

**Educating Amidst Uncertainty: The Organizational Supports Teachers Need to Serve  
Students in High-poverty, Urban Schools**

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## **Abstract**

### *Purpose*

We examine how uncertainty, both about students and the context in which they are taught, remains a persistent condition of teachers' work in high-poverty, urban schools. We describe six schools' organizational responses to these uncertainties, analyze how these responses reflect more open- versus closed-system approaches, and examine how this orientation affects teachers' work.

### *Research Methods*

We draw on interviews with a diverse set of 95 teachers and administrators across a purposive sample of six high-poverty, urban schools in one district. We analyzed these interviews by drafting thematic summaries, coding interview transcripts, creating data-analytic matrices, and writing analytic memos.

### *Findings*

We find that students introduced considerable uncertainty into teachers' work. Although most teachers we spoke with embraced the challenges of their work and the expanded responsibilities that it entailed, they recognized that their individual efforts were not sufficient to succeed. Teachers consistently spoke about the need for organizational responses that addressed the environmental uncertainty of working with students from low-income families whose experience in school often has been unsuccessful. We describe four types of organizational responses — coordinated instructional supports, systems to promote order and discipline, socio-emotional supports for students, and efforts to engage parents — and illustrate how these responses affected teachers' ability to manage the uncertainty introduced by their environment.

### *Conclusions*

Traditional public schools are open systems, and require systematic organizational responses to address the uncertainty introduced by their environments. Uncoordinated individual efforts alone are not sufficient to meet the needs of students in high-poverty urban communities.

Keywords: teachers, school working conditions, urban, order & discipline, parental engagement

## **Educating Amidst Uncertainty: The Organizational Supports Teachers Need to Serve Students in High-poverty, Urban Schools**

Teachers depend on their students for success and satisfaction in their work. From Waller (1932) to Lortie (1975) to Goodlad (1984) to Johnson et al. (2004), researchers repeatedly find that teachers are motivated by the chance to educate students, both academically and personally. In his classic 1975 analysis of teachers' work, Dan Lortie describes the "psychic" rewards that sustain teachers, explaining why the prospect of receiving extrinsic rewards, such as public recognition or financial bonuses, can never fully substitute for convincing evidence that teachers have contributed to their students' learning and growth.

Although students are the source of teachers' intrinsic rewards, they also introduce considerable uncertainty into their work. Unlike the predictable raw materials of the industrial assembly line, students range widely in interests, abilities, backgrounds, acquired skills, learning needs, attitudes, and effort. Therefore, within any class, a teacher constantly is encouraging, diagnosing, promoting, and managing the engagement and progress of some 20 to 30 students, whose behavior and responses are, at best, only partially predictable. As Lortie sagely observed nearly forty years ago, "Uncertainty is the lot of those who teach."

Teaching in high-poverty, urban schools today is, if anything, more uncertain work than it was over three decades ago when Lortie interviewed and surveyed teachers. On the whole, teachers continue to report that they have the same high aspirations and deep commitment to their students (Drury & Baer, 2011), but the realities of their students' needs and the challenges of working in public education today deepen the uncertainty that teachers have long experienced. Although teachers in any community face uncertainty in the classroom (Bruni, 2015), those working in high-poverty, urban schools teach many students who bring not only their own

academic needs, but also the social consequences of living in poverty, facing racial and ethnic discrimination, and coping with the day-to-day stress of moving through dangerous neighborhoods to and from school (Rothstein, 2004; Berliner, 2009; Yoshikawa, Aber, & Beardslee, 2012). At the same time, federal and state accountability policies call for all sub-groups of students to steadily improve their performance on standardized tests. Thus, in these schools, the inevitable uncertainty of teaching is compounded by the economic and social realities of urban students' lives as well as accountability policies that track and report their performance.

How—and how well—teachers deal with this intensified uncertainty of working in high-poverty schools is both a personal and an organizational matter. We know that individual teachers seek a “sense of success” in their work with students. Those who do not realize this fundamental intrinsic reward may well leave their current assignment, either for another school or for another career offering greater assurance that hard work pays off (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). This turnover among teachers is costly for schools and districts (Barnes, Crowe, & Schaefer, 2007; Birkeland & Curtis, 2006; Milanowski & Odden, 2007) and has long-term, negative consequences for students, especially those who live in low-income communities (Ronfeldt et al., 2013). Although some have concluded that teachers leave high-poverty, high-minority schools because they seek to work in whiter, wealthier communities, a growing body of research reveals that measures of the work context contribute much more to teachers' satisfaction and career decisions than do their students' characteristics (Ladd, 2011; Kraft & Papay, 2012; Simon & Johnson, 2015). This research suggests that schools can support teachers with appropriate, deliberate, and coherent approaches to the uncertainties of teaching in urban environments. Those schools that do so are far more likely to attract effective teachers, develop

their practice over time, and build expertise across classrooms, thus ensuring that all students routinely benefit from skilled and committed teachers

How school leaders respond to these complex challenges depends, in part, on how they envision their schools interacting with this dynamic and unpredictable environment. That is, do they regard their school as an organization that is (or should be) closed and managed without concessions to the external environment? Those who do may focus their attention exclusively on what happens within the school—instruction, assessment, and behavioral expectations that bring immediate rewards and punishments—without being distracted by the personal challenges students face or diverted by efforts to compensate for them. This stance would be consistent with a closed-system approach to schooling. Or do administrators see their schools as open systems that are permeable and inevitably interact with the local context of families, neighborhoods, and communities? Those who approach their work with an open-systems perspective are likely to believe that students who face unusual challenges or who have failed repeatedly will need additional academic supports to catch up, interventions by professionals to address their psychological and social difficulties, and ongoing efforts to develop working relationships with their parents and community organizations that might further aid those students' development. Few schools operate simply as if they are either a closed or open system. However, a school's orientation to its environment determines a great deal about how well urban teachers in high-poverty schools manage the uncertainty of their work.

In this article, we examine how uncertainty, both about students and the context in which they are taught, remains a persistent and challenging condition of teachers' work in high-poverty, urban schools. Based on intensive interviews with 95 teachers and administrators in six high-poverty, high-minority schools of one large urban district, we consider these schools' orientation

to their environment—that is, whether a school functions primarily as a closed or open system—and we examine how that orientation affects teachers’ work.

In the following sections, we review the theory and research about organizations that frame this inquiry, describe our research methods and present our findings. We begin by reporting on teachers’ views of their students and on the expanded role that their job demands of them, particularly given the uncertainties those students introduce in the context of school accountability. We then analyze the organizational supports that teachers say they need in order to succeed with their students and the degree to which these supports were available to teachers across schools. We consider four types of organizational responses that the schools we studied adopted to address the uncertainty inherent in their teachers’ work with students—instructional supports, systems for order and discipline, socio-emotional supports for students, and strategies for parent engagement—and we illustrate some of the tensions that teachers and administrators managed as they implemented and relied on those supports. We conclude by discussing the implications of this study for practice, policy, and future research.

## **Theoretical Framework and Prior Research**

### **Open Systems and their Environments**

Debate about whether organizations operate as open or closed systems has a long history of research that began in the 1950s with studies of industry (Woodward, 1958; Burns & Stalker, 1961; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967). In their review of that work, Scott and Davis (2007) explain that some factories and businesses seek to function as “rational” systems, excluding outside influences that might disrupt their operating practices or corrupt their management principles. Proponents of rational systems either disregard the effects of the environment in which their organization functions or view the organizational environment as “alien and hostile”—something

to be kept out rather than brought in (p. 106). In response to outside intrusions, organizations that deliberately seek to function as rational systems try to “seal off” or “buffer” their “technical core from the effects of environmental uncertainty” (Scott & Davis, 2007, p. 106).

The boundary between an organization and its environment is far less distinct than many assume. In their classic study of the plastics industry, Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) define the components of an organization’s environment very broadly to include “all those significant elements outside the organization that influence its ability to survive and achieve its ends. . . . [The environment] includes the clients, constituents, or customers that the organization serves and the providers of resources it requires to do so” (p. 19-20). Based on that research and more recent studies, Scott and Davis conclude that “organizations are not closed systems, sealed off from their environments, but are open to and dependent on flows of personnel, information, and resources from outside. From an open systems perspective, environments shape, support, and infiltrate organizations” (p. 31).

