
The Leadership Struggle: The Case of Costen Elementary School

Tim Hallett
INDIANA UNIVERSITY

A long-time principal, beloved by the faculty, retires and is replaced by an administration that, for the most part, maintains the status quo. Then a new principal is hired with an external mandate for change, only to be met with hostility by the faculty while discourse about instruction and its improvement comes to a halt. This scenario casts light on the trials and tribulations of Mrs. Kox as the new principal at Costen Elementary School.

Despite the growing literature that places the principal at the center of instructional leadership (Hallinger & Heck, 1996a, 1996b, 1998; Prestine & Nelson, 2005), the story of Costen Elementary reminds us that leadership does not lie dormant inside of official positions. This point is implicit in the literature on principal succession (Ball, 1987; Miskel & Cosgrove, 1985). Ironically, the infusion of new administrative personnel can promote old inertia instead of transformative directions as people cling passionately to the established practices with which they are familiar (Gouldner, 1954). The challenges of succession illustrate some of the hidden tensions of leadership, and these tensions gain additional clarity when we take a distributed perspective (Gronn, 2002; Spillane et al., 2004): Leadership involves a living, breathing relationship among leaders, followers, and an evolving situation. These relationships do not exist a priori. They have to be created, and it is often a *struggle* to establish them.

The case of Costen Elementary School tells us about what I call the “*ership struggle*,” the hidden, often-ugly relational “underside” of leadership that is glossed over by a myopic focus on success. This struggle can be a painful one, and the story of this struggle at Costen School has four interrelated parts. It is a story about a new principal’s struggle to develop a relationship with the teachers in order to create and forge a new leadership practice. It is a struggle in the era of high-stakes accountability where the principal is caught between district office demands and keeping her close to the very people on whom she depends to meet those demands, happy to embrace the struggle of a principal intent on cracking the cellular classroom structure that characterizes so many schools in an effort to create a structure where classroom practices are deprivatized and more standardized. And, it is the story of the teachers’ response.

To tell this story, I draw on 2 years of ethnographic study inside Costen School. I start by introducing Mrs. Kox, and then I describe how she grapples with the context of the school, a contradictory situation characterized by a new era of accountability and old norms of teacher autonomy. Next, I examine how Mrs. Kox tried to shape this context by emphasizing accountability. Finally, I describe the teachers’ response and how the contextual relations at Costen affected instructional discourse.

MRS. KOX’S PERSONAL STYLE

Perhaps the only thing more daunting than a kindergartener’s first day at school is a new principal’s first day on the job. However, Mrs. Kox is an intrepid soul and a strong woman, and she dove into her new job with conviction and conviction. She knew that change could be hard, and that so many of her efforts would anger incumbent teachers, but she advocated, “If you are willing to take the position, that [anger] comes with the job. It just comes with the job.” She was not afraid of making hard decisions, even in the face of resistance, because as she said, “If I know I’m right, I’m not giving up.” Mrs. Kox recalled how she learned from one of her mentors: “I worked with a new principal when I first became an assistant principal, and she had to overcome a lot of resistance, and I saw how she handled them [teachers]. And she is a very strong person, and she never backed down.” As she reiterated to me many times, “My role is not to be popular. It is to get things done.” Mrs. Kox was determined to stand on her principles, and she refused to participate in different groups. In her own words, she “doesn’t play games” and she is “a rock.”

Mrs. Kox’s principles were shaped by her experiences in principalship training in education (PLTE), a highly selective and prestigious

istrative training program. PLTE is a joint venture between an elite business school and an elite school of education, and it is believed to represent the best in leadership training. As a fellow at PLTE, Mrs. Kox encountered the most recent thinking on school leadership: The principal is an instructional leader who is responsible for setting a vision for instruction and monitoring its practice in the classroom. In good schools, instruction is not a private classroom affair but a public practice that is accessible and open to all.

Mrs. Kox also was shaped by PLTE's business principles. She was impressed by this aspect because "in education, if we don't cross over and learn from the business field, we won't have the effectiveness because business-people have a different orientation to improvement. They have a better sense of urgency." Kox's business-like sense of urgency and focus on the bottom line also happened to fit the educational policy trend in Chicago that emphasized accountability for student improvement.

Mrs. Kox said that she learned about two types of leaders at PLTE: "The leader who has a lot of structure, [and] a 'symbolic someone' who is articulate and has a good P.R. personality." Kox identified with the former and told me, "I don't seek to be popular. I don't seek to be well liked. Hopefully it's a good management style that can move people forward."

These very traits resonated strongly with the Local School Council (LSC)¹ as it went through the process of hiring a new principal. The chair of the LSC, Stan Feierman, described how they had interviewed almost two dozen candidates, but "Mrs. Kox was far and away the best as far as I was personally concerned." Mr. Feierman elaborated:

She had been through PLTE, number one. She was very articulate. She was obviously very committed. . . . I think that the job of principal . . . is much more demanding now than it was 10 years ago when I first started doing this. The dictates that come from the Board of Ed are much more severe, the whole issue of testing being the one and only thing that matters, accountability is very tight all the way around. The only person in the school who's really responsible is the principal, and we needed to know we had someone who could really take the lead.

