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The District Role in Instructional Improvement

Are changing conditions affecting the capacity of districts to provide focus, to coordinate support, and to scale up successful reforms? From a study of the roles played by central office staff members in shaping and supporting instructional reforms in three large urban districts, the authors derive an answer.

BY TOM CORCORAN, SUSAN H. FUHRMAN, AND CATHERINE L. BELCHER

RECENT literature on school improvement has stressed the important role that districts can play in improving instruction by providing vision, focus, support, and policy coordination and by building commitment at the school level.¹ However, large school districts have always had difficulty carrying out these tasks and persisting with a reform focus long enough to see results. Changes in leadership, new state policies, and changes in funding have been major impediments. Some critics have even argued that districts are inherently incapable of stimulating and sustaining meaningful reforms in teaching and learning because of their political

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and bureaucratic character.²

While the successful implementation of instructional reforms in locations as diverse as District 2 in New York City; Union City, New Jersey; Cincinnati, Ohio; El Paso, Texas; and Long Beach, California, argues against this harsh conclusion, the current policy environment certainly makes this work more difficult. Many large urban districts are attempting to carry out these functions in environments characterized by decentralized decision making, high-stakes accountability, and increasing competition among providers of comprehensive school reform designs and other “research-based” instructional improvement strategies.

Are these changing conditions affecting the capacity of districts to provide focus, to coordinate support, and to scale up successful reforms? The Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) examined the roles played by central office staff members in shaping and supporting instructional reforms in three large urban districts. In this article, the three districts have been given the pseudonyms of Metropolis, River City, and Sun City. They are located in three different states, and their enrollments range from 50,000 students to more than 200,000.

THE FINDINGS

Our findings are presented below in three broad categories, representing the major strategic decisions that face any organization seeking to improve its performance. Deciding what to do — the problem of design and adoption — is the first of these tasks. The second is determining how to get it done — the problem of support and coordination. The organization needs to focus people’s attention on the desired changes, ensure effective implementation, reduce distractions, and buffer the work from competing agendas. Finally, there is the task of scaling up the reforms if they are successful — the problem of replication. While these categories overlap, they are useful organizers for the presentation of our findings.

DESIGN AND ADOPTION

Central office staff members in the three districts were struggling to define their roles. They wanted schools to make decisions about improvement strate-

gies and professional development, but they also wanted them to adopt best practices. However, they were uncertain about who should determine what was best and on what basis such determinations should be made. Should schools be left to figure it out for themselves, or should the central office point them in the right direction and limit their options? Should the role of the central office be limited to providing schools with good information about specific programs and designs, including what the research evidence shows? District staff members agonized over these and related questions. Making a shift to evidence-based practice proved to be difficult in all three jurisdictions.

River City set up a screening process that examined the alignment between local standards and various whole-school designs with externally developed curricula and then reviewed the evidence supporting the claims of the developers. Schools were permitted to choose only those designs that had been approved by the districtwide committee. This initially limited the schools to four whole-school designs. The options were slowly expanded in subsequent years, but the committee became more demanding and ruled out designs that could not present strong evidence of positive effects. There were few objections to this process from the schools. In fact, school staffs indicated that they appreciated the effort by the central office to rule out programs that might prove ineffective.

Metropolis wanted to provide schools with summaries of the research evidence on various designs and programs so that they could make more informed choices. However, the project was delayed for two years as central office staff members debated which programs and what information should be included. These debates were largely ideological; there were objections to including some programs on philosophical grounds and objections to the presentation of evidence when it did not correspond to the preferences of staff members.

Sun City established a committee, including members from higher education institutions, to screen reforms being considered by the district. However, its members were unwilling to take on the screening function because they viewed it as being too prescriptive.

In the end, in all three districts, philosophical commitments and political necessities often prevailed over evidence. One district mandated the creation of small-

er units in all its schools as a result of the strongly held philosophical views of some influential members of the central staff, ignoring evidence that these units were generating a new tracking system that resulted in unequal access to high-quality teachers and curricula. Another aggressively promoted charters and school restructuring while neglecting its investment in whole-school reform. And the third permitted an external funding agency to promote poorly defined school partnerships as an improvement strategy even though none of the district leaders believed that the strategy would produce significant gains and there was no evidence offered to support it. These were merely some of the examples of how the emergence of evidence-based decision making was hampered by whims, fads, opportunism, and ideology.

