

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## REINVENTING DISTRICT CENTRAL OFFICES TO EXPAND STUDENT LEARNING

*By Meredith I. Honig, Ph.D., and Michael A. Copland, Ph.D., University of Washington–Seattle*

In recent years, midsized to large school district central offices across the country have begun to undertake challenging initiatives to reinvent themselves to more intentionally support learning for all students districtwide. These learning- and equity-focused efforts build on decades of research showing that learning improvements fail to penetrate the majority of schools in a district without substantial central office support for various changes throughout district systems. What do research and experience teach about the dimensions of central office reinvention that seem to matter for expanding student learning? How can central office administrators participate productively in the reinvention process?

In pursuing these questions, we quickly found that the practice of central office reinvention efforts outstrips research. To be sure, in recent years a number of districts have attempted to take on key leadership roles in learning improvement through various discrete initiatives such as curriculum reform, new human resources strategies, and accountability efforts. But wholesale central office reinvention—efforts to fundamentally shift how the entire district central office operates as an institution—are still in their infancy

across the country. Not surprisingly, data on how these efforts actually play out in practice and their impacts on student learning are still relatively limited. However, central office reinvention efforts may do well to involve particular central office practices that researchers have found to matter in improving learning in the context of more modest central office reform efforts. Perhaps not coincidentally, we found that some of the longer term central office reinvention efforts across the country involve these practices in various respects. The jury is still out on whether these particular reinvention efforts will impact student learning. Nonetheless, the fact that they reflect emerging findings in the research literature on school district central offices suggests that they may be on the right track and offer important immediate lessons and illustrations for district leaders.

We elaborate on these points first by framing the urgency for central office reinvention as part of districtwide learning improvement initiatives. We then draw on recent district research studies to outline

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what the available research suggests may be important dimensions of central office reinvention efforts. We illustrate these dimensions with examples from central office reinvention efforts currently planned or under way in Atlanta Public Schools, New York City Public Schools, and Oakland Unified School District (California). We focus on these districts because during the past several years, each of them has made significant investments in central office reinvention as an important educational improvement strategy; accordingly, these districts arguably provide examples of central office reinvention efforts that are fairly well along, at least in their conceptualization.<sup>1</sup> These districts also represent a range of midsized to large urban contexts; therefore, their examples may resonate directly with leaders across different types of urban and suburban districts and relatively large rural districts. We conclude with key questions for education leaders to consider regarding the role of central office administrators in expanding learning districtwide.

## District Central Offices and Learning Improvements: Great Urgency, Few Guides

Recent, promising school improvement initiatives call on school district central offices to play unprecedented, integral leadership roles in strengthening student learning districtwide (Copland & Knapp, 2006; Honig, 2006; Institute for Educational Leadership, 2001; Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003; Knapp et al., 2003). Federal and state policies of previous decades largely overlooked school district central offices and focused on schools and eventually states as main agents in helping students reach basic minimum levels of competency. In contrast, contemporary federal and state policies as well as prominent initiatives by private foundations call on

school district central offices to participate centrally in helping all schools districtwide build their capacity to help all students learn at high levels (Cuban & Usdan, 2003). These demands implicate not only superintendents but also frontline, midlevel, and executive staff throughout central offices.

Central office administrators' productive participation in districtwide learning improvement seems essential to realizing such goals. For decades, various school improvement efforts have struggled or failed—in part because of limited or disappointing central office participation (e.g., Bryk, Sebring, Kerbow, Rollow, & Easton, 1998; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Malen, Ogawa, & Kranz, 1990; Ravitch & Viteritti, 1997). These and related findings suggest that district central offices are key players in realizing learning improvement goals (Honig & Hatch, 2004). However, research mainly features what central offices do when they curb implementation, not how they can enable it.

Those district central offices that have traditionally played reportedly limited or unproductive roles in learning support likely lack the capacity to participate in such work (Marsh, 2002). Many urban districts, in particular, operate under conditions that can significantly frustrate central office participation in learning improvement. According to policy analyses as well as various reports in the popular media, these conditions include the threat or reality of state takeover (Elmore, Ableman, & Fuhrman, 1996; Goertz & Duffy, 2003; Katz, 2003a); severe budget shortfalls (Bach, 2005; Katz, 2003b); increasing state controls on resource allocations to classrooms (Kepner, 2007); and desegregation and special education consent decrees that focus on compliance with external mandates rather than primarily on learning support (Boghossian, 2005; Chute, 2007; Haynes, 2007).

