In *Navigating the Principalship*, James P. Spillane and Rebecca Lowenhaupt look at the major challenges of the principal position, examining how new principals adapt to the role, set an instructional agenda, and build cooperation and collaboration.

They focus in particular on the dilemmas that mark the principalship—the inevitable, complicated conflicts that arise from a clash of worthwhile values and resist simple solutions, such as:

- Addressing the demands of various internal and external stakeholders.
- Accomplishing seemingly limitless tasks in limited time.
- Sharing leadership duties while maintaining ultimate responsibility for the school and everyone in it.
- Creating a safe space for teaching and learning while building bridges to the outside world.
- Balancing work life and home life.

Based on original research conducted with new principals in an urban environment, and rich with authentic voices discussing real conflicts and proven strategies, this book presents pragmatic ways to manage the most difficult parts of the job. Use it to spark both reflection and action and to chart a course for effective, rewarding school leadership.
All kinds of people become principals. Some bring a decade or two of classroom teaching experience to their new principal position, while others come with just a handful of years. Some are seasoned administrators who have spent a decade or more in various school leadership positions, while others are novices in the world of school administration. Some enter schools they know little about, while others assume the principal position in schools where they have worked for years and know inside out.

Some actively pursue the principal position. Others were coaxed into it by colleagues and family members. Kathy, a 40-something Caucasian mother of three, is an example of the latter. She never imagined she would become a principal, despite having grown up in a family of teachers and principals. As Kathy put it, “The day I graduated from college, my grandmother said to me, ‘I know you’ll be a principal someday.’ And I thought, ‘Oh, never!’” When Kathy was a teacher, colleagues encouraged her to pursue a leadership career. The first principal she worked for pushed her to get her administrator license and then supported her internship. Finally, after more than 20 years as an educator and a stint as an assistant principal (AP), Kathy stepped into the position.

Whether those who become principals actively pursue it or were encouraged by others, as Kathy was, they tend to share two common motivators: a desire for personal fulfillment and a sense of social obligation.
PERSONAL FULFILLMENT

Alejandro described his path to the principal’s office as a series of professional moves in an ongoing search for more challenging work. “Growing up as a kid, I never wanted to be a teacher,” Alejandro recalled. Nonetheless, he valued the six or seven years he spent in the classroom. “I really enjoyed myself teaching,” Alejandro explained. “Then I started to lose a little desire. It was not so much that I didn’t enjoy the kids; [teaching] just wasn’t as challenging for me.” Taking the assistant principal position in the school where he taught offered Alejandro new opportunities for growth. However, after a few more years, and although he liked that work too, he began to feel dissatisfied all over again. Seeking new challenges that would stimulate him and help him grow, Alejandro took his first principal position at Hoptree Elementary.

Located outside Chicago’s city center, Hoptree serves several hundred students in grades pre-K through 6. Nearly all of these students receive free or reduced-price lunches. Most students at the school identify as Hispanic, and almost half of the student body has been identified as English language learners. The neighborhood where Hoptree is located has long been a home to immigrants. European immigrants flocked there in the late 1800s, and a century later, Hispanic immigrants, along with some eastern Europeans, began to move in. Over the first decade of the 21st century, the neighborhood became primarily Hispanic.

Alejandro, a Hispanic man in his 30s, was born and raised in Chicago and spent the first part of his career as a teacher and assistant principal in the district. Shifting neighborhood demographics, entrenched divisions among staff, and the school district’s decision to put Hoptree on probation due to poor student performance on state tests meant that as a new principal, Alejandro was facing many challenges. He knew the school district had high expectations for him, and he welcomed that. As he put it, “If I’m not making a difference

---

1 Throughout this book, we use the term Hispanic to honor the language used by the principals whose stories we share and to align with the district’s use of the term as a designation for students. However, we acknowledge that the term is problematic, originating in U.S. federal government documents and emphasizing a history of colonization. We recognize that many who might be identified as Hispanic would choose other terms to describe themselves. We refer readers to a detailed discussion of terminology in Suárez-Orozco and Páez (2002).
here—not just based on [the district's] standards but on my standards too—then I shouldn’t be here. Quite honestly, I should do something else.”

Although Alejandro did not see his new position simply as a stepping-stone, he suspected it would not be his career finale, either. He expressed interest in serving as a district administrator someday, perhaps an associate superintendent with responsibility for curriculum and instruction, as that would allow him to have a broader impact on more than one school. Alejandro explained that, for him, the bottom line was having challenging work. “I want to be here as long as I feel challenged,” Alejandro explained, “but I’m open to going on to a different challenge—not in any set time period, but when the opportunity arises.”

For educators like Alejandro, becoming a principal is the logical next step once the work of assistant principal no longer provides sufficient challenge. It is a way to find stimulation and keep growing professionally and personally. Oscar, a new principal at Tulip Elementary, voiced a similar enthusiasm for learning, and this commitment figured prominently in his pursuit of the principal’s office. A Hispanic man in his mid-40s, Oscar had spent two decades as an educator, 10 of them as a classroom teacher, when he realized he was ready for a new challenge. “I was looking for an opportunity” Oscar explained. “I had been an AP for six years already. I felt [becoming a principal] was my next step; there was nothing else for me to learn.”