Each of the three districts also designed its own significant reforms that were intended to be widely, if not universally, adopted by its schools. However, the districts' use of research evidence in the design process varied. The champions of specific reforms typically examined literature selectively and found theories and "evidence" to justify their approaches, or they recruited "experts" who were advocates of the preferred strategy. The distinctions between empirical research, theories, and simple advocacy were not well understood and certainly had little effect on the decision-making process.

Metropolis sought to break up its large schools by first encouraging and then mandating the creation of small learning communities. District guidelines were issued about the size, organization, and function of these communities. River City addressed the same set of problems by issuing an invitation to schools to engage in a highly specified restructuring program and offering incentives for their participation. However, the invitation was viewed as a mandate by the schools, since it described a three-year rollout of the program. Nevertheless, the schools' response was less than enthusiastic, and district officials had to "recruit" participants. Only about half of the schools were involved in the project at the end of the three years. As the leadership's attention was drawn to other initiatives, the rollout slowed, and in the fourth year only a handful of new schools adopted the reform.

Sun City required low-performing schools to adopt a home-grown comprehensive school design. After three

years, the original sites had made significant achievement gains. The district published and disseminated evidence about the program's impact but was unable to recruit additional adopters because the design was viewed as "remedial" and suitable only for schools serving concentrations of low-income students. The district made no effort to "sell" the program to the schools that might benefit from it, nor did it strengthen the incentives.

There was significant investment in evaluations of these local initiatives. All three districts used the results of evaluations to make revisions in their programs. Sometimes the evaluations affected their decisions about continuing or expanding their investments in these programs. The district staff members seemed to be more demanding about evidence of effects from locally developed initiatives than from externally developed ones. Although they sometimes promoted local initiatives at design fairs and other events in the absence of any positive evidence, they did not make major resource commitments to such programs if they had negative evidence. The difference in the attitudes toward locally and externally developed programs may be related to the facts that the latter often brought external funds with them and that they were legitimated by their national reputations.

Commitment to the use of evidence and efforts to use evidence were much stronger in the central offices in all three sites than they were among school staffs. District staff members generally felt that decisions ought to be based on a solid rationale supported by or at least consistent with research. However, the efforts of district staff members to use research evidence were frequently frustrated by the lack of research on key issues (e.g., the effectiveness of middle schools, high school literacy programs, coaching strategies), the lack of readily available syntheses, and the persistence of contradictory findings. District staff members also reported that it was often hard to obtain the most recent studies and harder still to assess the claims made by various program developers.

In contrast, school staff members paid lip service to the use of research but in fact expressed more confidence in recommendations from other teachers than in research. They found research hard to access and even harder to interpret, and they were ill prepared to sort out significant findings from other knowledge

claims.

So the decentralization of decision making combined with weak district guidance appeared to be undermining the use of knowledge rather than promoting it. Selection of whole-school reforms by school staffs was often based more on personal testimonials, philosophical comfort, ease of use, lack of threat to current practice, and good marketing by developers than it was on evidence of effects. Teachers heartily endorsed the practice of visiting other schools that were using a design before selecting it, and they indicated that research was less useful for determining if a design was producing results than for determining whether the design fit their own notions of good practice. In other words, in choosing a research-based design, teachers were more interested in designs that drew on research about practices that they already felt were “good” than in designs that were producing results.

In summary, when educators selected designs, they were definitely interested in effectiveness. However, they defined effectiveness in a manner that might encompass, but certainly moved beyond, student assessment results. Teachers were more interested in how the design incorporated what they knew about good practice — as defined by the craft knowledge of “good” teachers and their own philosophical orientation. Ideally this judgment was consistent with research, but when it was not, experience and ideology often prevailed. Teachers were most persuaded when they received direct endorsements from other teachers.

The pressure to do “something” and to raise scores also made it difficult to proceed deliberately. Under conditions of uncertainty, the rational course would be to select the best option or options or to draw on the available evidence to design an intervention and then to pilot the program, monitor its effects, and make revisions. All of this would be done before encouraging widespread adoption. This process takes considerable time. It often takes three to five years to see any impact on student performance. Leaders in the three districts did not feel that they had that kind of time. They were expected to raise performance quickly, and they were expected to know what to do.

