The Rise of Networks

How Decentralized Management Is Improving Schools

By Maureen Kelleher   May 2014

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Introduction and summary

School districts across the country are shifting away from their traditional management paradigm—a central office that directs its schools through uniform mandates and policies—toward a new vision where district leaders support autonomous schools while holding them accountable for student performance. The advent of new governance mechanisms between districts and schools that have come with the rise of charter schools, contract schools, and various systems that allow district-managed schools greater freedom of action in hiring, budgeting, and instructional planning has transformed the command-and-control relationships that were long the hallmark of public school management. As a consequence, school-district leaders increasingly recognize that greater school autonomy requires rethinking their models of district-level management and support.

In 2006, New York City pioneered the transformation of the relationship between the central office and its schools by launching an initiative that gave autonomy to all schools regardless of their performance.[1] During the two-year pilot program that preceded the initiative's launch, an initial cohort of 26 schools organized itself into four networks of schools that worked together to solve common problems. These networks were supported by a small team of central-office staff who understood school autonomy and helped schools address a broad range of issues, from instruction to hiring to budgeting.[2] As the pilot program scaled up, additional schools followed suit and voluntarily affiliated into networks of similar-size schools. These new networks were also supported by expert teams of district personnel or by staff from a select group of education nonprofits. By 2010, every public school in New York City was required to select a support partner and join a network.[3]

Today, New York City's public schools are affiliated in networks based on a common interest: a similar type of school, such as an all-elementary-school network; a common instructional approach; or a similar target population, such as English language learners.[4] These school networks are supported by teams of about 15 experts, either from within the system or from a nonprofit education partner, who help principals hire teachers, manage budgets, find and create school-specific professional development, analyze student data, and troubleshoot technical and operational problems.[5]

This report describes the current state of school networks in New York City and outlines the successes and challenges the city has faced in implementing school networks. It also explores how networks have been implemented in other cities—Baltimore, Maryland; Chicago, Illinois; and Denver, Colorado—to show how the school-network concept has been adapted to a variety of local contexts. Educational researchers note that few, if any, urban public school districts consistently provide their schools with effective supports to improve instruction for disadvantaged children.[6] As districts struggle to improve their supports for schools, especially those serving large numbers of disadvantaged students, school networks show promise as an emerging strategy to help schools improve student learning and to solve the operational problems that can suck time and energy away from a focus on instruction.

Research on school networks in New York City and other districts is still in its infancy. However, based on a review of existing research related to New York City schools and interviews with experts on school networks in Baltimore, Chicago, and Denver, we offer these emerging findings:

- **Networks can deliver district supports more effectively than traditional central-office departments.** Organizing district support by cross-functional teams responsive to a small group of schools builds greater trust between school leaders and their district and helps district-level staff better understand the needs of the schools they serve. Network teams can serve as a single point of contact between principals and district leaders, which gives principals more time to focus on teachers and instruction.

- **Networks can open the door to collaborative problem solving among groups of schools, leading to improved student outcomes.** New York City educational leaders report that a handful of high-performing school networks used cross-school collaboration to make significant strides in school improvement during the 2011-12 school year. However, New York City's networks have had varying degrees of success fostering such collaboration across their schools. In Chicago, an externally managed, voluntary network of high schools has improved graduation and college entrance rates for students. Other cities have made less effort to use school networks as a tool for cross-school collaboration.

- **Outsourcing can enhance networks, but locale is key.** In cities such as New York, where robust educational nonprofit sectors exist, external partners can lead networks of schools in instructional improvement. However, New York City's experience with outside networks indicates that external partners still need district liaisons to solve problems with operations. In cities with a weaker base of educational nonprofits, district staff must continue to lead both operational troubleshooting and instructional improvement.

Although New York City's school networks made other significant changes to the relationship between the central office and city schools, two key strategies—deploying cross-functional teams to support schools and allowing schools to choose their networks—have changed how schools view their relationship with the central office, improved service delivery, and ultimately helped schools improve their performance. When districts in other cities have experimented with school networks, the strategy of delivering district supports through network teams has taken root more deeply than has the approach of allowing schools to choose their network affiliation. However, initial findings from New York City indicate districts may want to invest more heavily in voluntary, self-affiliated school networks and to give schools the time and tools to collaborate on solving problems of instructional practice.

