

# Leadership Practices and School Choice

Xiu Cravens  
Ellen Goldring  
Roberto V. Peñaloza

Peabody College, Vanderbilt University

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## **Abstract**

In this paper, we study the role of principal leadership in the context of school choice reform. Choice schools provide a unique laboratory where variation in governance and management structure is predicted and therefore offer a context to study the empirical evidence regarding important theoretical assumptions on the effect of choice on school leadership practice. We examine the results from principal surveys collected from charter, magnet, private and traditional public schools comparing leadership challenges and practices across school choice types, and exploring the influence of school governance structures on leadership practices. Preliminary analyses show that differences across school types in terms of challenges faced by principals, and their leadership practices, are small. However, there are noteworthy differences between charter schools that are affiliated with parent organizations and charters with no affiliation in terms of acquiring financial resources and the amount of time principals spend on instructional development. This paper broadens the understanding of school leadership in a choice environment by examining not only the association between leadership practices and school types, but also the influence of school management structures on instructional development beyond school type differences.

## Introduction

Research has repeatedly identified instructional leadership as the most important role of the principal to propel school improvement (Hallinger and Murphy, 1986; 2003; Heck, Larsen, and Marcoulides, 1990; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom, 2004). While much of the research indicates that the impact of school leadership on student achievement is indirect, mediated by the work of teachers in classrooms (Smith, Desimone, & Ueno, 2005), principal leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping the school culture and driving organizational changes that ultimately lead to a more effective learning environment (Murphy, Elliott, Goldring, and Porter, 2007).

The understanding of how school leaders impact school improvement has progressed over the past several decades. The knowledge of school leadership impact draws upon research regarding school change and effectiveness (e.g., Fullan, 2001, 2006; Hill & Rowe, 1996), and school leadership (Leithwood et al., 2004; Murphy & Meyers, 2008; and Reynolds, Teddlie, Hopkins and Stringfield, 2000). Empirical evidence suggests that school principals, along with their leadership teams, influence student outcome by mediating academic press through enhancing curriculum structures and processes as well as the academic support that students receive (Cohen & Hill, 2000, Smith, Desimone, & Ueno, 2005)

As major school choice reforms continue to receive attention to improve student achievement, especially those that are disadvantaged and lagging behind academically, we know very little regarding the extent to which principals in choice schools exhibit more of the leadership practices associated with school improvement and increased student achievement.

In this paper, we study the role of principal leadership in the context of school choice. With well-established theoretical and empirical perspectives that principal efforts on instruction-related activities are positively associated with student achievement improvement, choice schools such as charter schools, magnet schools, and private schools provide a unique laboratory where variation in leadership practice is predicted under different governance structures and therefore offer a context to study the empirical evidence regarding an important theoretical assumption on *the effect of choice*: Principals of choice schools that are presumed to be more autonomous and achievement-driven will exhibit more leadership behaviors that focus on student learning. Little research has compared the roles of principals in public choice schools, private schools, and traditional public schools, however. The available literature does suggest that school organizational conditions and leadership practices might be configured differently under school choice reforms (Fullan, 2006; Hausman & Goldring, 2001).

### **The Effect of School Choice on Principal Leadership**

In theory, school choice programs should alter the traditional roles of all stakeholders involved in the education of children, including principals (Hausman & Goldring, 2001, Chubb and Moe, 1990). Changes in principals' roles are predicted to stem from the more permeable boundaries, thematic curricula or special instructional approaches, and increased responsiveness and accountability to parents typical of schools of choice. School choice is often assumed to be associated with bottom-up reform that is characterized by the empowerment of teachers and principals (Finn, 1990).

The achievement focus, autonomy, and reduced bureaucracy of choice schools suggests that choice schools, compared to traditional public schools, may be better able to attract and

sustain principals who are instructional leaders. However, research also indicates that the nature of governance in charter schools and other choice schools, such as magnet schools and private schools as independent autonomous organizations, may create new role demands for principals that compete with time available for instructional leadership. In the absence of a network of support, that is a bureaucracy to take care of facilities, buildings and budgets, choice school leaders may have limited time and focus on instructional and school improvement matters. In a study of magnet school principals, Hallinger and Hausman (1993) report that principals in schools of choice spend increased time marketing their school's programs and services. A more recent survey of charter school leaders indicated that they struggled with such tasks as engaging parents and raising funds, managing facilities and negotiating with districts—all leadership roles that are not typically associated with regular public schools (except engaging with parents) (Campbell and Grubb, 2008).

The challenge to schools and their principals, as some researchers point out, is that along with autonomy comes increased susceptibility to market competition, but without relief from governmental actions that may modify the “public-market” of education (Bagley, 2006). This dilemma seems to be particularly salient to public choice schools such as charter and magnet schools. Empowered only with limited regulatory waivers, principals still must be responsive to policy requirements, external quality assurance demands, local communities, professional groups (i.e. the teachers’ union), and especially, to the parents and students who exercise their rights with attendance and exits (Campbell and Grubb, 2008). In many ways the role of leaders in choice schools may have been extended and enlarged.

While researchers suggest that market-driven organizations have a stronger tendency to develop strategies to meet the needs of customers (Slater and Narver, 1995) hence improve the

quality of their products, there are also concerns that when schools are exposed to market-like competition, in this case for students and the resources they bring, the demand on principals may have intended (i.e. improved curriculum content, innovative pedagogy, and professional development for teachers) and unintended (i.e. financial stress and creaming for high-performing students) consequences.