Over time, this line of analysis has led to a much better understanding of environmental factors and how they affect an organization’s work. In the context of public education, many elements comprise a school’s environment, including policies, parents, curricula, textbooks, and neighborhoods. But it is students—the school’s primary clients—who remain the most important and often the least predictable element of the organization’s environment. In an effort to make teachers’ work more predictable and students’ success more certain, some schools try to regulate their environment and “buffer” their instructional core, for example, by admitting only students (and their parents) who conform to certain standards or expectations. However, most high-poverty public schools must admit and serve all students and, thus, they remain highly permeable organizations influenced by the environmental contexts that shape students’ experiences outside

of school.

## **Methods**

This study is based on intensive interviews with 83 teachers and 12 administrators working in six high-poverty schools in one large, urban school district. It builds on earlier quantitative work in which we examined the importance of a teacher’s work environment—particularly the social factors, such as colleagues, principals, and school culture—in schools across Massachusetts (Johnson, Kraft & Papay, 2012). Below, we describe our approach to sample selection, interviews, and data analysis.

### **Sample Selection**

Our selection of schools was guided by two key principles. First, we identified high poverty schools as those that fell above the district median in the proportion of students who qualified for federal free and reduced-price lunch. Second, from among this group of schools, we identified ones that varied in the level of student achievement and growth, as well as teachers’ satisfaction with their work environment. We describe this selection process in detail in Appendix A. Within this broader framework, we also attempted to select schools that varied on a range of other measures, including grade-level structure, student demographics, and the principal’s race, gender, and experience. In other words, we wanted to include schools that represented the broad range of high-poverty schools in the district.

Our final sample included six schools: two K–5 elementary schools, one K-8 school, one middle school, and two high schools. We present basic information about these schools using data from the 2010/2011 school year in Table 1.1. All schools served large proportions of low-income students relative to other schools in the district and would be labeled “high-poverty” schools according to the Institute of Education Sciences’ criterion (>75% low-income). The



schools also enrolled large proportions of minority students (>90%), although the specific demographic composition of schools varied considerably. Median student growth percentiles across the schools ranged from as low as the 20th and 35th percentiles in mathematics and English language arts to as high as the 65th and 60th percentiles respectively, but they were generally clustered around the 50th percentile.

### **Interviews with Teachers and Administrators**

In each school, we first conducted a two-hour semi-structured interview with the principal in order to understand the general organization and features of the school as well as the principal's vision of school leadership. We then interviewed a wide range of teachers and other school-level administrators. Each semi-structured interview included questions about teachers' experiences with hiring, instruction, evaluation, discipline, the administration, and other factors of the school environment (see Appendix B for a sample protocol). Most interviews lasted 30 to 60 minutes. We solicited teachers' participation in a variety of ways, including principals' and teachers' recommendations, written requests to school email lists, flyers in teachers' mailboxes, and personal networking. We also relied on the teachers we interviewed to suggest others in their building who might have divergent views. We interviewed ten or more teachers in each school.

We sought to interview a broadly representative sample of teachers within each school in order to capture the full range of experiences and opinions of the staff. We present descriptive statistics on the experience, race, and gender of the teachers and administrators in our sample in Table 2. In each school, we were able to interview new teachers, mid-career teachers, and veteran teachers, teachers in different grades and subjects, teachers who had been hired new to the school and those who had transferred in from other schools in the district, and teachers with differing perspectives about their school. The race of teachers and administrators in our sample,

based on self-reports, was broadly representative of the schools and the district as a whole – 59% were white, 20% were African-American, 10% were Hispanic, 8% were Asian, and 3% were of mixed or other race.

Although we successfully captured a range of views that provide a nuanced description of each school's work environment, our purposive sampling of teachers and schools precludes us from generalizing about all teachers in the school, the district, or beyond. We learned about teachers' self-reported success with students and their career intentions. We have information about teachers' career decisions up to the point of the study and, therefore, report on this sample of teachers who had chosen to remain in teaching and in these schools. Our design did not allow us to capture the full range of views among all teachers who had ever taught in these schools.

### **Data Analysis**

As a first step in the data analysis, we wrote thematic summaries (Maxwell, 2005) of the interviews we conducted in each school, identifying the main themes and ideas that emerged at the school level. These summaries enabled us to examine broad similarities and differences across the schools. We then coded each transcribed interview according to key categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) using the qualitative software program, ATLAS-TI. Developing codes was an iterative process in which we first identified key themes from our review of the literature and then added additional codes that emerged during the data collection process.

After coding all interviews, we engaged in a collaborative analytic process. We began by developing matrices for data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1984) to explore emerging concepts and categories in the data. Next, we summarized preliminary findings by site and across sites in analytic memos, highlighting key themes that emerged from the coded transcripts and analytic matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Throughout the process, we returned to the data frequently

to reread full transcripts and crosscheck our preliminary findings with the interview data. We also searched for potential disconfirming evidence or rival explanations for our key findings in order to assess the validity of our analyses.

## **Findings**

### **Students Brought Considerable Uncertainty into the School**

Like their counterparts in comparable schools, the teachers we interviewed in these high-poverty, high minority urban schools typically taught classes with large percentages of English language learners, students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and students who were several grade levels behind academically, often as a result of disrupted learning experiences in dysfunctional schools. Many were eager to teach what one teacher called “complex and exciting material,” but often they reported that students’ poor academic background and weak study skills made that difficult or impossible. However, most teachers emphasized other challenges as well, such as students’ tardiness or truancy or the effects of persistent poverty and neighborhood violence on their students’ ability to concentrate and persist in school.

Teachers’ perceptions of the role that families and neighborhoods play in shaping their students’ educational outcomes were consistent with a long history of education research. Almost a half-century after the release of the Coleman Report (1966), studies of educational opportunity in the U.S. find that a strong relationship between family background and student outcomes still persists (Duncan & Murnane, 2011). The teachers we interviewed described how they saw inequality and poverty affecting their students. For example, one told of students in her school, “who don’t have enough to eat, who don’t have medical facilities that they go to, kids who have toothaches, kids who need glasses.” Another said that students come to school with lots of “baggage” because of past deprivation. A third described her students as “wonderful kids,

who need a lot of services.”

Teachers spoke of the violence some of their students experienced or witnessed and the toll it took. One elementary teacher explained: “A lot of the children are traumatized. And they’re going back to homes [where] there are shootings. And I’m not saying all of them but, you know, a large chunk of these children. And this is probably the only safe haven that they have.” Another said, “It’s kind of tough to feel like you’re trying to get someone to focus on getting their grade from a D to a C or a B, when their real focus is eating or something going on in their house.”

A few teachers held parents responsible. One observed, “the kids are not well cared for either, which is concerning. So, [they] don’t have the best parents.” However, most teachers described the situations their students faced with a combination of empathy and pragmatic realism. An elementary school teacher reasoned:

You can’t penalize the child because the parent is working all [hours], working to 5:00 [and] getting another job. I mean the parents are trying to survive; that’s all they can do; that’s it; and these are not jobs that give you time to be making phone calls on the side and checking up on your [child’s] work. These are the hard jobs, cleaning and hospital work and aid work and home healthcare work and very difficult work with very low pay. It’s primarily single mothers.

Nonetheless, teachers repeatedly spoke about the parent’s role in students’ success or failure.

Finally, some teachers mentioned the undertow of past failures on students’ academic self-esteem. One recalled:

It kind of killed me when I heard this, but one of the students started telling me, “Don’t expect us to know this stuff.” The hardest part is that the kids don’t see their own potential and they don’t think that they, themselves, are worthy of the same education. So pushing them that extra step is even harder, because they don’t think it’s worth it. So I think there’s a lot of outside pressure that we have to deal with and it’s ingrained in their heads somehow.