New York City's school networks

Currently, New York City's public schools are organized into nearly 60 Children First Networks. Each network comprises between 25 and 35 member schools. Although all Children First Networks report to New York City's central office, a select group of education nonprofits manages about one-fifth of the city's networks.[7] Each externally led network partners with a district-led, or internally led, network as needed to solve operational problems for member schools, such as obtaining adaptive technology or transportation services for special-needs students.[8] However, externally led networks work independently to support schools as they improve instruction.

School principals choose their networks and pay for network services out of their own budgets, though the district earmarks funds for the purpose.[9] Internally managed networks charge each school $34,000 for services, less than the $50,000 per school that the system allots.[10] Unspent network funds may be used at a school's discretion to support instruction. Externally managed networks charge between $35,330 and $71,688 per school member; when schools choose more expensive networks, they must make up the difference from their own discretionary funds.[11] The networks are grouped into five clusters for oversight and support from the central office.[12] A core task for cluster leaders is to articulate central-office directives in ways that make the most sense in the specific contexts of their networks and schools.[13] For example, in summer 2012, New York City's central office announced students would be taking Common Core-aligned, performance-based assessments in math and language arts the following spring. School principals and teachers were uncertain what to change first: curriculum frameworks, lesson plans, classroom assessments, or teaching strategies? To guide schools effectively, cluster and network leaders focused their professional development on new teaching strategies aimed at helping students master performance tasks.[14]
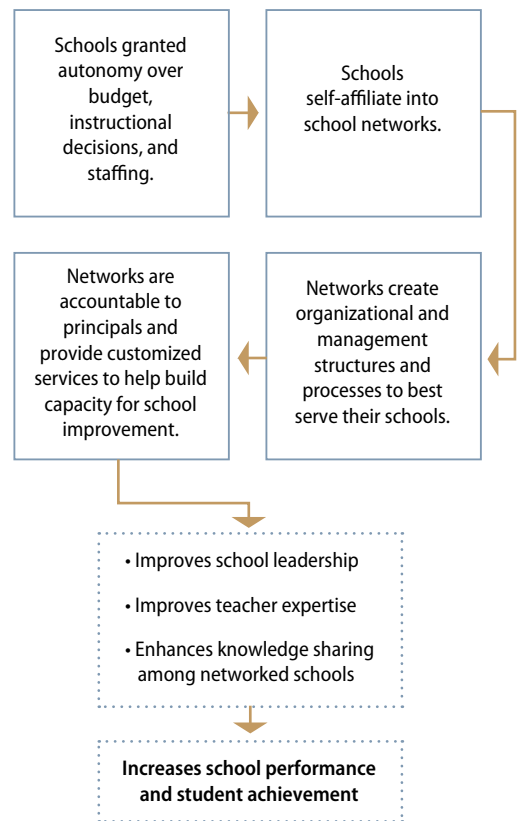
In the first published research on New York City's school networks—"New York City's Children First Networks: turning accountability on its head"—Priscilla Wohlstetter, Joanna Smith, and Andrew Gallagher describe the logic model of the network system as follows:

Principals would self-affiliate with like-minded colleagues with a common vision for teaching and learning in networks that would attract schools with similar needs, desires, and challenges. Network teams would then bring member schools together for joint [professional development] and knowledge sharing of promising practices across organizations. The network team also would spend considerable time in individual schools coaching and assisting school administrators and teachers. Over time, networks would also assume operational responsibilities to relieve principals of non-academic functions, so they could focus on the strategies they felt would improve student learning in their building.[15]

How do networks go about the business of serving schools? In New York City, each Children First Network is staffed by a network leader and a team of about 15 experts in instruction, operations, and student and family services.[16] All network teams offer services to their schools based on a common set of core expertise, which includes instruction—especially with respect to literacy, math, special education, and English language learners—human resources, budgeting, and procurement.[17] However, networks have flexibility to change the staffing model to meet their schools' needs, and some networks that are focused tightly on instruction have chosen to hire more staff—former teachers rather than former administrators, for example—at lower salaries. Former teachers are cheaper and often more familiar with specific subject areas.[18]

Notably, network staff members operate in a very different relationship to school principals than do traditional mid-level bureaucrats in a school district. Traditionally, district personnel in the closest working relationships with principals held supervisory authority over them. By contrast, New York City's network teams have no supervisory authority and are "accountable to principals for helping them improve school performance."[19] Networks also advocate for their schools with the central office by, for example, asking for additional funds, requesting an exception to a policy in order to serve the best interests of students, and more.[20]

FIGURE 1
Theory of action

New York City's school networks

Source: Priscilla Wohlstetter, Joanna Smith, and Andrew Gallagher, "New York City's Children First Networks: turning accountability on its head," *Journal of Educational Administration* 51 (4) (2013): 528–549.

