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# How Central Office Leaders Influence School Leaders' Decision-Making: Unpacking Power Dynamics in Two School-Based Decision-Making Systems

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## ABSTRACT

While past studies on school district decentralization found that central office leaders can limit school leaders' decision-making power, the studies did not examine how they do so. We investigated this in eight elementary schools in two large urban school systems with official policies of school site-based decision-making. We found that even though school leaders had legal authority over most instructional decisions, they overwhelmingly made decisions consistent with central office preferences. The question is why. By examining the micro process of interaction between central office and school leaders, we found that central office leaders in both districts used a range of persuasive strategies to influence school-level decisions. Specifically, they linked their suggestions to institutionalized norms, rules, and shared understandings in the district and profession. By doing so, central office leaders pushed against their decentralization policies. Differences in the combination of strategies that central office leaders used and the amount of interaction they had with school leaders led to (a) greater variability in the degree to which school leaders in one district made decisions aligned with central office preferences; and (b) greater feelings of coercion among school leaders in the second. These findings unpack the dynamics among local education leaders as they implement and sometimes alter the rules within policies through their daily practice.

## KEYWORDS

decision-making; decentralization; school autonomy; power; influence; central office leaders; school leaders

At the heart of the centuries-long and international policy debate on whether education systems should be more or less centralized (Egalite et al., 2017; Gobby et al., 2017; Ouchi, 2006) lies the question, “Who should have decision-making power over children’s instruction?” Advocates for centralizing decision-making power at higher levels of governance (e.g. federal, state, or local education agencies) argue that centralization is a vehicle for equity, creating coherence and reducing uneven and fragmented learning opportunities for students, particularly students who move from school to school (Anderson et al., 2012). Proponents for decentralization argue that if lower levels within the governance structure (e.g. states, local education agencies, schools) have more autonomy around decision-making, local leaders can be more responsive in serving their students and communities and, thus, improve their schools (Diem et al., 2018; Watson & Supovitz, 2001).

In practice, the answer to who has decision-making authority is not straightforward. States may create one education policy, but districts and even subunits within districts interpret the state policy in various manners and sometimes add their own policies to the mix (Spillane, 1998, 1999). District decentralization policies formally grant school leaders power over school decisions. However, school leaders exercise that power to varying degrees (Hashim et al., 2019; Steinberg & Cox, 2017). Moreover, central office leaders typically retain formal power over some areas (Anderson et al., 2012), resulting in what some scholars call “controlled autonomy” (Weiner & Woulfin, 2016).

Implementing decentralization policies is also complicated because local educators are simultaneously charged with implementing other policies that centralize decision-making, such as standards-based reforms and high-stakes accountability (Mehta, 2013). In fact, the pressure that central office leaders experience can cause them to act in ways that undermine school leaders' decision-making power (Mayer et al., 2013; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016).

Yet, how do school leaders make decisions when a decentralization policy formally grants them power over certain areas of instruction? How do central office leaders influence such decision-making? What does that dynamic power-play look like within the day-to-day implementation of a decentralization policy? The purpose of this paper is to examine the micro-practices of school and central office leaders as they jointly navigate policies and make instructional decisions.

We investigate these questions in eight elementary schools in two large urban school systems that had official policies of school site-based decision-making. We focused on school-level decision-making in English Language Arts (ELA). In each district, we interviewed school leaders in four schools during the fall and spring of the 2016-17 school year. We use theoretical tools from institutional theory—especially the concept of systemic power and regulative, normative, and cognitive carriers—to help us understand the relationship between school and central office leaders in districts with formal policies of school-based decision-making.

We found that even though school leaders in these two districts had legal authority over most instructional decisions, they overwhelmingly made decisions consistent with central office preferences. Why was this? Central office leaders in both districts used a range of persuasive strategies to influence school-level decisions. Differences in the combination of strategies that central office leaders used and the amount of interaction they had with school leaders led to (a) greater variability in the degree to which school leaders in one district made decisions aligned with central office preferences; and (b) greater feelings of coercion among school leaders in the second. These findings contribute to research and practice related to decentralization policies by going beyond a focus on the nature of school leader decisions to uncover the mechanisms by which the decisions were produced. In so doing, we show how actors leverage systemic power in social interaction as they remake governance policy in practice.

### ***School district decentralization and school-level decision-making***

While district decentralization policies formally grant school leaders power over school-level decisions, existing studies find the policies do not always result in more decision-making power for school leaders (Mayer et al., 2013; Trujillo, 2012; Watson & Supovitz, 2001). For one, some policies grant autonomy as a reward for performance (Klein, 2017), such that lower performing schools actually experience more oversight (Steinberg & Cox, 2017). This creates inequity that runs counter to the spirit of democratic governance espoused in decentralization policies. Studies also suggest that when school leaders have autonomy, they do not always exercise it (Hashim et al., 2019; Steinberg & Cox, 2017). Steinberg and Cox (2017) surmise this may be because some school leaders do not fully understand the nature and extent of their autonomy. Hashim et al. (2019) found that school leaders selectively use the autonomies they need for particular goals, and some leaders have little intention of using all the autonomy they are granted.

