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ABSTRACT

Because public school districts have highly permeable organizational boundaries, analyses of their structures and processes should include consideration of external as well as internal factors. Such analyses have become feasible with the application of general systems theory, which views organizations as functioning units that have continuous interaction across boundaries. The recent application of general systems theory to organizational structures by Pfeffer and Salancik contends that external factors, such as population mobility, external mandates, and religious and cultural conditions, are influential in both the public and private sectors. Two case studies of executive succession in public schools--one in an urban-rural district using a centralized, districtwide approach to linking testing and evaluation activities with district instructional programs, the other in a large urban district using a decentralized, school-by-school approach--confirm Pfeffer and Salancik's model of environmental effects. In both cases, the selection of superintendents reflected the environmental context, which in turn influenced district power distribution. Findings confirmed Pfeffer and Salancik's perception that external environmental influences exert control on the internal workings of an organization. School administrators should understand such external conditions to attain optimal organizational effectiveness. (JBM)

HOW DO EXTERNAL FACTORS INFLUENCE SCHOOL DISTRICT MANAGEMENT: A PRELIMINARY INQUIRY

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INTRODUCTION

For the past two years project staff at UCLA's Center for the Study of Evaluation (CSE) has been studying ways in which school districts can effectively link their district-wide testing and evaluation activities with district instructional programs. Previous research (Lyon et al., 1978) had convinced us that most school districts had not forged such a linkage; testing and evaluation had remained largely uncoupled from the central instructional program (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Williams, 1979).

Based on recommendations from knowledgeable colleagues in the research and practitioner communities, we identified six school districts that had reputations of having made exemplary efforts to link their testing and evaluation efforts to their instructional core. Subsequently we conducted case studies in these six districts to see whether or not they had forged such a linkage, to determine the processes and structures they had employed, and to see if there were any generalizations and insights we could derive from these districts' activities that might be useful to other districts wanting to forge similar linkages. We found, not surprisingly, that the districts differed in the progress they have made in their program and in the structures and processes they have been using (Williams & Bank, 1981). After having described these programs in some detail we have now begun trying to understand the variations we have observed. For example, one district

has developed a district-wide plan based upon a common district instructional continuum. That district is developing a common set of expected teacher competencies and behaviors and the testing and evaluation programs are tightly coupled to that emerging technical core. We refer to this as a centralized approach.

Other districts, in contrast, have a much more decentralized approach in which the unit of change seems to be the local school site. While school site data may be collated and compared district-wide, each school site is considered the main unit of analysis and change; and the testing and evaluation programs are more loosely coupled to the instructional core through intermediating local school sites. We refer to this as a decentralized approach.

What accounts for these two different approaches? Both seem to be, or have the potential to be, successful. No doubt the different approaches have resulted from both carefully considered as well as accidental factors. That is, those who have been involved in the development of the systems likely had some preconceptions about the advantages of centralized versus decentralized approaches. Administrators supportive of one or the other position could probably marshal arguments from the organizational theory literature to support each of their views. However, educational organizations, in common with other organizations, experience twists and turns in directions due to the arrival or departure of key actors at critical times.

The belief systems that influence organizational design and the historical condition that surrounds such decisions have been recognized for many years by researchers and practitioners alike. However, much of

their attention, we would argue, has been directed towards the internal workings of an organization. Who are the powerful organizational leaders and policy makers? What belief systems guided their thinking? How can the organization's design be made most compatible with the organization's personnel? What internal coordinating or authority system will work best given the organization's personnel and design? Certainly these internal organizational characteristics and conditions are essential to designing and implementing a decentralized or centralized system but all suggest that even deeper insight can be gained when one considers, in addition to the internal factors, the external factors.

All organizations exist within a number of relevant environments and have interactions with them. Organizational boundaries are penetrable by outside influences. This permeability means that organizations cannot function isolated from such external factors as funding sources, client characteristics and preferences, legal and legislative mandates, and unexpected events such as floods, recessions, and population shifts.