Therefore, a central proposition of this study is that there is a relationship between the extent to which a school is part of a system or bureaucracy and the principals' focus on instructional leadership. We suggest that schools that are part of a system or bureaucracy will have principals that are more focused on leadership roles in terms of instructional improvements and will face fewer core leadership challenges because there are other units in the system that can tend to managerial tasks (facilities, contracts). Following a resource dependency perspective, based on the work of Pfeffer & Salancik (1978) and others, we posit that schools that are part of systems may support principals that have reduced uncertainty and thus can focus on the core leadership of instruction, teaching and learning and will have fewer boundary spanning tasks, such as public relations and recruiting students. The employee, in our case the school principal, who serves an organization at its point of contact between those who are employed by and those who are the clients or customers of the organization is necessarily placed in a position of spanning or bridging between the internal and external environments. As boundary spanners, principals are better able to maintain autonomy and control over internal organizational activities when they can better manage external dependencies (Goldring, 1995). We can explore these propositions by examining the range of school types, with varying levels of system affiliation. At one extreme are traditional public schools that are part of a school system with district level organizational bureaucracy, that are highly dependent on their external

environments.<sup>1</sup> On the other extreme are private schools that are largely independent of systems. In between are magnets schools, that are part of school district systems, and charter schools that are more independent of their local school districts. Furthermore, some charter schools are independent while other charter schools are affiliated with larger organizations and operated by Education Management Organizations (EMOs). Charter school companies that operate in multiple states tend to expect greater compliance with top-down initiatives for consistency and accountability.

The capacity for leadership practices that will enhance student learning may very well differ in terms of the system management context. Although, research on organizational structure and behaviors suggests that low levels of centralization facilitate the “bottom-up” process of technical innovation (Damanpour & Gopalakrishnan, 1998; Weick, 1976), principally by making organizations more sensitive to the external environment, it may be that an organization that is on its own may be more susceptible to market volatility, competing demands and dealing with multiple uncertainties and tasks with limited buffering and control. In the case of choice schools, principals of independently run charter schools and private schools may be more concerned over raising funding, securing facilities and maintaining student enrollment than their counterparts that are affiliated with parent organizations. Schools, as other organizations that operate as a system, might have more resources to engage in environmental spanning in order to identify and acquire new innovations (Tooley, 1999). They may be better able to buffer individual school units to focus on their core technologies of teaching and learning.

This paper takes a twofold approach to examine the leadership practices of school principals across school choice types and traditional public schools. First, we examine principal

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<sup>1</sup> We acknowledge that there is within school type variation in terms of amounts of support and control by districts or in the case of charter schools, Education Management Organizations or Charter management affiliations. This will be further explored in subsequent analyses.

practices among four school types in terms of challenges, job focus, and time spent on core leadership roles. Second, we probe the differences in management affiliation structure among charter schools and examine the influence of such differences on principal instructional leadership. We ask:

1. Do principals from different school types namely charter, magnet, private, and traditional public schools report different levels and types of leadership challenges?
2. Do principals from different school types report differences in their leadership practices? And are such differences related to other school features?
3. Are there differences in the level of instructional leadership exhibited across school types?
4. For charter school principals, are challenges and practices, especially instructional leadership associated with school management structures?

We hypothesize that there will be relationships between perceived leadership challenges and leadership practices and school type, and that charter school affiliation with management organizations that have a strong academic mission will be positively associated with a strong focus on instructional leadership, and relief from financial and personnel challenges.

## **Method**

To study the variation of leadership challenges and practices across school types, and the relationship between management structures and leadership practices, we examine the results from a principal survey collected from charter, magnet, and private schools and traditional public schools.

### *Sample Selection and Data Collection*

As part of a larger study of school choice, this current study of variation in leadership practices across different school types, relied on a convenience matched sample of schools, and of the principals, teachers, and students in those schools. The schools for our study were selected from the set of schools with which the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) had partnered to monitor student achievement through the administration of computerized adaptive tests in math, reading and language arts every spring and fall of the school year. As of the spring of 2006, approximately 7,500 schools were in the NWEA files in our possession, but only about 270 were identified as charter, 140 as magnet, and 90 as private schools; the rest were traditional public schools. We linked the NWEA schools to the public NCES-CCD and PSS files to obtain school characteristics. After correctly classifying some schools that were incorrectly classified as magnet schools and other minor data problems, our sample frame was defined as the set of schools that could be found in the latest available CCD and PSS files (i.e. the 2005-06 files), tested by NWEA in 2005-06, with at least one grade having over 50% testing coverage in both math and reading, and at least 10 students tested. We excluded special education, vocational and alternative schools, schools that were no longer testing with NWEA, and schools that did not have all the variables that we needed for school matching. With all these requirements, our sample frame ended up consisting of 223 charter, 65 magnet, 33 private, and 5,864 traditional public schools as potential matches.

Our selected sample, then, for participation in our study, consisted of all available 321 schools of choice and 345 best matched traditional public schools. For each school of choice, a match was selected from the pool of 5,864 traditional public schools according to several dimensions. The school match had to be in the same state, and be the 'best match' - for the

school of choice in terms of geographical distance, grade range, ethnic composition, socio-economic status, and size. The geographical distance between the schools was calculated using the longitude and latitude coordinates of the schools. Distance was a very important criterion because we wanted the school of choice and the matched traditional school to “compete” for the students in roughly the same area. Grade range match was evaluated in terms of both reported grades and also tested grades; we tended to pick schools with the greatest tested grade overlap. For ethnic composition, we sought to minimize the difference in the school percentages of American Indian/Alaskan, Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic, Black Non-Hispanic, and White Non-Hispanic students. For socio-economic status we used the school percentages of free and reduced-price lunch (FRL) students when available; we ignored this for private schools. For school size we used the school average of students per grade. For the actual matching process, we did not use propensity score matching (PSM) because models that we tried did not consistently produced the same matches or produced too few good matches, and no acceptable value of propensity score differences to choose the matches could be determined. Furthermore, we wanted a method by which we could give more weight to certain matching dimensions than to others, and we thought our match quality measure was easier to interpret than a difference in propensity scores.

