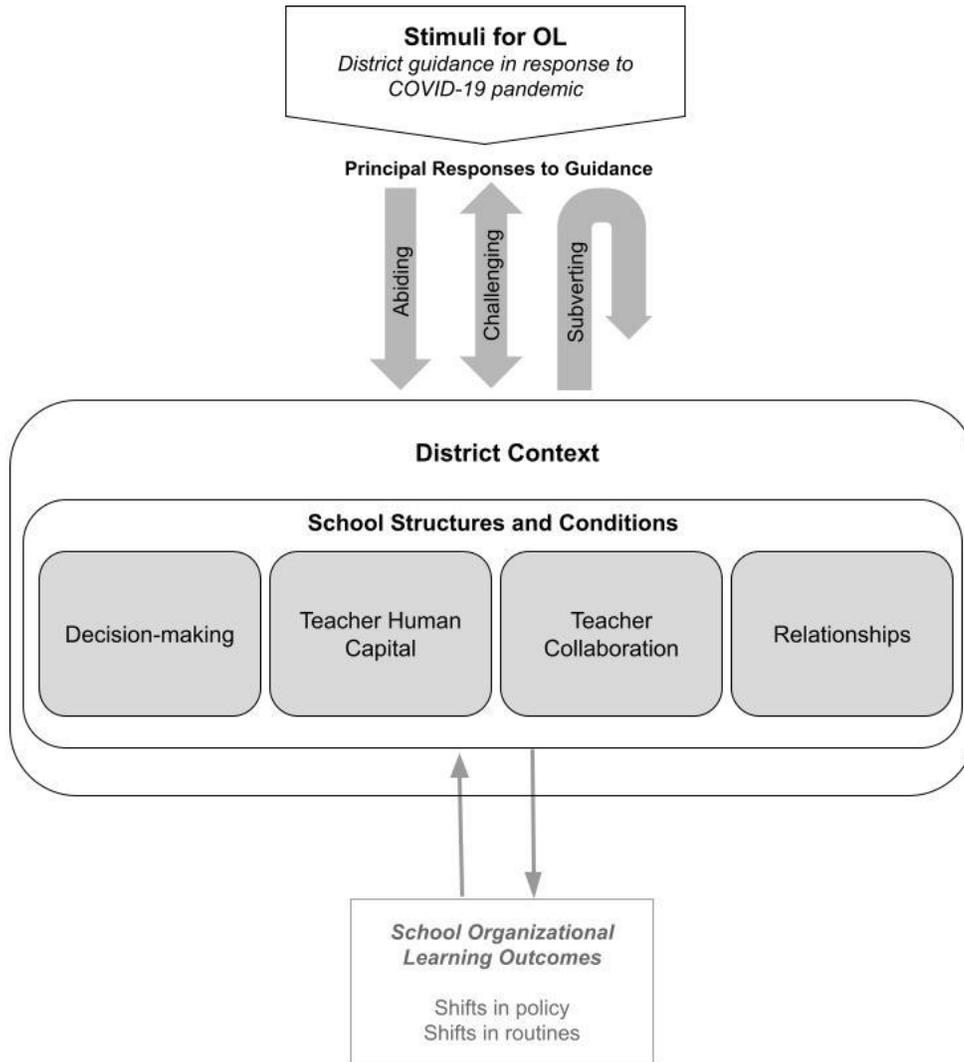
| District      | Principal          | Principal Characteristics           |                               |                                  | School Characteristics |            |                   |                              |
|---------------|--------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------|------------|-------------------|------------------------------|
|               |                    | Total Years of Principal Experience | Years of Experience at School | Race/Ethnicity                   | Grade Span             | Enrollment | Students of Color | Students Qualifying for FRPL |
| Denver        | Principal Day      | 5                                   | 5                             | White                            | PK-5                   | 450        | 25%               | 10%                          |
|               | Principal Davis    | 14                                  | 1                             | Black                            | 6-12                   | 1,000      | 30%               | 10%                          |
|               | Principal Daniels  | 8                                   | 5                             | White                            | 6-8                    | 800        | 75%               | 70%                          |
| San Diego     | Principal Stewart  | 3                                   | 2                             | Black                            | 9-12                   | 1,700      | 98%               | 80%                          |
|               | Principal Sullivan | 11                                  | 5                             | Hispanic/Latino                  | KG-5                   | 400        | 98%               | 95%                          |
|               | Principal Shaw     | -                                   | 0                             | White                            | KG-5                   | 600        | 98%               | 95%                          |
|               | Principal Snyder   | 12                                  | 7                             | Black                            | KG-5                   | 400        | 98%               | 70%                          |
|               | Principal Salas    | 11                                  | 11                            | Black                            | KG-5                   | 300        | 98%               | 90%                          |
|               | Principal Boyle    | 7                                   | 30                            | White                            | 9-12                   | 1,200      | 90%               | 55%                          |
| Boston        | Principal Beale    | 7                                   | 7                             | White                            | PK-8                   | 1,000      | 75%               | 50%                          |
|               | Principal Nelson   | -                                   | -                             | White                            | 6-12                   | 700        | 85%               | 65%                          |
| New York City | Principal Neal     | 4                                   | 4                             | White                            | 9-12                   | 400        | 75%               | 75%                          |
|               | Principal Newton   | 10                                  | 10                            | Black / Hispanic/Latino          | 9-12                   | -          | 90%               | 95%                          |
|               | Principal Nash     | 7                                   | 7                             | White                            | 9-12                   | 550        | 99%               | 80%                          |
|               | Principal Noble    | 14                                  | 14                            | Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander | 6-12                   | 500        | 90%               | 80%                          |
|               | Principal Nott     | 3                                   | 3                             | White                            | 9-12                   | 450        | 98%               | 70%                          |
|               | Principal Nasir    | 10                                  | 10                            | Hispanic/Latino                  | 9-12                   | 350        | 90%               | 80%                          |
|               | Principal Newcombe | 3                                   | 3                             | White                            | 9-12                   | 250        | 97%               | 85%                          |
|               | Principal Newhart  | 5                                   | 10                            | White                            | PK-12                  | 900        | 97%               | 80%                          |
|               | Principal Norman   | 15                                  | 15                            | White                            | PK-12                  | 900        | 96%               | 80%                          |