Central office leaders play a prominent role in determining how much decision-making power school leaders have under decentralization policies (Honig & Rainey, 2012; Mayer et al., 2013). Even in districts that are formally decentralized, central office leaders typically still hold formal power over some areas (Anderson et al., 2012; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016). Central office leaders can also unintentionally limit school leaders' decision-making power because they do not have the organizational capacity to support school autonomy (Hashim et al., 2019).

Central office leaders may also actively resist, imposing limits on school-leaders' decision-making power because they are also under pressure by high-stakes accountability policies (Mayer et al., 2013; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016). In so doing, they act in ways that undermine school leaders' power over

decision-making. For instance, central office leaders may compel school leaders to follow district-wide goals and programs with which school leaders disagree (Mayer et al., 2013; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016). They may also evade their decentralization policies to ensure, for instance, that school leaders in all of their schools are engaging in equity work (Castagno & Hausman, 2017). The power dynamics are complicated.

While these studies found that central office leaders can play a key role in limiting school leaders' decision-making power under decentralization policies and explored why they might do so, we know little about the mechanisms these leaders use to influence school-level decision-making. We address this gap in our study.

### **Conceptual framework**

We draw on theoretical tools from institutional theory to investigate the degree to which and ways that school leaders' decision-making was influenced by central office leaders in the context of formally decentralized school districts. Institutional theory is, at root, a cultural approach. It emphasizes how norms and cultural conceptions are constructed and reconstructed over time, carried by individual and collective actors, and embedded within policy and organizational structures, cultures, and norms (Scott, 2014; Scott et al., 1996). The theory helps us understand the dynamics of stability and change (Hwang & Colyvas, 2019; Powell & Colyvas, 2008), especially the ways these dynamics within organizations are influenced by social structure, culture, and norms in the environment (Scott, 2014).

Historically, institutional theory has been criticized for a lack of attention to power (Burch, 2007; DiMaggio, 1988; Powell, 1991). In emphasizing the ways in which organizations conformed to deeply institutionalized norms of legitimacy in the environment, early institutional theorists appeared to underplay the role of micro-level processes—particularly individual and collective actors' interest and agency—in dynamics of stability and change in organizations. Fortunately, recent scholarship in institutional theory has focused on bringing elements of power, persuasion, and social control to the fore (Coburn, 2006; Kellogg, 2009; Lawrence, 2008; McAdam & Scott, 2005; Oliver, 1991). This work highlights the ways individuals and organizations can act strategically in their response to pressures from the institutional environment.

In 2008, Lawrence synthesized much of this recent scholarship, putting forth a theory of power in the context of institutional theory. For Lawrence, power is a relational phenomenon rather than a commodity that someone or something holds. He defines power as a “property of relationships such that beliefs or behaviors of an actor are affected by another actor or the system” (p. 174). He argues that the relationship between institutions and agents is shaped by two forms of power: systemic and episodic. Systemic power is power that is vested in social and cultural systems rather than individuals. It shapes action and interaction, at times with very little visible conflict. Episodic power, by contrast, comprises strategic acts of mobilization by agents who use influence or force to contest, reify, or remake the institutional order.

In this study, we focus on how the interactive dynamic between systemic and episodic power influences school-level decision-making. More specifically, we focus on the ways that systemic power operates to influence school-level decision-making in ELA via institutionalized rules, shared norms, and taken-for-granted understandings that influence what is allowed, considered acceptable, and is even conceivable (see Figure 1). We view the state and school board policies that assign authority for decision-making to a particular level of the system, what we call jurisdiction, as one of many rules that are embedded in the social structure of school districts. Other rules that likely influence school leader decision-making include those related to testing and accountability, school and teacher performance, and hiring and credentialing, among others. Action and interaction are also shaped by shared professional and organizational-specific norms. For example, shared norms in the environment and in the district about appropriate roles for school and central office leaders, legitimate approaches to teacher professional learning, or how teachers should teach ELA may influence decision-making. More subtly, decision-making may also be shaped by taken-for-granted understandings. Some instructional, organizational, or leadership practices can come to be seen as