At their best, network leaders and teams know their schools intimately and foster deep trust with school leaders. "There are so many things I go to my network leader for that I would never have asked [a district superintendent], because I know she's on my side," said a veteran principal in a recent focus group that compared networks to New York City's prior system of service delivery.[21]

However, separating supervisory authority from support has drawbacks too. Separating principals' support from evaluation may make it harder for supervisors to get a close look at principal performance. New York City's 32 local superintendents have formal authority over principals, including the power to fire them. But they have no authority over the network teams that work regularly within schools. District superintendents manage schools' compliance with district, state, and federal policies but have no supervisory, or line, authority over network staff. As a result, the local district and the network essentially operate in parallel.[22] This means the network leader—who is the central-office representative closest to the principal and the person most able to observe the principal's performance—has no formal role in evaluating that performance.

Without formal authority over principals, network leaders sometimes fail to win needed school improvements. Although research suggests that many network leaders effectively use what is termed "earned authority," which is based on relationships and a leader's demonstrated expertise to change schools, the leaders of lower-performing networks who lack authority—both formal and informal—over principals in their schools struggle to gain traction for change.[23]

New York City's education leaders pay close attention to the performance of school networks. Networks are evaluated annually based on student performance in member schools and on principals' satisfaction with their services. Since the 2011-12 school year, networks have received evaluations that rate them on a 1 to 4 scale, with 1 being lowest and 4 being highest, on the following measures:[24]

• Progress reports, which give schools a grade from A to F based on student performance and on surveys assessing a school's academic and social climate

• Quality reviews, which summarize observations made during a multiday visit to a school by a team of experienced educators

• Qualitative evaluations, which are conducted by cluster teams, with all clusters using a common rubric

- Principal satisfaction surveys, which are annual surveys conducted by the New York City Department of Education to elicit feedback on the district supports principals receive, including school networks

Networks can be disbanded for poor performance, as measured by shrinking demand or by posting two years of poor evaluations.[25] According to New York City schools' then-Chief Academic Officer and Deputy Chancellor Shael Polakow-Suransky, as of October 2012, 15 networks had leaders replaced. He shared this information with members of the New York City Council's Education Committee during a hearing on the network structure.[26]

Network successes

The adoption of networks has brought important benefits to New York City's public schools, most notably a devolution of funds from the central office out to schools and increased principal satisfaction with central-office supports. Networks have also freed principals' time to some extent and created "hot spots"—as Wohlstetter describes them—of cross-school collaboration. In these hot spots, school networks have fostered school-to-school interactions to increase shared knowledge and problem solving.[27]

Cost savings

Notably, New York City's school networks appear to be providing satisfactory services even as their costs are declining. Between 2007 and 2011, funding for the networks decreased from $250 million to $181 million.[28] In a recent report, The Parthenon Group, a leading advisory and consulting firm, noted that school and district leaders were highly satisfied with the networks when it came to providing cost-effective supports for schools in budgeting and human resources.[29]

Interviews with New York City school leaders indicate that networks have reduced central-office expenditures and that those savings have gone into school budgets. A network leader who formerly worked for a regional office itemized the cost savings realized by networks, noting:

The implementation of the CFN, or Children First Networks, structure put $400 million into the schools' budgets that [formerly] went to fund the central and regional offices. Before CFNs, the regional office overseeing high schools in the Bronx had 20 schools and our budget was $650,000 off-the-top for each school we supervised. We had 120 people in the office supporting 20 schools.[30]

The network leader estimated the true costs of support services provided by school networks to be between $75,000 and $80,000 per school, a significant savings over the previous system.[31]

Improved customer service to schools

Based on interviews with New York City school and network leaders, The Parthenon Group found the leading advantage of the current network system to be its premise that schools should choose the supports that best meet their needs.[32] Other benefits Parthenon noted were principal satisfaction with networks, the diverse approaches and room for innovation in school support the network structure has created, and the push for continuous improvement among networks created by giving principals regular opportunities to switch their network affiliation.[33]

Principals have praised networks for providing a single point of contact with the central office for resolving problems. As one principal was quoted saying in the "New York City's Children First Networks" report: "When a principal has a problem, they have one person to call at the network, and that person tries to get back to the principal with a solution within 24 to 48 hours."[34]

