Public school principals are frustrated by bureaucracy that holds them accountable but prevents them from making major decisions.

Have you, as a principal, ever felt that your hands were tied? That you needed to make some tough decisions related to your school’s staffing or curricula, but that you didn’t have the authority to make them? Have you ever felt that your job performance was judged by factors beyond your control?

If you answered yes to those questions, you’re not alone. “The Autonomy Gap,” a recent study by the American Institute for Research and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, found that many public elementary school principals feel constrained by a bureaucracy that impedes their ability to raise student achievement. Unfortunately, those principals are still held accountable for their school’s results—even though they don’t have the tools to make the changes they need. They are caught in the autonomy gap.

In our study, we asked elementary school principals in urban districts in three states about barriers they face—including procedures, regulations, laws, conventions, court orders, and union contracts. For comparison purposes, the same questions were asked of a small number of charter school principals in the same locales. All principals were assured that answers would be treated confidentially and that pseudonyms would be used in reporting the findings by district and state.
Many of their answers came as no surprise. Principals working in the traditional public education system describe a lack of authority over functions they regard as critical to raising student achievement, especially school staffing. They can’t always hire the candidates they want; they can’t remove incompetent teachers; and they can’t assign teachers without restrictions. Charter school principals, on the other hand, said they have more room to operate, and school leaders in one right-to-work state say they enjoy more autonomy in most personnel matters than their counterparts in collective-bargaining states.

These findings are in line with previous research, and our report gleaned some new insights that may be a cause for even greater concern.

**Working the System**

Think for a moment about the questions posed at the start of this article—about whether you feel frustrated by a seeming disconnect between your job’s responsibilities and the autonomy you are permitted. Surprisingly, most principals aren’t too distressed about this autonomy gap.

The majority told us they would certainly like to have more control over the allocation of resources and personnel (especially hiring, firing, or transferring teachers), but they don’t demand it, they don’t expect it, and they aren’t about to quit over it. Why? Because they have learned to work the system. They do the best they can as managers within the system without seeking to transform it.

But that doesn’t mean that, as professional administrators, principals shouldn’t expect more. Apple founder and cultural icon Steve Jobs recently asked, “What kind of person could you get to run a small business if you told them … that they couldn’t get rid of people that they thought weren’t any good?” To Jobs, it seems ridiculous to hold managers responsible for results while withholding from them the tools to change even such basic things as personnel. However, the situation Jobs described isn’t ridiculous; it’s the status quo in most urban public schools today.

**Managers in the Middle**

Squeezed between federal, state, and district policies, procedures, and contractual obligations on one side, and district, state, and federal accountability measures on the other, the principals we interviewed see themselves as mid-level managers, not as CEOs or necessarily even instructional leaders. They find themselves balancing the challenge of maintaining a school climate conducive to teaching and learning with the need to accommodate outside pressures, reporting requirements, and meeting other demands of the district and state. Indeed, many principals commented that they feel responsible for buffering their staff from external demands and policies so as to maximize
the potential of their schools’ learning environments.

As is the case for managers in large organizations, we found that strong relationships and informal networks are critical to principals’ success. By working the system and knowing the right people, principals can bargain for additional resources; spur action on staff hiring and transfers; and gain additional flexibility from the central office. Positive relationships throughout the district bring a de facto sense of autonomy to school leaders and give them the power of persuasion necessary to control and lead their schools.

With more districts embracing managed instruction as an education reform strategy—with key curricular decisions made by the central office—the image of the principal as an instructional leader seems increasingly far-fetched. The principals we interviewed do their best to carry out district mandates and navigate the system, and most are quite satisfied at the way they play this role.

Closing the Autonomy Gap

The autonomy gap varies from state to state and district to district, reflecting differences in the various contexts in which principals work. Consider the dismissal of unqualified or ineffective teachers—unanimously considered a long and arduous process by public school principals in every state. In many cases, principals seek an alternative route because the time required by the process would keep them from other duties.

Principals stated that in many instances, even after following all the procedures for dismissing a teacher, they still could not be certain that the teacher would be removed. In strong union states, nearly all the principals expressed this belief. However, in the right-to-work state principals could at least expect that the drawn-out process, if followed correctly, would result in removal.

At first blush, this example seems to simply buttress the conventional wisdom that principals in right-to-work states have more autonomy, especially over staffing decisions, than those in union states. State policy certainly matters, but the example also indicates the importance of district leadership. Some principals, especially those in the right-to-work state, felt that their superintendent would back up their decision to remove a teacher. This is a key lesson for superintendents in every state: If they want their principals to fully exercise leadership, they need the principals to know that they are supported 100 percent.

Empowering the Principal

If districts want to tap the energy and experience of effective education leaders, and draw talented individuals into school leadership roles, we feel they should embrace a decentralized approach—in essence, treating every school like a charter school. This idea goes back at least 15 years, but it recently gained attention from the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, which includes two former secretaries of education and a host of respected scholars and educators. Under this approach, school boards and central
Some districts are edging in this direction. New York City and Las Vegas, for example, have established “empowerment zones” in which principals enjoy much greater autonomy than in other districts. Dallas is pushing this way, too, and is helping to train current leaders to make the transition. Such developments are promising. But the present study also provides a cautionary tale about this approach.

Six of our principals who worked in a district that claims to follow this decentralized model acknowledged having some additional authority over their schools’ instructional programs. But they recognized that their actual powers were quite limited by the district’s teacher union contract and by state mandates regarding instructional time allocations. Their autonomy was more rhetoric than reality.

It’s genuinely hard for school districts to transition from command-and-control to autonomy-in-return-for-accountability—but they must. Such a shift means doing battle with meddling some states, powerful unions, and central-office fiefdoms. It means paying principals more and micromanaging them less. But if leadership is as important a factor in school success as research indicates, and if great leaders demand (and need) true authority, taking this difficult step is worth the effort. It’s the best way to close the autonomy gap.

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