A few weeks before he began his first year as principal at Tulip, Oscar shared, “I’ve always been the person who likes challenges and likes to keep progressing and learning new things. Right now, I feel that I’m there, I’m learning some things that I didn’t know. I feel that when I was an AP, I got to a certain limit. But now, as a principal, there are a lot of new issues for me to learn about, and I like learning.”

SOCIAL OBLIGATION

It’s common for educators to step into the principal position because they are seeking opportunities for professional growth and self-actualization. But intertwined with this somewhat individualistic and personal locus is a sense
of social or moral obligation—to society in general, and to its more vulnerable members in particular.

Oscar took his first principal position at Tulip, a large elementary school serving a high percentage of Hispanic students. After working as a teacher and administrator for over a decade, being principal at Tulip helped address Oscar’s thirst for new challenges. At the same time, he purposefully sought out a school in a Hispanic community where he might become a community leader and a role model. “There were very few models up there for students, and we have a large population of Hispanics,” Oscar explained. “I think it is important that our students see some people who are like them in leadership positions. That was something that motivated me to become a principal.” For him, the principal position offered the possibility for both personal fulfillment and social service—motivations that are closely intertwined for him.

Kathy’s first principal position was at Nyssa Elementary, a small magnet school on Chicago’s North Side that serves a diverse student population drawn from neighborhoods across the city. She had worked there for numerous years as an assistant principal before making the move to the principal’s office. She, too, was motivated by a sense of social obligation. As Kathy put it, “We are present for the kids and for their families. My vision is that we provide resources and provide support for our children who are going through difficult times, and their families as well.” For Kathy, becoming a principal was about obligation, a desire to help others who are less fortunate. Serving Nyssa’s students was her first obligation, but she was also committed to helping families.

A sense of responsibility for and obligation to others was also central to Nelson’s decision to be a principal. A 30-something African American who was himself a graduate of the school district, Nelson wanted to work in one of the lowest-performing schools to fulfill this sense of obligation to serve others. He explained, “I want to feel like I’m being of use. It’s how I get motivated, because students are behind their potential. That’s the only way I could get

---

2 This is what John Goodlad (1990) refers to as “moral obligation,” a sense of social responsibility to work on the behalf of others. While Goodlad’s work focuses on this sense of obligation among teachers, our work shows that this same commitment carries over into the principalship.
really, really motivated about it.” A former football player, Nelson started his education career as a teacher and coach. Through coaching, he recognized his talent for motivating and influencing others and decided to pursue a career in leadership. “I’m a people person,” Nelson explained, “and, as I go back over my coaching, I guess I was a player’s coach. My players would always want to run through a brick wall for me.”

After stints as an assistant principal, Nelson was confident that he was ready for his first principalship at Birch, a large, low-performing elementary school with a primarily African American student population. Birch was the sort of school Nelson had been searching for, one where he could fulfill his sense of social obligation. He explained that he had been raised by parents who provided regular access to parks, museums, and a host of other out-of-school activities. Compared to his own experiences, Birch’s students seemed to have very little. The chance to create opportunities for them that they had been denied by virtue of circumstance was a prime motivator for Nelson. As he put it, “It’s really on me. I get to get out there and do what I feel needs to be done.”

Becoming a principal is a way for many educators to continue working directly with children and deepen the commitment to service that drew them to the profession in the first place. Alejandro explained that becoming a principal was a way to have a bigger impact while still being able to work directly with students. “As a young teacher, I figured I could save the world,” Nelson remembered. He explained, “I have to be able to help kids, and that’s what keeps me going—seeing the look on their faces when they’re learning and knowing that I had a lot to do with that.” Kathy described a similar commitment and a similar sense of reward. “Being the daughter of a teacher, I grew up surrounded by teachers, and I’m very, very comfortable in this environment,” she said. “I spent a year at central office about 10 or 11 years ago, and I hated...
that. I hated working in a cubicle. I will always be with kids. It’s the best part of this job. I can’t ever imagine moving beyond the school level to do something that didn’t involve kids.”

**CHALLENGING CIRCUMSTANCES**

Becoming a principal offers plenty of opportunities for educators seeking new challenges—and this is often especially the case for those who choose to work in an urban environment. While today’s classrooms may look similar in many respects to classrooms 100 years ago, the circumstances in which schools operate have changed in several important respects. Significantly, over the past quarter century or so, state and federal policies have reshaped the circumstances in which teachers and school administrators work.¹ Standards and high-stakes accountability tied to student assessment results have become staples in the daily work of both teachers and administrators. Policymakers and the public writ large hold schools accountable based on their performance on a few key metrics—chief among them student achievement and attendance. The charter school movement has introduced an additional element of competition. Principals must navigate these changing and challenging circumstances as they transition into their new role.

**Performance Metrics**

Just prior to Nelson’s first school year as principal, the district informed Birch that student and teacher attendance rates, test scores, and graduation rates all needed to increase. Nelson took the job knowing that these measures would be the means through which he would ultimately prove his value to district administrators. Metrics were also a core concern for Kathy, even though she became principal at a relatively high-performing school under no threat of district probation. As she explained at the time, “The district expects me to take the school to the next level. They expect the reading scores to be higher.”