Based on her training and the pressures of accountability, Mr. Feierman thought Mrs. Kox was the person to "take the lead" because "she's very opinionated and has very high standards" and "she seemed very tenacious, she seemed very intelligent, very well spoken and I guess—she had a lot of energy and a lot of integrity as far as I was concerned." When I asked Jessica Churley (the LSC secretary) what made Mrs. Kox a good candidate, she commented on Mrs. Kox and her assistant principal, Mrs. Milbern: "I think

they're very tough. I think they're very no-nonsense. They're not afraid confrontation."

These are some of the reasons why the LSC felt that Mrs. Kox was an ideal candidate to lead the school through the myriad new accountability policies that were creating unprecedented pressures for school change. This leads us to a discussion of the school context that confronted Mrs. Kox when she arrived at Costen Elementary.

GETTING STARTED: COMING TO TERMS WITH THE PRIOR SCHOOL ORDER IN THE NEW ERA OF ACCOUNTABILITY

We had a principal [Mr. Welch], he's a really good guy and what he did was he hired good people who he let do their jobs. And his assistant principal was a strong woman but she was the same way, she let people do their jobs.

The old administration was more of a delegating authority. Where she [Jackson] was the head person and she would allow the teacher to do whatever it is they want.

The distributed leadership perspective forces us to recognize that leadership is not simply about people, but also about the situation, and when Mrs. Kox arrived at Costen School she inherited organizational arrangements—routines, culture, norms—that the teachers and the prior administrations had developed over time. The teachers had been left alone to "do their jobs" without the burden of outside intervention. They were free to "do whatever it is they want" in the classroom. These organizational arrangements had been in place for over 10 years and across two previous administrations, the first led by Mr. Welch, the next by Mrs. Jackson.

During Mr. Welch's tenure the teachers and the administration had negotiated a system of high classroom autonomy and low administrative surveillance. Indeed, Costen resembled the classic description of many American schools (Bidwell, 1965; Lortie, 1975). This arrangement placed great confidence in the skills of Costen's veteran teaching staff and provided them with substantial flexibility in their efforts to meet the diverse needs of the students, resembling what Rosenholtz (1989a) termed a "non-routine technical culture." A teacher explained:

The first administration—when I first started in 1991—was a man [Welch] who was very, very laid back, and we have a lot of creative

teachers in this school and you pretty much were able to do what you needed to do and use your creativity and kind of go with your own flow more or less.

The classroom was the individual teacher's domain, and the teachers closed their doors and did their own thing without interference from school administrators. Instruction was mostly a private matter between teacher and students. Early in my fieldwork, I was able to observe the legacy of this autonomy-based order. Many teachers relied on a skill-centered, teacher-driven pedagogy, while some used a more constructivist, open-ended, inquiry-based pedagogy. Some teachers taught reading through phonics, while others taught whole language. Some used textbooks, while others used trade books. In math, some teachers used an innovative curriculum that featured hands-on manipulatives, while others used traditional direct instruction techniques. The teachers also had their own styles of classroom management. Some were rigid authoritarians, while others developed sophisticated reward systems to promote good behavior.

During the Welch era, one of the important roles of the principal was to buffer teachers from the interference of district policies and other external pressures. This became increasingly difficult with the emergence of state- and citywide standards late in Mr. Welch's tenure. Standardization threatened the norm of teacher autonomy, but Mr. Welch resisted these policies and maintained a loose coupling between the reforms and the teachers' individualized practices (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, 1978). In particular, Mr. Welch resisted the purview of the LSC and the accountability that it had come to represent. For example, during an LSC meeting, the former chair, who worked with Mr. Welch, told Mrs. Kox:

[Mr. Welch] would bring me documents and would say, "Sign this." And, uh, he just wanted my signature because it was the law. But, you know, he wouldn't give me the opportunity to examine what I was signing, and he didn't want the council to know.

Likewise, Mr. Feierman said that that during Mr. Welch's tenure, "curriculum issues were never the purview, were never allowed to be the purview of the LSC. In fact, I was actively discouraged."

The staff loved Mr. Welch and his *laissez-faire* style, and when he retired, the long-time assistant principal took his place for 1 year before retiring. For the most part, the next principal, Mrs. Jackson, kept this arrangement intact. In a nod toward standardization, Mrs. Jackson used the school's discretionary funds to hire a consulting firm to align the school's curriculum with state and city standards. However, this act was largely ceremonial (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), as the teachers held onto their own

autonomous classroom practices. One teacher described the new curriculum by saying:

Everyone kind of realized that this is something that's not going to be used. Something that we're doing because [Mrs. Jackson] wants us to do it. . . . It was something unnecessary. I think that's why a lot of people don't use it.

Mrs. Jackson did not force the new curriculum onto the teachers, and the teachers told me that it sat dormant on their shelves, or that they drew from it selectively. The teachers' autonomy increased when Mrs. Jackson left the school at the start of the 1998–99 school year to take a position with the consulting firm that had aligned Costen's curriculum. A teacher explained, "We really were running ourselves before Mrs. Kox got here. In fact, school started without a principal, and we did very well."

This was the established order that Mrs. Kox inherited when she started at the school in January 1999. However, this inheritance was somewhat unwitting because Mrs. Kox had little sense of how the school had been operating when she arrived at Costen. Her lack of knowledge was exacerbated by the fact that the established order existed only in the minds and practices of the staff: When Mrs. Kox began work there was no documentation of the school's operation.² During my first day of fieldwork, Kox told me, "We're fine tuning a lot of procedures. When I came in, the old administration didn't leave anything, so we're really starting from the bottom." When she arrived at the school, the principal's office was barren, and she explained, "It's hard when there's a history of things that are done, and you don't know anything about it." Some of the teachers and Stan Feerman corroborated the story.