An emerging body of research examines the efforts of some districts to buck these trends and play more prominent roles in learning improvement, usually through discrete efforts to reform mathematics or literacy curriculum and instruction, to recruit highly qualified teachers and principals, or to increase school accountability for results (e.g., Burch & Spillane, 2004; Corcoran & Foley, 2003; Cuban & Usdan, 2003; Darling-Hammond, Hightower, Husbands, Lafors, Young, & Christopher, 2005; Elmore, 1997; Hightower, Knapp, Marsh, & McLaughlin, 2002; Hubbard, Stein, & Mehan, 2006; Knapp et al., 2003; Spillane, 1996; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). These initiatives are certainly ambitious but far more limited in scope than central office reinvention efforts that aim to remake central office functions across the district. Nonetheless, these studies offer some compelling lessons—lessons about how district central offices matter to learning improvement—that seem applicable to central office reinvention efforts. Interestingly, we find that central office reinvention efforts across the country reflect these lessons by doing the following:

- Engaging central office administrators across the central office in learning-focused partnership relationships with schools.
- Investing substantially in the development of central office administrators as key reform participants.
- Supporting central office administrators in inventing new forms of participation in reform on the job.
- Involving external support providers in central office support roles.

In the following sections, we elaborate on these lessons from research on school district central offices and illustrate them with examples from district central office reinvention efforts currently under way in Atlanta Public Schools, New York City Public Schools, and Oakland Unified School District.

## Lessons From Research on District Central Offices and Examples From Practice

**PARTNERSHIP RELATIONSHIPS.** First, in district central offices that play promising roles in learning improvement, central office administrators engage not mainly in limited, compliance-oriented or managerial relationships with schools but in learning-focused “partnership” relationships with them. The activities involved in these partnership relationships go by many names in the research literature, including “building policy from practice” and “organizational learning” (Honig, 2003), valuing “working knowledge” (Kennedy, 1982), “reform as learning” (Hubbard et al., 2006), “inquiry-based practice” (Copland, 2003), and, simply “leadership” (Burch & Spillane, 2004). By whatever name, these partnerships generally call on central offices to dedicate a group of central office administrators to work closely with school leaders to accomplish the following:

- Identify “problems of practice” or what some call “joint work”—that is, conditions that seem to impede student learning; and strategies that may help schools, central offices, and their communities address those conditions to enable learning at high levels for all students.
- Codevelop intentional, public theories of action that provide an articulated rationale for why particular courses of action may help improve learning in their own contexts.
- Develop central office and school policies and practices consistent with those theories of action.
- Continually revisit and refine those theories of action, policies, and practices as implementation unfolds to build on lessons learned and other evidence.
- Hold each other accountable for results.



In some districts, the central office administrators dedicated to these partnership relationships are located in a division of teaching and learning. However, in other districts, various central office administrators participate, including those in human resources and purchasing.

Partnership relationships of this sort move beyond long-standing debates about whether schools or the central office should direct educational improvement efforts. Rather, these relationships rest on assumptions that each party—the central office and the schools—has knowledge essential to expanding students' opportunities to learn and that such distributed expertise should be shared and used. Such relationships are fundamentally dynamic (Murphy & Hallinger, 1988) and rooted in notions of reciprocal accountability (Fink & Resnick, 2001). In such relationships, district central offices do not abandon their traditional assessment functions but redefine them so that they help build school and district capacity for learning improvement.

