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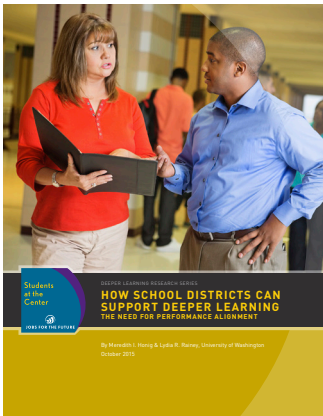
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DEEPER LEARNING RESEARCH SERIES | OCTOBER 2015

## HOW SCHOOL DISTRICTS CAN SUPPORT DEEPER LEARNING

### THE NEED FOR PERFORMANCE ALIGNMENT

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School district leaders nationwide aspire to help their schools become vibrant places for learning—where students have meaningful academic opportunities *and* develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills, the ability to communicate effectively, and other deeper learning capacities that are essential to success in later life. Historically, though, school district central offices have been ill equipped to support such ambitious goals.

However, a new wave of research suggests that central offices have a key role to play in creating the conditions that make deeper learning possible. Specifically, the authors call upon district leaders to embrace what they call “performance alignment,” a continuous effort to ensure that every part of the district is on the same page, actively supporting teachers and principals as they work with students.

### DEEPER LEARNING AND ITS CONNECTION TO CENTRAL OFFICES

For at least the past two decades—from Goals 2000 and No Child Left Behind to the Common Core—federal and state policymakers have called upon educators to raise academic standards and help all

students to reach them, in order to ensure that they graduate from high school ready for college and careers. Numerous researchers have found that within school systems, it is teachers and principals who tend to have the most, and most direct, impact on students’ progress toward meeting such standards. But fairly little is known about the contributions that district leaders and central office staff can and must make in order to make it possible for teachers and principals to be effective.

#### **Little research or policy attention on central offices:**

In past decades, district central offices appeared mainly in the background of studies that focused on schools, and mainly as impediments to school improvement. More recently, attention to districts has increased somewhat, but the role of central offices



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also has been largely absent from policy education reform. Many foundations and state and federal policymakers have essentially forgotten about the critical role of central offices.

**Limited central office support for teaching and learning:**

History is partly to blame for the lack of attention by central offices to improving teaching and learning. From the dawning of public schools in the United States, the central office's role focused mainly on record-keeping and compliance to state and federal laws; district staff rarely saw their work as having much to do with teaching and learning. Thus, when central offices were charged with helping to oversee and implementing standards-based reforms and other efforts to improve classroom teaching in the 1990s, they were a poor fit for the job.

**Why central offices struggle to support improvements in teaching and learning:** When district leaders try to shift their roles to support ambitious teaching and learning, the misalignment of central office resources, data, and other systems can make change arduous.

## WHY IS THIS CHANGE SO HARD?

**Competition and lack of coordination within central offices can impede their support for teaching and learning improvement.** For example, the authors describe one district that provided its teachers with state-of-the-art professional development in mathematics for many years, helping raise test scores. But in order to provide this support, the central office used up well over half of the days available for teacher training and most of the district's allotment for substitute teachers. This left few resources for professional development in other subjects, and achievement declined in those areas.

**There is a lack of data to inform the use of scarce professional development resources.** The authors describe another district that initiated a major effort to provide professional development for teachers in schools identified, based on students' test scores, as having the greatest needs. But some of the targeted schools were already participating in a separate initiative to bring stronger teachers into those schools, and they had already recruited on-site teacher leaders to provide enhanced professional development opportunities. As a result, the district's efforts were redundant and not particularly helpful. With better data on local needs, resources could have been used much more effectively.

**The hiring and placement of personnel in many districts does not support improved teaching and learning.**

Human resources departments tend to provide only limited screening of teaching candidates before passing them along to principals. As a result, principals must often spend enormous amounts of time reviewing dozens of candidates for each position, conducting interviews, and struggling to identify those whose instructional strategies and experiences are most aligned with deeper learning.