We chose a more direct and flexible method that allowed us more control of the process: we created an index that indicated how different were the school of choice and the potential traditional school in terms of ethnic composition, socio-economic status, and school size. The index gave equal weight to ethnic composition and socio-economic status and much lower weight to school size. Then we sorted the matches by distance brackets and the index, and chose the match with the smallest index and the greatest tested grade overlap within the closest

distance bracket. An extra dimension that we had to consider was whether the potential traditional school match had a history of reporting their students to NWEA in a format that would facilitate the eventual matching process of the students to their teachers. Between two equally good matches to a school of choice, we chose the one that was better for teacher-student matching. Given that our sample was chosen from the limited set of NWEA available schools and that the matching had to be in multiple dimensions, excellent matches were not always possible. We many times had to choose several matches for one school of choice to roughly complete this school's grade range; other times we had to pick a school that was very distant because there were simply no close schools; sometimes we had to choose not-so-good matches as long as they were close to the school of choice; for magnets, when a good match was not available in the area, we chose a not-so-good match as long as the match was in the same school district as the magnet. In addition, when good matches were not available for a school of choice, we sometimes had to choose the same traditional school that had already been chosen for another school of choice. We ended up with mostly one-to-one matches, but sometimes several-to-one and one-to-several matches. The following table describes the selected sample of schools.

[Table 1 about here]

In Table 1, the difference in means of certain variables are statistically significant, but the differences are not so pronounced, except for the students-per-grade-in-school variable, which was expected considering the large variability across schools in this aspect. Notice the mean and maximum distance between the schools of choice and their matched traditional public schools; they are not as small as we wished for but it was the best that could be done given the school availability. The grade and tested grade overlap means indicate a good match in grade range, and

these are actually underestimates of the true overlap because they do not take into account that we many times matched more than one traditional school to a school of choice to complete this school's grade range.

The selected 321 schools of choice (i.e. 223 charter, 65 magnet, 33 private) and 345 matches were contacted to seek their participation in the study. Given the nature of the sample design, schools of choice and their districts, when applicable, were contacted first. Traditional public schools were contacted only after their matched school of choice (or at least one of their matched schools of choice) had accepted to participate. When schools of choice did not agree to participate for any reason, we lost that school. However, when a traditional public school or its district declined participation, had recently closed or stopped testing with NWEA, we found a replacement for it. Unfortunately the replacement was almost always of lower match quality than the original match; and sometimes the replacement did not work, and another replacement was needed. In addition, despite our school-type verification process, a few schools were found to be misclassified: when a school of choice turned out to be a traditional public school, it was re-classified and placed in the pool of traditional schools; when a traditional public school turned out to be a school of choice, it was re-classified and a match or matches were found for it. After all these changes, our school sample changed to 217 charter, 60 magnets, 32 private, and 480 traditional public schools. Of these, only 117 (53.9%) charter, 34 (56.7%) magnet, 17 (53.1%) private, and 128 (26.7%) traditional public schools agreed to participate. The characteristics of the participating schools are included in Table 2.

[Table 2 about here]

Principals of the schools that agreed to participate were asked to fill out online, confidential questionnaires. Principals and assistant principals had access to a different version of the principal questionnaire depending on the school type.. The questionnaire completion rates for principals (and assistant principals) were  $156/194=80.4\%$  for charter,  $38/66=57.6\%$  for magnet,  $19/19=100.0\%$  for private, and  $140/187=74.9\%$  for regular public schools. The principals are from (and assistant principals) a total of 245 (i.e. 103 charter, 22 magnet, 17 private and 103 traditional) schools, compared to the total of 296 schools that agreed to participate.

#### *Missing data*

For the variables with missing values in the full principal survey data, we selected the variables and studied the behavior of their missing and non-missing values. First, we identified the variables that had the greatest proportion of missing values overall and per school type (i.e. charter, magnet, private, and traditional). This is a very important to point out problem areas. We found that all the school demographic variables had too high missing-value proportions ranging from 7% to almost 16%. The other principal variables of interest had acceptable proportions of missing values (i.e. around 5% or less). Second, we addressed problems suspected due to the high proportion of missing values for the ethnic structure percentages and for Free and Reduced Price Lunch (FRL) percentages, and school enrollment using data from the most recent Common Core Data (CCD) and the Private School Survey (PSS) data files.

### *Operational Measures for Principal Leadership*

We conceptualize our study of leadership across school type contexts in terms of two board foci: leadership challenges and leadership practices. In terms of leadership challenges, we asked principals how much difficulty they have experienced in their schools (on a five point scale from 'not difficult at all' to 'extremely difficult') in regard to five areas: acquiring financial resources, recruiting teachers, retaining teachers, attracting students, and retaining students.

In terms of leadership practices, we asked principals to reflect on two aspects of their work: their job foci and their use of time. Principal leadership foci were measured in regard to two broad areas: traditional school leadership foci and school choice leadership foci. The traditional leadership foci scale is a four item scale ( on a five point scale from 'not a focus at all', to 'a primary focus') including managing the building and staff, monitoring instructional improvement, recruiting and hiring teachers, and developing school improvement goals. These are foci that all school leaders should do. In contrast, the school choice leadership foci include four items that may pertain more to principals in choice school context. This scale included the items s, promoting this school to parents and/or students, obtaining facilities for this year or next, managing relationships with the school governing board, increasing public awareness of the school, and securing financial resources.