**Atlanta.** For example, since 1999, Atlanta Public Schools, under the leadership of Superintendent Beverly Hall, Ed.D., has aimed to reimagine and reconfigure the work of its central office regarding school support relationships. Dr. Hall inherited a central office organized in traditional "silos" of activity, removed from immediate contact with schools. Intended changes in central office structure, function, and operation include the physical relocation of new key central office administrators, known as School Reform Team (SRT) executive directors, out into schools. SRT executive directors are mandated to improve teaching and learning within a small cluster of schools. Hired into the new role specifically for their instructional leadership expertise, they are to act as a main point of contact for each school principal and are to respond rapidly to schools' requests for teaching and learning assistance. SRT resources include a cadre of model teacher leaders who are subject-area

specialists in content and pedagogy and who provide targeted, real-time professional support to schools. SRT executive directors tell us that their day-to-day work involves figuring out how to act as efficient and effective resource brokers between the central office and schools, in a way that supports diverse school needs and interests, while staying true to the district's overarching vision for improving teaching and learning. Through a new regular system of assessments and direct communication between school principals and the superintendent, central office and SRT staff receive feedback on their efforts.

**New York City.** In New York City Public Schools, central office staff for years had been deployed into geographically based offices (similar to the new offices in Atlanta), but relationships between the central office and some schools—by many accounts—remained primarily supervisory, distant, and not focused on learning improvement. In July 2007, the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) replaced the central office regional structure with three broad categories of support specifically for learning improvements. Schools now have increased discretion over their own budgets and, regardless of their geographic location, may purchase services to support their learning improvement efforts through one of the following avenues:

- **Local Support Organizations (LSOs).** Each LSO focuses on a different dimension of school improvement (namely, Integrated Curriculum and Instruction Learning Support Organization, Community Learning Support Organization, Leadership Learning Support Organization, and Knowledge Network Learning Support Organization). Schools that affiliate with an LSO receive a range of supports determined by LSO staff based in part on their own expertise in particular areas and schools' demands for particular services.
- **Private Support Organizations (PSOs).** NYCDOE likewise selected several

external organizations, called PSOs, to work intensively with schools on particular learning improvement approaches and to infuse the public school system with resources for school support beyond those available from in-district staff.

- **Empowerment Schools Organization (ESO).** The ESO works with “empowerment schools,” which are schools granted new freedoms from central office rules regarding various aspects of school operations beyond the freedoms available to all schools. Through the ESO, each empowerment school affiliates with a network team that includes new central office staff—typically a network leader, an achievement coach, a lead instructional mentor, and a business manager—to work together to provide school-by-school support for improving teaching and learning. Although network leaders’ roles vary in part by leaders’ expertise and schools’ needs, all network leaders we interviewed agreed that the role of a network leader and a network team is not to supervise or monitor principals but to support them—to help bring various resources to bear on schools’ efforts to chart their own path for school improvement.

In tandem with this new central office support structure for schools, Integrated Service Centers across the city provide a range of assistance to schools and their network teams for largely managerial functions such as processing some purchases and requests for leave. NYCDOE leaders tell us that they intend to focus schools on improving student learning in part by improving the efficiency with which the central office carries out these other business functions. All of these efforts are supported by a new periodic and annual assessment system that aims to provide leaders throughout the district system with real-time data and other new tools for understanding progress at the level of individual students.

**Oakland.** In the Oakland Unified School District, central office departments and divisions of the past focused on the administration and monitoring of particular grant programs—or otherwise operated, in the words of one central office administrator, “for their own sake, without any rhyme or reason regarding what schools needed.” Under the banner “Expect Success!” school-based financing and a weighted student funding formula have helped give schools what some central office leaders call “purchasing power” and prompted the central office to operate in a school-service mode. Now, a central office strategy team spearheads various cross-cutting strategic planning processes to identify core services that the central office will provide or make available to schools for purchase, depending on their learning improvement strategies. Central office leadership eliminated many long-standing central office departments or streamlined them into what they call the Service Organization, which, according to its official description, aims to provide “reliable support to educators in human resources, in the smart use of data, in teacher training, in payroll, and in other areas necessary to keep schools running smoothly.” New central office staff called Network Executive Officers (NExOs) work with groups of school principals and schools to help build their capacity to make their own strategic decisions about learning improvements and to meet the accountability-for-results demands that go along with their new purchasing power. Central office leaders tell us that they aim to infuse these efforts with an “accountability culture” reinforced by multiple opportunities for staff and community members to look continuously at data on student learning and provide feedback on district progress.