The fact is that Denise [Kox] came into a school where there were no records, where there was no structure, and she had to create it. From scratch. Which she should not have had to do. You know, there should have been something she could take over. . . . She was actually trying to bring order to a disordered situation.

In one sense, Mr. Feerman is correct. It is not easy to take over an organization with no documentation. However, when he says that there was "no structure," he is incorrect. There *was* a structure at the school. The school *did* have an order, but Mrs. Kox could not learn about it from written documents.³

Although Mrs. Kox did not know about the established norm of autonomy and the teachers' individualized routines, she *did know* that accountability policies and pressures had been steadily increasing since the mid-1990s.

These policies emanated from both the state and the city. At the statewide level, some basic curriculum, instructional, and testing standards had been developed as a way to create uniformity so that schools could be usefully compared with one another. These comparisons created an additional wave of accountability reforms in Chicago because of the dismal performance of Chicago schools on standardized tests. From 1988–1995, the Chicago Public Schools had been experimenting with a school-based governance approach that emphasized LSCs. Under this plan, schools and their LSCs were given broad autonomy to formulate their own improvement plans. When this approach did not yield gains in test scores, the Mayor of Chicago, in 1995, went in the opposite direction of centralized control. He oversaw further standardization of the curriculum across the city, and he established rigid benchmarks for student promotion based on standardized test scores. He also appointed a “Chief Executive Officer” of city schools and gave the CEO the rational-legal authority to place low-scoring schools on probation. If these schools did not show improvement on standardized tests, the CEO could have them closed and reconstituted. However, the CEO’s ability to reward and punish schools created pressure to improve test scores across the system, and not just for the schools that were facing probation. The era of high-stakes accountability had begun. With this shift in policy, LSCs were placed under the umbrella of accountability. As some of the quotes cited earlier suggest, this was the policy backdrop for the LSC’s decision to hire Mrs. Kox.

Because of their position as middle managers (Spillane et al., 2002), principals have the double strain of implementing the policies within their schools while facing accountability themselves. Accountability policies put enormous pressure on Mrs. Kox to act in ways that would improve the school. As an assistant principal explained:

The principal goes down for a rating with the REO [Regional Education Officer]. And the first question the REO is going to say to the principal is: “How’d you do with reading and math?” It’s measurable. It’s empirical data. It’s something you can hold somebody accountable for. I’m not saying it’s the end all, but it is. Secondly, “How’s your attendance rate? What were your statistics on your [student] misconduct? Your [student] behavior?”

Mrs. Kox’s standing with the regional office depended in part on the school’s measurable improvement, but accountability also fit Mrs. Kox’s personal beliefs. As she told me, “I had heard this phrase so much when I was teaching, ‘You can’t reach every child. If you can reach at least 80% of them, you are successful.’ That’s just not a standard I can live with.” Mrs. Kox passionately believed in high standards and continued improvement.

To summarize, Mrs. Kox entered a situation that was characterized by an established system of teacher autonomy, as well as new pressures for standardization and accountability. This contradictory context and the commitment of different people to the poles of autonomy and accountability lead us to a key element of the situation: the school's standardized test scores and the various interpretations of them.

When Mrs. Kox arrived at the school in 1999, 55.7% of the students at Costen were scoring at or above national norms in reading on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, while 57.9% of students did so in math. When viewed through the lens of accountability and high achievement, these marks are not spectacular, and Mrs. Kox saw considerable room for improvement: "When I look at the test results, 50% are succeeding. I look at it the other way. Fifty percent of our children are not succeeding. . . . Bottom line is the kids have to bring those grades up to apply for the best high schools." Indeed, it is the tragedy of urban education that some people would deem as acceptable a situation in which nearly half of the students were not performing at grade level. This standard would never be accepted in the wealthy White suburbs that surround Chicago, and 3 years before accountability policies were signed into *federal* law, Mrs. Kox was determined to leave no child behind.

However, Costen's ITBS scores were much better than the citywide average. In 1999, the citywide average was a miserable 39.1% for reading and 43.4% for math. Ironically, the very metric created by accountability made Costen look comparatively good, and the situation that Mrs. Kox viewed as unacceptable was interpreted differently by the veteran teachers at Costen. In their view, they were doing an extraordinary job under difficult circumstances. Costen is a big school that is burdened by large classroom sizes and an enrollment approaching 1,500 students. The school serves multiple immigrant groups, and Costen has bilingual programs in Spanish, Russian, and Urdu.⁴ Numerous other students receive English as a second language instruction (ESL), and overall more than 40% of the students are classified as "limited English." The mobility rate⁵ is over 30%, and from 1990–1998 the percentage of low-income students increased from 44% to 73%. Despite these challenges, Costen had its share of success. Of the 10 largest public elementary schools in the city, Costen's ITBS scores were among the very best. Moreover, the school's reading scores had been on a steady *increase*, up 14 percentage points since 1991 (although math scores were stable).