We next asked principals how much time they spend on three area of leadership of practice: management (such as paperwork, supervising non-instructional staff), instructional leadership (observe teachers, work with student data) and public relations leadership (participate in community meetings/events, answer questions from potential parents). The frequencies of

these practices are measured on a five-point scale from “never” as 1 to “more than 2 days per week” as 5. These five scales that measure principal leadership practices were established based on theoretical concepts supported by prior research and validated by correlation and factor analyses.

The scales, items and internal consistency measured by Cronbrach’s alphas are presented in the table below.

<b>Principal Practice Measures</b>	<b>Survey Items</b>
<p><u>Challenges Experienced by School:</u> (used as individual items)</p>	<p>How much difficulty has this school experienced in the following categories during this 2007-2008 school year?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Acquiring financial resources</li> <li>Recruiting teachers</li> <li>Retaining teachers</li> <li>Attracting students</li> <li>Retaining students</li> </ul>
<p><u>Principal Job Focus:</u> Traditional school tasks</p> <p>Cronbach’s alpha=0.60</p>	<p>How much does your job as principal focus on the following areas during this 2007-08 school year?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Managing the building and staff</li> <li>Monitoring instructional improvement</li> <li>Recruiting and hiring teachers</li> <li>Developing school improvement goals</li> </ul>
<p>Choice-related tasks</p> <p>Cronbach’s alpha=0.77</p>	<p>How much does your job as principal focus on the following areas during this 2007-08 school year?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Promoting this school to parents and/or students</li> <li>Obtaining facilities for this year or next</li> <li>Managing relationships with the school governing board</li> <li>Increasing public awareness of the school</li> <li>Securing financial resources</li> </ul>
<p><u>Principal Practices (Use of Time):</u> Basic school management</p> <p>Cronbach’s alpha=0.68</p>	<p>How often do you do any of the following during this 2007-08 school year?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Supervise clerical, cafeteria, and maintenance staff</li> <li>Monitor public spaces</li> </ul>

Deal with emergencies and other unplanned circumstances  
 Work with students and their parents on discipline/attendance issues  
 Complete routine paperwork

Instruction and Development

How often do you do any of the following during this 2007-08 school year?

Cronbach's alpha=0.84

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Demonstrate instructional practices and/or the use of curricular materials  
 Observe a teacher during classroom instruction  
 Examine and discuss student work  
 Examine and discuss standardized test results of students from a teacher's class  
 Create and implement staff development  
 Personally provide staff development  
 Troubleshoot or support the implementation of school improvement efforts  
 Monitor the curriculum used in classrooms to see that it reflects the school's improvement efforts  
 Monitor classroom instructional practices to see that they reflect the school's improvement efforts

Public Relations

How often do you do any of the following during this 2007-08 school year?

Cronbach's alpha=0.73

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Promote the school's image in the surrounding community  
 Communicate student achievement results to the external community  
 Attend or participate in events taking place in the surrounding community  
 Host fundraisers or financial development efforts  
 Answer questions from potential students and/or parents

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*Analytical Model*

Our choice of analytic strategy was guided by each of the research questions. To explore if principals from different school types report different levels and types of leadership challenges and leadership practices, we first conducted a series of descriptive, bivariate and ANOVA analyses of the survey results. The purpose of the survey was to obtain principal feedback on central questions related to their work at various types of schools. School and principal characteristics were also captured by the survey. We identify patterns and variations in key

constructs regarding principal job challenges, foci, and leadership practices among school types. For charter schools, we also check the variation by management organization affiliations.

We further examine the association between instructional leadership practices and affiliation with management organizations *within* the charter school sector by employing robust regress analysis that accounts for clustered variances at the school level. The models were built in a stepwise fashion:

$$(1) \text{ PIL}_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Affiliation}_i + \varepsilon_i$$

$$(2) \text{ PIL}_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Affiliation}_i + \text{Principal}_i \theta_1 + \text{School}_i \theta_2 + \varepsilon_i$$

$$(3) \text{ PIL}_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Affiliation}_i + \text{Principal}_i \theta_1 + \text{School}_i \theta_2 + \text{Influences}_i \gamma_1 + \text{Challenge}_i \gamma_2 + \varepsilon_i$$

Where *PIL* is principal-reported time spent on instructional leadership practices in school *I*; *Affiliation* is a dummy variable indicating whether school *i* is affiliated with a management organization; *Principal* is a vector of two characteristic variables for the principal at school *i*: total years of experience at a charter school and years of experience as a principal; *School* is a vector of school-level characteristics including percent of special education students, percent of students with limited English proficiency, percent of minority students, and percent of students on free or reduced lunch program; *Influence* is a vector of variables from the survey results indicating the level of influence on school decision from district administration, principals, teachers, parents, or the charter-granting agency; *Challenge* is a vector of two variables indicating the level of challenges in financial resources and staff-related issues; and finally  $\varepsilon$  captures the error variance for school *i*. To address possible heteroskedasticity in the data, robust standard errors were obtained accounting for school-level clustering effect.

## Results

### *Differences in Challenges and Practices across School Types*

We first address the extent to which leadership challenges and practices differ across school types with descriptive analyses. As presented in Table 3, we note that on average all principals indicate that they have some difficulty, although not to a great extent, in terms acquiring resources, recruiting and retaining teachers and students. When compared with the traditional public schools, the choice schools do not appear to have noteworthy differences in principal-reported school type-specific challenges. The only significant difference that emerges is that private school principals report more difficulty in attracting students than their counterparts from traditional public schools. Thus far it does not seem that being part of a system or bureaucracy is influencing the nature of leadership challenges as one might hypothesize. For example, charter school principals are not reporting more difficulty with acquiring financial resources as might be expected.