*Notes.* (1) All principal names are pseudonyms. (2) All enrollment numbers and student demographics (including racial/ethnic demographics and FRPL%) are rounded in order to ensure anonymity of research participants and schools. Student demographics are also not disaggregated in order to ensure anonymity. (3) Dashes indicate missing data. (3) FRPL is free and/or reduced-price lunch.

Table 3. Organizational Structures and Conditions by Principal Response Type

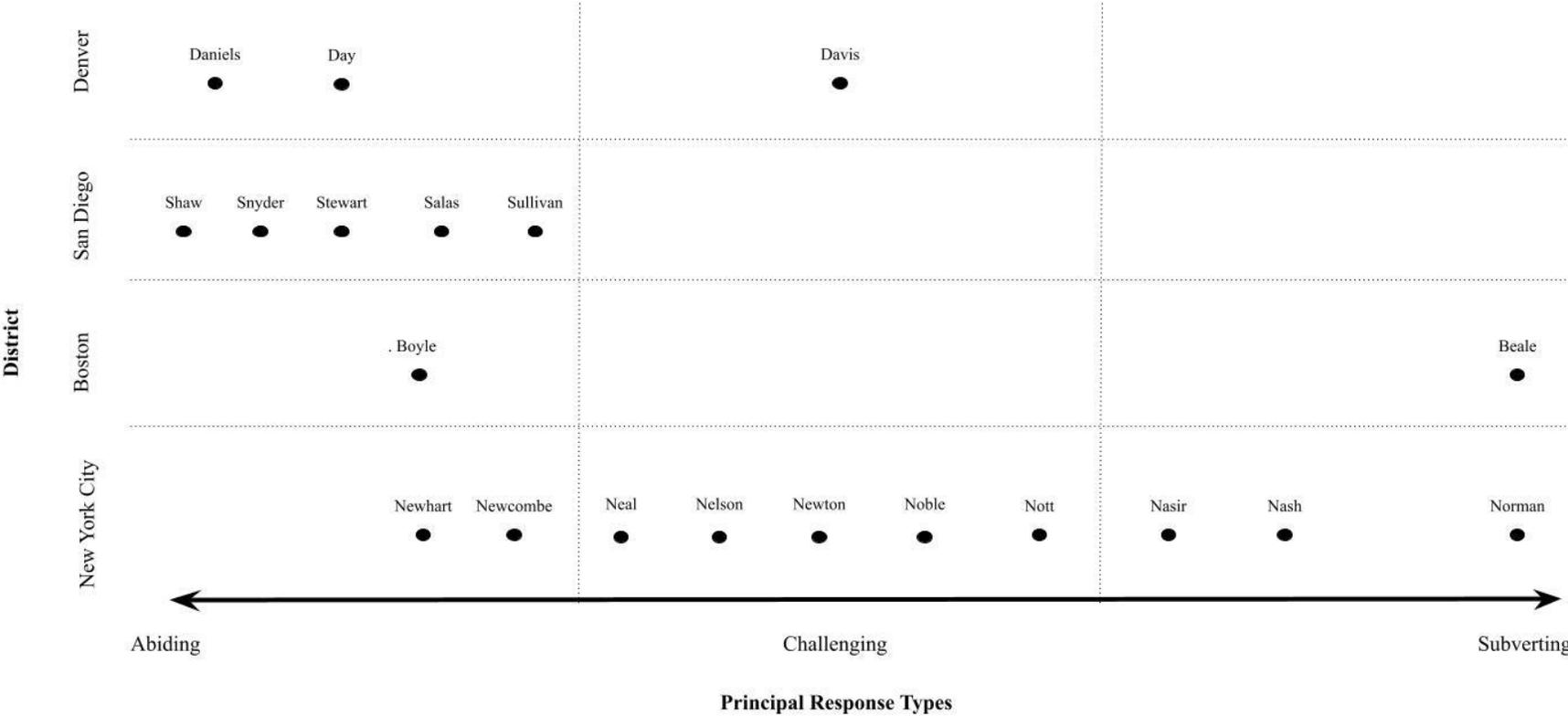
| <b>Principal Response Type</b> | <b>Decision-making</b>   | <b>Teacher Human Capital</b>                           | <b>Teacher Collaboration</b>  | <b>Relationships</b>   |
|--------------------------------|--|--|---|--|
| Abiders                        | Range of responses: stakeholder input, delegation, sole decision-making, and collaborative decision-making | Perceptions of wide variation in teacher human capital | Use of both department/grade level team and in some cases, whole staff meeting structures | Mostly strong relationships. Some issues between admin and staff, and staff and students |
| Challengers                    | Delegation-based or collaborative  | Limited discussion of teacher human capital            |   | Strong relationships between administrators, staff, and students                         |
| Subverters                     | Stakeholder input or collaborative   | Perceptions of high levels of teacher human capital    |   | Particular emphasis on strong school/family relations                                    |