Given Costen's relative success, the teachers resisted Mrs. Kox's efforts to frame the situation at the school as a problematic one in need of improvement (Coburn, 2005; Spillane et al., 2002). For example, during a faculty meeting early in my fieldwork, Mrs. Kox tried to frame the situation as in need of change by saying, "Costen is a good school. The former administration did a good job, but we can't take it for granted. Society is changing." She continued, "We are putting those preventative resources in place. Why

should we wait for a disaster?" Then she told the teachers, "You've got to have higher expectations, because [the students] are going to be taking care of you someday." However, a teacher quickly interjected, "But our scores are going up." Mrs. Kox responded, "But our students are changing, and we want to ensure that *everyone* is going up." Mrs. Kox framed the school's changing demographics as a motivation to get better. But then another teacher responded with a different interpretation: "We're getting more and more kids now with problems at home. There's no discipline in the household, and I can model things here, but if they don't get it at home . . ." When Mrs. Kox tried to make the case for improvement, the first teacher rejected Mrs. Kox's definition of the problem, and the second teacher rejected Kox's belief that classroom changes could generate higher student achievement.

At another meeting, Mrs. Kox turned the floor over to Mrs. D. (an upper-grade literacy teacher) so she could share with colleagues what she had learned at an off-campus staff development meeting where the city introduced its new "structured curriculum." Mrs. D. told her colleagues, "First of all, people were really angry at the meeting because [the city] spent so much materials on this," when it is really just a set of lesson plans that are aligned with the statewide goals. Then a teacher asked, "I thought this was just for schools on probation?" Another teacher who had been at the meeting answered, "It's not mandated except for schools that are on probation." Then Mrs. D. reiterated her negative interpretation by saying, "For those of you who have been in Chicago schools before . . . it's just like the old punch cards" and a "waste." Since Costen had relatively good test scores, it was in not in danger of being put on academic probation. As a result, many of the teachers rejected any interpretation of the situation that suggested a need to standardize their autonomous teaching practices.

The situation at Costen was characterized by rival organizational logics (Heimer, 1999; Ingersoll, 2003), and the contradictory tensions between the old autonomy and the new accountability created different interpretations of this situation. However, in Mrs. Kox's calculus, accountability won out, partly because the LSC had hired her with accountability in mind, but also because she had little working knowledge of how the school had been operating and because accountability fit with her own beliefs. Just as she said she would do in her interviews, Mrs. Kox stood firm on her convictions.

MRS. KOX'S EFFORTS TO ESTABLISH ACCOUNTABILITY-BASED LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

People are held more accountable under Kox's administration.
There's more accountability of what teachers are doing now.
(Teacher interview)

Mrs. Kox likes to get her hands in and say, “What’s going on here? This is what we’re going to have to do,” rather than just allow the teacher to do it. (Teacher interview)

Like many new principals, Mrs. Kox was intent on improving student achievement at her school, and to do so she used the authority of her position to create changes that were inspired by accountability. When I asked teachers to compare Mrs. Kox with the previous administrations, they broadly cited “accountability” in the form of Mrs. Kox’s increased surveillance of and intervention in teaching practices. More specifically, Mrs. Kox tried to crack open the cellular classroom structure that characterizes many schools, as a way to facilitate transparency and deprivatize the teachers’ idiosyncratic practices by creating more standardization. In what follows, I outline three of Mrs. Kox’s attempts to establish accountability-based leadership practices: her purview of classroom and student management, grading, and curriculum and instruction.

Classroom and Student Management

One of the most immediate ways that Mrs. Kox attempted to deprivatized teachers’ classroom practices was by entering their classrooms. City policy requires formal classroom observations twice a year. However, Mrs. Kox would frequently “pop” into classrooms unannounced, often when making her daily morning rounds. Mrs. Kox even encouraged me to do the same thing because “without some external partner to come in and observe I don’t think it will get us to do what we need to do.” I decided not to do this because I feared it would alienate the teachers. However, I witnessed Mrs. Kox’s unplanned visits on many occasions.

Mrs. Kox heads to room 124. She enters and stands inside the doorway. The students are sitting quietly as the teacher is doing something at her desk. Mrs. Kox observes for a few seconds, but does not say anything. Then we head upstairs to room 224, and Mrs. Kox does the same thing.

Mrs. Kox stands in the doorway of a classroom. The teacher is taking attendance and collecting lunch money. The noise increases as the teacher tells the students, “My name is not 1st National Bank. Please bring, if you can, correct money, because last week the lunch lady got quite mad at me.” Then Mrs. Kox moves further in and walks around the room. She looks over the students’ shoulders to assess what appears to be their homework (though she says nothing). The room is quite and we leave.

Mrs. Kox opens the door to a classroom and the students are scurrying around their desks. The noise rises, and Mrs. Kox asks the teacher, "Why are they running?" The teacher responds, "They're running to get their books." Mrs. Kox says, "That's unacceptable," and makes the students settle down, telling them, "Show me your learning position." Once the students are sitting quietly, Mrs. Kox instructs them, "Stand up, get what you need for science, and put your book bags away. You have 5 seconds. Five . . . four . . . three . . . two . . . one . . ." The students move quickly but quietly and return to their seats. Mrs. Kox tells them, "Straighten up the books around you." Then she walks around the room checking their homework and telling them, "Raise your hand before you speak." When the students settle down, Mrs. Kox says, "OK, we are ready for learning. See you at lunchtime. Have a good day."

During these visits, Kox paid particular attention to the teachers' grip on student behavior. She preferred quite, calm classrooms, and she would intervene if she felt necessary.

While this practice fit the logic of accountability, it disrupted the classroom autonomy of the past. In comparing Mrs. Kox with the previous administrations, one teacher invoked the imagery of "Big Brother." He described how Mrs. Kox is "more visible in the building," and how the teachers see her "in the cafeteria," and "in the halls, popping out of lockers, popping out of closets." Indeed, Kox held the teachers accountable not only for student behavior inside the classroom, but outside as well. Whenever Kox felt that the students were becoming rowdy in the hallways, she would separate them into two lines (boys and girls) and prepare them to return to their classrooms, sometimes at the expense of the teachers' lunch break.