[Table 3 about here]

When examining job focus areas, some school type-specific differences are noticed. On average, charter school principals (3.98) are significantly more likely than traditional public school leaders (3.83) to focus on traditional school tasks, such as managing the school building and staff, monitoring instructional improvement, while only magnet (3.11) and private school leaders (3.11) report more school choice focused leadership behaviors compared to traditional public school principals (2.77); while this is not the case for charter school leaders (2.75). Overall, regardless of school type, principals consistently report a higher level of focus on

traditional school tasks than on choice-related tasks. It seems that charter school principals are the most focused on the “leadership business” of their schools and are not pulled away to focusing on school choice tasks such as public relations and recruiting.

There are few differences across school types in terms of how principals are using their time as well. All principals spend more time on school management; on average principals report spending 1-2 days per week on management tasks, compared to a few times per month on instructional leadership and public relations outreach tasks. Private school leaders spend less time on management than public school principals. Recall that basic management involves supervising staff, monitoring public spaces, dealing with emergencies, disciplinary issues, and doing paperwork. It is conceivable that private schools with their smaller school size and relatively more homogeneous student population may well be facing less challenging and complex school environments than their public school counterparts.

On the face of it, these results suggest little support for our proposition that traditional public school principals will be able to focus most on instructional matters. Likewise, these descriptive results do not lend support to school choice theories that suggest independent schools organizations, such as charter schools and private schools will be more able to focus on instructional matters and focus on outreach and responsiveness to their communities.

#### *Factors that Influence Principal Practices within the Charter School Management Context*

While we found few differences among mean values of measures for school challenges and principal foci and practices across school types, we note some noteworthy variations on the within the charter school sector. Among the 103 charter schools for which we received principal responses, 53(51.5%) are reported to be operated or affiliated with a larger system, network or

organization such as National Heritage Academies, Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound, International Baccalaureate Organization, or colleges and universities. The linkage to a parent organization or larger system provides variation in terms of governance conditions under which school leadership may take place and allows us to further explore our propositions that systems can free up leaders to focus on instruction and outreach, or in theoretical terms, systems can reduce leader uncertainty and the boundary spanning roles of principals.

As presented in Table 4 with ANOVA results, principals working in affiliated charter schools report experiencing a much lower level of financial difficulty (1.55; 0.74 SD) than traditional school principals (2.68; 1.11 SD). Furthermore, there is quite a contrast to what is reported by principals of charter schools with no affiliations in terms of the high level of financial challenges they face (2.79; 1.20 SD).

[Table 4 about here]

Interesting within-charter sector differences are also evident among measures for principal job foci and use of time. Recall that on average charter school principals reported higher level of focus on traditional school tasks (Table 3). In Table 5 we notice that charter school principals with affiliations focus much more on traditional school tasks (4.11; 0.60 SD). Non-affiliated charter school principals report a higher level of focus on choice-related tasks (3.11; 0.76 SD) compared with traditional public schools. Non-affiliated charter school principals seem to be more focused on boundary spanning tasks such as public relations.

[Table 5 about here]

Affiliated charter school principals also report higher frequency of practice in instructional leadership (3.44; 0.56 SD) as compared with traditional public schools (3.29; 0.65 SD) and charters with no affiliations (3.01; 0.64 SD), suggesting a new dimension to the previous observation of no statistically significant difference in instructional leadership across school types, providing some support for the notion that a system of organizational affiliation that may provide support to school principals, may also allow charter school principals more time to implement instructional and school development practices.

A closer look at the types of charter affiliations reveal that among the 53 schools, 37 of those (69.8%) are affiliated with national educational management organizations that operate charter school in multiple states such as the National Heritage Academies, the International Baccalaureate Organization, and the Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound; 13 (24.5%) are affiliated with post-secondary institutions, the majority of which are state colleges and universities; and a small share of three schools (5.7%) are affiliated with local organization, for example, an performing art center.

In the survey, principals from all four school types were asked how much influence district administrators, the principal, the principals' teachers, and parents have on decisions over four major areas: selecting curriculum material, hiring new staff, determining the content of the professional development for teachers, and firing or dismissing teachers (on a 4 point scale from 1=no influence to 4=major influence). Table 6 indicates that when the four areas are combined together, charter school principals report that district administrators tend to have less influence on decisions (2.57) as compared with principals from traditional public schools (3.36); while private school principals comparatively report they themselves have the most influence over school decisions, charter school principals and their traditional public school counterparts report

they have very similar levels of influence on school decisions measured across the four-area mean.

[Table 6 about here]

However, further examination of the within-charter management context reveals a more interesting picture. In addition to the aforementioned four sources of influence, we also asked only charter school principals to report about the level of influence from the charter granting agency or authorizer. Table 7 provides a comparison between charters affiliated with management organizations and charter schools with no affiliation in the two areas of school decisions that are directly related to instruction: selecting curriculum materials and determining teacher professional development. Two statistically significant differences between affiliated and non-affiliated charter schools emerge from this comparison: Principals in charter schools with affiliations report much stronger influence from district administrators on selecting curriculum materials and determining teacher professional development; on the other hand, teachers have significantly more influence in non-affiliated charter schools on the same two areas. It may be that charters with no affiliation are more autonomous organizations, thus affording their teachers more influence over decisions. In addition, charter school principals with no affiliated organizations spend more time on choice related tasks, boundary spanning tasks and therefore may need to distribute other core internal instructional tasks to teachers. Furthermore, we posit that charter school organizations work with districts to align their instructional goals, assessments and other matters. In terms of the influence of chartering granting organizations, overall all charter school principals reported minimal influence across all domains.

