Imagine this school scenario: For the most part, staff members go about their business, doing what they’re asked to do. They look at data; they make some adjustments. They work with coaches who have helped usher in a host of different programs. Student performance is adequate but not stellar, yet parents seem satisfied, making relatively few complaints.

If you were the new principal, what changes would you make? Whatever you decide to do, imagine that those decisions are soon followed by

- The development of new state science standards that your school is expected to follow.
- A district requirement for staff members to use new formative or benchmark assessments in reading and math.
- A sudden drop in student enrollment, which means that you will lose at least one or two teachers (including that teacher you just hired who is specially trained in the new reading program).
- A shift in your student population, which means that you will need more certified bilingual teachers.
- Growing parent dissatisfaction with the size of your classes and the number of professional development days when students are not in school.

That says nothing, of course, about the neighborhood sewers that keep backing up and leaving puddles on your playground or the severe economic downturn and the budget cuts that are likely to follow.

In other words, the challenges you face inside the school are connected to and compounded by things that are happening outside. In fact, schools face a number of external demands and pressures that they have to address.

Moreover, without the connections, support, and expertise that come from interacting with a host of people, organizations, and institutions on the outside, schools cannot develop the goals, staff, or productive work environment they need to be successful (Hatch, 2009).

Distribute the Work

The education rhetoric these days focuses on developing principals who are both good administrators—managing staff and school operations—and good instructional leaders—focused intently on teaching and learning. But the demands of managing the environment mean that principals need to be strong external leaders as well; they need to serve as the liaison to those outside the school and act as spokesperson, negotiator, and champion of the school’s interests.

However, relying on the principal to take on all the responsibilities of developing these connections leads to several key problems:

- Already overextended leaders may find themselves overwhelmed when...
trying to fulfill the responsibilities of managing both the internal and external environments.

- School leaders may spend so much time developing contacts and managing external relationships that they grow distant from the work going on inside the school.

- Leaders who leave the school—like doctors or lawyers who leave their practices for a rival firm—will take many of their contacts and relationships with them; the new leader will have to reassemble the network of relationships that the school needs to be successful.

To combat these problems, school leaders need to distribute the work both outside and inside the school. This distribution of responsibilities can grow out of a shared knowledge of a school’s goals. School members who attend conferences, take courses, and just walk around in the community can help explain the school’s mission, recruit qualified staff, find resources, and advance the school’s interests. Without that common understanding, members of the school community can sometimes do more harm than good by inadvertently spreading conflicting messages about the school or, in some cases, by deliberately undermining their colleagues’ efforts.

**Scan and Seed**

Far beyond typical parental involvement activities or show-and-tell sessions for administrators, connections between staff members and parents, community members, district administrators, policymakers, and other educators make it possible to discover common interests and develop the wider understanding and trust that people need to work constructively toward common ends. These connections also give schools the capacity to both scan the environment—to learn about issues, concerns, and new developments outside the school—and seed the environment—to put insiders and advocates into positions of power and influence on the outside.

Getting staff to participate in and lead local and national professional development activities can serve as a crucial avenue for both information and influence. Teachers at Peninsula Elementary School, a suburban high-performing K–5 school in the San Francisco Bay Area, regularly serve on the district’s literacy leadership team. In one instance, a veteran 4th grade teacher from Peninsula learned that another teacher on the team had an approach that matched Peninsula’s emphasis on direct instruction. After learning that the teacher was getting worn out at her own school, the veteran teacher urged her to apply for a new job at Peninsula. When she was hired, Peninsula gained another advocate for the district’s approach to literacy instruction—a crucial avenue of influence when some schools in the district adopted whole-language approaches to literacy that the school found inconsistent with its own philosophy.

Schools can also invite outsiders in to learn more about the school’s work and, in some cases, draw them directly into school activities. For example, Dewey, a progressive, student-centered school in Peninsula’s district, organizes orientation meetings, coffees, open houses, and information nights that enable parents and community members to learn about the school. Although in many schools these are seen as obligatory nods toward parent involvement, at Dewey these activities are part of a strategic series of initiatives designed to ensure that everyone understands the basic goals, philosophy, and work of the school. In addition, these informal meetings give the principal opportunities to recruit parents and community members for various roles and responsibilities.