Therefore, by their accounts, teachers in these high-poverty schools were contending with the

effects on their students of poverty, unequal opportunities, unsuccessful educational experiences, and limited services and support in their communities. Unlike teachers in wealthier schools, they could not count on the large majority of their students being academically prepared, well-fed, or socially secure. They described those challenges as reaching into their classrooms and they looked to their school for organizational approaches that would help them deal with them successfully.

### **Teachers Valued Working with Students in High-poverty, Urban Schools**

Although the teachers spoke of the challenges that their students brought into their classrooms, many said that it was those very challenges that had drawn them to their school and kept them there. For example, a high school special education teacher recalled that in looking for a job, he had “toured a lot of really fancy programs for kids with disabilities.” However, these plentiful resources made him realize that he “wanted to be somewhere where maybe kids weren’t getting the support they needed.” Some teachers we interviewed had transferred from wealthier communities where students’ success was far more likely. One elementary teacher explained that she had felt “very jaded by the rich population that I was working with . . . . I felt like whether or not I was in [that district], the students there would get what they needed.” Other teachers spoke of wanting to give back to the communities where they had grown up, arguing that they owed it to their students to stay and do their best. One such high school teacher explained that he might have chosen a very “different path” in his own life had he not been fortunate enough to have “mentors as a teenager or even before becoming a teenager [who] influenced my life.”

Many teachers working in these high-poverty, urban schools described the close bonds that developed between them and their students. One high school teacher’s comments echoed those of many we interviewed, “I love the kids I work with, and that’s what keeps me coming

back.” Time and again, when we asked teachers why they stayed in these schools, they responded, “the kids.”

### **Challenges Required an Expanded Role that was More Rewarding and More Demanding**

Many teachers described how they had to play a large role in students’ lives, a role that went well beyond that of instructor. An elementary school teacher who felt responsible for the academic and socio-emotional development of his students likened himself to a “one man band.” A high school teacher called her job “all encompassing. . . . You aren’t just a teacher.” Another high school teacher explained, “It’s kind of like what we do is therapy and teaching subjects.” He found that he first had to address the socio-emotional needs of disaffected students and connect them with the appropriate support services before he could help them succeed academically. A third high school teacher said he would be “really unfulfilled” if his “only goal was to get through this physics material or get through these ten books.” He said he was in his school for “two reasons. One is to teach math, and then one is to teach, whether it’s explicitly or by example. . . how to be in the world. . . . And I kind of enjoy that.”

Teachers frequently spoke about the satisfaction they gained from helping students succeed academically despite the challenges they faced. One teacher explained how surmounting greater challenges often led to greater rewards:

One of the things I like most about them is also the most frustrating. . . .They have so much potential and you can see it in them, but then they also shut down so quickly. So I really like just getting through at least to one or two kids, and you can see a change and you’re just like “Yes! Yes! Success!”

The importance of achieving this “sense of success” is not unique to teachers in high-poverty contexts (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003), but these teachers in high-poverty schools seemed to experience the rewards of success even more intensely because of the challenges their students and they had to overcome.

## **What Helped Teachers Address the Uncertainty of Working in High Poverty Urban Schools?**

It became clear in our study that individual teachers could not single-handedly manage the day-to-day challenges they faced in working with their students who lived in high-poverty communities. These were organizational problems that called for organizational responses. However, the schools we studied differed markedly in how they viewed and engaged with the school's environment and whether they deliberately supported teachers in responding to it.

Several principals seemed inclined to view their school as more of an open than a closed system; they recognized the academic and social needs of students and developed school-wide practices to respond to them, thus supporting teachers' work. Administrators in other schools did not deny the role that the environment played in their school, but to varying degrees responded to it as a problematic intrusion that should be discounted, minimized or buffered, rather than faced incorporated and addressed. Although they did not consider their school to be a closed system, they did act as if it were possible to hold problematic sources of uncertainty at bay, thus reinforcing the school against intrusions by elements of its environment. Within a school, administrators did not necessarily approach all aspects of their work with the same orientation.

We can best illustrate how schools responded to the uncertainty that students introduced with brief case examples, focusing on four areas of common concern to teachers: instructional supports to meet students' diverse learning needs; steps to create disciplined and orderly environments for teaching and learning; social and psychological resources to develop students' personal strength and skills; and strategies to promote parental engagement. Principals and other school leaders contributed substantially to the variation in these practices across schools. As we and others have reported, principals initiate and facilitate successful implementation of reforms

(e.g., Johnson et al., 2014; Scherer & Spillane, 2010). For example, in a related analysis drawing on data from this study, we conclude that school initiatives were more successful when principals took an inclusive approach to the school's teachers by drawing on their ideas and expertise in developing reforms, than when they took an instrumental approach to their contributions, expecting teachers to routinely adopt and implement practices the principal deemed to be effective (Johnson et al., 2014).

Here, we focus not on how these reforms developed, but on how they affected practice. These examples illustrate different approaches across the six schools as well as teachers' views about whether their school's stance and responses inhibited or supported their success with students.

**Instructional supports.** Teachers identified many instructional uncertainties in their work and described a variety of organizational strategies that their schools took in an effort to support their instruction. Because the lowest performing schools faced the possibility of closure under the state's accountability system, most teachers recognized the importance of coordinating instruction with their colleagues. Teachers suggested that they could not be certain that their current students had covered necessary content or mastered foundational skills because some of their peers had not taught them in earlier grades. Given the norms of privacy and autonomy as well as the segmented structure of most schools (Lortie, 1975), even veteran colleagues who had taught side by side for many years might not know what a peer was teaching in the next classroom.

Often, coordinating instruction among teachers involved introducing common standards, curricula, and practices across all classes within grade levels or subject areas. In these cases, teachers were expected to relinquish some of their autonomy in exchange for greater



predictability in students' preparation and progress. Having a common curriculum allowed schools to ensure that all students would cover required content in a planned sequence that aligned with the demands of state standards and tests. Schools could take either a closed or open systems approach to aligning curriculum and pedagogy across classes and grades. The former would mandate a fixed curriculum and pacing guide that remained constant, despite the varied knowledge, skills, and experiences of either students or teachers. However, a more flexible approach—consistent with an open systems perspective—would encourage teachers to work together in elaborating a curriculum or differentiating instruction in response to their own expertise and the learning needs of the school's students. However, because teachers worked together to implement their curriculum, parents could be assured that their children would have similar—though not identical—academic experiences, whoever their teachers might be.

In most schools, special education teachers followed a “push-in” rather than a “pull-out” model of providing services, not only giving individualized help to students, but also doubling the number of teachers in the classroom who could respond to a wider range of students' particular needs. Schools also provided instructionally focused professional development for teachers and, in some cases, individualized coaching for new teachers as they developed skills in classroom management and instruction. Finally, all schools had dedicated time each week when teachers met with teams of colleagues from their grade-level, subject, or cluster. Several examples illustrate how these initiatives provided teachers with instructional structures, routines, and supports to manage the wide range of academic proficiency among students in their classes.

**A common curriculum at Angelou Elementary School.** The year before we conducted this study, state officials had sanctioned Angelou Elementary School for poor student performance and required the school to prepare an improvement plan that would be subsidized

with additional state funds. In response, a school-level planning team of administrators and teachers decided that all teachers should use the district-sponsored curricula in mathematics and literacy, rather than the wide variety of curricula in use at the time. Standardizing the curriculum that teachers could choose allowed Angelou to ensure that all students studied similar topics in a common sequence and that all teachers could benefit from the professional development offered by district specialists. Recognizing that teachers would need time and support to learn how to use the new materials, Angelou committed additional state funding to professional development in grade-level team meetings.

When we visited, Angelou was in its first year of using the new curricula and most teachers found the sequence of units well-designed, but challenging to teach. According to a special education teacher who co-taught in a number of classes, most teachers had adopted the curricula and were relying on their grade-level colleagues as partners in implementation. Kindergarten teachers collaborated closely as they created learning centers for their students. One noted the importance of grade-level planning time to help them with “consistency” and “staying on the same page.” Upper-grade teachers reported using common planning time to compare their approaches and progress on various topics. A fourth-grade teacher explained, “Most of us are at similar points in the curriculum, so ‘Oh, today I taught lesson 4.5, did you?’ Or ‘How did that go for you when you taught that?’” Realizing that their school’s future might depend on it, teachers and administrators counted on the new curricula and team time to support them in responding to students, many of whom entered with skills that were well below grade level.