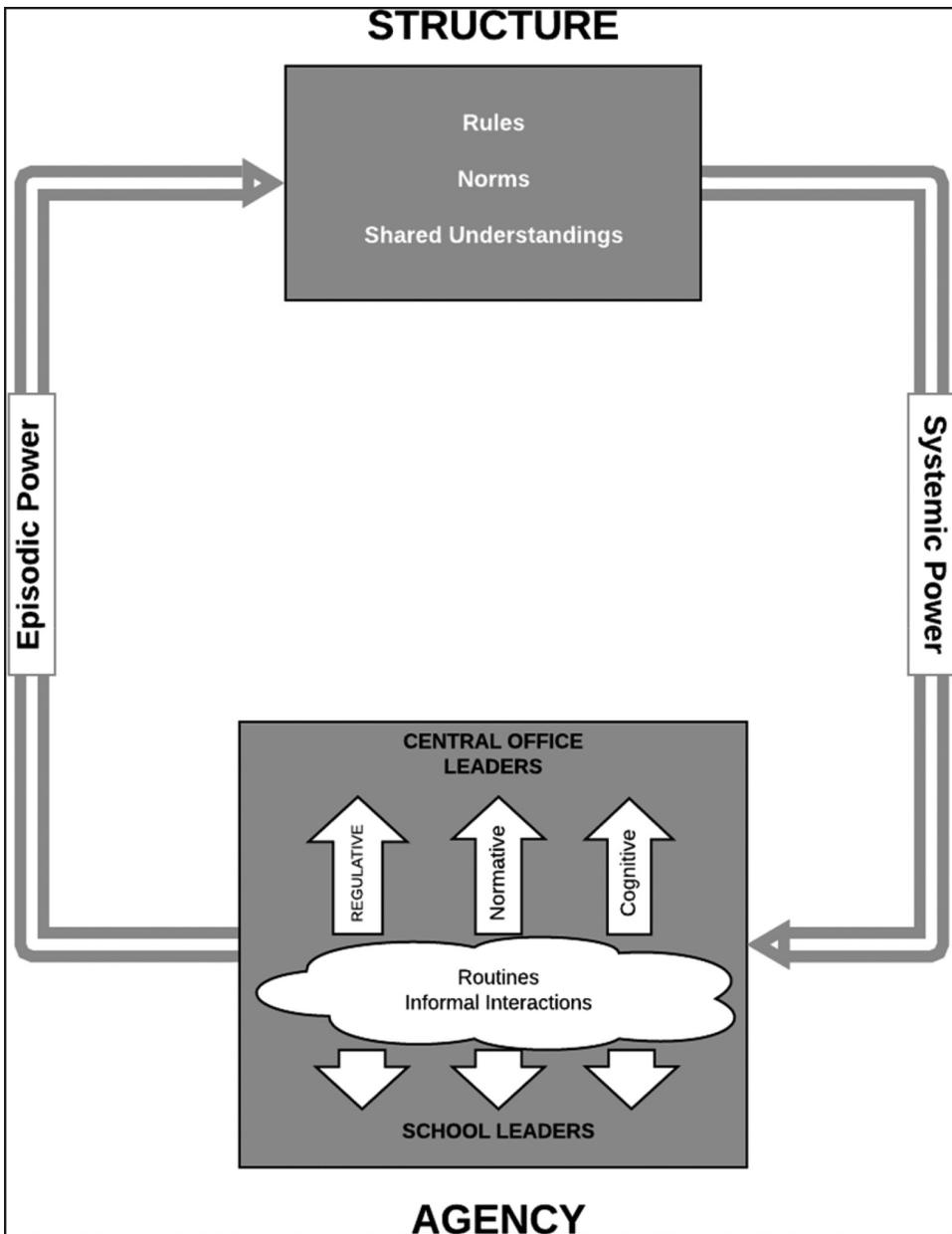


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

normal and natural such that they are taken as fact, as simply “the way we do things here.” These shared understandings shape what is even conceivable.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, actors are not automatons, simply enacting these rules, norms, and understandings. Rather, individual and collective actors exercise episodic power as they challenge, remake, or reify the existing social order, as represented by the arrow on the left-hand side of the Figure 1 (Coburn, 2004, 2006; Giddens, 1979; Lawrence, 2008; Oliver, 1991; Bray & Russell, 2016). In this study, we focus on

<sup>1</sup>Rules, norms, and shared understandings are not independent of one another; they may interact in important ways that reinforce or are in conflict or contradiction with one another (Hopkins & Spillane, 2015).

efforts by central office leaders to influence school leaders' decisions and the decisions made by school leaders in response. Central office leaders may use regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive strategies to influence school leaders' instructional decisions in ELA, represented by arrows within the box in [Figure 1](#). We define regulative strategies as when individuals (in this case, central office leaders) invoke formal rules, create sanctions or rewards, or utilize monitoring to influence behavior (in this case school leader decision-making). Normative strategies are those that invoke professional or district-specific standards that define how things should be done or specify "legitimate means to pursue valued ends" (Scott, 2014, p. 64). Central office leaders use cultural-cognitive strategies when they draw on taken-for-granted understandings about such things as the nature of high-quality instruction or leadership practices.<sup>2</sup> It is the interplay between central office leaders' persuasive strategies and school leaders' response via instructional decisions that, together, remake the social structure, including how policies related to jurisdiction for instructional policy play out in practice.