Gita has left the teachers' lounge to pick up her students from lunch, but she comes back to warn her colleagues that Mrs. Kox is lining up the students in the hallway. Carrie jokes sarcastically, "Did you tell her I'm not coming back?" The group sighs and laughs at Carrie's joke, but begins to pack up their unfinished lunches.

The teachers often told me that in the past, lunch time had been a kind of recess for the students. However, Kox believed that even the "lunchroom is a place of learning," and she held the teachers accountable for their students' behavior at all times.

Grading

Another way Mrs. Kox tried to deprivatize classroom practices involved the school's grading procedures. In contrast to the previous administrations,

Mrs. Kox required greater accounting of grading practices so students could be monitored and classrooms could be reviewed and compared. She introduced the new procedures early in my fieldwork during a staff meeting.

I sit with John [teacher] in the multipurpose room and wait for the meeting to begin. As we wait, there is an announcement telling the teachers to bring their "report card packets" to the meeting. As the teachers arrive, John asks one of them, "Did you bring your grade book packet?" The teacher says "Yes" and then jokes sarcastically, "What we need is another form" to document who brought the grading forms and who didn't.

During the meeting, Mrs. Kox refers to the grading packet and says, "We have to monitor the children's progress because too many students are falling through the cracks." As she continues to discuss the new procedures, she adds, "We have to follow students who have failed 2 or 3 years in a row" with district paperwork.

As the meeting ends, a teacher at our table says to her colleagues, "This is unbelievable! Unbelievable!" (in a terse, punctuated whisper with a look of disgust on her face).

The introduction of the new grading procedures continued the following week

Mrs. Kox reacquaints the teachers with two forms. One is for a "report card review," and the other for a "grade book review." She tells the teachers that she will review their report cards and grade books and use the forms to give them feedback. For the grade books, Mrs. Kox says that the teachers should have "at least 15 grades per subject." A teacher interjects, "We've never had that much," and it would require two assessments per subject per week, which is "too much assessing" and not enough instruction. Many agree, but Mrs. Kox explains that testing is important because parents often do their children's homework. Then she asks the teachers, "Who wants feedback on this form this quarter?" No one raises their hand.

Mrs. Kox eventually decided not to give the teachers formal "feedback" via the forms. However, she still reviewed the grade books and report cards later that day.

Mrs. Kox and the assistant principal are reviewing the second-grade report cards, and Kox wonders aloud, "If they are all using the same materials, do the teachers assign the same grades? It's the same curriculum" (implying they should).

As Mrs. Kox continues the review she says, "We should standardize." While looking at a report card she sighs, "Oh, I don't like it."

Mrs. Kox looks at a report card and comments in disbelief, "Oh, come on! Recognizing numbers one through ten is not introduced (during the first quarter) in kindergarten?"

Looking at another report card, Mrs. Kox comments, "No, this is more than I can handle. Why is it [rooms] 231 and 232 have different criteria? Are we teaching the same things to students?"

Mrs. Kox told me that in the past the grade reviews involved only a "Post-it note" to signify the administration's approval. Kox's purview of grading was a discontinuous shift from previous practices, and this shift was unsettling for many of the teachers. Kox told me that a lot of them were "panicking" and one was "very worried because she had never seen anyone review her grade book for the past 26 years."

Curriculum and Instruction

In addition to grading, Mrs. Kox also monitored the school's instructional practices and curriculum. For example, during a staff development day early in my fieldwork, the staff was supposed to work on creating a standardized curriculum aligned with city and state goals. Echoing accountability, Mrs. Kox told the teachers, "I truly believe every student in Chicago can succeed." She gave an example of her former school, which "turned it around," and the only reason they had struggled in the past "was the curriculum." Mrs. Kox said that with the right curriculum, even the "difficult" children could "succeed if you give them the proper support." She implored the teachers to "put the foot down and demand the children learn," because "children know when we lower our expectations."

However, the discussion soon turned to the rigidity of accountability and the need for autonomy and flexibility. Teachers interjected, "There is a perception in this school among teachers and students that creativity is limited," and "I agree there should be order, but there has to be some noise with creativity," and "There has to be a balance with the fluidity required for creativity." As emotions began to simmer (apparent from looks of disgust and rising tones and pitches), Mrs. Kox defended her actions (while connecting instruction to student management).

Mrs. Kox said, "If you value running a tight ship," then you have to have structure, not just in the classroom but also in the hallways and in the lunchroom. She continued, "I believe in giving children freedom of

control, but until they can control themselves, you can't give them freedom," and "you've got to have order in society."

The issue is control. The teachers were used to individual control, but not Mrs. Kox sought accountability throughout the school. The issue is framed in terms of the students, but the "structure" that Mrs. Kox describes violated the individual autonomy that the teachers had enjoyed in the past.

Despite Mrs. Kox's framing, the teachers struggled to reconcile the change with what they saw as the school's past success. For example, at lunch later that day, a group of teachers were unable to make sense of this change because "the school ran fine before." One of the teachers told a story that exemplified their distress. Speaking with a slight quiver in her hands and lip she said she was so "freaked out" by accountability that she brought a trash bag to school, tore up the accountability-related paperwork that Mrs. Kox used to monitor instruction into "bits and pieces," put the pieces into the bag, and then "poured chocolate milk over it" to disguise her actions.