Networks often tackle thorny operational issues that previously required hours of principal time. A network team member provided Wohlstetter with an example:

All our schools needed to buy service protection plans for their computers. The schools had central office telling them, "You need to do it by this date" and the date had passed but the schools couldn't get into the district's [management information system] to get information about requirements and choices. So, as a member of the network leadership team, I tried to help schools get access to information and make an intelligent selection.[35]

Knowledge sharing and cross-school collaboration

Research indicates pockets of cross-school collaboration exist in high-performing networks. In interviews, a cluster leader observed that highly effective networks "facilitate conversations across schools or provide space for conversations and cross-learning."[36] For example, New Visions for Public Schools, the nonprofit that led development of New York City's small schools and continues to support them as an external network partner, has analyzed high school data for graduates who were placed in remedial college courses from all three of its networks. The goal of the analysis, according to Mark Dunetz, vice president of school support for New Visions, was to uncover "opportunities for intervention that would likely have an impact" on reducing those rates. New Visions has conducted similar analyses of Regents end-of-course exam results for comparable students attending different schools within the networks, with an eye toward finding successful school practices and disseminating them. "People are hungry for this," said Dunetz.[37]

The clearest and most consistent method of sharing knowledge among network principals is their monthly meeting with each other and network staff.[38] In addition, most networks hold monthly professional-development sessions for teacher leaders from all member schools who share similar responsibilities, such as special education, English language learners, math, and literacy.[39] However, network staff acknowledged that levels of participation vary among their schools. In at least one case, a subset of network schools were highly collaborative and shared their learning on team teaching with the rest of the network. As another network leader noted, "Some schools participate consistently and regularly and with passion. And other schools say, 'I know what I'm doing. I'll call you when I need you,' which we have to respect."[40]

Implementation challenges

Even as networks have demonstrated success, New York City continues to face two major challenges in its implementation: ensuring networks are giving sufficient guidance and support to the neediest schools and finding time to deepen cross-school collaboration, especially among teachers. The shift to networks has also caused unintended consequences—difficulty holding principals accountable, lack of clarity for parents, and barriers to cooperation among schools in the same neighborhood—that must be addressed for New York City to take its reforms to a new level of success.

Perhaps the most significant challenge in implementing networks is that the neediest schools may need more direction and support than networks are currently able to provide.[41] Because networks have close day-to-day working relationships with principals but do not formally supervise them, networks cannot force principals to change behavior even when such change would benefit the school.[42] Wohlstetter suggested this is not a flaw in the network strategy per se but instead a consequence of the rapid scale-up. That is to say, when networks were limited to principals who had asked for autonomy in order to improve student performance, these principals had an incentive to seek support from a high-performing network and to leave a network if they felt unsatisfied. However, according to Wohlstetter, "when scaled up system wide, it is not surprising that some principals are unmotivated to change."[43] In those circumstances, the network's limited authority is unlikely to be able to spur change in a principal's behavior.[44]

Although joint professional development and knowledge sharing among schools are components of the theory of action that undergirds the network strategy, the extent to which schools are able to do this varies significantly from network to network.[45] In her paper, Wohlstetter suggested that future research dig deeper to determine why cross-school collaboration is not more widespread and how successful networks create what she termed "hot spots" of collaboration.[46] Moreover, creating opportunities for teachers to collaborate across schools appears to be much more difficult than building in joint professional-development time for principals, data strategists, and other school personnel whose work day is not totally dedicated to classroom instruction. As one interviewee noted, "In some of the networks, very few teachers have created opportunities to work together across schools on projects they think will help improve student performance. So there are a handful of networks that actually do that, but those are definitely in the minority."[47]

The most significant constraint impeding cross-school collaboration is the lack of time. "Folks in schools don't exactly have lots of free time on their hands," noted Dunetz.[48] Sharing knowledge across schools will inevitably require both peer-to-peer conversations among schools and network-led dissemination of best practices. However, when a network can offer schools practical tools and interventions to solve instructional problems—or facilitate a visit to a demographically similar school that has mastered a challenge its peers are grappling with—schools seize the opportunity "quickly,"[49] according to Dunetz.