¹The shifting context of education policy over the last 20 years has been the subject of much analysis and writing. See Mehta (2013) or Spillane (2009) for a detailed accounting of how education reforms have reshaped the work of educators in U.S. public schools.
Government policies increasingly hold school principals and their staff accountable for their performance, usually on a handful of performance metrics. Most principals are well aware of the need to attend to performance metrics. While student achievement in core school subjects tends to be their chief concern, they also focus on two other metrics: student attendance and teacher attendance. Although some feel pressure to raise scores primarily from the district and sometimes the state, others also feel accountable to communities, parents, and themselves. Regardless of where the pressure comes from, principals feel a sense of urgency about getting the scores up. Principals who work in particularly challenging circumstances can feel helpless. Nelson reported feeling like it would take a miracle to improve the performance metrics at his school, comparing his situation to “being on the Titanic and we’re heading toward the iceberg. I’m spinning the wheel and trying to keep us from hitting it.”

Principals may be aware of the limitations of mandated performance metrics, but they know they cannot ignore them. Most are of two minds about these measures of and guideposts for academic development. For example, although Oscar recognized the use of student test scores in driving improvement and as an indicator of progress, he lamented the heavy focus on them. “We’re creating human beings. They need to be prepared and to be given exposure to the arts, the humanities, and all that,” Oscar said. “Sometimes we just have to focus so much on making sure that we have the scores for reading and math that we limit students’ exposure to other things.”

When he took the principal position at Tulip Elementary, Oscar promised himself that once students’ scores in the core tested school subjects improved, he would expand the curriculum so that students could experience a broader array of subjects—ones he believed to be essential for cultivating “good human beings, good citizens.” Of course, Oscar’s ambitions depended on more than just the efforts of Tulip’s staff and would take time. A principal who tables a proposed action until after certain performance metrics are met might find it takes years to hit those marks, long after the current students have moved on. Yet faced with the very real accountability pressures of testing, Oscar and other principals who are similarly motivated by social obligation maintain their commitment to do more than just teach to the test; they strive to fulfill a duty to care for students in a more holistic way.
Competition

Today’s principals cannot take student enrollments for granted. Competition from charter, magnet, and private schools means principals must ensure families opt for their school and are satisfied with the services it provides. In some respects, this increases the sense of urgency surrounding improvement on performance metrics, but it also means acknowledging that families are often looking at much more than student achievement data when selecting a school. Oscar explained, “You want to have a place where parents and children want to be.” Principals like Oscar know that the competition for students requires considering factors beyond how well the school does in terms of the handful of metrics that district administrators use to evaluate a school. Parents have a broader repertoire of things they consider in choosing a school for their children, such as school culture and community.

As a principal in a high-achieving magnet school that has a high profile with the public at large, Kathy definitely felt the press of competition. Because parents actively opt to send their children to Nyssa, they constantly challenged Kathy to provide particular services tailored for their children. And then there are parents who have the means to be demanding in all aspects of society, so they feel that they should be able to be demanding in school too. Some parents expected Kathy to have her staff tutor their children one on one after school to ensure the children’s competitiveness in the high school placement process. For principals like Kathy, competition also comes from outside the system—from neighboring charter schools, private schools, and the threat of school closure. It’s not uncommon to lose children to nearby competitor schools that are not necessarily any better in terms of student performance but have “great marketing.” Principals must manage these complex competing pressures if they are to maintain and grow enrollments.

Policy Churn

While standards, high-stakes accountability tied to student assessment, and competition may be staples in the policy environment, instability is everywhere. Policy churn is a constant, with district and state policymakers...
regularly changing their minds and enacting new policies and regulations on everything from evaluating teacher performance to budgeting. In part, this is because policymakers are always trying to figure out how best to incentivize and support instructional improvement. It also reflects the reality that district administrative regimes are striving to make their mark.

As one principal described it, keeping up with constant changes in the policy environment feels like “surfing without a surfboard.” Responsible for compliance with a vast array of demands, principals must learn about and work with teachers to implement new testing policies, curriculum standards, teacher evaluation approaches, and other reforms on an ongoing basis. And often, once they learn how to address one set of policy requirements, the requirements change. Being a principal means adapting constantly.

**Growing Poverty**

Circumstances are further complicated by rising and increasingly concentrated poverty among families of school-age children. High poverty combined with decreasing government funding for many social service programs create a need-based vacuum in which school systems are left, often by default, to provide basic services such as meals, clothing, and mental and physical health services.5 These environmental circumstances create significant challenges for school leaders in their attempts to address the diverse educational needs of their students.

**MANAGING DILEMMAS**

Addressing these and several other challenges means principals must work to define problems and craft solutions to match their commitments and values. Nelson, well aware that metrics like student attendance and performance could make or break him and his school, had to figure out why student attendance at Birch was not where it ought to be. There are several ways to define

---

5 See Orfield, Ee, Frankenberg, and Siegel-Hawley (2016), which highlights the ways in which poverty, race, and segregation combine to influence schools and school systems.
a problem like lagging attendance, and doing so involves more than just gathering data and crunching numbers. It may have to do with how students are treated by school staff, or perhaps it’s related to students being bored by classroom academic work or feeling disrespected by their teacher or student peers. Then again, attendance problems may have nothing to do with the school but rather with circumstances beyond the schoolyard. Perhaps students don’t feel safe coming from and going to school due to gang violence or other neighborhood circumstances. Perhaps the problem of student attendance might be more accurately defined in terms of some combination of these circumstances.