**Central office staff who supervise principals rarely provide them with the kinds of support that can help them lead for instructional improvement.** In many districts, supervisors devote much of their time to monitoring principals' compliance with central office directives. Often, they are also called upon to fill in for other parts of the office, serving an all-purpose district role that leaves them with little time to mentor and supervise local principals.

## HOW CENTRAL OFFICES CAN SUPPORT SYSTEMWIDE DEEPER LEARNING

The authors have studied a number of districts that have confronted the mismatch between the goals of deeper learning and the limitations of central office staff capacity and systems. These districts are taking steps to ensure that all parts of their daily work—particularly those related to human resources, curriculum and instruction, and principal supervision, but sometimes involving administrative functions such as payroll processing and transportation—meaningfully supports principals and teachers' efforts to help all students reach ambitious academic and personal goals.

The authors identify three main elements common in districts pursuing performance alignment:

**Define high-quality teaching and principal and teacher leadership.** Districts that align their work to performance make their goals clear and mobilize their resources appropriately. At the school level, clear and explicit definitions of strong performance set the stage for teachers and principals to develop a shared understanding of the kind of teaching they aim to develop and how principals can support it.

### Guiding questions for district leaders:

- > What would the office look like if it were truly designed to support instructional leadership, high-quality teaching, and—ultimately—deeper learning?
- > Are staff engaged in work that is not in service of such results?
- > Beyond simply helping them do their current work more efficiently, what can be done to engage teachers in the *right* work?

#### **Ensure that principal supervisors are truly focused on supporting principals' instructional leadership growth.**

To become better instructional leaders, principals often need intensive and personalized support from district supervisors. Viewing principal supervisors as an important but largely untapped resource, districts that pursue performance alignment take deliberate steps to reduce the time supervisors spend on operational and regulatory functions, so that they can shift their focus to providing direct support to principals.

#### **Ensure that all district staff members focus their time and other resources on activities that support schools' pursuit of deeper learning.**

It is particularly important that district leaders identify conflicts within and among parts of the central office, encouraging staff to break out of long-standing siloes and find ways to bring their work into alignment. For example, if HR systems make it difficult or impossible to reassign or remove administrators, then supervisors may end up devoting all of their time to trying to help a handful of ineffective principals, leaving them no time to support the rest. And if supervisors neglect to mentor new principals, then HR will soon be faced with a slew of openings to fill. In short, each part of the district must recognize how its work makes it possible for the others to function effectively.

## CONCLUSION

Strong, coordinated support from school districts' central offices is essential to realize deeper learning for all students. This goes well beyond shifting organizational charts—it should reach into the daily work of all central office staff members and engage them in redesigning their roles.

### Recommendations include:

- > **District and state leaders—and policymakers and foundation leaders—must recognize the urgent need to support major improvements in central offices.** Because aligning for performance relies so heavily on remaking the day-to-day work of the central office, district leaders should invest in building the capacity of their own staff, rethinking staff assignments, and redesigning outdated systems and administrative roles.
- > **Collect and use the right data:** New data systems can help by capturing and displaying information well beyond test scores, allowing central office staff to better understand the quality of teaching, learning, and principal leadership in their schools, and to see how they might align their work to support improvement.
- > **Address teaching and learning across the subject areas:** As districts make decisions about professional development for schools, they shouldn't assume that each academic subject area requires its own distinct services, each one funded at the same level. Rather, they should consider working collaboratively, making joint decisions as to where professional development needs are greatest, and which services can be provided across departments and schools.
- > **Build bridges within the central office—especially between curriculum and instruction and human resources:** In districts aligning to performance, C&I and HR leaders collaborate to ensure that professional development aligns with the placement of teacher and principal candidates. C&I and HR leaders can also eliminate or streamline existing tasks to maximize the time staff spend on supporting better teaching and learning.
- > **Search out additional opportunities for alignment:** District leaders should consider the ways in which every department—even those with less obvious connections to instruction, such as facilities and transportation—can contribute to teachers and principals' efforts to promote deeper learning. At times, effective instruction and principal supervision may depend on the bus driver, the payroll staff, or the maintenance crew.



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