**Instructional teams at Giovanni Elementary and Stowe Middle Schools.** All teachers in our study participated in at least one type of weekly instructional team with their peers.

Teachers repeatedly said that there was value—or potential value—in such organized collegial support and that when teams were implemented effectively, they provided opportunities for teachers to collaborate and seek advice about how best to meet the complex needs of their students. However, when teams were not organized thoughtfully or supported effectively, teachers criticized them as a waste of precious time or an affront to their professional judgment. The attitude of the principal and the approach to implementation made all the difference.

For example, at Giovanni Elementary School, teachers consistently affirmed the value of their grade-level instructional teams to establish school-wide standards in literacy and mathematics, plan a sequence of instructional topics and develop a calendar for when each topic should be taught. Giovanni teachers also used team time to compare students' work on similar lessons and to teach and receive feedback on sample lessons. The principal was a frequent and active participant in grade-level literacy meetings, often leading and coordinating the teachers' work. One fifth-grade teacher described her team's activities:

Our common planning times are pretty helpful. We're doing professional development right now on reading comprehension strategies, so we've been using that time to watch these videos and kind of plan lessons together and then. . . we've been teaching sample lessons and the principal's there and we all kind of give each other feedback. It's just teach a lesson, get like six kids. . . and teach a small group lesson. And then we'll talk about what strategies we used, what we could do to improve it.

Whereas teachers at Giovanni valued their teams, teachers at Stowe Middle School had little positive to say about theirs. Administrators or outside consultants usually directed team meetings, during which teachers were required to follow preset protocols and keep records about how they used the time. Stowe's teachers repeatedly said that required team meetings and mandatory activities interrupted rather than advanced collegial work. They did not think these activities helped them to improve their own teaching or to serve their students better. A language arts teacher said, "I feel like we are called into meetings to do a certain task that

sometimes can seem disjointed or unrelated to what I'm going through during the day.” Another teacher said,

There are a lot of products that are expected. So, like each meeting we have to have some sort of outcome, and just by the nature of our meetings, we don't finish it, and then you are finishing it up later, and then you are like trying to get all this stuff done, and it just kind of piles up.

Because these teams were seen as introducing burdens without encouraging teachers to develop or tailor strategies for their students, teachers dismissed them as an annoying waste of time.

As these examples illustrate, teachers reported that they and their students benefited when their principal or another administrator recognized that their school functioned as an open system in a complex, dynamic environment. Instructional supports aimed at enhancing teachers' practice through individualized feedback, common planning time, and productive instructional teams helped teachers to meet the varied needs of their students and the external demands of accountability. However, the value of these initiatives depended largely on how they were designed and implemented. When teachers played a role in determining how these supports would be used, they expressed greater confidence about being able to succeed with students amidst the uncertainty introduced by life in high-poverty, urban communities. As Stowe teachers saw it, when administrators imposed an invariable template to specify and standardize their collegial interactions and instructional approaches, the intended “supports” did more harm than good. Despite the best intentions of principals at both schools, teachers found success in the more open-systems approach at Giovanni, while a closed-system approach used by Stowe fell far short of what they and their students needed.

**Orderly and disciplined environments for teaching and learning.** Teachers commonly emphasized the important role that an orderly and disciplined school culture could play in helping students make a successful transition from stressful, often unpredictable, experiences

outside the school to a stable learning environment within it. When well-designed discipline policies were implemented collectively and consistently by administrators and teachers across the school, teachers reported being able to focus on instruction and to manage behavioral problems effectively when they arose. However, when school-wide discipline initiatives were poorly conceived, or when rules were enforced rigidly or impersonally—as beliefs about closed systems would dictate—teachers expressed great frustration with their effects on students and the disorder, even chaos, that could disrupt their classes. Teachers who had taught in several schools observed that, although students were quite similar across high-poverty schools, student behavior varied considerably. The examples of Whitman Academy and Thoreau High School illustrate such a contrast.

***Whitman’s comprehensive approach to creating a welcoming, safe and orderly school.***

Teachers at Whitman Academy, a district-sponsored charter high school that enrolled low-income minority students through a lottery admissions process, reported that the systems in place had created a safe and orderly school environment within the school. The teachers we interviewed described how students often enrolled in the school several years below grade level and faced challenges in their lives that potentially interfered with their school work.

Nevertheless, teachers at Whitman seldom said that student behavior detracted from the learning environment. As one teacher explained, “I guess the students at this school are pretty calm compared to other schools I’ve been in. And both of the other schools were urban schools. The administration helps a lot with that – with being consistent.” Teachers could count on administrators and their peers to uphold the school’s norms and to enforce rules that teachers viewed as important. Another teacher explained, “Kids realize now that there are consistent policies and so that’s what keeps it a more calm environment.”

However, teachers did not describe a regimented, impersonal discipline system. Instead, Whitman’s administrators used various formal and informal approaches to identify students who were behaving inappropriately when they arrived at school. As in most high schools in the district, students entered the building through a metal detector each morning. But as one teacher explained, Whitman personalized this daily routine in a way that enhanced relationships and helped to create a caring school culture.

We have three staff members at the door every day, and not just to make sure they’re not bringing guns to school. It’s to check—doing the little 10-second assessment, and be like, “This kid doesn’t look like he’s ready to be in school today. Well let me talk to this kid.” Just that little bit: “Hey how’s it going man? I talked to your mom last night.” ... Just that little, those 5-second, 10-second, 30-second conversations, I think, make a huge difference.

Whitman’s dean of discipline had recently established a new sequence of consequences for students who skipped class and then failed to stay for detention. Teachers acknowledged that attendance had been a challenge in earlier years, but reported “seeing a big difference” with the Dean’s new policies and consistent follow-up. One observed, “Kids are in class now.” Other systems included a sequence of steps for addressing and resolving conflicts that arose between students and teachers. A teacher explained how discipline was “handled in a way that supports me as a teacher because I am building a relationship with that student.” At the same time, teachers could count on a clear process when they needed back-up:

If I have an issue with a student and I’ve tried talking to the student and that doesn’t work, I will go to [the Dean] and ask that we have a meeting with him and the student to resolve the issue. And if that doesn’t work, then the parent is called. If there’s still no result, then the parent comes in to have a meeting. And then the student may be suspended.

The efforts of administrators to establish and implement policies that supported an orderly, disciplined, and responsive school environment directly affected teachers’ experience at Whitman. Teachers and administrators focused on addressing conflicts and restoring

relationships, while sometimes overlooking smaller infractions of the rules. This was not a closed system “no excuses” school. One teacher, like others, reported that “There are little things that get by, like hats and headphones and things in the hallway,” but few saw this as a problem. Instead, they were grateful, as one explained, that disruptive behavior “never really bleeds into the class” and that the “flare-ups” that do occur are “so few and far between that it’s not enough to make me be frustrated on a daily basis.”

*Thoreau High School’s inconsistent student discipline policies.* Teachers at Thoreau High School, which served a similar high-poverty, high-minority student population, criticized their administrators’ approach to discipline, which set forth school-wide rules that were seldom enforced—a closed system stance that proved impossible to implement. Repeatedly, teachers said that the school’s lack of order and discipline made them less effective in their classes. Although most teachers emphasized that they enjoyed working with their students, several said that they planned to leave for schools that had greater success in promoting orderly student behavior.

For many years, expectations about discipline had been addressed within the school’s five small learning communities (SLCs). Individual teachers were expected to deal with issues as they arose in and around their classes. However, individual teachers were not entirely on their own because they had the support of their SLC colleagues, who shared and reinforced expectations for students. However, a new principal who arrived four years before we conducted our study sought to de-emphasize the role of distinctive SLCs, which she thought created inequities among groups of students, and to establish more consistent expectations and experiences across the school. However, but this change proved hard to achieve, in part because of the strength of the SLCs and the personal attention they could provide students. Part of the

principal's reform was a new student conduct policy with rules posted throughout the school: "No hats, No cell phones, No skipping classes." Some teachers said that their principal was trying to improve the school culture, although many more criticized the focus on these infractions and doubted that enforcing the rules would bring meaningful order to the school. One teacher recalled:

[On the] first day, I walk in and there's kids coming in the door going through the metal detectors, and there's some guy saying "Come here, you" and he goes over the three rules and he says "now you know I'm going to be watching you" and it's like, that's a kid's first experience on the first day of school?