To monitor instruction, Mrs. Kox required (and reviewed) daily lesson plans, and she organized a larger instructional review that included an examination of student work.

Mrs. Kox begins, "Part of my training, my work" is to make sure that instruction is "in alignment with the state and city standards." As a result, "I have a form, a very simple form that I have passed on to you." Mrs. Kox tells teachers that they should fill out the form based on "one period a day," and include "actual work from the children, so I can give you feedback." The teachers are to turn in the form and the examples of student work along with their lesson plans and the rubrics they used for grading. Based on this review, they will "come back and talk about the kinds of assessments we want to do and create some standardized practices.

At lunch later that day the teachers chafed at this imposition on their autonomy. One of the teachers told her colleagues that she heard that the lesson plans had to correspond exactly with teaching activities on specific days which was "ridiculous" because teachers have to be "flexible." The other teachers agreed and recalled how lesson plans were originally developed to aid substitute teachers, not to constrain practice.⁷

The frustration increased when the teachers received Mrs. Kox's comments. For example, one of the kindergarten teachers turned in an assignment where students practiced writing upper- and lower-case letters. On the sample of student work, Kox had written, "What's the rubric?" But

teacher was furious and told me, “This is bulls-t,” because “this is kindergarten” and the students are “just learning this letter.” She added, “It doesn’t have to be like this” because things had run smoothly in the past.

THE TEACHERS’ RESPONSE AND THE FATE OF INSTRUCTIONAL DISCOURSE

No examination of distributed leadership is complete without a discussion of teachers, because teachers can move out of and into the role of follower and, of course, the role of leader (Spillane, Hallett, & Diamond, 2003). As some of the examples discussed above indicate, the teachers at Costen were not docile participants who were willing to follow whoever stood out front. The veteran teachers in particular cherished the autonomy that had characterized the prior school order, and they had a much different view of the situation than the one espoused by Mrs. Kox. These teachers responded to Mrs. Kox’s efforts to implement accountability with hostile resentment and by “leading” their own anti-Kox movement—all of which had implications for the practice of leadership at the school.

As some of the examples discussed earlier indicate, many of the teachers were angered by Mrs. Kox’s surveillance of their classroom practices. To quote another teacher:

They [Mrs. Kox’s administration] watch over us too much, and I think the staff is capable. When I first came here, the principal we had was never ever [watching them], and this school was supposed to be one of the best schools in Chicago as far as public schools. That is why I can’t understand why there is so much people looking over our shoulders.

The previous administrations had high confidence, good faith, and trusted what the teachers were doing behind the closed doors of their classrooms (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Mrs. Kox’s surveillance suggested to many teachers that she did not. The teachers took offense to this, especially in light of their interpretation of the past.

The pace at which Mrs. Kox attempted to implement new organizational routines also angered teachers. For example, during lunch in the teachers’ lounge one day, a student teacher said that she could feel a lot of tension in the air, and she asked her mentor why the school had fallen on “tough times.” The teacher explained, “She [Kox] made lots of changes, quickly. In most cases, making such quick changes is not good. Mrs. Kox did not follow that code.” Other teachers expressed similar sentiments.

Mrs. Kox didn't really take time to look at our school and what the teachers were doing before she changed it. She should have observed before she felt the school needed changing. That wasn't really fair. . . . If maybe after a year of observing, then make changes. That would have been more legitimate.

Another teacher put it more simply: "You don't have a baby in a month; it takes 9 months."

The teacher who was most offended by the changes at the school was Mrs. Drew. Mrs. Drew is a highly regarded language arts teacher, and her pedagogical skills are the foundation on which her colleagues pay her considerable respect. Prior to Mrs. Kox's arrival, the students and teachers nominated Mrs. Drew for a prestigious "Golden Apple" award, and she won. In response to Mrs. Kox's actions, Mrs. Drew told me:

What bothered me most is that [Kox] never took the time to figure out what was going on here because she just totally dismantled. And I'm not using hyperbole when I'm using that word "dismantled." She totally dismantled every system that we had. . . . And to me, that is the most illogical way to go into any system. . . . You first go and see, "Well, what are they doing? How is it working?"

In retrospect, Mrs. Kox admitted that she made changes too fast—she attempted to introduce too many new organizational routines too quickly. At the conclusion of my fieldwork, she told me, "When I came in, I didn't take the time to establish the rapport because I was eager to get the job done." However, Mrs. Kox's attempts were not as "illogical" as Mrs. Drew would contend. Recall that Mrs. Kox came to a school that had no documented history of its previous mode of operation—there were no documents that listed the organizational routines at Costen, and Mrs. Kox was facing a rising tide of accountability that she chose to swim with as opposed to against.