Finally, central office leaders' persuasive strategies may be more or less influential in school leaders' decision-making depending upon the frequency of interaction between central office and school leaders (Coburn, 2004). There are two key mechanisms that may influence the frequency of interaction between central office and school leaders: organizational routines and informal social interactions (see [Figure 1](#)). Organizational routines are "repetitive, recognizable pattern[s] of interdependent actions, involving multiple actors" (Feldman & Pentland, 2003, p. 95). Examples of organizational routines that link central office and school staff could include central office trainings or site visits by central office leaders. These routines may provide opportunities for central office leaders to use persuasive strategies with school staff (Burch & Spillane, 2004). School leaders may also make school-level decisions while engaging in central office-school routines. For instance, school-based literacy coaches participating in a districtwide literacy meeting may make decisions during the meeting about the content of teacher professional development, possibly with a central office coach as a thought partner.

Informal social interactions are based on relationships that school staff have with central office staff, such as professional relationships built on prior experiences working together. These informal connections can be forged when school leaders reach out to central office leaders for guidance or information or when central office leaders contact school leaders to convey a message or provide support. Informal social interactions can create pathways through which information travels (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Granovetter, 1983; Lin, 2001) as well as serve as sites for social influence (Frank et al., 2015; Ibarra & Andrews, 1993) or reform coordination (Daly & Finnigan, 2010).<sup>3</sup> They may be especially effective at influencing behavior because their informal nature may lend themselves to more specific and targeted persuasion (Coburn, 2006). Interaction between central office and school leaders via informal interactions or organizational routines may provide opportunities for central office leaders to invoke rules and also to link recommendations to professional and district-specific norms and taken-for-granted understandings.

This paper unpacks school-level decision-making within decentralization policies by examining the dialectical relationship between systemic and episodic power and how these dynamics shape school-level decision-making. We address the following research questions:

- (1) How, if at all, do central office leaders influence school-level decision-making in English Language Arts?
- (2) How, if at all, does this vary by the extent and nature of schools' formal and informal relationships with the central office?

<sup>2</sup>As represented by the two-way arrows in [Figure 1](#), both central office leaders and school leaders may use these persuasive strategies. For example, one could imagine school leaders invoking the rules related to school-level authority for instructional decision-making to bolster their autonomy. In this article, we focus on the strategies used by central office leaders as experienced by school leaders and how that relates to school leaders' decisions.

<sup>3</sup>There is research that suggests that organizational routines and social networks are not independent of one another. Routines can influence social networks as individuals who interact with one another in routines may reach out to each other in other ways (Coburn, Choi & Mata, 2010; Coburn, Mata & Choi, 2013; Spillane, Hopkins & Sweet, 2015). The nature and degree of the interaction between routines and social networks is outside the scope of the study.

## Methods

This analysis is part of a larger study on decision-making and the role of research and other forms of information therein. The four districts in this larger study were strategically sampled from a survey of the 30 largest districts in the nation implementing the Common Core (Penuel et al., 2017). For this paper, we focused on two of the four districts, which we call Hawthorne School District and Magnolia School District, because both had formal policies of district decentralization that delegated instructional decision-making to school leaders. [Table 1](#) summarizes characteristics of the two districts.

Within each district, we selected four elementary schools. Because prior literature suggested that school-level decision-making might vary by the nature of schools' connections with the district (Huguet et al., 2018; Klein, 2017; Steinberg & Cox, 2017), we selected two schools with high connections to the district and two with low connections. We first created a list of elementary schools in the middle two quartiles of each district based on ELA student achievement data to avoid capturing connections that might flow from performance on academic tests. We then shared a rubric of our criteria for high and low connections with central office leaders and asked them to apply the rubric to the schools on our list. Based on that information, we selected schools. We focused on decision-making in ELA because of the emphasis on this content area in national and local policies. We anticipated school leaders in all schools would be able to describe multiple decisions about ELA instruction, thus allowing us multiple opportunities to understand the nature of their decision-making. [Table 1](#) summarizes characteristics of the four schools in each district.

## Data collection

For the larger study, we drew on organizational charts, district websites, and reports from participants to identify and recruit central office leaders involved in instructional decision-making in mathematics and ELA. We interviewed and observed central office leaders over an 18-month period. Each central office leader was interviewed between one and four times, depending on their availability and level of participation in the mathematics and ELA areas of work. This analysis includes 47 interviews from 22 central office leaders in Hawthorne and 35 interviews with 19 central office leaders in Magnolia involved in ELA decision-making.