While the time frame for making improvements was an issue in all three districts, they still invested in initiatives that were long-term in character. They tried to protect these programs in order to give them time to pay off. However, this was often difficult. In all three districts, within four years of launching the reforms, the superintendents who had led the design of the initiatives left under pressure from their boards and lo-

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cal political leaders. In two cases, they were pushed out even though their initiatives had produced significant growth in student achievement. That was not deemed sufficient. The reasons that the leaders were pushed out varied, but in each case, they had offended significant interest groups or political leaders. Even though two of the three boards made public commitments to continue the reforms and to seek new leaders who would sustain the work, transitions in leadership brought new agendas and a weakening in the resolve to implement the earlier programs.

COORDINATION AND SUPPORT OF REFORM

All three districts had developed highly elaborate systems that were intended to provide stable sources of high-quality professional development for teachers. They were in place at the beginning of the study and, with minor modifications, remained in place five years later. In River City, a central staff development academy had been created. Most of the district’s funding for professional development went to this academy. The academy provided short courses for teachers, which were determined by central office and academy staff members and represented their vision of the core knowledge that their teachers needed. The courses focused on generic teaching competencies. The academy also provided training in support of the district’s reform initiatives, but it did not provide support for comprehensive school reform. The latter task was left

to the program developers. Nor did the academy provide much follow-up support for its courses. This responsibility was left to school staff members, who had few discretionary resources for professional development.

In Sun City, the central office had a small staff of trainers who annually developed a large menu of workshops and courses in cooperation with the schools and local universities. Their goal was to meet the needs of the schools and to make their offerings attractive enough to recruit large numbers of teachers. High participation rates and high levels of teacher satisfaction were used to justify the funding of the staff development. Teachers could enroll in these courses with the permission of their administrators. The menu included some activities directly related to district reforms, especially work on standards-based instruction in the various disciplines, but it also included a wide variety of other topics. K-12 clusters of schools also had some professional development funds and offered training that focused on common concerns and improvement efforts. Most of the individual schools likewise had funds for professional development.

Metropolis developed a large network of full-time professional development specialists who were expected to provide services to K-12 clusters of schools. These staff developers ran workshops and did coaching for teachers in support of the district reforms. Although the network was intended to be a resource for the schools and responsive to their needs, its members were most frequently deployed in support of district and cluster initiatives. For the most part, they had no connection to the comprehensive school design teams that were working with the schools. The schools had few discretionary resources for professional development.

Empirical research had little to do with the professional development offerings in the three districts. Although the infrastructures for professional development differed considerably, they had several things in common. First, the staff members who led professional development were not members of an evidence-based culture themselves. And district leaders seldom asked whether participation in the activities that the trainers and consultants planned and conducted led to changes in practice or improvements in student performance. None of the three districts monitored professional development activities carefully, nor did they

collect any information on how teachers used the experiences or what impact they had on practice.

Second, the professional development staff members felt that their effectiveness would be judged by whether they could attract and please teachers, so when they had discretion over what to offer, they tended to focus on the hot topics of the day.

Third, they tended to be generalists whose special skills were group management and putting together presentations. They saw themselves as trainers. In most instances, they did not have special expertise in substantive areas, and they typically did not have strong links to the research community. So professional development was driven by self-defined needs and interests, not by evidence of effectiveness.

All three districts reported problems with focusing and coordinating their development initiatives. One source of these problems was philosophical. The district professional development staffs believed that they should be responsive to the needs of the schools and therefore wanted to offer multiple forms of training rather than to focus on a few priorities. They did what they knew how to do best, which was to repackage techniques and procedures promoted in the professional development community into workshops for their teachers.

There were several other reasons why the districts had trouble coordinating professional development and aligning it with core initiatives. One reason was that the districts themselves were not focused. They were supporting multiple initiatives simultaneously, and they expected the professional development infrastructure to support all of them. They used professional development as their primary means of communicating with school staffs, so much of the energy went into awareness sessions designed to inform people rather than to prepare them to implement something or to behave differently.

A second reason for the lack of focus and coordination was that the districts had developed professional development cultures that were not grounded in evidence and were committed to meeting the wants, desires, and needs of teachers. Once these systems were in place, it was hard to focus them. The staff development personnel themselves had to be persuaded that the new initiatives made sense. A third reason was that most of the professional devel-

opment decisions were being made at levels below the central office.

District- and school-sponsored professional development activities generally neglected the content knowledge of teachers. The professional development activities were not discipline-based and tended to emphasize process and procedure over curriculum and subject-matter knowledge. The staff members carrying out this work were not linked to the same reform networks as the central office staff, and they valued different approaches to instructional improvement. For example, they played almost no role in whole-school reform in two of the districts and only a minor role in the third. The net result of these preferences and beliefs was a potpourri of workshops and events rather than a coherent program of professional development.