Organizations differ with regard to their boundary permeability. Public school districts, with their publically elected school boards, high client interest in pupil performance, and public control of funding, represent highly permeable organizations. It follows that the governing and operating structures of public school districts are likely to be influenced by external factors--and that a better understanding of public school district design and functioning can be understood when both internal and external factors are examined. More specifically to the topic of decentralized and centralized testing and evaluation and instructional subsystems, is whether there

is some relationship between the extra-organizational conditions and decisions to use a centralized or decentralized approach. Or, can one better estimate a selected approach's chances of success within a given district when only internal conditions and factors are considered.

Our purpose here is to speculate a bit on the influence of external environmental factors on centralized and decentralized testing, evaluation, and instructional subsystems. We do not suggest that this examination of external factors will result in any hard and fast set of rules that will settle conclusively the merits of one approach over the other. Instead we want to raise the "consciousness level" of those who work within such systems so that they consider both internal and external organizational factors. In this paper we will:

- discuss briefly the theoretical perspective that guides the consideration of external factors upon organizational design and processes;
- describe case studies of two districts--one using a centralized and the other a decentralized linking subsystem--and focus on the role and influence the external environment has on the centralization-decentralization approaches;
- discuss implications these observations have for those considering a centralized versus decentralized approach to linking testing or evaluation with instruction.

A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE ON EXTERNAL INFLUENCES ON ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES

A major step in understanding organizational functioning was the adoption of general systems theory (Bertalanffy, 1937; Katz & Kahn, 1966) when analyzing organizations. Prior to using general systems theory, organizational analysts had focused on internal matters and had largely ignored the role and function an organization's external environment may have had. But general systems theory properly placed organizations in the perspective of a functioning unit that has continuous interaction across its boundaries--influencing its environment and being influenced in return by the environment.

A number of theorists have speculated on and conducted research on that phenomenon and its influences on organizational functioning. One of the earliest speculations on this phenomenon was that of Burns and Stalker (1968) whose research on the post-war electronic firms identified mechanistic and organiz organizations.

Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) for example, have, on the basis of research, evolved a contingency theory which seeks to explain how the number of components in the environment and their characteristics can, or should, help determine an organization's function and design. That is, an organization's function and design should properly be flexibly contingent upon the external environment's characteristics. Derr and Gabarro (1972) applied that work in analyzing the Boston Public Schools.

Perhaps the major recent influential work on this topic has been that of Pfeffer and Salancik (1978), who develop a "model of environmental

effects" which can be applied to both private sector and public sector organizations. Their main thesis is that external environmental influences exert control on the internal workings of an organization and consequently help shape the organization. They contend that "to understand the behavior of an organization you must understand the context of that behavior--that is, the ecology of the organization"(1978, p. 1). Part of the problem in understanding the environment is that the environment of an organization can affect an organization's outcomes without affecting its behaviors. This occurs because important elements of the environment may be invisible to organizational decision makers and, therefore, not considered by them in their shaping of organizational actions; but these same elements, independent of administrators' perceptions, do affect organizational success or failure. For example, in the early 1960's when some American firms decided to purchase coal mines, it is doubtful that they gave much thought to the Arab world when making these investments. In the 1970's, however, when Arab governments raised oil prices, many of those companies who had invested in coal profited. Outcomes were affected by external events even though it is unlikely that the original decisions had been influenced by them.

Pfeffer and Salancik present the model by which the environment is linked to organizational change and action. The model suggests that the relationship between environments and organizations is not random but is indeterminate, and that the very indeterminacy of environmental effects on organizations is potentially explainable. As an example, the model plots the effects on the organization of executive succession--the removal of one executive and the selection of another. The authors contend that

both the removal and subsequent selection of top administrators is affected by the organization's environmental context.

Pfeffer and Salancik's model of organizational change can be summarized briefly: (1) the environmental context--with its contingencies, uncertainties, and interdependencies--influences the distribution of power and control within the organization; (2) the distribution of power and control within the organization affects the tenure and selection of major organizational administrators; (3) organizational policies and structures are results of decisions affected by the distribution of power and control; and (4) administrators who control organizational activities affect those activities and resultant structures. Executives are a source of control, and it matters who is in control because control determines organizational activities. The environment affects organizational activities because it affects the distribution of control within the organization (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978, p. 228).