At the school level, we worked with principals in each school to identify three to five school leaders involved in decision-making in ELA instruction. We then interviewed all school leaders in fall 2016 and spring 2017. Interviews focused on decision-making around current school and district initiatives and central office-school relationships. This analysis includes 30 interviews from 15 school leaders in Hawthorne and 26 interviews with 13 school leaders in Magnolia.

## Data analysis

For each district, we began by documenting how formal jurisdiction over decisions was allocated between schools and central offices. We specifically asked about formal jurisdiction in interviews and

**Table 1.** District and school characteristics

School	Number of Students	Free/Reduced Lunch	Students of Color
Hawthorne	>100,000	64%	51%
School 1	450	83%	53%
School 2	456	81%	42%
School 3	317	91%	25%
School 4	481	79%	68%
Magnolia	>175,000	55%	79%
School 1	1393	48%	79%
School 2	1024	79%	90%
School 3	1212	81%	95%
School 4	826	49%	75%

coded central office and school leaders' responses. We then triangulated with state and school board policies. Next, we identified all school-level decisions related to ELA that school leaders shared, coding each decision according to the degree to whether school leaders' had formal jurisdiction over the decision and the degree to which it aligned with central office preference, as determined from interviews with central office leaders.

Next, because we were interested in the role of central office leaders in school leaders' decision-making, we coded each ELA decision for: (a) whether central office leaders were involved; and (b) the ways in which they were involved. Since it soon became clear that school leaders consistently reported experiencing a range of pressures from central office leaders to consider central office preferences while making school-level decisions, we drew on institutional theory to better understand the nature of these pressures. As a result, we coded for evidence of central office leaders' use of regulative, normative, and/or cultural-cognitive strategies. Finally, because we were interested in how interactions between school and central office leaders relate to school leader decision-making, we also coded each decision for the presence of organizational routines and informal social interactions (see Appendix for codes and definitions).

We summarized our emerging findings in analytic matrices and memos (Miles et al., 2014; Yin, 2015). We began by summarizing the findings for each school. We noted any disagreements among school leaders and weighed the reports of those directly involved in a particular decision more highly than second-hand reports from others. We then conducted within-district analyses to understand how central office-school relationships shaped school-level decision-making within each district. Next, we conducted multiple cross-district analyses to understand how district context might matter. Finally, we dug deeper into the types of strategies central office leaders used by first open coding the pressures mentioned in each decision and then using those codes to count how often they were utilized within and across decisions.

## **Findings**

Central office leaders in both districts played key roles in influencing school leaders' decision-making, despite the decentralization policies that granted their school leaders substantial autonomy over instructional decision-making. The central office leaders in our study did not defy the decentralization policies of their districts; school leaders still made the final decisions. Instead, central office leaders leveraged systemic power by invoking institutionalized rules, norms, and shared understandings as they encouraged school leaders to make decisions that aligned with central office preferences. Differences in the strategies central office leaders used and the amount of interaction with school leaders in the two districts resulted in greater variability in the degree that decisions aligned with central office guidance in Hawthorne schools, and in Magnolia, it resulted in greater feelings of coercion among school leaders.

### ***Jurisdiction over instructional decision-making***

Both Hawthorne and Magnolia school districts had official policies of school-based decision-making. For Hawthorne, state law mandated that school-based councils and principals had formal authority—or jurisdiction—over most instructional matters. The legislation stated that central offices only had authority over requirements related to state accountability. That is, central office leaders had the authority to ensure adherence to the state standards and the responsibility to administer central office assessments that provided the state with accountability data. For Magnolia, a school board policy stated that the district “plac[e] decision-making authority at the lowest possible level . . . The goal is to provide principals and teachers maximum empowerment.” Thus, “ . . . schools should be given more or less control over school operations and instruction.”

Accordingly, central offices in both districts had official jurisdiction over a relatively narrow range of instructional matters. Both central offices had formal authority over standards and district assessments used to monitor progress on those standards. Magnolia's central office also had authority over the scope and sequence of standards taught during each grading period. Thus, school

leaders in both districts had formal authority over the majority of instructional matters, including curricular materials, professional development, and instructional strategies.