In 2012 testimony to the New York City Council Education Committee, network advocates noted that the separation of support for principals from their supervision has made it harder to hold principals accountable when necessary.[50] "Creative network staff may be able to persuade a principal to change his or her mind, or provide support needed to address a challenging situation," such as implementing appropriate services for homeless or special-needs students, said Kim Sweet, executive director of Advocates for Children of New York, in her testimony.[51] "But networks cannot force a principal to do the right thing, and in this structure, it is unclear who can."[52]

Sweet also observed that parents struggle to understand what networks are and how to access their assistance. "Almost universally, the parents we meet do not really understand what networks are and what relationship they have to their schools. If they have a problem that the principal cannot, or will not, resolve, they do not understand the chain of command and how to navigate it effectively."[53]

Perhaps most problematically, the current network structure makes it difficult to collaborate within local communities. In her testimony, Sweet gave the example of a kindergartner who needed a small special-education class that her zoned neighborhood school could not provide. The network refused to allow the kindergartner to transfer to a non-network school nearby that had the smaller, specialized class, and offered her a spot in a network school farther from her home.[54] Although networks tend to look within their member schools for solutions to problems,[55] this decision contradicted a premise of the city's recent special-education reforms, which emphasize allowing special-needs students to be educated closer to home.[56] In its recent report, The Parthenon Group echoed the concern that current networks make it hard for non-networked neighboring schools to collaborate and share resources.[57]

Networks beyond New York City

Beyond New York City, other urban districts have begun using networks to support schools instructionally and operationally. Let's look next at networks in three cities—Baltimore, Chicago, and Denver. In Baltimore and Denver, New York school leaders who had formerly worked under Joel Klein, Mayor Michael Bloomberg's first schools chancellor, brought their vision of networks to these cities' schools and adapted the network approach to the local culture. In Chicago, the district reorganized its support system into geographically based networks, but most observers have seen little change in service delivery as a result. However, a voluntary, nongeographic network of 18 Chicago high schools that is supported by an external partner—the Network for College Success—demonstrates the power of innovation and specificity in network support for schools.

Baltimore

Currently, Baltimore City Public Schools organizes its 195 schools into 15 networks.[58] Schools do not choose their networks; instead, based on principals' preferences, the networks are generally organized by school type—elementary, K-8, high school, charter, or special program. Baltimore even has one network that combines middle schools and high schools, a deliberate attempt to create both cross-collaboration among high schools and encourage stronger alignment between middle schools and the high schools their students will enter.[59]

Networks are staffed by teams of about 10 district staff and provide a single point of contact for schools to communicate with the district. Networks do not supervise principals but instead collaborate with their supervisors—executive directors for principal support—and with district departments to provide schools the supports they need in instruction, data, budgeting, family and community engagement, human capital, and facilities and maintenance.[60]

Baltimore's theory of action for networks focuses on their role as support providers, and, in this way, it parallels the New York City effort.[61] Baltimore schools' former chief executive officer, Andrés Alonso, credits his time spent in New York City with instilling fundamental principles on which he drew as he worked to make Baltimore's central-office supports more responsive to school needs. According to Alonso, these needs included centering attention on individual schools, student outcomes, and effectiveness of personnel, plus "a willingness to move very fast—sometimes without consensus."[62] Although those principles informed the creation of Baltimore's system of networks, Alonso left New York shortly before the first iteration of networks was launched there. In a recent interview, Alonso emphasized that networks in Baltimore are unique and tailored to the local circumstances. "We were not modeling New York. We were not adopting direct practices from elsewhere,"[63] explained Alonso.

While New York City's Klein pushed hard to give principals near-total control of their schools, in Baltimore, Alonso wanted to ensure that school autonomy was bounded and balanced with the need to maintain district-wide priorities. "I wanted to engage deep problems of equity and justice that should not be left to the discretion of the school," he said.[64] That meant addressing deep-seated equity issues regarding the use of suspensions and ensuring special-education students received a high-quality education. Ultimately, Baltimore's school networks helped principals enact new district policies on suspensions and support for special-needs students that helped settle a long-standing lawsuit over special education.[65]

When Alonso arrived in Baltimore in 2007, the district served about 81,000 students in 200 schools. The district divided schools into 10 geographically based administrative areas; an academic officer and a team of area staff led each. This area structure was connected to a central office of nearly 1,500 employees.[66] "Things seemed to be operationally inefficient. People in schools felt frustrated," Alonso recalled.[67] At the same time, after five years of state funding increases, Baltimore was about to see its state money level off. In remaking the central office, Alonso said he was trying to accomplish multiple goals at once: create district support "that was nimble and about service," create a climate where school staff felt accountable for their students' performance, shift dollars toward schools, and create clear district priorities endorsed by the community.[68] By creating a school network structure for service delivery, Baltimore accomplished many of these goals.