Defining problems is difficult work because problems are not tangible things that lurk under the floorboards of the schoolhouse, awaiting discovery by a new principal. Problems are social constructions, built on the subjective interpretations of those who encounter them. How problems are defined is critical. As Mark Moore (1976) reminds us, different problem definitions can lead to distinctly different ways of resolving problems, and the consequences are immense.6 Facing an ongoing string of challenges, principals construct solutions according to their definitions of the problems through a process of diagnosis (see Chapter 5). But they do not do this alone. They engage staff and other stakeholders in problem solving in an attempt to do the work in a way that will enable change in everyday practice in their schools. And there is no shortage of problems for principals to solve.

Although problem definition and problem solving are at the heart of being a principal, it’s important to pay special attention to a particular type of problem—what Larry Cuban (2001) refers to as “wicked problems” or “dilemmas” (p. 10). The challenges that both Nelson and Oscar encountered with performance metrics went beyond defining and solving problems of attendance or student performance. Both principals were torn between focusing on performance metrics as measured in terms of student achievement in a couple of school subjects and making room for much broader ambitions for student learning. As you will see in the pages ahead, both Nelson and Oscar embraced more comprehensive, holistic notions about student development.

6 For more discussion of the implications of problem definition, see Moore (1976).
What both Oscar and Nelson were presented with was a dilemma—in Cuban's definition, one of those “messy, complicated, and conflict-filled situations that require undesirable choices between competing, highly prized values that cannot be simultaneously or fully satisfied” (2001, p. 10). To confront a dilemma is to face alternative solution pathways that are roughly equally desirable, either of which requires some compromise among closely held values. Choosing one of these alternatives over the other is difficult, if not impossible.

Theorists (and we include ourselves among them) might argue that principals should resist state- and district-mandated performance metrics that limit the scope of a broader educational mission, but principals do not always have the luxury of theorizing. As Nelson explained, “I can’t sit back and be an armchair quarterback; I’m actually on the field.” Student achievement metrics can’t be ignored, because they have real consequences for the school, for a principal’s job security, and for students themselves, whose achievement on state tests will very likely matter to their futures. But could someone like Nelson also be expected to ignore a deep commitment to creating meaningful learning opportunities for students?

Dilemmas aren’t like ordinary problems, which can be solved with technical solutions. Because dilemmas derive from a clash of values that are roughly equally compelling and in constant conflict, they can’t really be solved at all. But dilemmas can be managed through a process of ongoing negotiation and renegotiation. Learning to cope with dilemmas and to accept them as a continuing feature of the work is a key skill for all new principals—and it’s a particular focus of this book.

We are not the first to emphasize the importance of recognizing and managing dilemmas. Scholars have documented the centrality of managing dilemmas in the education sector, from Magdalene Lampert’s (1985) work on classroom teaching practice to Larry Cuban’s (2001) work on educators and administrators. Michael Lipsky (2010), focusing on the public sector more broadly, documents how managing dilemmas is central to various forms of public service work ranging from teaching to social work.7 Dilemmas are part

---

7 Read Lipsky (2010) for a discussion of how other public services manage dilemmas similar to those that factor in education.
and parcel of life in general and life in schools in particular, where competing demands, the unpredictability of human interaction, and unanswerable issues confront teachers and principals on a regular basis. For these reasons, it's essential for new principals to learn to cope with and manage dilemmas rather than burn themselves out trying to “solve” that which is insolvable.

In our usage, managing (i.e., coping with) dilemmas is in no way pejorative. It hints at no mediocrity or failure. It’s life, and as David Cohen (2011) and Michael Lipsky (2010) so brilliantly remind us, it’s especially life when one is a practitioner of human improvement and working in the public sector. Principals experience myriad challenges—some of which involve definable and solvable problems, and some of which are rooted in ongoing dilemmas that they must learn to manage. New principals must also learn to distinguish between ordinary, solvable problems and the larger dilemmas they must manage rather than solve. This is no easy task, and from our perspective, managing dilemmas is a key benchmark of managing to lead.

This critique of the education field and other public sectors has been referred to in various ways by shrewd observers. The push to identify actionable solutions and generate productive output is what Ball (2003) terms “performativity” and Majone (1989) calls “decisionism.” Similarly, Lampert (1985) refers to the pressures that teachers face in playing the role of technical-production managers. She highlights the importance of sitting with uncertainty and acknowledging the messy complications of dilemmas. In distinct ways, these scholars critique the field for embracing easy solutions at the risk of ignoring the many unsolvable conflicts inherent in the educational enterprise. Cuban (2001) reminds us that focusing on solutions for hastily defined problems can often lead to more problems. While recognizing that problems are everywhere and problem solving is an important aspect of the work, we seek to draw attention to those wicked problems that cannot be resolved—dilemmas—and the importance of managing these dilemmas on the job.

---

8 See Ball (2003) and Majone (1989) for more detail about the pressure to resolve problems and produce action.
NAVIGATING DIFFERENT CROSSINGS

All new principals encounter challenging circumstances that give rise to problems and dilemmas for them to manage, but their initial encounters with these circumstances do differ in a key respect. Some principals are homegrown, native to the schools where they assume the principalship, having worked there often in various positions for several years. In contrast, others are strangers, outsiders to the buildings where they take their first principal position. These two different “crossings” pose some unique navigational challenges.