[Table 7 about here]

Thus far, descriptive results suggest that principals across school types face largely similar challenges in acquiring financial resources, recruiting teachers and students, and retaining teachers and students, while charter school leaders affiliated with systems or network of schools indicate fewer financial challenges. Principals of all four school types reported focusing on traditional school tasks more than on choice-related tasks, and devoting more time to basic management issues than on instructional development and even less on external/public relations. Comparisons between charter schools that are affiliated to management organizations and those that are not affiliated reveal differences that may suggest that charter schools with systems of support may be better able to focus on instructional matters and suggest that more in-depth inquiries into the influence of governance, management and funding structure over school operations and principal practices are warranted.

Table 8 summarizes the results of the stepwise regressions exploring further the relationship between charter management organizations and principals' foci on instructional leadership. The regression results further support the hypothesis that charter school affiliation with management organizations that have a clear academic mission will be positively associated with a stronger focus on instructional leadership. The baseline model indicates that being affiliated with charter management organizations is significantly associated with a .427 gain on the scale of 1-5 (5 being the highest) measuring the time spent on instructional leadership-related tasks. When principal experiences and school characteristics are included, the affiliation effect is still significant at a positive .352. Among the school characteristics, percent of minority students shows a small positive association of .006, indicating that an increase of 10 percent is reflected in a .06 gain in the level of instructional leadership practices.

[Table 8 here]

When considering the influences of various organizational contextual factors on instructional leadership, the positive effect of charter affiliation with management organizations on principal instructional leadership practices remains strong and statistically significant. Among the five sources of influence on school decisions, influence of parents (.235) is statistically significant, signaling that controlling for other factors, charter school parents play a strong role in influencing the principal to focus on instruction by monitoring classroom instruction, examining assessment results, and enhancing professional development for teachers; the influence of charter-granting agency is also significantly associated with (.210) principal instructional leadership practices, reflecting the academic charge of charter schools to improve student achievement, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

### **Conclusions**

The debates surrounding school choice are rooted in the assumption that educators in choice schools will substantially change their roles and focus of responsibilities to be aligned with improving instructional quality and student outcomes. There is a widespread assumption that choice school leaders will be better able to focus on the core domains of instructional leadership and learning centered leadership tasks because of the assumed increase in autonomy and principal influence compared to traditional public schools. Moreover, there is the expectation that choice school leaders will develop and support teacher influence over decisions as teachers' professional autonomy is both respected and valued.

In this paper, we first ask whether there are noteworthy differences in leadership challenges, leadership practices, and especially in instructional leadership across school types. Through descriptive comparisons, we find that principals from choice schools face similar levels and types of leadership challenges in terms of acquiring financial resources, recruiting and retaining teachers, recruiting and retaining students as their counterparts in traditional public schools.

While no pronounced differences across school types in challenges faced by principals emerged, we find differences between charter schools that are affiliated with parent organizations and charters with no affiliation in acquiring financial resources and the amount of time principals spend on instructional development. Portin and colleagues (2003) found that principals in choice schools, both private and public, distributed their leadership and had more authority than principals of traditional public schools. In our paper, when compared by school type, teachers in charter and magnet schools do not appear to have more influence than teachers in traditional public schools. Additionally, teachers in affiliated charter schools appear to have less influence in decision making than their counterparts in non-affiliated schools.

Such differences add to the complexity of school choice studies, which often group together all charter schools and compare them with traditional public schools. Why do affiliated charter school principals put the most focus on the traditional tasks of principals, such as hiring teachers and monitoring school improvement and instruction, instead of on choice-related tasks? Furthermore, why do affiliated charter school principals tend to devote the highest level of time to instruction, more than their counterparts in traditional public school and in non-affiliated charter schools?

We posit these differences emerge because of the need for leaders to control their boundaries and reduce uncertainty. Thompson (1967) proclaims that “coping with uncertainty [is] the essence of the administrative process” (p. 159). Under conditions of relative certainty, leaders function more efficiently. That is, they work in environments that are stable, organized and more resource-abundant. Our results suggest that charter management organizations may help reduce the uncertainty charter school principals face, thus reducing their need to play boundary spanning roles, and increasing their ability to focus on the technical core of schooling: instructional leadership.

The results of our preliminary analyses suggest that it is increasingly important to examine the variation in the organizational arrangements of schools of choice and their influence on school leadership. With this research we revisit the importance of school governance design strategies that can maximize the organizational potential for student learning. Within-charter differences in principal leadership echo the findings by previous research that governance structures can influence school leadership practices. Our findings underscore the importance of teasing out the organizational contextual factors that can effectively influence leadership practices. With prior research illuminating an indirect but important connection between school leadership and student achievement, the understanding of what organizational features and governance structure may lead to stronger instructional leadership becomes essential.