Alonso launched networks in the second year of his tenure, with the primary goal, in his words, of "trying to get a sense of what was going on in the schools, creating a flow of information."[69] After some experimentation, Baltimore has settled upon geographically based networks for elementary schools, but it generally groups middle and high schools by the grade levels they serve.[70] Alonso said high school principals and staff "demanded" to be networked separately from elementary schools out of a sense that their instructional and professional-development needs were very different.[71]

According to Alonso, the two major implementation challenges Baltimore faced in developing its networks were finding enough people with the talent, capacity, and inside knowledge of the district to support schools well and establishing effective pathways to capture knowledge of school-based best practices and share them among schools.[72] Knowledge management—determining the key knowledge that needed to be captured and transmitted among schools and convincing overburdened school staff to take the time to share their best practices—remained a significant challenge throughout Alonso's tenure.[73]

The shift to networks occurred as Alonso was undertaking a broader reduction in the central office. By May 2013, the end of his tenure in Baltimore, total central-office positions had been reduced by more than half.[74] As happened elsewhere, the move to networks resulted in reductions in central-office positions.[75] However, networks themselves have been revenue neutral.[76] Baltimore City Public Schools cites improvements in service delivery to schools—a single point of contact and integrated service delivery—as the most important results of the shift to networks.[77]

Reflecting back on his time in Baltimore, Alonso took pride in the balance struck between school autonomy and networks as both a support to schools and a driver of district priorities. "No one in Baltimore is talking about pulling back either the networks or decision making at the school level."[78]

Denver

Denver's experience with school networks began in 2005, shortly after Jaime Aquino, who served as a regional superintendent in New York City prior to its adoption of networks, became Denver's chief academic officer.[79] Before Aquino arrived, Denver Public Schools divided its approximately 175 schools into four geographical quadrants, each overseen by an area superintendent who had full line authority

over principals and largely supported them operationally.[80] In 2005, Denver's school enrollment of about 65,000 students was smaller than Baltimore's.[81] However, by 2013, Denver's enrollment had grown to about 84,000 students, bringing the two cities very close in number of students served, though their demographics differ.[82] And while New York City made strategic use of external partners as network providers, Denver, like Baltimore, has chosen to keep network services entirely in house.

According to Patricia Slaughter, Denver's assistant superintendent for elementary education, the shift to networks was prompted more by a desire to focus on instruction than by a push for cost savings. The overall goal was to help principals shift their role from being building managers to becoming instructional leaders.[83] Schools were grouped by the type of student served—elementary, middle, high school, or alternative—rather than by geography. "This allows us to focus more on the needs of the schools," explained Slaughter.[84]

Denver networks serve a maximum of 20 schools, and an instructional superintendent leads each network.[85] Slaughter served as a principal under Denver's old area structure and was an instructional superintendent prior to assuming her current position. During her tenure as a principal, Slaughter pointed out that she had "my area superintendent in the building once for a meeting."[86] By contrast, in her own work as an instructional superintendent, she said, "Aquino expected us to be in schools 85 percent of the time. I lived out of my car. My job then was to be available to the schools. I had regular meetings with the principals, went on classroom walkthroughs."[87] At the time, Slaughter held meetings with her schools every three weeks. Today, networks meet monthly, and principals are only required to attend district-level meetings twice annually.[88] Instructional superintendents provide principals with both support and formal oversight; only what Denver terms "innovation schools"—autonomous schools created by state law and subject to local approval— are free to choose between their assigned instructional superintendent and the district's Office of School Reform and Innovation as their support provider.[89] Most elementary schools are organized geographically; however, turnaround elementary schools—which face special challenges in assimilating new principals and staff while accelerating student achievement—form their own network.[90]

In Slaughter's view, Denver's decision to keep support and oversight united within the network structure has been a win. "What we hear from our principals all the time is, 'I need my instructional superintendent in the building more.' The relationships instructional superintendents build with their principals are so close, principals don't have a problem with them being their coach, their mentor, and their evaluator."[91] When a network school loses a principal or assistant principal, its instructional superintendent is responsible for identifying candidates to fill the vacancy.[92]

Denver's major implementation challenges in creating networks have centered on how and when to integrate more central-office services into the network structure and how to free principals' time. When Denver launched its networks in 2006, Aquino shifted money from central departments to fund the instructional superintendents and a team of five or six specialists per network. "This created a challenge for people who had always done it one way," said Slaughter.[93] Some initial network positions have disappeared over time—for example, parent liaisons were originally part of networks but were later recentralized,[94] she noted.