Some principals, like Kathy, assume the principal position in schools where they have worked for several years. Others, like Nelson, assume the principal position in schools where they are unfamiliar with the school culture and practices. Crossings are difficult, and the circumstances vary widely. Some new principals inherit an entire staff when they transition into the position, while others get to hire most or even all their staff as they transition. To complicate matters further, some have planned their transition into the principal position, whereas for others, the transition is unplanned.9 Some are hired to disrupt, whereas others are hired to maintain.

Inside Crossings

Upon taking the assistant principal position at Nyssa, Kathy began working closely with the principal on all aspects of leadership. Even though she never planned on being a principal, over the course of several years as assistant principal, she was groomed to succeed the principal with whom she worked closely. She reported feeling fortunate that she had the opportunity to learn from her predecessor, who provided her with many opportunities to experience the leadership role. Kathy explained, “In my role as assistant principal, I was blessed that I was not stuck with the dirty work.” Encouraged by her predecessor, Kathy pursued the principal opening at Nyssa and, with support from the staff and community, stepped into the position as part of a purposeful succession plan.

9 For further discussion of principal succession, see Spillane and Lee (2014) and Lee (2015).
One advantage Kathy had coming from inside was that she had the trust of the Nyssa staff and parents. Her reputation at Nyssa was such that the local school council, although it advertised the position and received applicants, decided not to interview anyone else for the job. They wanted Kathy. “I didn’t interview,” she explained, smiling. “Being hired was beautiful, such a wonderful testament to the community’s trust in me. They chose to just offer me the position.” Laughing, Kathy added, “It was, other than the birth of my children, the greatest day of my life.”

Not only did Kathy enjoy the support of her local board, but she also had the advantage of knowing Nyssa and the families the school served; she was well acquainted with staff members and the school’s interpersonal dynamics—all knowledge that any principal hired from the outside would have needed months of time and effort to figure out. Kathy said, “I know the people, I know our instructional programs, I know the areas where we have made great strides, and I want to continue in that direction. I know the areas that we need to focus on.” Three months into her tenure, Kathy offered an early assessment of her staff as happy and supportive of her as principal: “The feedback has all been very positive. They will say to me things like, ‘You know, I really appreciate how you keep us informed.’”

Janice, a Caucasian woman in her mid-40s who has spent almost her entire education career at one school, Poplar Elementary, was also encouraged to apply for her initial administrative position by her principal. She explained, I was still getting my administrative certification, and the principal waited for me to finish. She went a whole year without an assistant principal. She said, “I really want to put you in this position.” So that’s how I got out of the classroom. I was truly expecting to be in the classroom more years, but the position happened to open up here.

By the time Janice took over as principal at Poplar, which is located in a low-income neighborhood and enrolls mostly Hispanic students, she had been at the school for well over a decade as both a teacher and administrator. “I knew the climate and the culture of the school,” Janice explained. “I knew the people. I knew what the school’s vision was, what we were working
toward, what people were dedicated to accomplishing. I was already part of that, so I didn’t have to learn or figure out the culture of the school.” From their first days in the principalship, Kathy and Janice knew the lay of the land, how things worked, and the various stakeholders they would have to satisfy.

While crossing from the inside has its advantages when assuming the principalship, it also brings its own set of challenges. As an insider, it can be difficult to shift staff expectations to enact change. Janice experienced this as an assistant principal who moved into the principal position:

Because you’re kind of associated with a previous principal, they see you as one and the same. The biggest transition that I had to make here at this school was getting the staff to realize that, even though I was part of the former administration, I would make changes and things would be different.

Janice explained that she admired the previous principal, with whom she had worked closely, but her priorities were distinct, something she needed to convey to the staff who expected her efforts to support the previous principal’s priorities.

Kathy also struggled to shift staff expectations of her as she crossed into the principal position. As Nyssa’s assistant principal, she worked hard to be always available for staff and build open, trusting relationships with them. As a new principal, though, she felt the need to set additional boundaries in order to protect her time and her work as the leader. She explained that with her history of maintaining an open door policy, staff “are used to coming in this door whenever they want. I’m concerned about that challenge, and I’m thinking about putting in limits so I can get things done.” Although both Kathy and Janice could draw on deep knowledge of the school and strong relationships, their crossings came with the challenge of establishing themselves, their agendas, and their relationships in new ways.

Outside Crossings

Others take the helm of schools they know relatively little about through direct experience, bringing an outsider’s perspective to both their new school
and its staff. These principals experience an even steeper learning curve as they gather information and build new relationships. While they bring expertise from the outside to their new position, they need time to figure out how things work in their new schools and what stakeholders expect of them and the school. As Oscar put it in the early days of his principalship, “I’ve only been here for a couple of weeks. I’m still learning about people, about what’s in place, about programs that might or might not work.” For Oscar, looking, listening, and learning were key first steps in building relationships with staff and other stakeholders he didn’t yet know.

For Alejandro, navigating new relationships is one of the most daunting aspects of the job. He explained it this way:

I think coming into a new building where I didn't know anybody, the hardest part is just not knowing people’s strengths or areas they need to improve. Not only the unknowns on a professional level—about them as instructors, about knowing what they’re really good at. But also knowing how sincere people are and how open and trusting they are with you.