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework



Note: Given the nature of our data and focus of our study, we do not provide evidence for *shifts in schools' organizational outcomes*; however, we include these outcomes in our conceptual framework as a hypothesis to investigate in future studies.

Figure 2. Principals by District and Response Type



## Appendix A. Coding Framework

| Codes                       | Description   |
|-----------------------------|---|
| <b>SCHOOL BACKGROUND</b>    |   |
| School Context              | Includes both school descriptions of school (e.g., student or staff demographics, regional context, description of neighborhood, history of school) AND descriptions of school mission (what the school aspires to accomplish – if explicitly talking about mission do not double code with culture)  |
| Turnover/Staffing           | Why other people stay or leave; both causes and frequencies, personal plans to stay or leave (especially if COVID-related), also about satisfaction and dissatisfaction, might be stuck in job; including staffing shuffles (e.g., budget cuts -> moving staff around)  |
| <b>PRINCIPAL BACKGROUND</b> |   |
| Personal Background         | Personal background (past work history, education; philosophical reasons for becoming a school leader (including ongoing personal motivations, understanding of the purpose of the work, and personal values—e.g., concern for equity, interest in management); reasons for selecting to work at their particular school  |
| Principal Well-being        | Mentions of how principal maintained/didn't maintain their personal well-being during crisis  |
| Admin Role                  | Descriptions of how the principal spends their time, including explicit talk around what they were working on during different phases of their response and how their work might have shifted (e.g., “I used to do X, and now I do Y.”) Also code “leadership lessons” here.  |
| <b>SCHOOL CONDITIONS</b>    |   |
| Collaboration               | Descriptions of <b>formal/ongoing</b> structures for teachers / school staff to work together and build a sense professional community/collegiality – more than a one off; horizontal collaboration (peer-to-peer); includes collaboration within school networks   |
| Relationships               | Descriptions of relationships between members of the school community, including relationships amongst leadership, staff, students, and families. Might include descriptions of the level of trust in community, school's relationship with families, etc.<br><br><i>Double code with “Network” and/or “Collaboration” if relationships are mentioned as existing through either informal or formal spaces, respectively.</i> |
| Resources                   | Discussion of material and human resources (money, buildings, positions, facilities, internet/computer hardware, medical infrastructure at the school) – code used for any issues around teacher and/or student resource access; any mention of budget cuts<br><i>Double code with “Equity” if issues around equitable resource allocation are mentioned</i>  |