For example, the principal created a community relations committee composed of teachers and parents whose role it was to bring to attention any emerging issues about the school and district. That committee provided crucial support for the principal when a new superintendent came to the district and mandated the use of a new report card that would have supplanted the school’s narrative reports. The principal worked with the community relations committee to engage the superintendent’s staff and a school board member in a daylong retreat in which they all studied the school’s assessment process. In the end, the administrators attending the review recommended that the superintendent give the school a waiver from implementing the new report card.

This effort had two other important consequences. First, the administrators decided to incorporate some aspects of Dewey’s narrative approach into the report card the district required other schools to use. Second, the new superintendent began to recognize other instances in which district policies were likely to conflict with Dewey’s
approach—such as requirements for districtwide professional development—and in some cases, offered the school waivers even before the principal requested them.

**Build Networks with Allies**

Over time, regular contacts between insiders and outsiders can grow into long-term relationships with allies who understand the school, provide access to resources, and act as advocates in times of crisis. For example, consider the work of Alliance Schools, a coalition of schools and religious and neighborhood groups modeled on the community-organizing tradition of Saul Alinsky and the work of the Southwest Industrial Areas Foundation. Alliance Schools help build networks of allies by

- Surveying the members of a school and the surrounding community to find common interests.
- Using that information to fuel conversations and identify crucial issues that many members of the community and school care about.
- Pursuing an issue the schools can address in a reasonable period of time (Hatch, 1998; Shirley, 2002; Warren, 2005).

In one instance, members of the Alliance Schools conducted short interviews with staff members and parents in a struggling elementary school. When the members reported their results during a community meeting, parents were surprised to learn that among the biggest concerns of school staff was a rodent problem that the principal had been unable to get the district to address for years. The parents brought their concerns to the superintendent and the school board, and crews were sent out to address the problem the following weekend. Even such small but concrete achievements can help establish the trust, motivation, and social capital that serve as the basis for further school improvement efforts (Bryk & Schneider, 2002, Putnam, 2000).

Schools can also manage the external environment by establishing lasting relationships with key organizations. For example, Manzanilla, a low-performing school in a troubled district in the Bay Area, fueled its efforts to improve and maintain its bilingual program through partnerships with well-known teacher preparation programs and reform organizations in the area. A highly respected local teacher education program supplied the school with almost 20 student teachers each year and helped staff an after-school English language development program. The student teachers got an extended tryout period during which they could learn about the school and the school could learn about them. The school was able to establish a pipeline to a crucial resource, gaining an influential partner and an advocate who now had a vested interest in the school’s success.

**Find the Right Balance**

By cultivating external relationships and support networks, however, schools also expose themselves to a host of additional demands (Hatch, 2002). For example, Manzanilla’s partnerships with the teacher education programs and two local school reform networks meant that staff had to take on a lot of additional work: supervising student teachers, attending network meetings, hosting visitors, presenting at conferences, and completing assessments their network partners needed for their own accountability reports. School leaders need to search for a balance that allows access to crucial resources, personnel, and expertise without compromising their organizational flexibility.

From this perspective, leaders at each level need to decide whether collaboration will help them advance their goals. In some cases, schools may find that they can ignore demands from outsiders. However, many schools—particularly those that have a distinct approach or are designated as low performing—need the information, expertise, and social capital they develop through their contacts and networks of allies to negotiate with powerful partners and shape external demands and expectations to their own needs and goals.

Even the leaders of charter schools, which many presume can escape the burdensome requirements that may come with district and state education bureaucracies, have to think carefully about what kinds of external relationships they need and want. In fact, stepping outside traditional district structures means that charter schools can also get cut off from many of the people who have the information, resources, and expertise the schools could use (Wohlstetter, Malloy, Smith, & Hentschke, 2004). Compounding the problem, the intense work of starting and managing a school can consume the entire staff and leave little time to get outside school walls. As a consequence,
Collaborative relationships provide the social capital that comes from a “strength-in-numbers approach.”