Hindsight is 20/20, but people act in the moment, and Mrs. Drew responded not just with anger, but with organized collective action. Individual acts, more often than not, involve interactions, and it is in these interactions that leadership practice takes shape. In response to Mrs. Kox's actions, a number of teachers had sent anonymous complaint letters to the district office. Mrs. Drew asked the teachers for copies of these letters, and she also encouraged her colleagues to write new complaint letters, which many of them did either individually or in groups. Mrs. Drew compiled all of these complaint letters into a 119-page bound volume, and she titled the book with a play on Mrs. Kox's name: *Turmoil at 'KOX'sten School*. Mrs. Drew made dozens of copies of the book, and she sent it to the school's district office.

the regional office, the city's central office, and any other relevant audience she could think of. She explained to me:

I plastered her [Kox's] name all over this city. Everybody I could think of I sent that book to. And the book was just magnificent. . . . And I compiled letters from the entire staff here and I compiled—it had—oh God, maybe a good 40 odd letters from various teachers. . . . And the title of the book was, a little thing with her name, "Kox," *Turmoil at 'KOX'sten School*. And I sent it all over the city. [After sharing a copy with me, she continues.] And through the whole process, all I kept hearing was, "You can't make principals change. You can't get rid of principals. This is Chicago. Principals are here forever. Let's just ride her out and eventually she'll be gone." I was just like "No, no." The reason it's so difficult to combat leadership is that everybody runs scared.

Mrs. Drew spoke of her effort to "combat leadership," but in effect *she* was also a leader of a teachers' movement against Mrs. Kox's efforts to change the existing order.

Most of the complaint letters criticized Mrs. Kox for trying to change how the school had been organized and for doing so too quickly. For example, one of these letters warned Mrs. Kox:

Your arrival at Costen is like a person who buys a new house. It is only natural to be anxious to fix it up and make changes that turn your new house into your own home. But in doing so, you should remember that your new "house" already had people living in it. It can be detrimental to the morale of the staff when massive change is forced upon us in a relatively short time—especially when it seems to occur without the benefit of any discernible observations of how things have worked thus far. (Anonymous letter from a group of teachers first sent to Mrs. Kox and then included in *Turmoil at 'KOX'sten School*)

A related criticism decried the increased level of surveillance that came with Mrs. Kox's emphasis on accountability. One letter even went so far as to exclaim, "We feel like we are in a communist country!"

The complaints in the letters were at times reasonable, at times unfair, and often venomous. Mrs. Drew's "book" prompted an investigation of Mrs. Kox by the Chicago Schools' central office. The investigators spent time observing Mrs. Kox, interviewing individual teachers, and having group meetings with the teachers. However, nothing substantive came out of this

investigation because Mrs. Kox never overstepped the bounds of her authority, and she never broke any formal Chicago rules. The investigative team gave Mrs. Kox a slap on the wrist because she offended the teachers, but they also gave her a pat on the back because her efforts to change the school were premised on accountability.

However, the damage was done. Mrs. Kox was quite understandably paranoid that, as she frequently told me, many of the teachers were "out to get" her. On the other side, many of the teachers felt deeply wounded by how Mrs. Kox had attempted to dismantle the previous school order that they had interpreted as successful. The relational well had been poisoned, and even the people who tried to stay out of the conflict had to drink the water. They were pressured to take sides, and even if they refused to do so, they had to live and work in an increasingly angry atmosphere. It was going to take a tremendous amount of work to sanitize the well before cooperative relationships would flow forth. The situation illuminates how the interactions, not simply the actions, of individual formal or informal leaders are the meat and potatoes of leadership practice.

This atmosphere took an emotional toll on everyone. People told me that the situation was "hard for all of our personal health," that "things are becoming very frayed at the edges," and "it seems like everyday somebody else is losing it." When I asked one teacher how she coped, she replied, "I'm seeing a therapist (laughs), just for work." Despite her laughter, her therapy was no joke, as she mentioned it frequently. Another teacher recited a litany of self-help books: *The Natural Mind*, *Spontaneous Healing*, and *Eight Weeks to Optimum Health*. This contentious atmosphere also wore on Kox and the parents of the LSC. Over time I noted that Mrs. Kox had become thinner, she had frequent colds, and her skin was often pallid. The chair of the LSC often lamented that he was at the "end of his rope." When I asked him how he coped with the turmoil at the school, he said, "I don't. I get sick. . . . It takes a terrible toll on me personally."

Quality of life aside, the painful struggles at the school had implications for the work of education. After the investigation, it was rare for people at Costen to talk about the core technology of schooling—instruction. Most of the available time and energy had to be spent cleaning up and re-establishing basic relationships between the teachers and the administration, and this relational drama was stressful. When I asked one teacher how she coped with the stress, she said, "I close that door. . . . Once I have to open that door and be part of the bigger community, I—it's difficult and stressful. . . . I don't go out there much." Many of her colleagues responded in kind. Although the classroom became a sanctuary, it further isolated teachers from one another and prevented them from forming a community conducive to instructional improvement (Purkey & Smith, 1983; Rosenholtz, 1989a). With all that was

going on in the school, I witnessed sustained discourse about instruction on only four occasions, and all of those occasions were during staff development days that were mandated by the Chicago Public Schools.

Everyone at the school suffered, but the real victim of the leadership struggle was instructional discourse. Moreover, it can be argued that the struggles at the school and the fate of instructional discourse affected student achievement: Costen's ITBS reading scores reversed direction. While they had been on a steady rise, on the heels of the investigation of Mrs. Kox, they dropped slightly for the first time in years (from 55.7% reading at or above national norms to 54%).

THE MORAL OF THE STORY: LESSONS FROM COSTEN SCHOOL

"Leadership struggle" may seem like a contradiction in terms. The very idea of clear-cut "leaders" and "followers" seems to preclude any type of struggle. Moreover, when we think about leadership, we tend to think about its glorious triumph, not the often difficult, even painful, interactions that constitute its development. This is the hidden, sometimes ugly, sometimes pleasant, underside of leadership. It is part of the "dark side" of organizations that too often is neglected in our research (Morrill, Zald, & Rao, 2003; Vaughan, 1999). However, the distributed leadership perspective shines a beam of light into this darkness because it forces us to look into the connections—among leaders, followers, and the situation—and all of the complex relationships therein.