As the dynamics among staff came into view, Alejandro began to see the need to influence social interactions as the first step in pursuing his agenda: “If I could unite the faculty, that would be a huge accomplishment. I mean, it amazes me that everybody loves working here, yet there's this subculture where nobody likes each other.” Alejandro laughed before continuing, “I'm going to break that subculture. I have to; otherwise I'm not going to get anything done.”

Some aspects of entering the principal position from the outside can make the transition easier. Unlike Kathy and Janice, who both needed to assert their own priorities despite expectations, Alejandro and Oscar benefited from the assumption that they would bring change to their schools. Staff expect new initiatives from newcomers. As Oscar explained,

They expect me to bring a different kind of school environment to create. It’s something that I’m working on. I’ve had some good comments about how people feel that I am open to their opinions and that I listen.
While Alejandro and Oscar both viewed their initial steps as listening and learning, they also actively sought to align what they heard to the goals they were bringing to their leadership roles.

Regardless of whether principals cross into the position from within or outside the school, they step into complex leadership roles within a complicated and changing environment. Ultimately, they will need to rely on their staff to help them respond to the many demands that various stakeholders have placed on them.

**THE BOOK AND ITS OBJECTIVES**

This is a book about practitioners, for practitioners, and based on the accounts of practitioners. By *practitioners*, we mean school principals in particular but also school leaders who might aspire to be a principal. Our audience also includes those who work with school principals, including school system staff, professional development providers, and education policymakers.

In the pages to come, we explore the principalship through the accounts of newcomers to the position. We have endeavored to capture the work of becoming and being a principal by sharing the experiences of 11 principals as they transitioned to and were socialized into the position over their first few years on the job in Chicago public K–8 schools. We use pseudonyms for both the principals and their schools. However, whenever possible, we use their own words to relate the everyday headaches, heartaches, and successes that new principals typically experience in the early years of the 21st century. In Figure 1, you’ll find a brief description of each of these principals, some of whom you have already met. You will glean additional details about each as you move through the book, but the information here will help you distinguish among them.

While the stories of the principals in this book are particular, their experiences are more general. We are confident that the challenges they face mirror the experiences of new principals in many places. Our hope is that by sharing their stories and the dilemmas they managed, we can help others anticipate and manage their own crossings and meet the challenges that come with moving into the principal’s office and not only becoming but being the principal.
Alejandro became principal at Hoptree, a K–8 school, after 10 years of teaching and several years as an assistant principal. Hispanic and in his mid-30s, Alejandro grew up and attended school in Chicago and became an elementary school teacher after college. After various positions in the district, Alejandro felt prepared for his move into leadership. When interviewed, Alejandro frequently referred to the importance of articulating his vision for instruction. He explained his belief that a good principal must be a strong instructional leader who is “willing to either provide the in-house professional development or seek outside resources to make sure that teachers are prepared to do the best job they can.” Alejandro was deeply invested in his staff’s growth, viewing his Instructional Leadership Team as “the heart and soul of the school.”

George entered his first principal position at Buckthorn Elementary. Caucasian and in his early 30s, he grew up in a family of educators and described himself as driven by a commitment to serve others. He taught for only a few years before training as a principal. When he was a special education teacher, George was inspired by his mentors to pursue the principalship and enrolled in a nontraditional principal preparation program. As a new principal, George was drawn to try strategies that were “out of the box” to accomplish goals related to academic achievement. He was committed to transparency and described his leadership style as laid-back and “laissez-faire,” stressing that he had “no problem making mistakes and owning up to those mistakes.”

Janice, Caucasian and in her early 40s, began her career as a teacher at Poplar Elementary before becoming the assistant principal there. Eventually, she stepped into the principal position. Poplar is a small neighborhood elementary school serving a predominantly Hispanic population. Having spent her entire career there, Janice described the school as “a well-oiled machine.” Even as an undergraduate majoring in education, Janice knew she wanted to work in the service of “helping people.” After several years of teaching, she discovered an interest in administration, and this pursuit was nurtured by her former principal, who supported her throughout her subsequent training and during the application process. Janice explained that the principalship suits her individual strengths and identity as someone who is “a people person” and adept at “dealing with people and building relationships.” She acknowledged that “you can’t do it by yourself” and made it a priority to support her staff—not just teachers, but everyone in the building who supports students in many different ways.
Jennifer, who took her first principalship at Bur Oak Elementary, is African American and in her early 40s. Conscious of how her own background differed from those of her students at the predominantly Hispanic elementary school, she embraced her new role with a deep sense of responsibility. Although Jennifer grew up in a family of educators, she described her education career as accidental, something she fell into after working in a corporate environment. Jennifer stepped into the principal role after several years of teaching experience and work as an instructional coach in a different school in the city. She was attracted to Bur Oak, a school that had been on probation for several years in a row, because of what she saw as a disparity between high teacher quality and low test scores. Motivated to make a difference, Jennifer felt that it was “a great place to come and make improvements.” She described herself as a nontraditional principal and explained she has “an ethical imperative to do what is necessary to help the children of this community.”

