Partners in a Leadership Learning Community: The Role of the Central Office

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Discussion & Reflection: The 5 Findings for Central Office

1. Focus on Improving Teaching and Learning

2. Build Principals’ Sense of Efficacy for School Improvement

3. Model the Use of Data

4. Ensure Productive Leadership Succession

5. Harness Family and Community Energy for School Improvement

Reflection & Discussion: Build Collective Efficacy

Rank the following district conditions according their impact on a principal's collective efficacy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District Conditions</th>
<th>Rank</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relationships with Schools &amp; Stakeholders</td>
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<tr>
<td>Modeling the Use of Data</td>
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<tr>
<td>Investment in Instructional Leadership at the District and School Levels</td>
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<td>Focus on Quality</td>
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<td>District Culture</td>
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<td>Job-embedded professional learning for teachers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emphasis on Teamwork</td>
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<td>Targeted Improvement Support</td>
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Reflection & Discussion: Research-Central Office Transformation for District-wide Teaching and Learning Improvement


Executive Summary

This study breaks new ground in educational research by uncovering the daily work practices and activities of central office administrators as they sought not just to make the central office more efficient but also to transform the central office into a support system to help all schools improve the quality of teaching and learning.

Our findings reveal that… districts generally do not see districtwide improvements in teaching and learning without substantial engagement by their central offices in helping all schools build their capacity for improvement. Central offices and the people who work in them are not simply part of the background noise in school improvement. Rather, school district central office administrators exercise essential leadership, in partnership with school leaders, to build capacity throughout public educational systems for teaching and learning improvements.

Central office transformation is a far cry from central-office-administration-as-usual. This approach to reform:

• Focuses centrally and meaningfully on teaching and learning improvement. Other central office reforms aim to increase the efficiency with which the central office provides basic services to schools. Many central office leaders say that they work in service of teaching and learning. In transforming central offices, by contrast, staff are able to demonstrate how their work matters in concrete terms to teaching and learning improvement. What is more, they act, not just talk about it, and actually change their work to leverage specific supports for teaching and learning improvement.

• Engages the entire central office in reform. Some central office change strategies demand that certain departments, such as those focused on curriculum and instruction, work with schools in new ways. By contrast, central office transformation involves remaking how all central office administrators work with schools and with each other—everyone from the entire central office, no matter what department, unit, or function, participates in the transformation.

• Calls on central office administrators to fundamentally remake their work practices and their relationships with schools to support teaching and learning improvements for all schools. School district central offices routinely attempt to reform themselves by restructuring formal reporting relationships within central office hierarchies, adding or removing units, or revising their standard operating procedures.
While structural changes can be helpful, a transformation strategy is fundamentally about remaking what the people in central offices do—their daily work and relationships with schools.

- Constitutes an important focus for reform in its own right. Some districts aim to remake central office work practices and relationships with schools in service of implementing a particular program or initiative. By contrast, districts engaged in central office transformation are working to change their central offices regardless of the particular programs or initiatives in which they may be participating at a given time.

Central office transformation involves ongoing work on central office practice that supports teaching and learning improvement and that transcends particular programs or initiatives. Central office transformation, then, is hardly a rehash of old efforts at “restructuring” the district organizational chart. Nor is it a top-down or a bottom-up approach to change. Rather, central office transformation goes right to the heart of practice—what people in central offices actually do day in and day out—to help improve teaching and learning for all students.

Discussion:

How does this research challenge and/or extend your thinking about the role of central office leaders in school improvement?
Reflection & Discussion: Research Report
Collaborative v. Authoritative Orientations


The researchers identified two distinct orientations (of central office administrators) they have about where expertise for reform resides. These orientations affect the attitude that they bring to their work and to their interactions with principals, teachers, and other schools staff.

1. Authoritative Orientation: District administrators with this orientation see themselves and other central office leaders as experts and see principals, teachers, and other school staff primarily as targets and beneficiaries of their own and others’ expertise. From this perspective, a primary goal is to cultivate exchanges that channel expertise to schools.

2. Collaborative Orientation: District administrators with this orientation see principals and teachers not simply as targets of policy change but as substantive sources of expertise as well. From this perspective, a primary goal is to foster exchanges that help central office staff learn from and become more informed by schools’ expertise and reform experiences.

The researchers found that the majority of mid-level central office administrators brought an authoritative orientation to their interactions with schools. They argue that the predominance of an authoritative orientation in district/school interactions is problematic and undercuts district efforts to improve instruction district-wide. While far fewer mid-level administrators have a collaborative orientation, their approach to working with schools is essential in creating communities of practice around instructional reform.

Reflection:
Take a minute to re-read the last paragraph. Do you agree or disagree with the assertions of the researchers? Discuss your thinking with your teammates. Where would your current practices fit on the chart?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authoritative</th>
<th>Collaborative</th>
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Reflection & Discussion:  Barriers Impacting Support to Schools


From the Principals’ Perspective

1. School Relationships Seen as Low Priorities:

District administrators at the mid-level spend little time in direct communication with school staffs and feel burdened with district meetings and paperwork that take precedence over their work with schools.

2. Communications Based on Directives, Not Dialogue:

When mid-level district administrators do have contact with schools, they spend too much time communicating policy expectations and too little time in substantive conversation about teaching and learning with school leaders.

3. Administrators Lack Understanding of School Issues:

School principals and teachers want central office leaders to visit schools and experience first-hand the challenges they encounter every day. Instead, schools are recipients of directives, memos, and emails from people who most likely have never been in their schools or classrooms.

4. Central Office Staff Lack Expertise Around Teaching and Learning-

Across districts, school leaders viewed the knowledge of district staff about teaching and learning (process and content) as a weak link in district support.

Discussion:

Would the principals in your district find agreement with any of the barriers to school support listed above?

What changes in daily practice in your central office might help breakdown those barriers?
Reflection & Discussion: Deliberate Practice

As a result of my learning about best practices in supporting schools for the improvement of teaching and learning, I recommend our district…

**KEEP the following practices…**

•
•
•
•

**STOP the following practices….**

•
•
•
•

**ADD the following practices….**

•
•
•
•

In my effort to improve support to schools

I will start………

I will stop………
References