At Costen, the nature of these relations put Mrs. Kox in an incredibly difficult position. She had little knowledge of the social order that prevailed at the school before her arrival, so she had little footing on which to build relationships with the teachers. Moreover, city and state policy (as well as her own beliefs) compelled her to quickly introduce accountability into the school. However, this accountability was at odds with the autonomy that the teachers were used to and that they felt had produced results in the past. As a middle manager, Mrs. Kox was being held to account as well. But the teachers, the very people on whom Mrs. Kox's success depended, were offended by her efforts to increase accountability. They refused to follow, and their own efforts to lead a movement against Mrs. Kox resulted in an investigation of Kox. The struggle to deal with all of these tensions was painful for everyone.

The leadership struggle at Costen Elementary teaches us that leadership is not inherent in organizational positions. Simply because someone holds a position as a school principal does not mean that teachers will follow his or

her lead, and simply because someone is in the position of a teacher does not mean that he or she cannot be a leader. This point may seem trite, but it has been somewhat lost in recent accountability policies. In many ways, accountability policies are an effort to formalize schools as organizations. They are premised on rational-legal models of positional authority, and they increase the centralization of schools by creating standards that are enforced by a line of school authorities, from the CEO of the Chicago Schools to the central office to the regional offices to individual school principals and their subordinates. In holding schools accountable for student performance, these mechanisms attempt to create a tighter connection between educational policy and instructional practices where loose connections had been the norm (Meyerson & Rowan, 1977; Weick, 1976).

Mrs. Kox acted in ways that fit this accountability model. If the assumptions about the nature of authority in the accountability model were right, we would expect teachers to comply because they were Kox's subordinates. But life in schools is never this simple. Despite Mrs. Kox's formal authority, many of the teachers never saw her as a credible leader, and they refused to follow. As a result, when Mrs. Kox used her authority in an effort to crack open classrooms and deprivatize instruction, the emergent struggle resulted in *more* closed doors as teachers tried to escape the controversy, and *less* instructional discourse. Even though Mrs. Kox used her authority to make changes with the intention of increasing test scores, in the emergent struggle test scores *declined*.

While some of the particulars of the leadership struggle at Costen School may be extraordinary, this kind of situation is not that unusual, especially for new principals who are intent on changing standard organizational routines in their schools. Nor is Costen the only school that faces external accountability pressures that clash with local autonomy. With the passage of federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, many schools find themselves in a similar situation. In this sense, there are many "Costen Schools," there are many "Mrs. Koxes," and there are many "Costen teachers."

What can be done to ease the tensions of the leadership struggle? As Mrs. Kox admitted in retrospect, she could have taken more time to establish a rapport with the teachers before introducing change. However, this would have necessitated holding off accountability policies while risking the wrath of the LSC and the district office. Time is exactly what principals lack in the era of high-stakes accountability, and the clock continues to tick against Costen (and many other schools). At the same time that Costen's reading scores on the ITBS dipped for the first time in years, a school in the same neighborhood with the same student population outpaced Costen by eight points in reading and seven in math. Kox and her superiors were well aware of this comparison, which created greater accountability pressure. These pressures

were exacerbated by the federal NCLB policies that were created after I finished my fieldwork. Even though Costen's test scores rebounded at the end of my fieldwork and rose in the following years, under the first year of NCLB (2003-04), Costen was already failing to meet "adequate yearly progress" toward goals in seven areas.⁸ Although NCLB policies have many provisions to exempt schools, "needing time to establish the human relationships on which leadership depends" is not one of them.

Accountability is not the only approach that has a myopic view of leadership. "Leader-centric" models have long characterized the literature (Likert, 1967; Mouton & Blake, 1984; White & Lippitt, 1960; Yukl, 1981). In contrast, Meindl (1995) and others argue that to understand leadership, we must focus on how followers construct leaders and not on leaders per se. In this view, leadership is in the eye of the beholder. However, this "follower-centered" approach is still too narrow because it downplays the substance on which followers construct others as leaders (Spillane, Hallett, & Diamond, 2003), and how the construction of leadership evolves as a product of ongoing social interactions (Ehrlich, 1998; Schneider, 1998).

Just as leadership is not affixed to a position or to specific people, it is not equivalent to a set of actions, even when those actions are informed by "best practices." Based on research on what scholars already deemed as "successful" cases of leadership, a growing literature argues that the principal should engage in a particular set of practices. The principal is to set the tone for instruction by creating an instructional vision and by monitoring classrooms, and he or she should promote the formation of "instructional communities" by deprivatizing classroom practices as a way to make instruction transparent and public, and creating opportunities for teachers to talk together about the challenges inherent in their work. In many ways, these were the very things that Mrs. Kox tried to do. However, these practices did not fit the norm of teacher autonomy that was an important part of the situation at Costen, and the teachers reacted against these practices instead of following along. To be sure, practice is a part of leadership, but these practices are always embedded in the relationship among leaders, followers, and the situation. Principal practice alone is not sufficient for success because leadership is a distributed phenomenon that takes shape in the interactions. The leadership struggle at Costen School teaches us that "best practices" and accountability policies are not a cure-all because they are only part of a bigger relational picture.