Kathy, Caucasian and in her 40s, grew up in a family of educators and never seriously considered any other profession. With both public and private school teaching experience, Kathy eventually moved into a school leadership position, and with encouragement from colleagues, family, and friends, she decided to pursue the certification necessary to become a principal. She got her first principal position at Nyssa Elementary, a school she had worked in as both a teacher and assistant principal. She explained that the development of others, both teachers and students, was central to how she thinks about the principalship.

Nathan, 30-something and Caucasian, began his principal career at Spruce Elementary after three years of teaching and various administrative positions. He worked as an assistant principal for a brief time before taking on the principalship at Spruce and was pursuing a doctoral degree in school administration during the study. Having been inspired by childhood experiences with numerous family members who were educators, Nathan sought a career that would let him “help kids make decisions—and do something good with their life, whether it’s college or work or just decision-making ability.” In seeking out principal positions, Nathan actively looked for schools that were in turnaround so that he could help rebuild them. Instead, he ended up at Spruce, a new school where he had an opportunity to hire his own staff and set a new vision.

(Continued)
Nelson, African American and in his 30s, became the principal at Birch Elementary after four years of assistant principal experience and several years of teaching. Born and raised in Chicago, Nelson graduated from a local high school and started his career in the school district as a coach and physical education teacher. He recalled being bored as a student in grade school, but things changed when he got to high school, where a new school principal with a background as a physical education teacher helped Nelson see how administration might be a way to pursue his passion. Nelson viewed the principalship as an opportunity to combine his interests in leadership and athletics. He explained his mission as influencing children so they can be successful members of society, and was troubled that he had to “fight” to get his students “fundamental exposures to simple things like preschool.”

Octavio, Hispanic and in his 40s, moved to Chicago from Latin America in his youth and became principal at Dogwood Elementary after more than a decade of teaching experience in the district and a few years as Dogwood’s assistant principal. A self-described lifelong learner, Octavio explained that he was drawn into education because he enjoys “sharing knowledge, information, and skills . . . and helping by coaching and modeling.” He viewed academic and socioemotional learning as fundamentally integrated processes and expressed a belief in educating “the whole child.” He took on the role of mentor for his students, many of whom shared similar immigration experiences. He also aimed to mentor staff and develop leadership skills in his colleagues.

Oscar, Hispanic and in his 40s, became principal at Tulip Elementary after spending almost two decades as a teacher and administrator in various schools both within and outside the United States. In his prior positions, Oscar generally attended to the instructional side of the work, and he began the principalship anticipating that the managerial aspects of the work would be a challenge. From a family of educators, Oscar trained as a teacher in his native Latin American country, and as a principal after he relocated to Chicago. Aware of his own bilingual and bicultural identity, he was determined to step up and provide leadership models for Hispanic students—and Tulip’s demographics were a draw to him.
We draw on the stories shared through semi-structured interviews conducted as part of a study in which we followed two cohorts of Chicago principals from the summer before they started as principals to either their fifth or sixth year on the job. We systematically followed the experiences of these principals, mostly through interviews but also through surveys, observations, and administrative records, as they entered, managed, and adapted to their new positions. For the larger project, we interviewed 35 principals across these two cohorts of new principals.

Rich, Caucasian and in his early 30s, became the principal at Sevenson Elementary, the elementary school where he had worked previously as the assistant principal. He was inspired to pursue a career in administration by negative experiences as a teacher in a school where he didn’t see eye to eye with his principal. At Sevenson, Rich was excited by the opportunity to shake things up and pursue a new direction for the school. He viewed the principal role as “being a coach, being a mentor, a strong-handed leader when need be. It’s about being able to match a vision with a reality that you bring about.”

Samantha, African American and in her mid-30s, became the principal of Sweetgum Elementary, a newly established school, after nearly a decade of teaching experience and several years of administrative experience. Influenced by her mother’s philosophy that “everybody should be a teacher at least for some amount of time,” Samantha followed in the footsteps of many of her family members who are also educators. After completing her principal training and in the midst of pursuing her doctorate, she was enjoying her work as an assistant principal but decided that she “couldn’t pass up” the opportunity to start a new school guided by her own vision. Owing to the support she received from mentors and her own skills in collaboration and management, Samantha felt prepared for the role in terms of both her vision and her organizational skills. As the principal of a new school, she was responsible for hiring many staff in a short time and focused on maintaining her vision during a period of rapid growth.
Although the 11 profiled principals’ crossings took different forms depending on whether they actively sought or were coaxed into the position, or were seen as insiders or outsiders, the challenges they encountered, and the ensuing dilemmas these challenges presented, were similar and, we believe, instructive. Throughout the book, we identify some of the core challenges that principals encounter related to responsibility, stakeholder demands, time management, staff cooperation and coordination, shared leadership, and school safety; identify associated dilemmas; and explore practical and pragmatic ways to manage these dilemmas through ongoing negotiations. Although we discuss ordinary problems in addition to the ongoing dilemmas, we intend our account as something of an antidote to the problem-solving mentality that tends to drive much of the work of educators and, indeed, the general culture in which we live. We are often motivated to jump headlong into implementing solutions for problems without acknowledging the unresolvable trade-offs and conflicting values at play.