Envision a New Organizational Chart

Although managing the environment depends on identifying those who are outside the school and figuring out how to deal with them, in some ways schools can draw their own boundaries. The traditional organizational chart listing those who report to the principal or school leader formally defines who counts as being inside the organization, but schools can also draw in parents, community members, district administrators, and other educators to develop a larger school community.

Instead of treating these groups as outsiders with whom they have to deal, schools can treat them as insiders who have useful information and expertise, can take on key roles and responsibilities, and can help the school expand its network. Rather than treating schools as part of a system in which control and authority are clearly defined, it may make more sense to view the system as a collection of diverse constituencies who have access to different kinds of information, expertise, and authority and who can come together to pursue their interests in many different ways.

Improve the External Environment

Managing the environment outside the school is closely intertwined with the work of making improvements inside the school. Schools that can carry out three key internal practices—developing a shared understanding and a common theory of action, effectively dealing with hiring and turnover, and fostering a productive staff work environment—are in a much better position to manage the external environment than are other schools (Hatch, 2009).

This circular relationship between internal and external practices helps explain why it takes capacity to build capacity and why it is so hard to help schools that do not already have some capacity to manage external demands (Elmore, 2002; Hatch, 2001). Given this problem, efforts to make improvements in the schools that struggle the most may be more successful if they begin with work on the external environment.

From this perspective, some of the funds designated for “failing” schools—focusing on hiring consultants, developing new strategic plans, and implementing new programs—are likely to be better spent on thoughtful improvements to libraries, playgrounds, or other aspects of the physical environment that can serve both the neighborhood and the school community. Similarly, efforts to establish new day-care or after-school programs can serve community needs,
whole (Fullan, 1993, 1999).

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managing the external environment means that successful schools can cultivate a competitive advantage. Schools that are relatively high performing and schools that develop innovative approaches are more likely to attract the attention of people and outside organizations. That attention creates opportunities to develop relationships with individuals and groups that can help the schools to get better assistance, more expert staff, and better resources and to make further improvements.

In turn, the increased visibility brings visitors and recognition to the school that can help validate the schools approach and build a positive and collaborative school culture. Those contacts then give schools the social capital to negotiate with their partners, get support and assistance adapted to their needs, and say no to requests and demands that they believe would detract from achieving their goals.

See the Big Picture
The competitive advantage that comes with the capacity to manage the external environment means that successful schools, ironically, can resist demands to improve, can maintain the status quo, can lower expectations, and can gloss over problems in operations and outcomes. As a result, the work of managing the external environment always has to extend beyond the individual school and take into account the larger purposes of schooling and the role that successful schools may play in helping or hindering efforts to improve surrounding schools and society as a whole (Fullan, 1993, 1999).

Capitalize on the Snowball Effect
External relationships provide opportunities for more outside contacts, more information, more access, and more allies. Success breeds success—and successful schools can cultivate a competitive advantage. Schools that are relatively high performing and schools that develop innovative approaches are more likely to attract the attention of people and outside organizations. That attention creates opportunities to develop relationships with individuals and groups that can help the schools to get better assistance, more expert staff, and better resources and to make further improvements.

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Promoting Wide-Scale Success
School improvement efforts that focus largely on scaling-up specific programs or replicating the successes of individual schools without regard to maximizing external relationships and opportunities are likely to continue to fail. To succeed on a wide scale, school-based improvement initiatives have to be accompanied by a concerted effort to create more favorable economic, social, and political conditions that will give all schools a better chance to manage the external environment.

References
Hatch, T. (2001). It takes capacity to build capacity. Education Week, 20(22), 44, 47.

Author’s note: All school names are pseudonyms. The school examples are drawn from a study of six schools in the San Francisco Bay Area. For more information, see Managing to Change: How Schools Can Survive (and Sometimes Thrive) in Turbulent Times (Teachers College Press, 2009); www.tc.edu/ncrest/hatch/managingtochange.

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EL online
For more stories of how principals deal with challenging situations, read the October online-only EL article, “Taking Your Leadership Pulse” by Kathryn A. Riley at www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/oct09/vol67/num02/Taking_Your_Leadership_Pulse.aspx