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## Tables

Table 1

Characteristics of Schools in the Original Sample: Schools of Choice and Traditional Public Schools

Variable	Schools of choice				Traditional public schools			
	Mean	Std Dev	Min	Max	Mean	Std Dev	Min	Max
Percent of American Indian/Alaskan Students	1.61	6.59	0	100	2.07	10.01	0	100
Percent of Asian/Pacific Islander Students	4.22	12.11	0	100	2.96	4.97	0	31.79
Percent of Hispanic Students	13.41	19.42	0	97.79	14.29	19.05	0	94.83
Percent of Black Non-Hispanic Students	29.59*	33.68	0	100	19.19	27.96	0	99.62
Percent of White Non-Hispanic Students	51.17*	34.18	0	100	61.49	31.52	0	99.5
Percent of Free and Reduced Price Lunch Students	46.9*	31.76	0	99.22	41.72	27.07	0	99.66
Students per Grade in School	68.53*	92.7	7.25	607	131.64	121.22	15.57	725.5
Distance to School of Choice					26.58	63.24	0.15	625.74
Grade Overlap with School of Choice					65.61	26.12	11.1	100
Tested Grade Overlap with School of Choice					72.13	31.44	14.3	100

Note: The schools of choice include 223 charter, 65 magnet and 33 private schools, for a total N of 321. The percent of free and reduced-price lunch student does not apply to the private schools, for a reduced N of 288 for this variable for schools of choice. The N for traditional public schools is 345. All the school characteristics come from the 2005-06 public NCES-CCD and PSS files.

\* Indicates a statistically significant difference from traditional public schools at the .05 level.

Table 2

Characteristics of Schools in the Participating Sample: Schools of Choice and Traditional Public Schools

Participating Schools	Schools of Choice					Traditional Public Schools				
	N	Mean	Std Dev	Minimum	Maximum	N	Mean	Std Dev	Minimum	Maximum
Percent Of American Indian/Alaskan	142	1.09	2.27	0.00	14.66	103	1.96	9.76	0.00	98.46
Percent Of Asian/Pacific Islander	142	2.73	5.20	0.00	44.27	103	3.55	5.23	0.00	27.95
Percent Of Hispanic	142	11.78	18.78	0.00	97.79	103	11.97	19.20	0.00	90.20
Percent Of Black Non-Hispanic	142	29.99*	33.26	0.00	99.81	103	18.10	25.29	0.00	97.03
Percent Of White Non-Hispanic	142	54.41*	34.16	0.00	100.00	103	64.42	30.29	1.54	99.39
Students Per Grade In School	142	61.47*	70.94	7.25	510.00	103	121.94	123.65	20.13	725.50
Percent of Free And Reduced Price Lunch	125	43.75*	30.79	0.00	99.22	103	35.10	23.93	0.00	90.21

\* Indicates a statistically significant difference from traditional public schools at the .05 level.

Table 3

## Descriptive Statistics by School Type from Principal Surveys

Variable	All School Types		Charter		Magnet		Private		Traditional Public	
	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean
<u>Difficulty experienced by school:</u>										
Acquiring Financial Resources	348	2.402	152	2.118	38	2.395	19	2.684	139	2.676
		<i>SD 1.146</i>		<i>1.156</i>		<i>1.028</i>		<i>1.057</i>		<i>1.111</i>
Recruiting Teachers	348	1.868	154	2.013	38	1.632	19	1.789	137	1.781
		<i>SD 0.939</i>		<i>0.956</i>		<i>0.852</i>		<i>0.631</i>		<i>0.960</i>
Retaining Teachers	350	1.589	153	1.837	38	1.447	19	1.105	140	1.421
		<i>SD 0.854</i>		<i>0.990</i>		<i>0.686</i>		<i>0.315</i>		<i>0.700</i>
Attracting Students	349	1.599	154	1.584	38	1.447	19	2.579	138	1.522
		<i>SD 0.906</i>		<i>0.846</i>		<i>0.950</i>		<i>1.121</i>		<i>0.856</i>
Retaining Students	351	1.738	154	1.890	38	1.474	19	1.895	140	1.621
		<i>SD 0.962</i>		<i>0.987</i>		<i>0.979</i>		<i>1.150</i>		<i>0.877</i>
<u>Principal Job Focus:</u>										
Traditional School Tasks	349	3.907	153	3.975*	38	3.921	19	3.882	139	3.831
		<i>SD 0.604</i>		<i>0.624</i>		<i>0.558</i>		<i>0.591</i>		<i>0.594</i>
Choice School Tasks	339	2.819	148	2.750	37	3.119*	19	3.116*	135	2.772
		<i>SD 0.759</i>		<i>0.809</i>		<i>0.717</i>		<i>0.707</i>		<i>0.695</i>
<u>Principal Use of Time:</u>										
Basic Management Tasks	343	4.266	150	4.220	38	4.358	19	3.884*	136	4.346
		<i>SD 0.649</i>		<i>0.714</i>		<i>0.488</i>		<i>0.743</i>		<i>0.578</i>
Instruction & Development	338	3.270	147	3.246	37	3.411	17	3.039	137	3.286
		<i>SD 0.644</i>		<i>0.631</i>		<i>0.636</i>		<i>0.679</i>		<i>0.654</i>
Public Relations	345	2.742	153	2.693	38	2.853	18	2.956	136	2.738
		<i>SD 0.659</i>		<i>0.702</i>		<i>0.678</i>		<i>0.836</i>		<i>0.572</i>

Note: For the calculations, both Principals and Assistant Principals were included (14 assistant principals, 339 principals, n=353). The mean value of the variables for Charter, Magnet and Private schools has been compared to the mean value of the Traditional Public Schools. Standard deviations are listed below the mean values in italics. An asterisk (\*) indicates a statistically significant difference in means at 5% significance level.