This situation began to change in the last two years of the study in two of the sites. The districts shifted their investments into content institutes for teachers that were based on the curriculum to be taught. But these shifts had not yet altered the primary delivery systems in the districts.

REPLICATION OF REFORMS (SCALING UP)

All three districts lacked well-accepted processes for deciding what to scale up, they seldom considered how teachers viewed the costs and benefits of new programs, and they rarely developed comprehensive marketing campaigns to persuade staff members to adopt new practices. The tendencies were either to offer opportunities to schools or to mandate reforms and provide training. Little thought was given to incentives and disincentives, to possible barriers to implementation, or to the legitimacy of alternatives.

Many central office staff members believed that high-stakes accountability systems, with their pressure to improve performance, would lead to the adoption of “proven” practices and that over time school staffs would make better adoption decisions. There is some evidence to support this assumption. Literacy programs spread rapidly across two of the districts because early adopters achieved higher gains on reading tests than other schools. But there is also some contrary evidence. Schools continued to participate in some whole-school designs even though they had not experienced gains after several years. New adopters in whole-school de-

signs did not seem to be basing their decisions on evidence of positive effects. Moreover, the accountability programs placed a premium on obtaining quick effects, which are not a hallmark of programs intended to achieve significant changes in classroom practice.

The noisy reform environment, changes in state policies, and particularly turnover in leadership made it difficult for the districts to persist with or scale up reforms. In addition to changes in superintendents, all three districts experienced significant turnover among the middle-level staff members who actually reviewed evidence and championed programs.

District leaders wanted to make decisions about scaling up reform on the basis of evidence. They often could not do this because they felt pressure to display confidence in their vision and to move the reforms forward even when they lacked such evidence. When the districts did invest in evaluations, the feedback about effects often came too late. District policy makers could not wait for years to decide whether to aggressively push a reform. They were under pressure to act, and they often merely planned for replication.

CONCLUSIONS

Leaders in all three districts claimed that they wanted staff members to base their decisions on evidence whenever possible and that they wanted to support and spread programs and practices that produced results. In all three instances, there were serious efforts to build evidence-based cultures in the central office and to encourage schools to pay attention to research evidence. However, these efforts were hampered by the inadequacy of the research evidence and by difficulties accessing and making sense of it. Conflicting research findings and the lack of attention to key issues facing districts were also problems. In addition, district and school staff members were reluctant to put aside old patterns of decision making that focused on philosophy or on the “goodness” of an option rather than on its effects. Nevertheless, some progress was made in getting central office staff members to consider evidence in making decisions. There was much less progress, however, in shifting mindsets among school staff members and, most important, among members of professional development staffs.

The leaders in the three districts agreed that most investment decisions were not being made based on the evidence and viewed this as a significant weakness, but they also felt that correcting it would require major cultural changes in their organizations. They all felt they had put “evidence” on the table and that it had become part of the decision-making process, but the difficulties in assembling persuasive and timely evidence prevented it from being the central focus in debates over what to do and where to invest.

1. See, for example, Susan J. Bodilly, *Lessons from New American Schools'*

Scale-Up Phase: Prospects for Bringing Designs to Multiple Schools (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 1998); Richard F. Elmore and Deanna Burney, *Investing in Teacher Learning: Staff Development and Instructional Improvement in Community School District 2, New York City* (New York: National Commission on Teaching and America's Future and the Consortium for Policy Research in Education, 1997); Joseph Murray and Phillip Hallinger, “Characteristics of Instructionally Effective Districts,” *Journal of Educational Research*, vol. 8, 1988, pp. 175-81; and James P. Spillane, “Districts Matter: Local Educational Authorities and State Instructional Policy,” *Educational Policy*, vol. 10, 1996, pp. 63-87.

2. John E. Chubb and Terry M. Moe, “No School Is an Island: Politics, Markets, and Education,” in William L. Boyd and Charles T. Kerchner, eds., *The Politics of Excellence and Choice in Education* (Philadelphia: Falmer, 1988), pp. 131-41; and Paul Hill, Lawrence Pierce, and James Guthrie, *Reinventing Public Education: How Contracting Can Transform America's Schools* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), chap. 3. **K**