Pfeffer and Salancik use this model to highlight three seemingly causal linkages that may connect environmental factors to organizational characteristics. First, a link exists between the environment--a source of uncertainty and constraint--and the distribution of power and control within the organization. Second, a link exists between the distribution of power and control and the choice of executives and their tenure. Third, a relationship exists between organizational executives and the actions and structure of the organization. One may not observe a perfect relationship among these links because, according to Pfeffer and Salancik, organizations are only loosely coupled with their environments, and power is only one important variable intervening between environments and organizations.

EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCES--TWO SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Admittedly, the ways in which organizational structure and behavior are constrained by forces in the environment are different for different types of organizations. Private sector organizations which focus on producing and delivering goods may be affected by the buying trends of the public whereas public sector organizations which are concerned with delivering services may not be influenced at all by sales or marketing trends. Industrial organizations which fail to take environmental variables into account when making strategic decisions risk losing their competitiveness in the market place. Each industry depends on the demand for its products to maintain its supply of customers and revenue, and thus its very survival.

At first glance the public sector, especially the public schools, would seem to be more environmentally free than industry. Carlson (1964) has referred to public schools as disinterested organizations which are guaranteed their resources and clientele. This has the effect of diminishing the public schools' resolve to respond to external environmental influences and the pace and adequacy of response to environmental changes is comparatively weak. Likely this phenomenon is true but this should not blind school administrators and analysts to the effects the internal environment can have and the symbiotic relationship between school district structures and process and the external environment. Zucker (1981), for example, has argued that because school districts are "institutional" rather than "technical" organizations, they must perform in accordance with public prescriptions and expectations rather than attending primarily and exclusively to their technical--i.e., instructional--functions. When school

administrators are reflecting on their own structures and functions they should consider environmental conditions and characteristics.

As a means of illustrating some of these, and for purposes of helping those who wish to derive an appropriate organization configuration for linking testing, evaluation, and instruction, we turn next to two case studies of districts that have derived a testing, evaluation and instruction subsystem. One is centralized; the other decentralized. We will speculate on how external environmental considerations have shaped the structures and activities being used and we will discuss the "fit" between external conditions and each school district's approach.

Two Case Studies

We have selected two districts--one using a centralized approach (Crescent City) and the other using a decentralized approach (Bordertown). From an admittedly large number of external conditions we have selected the following three characteristics:

- Population mobility;
- External mandates;
- Religious and cultural conditions.

Using the Pfeffer and Salancik conceptualization we will link these characteristics to executive succession. Finally we will discuss implications that this approach has for understanding organizational functioning.

Population Mobility. Crescent City School District is an urban-rural district with a 79 percent Anglo population, experiencing a surge of growth in its student enrollment. Since 1970 the district has added 17,000 pupils. As a result the district has built new school buildings and hired more

teachers. In addition, the city's major industry encourages considerable population mobility. Many families come and go regularly and there is considerable movement among school attendance zones. In order to provide some consistent educational program for pupils who move from school to school the district has abandoned its somewhat decentralized approach to curriculum and instruction and has adopted what many districts would consider a very centralized approach.

Bordertown School District, on the other hand, is experiencing a decline in student population. Between the 1964-65 school year and the 1976-77 school year the district's enrollment declined by 22,500 pupils. As a large urban school district, it is experiencing "white flight" and is witnessing a slight influx of black students annually. Currently, 56 percent of the district's pupils are black. Moreover, a small percentage of minority students from a neighboring state is moving into Bordertown. These students are characteristically poor, unschooled, and illiterate; the parents are extremely protective of the children and suspicious of the schools. Even though there is some transiency both into and within the school district, more students are exiting than entering. Too, the heterogeneous quality of the population is an environmental constraint against any mass mobilization effort to centralize the schools. Consequently, for this and for cultural reasons to be discussed in a future section, Bordertown has adopted a relatively decentralized approach to school district curriculum and instructional management.

