The purpose of this study was to explore how urban elementary principals enact instructional leadership in K–5 urban elementary public schools at a time when principals are held accountable for students’ state test scores. The participants in this bounded case study were three urban elementary principals from the same school district. Data collection was obtained from interviews, documents, and school walks in the participants’ schools. The following three themes emerged: (a) instructional leadership was shaped by district focuses, (b) building positive school climate was important to principals as instructional leaders, and (c) principals in urban districts face a variety of challenges. Implications that emerged from this study were: (a) principals knowing that it is possible to navigate the tension of trying to lead with integrity while dealing with the tensions of accountability, (b) principals can lead teachers to think about curriculum through the lens of critical theory, (c) principals have a variety of strategies that are available to be an instructional leader in their building, and (d) principal preparation programs can use the findings from the study to align them with the ISLCC standards.

Further research on this topic could be studied using principals from different school districts.