#### **CENTRAL OFFICE STAFF DEVELOPMENT.**

Second, to support these partnership relationships, districts make substantial investments in the development of the people who work within central offices as key reform participants. Promising school-



improvement efforts have struggled even in the face of supportive formal policies, in part because central office administrators have not participated productively in their implementation (e.g., Malen et al., 1990). Such findings suggest that strengthening how central offices support student learning is not solely or even mainly a technical matter of developing better policies and formal governance structures. Rather, central office support involves helping administrators throughout central offices build their capacity to participate productively in improvement efforts (Burch & Spillane, 2004; Honig, 2004b; Honig, 2006). Such an approach requires significant investments not only in schools but also in the professional development of central office staff. All three of the districts we feature make substantial investments in the development of central office administrators' professional practice.

**New York City.** For example, as noted, New York City's ESO network team members are charged with hands-on work with each school principal to improve student learning. To support the development of these new central office staff, other central office leaders and local professional development experts convene the network leaders and other team members in various configurations to explore particular problems of practice and to share lessons learned. As the number of empowerment schools has expanded, "veteran" network leaders, as well as principals themselves, have nominated individuals to oversee new networks, and the more experienced leaders serve as formal mentors to the incoming network leaders and their network teams. These efforts play out in the context of a broader human capital development strategy that includes careful selection of principals who may operate ably in an empowerment context with high demands regarding student learning and accountability for it.

**Atlanta.** In Atlanta, the district created a new Project Management Office to provide

direction and support for cross-functional teams' focused projects. It also created new evaluation processes to make clear the performance expectations for the new work. A central office administrator highlighted how this change created a felt need for seasoned individuals on his team who were used to doing business the old "Atlanta way" to learn to shift their ways of working within and across departments in order to meet new performance expectations associated with the changes. This shift has been supported through the introduction of collaborative planning processes between personnel in various parts of the central office, helping to break down the traditional barriers between "silos" in the central office.

**Oakland.** Oakland's NExOs each develop network leadership plans that focus on their own development and that of their principals. We have observed how, as part of their semimonthly meetings, NExOs take turns presenting challenges that particular schools in their networks are facing and elaborating on how they have been supporting the principals in those schools in developing their capacity for instructional leadership. Other NExOs and central office administrators then engage in extended dialogue with the presenting NExO about how to strengthen their participation in principal and school support. Such critical, inquiry-focused consultations focus in part on underlying school-level barriers to learning improvement but mainly hone in on how the NExOs themselves can better support school-based improvement efforts. These professional development opportunities are part of a broader human resources investment strategy to improve the capacity of employees throughout the district.

**INVENTIVENESS.** Third, central office administrators in these districts are encouraged to invent on-the-job what it means to engage in these new partnership relationships. Beyond the general admonition that central office administrators should support learning,



research-based models of this professional practice are virtually nonexistent. Even extensively documented cases, such as that of New York City's Community School District 2 in the 1990s (Elmore, 1997), reveal little about how administrators throughout central office units transform their daily practice to better support learning improvement. Some research refers to how the district participated in successful reform efforts but does not differentiate who in the central office participated in such efforts, what they did, how their work may have differed from that of other central office administrators, and how their work evolved over time (e.g., Marsh et al., 2005). Even if detailed models of central office practice were available, such practices invariably would involve some degree of context-specific, on-the-job invention as central office administrators work in partnership with schools to continually gauge how to deepen schools' capacity for strengthening student learning (Honig, 2006). Within the districts we feature here, central office leaders have created new opportunities for central office staff to imagine new roles for themselves that support learning improvements.

**New York City.** NYCDOE network leaders come from a broad range of backgrounds—from teaching and the principalship to private business, higher education administration and research, educational philanthropy, and community organizing. Central office leaders explain that the selection of such a varied group reflects a deliberate strategy to infuse the system with new paradigms of school support. According to one facilitator of the professional support sessions noted above, these sessions aim not to bring the network leaders to consensus about what a network leader does but to generate ideas about a range of ways that network leaders might operate to support schools and what network leaders are learning about the benefits and limitations of different approaches.