These attempts to keep problematic elements of the environment from entering the school proved to be unsuccessful. Despite the administration's efforts, students widely flouted these rules and congregated noisily in the halls. "Activity in the hallway stinks," one teacher said. "I hate it. I try to avoid the hallway. I can't stand what I see. I can't stand what I hear." Others echoed these sentiments, describing frequent physical fights in the hallways and students' general contempt for teachers who tried to "sweep" the hallways clear of students and send them off to class.

Teachers attributed these problems to the school's lack of cohesive policies, consequences and consistent follow-through by administrators. "Where are the strict guidelines about what you do and how you act in the halls?" wondered one teacher. However, teachers did not all believe that discipline was a shared responsibility beyond their SLC or that enforcing the rules should be a common priority school-wide. Another teacher complained that administrators' only response to students who violated the "no skipping" rule was to walk them back to their class: "There is no incentive for the kids to not do that every day. Like why not come to your English class 40 minutes late every day? I mean the only thing that happens is somebody brings you there late."



Because Thoreau's teachers could not count on order, respect, and discipline throughout the school, they had to deal on their own with the unpredictable disruptions created by some students in their classes. There were no meaningful forums outside the SLCs where they might develop an understanding of shared responsibility for the problem. One teacher described how "most of the teachers deal with things independently," causing them to spend "so much time handling discipline issues." Another said that dealing with discipline kept her from "focusing on preparing really great lessons and helping students." Another concurred: "I'm ready to teach. I'm ready to not worry about discipline." Many teachers we interviewed were frustrated and several talked about transferring to a different school. One spoke for herself and two colleagues: "I know personally that the three of us don't feel supported by the [principal]. I feel like we're not making a difference because the behavior is so bad [that] the teaching is not happening."

The success achieved at Whitman and the struggles teachers faced at Thoreau highlight the central importance of careful coordination and collective implementation of school-wide discipline systems. As the example of Whitman illustrates, a discipline system that is grounded in an open-systems approach is by no means a free-for-all, but requires a thoughtful design and collective efforts to ensure effective implementation. At Thoreau we see how haphazard practices and disruption ensue when fixed rules, typical of a closed system, were imposed on the school without regard to the students, teachers or current organizational structures.

**Socio-emotional and psychological supports for students.** Although teachers were willing to take on an expanded role to serve the socio-emotional and psychological needs that students brought with them to school, they acknowledged that these issues were often more serious than they could handle on their own. Teachers across all the schools we studied spoke about the need for student support services that they, as teachers, were unable or unqualified to

provide. Although all schools offered some such services, they differed in whether supports were ancillary or central to the school's ongoing work. Teachers spoke positively about the attention given to students' needs at Morrison K-8 and Whitman Academy, although the schools used distinctly different approaches.

***Morrison's formal student support team.*** Morrison K-8 was, itself, experiencing uncertainty during the year we collected data. The principal was on medical leave and the director of instruction had left to become the principal of another school, taking several key teachers with her. Amidst these changes, teachers relied on Morrison's Student Support Team (SST), which continued to function effectively thanks to an established formal structure and teachers who valued its work. The SST, which included elementary, middle, and special education teachers as well as administrators, met weekly to discuss the cases of students who had been referred by their teachers because they were struggling "socially or emotionally" as well as "academically [or] behaviorally." This was a deliberate open-systems approach. Parents were invited to attend any meeting where their child's case was discussed, and on occasion teachers even drove to the student's house to talk with parents. Once the team had considered the referral and additional information about the student, members developed a set of recommendations that might include instructional accommodations, behavior logs, and counseling. Parents sometimes were asked to participate in counseling sessions. The SST's response might extend beyond the traditional school bounds to help the parents of struggling students. In one case, a teacher said that the SST worked at "getting a support service in place for the parent at home."

Teachers at Morrison repeatedly described the school's SST and counseling services as necessary and extremely helpful resources for both students and staff. As one teacher explained, students' personal experiences outside the school, which in some instances included living in

abusive homes, foster homes, or homeless shelters, could not be ignored by teachers or the school: “They say you shouldn’t take that into consideration, [that] we need to have high expectations and yes we do. But still that needs to be addressed.” Teachers widely said that support services provided at Morrison established a strong scaffolding that teachers could rely on to help them in addressing the many socio-emotional and psychological needs that students brought with them to school.

*Dedicated administrative positions for student support at Whitman.* In contrast to Morrison’s teacher-driven student support team, the Student Support Department at Whitman Academy included two full-time counselors and a dean of discipline, all dedicated to ensuring that students had access to appropriate psychological and socio-emotional counseling at school. Rather than imagining that their school was a closed system where they could deny or discount the difficulties that students experienced in their lives, Whitman’s teachers and administrators accepted their students’ personal challenges and sought to respond to them constructively. As one teacher explained, the Dean “does a lot more sort of mental health support than you would think . . . which just means a lot of parent meetings, trying to get kids services.” Whitman also dedicated time for all teachers to meet as a team twice each year to discuss every student. For students who were struggling, this served as a case conference that included student support staff. Teachers from several subjects would then work collectively to develop a plan to address the student’s needs. One explained:

We generate a list of students that may be having difficulties with one class and then all the teachers get involved and say, "Oh, this student is also having difficulty in my class." . . . . That way it’s not just you and your classroom dealing with a problem.

Whitman’s approach to student support helped to create a safe environment where students wanted to be and felt supported to learn. One teacher contrasted its effectiveness with

what she had experienced at her former school:

While I was teaching at [my old school], it was very challenging because I was working with a lot of kids that were court-involved, and one day I would have 32 students in my classroom and the next day that number [was] down to 20. And as I tried to get to know the kids better, I'd find that a lot of them are in and out of jail, or in and out of DUIs, or there were many issues that were interfering with their learning. And some of them lost interest in learning anything that I had to present because, well, the next day they had to appear in front of a judge and chances are they were going to be away for a while.

She noted that at Whitman “we have the same group of kids,” but with “the support that is in place ... we give the kids a certain environment that they want to come back to, even though they may have a court date coming up. ... It's a positive environment for them to be, so they keep coming.”

Although the design and implementation of student support programs differed at Whitman and Morrison, both schools took an open-systems approach and proactively engaged with the socio-emotional challenges students faced outside of school. This allowed teachers at both schools to focus on students' academic needs, having secured specialized support when they could not meet students' socio-emotional needs in the classroom. These examples also illustrate how open-system approaches are not one size fits all. Importantly, both schools developed systems that leveraged their strengths and could be implemented effectively in their context.

**Parental engagement.** The schools we studied also sought to address the uncertainty that their students introduced by involving parents in their children's education and thus working to shape a key element of the school's environment. Most teachers we interviewed recognized the important role that parents play in students' academic success. Teachers often suggested that an open-system approach of frequent interactions and stronger home-school relationships could help students recognize the importance of school while informing teachers about how best to address problems that might arise. As one teacher explained:

You really want to make a difference with the kids and with families. I've tried really hard to build a relationship with families because I feel like we all have to work together to help their child. ... I'm [only] with each child so long [during the day]. If I can build a relationship with families, do home visits, through parent/teacher conferences, just through not even formal [interactions], I think it makes a difference when there is a problem.

In every school we studied, teachers and administrators described not only the importance, but also the challenge, of engaging parents. Some parents were said to distrust the schools and to keep their distance because they, themselves, had failed as students or been poorly treated as parents in the past. Most teachers in the schools we studied offered sympathetic explanations for parents' lack of involvement. They spoke of parents working long hours—often at several jobs—and not having the time or transportation to visit the school. One teacher explained, “You know parents are busy and work different jobs.” Another said that they “have no transportation and the school is not in a place where they're right on the [subway line] or on a bus line even. So it's very difficult for them to get here.”