|                            |   |
|----------------------------|---|
| Instructional Supports/PD  | <p>Descriptions of principals and/or instructional coaches providing direct, formal instructional support themselves to staff (e.g., descriptions of teacher observations) either one-on-one OR via traditional professional development sessions</p> <p><i>Double code with “Collaboration” in cases where formal structures, like PLCs, are mentioned; likely to be double-coded with “Curriculum &amp; Instruction”</i></p>                              |
| Curriculum & Instruction   | <p>Descriptions of instructional issues—how teaching/learning was structured before/during COVID; including teachers’ instructional planning</p> <p><i>Likely to be double-coded with “Instructional Supports/PD” if principal discusses PD related to shifting instructional practices for virtual learning</i></p>  |
| Student                    | <p>Mentions of students– including student learning, student health/wellbeing, broader issues students were dealing with (e.g., homelessness/housing insecurity, hunger, mental/physical health)</p> <p><i>May be double-coded with “Family Engagement” when respondent explicitly calls out family as well, but not necessarily.</i></p>   |
| Family Engagement          | <p>School’s relationship and communications with families in particular.</p> <p><i>Likely to be double-coded with relationships, communications, students.</i></p>  |
| Staff Wellbeing            | <p>Mentions of staff health/wellbeing – include mentions of broader issues staff families were dealing with (e.g., physical/mental health, managing work/life balance)</p>  |
| Principal Supports         | <p>Descriptions of principals RECEIVING direct, <b>formal</b> leadership supports.</p> <p><i>Do not code informal supports principals receive from their colleagues – e.g., if they receive support from other principals in their district, code as “Collaboration”</i></p>  |
| Network                    | <p>Descriptions of sources of professional community/collegiality BEYOND school site, such as external support from community partners working alongside district – e.g., Comcast providing free internet to families, foundations donating laptops, partnerships with non-profits</p> <p><i>Double code with “Collaboration” in cases of formal/ongoing collaboration, such as in a school network with structured principal collab. Opportunities</i></p> |
| <b>DISTRICT CONDITIONS</b> |   |
| District                   | Description of district communications/guidance   |

|                               |  |
|-------------------------------|--|
| Union                         | Mentions of the role of union in school/district   |
| Bureaucracy                   | Mentions of having to “jump through hoops” / the sense that the system came in the way of principal’s work, as well as mentions of principals being able to “game the system” and ignore guidance<br><br><i>Likely to be double-coded with “District” or “Union” – depending on where the principal identifies the source of the bureaucracy</i>   |
| <b>EXTERNAL CONDITIONS</b>    |  |
| COVID                         | Any mentions of COVID itself—including the incidence of COVID within school community and timing of incidence relative to school closures<br><br><i>Likely to be double coded with other topics – i.e., whichever topic they are discussing COVID in the context of</i>  |
| Protests                      | Mention of nationwide protests on the school response to COVID<br><br><i>Likely to be double-coded with “Equity”, if principal reflects on how protests spurred a conversation around equity at their school)</i>  |
| Economy                       | Mentions of how pandemic has affected school community’s economic security – e.g., job loss, students needing to work, homelessness.<br><br><i>Do not include budget cuts here – code that under Resources. Do not code descriptions of underlying inequities here (UNLESS the economy during COVID comes up) – otherwise just code that under School Context and Equity.</i>                          |
| Government                    | Descriptions communications/guidance and/or directives from the government telling the school what to do structurally and/or dictating a policy— e.g., messages from the city mayor, governor, federal guidance; resolving potentially competing guidelines<br><br><i>Likely to double-code with “COVID” and “Bureaucracy” – potentially “Network” if they sought out advice within their networks</i> |
| <b>Preexisting structures</b> | Prior systems school leaders were able to draw on. Can be at the school or district level.<br><br><i>ALWAYS double-code with the system in question (e.g., communication, collaboration, accountability)</i>   |
| <b>Accountability</b>         | Related to external accountability (state accountability status and state testing, turnaround status) - what the state does and then what is done as a result AND school-level accountability (e.g., how principals informally held teachers accountable, student attendance policies/practices)   |

|                        |  |
|------------------------|--|
| <b>Decision-making</b> | <p>Descriptions of decision-making.</p> <p><i>Likely to be double-coded with child codes under either school or district conditions, depending on who was involved in decision-making</i></p>  |
| <b>Communication</b>   | <p>Descriptions of communication <b>structures</b> – e.g., districts’ means of communication to principals; principals’ communicating with others/families. Distinct from collaboration (i.e., talking in regular team meetings).</p> <p><i>Likely to be double-coded with child codes under either school or district conditions, depending on the level/source of communications</i></p> |
| <b>Equity</b>          | <p>Discussions of equity-related dilemmas or solutions related to race/ethnicity, special education, English learners, etc.</p>  |
| <b>Gem Quote</b>       | <p>Strong quote/vignette</p>   |