### **Alignment with central office recommendations**

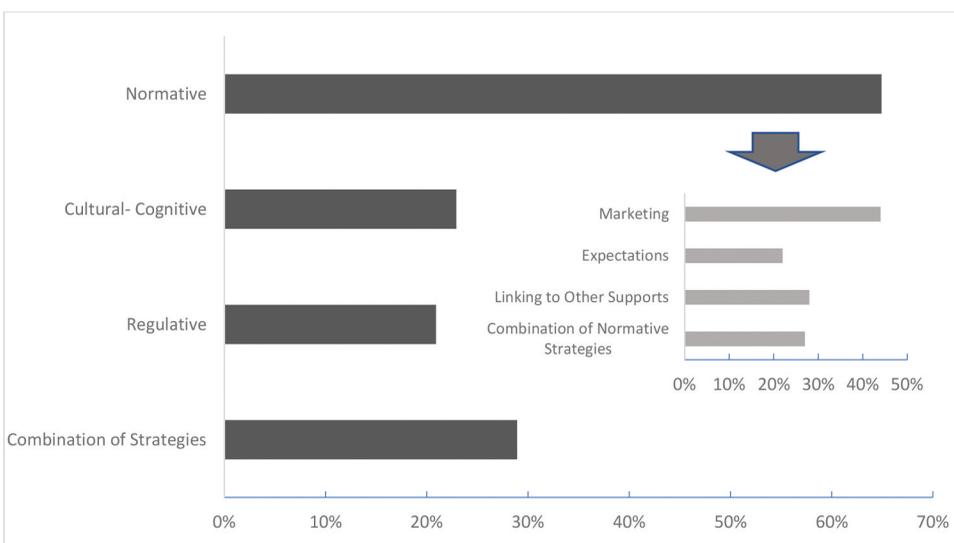
Despite school leaders' jurisdiction over most areas of instruction, school leaders in both districts used that authority to make decisions that aligned with central office recommendations the vast majority of the time. Across the two districts, 80% of the 103 school-level decisions included in our analysis aligned with central office recommendations. For example, three Hawthorne schools implemented or redesigned schoolwide intervention programs based on central office trainings. When leaders in two Magnolia schools designed book studies for their staff, they selected books that central office leaders recommended and that were aligned with upcoming central office initiatives.

### **Central office leaders' persuasive strategies**

School leaders in both districts reported experiencing persuasive strategies from central office leaders that encouraged them to make some instructional decisions and not others. In analyzing the persuasive strategies, we found that central office leaders frequently leveraged systemic power in their interaction with school leaders. As shown in Figure 2, central office leaders utilized normative strategies most frequently, followed by cultural-cognitive and regulative strategies.

### **Normative strategies**

Central office leaders utilized normative strategies the most frequently (65% of 103 school-level decisions; see Figure 2). Normative strategies are those where people invoke professional or district-specific norms that define how things should be done. When using normative strategies, central office leaders do not compel. Rather, they suggest what they see as the best way to do things. We identified three types of normative strategies utilized by central office leaders in both districts—marketing, explicitly stating expectations, and linking to other central office supports.



**Figure 2.** Frequency of persuasive strategies used in school-level decisions (n=103)

First, school leaders in both districts described how central office leaders sometimes used *marketing* to persuade school leaders to move forward with a specific decision (44% of 103 decisions; see Figure 2). We defined marketing as a subset of normative pressure when central office leaders presented school staff with information as a way to render the central office's recommendation appealing. For instance, central office leaders used marketing for a new initiative in Hawthorne when they presented growth data and/or testimonials from teachers and school leaders from other schools. In other instances, central office leaders argued that particular instructional approaches were "research-based" or represented "best practices." In so doing, the central office leaders linked particular approaches to symbols of legitimacy in the broader profession.

The second normative strategy central office leaders used was *explicitly-stated expectations* (22% of 103 decisions). We defined explicitly-stated expectations as when central office leaders acknowledged that a decision was the school leaders' choice but stated that they had expectations that leaders decide in a particular way. For instance, Magnolia school leaders shared how central office leaders in both Curriculum & Instruction and principal supervision pressured schools to adopt and implement Units of Study for Writing.<sup>4</sup> A school leader explained, "Units of Study, if this is what the [central office] is saying you're doing, you need to be doing it. If you're not, there better be a good reason why you're not doing it." Magnolia central office leaders also pressured school staff to attend a summer training they offered for Units of Study for Writing. While summer training could not be mandated because it was outside of school staff's contracted time, school leaders reported that school staff felt they had to attend. One school leader explained, "It wasn't a choice. It was not a choice. It was, 'We are having these meetings in the summer. You need to come with your grade level. You bring your units.'" Another school leader said, "It's a [central office] thing. It's a [central office] expectation." As a result, all four Magnolia schools participated in the summer training.