**Oakland.** Leaders in the Oakland Unified School District have configured central office staff in a matrix structure, in which many central office administrators belong both to their regular unit (e.g., human resources or budget) but also to a time-limited project team. Each project team is charged with reinventing a dimension of central office operations. For example, project teams in 2007 addressed principal leadership development, the elaboration of the network model, new school support, community engagement in Expect Success, performance management for network leaders, and technology support to schools and the overall Expect Success effort. This project-team approach reflects principles of the “new public management,” which include empowering staff to use their expert knowledge of particular work functions to invent solutions to nonroutine problems.

**EXTERNAL SUPPORT.** Fourth, external support for central office administrators seems essential to enabling central office administrators' productive participation in the dynamic learning support partnerships. Research has begun to demonstrate how community agencies and reform-support organizations, in particular, can significantly assist with not only school change but also central office participation in learning improvement initiatives (Corcoran & Lawrence, 2003; Gallucci, Boatright, Lysne, & Swinnerton, 2006; Honig, 2004a; Honig, 2004b; Marsh et al., 2005; Smylie & Wenzel, 2003). In these arrangements, fellows or coaches from the external organization assist central office staff specifically in their own transformation efforts. As part of this process, some external colleagues model the various ways that central office leaders could work with school principals and others to address various problems of practice and provide other resources for central office change.

**Atlanta.** For example, as an early partner in Atlanta's district reinvention effort, Graduation Really Achieves Dreams (Project GRAD),



a national reform organization, brokered relationships between Atlanta and a number of external school reform models such as Success for All and Move It Math. These partnerships and the resulting strategies produced significant and rapid initial improvement in achievement outcomes for students in a cohort of Atlanta's most challenged schools. Project GRAD staff, employed through a combination of district funds and external support from Atlanta's philanthropic community, developed into key partners in planning and implementing the work of reform alongside district central office administrators. The former executive director of Project GRAD Atlanta, Kweku Forstall, described his role in working as a bona fide member of the superintendent's senior cabinet as "friendly agitator," charged with raising critical questions that helped the district stay focused on providing quality support for the poorest performing schools early on in Dr. Hall's tenure.

**Oakland.** The Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools (BayCES) has been a significant driver of Oakland's central office redesign efforts. In the early 2000s, the BayCES executive director partnered with staff of the district's Office for School Reform to elaborate a model for a fundamentally new central office that would operate as a learning support network—a coordinated group of highly skilled staff working to strengthen students' opportunities to learn equitably across Oakland's schools. This external assistance model became the blueprint for the current central office reinvention effort that has survived through Oakland entering state receivership in 2003 and operating under three state administrators between 2003 and 2008. In the past two years, several BayCES staff members have become so involved with the redesign work that they have taken on full-time positions within the district's central office to assist with the redesign effort in such foundational areas as principal recruitment and support. BayCES directors currently design and facilitate the consultations that anchor professional development for the NExOs.

## Key Questions for District Central Office Leadership

This review of literature and district examples raises key questions that central office leaders might consider if they are interested in central office reinvention strategies that aim to deepen how district central office administrators support student learning districtwide. First and foremost: Are we making significant investments in the central office as a site of change? District leaders who are serious about engaging their central office staff as key reform participants might further consider the following questions:

- Are we adequately investing in our people within the central office to forge the kinds of new school-partnership relationships that seem fundamental to districtwide learning improvements?
- Are we reinforcing those partnership relationships with new work structures and accountability systems that promise to seed and grow learning improvements?
- Are we providing our central office administrators with the resources and freedom to invent new ways of participating in learning support?
- Are we engaged in strategic partnerships with external organizations not only to provide knowledge and other resources to schools but also to bolster the work of central office reinvention?

As educational research has demonstrated for decades, many school improvement efforts post disappointing results, in part because of limited central office participation in implementation. The research and examples from our three featured districts highlight the importance of engaging central office administrators as key participants in educational improvement and suggest that ambitious central office reinvention initiatives in particular may prompt meaningful central office change in support of learning outcomes.



## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> For these and other reasons, we currently are focusing on these three districts as part of a national study on educational leadership funded by the Wallace Foundation. A series of literature reviews that were published in a run up to the study design may be downloaded from <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/KnowledgeCenter/KnowledgeTopics/CurrentAreasofFocus/EducationLeadership/LeadingLearningLeadership.htm>

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