External Mandates. The Crescent City School District has programs (e.g., ESEA Title I, State Minimum Competency Testing) many of

which have state or federally mandated evaluations. The District is obligated by law to comply with such policies. The State and/or Federal government also provides an increasing percentage of the District's budget. The state is currently controlled by a fiscally conservative governor and legislature and is subject to reductions in financial support. Although the District already has a low expenditure per pupil, ranking near the bottom nationally, more budget cuts are planned. With less money allocated to schools, the District is operating under considerable financial restraints. A result of this has been an increasing level of internal conflict between the organized teachers and the school board and administration over salaries and working conditions. This has influenced teacher attitudes toward the administration and played an important part in the school superintendent's recent resignation from his post.

Although it is not controlled by State minimum competency testing mandates, Bordertown must comply with a State mandated "graded course of study." This governs the scope and sequence of subjects taught in the public schools. The legislature has also recently reduced the funding allocations for urban public schools; this political body has a reputation as being a "pro-suburb advocate," and many District officials feel that it neglects the urban areas and their problems. Bordertown, however, does receive additional funding through ESEA Title I and Title IVC programs which have allowed the District to create and implement some innovative programs of its own. In addition, Bordertown School District receives extensive funding through Federal vocational education sources. In fact, approximately 50% of its secondary pupils are enrolled in vocational

education programs. An additional environmental constraint is apparent in the State mandate that vocational education teachers must also teach regular subjects (e.g. English, Math, etc.). Located in a large manufacturing center, the District's vocational education programs receive strong support from the business community.

Other external organizations are influential in bringing about changes in the District. For example, the teachers' union has had sucessful strikes in the past, and still exerts pressure on district decision makers. Community groups, too, form coalitions for particular causes and exert pressure on the District's administration. For example, the existence and power of community task forces changed the District's procedures for evaluating its alternative schools.

Religious and Cultural Conditions. Although Crescent City was founded in the mid-1800's, it remained a tiny watering spot on the westbound trail until after World War II. In the early 1950s a growth spurt began and today it is one of the larger cities in the nation. Still, it is a relatively young town with a somewhat homogeneous population. Most of the District administrators now in top level positions immigrated to Crescent City in the mid 1960s. Consequently, the "traditional way" of doing something was non-existent. Attention to current commitments is more characteristic of the District's leadership.

Crescent City is now the largest city in the State and the District educates 59% of the State's pupils. The city is surrounded by desolate areas with small rural communities as its only neighbors. Therefore, the District represents an educational monopoly; there are virtually no competitive public or private schools to drain off pupils or to attract

teachers. The large Mormon population promotes the separation of church and State and the separation of family responsibilities from school responsibilities. Thus, benign support is given to District policies unless they interfere with family responsibilities (e.g., sex education) or fall short of expected performance levels (e.g., student test scores). For example, there was no public outcry when the District recently instituted an attendance policy requiring failing grades to any student absent more than a set number of days; instead community members accepted, and indeed supported, the policy.

Bordertown is a densely populated area with many suburbs and other major metropolitan cities nearby. Approximately one fourth of the school age children attend private or parochial schools. The large Catholic population staunchly supports the Catholic schools. Thus, Bordertown School District faces tough competition in attracting high-achieving students and quality teachers. Community members often compare--unfavorably--the public schools to the private schools. The public school officials complain about the unfairness of the criticism considering the constraints the public schools face in acceptance of clients and availability of resources.

Moreover, Bordertown lives with a strong sense of history. Founded in 1788, it was the nation's sixth largest city and third largest manufacturing center by 1860. There are many stable, old neighborhoods whose natives wouldn't conceive of doing anything which would violate Bordertown's past culture. In fact, Bordertown has been called a "city of cities" where these neighborhoods are identifiable by race, ethnicity,

and social class. Consequently, decision-makers are often tied to tradition and fearful of untested solutions to local problems. In each neighborhood active community task forces, or "forums," serve to protect local interests on matters such as zoning, road construction, and schools. The diversity of the population has led Bordertown School District to adopt a decentralized approach to education and to establish many types of alternative schools.

As Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) contend, the environmental context, with its contingencies, uncertainties, and interdependencies, influences the distribution of power and control within the organizations. Then the distribution of power and control within the organization affects the tenure and selection of the major organizational administrators. Finally the organizational policies and structures are results of the decisions affected by the distribution of power and control. Admittedly, the administrators who control organizational activities affect those activities and resultant structures. The histories of executive succession to the Superintendency for both Crescent City and Bordertown serve to illustrate Pfeffer and Salancik's "model of environmental effects" regarding executive succession and organizational change.

During the heyday of change and innovation in the 1960s Crescent City's Superintendent emphasized local school building autonomy--each school was to develop its own program tailored to its pupils' needs. Following through with the administration's decentralized approach, the District was subdivided into four administrative zones with considerable autonomy in each zone. When that Superintendent resigned to accept

a superintendency position with another district, he was promptly replaced with an administrator who shared his views and would continue his policies.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, environmental conditions changed. The community became concerned over pupils' low test scores, desegregation, and the educational inequalities of Crescent City's decentralized system. Thus, that Superintendent was forced to resign by pressure from the community and the Board of Education. A new superintendent who would address the current issues of concern was appointed. This Superintendent guided the District through desegregation and began the centralization process by eliminating the four-area decentralization scheme. He appointed one deputy and four associate superintendents who ran the District's central administration. He also allowed certain administrators to begin revising and centralizing the District's instructional program. When this Superintendent chose to resign to enter the private sector, a successor who was committed to a centralized curriculum was selected. More recently a crisis between the teachers' union and the board, precipitated by limited district financial resources, played an important part in this Superintendent's decision to resign.

Therefore, in each case of executive succession the selection of the new superintendent seemed to be a reflection of the environmental context, which in turn influenced the distribution of power and control within the District.

The minority population of Bordertown was concerned with desegregation in the early 1960s. In 1963 the Board of Education successfully defended a desegregation suit brought by the NAACP. Although the federal district

court found, and the Court of Appeals affirmed, that no alleged discriminatory practice on the part of the Board brought about the racial imbalance that existed, many community members were dissatisfied with the school district's policies. Neighborhood associations exerted pressure on the Board of Education to reduce the racial isolation of Bordertown's schools. Consequently, in the early 1970s the Board hired a new liberal superintendent who favored integration and had a successful record for integrating schools and implementing innovative programs. The new Superintendent instituted an administrative decentralization plan, creating six area directors. He then promoted a number of principals (including several black principals) to these new positions, thereby installing a new echelon of administrators loyal to him. In addition, he was influential in getting the Board to adopt a policy establishing integration as a high District priority, and also in establishing an open enrollment policy which allowed students to attend any District school with available space providing the transfers would improve the racial balance. The administration also began plans for the city's first two alternative schools. By the mid-1970s the environmental conditions had changed and a more conservative Board was elected. The Superintendent resigned under pressure from the Board and a more conservative Superintendent succeeded him.

Thus, as in Crescent City, the removal of the Superintendent and the naming of the successor seem to be reflections of the environmental influences upon the balances of power in the District.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS

In reviewing the literature many authors point out that understanding the relevant environments is important for understanding organizational actions and structures. In the past many organizations seeking to increase their effectiveness have adopted other organizational patterns, policies, and/or strategies on the basis of internal conditions without considering the external conditions. Pfeffer and Salancik contend that external environmental influences exert control on the internal workings of an organization and help to shape the organization. Admittedly, our research seems to suggest that organizational patterns, policies, and strategies are indeed reflective of the external environmental conditions encompassing the organization.

Thus, school district administrators wanting to implement some organizational change need to understand the ecology of the organization, the environmental context of the behavior of the school district. By addressing the external environmental conditions as well as the internal organizational conditions, administrators can select and implement successful change strategies. By considering all of the relevant variables--population mobility, pressures from special interest groups, available resources to name a few--an optimal system for increasing organizational effectiveness could be developed.

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