A third type of normative strategy was *connecting central office recommendations to other central office supports*, such as central office-provided professional development, central office-sponsored initiatives, and central office-endorsed ideas and methods (28% of 103 decisions). For instance, school leaders in two Hawthorne schools reported that central office leaders recommended a schoolwide intervention program, discussing the way it linked with what they learned in the local university literacy project, a central office initiative the schools voluntarily joined. Similarly, Magnolia school leaders reported that central office leaders encouraged school leaders to attend a number of trainings because the trainings aligned with the specific approach to writing that they had earlier pressured school leaders to adopt.

Importantly, sometimes central office leaders combined the three forms of normative strategies to influence individual decisions. For example, school leaders at one Magnolia school shared that when they designed their literacy and numeracy PD, their district literacy and staff development coaches provided "pretty directed assistance" on what the PD should look like (evidence of expectations). In addition, the central office leaders suggested that PD support the school's implementation of Units of Study (evidence of linking to other central office supports). We found combinations of normative strategies in 27% of 103 decisions. Marketing and linking to other supports was the most common combination (15%), followed by expectations and linking to other supports (5%), and expectations and marketing (4%). All three types of normative strategies were used simultaneously in 3% of school-level decisions.

### **Cultural-cognitive strategies**

Cultural-cognitive strategies were the second most common form of pressure used by central office leaders (23% of 103 decisions). We defined cultural-cognitive strategies as when central office leaders drew on taken-for-granted understandings about such things as the nature of high-quality instruction or leadership practices. School leaders in both districts described how central office leaders invoked instructional

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<sup>4</sup>Units of Study in Opinion, Information, and Narrative Writing (i.e., Units of Study for Writing) is a set of curricular materials developed by Lucy Calkins and colleagues at Teachers College Reading and Writing Project and published by Heineman.

approaches that were agreed to be quality practices when making central office recommendations. For instance, school leaders at one Magnolia school explained how their decision to focus on guided reading in small groups was informed by central office suggestions during recent central office trainings that reflected districtwide understandings of the effectiveness of guided reading and small groups. One school leader expressed, “We all know there are huge benefits to working in small groups.” Another shared, “[Guided reading] is something that I’ve always done ... guided reading has always been important.”

### ***Regulative strategies***

Of the different persuasive strategies, central office leaders used regulative strategies least often (21% of 103 decisions). We defined regulative strategies as those where individuals invoked formal rules, sanctions or rewards, or utilized monitoring to influence behavior. Hawthorne and Magnolia central office leaders used regulative strategies when they tied their recommendations to standards and district assessments, invoking central office’s jurisdiction over these two areas of instruction. For instance, in Hawthorne, central office curriculum maps were aligned with mandated district assessments. Even though schools decided whether and to what extent to follow central office’s curriculum maps, one school leader shared, “There’s not a lot of wiggle room to deviate from [the curriculum maps] because of the [district] assessments.” All four Hawthorne schools reported following the curriculum codified in the maps even though curriculum was under schools’ jurisdiction. In Magnolia, a number of central office recommendations, such as participating in central office professional development and adopting and implementing Units of Study for Writing, were tied to the district’s standards and assessments.

### ***Combinations of strategies***

In addition to using combinations of the three types of normative strategies, we found that central office leaders sometimes combined regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive strategies to influence school leader decisions (29% of 103 decisions). For instance, when central office leaders tied a new professional development opportunity to improving student test scores as well as described neighboring schools’ positive experiences with the approach, we coded for both regulative and normative (specifically marketing) strategies. Regulative and normative was the most common combination (13% of decisions), followed by normative and cultural-cognitive (12%), and regulative and cultural-cognitive (2%). All three types of strategies were combined in 2% of school-level decisions.

### ***Variability between districts***

While school leaders in both districts made decisions in line with central office preferences the majority of the time, there were two key differences. First, there was greater variability between schools in Hawthorne than in Magnolia. In Hawthorne, the percentages of school-level decisions made in line with central office preferences ranged from 63% to 92%. By comparison, in Magnolia, school-level decisions made in line with central office preferences ranged from 78% to 85%. Second, school leaders differed in the degree they felt that they could make an authentic choice, in spite of legal authority to do so. Hawthorne school leaders largely felt free to make their own decisions. For example, they reported that central office leaders “suggested” new ideas which they were free to choose to take-up or not. One principal added, “I really feel I have a lot of decision-making [power] ... I’ve got a lot of power [over] making decisions about what I want at this school.” Another Hawthorne principal said she never felt central office leaders gave directives and felt at liberty to say no to central office recommendations even though her school was targeted for low performance.