Although teachers across the schools talked about the value of parental engagement, their schools differed markedly in what they did to increase interactions with parents. All six schools attempted to involve parents by inviting them to open houses or providing student grades and other information on-line for them to review. Increasingly, teachers were developing class websites or blogs that informed parents about what was being taught and encouraged parents to track their children's academic progress. However, at several schools, teachers and administrators sent information out to parents but did little to draw them into the school or convey that had invaluable insights into their child's experience that would help their teachers be more effective. As one teacher described, their efforts followed a “push rather than pull model.”

*Direct efforts to involve parents at Giovanni, Angelou, and Thoreau.* Educators at Giovanni Elementary, Angelou Elementary, and Thoreau High School described more deliberate

efforts to reach out to parents than did those in the other three schools. Administrators made active outreach a priority and provided support so that teachers could do their part. Rather than treating parents as outsiders, these schools sought to make the most of their school's being an open system by inviting parents to participate in an ongoing relationship with teachers, administrators, and the school's program.

At Thoreau High School, teachers explained that engaging parents was more difficult in high schools than in elementary schools, because parents tended to give teenagers more leeway in managing their lives and because the district's school choice policies meant that many high-school students traveled long distances to school. Thoreau's teachers emphasized that connecting with high school parents by phone was rarely effective and that school-based events, such as open houses or breakfasts, reliably attracted only the parents of high-performing students. Instead, teachers in several SLCs took more direct action. In an attempt to break down transportation barriers, these SLCs hosted open houses and parent meetings at off-site locations closer to students' neighborhoods. For example, one SLC serving English Language Learners held parent conferences in a church across town, where many of the students lived, and another hosted a portfolio night in a local Boys and Girls Club.

Giovanni and Angelou Elementary Schools regularly hosted events not only to bring parents to school, but also to help them learn how to encourage and help their children with homework. One teacher at Giovanni Elementary described her school's efforts: "A couple of times during the year [we] will have bedtime story night, math night, all different nights, pasta night, and we have a huge [number of parents] showing up." Through these activities, the school could welcome parents and also solicit their help in activities such as checking to see that their children completed their homework.

At Angelou Elementary, teachers described a similar arrangement with other topical “nights,” designed to increase parents’ familiarity with the school and to acquaint them with new academic content. As one teacher explained,

We have a family coordinator who ... is offering classes for parents on how to deal with your social, emotional needs of your child. In the fall she offered a math class where a math teacher came here to help parents work with their child and do their work at home.

She explained that today’s curriculum is very different from the one parents studied in school; helping them become comfortable with the new content and format made them more confident in working with their children.

Angelou took parental engagement even further by introducing a new requirement that teachers conduct home visits for each student twice a year. Some teachers resisted because they felt apprehensive about the neighborhood or uncomfortable going to students’ homes, saying that their time was better spent in the school. The principal, who lived in the community offered to accompany any teacher who felt uncomfortable making the first visit alone. In the end, many teachers said that these home visits were worthwhile because they got to know students and their parents outside of the classroom. As one explained:

It was great to see the kids out of school. They were really excited to hear that I was coming. They were really excited to show me their rooms. And I think some parents that were open to the idea, I think got a lot out of it. I feel really comfortable now. I think they feel comfortable talking to me more now.

These teachers felt that the principal’s support made their outreach to parents easier because he served as a bridge between the community and the school. This work in turn improved their relationships with students. Thus, teachers recognized that their instructional effectiveness improved when the school helped them establish stronger partnerships with parents.

## **Conclusion**

Urban public schools that serve students from impoverished communities operate in dynamic, unpredictable environments that introduce considerable uncertainty for teachers. Many students are well below grade level academically, are affected by the racism, poverty, and violence of their neighborhoods, and have psychological and socio-emotional needs that go well beyond the minimal supports that most schools offer. In addition, these schools often operate under the threat of sanctions, restructuring, or closure due to the low performance of their students on standardized tests. Teachers' experiences are shaped by the intense uncertainty introduced by the students and communities they serve as well as the accountability systems in which their schools operate.

Urban educators recognize the challenges of working with students who bring substantial academic and personal needs with them to school, but schools take different approaches in responding to this environmental uncertainty. Some operate as if they are—or can successfully function as—closed systems that buffer the school and teachers from the effects of the challenging, shifting environment in which they exist. Schools that are permitted to select students, including private, public magnet, and some charter schools, may establish detailed rules of student conduct, institute systems of rewards and penalties to promote compliance, and suspend or dismiss students who fail to conform to expectations. Conventional public schools that try to operate as closed systems may find it impossible to dismiss students who violate their rules, but they can suspend them frequently, tightly control who may enter or leave the building, and focus attention narrowly on classroom instruction.

However, for educators in traditional public schools that are required to enroll all students, ignoring or trying to block out the environment will not likely lead to success with



students who are, themselves, part of that environment. Along with their many strengths and positive contributions to the school, these students also often bring academic shortcomings and personal needs that result from poor schooling, poverty, and discrimination. In the past, ineffective schools could fail to respond to those needs without formal consequence. However, with heightened public attention to measures of school success, including test scores and graduation rates, these schools must succeed with their students or fail as institutions.

We conducted comparative case studies of a diverse sample of six high-poverty, high-minority schools in one large urban district. Based on intensive interviews with 95 teachers and administrators, we learned that students attending these schools introduced many elements of uncertainty into their classrooms and corridors, which presented ongoing challenges for their teachers. Many teachers said that they particularly enjoyed working with this population of students and deliberately choose to stay in these schools. To do so, they needed to conceive of their role very broadly to include both academic and social responsibilities. However, their accounts illustrated that they benefited as educators when they and their school leaders took an open-systems approach to its environment. In fact, as educators in high-poverty, high-minority, urban schools, teachers often fail in their work unless their colleagues and administrators enact organizational approaches that support them in managing the uncertainty introduced by their school's environment, especially its students.

Effective responses necessarily go beyond the scope of any individual teacher—they are organizational in nature. Although school leaders and teachers must take an active role in developing and implementing these responses, they may not succeed or fail on the action of any individual alone (Lugg & Boyd, 1993). Across the schools we studied, teachers described how school-wide supports facilitated (or constrained) their ability to succeed in meeting the

challenges presented by their students. We highlighted four examples of such organizational supports that increased teachers' chances for success: efforts to coordinate instruction across the school so that a student's academic experience would be coherent and teachers could effectively implement the school's curriculum; systems for establishing an orderly, disciplined learning environment throughout the school; specialized support for students with serious emotional or behavioral problems; and efforts to engage parents in shaping students' attitudes, behaviors, and readiness to learn.

Teachers reported that such organizational supports increased opportunities for them to succeed with their students. When school leaders established the conditions for such approaches, they implicitly acknowledged the role that the school's environment plays in teachers' work and equipped teachers to deal with the uncertainty that the environment introduced through their students. The schools we studied varied both in how and how well they assessed and responded to students' strengths and needs. The examples presented in this study illustrate what, from the perspective of teachers and administrators, worked well and what failed or fell short. Overall, open-systems approaches proved to be more realistic and reliable than closed-systems approaches, because they could accommodate and respond to the wide variation in students' knowledge, skills, and personal experiences. The schools' dynamic environments called for administration and teaching that were more responsive than reactive. By contrast, closed-systems beliefs were associated with practices that treated students as if they were all similarly prepared and would respond favorably to rationalized, standardized expectations, however unrealistic those might be. These practices typically met with failure.