During the 2013-14 school year, Denver has organized its central-office departments to serve as what are termed "extended partners" to networks. For example, while human resources is still a central-office department, each human resources staff person is assigned to schools through the network system and works closely with the instructional superintendent and network staff. "We're including more people in the conversation about what schools need," said Slaughter.[95] Connecting more central-office departments with networks is also reducing the demands on principals' time by coordinating information requests and streamlining communications. "We don't want to overload our principals," said Slaughter. "We're looking at how many surveys we're asking them to complete, how many meetings we are asking them to attend."[96]

Denver has strategically chosen to keep networks an internal designation, communicating about groups of schools to parents and the public using more readily understood language about neighborhoods and feeder patterns. "We don't talk about networks much externally," said Michael Vaughn, chief communications officer for Denver Public Schools. "We talk more about feeder patterns, geographic regions, communities."[97] External audiences—parents and communities—commonly understand schools in relationship to their neighborhoods and to the schools their children attend, where they age and advance from one specific elementary school to one specific middle school to one specific high school. Because networks group schools by similar type or similar problem area, these groupings are useful for district internal communications but make less sense to external audiences.

At the same time, parents and community members active in the schools know their schools' instructional superintendents and understand their role. "We've been doing this for seven years now. Parents know the structure. Instructional superintendents are in the buildings. Parents see them as a great support," said Slaughter.[98]

Chicago

Although the Chicago district has organized its support for schools into networks, its functioning has not radically changed from the previous structure. Networks were first introduced in Chicago in 2011 and were drawn to keep neighborhoods together.[99] Then-Superintendent Jean-Claude Brizard also introduced a School Support Center to help principals manage operations.[100] In fall 2013, the number of networks was reduced from 19 to 13 to save money and improve service delivery; this was accomplished by grouping high schools geographically with elementary schools.[101] Chicago's network leaders retain supervisory authority over principals.[102]

However, a closer analogue to the New York City vision of networks—school chosen, collaborative, and focused on a common objective—has emerged in the Network for College Success, or NCS, which was founded in 2006 by University of Chicago professor Melissa Roderick in response to high school principals' requests for assistance in improving student outcomes using research and data.[103] In 2009, NCS became a formal area within the Chicago district support structure, and a former network principal became its chief area officer, which helped ensure NCS supports remained consistent through the transition.[104] And while successful, two years later, due to the district's reorganization, NCS returned to its original model of a voluntary network led by an external support provider.[105]

Currently, NCS supports 18 Chicago public high schools with varying demographics and histories of student performance, from selective-enrollment high schools with high rates of college entrance to schools that have received federal School Improvement Grants due to a history of low performance.[106] Schools pay for NCS services through their discretionary funds.

NCS coaches school administrators, guidance counselors, teacher leaders, and social workers during the school day as part of their regular duties. NCS also hosts monthly collaborative learning sessions tailored to each of those groups that are focused on common problems of practice. Network schools have also hosted tours for colleagues to see best practices in action. Although NCS customizes its collaborative learning sessions and individual coaching for each role, all of the work is aligned to clear goals—increasing network schools' high school graduation and college enrollment rates.[107]

"In my mind, there's only one way to do cross-school learning, and that's bringing people from across schools together," said Mary Ann Pitcher, co-director for NCS. "We manage to make it happen despite all the challenges."[108]

This approach is showing quantitative results. In recent years, NCS network schools have exceeded district averages in the percentage of freshmen on track to graduate on time—a key predictor of future graduation rates—and the percentage of graduates enrolling in college.[109] For two years, increasing college enrollment among NCS network schools largely accounted for Chicago's overall increase in college entrance among the city's public school graduates.[110]

As these examples show, school networks are gaining traction beyond New York City. However, all three of these cities—Baltimore, Denver, and Chicago—use district-led networks to provide supervision as well as support to schools—a significant departure from New York City's Children First model. Only Chicago has developed a school network that takes advantage of voluntary affiliation among like-minded schools and taps the resources of an external partner, similar to New York City networks. Significantly, this network—the Network for College Success—has demonstrated quantitative evidence of improved outcomes for students that outpaces district averages.