We hope the stories and strategies we share in this book will support reflection and dialogue among practitioners. To that end, we have included discussion questions at the end of each chapter. Reflection questions prompt you to think more deeply about the experiences shared in the chapter. Application questions prompt you to consider how these themes apply to your own context. Finally, Implications questions invite you to explore how what you have read might inform your future work.
APPENDIX: STUDY METHODS

Data for this book come from a research project based at Northwestern University’s School of Education and Social Policy and funded by the Spencer Foundation.

The primary goal of the research was to examine the transition and on-the-job socialization of new principals. To do so, researchers used a longitudinal, mixed-methods design, following two cohorts of new principals in the Chicago Public Schools for the first five to six years of their principalship. Cohort 1 began their principalships roughly a decade into the 21st century, and Cohort 2 began one year later.

Extensive data were gathered using multiple approaches including surveys, semi-structured interviews, administrative records, observations, and public documents. A subsample—a purposeful sample for Cohort 1 (n = 18) and randomly sampled for Cohort 2 (n = 17)—based on survey responses from the entire cohort were interviewed at regular intervals for five or more times over their first five or six years on the job, depending on the cohort (see Figure 2).
Principals were interviewed using semi-structured protocols immediately before starting their first school year as principal (Time 1), three months into that school year (Time 2), at the end of their first year on the job (Time 3), at the end of their second year on the job (Time 4), and, depending on the cohort, at the end of their fifth or sixth year on the job (Time 5). Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and was transcribed. Both inductive and deductive approaches were used to analyze the data using NVivo 8.
REFERENCES


James P. Spillane is the Spencer T. and Ann W. Olin Professor in Learning and Organizational Change at the School of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern University. He is also professor of Human Development and Social Policy, professor of Learning Sciences, professor (by courtesy) of Management and Organizations, and faculty associate at Northwestern’s Institute for Policy Research. Spillane has published extensively on issues of education policy, policy implementation, school reform, and school leadership. His work explores the policy implementation process at the state, district, school, and classroom levels, focusing on intergovernmental and policy–practice relations. He also studies organizational leadership and change, conceptualizing organizational leadership as a distributed practice.

Spillane’s recent projects include studies of relations between organizational infrastructure and instructional advice seeking in schools and the socialization of new school principals. His work has been supported by the National Science Foundation, Institute of Education Sciences, Spencer Foundation, Sherwood Foundation, and Carnegie Corporation of New York. He has authored several books, including Standards Deviation: How Local Schools Misunderstand Policy (Harvard University Press, 2004), Distributed Leadership (Jossey-Bass, 2006), Distributed Leadership in Practice (Teachers College Press, 2011), and Diagnosis and Design for School Improvement (Teachers College Press,
2011), and has contributed numerous journal articles and book chapters. In 2013, he was awarded the Ver Steeg Research Fellowship at Northwestern University and was also elected to the National Academy of Education.

**Rebecca Lowenhaupt** is an associate professor of Educational and Higher Leadership at Boston College’s Lynch School of Education and Human Development. She studies the role that school principals—and other school and district leaders—play in supporting culturally diverse students. Drawing on multiple methods of empirical research, including survey methods, social network analysis, and qualitative analysis, her work investigates educational leadership and policy in the context of immigration, with a focus on new immigrant destinations. At Boston College, she teaches aspiring school and district leaders about teacher supervision, organizational theory, and research methods.

A former middle school English teacher, she received her bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Harvard University and earned her doctoral degree from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Lowenhaupt has received funding for her work from the Spencer Foundation, W. T. Grant Foundation, and National Science Foundation. She serves as an associate editor for the journal *Educational Policy* and has contributed to numerous scholarly articles and book chapters. You may contact her at rebecca.lowenhaupt@bc.edu and follow her on Twitter @RLowenhaupt.
Related ASCD Resources: The Principalship

At the time of publication, the following resources were available (ASCD stock numbers in parentheses):

**PD Online® Courses**
Leadership: Effective Critical Skills (#PD09OC08M)
What Works in Schools: School Leadership in Action, 2nd ed. (#PD11OC119M)

**Print Products**
The Aspiring Principal 50: Critical Questions for New and Future School Leaders by Baruti K. Kafele (#112023)
Improving Student Learning One Principal at a Time by Jane E. Pollock and Sharon M. Ford (#109006)
Leading in Sync: Teacher Leaders and Principals Working Together for Student Learning by Jill Harrison Berg (#118021)
Never Underestimate Your Teachers: Instructional Leadership for Excellence in Every Classroom by Robyn R. Jackson (#110028)
The Principal Influence: A Framework for Developing Leadership Capacity in Principals by Pete Hall, Deborah Childs-Bowen, Ann Cunningham-Morris, Phyllis Pajardo, and Alisa Simeral (#116026)
Qualities of Effective Principals by James H. Strong, Holly B. Richard, and Nancy Catano (#108003)
You’re the Principal! Now What? Strategies and Solutions for New School Leaders by Jen Schwanke (#117003)

For up-to-date information about ASCD resources, go to www.ascd.org. You can search the complete archives of Educational Leadership at www.ascd.org/el.

For more information, send an e-mail to member@ascd.org; call 1-800-933-2723 or 703-578-9600; send a fax to 703-575-5400; or write to Information Services, ASCD, 1703 N. Beauregard St., Alexandria, VA 22311-1714 USA.