### **Implications for Practice, Policy, and Research**

This study extends what is known about high-poverty schools and how they respond

organizationally to the needs of their students, while also providing important lessons for practice, policy, and research. Efforts to introduce health and social services into schools in an effort to support children and youth perceived to be at-risk date back well over a century (Tyack, 1992). In recent decades, these efforts led to school-wide models that were variously known as “community schools”, “full-service schools” and “wraparound services” (Adelman & Taylor, 1996; Dryfoos, 1994). Studies of such programs, such as the Annie E. Casey Foundation's New Futures Initiative, revealed that implementing them is especially challenging (The Center for the Study of Social Policy, 1995). More recent studies of community schools have employed quantitative analyses to describe their implementation and examine their impacts (Adams, 2010; Castrechini, 2012). Calls for a “Broader Bolder Approach” to education reform today echo similar sentiments, arguing that low-income students’ academic experiences cannot be separated from the array of social, health, and economic factors that affect their lives (Rothstein, 2004; Ladd, 2012).<sup>1</sup> Our research complements this prior work by providing in-depth case-studies of how traditional public schools respond to the uncertainty students from low-income communities introduce into the learning environment. Some of those responses are effective, while others are not. By comparing how differences in the design and implementation of these organizational responses affect teachers, we illuminate key lessons for all administrators, teachers, and policymakers who seek to improve students’ opportunities and success in high-poverty, urban schools.

First, the findings suggest clearly that educators cannot serve students well if their schools try to shut out the environment in which those students live. Selective schools may have

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<sup>1</sup> See the Broader Bolder Approach mission statement for a detailed description: [www.epi.org/files/2011/bold\\_approach\\_full\\_statement-3.pdf](http://www.epi.org/files/2011/bold_approach_full_statement-3.pdf)

that option, but traditional public schools do not. Therefore, administrators and teachers would be wise to become active learners and participants in their school's community, seeking to understand its strengths, resources, and needs. At the same time, policymakers can acknowledge the benefits to be gained from linking and funding community services that support public schools in low-income communities.

Second, administrators and teachers should approach their school as an interdependent organization, rather than as a collection of semi-autonomous classrooms, each with a teacher who functions independently. From an open systems perspective, teachers introduce further uncertainty into the school organization, with some being more skilled, experienced and effective than others. Although a few teachers may well succeed on their own, self-reliance is not a strategy for achieving success at scale. Instead, if the school as a whole is to be responsive to students' academic and social strengths and needs, improvement efforts must be systematic rather than piecemeal or accidental. This necessarily involves more than adopting an "open-systems" perspective; it also requires active work by teachers and school leaders working together to decide how best to address students' needs and the uncertainty they bring to public schools. Above all, teachers who may be accustomed to working on their own—exercising their unique strengths and coping with their personal limitations—will need to coordinate what they do on behalf of the students, for those students move through the classes and grades of the school and their success over time depends on the staff working as one. This means that teachers recognize their shortcomings and learn from their peers. This need presents a clear opportunity for teacher leaders, who can take initiative to promote knowledge and best practices across classroom boundaries. Policymakers can reinforce the interdependence of teachers, administrators, and support personnel by introducing into law and regulation opportunities and

incentives that promote collaboration and joint problem-solving, rather than initiatives designed to celebrate individuals who shine—sometimes at the expense of the greater good.

Third, these findings provide strong evidence that effectiveness is not achieved solely by the individual, but also depends on the organization. In other words, the same teacher with the same students might accomplish outcomes in one school setting that would be impossible to achieve in another. Different schools provide different types of supports for teachers and students, which can enhance or constrain a teacher's ability to be effective with a given group of students (see Chang (2012) for further examples). Clearly, formal evaluation can be a useful process for identifying teachers who are struggling, some who deserve more support and others who ought to be dismissed. However, those who design evaluation policies can create instruments that signal the importance of teachers' collegial work by assessing their collaboration and contribution to other adults' learning. They also can ensure that teachers receive the support they need as they learn to work with new and unfamiliar student populations. At the same time, school-site administrators must recognize that their responsibility goes beyond assessing teachers and offering recommendations for improvement. Our findings suggest that principals are pivotal in developing school-wide approaches to discipline, student support, and parental outreach, all of which can promote organizational improvement and success.

Fourth, the success of administrators' and teachers' efforts to engage productively with the uncertainty of their environment through school-wide organizational supports depends largely on how these supports are implemented (Honig, 2006). Recognizing that schools are open systems will not in itself ensure that efforts to support effective teaching for all children succeed. Well-financed efforts to integrate wraparound services can falter without formal collaborative agreements, clear governance structures and relational trust between schools and

community organizations (Carreon, 1993; White & Wehlage, 1995). Poorly designed policies can lead teachers to withdraw their efforts and focus on “satisficing,” (Halverson & Clifford, 2006) as was the case with teacher teams at Stowe and school-wide discipline policies at Thoreau. Policymakers aiming to strengthen organizational supports for teachers must work closely with administrators to attend to the implementation challenges inherent in decentralized organizations such as schools. The examples of the student support teams and parent engagement initiatives in the schools we studied illustrate that effective implementation may look different, but always calls for teachers’ involvement.

Fifth, organizational success can create stability and ensure ongoing development within a school. Substantial research demonstrates that teachers who are not satisfied with their school will decide to leave, either to join the faculty of a more orderly, supportive school or to enter another line of work (Simon & Johnson, 2015). Teachers’ relationships with principals and colleagues along with the quality of their school’s culture influence teachers’ decisions to stay or go. This is largely because these factors profoundly shape whether they can succeed with their students. When teachers leave schools in large numbers, as they often do in high-poverty, high-minority schools, students pay the price. When urban schools engage effectively with their environment and then coordinate teachers’ responsibilities and responses, they can become stable, responsive and productive organizations that retain teachers who are committed to students and their success. In funding schools in low-income communities, policymakers can ensure that districts provide sufficient time for teachers to work together so that they can achieve the success they seek. For their part, administrators can make sure that teachers are able to spend that time addressing the instructional concerns they face together.

Finally, this study leads us to make several recommendations for future research. Very

few in-depth studies exist about the experiences of students and teachers in high-poverty schools. The case studies that are available often focus on the shortcomings of these schools or on the successes of a special teacher, who triumphs despite her school. It is essential that much more research focus on understanding the factors that contribute to the academic success of students in such schools. Given the well-documented challenges that educators in these schools face, researchers should bring to bear an array of methods to study them. Ideally, this would involve using both qualitative and quantitative methods iteratively over time to identify, assess, and understand successful practices, not only in the classroom, but also across the school (e.g. Center for the Study of Social Policy, 1995). This qualitative study grew out an earlier quantitative analysis that we conducted documenting how teachers' responses to a statewide survey about their working conditions relate to their career decisions as well as to student demographics and performance in their schools. The comparative case studies reported here have allowed us to better understand what was actually happening in those schools. As case studies like these identify school-based practices that seem particularly effective, researchers may then conduct experimental or quasi-experimental studies to assess their value and contribution to students' learning. For example, school-based student support teams, used by the Morrison School in this study, seem to be promising mechanisms for identifying the needs of particular students and organizing supports on their behalf. Such an intervention warrants further exploration and analysis.

As we interviewed teachers for this study, we were struck by their commitment to the mission of educating students who live in poverty and have access to few of the resources that are routinely available for students from wealthier communities. The media tend to portray most urban teachers –with the exception of a heroic few—as distant, self-protective, and unresponsive

to students and their needs. Our study did not bear out that stereotype. However, we did hear clearly that committed work by these teachers is intellectually, emotionally, and physically draining. Teachers who could count on their school's administrators and colleagues to support their work with students reported being confident about achieving success both now and in the future. Individual teachers' effectiveness certainly matters, but it is only one of many elements that must be in place and work together coherently on behalf of students. For the reality is that schools are open systems. This is especially apparent in high-poverty, urban schools where students bring much uncertainty into teachers' classes. Serving these students well requires effective teachers, effective leadership, and effective organizations.



Table 1. Selected characteristics of the six sample schools.

School Name	School Level	Principal Name	Enrollment	% Low-Income Students	% Minority Students	Student Growth Percentile: English Language Arts	Student Growth Percentile: Mathematics	Teachers Interviewed	Admin. Interviewed	% of All Teachers Interviewed
Angelou	Elem.	Mr. Andrews	700	90%	95%	35	50	10	1	18%
Giovanni	Elem.	Mr. Gilmore	450	95%	90%	55	60	13	1	29%
Morrison	Elem./ Middle	Ms. Maxwell	400	95%	95%	45	20	14	2	52%
Stowe	Middle	Ms. Sterling	700	90%	95%	45	45	15	3	30%
Thoreau	High	Ms. Thomas	900	80%	95%	50	55	20	2	29%
Whitman Academy	High	Ms. Wheeler	250	85%	95%	60	65	11	3	46%

NOTE: We rounded 2010/11 school data and did not break out specific racial/ethnic groups in order to protect school confidentiality.