Note: The author served as NCS's knowledge manager from September 2012 through February 2013.

Recommendations and conclusion

Across the country, urban districts are struggling to develop the support systems needed to improve teaching and learning, especially for disadvantaged students. At the same time, changes in the governance relationships between districts and their schools—charters, contracts, and increasing autonomy for principals in district schools—require new models of district oversight and support. By creating school networks, New York City has led the way in building new models of district support for schools as they improve instruction and troubleshoot day-to-day operational issues.

In the years since New York City's Children First Networks were launched citywide, they have succeeded in improving the speed and quality of service delivery to schools, cut central-office expenses to redirect funds directly to school budgets, and begun to foster knowledge sharing and collaboration among some networks' member schools. However, two major implementation challenges have yet to be resolved: ensuring networks effectively guide and support the neediest schools and scaling up the pockets of cross-school collaboration that currently exist within a handful of networks. Children First Networks also face challenges specific to New York City, including lack of clarity among parents and community members about networks and their role in solving problems and barriers to cooperation among neighborhood schools in different networks. As noted above, a recent report by The Parthenon Group offers possible solutions geared to the local context.[111]

As discussed in this report, other cities have begun to adopt school networks as a model for district-school support and oversight with changes appropriate to their settings. Most significantly, a number of cities have chosen not to separate oversight from support, nor have they allowed schools to choose their own network affiliations. Additional research is needed, however, to determine what effect this change in approach has had on network effectiveness in helping schools improve instruction and, ultimately, student outcomes.

School networks in New York City combine the following two key strategies for improvement:

- **Changing the way the district's central office works.** That is to say, the networks shift school support from central departments that handle specific functions coupled with a geographically based system of school oversight to teams of expert staff collectively responsible for all facets of support for a small group of schools.

- **Creating voluntary, self-selected networks of schools that share a common philosophy and/or tackle a common set of issues.** These networks emphasize sharing knowledge and best practices across schools and solving problems collaboratively, facilitated by a team of education experts, such as former principals, who deeply understand the issues and the context.

The first strategy—changing the way the central office works—has taken root more deeply in New York City and has been disseminated more widely than the second strategy—as the experiences in Baltimore, Denver, and Chicago demonstrate. However, the idea that schools can solve their own problems by working collectively, supported by experts, shows promise and deserves greater attention and support in urban districts.

With these ideas in mind, we make the following recommendations as districts consider whether to adopt a school-network model of service delivery:

- **Use networks as a springboard to bring central-office services closer to schools.** Networks can deliver district supports more effectively than traditional central-office departments. Organizing district support by cross-functional teams responsive to a small group of schools builds greater trust between school leaders and their district and helps district-level staff better understand the needs of the schools they serve. Network teams can serve as a single point of contact between principals and district leaders, which gives principals more time to focus on teachers and instruction.

- **Consider the local context before outsourcing network teams.** In cities such as New York, where robust educational nonprofit sectors exist, external partners can lead networks of schools in instructional improvement. However, New York City's experience with outside networks indicates external partners still need district liaisons to solve problems with operations. In cities with a weaker base of educational nonprofits, district staff must continue to lead both operational troubleshooting and instructional improvement.

- **Investigate ways to provide time and resources for network schools to solve problems collectively and provide expert technical assistance as needed.** New York City is struggling to scale and systematize cross-school collaboration among networks; building in time for the work is a key challenge. However, the pockets of successful cross-school collaboration in New York, as well as Chicago's example of a voluntary school network tightly focused on improving graduation and college entrance rates, show evidence that creating school-chosen networks geared to a common interest can improve student outcomes.

New York City's school networks demonstrate the power of giving schools the freedom to choose the supports that best meet the needs of their staff and students. They also show the effectiveness of creating lean school-district supports that can work closely with schools across a range of issues. Although networks continue to struggle with the challenges of supporting the neediest schools and building opportunities for cross-school collaboration, they have made significant strides in moving the culture of the city's public school system away from mandates and compliance and toward responsive service to the diverse needs of hundreds of schools.

About the author

Maureen Kelleher is an independent education writer and policy researcher. Her work has appeared in *Education Week* and the *Harvard Education Letter*. Previously, she was an associate editor at *Catalyst Chicago*, a news magazine covering urban education, where her reporting won awards from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the International Reading Association, and the Society of Professional Journalists.

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