Table 4

## Challenges Faced by the Charter Schools and Traditional Public Schools in 2007-2008

School Type	Challenges Faced by the School in 2007-2008				
	Financial	Recruit Teachers	Retain Teachers	Recruit Students	Retain Students
Charter (No Affiliation)	2.79	2.06	1.83***	1.66	1.86
N=73; SD	<i>1.20</i>	<i>0.89</i>	<i>0.92</i>	<i>0.83</i>	<i>0.91</i>
Charter (Affiliated)	1.55***	1.98	1.84***	1.52	1.92
N=83; SD	<i>0.74</i>	<i>1.01</i>	<i>1.05</i>	<i>0.86</i>	<i>1.05</i>
Traditional Public	2.68	1.78	1.42	1.52	1.62
N=140; SD	<i>1.11</i>	<i>0.96</i>	<i>0.70</i>	<i>0.86</i>	<i>0.88</i>
F statistic	36.8***	2.25	8.42***	0.75	3.07*

Note:

The mean value of the variables for Charter (no affiliation), Charter (Affiliated), and Traditional Public Schools are compared with ANOVA. Standard deviations are listed below the mean values in italics.

\*P<.05, \*\* P<.01, \*\*\* P<.001.

Table 5

## Principal Practices in Charter Schools and Traditional Public Schools

School Type	Principal Job Focus		Principal Use of Time		
	Traditional	Choice-Related	Basic Management	Instruction and Development	Public Relations
Charter (No Affiliation)	3.82	3.01***	4.14	3.01**	2.79
N=73; SD	<i>0.62</i>	<i>0.76</i>	<i>0.71</i>	<i>0.64</i>	<i>0.70</i>
Charter (Affiliated)	4.11**	2.53*	4.29	3.44***	2.60
N=83; SD	<i>0.60</i>	<i>0.79</i>	<i>0.72</i>	<i>0.56</i>	<i>0.70</i>
Traditional Public	3.83	2.77	4.35	3.29	2.74
N=140; SD	<i>0.59</i>	<i>0.70</i>	<i>0.58</i>	<i>0.65</i>	<i>0.57</i>
F statistic	6.54**	7.58***	2.24	8.68***	1.84

Note:

The mean value of the variables for Charter (no affiliation), Charter (Affiliated), and Traditional Public Schools are compared with ANOVA. Standard deviations are listed below the mean values in italics.

\*P<.05, \*\* P<.01, \*\*\* P<.001.

Table 6

## Influence of Each Group of Players on School Decisions

School Type	District Administration	Principal	Teachers	Parents
Charter	<i>2.57*</i>	3.55	<i>2.73*</i>	1.63
N=156	1.10	0.60	0.63	0.50
Magnet	3.41	3.45	<i>2.56*</i>	1.63
N=38	<i>0.47</i>	0.42	0.52	0.54
Private	NA	<i>3.88*</i>	2.94	1.61
N=19	NA	0.24	0.39	0.51
Regular	3.36	3.58	2.89	1.73
N=140	<i>0.52</i>	0.36	0.41	0.50

Note: The mean value of the variables for Charter, Magnet and Private schools has been compared to the mean value of the Traditional Public Schools. Standard deviations are listed below the mean values in italics. An asterisk (\*) indicates a statistically significant difference in means at 5% significance level.

Table 7

## Sources of Influence on School Decisions for Instruction

	Selecting Curriculum Materials				Determining the Content of Teacher Professional Development					
	District Admin	Principal	Teachers	Parents	Charter-Granting Agency	District Admin	Principal	Teachers	Parents	Charter-Granting Agency
No Affiliation	2.20	3.31	3.39	2.01	1.63	2.27	3.58	3.20	1.51	1.67
SD (N=73)	<i>1.21</i>	<i>0.89</i>	<i>0.82</i>	<i>0.72</i>	<i>0.92</i>	<i>1.25</i>	<i>0.72</i>	<i>0.83</i>	<i>0.68</i>	<i>0.91</i>
Affiliated	2.80*	3.04	3.07*	1.79	1.65	3.04*	3.48	2.86*	1.38	1.63
SD (N=83)	<i>1.06</i>	<i>0.94</i>	<i>0.95</i>	<i>0.80</i>	<i>0.88</i>	<i>1.05</i>	<i>0.71</i>	<i>0.88</i>	<i>0.58</i>	<i>0.86</i>

## Note:

The mean value of the variables for Charter (no affiliation) and Charter (Affiliated) has been compared by two-tailed t-test. Standard deviations are listed below the mean values in italics. An asterisk (\*) indicates a statistically significant difference in means at 5% significance level.

Table 8

## Principal Instructional Leadership in Charter Schools

	Principal Instructional Leadership					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
Charter Affiliation	0.427***	0.101	0.352**	0.117	0.396*	0.162
Years with Charter			0.001	0.015	0.005	0.016
Total School Experience			0.007	0.005	0.006	0.005
School Size			0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Percent Minority			0.006**	0.002	0.005*	0.002
Percent Limited English			-0.288	0.403	0.199	0.381
Percent Special Ed			0.165	0.258	-0.102	0.303
Influence of District Admin					-0.010	0.059
Influence of Principal					0.025	0.091
Influence of Teachers					-0.053	0.088
Influence of Parents					0.235*	0.119
Influence of Charter Agency					0.210*	0.094
Challenge-Financial Resource					0.042	0.044
Challenge-Staff & Students					0.101	0.078
Intercept	3.013***	0.075	2.768	0.191	1.834	0.358
Observations	147		144		110	
R <sup>2</sup>	0.115		0.169		0.337	
Adjusted for Robust Standard Error	Yes		Yes		Yes	

Note: Percent of Free and Reduce Lunch Students has a 0.79 correlation with percent of minority students, and is dropped from the model to avoid multicollinearity. \*P<.05, \*\* P<.01, \*\*\* P<.001.