Table 2: Selected characteristics of interviewed teachers and administrators

	<b>Teachers</b>	<b>Administrators</b>	<b>Full Sample</b>
Female	78%	58%	76%
White	61%	42%	59%
African American	18%	33%	20%
Hispanic	8%	17%	9%
Asian	10%	0%	8%
Multi-Racial	2%	8%	3%
Experience (years)	12.3	16.6	12.8
0-3 years	14%	8%	14%
4-10 years	46%	33%	44%
11-25 years	25%	42%	27%
25 plus years	14%	17%	15%
n	83	12	95

Note: Experience is defined as total number of years as a classroom teacher and administrator.

## Appendix A

We began by identifying high poverty schools as those that fell above the district median in the proportion of students who qualified for federal free and reduced price lunch using data from the 2007/08 school year. Because the proportion of students who apply for federal lunch subsidies decreases as students age, we stratified by school level and calculated median rates across the district of 80% (elementary schools), 82% (middle schools), and 64% (high schools). We then calculated an average measure of each school's working conditions from a survey developed by Eric Hirsch of the New Teacher Center and administered statewide in 2008 [see Johnson, Kraft and Papay (2012) for more details].

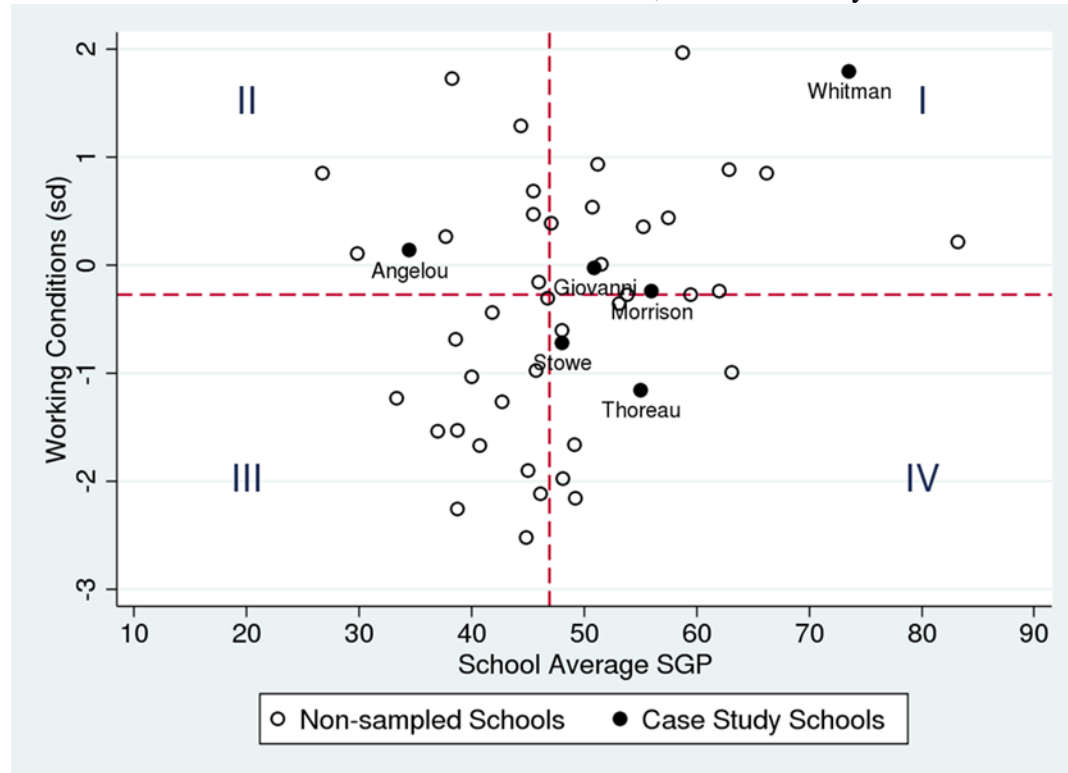
We also examined student achievement, focusing on a measure of student test score growth used by the state, the Student Growth Percentile. We averaged these SGP measures across two academic years, 2007/08 and 2008/09 in both mathematics and English language arts in the figures presented in the appendix. In the top panel of Figure A1, we present a plot of the high-poverty schools in the district, arrayed by their average SGP in mathematics and English language arts (horizontal axis) and their average working conditions measure (vertical axis). For ease of interpretation, we placed horizontal and vertical lines at the median value of working conditions and SGP within our sample of high-poverty schools in the district. These lines divide the sample into four quadrants: high-growth schools with strong work environments (QI), low-growth schools with strong work environments (QII), low-growth schools with weak work environments (QIII), and high-growth schools with weak work environments (QIV).

This analysis informed our selection, as we sought schools in different quadrants and with different values on each of these measures. However, we did not adhere strictly to these data for several reasons. First, our measure of the working conditions in a school was only a

proxy for the current school context given that we initiated this study several years after the survey had been administered. Second, as described in the text, we sought schools that varied on a range of other measures.

Finally, we struggled to include low-performing schools with poor working conditions because the district was closing or reconstituting some of these schools. Several of the schools in Quadrant III had been closed by the time our study began. We attempted to recruit one school in this quadrant, but the principal declined to participate and the school was subsequently closed. All other schools that we recruited agreed to participate in the study.

Figure A1. Average school-level working conditions by school average Student Growth Percentile in all low-income schools in the district, with case study schools identified.



## Appendix B

### Teacher Interview Protocol

**Background:** How long have you been teaching? How long have you been teaching in this district? at this school?

1. **School overview:** Please tell me a bit about your school—how it is organized, the students it serves, whether it has a particular focus—anything that seems important to you.
2. **Teaching assignment:** What grade or subject do you teach?
3. **Overall view of school:** If another teacher would ask you, “What’s it like to teach at \_\_\_\_\_?” How might you respond? What are the advantages and disadvantages of being a teacher here?
4. **Why teach here?:** How did you decide to teach here? Did you choose to teach here? If so, why? What other choices did you have? Do you plan to stay? (If not: Will you stay in teaching? Go to another school? Do something else?) Do other teachers plan to stay?
  - Why do you think teachers want to stay at this school?
  - OR Why do you think teachers don’t want to stay at this school?
  - Does the school have a reputation among teachers?
5. **Principal’s role:** Please describe the role of the principal in your school. (How does he/she use time? Visible to teachers and students? Instructional expertise?) How does the principal help support or drive student achievement? How does the principal/admin support teachers?
6. **School order:** Would you say that this school is an orderly place for teaching and learning? Is there a behavior or discipline program for all students?
7. **Colleagues:** How often do you talk or meet with your colleagues? What do you do?
  - Is there a fixed time for collaboration among teachers? If so, how do you use it? Do the teachers decide how the time is used?
8. **Student Achievement:** What approaches do you and others in the school use to increase student learning and achievement?
  - Does the school monitor individual progress across grades? How formal is this process? Can you give me an example?
  - How is individual student progress monitored (within classes and across school)?

- How often are students tested?
  - Do you think the school's approach works?
9. **Curriculum:** Do you use a standardized curriculum? All subjects? How do you decide what to teach from week to week or day to day?
10. **Governance:** Do teachers have a role in governance at your school? (If a governance team functions, what does it do? Do teachers take that team seriously? Who is appointed and how?)
11. **Hiring and Assignment:** Could you describe how teachers are hired and assigned to classes?
- Who participates in hiring?
  - Does your grade level include a mix of new and veteran teachers?
12. **Support:** What kind of support do new teachers get when they come to the school? What kind of ongoing support is available to you as a teacher? Coaches?
13. **Parents:** In what ways are parents involved with the teachers at your school?
14. **Evaluation:** How is your teaching evaluated? Is it helpful to you?
15. **Union and Contract:** What role does the teachers contract or the union play in your school?
16. **Recommendations for improvement:** What recommendations would you make for improving your school?
17. **More:** Do you have any additional comments?

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