By comparison, Magnolia school leaders reported either following central office expectations without question or feeling coerced to do so. For example, when teachers at one school argued to keep their existing writing program instead of implementing the central office’s new adoption,

presenting their principal with evidence that their existing program worked well for their students, the principal countered, “But it doesn’t fall in line with what the district is asking us to do.” For this principal, central office preferences held greater weight in his decision-making than evidence of student success. When asked about jurisdiction, a school leader at another school shared, “Although a local school has control, the thought process is ... if this is what the [central office] is saying you’re doing, you need to be doing it.” When asked what happens when someone bucks the trend, she replied, “You don’t buck the trend for long.” She continued, “The thought process is, if you’re doing what you’re asked, you’re not gonna be asked to leave. When you’re doing something different, as long as you’re getting results, and you’re quiet about it, there can be some give.”

We argue that these differences flow from differences in the combination of persuasive strategies central office leaders used in each district, as well as the range and frequency of venues in which they used them.

### **Differences in strategy choice**

While central office leaders in both districts used similar persuasive strategies, they used them to different degrees and in different combinations. Specifically, Magnolia leaders were more likely to use regulative and cultural-cognitive strategies and more likely to use multiple strategies in combination than central office leaders in Hawthorne. As [Table 2](#) shows, 26% of 50 Magnolia school-level decisions were influenced by regulative strategies, compared to 17% of 53 school-level decisions in Hawthorne. Magnolia central office leaders also utilized cultural-cognitive strategies in 28% of Magnolia’s 50 school-level decisions, compared with 19% of 53 decisions in Hawthorne. Magnolia leaders were also more likely to use combinations of strategies to influence school leaders. In Magnolia, we found combinations of strategies in 36% of decisions, compared with 21% of decisions in Hawthorne. In fact, two Magnolia decisions were influenced by all three persuasive strategies. This did not occur with any Hawthorne school decisions.

In addition, while both districts used a similar percentage of normative strategies overall, they differed in their preferred normative strategy. Magnolia central office leaders were more likely to link recommendations to expectations or other central office supports, while Hawthorne central office leaders were more likely to utilize marketing (see [Table 2](#)). Magnolia central office leaders utilized expectations in 34% of 50 decisions. This was more than three times as often as Hawthorne central office leaders (11% of 53 decisions). Magnolia central office leaders also linked their recommendations to other central office supports more than twice as often as Hawthorne leaders (40% versus 17%).

Moreover, we found that Magnolia central office leaders combined types of normative strategies to influence individual decisions three times more often than Hawthorne central office leaders. Magnolia central office leaders used combinations of normative strategies in 40% of decisions, compared with 13% of decisions in Hawthorne. In fact, all three types of normative strategies were used to influence three Magnolia school decisions. This did not occur with any Hawthorne school decisions.

**Table 2.** Frequency of persuasive strategies by district

Persuasive Strategies	Hawthorne (n=53)	Magnolia (n=50)
Normative	64%	66%
Marketing	49%	38%
Expectations	11%	34%
Linking to Other Supports	17%	40%
Combinations of Normative	13%	40%
Cultural-Cognitive	19%	28%
Regulative	17%	26%
Combinations of Strategies	21%	36%

### Range and frequency of venues for interaction

Not only did central office leaders have different preferred persuasive strategies, they also varied in the range and frequency of venues during which central office leaders used them with school leaders. In both districts, organizational routines and informal social interactions were opportunities for central office leaders to use persuasive strategies to influence school leaders' decision-making. Magnolia central office leaders used persuasive strategies in a greater range and frequency of settings than Hawthorne leaders.

**Organizational routines.** School leaders in Magnolia interacted with a greater range of central office leaders and did so more frequently than Hawthorne school leaders. Thus, Magnolia central office leaders had many more opportunities to use persuasive strategies with school leaders. As illustrated in Figure 3, school leaders in Magnolia reported meeting more frequently with senior leadership in the district, including principal supervisors, associate or assistant superintendents, and the superintendent, than Hawthorne school leaders. Furthermore, the full range of Magnolia school leaders (including assistant principals, coaches, and teacher leaders) reported meeting with central office leaders, while it was primarily school principals who met with central office leaders in Hawthorne.

Magnolia school leaders also reported participating in more organizational routines with their ELA Department than school leaders in Hawthorne (see Figure 3). Magnolia school leaders regularly interacted with their ELA Department in eight distinct settings. School leaders in Hawthorne regularly interacted with their ELA Department in only one setting. Moreover, Magnolia ELA Department leaders interacted with schools more frequently (monthly vs. quarterly). Additionally, they worked with a broader range of school staff—principals, assistant principals, school coaches, and teachers. The single opportunity in Hawthorne connected the ELA Department only with school coaches and teachers who were not empowered to make school-level decisions.

**Informal interactions.** Magnolia school leaders also reported more informal interactions with central office leaders than Hawthorne school leaders, providing central office leaders with more opportunities to influence school-level decision-making. Magnolia school leaders said they felt comfortable emailing, calling, and even texting central office leaders at any time with their questions because they knew their central office leaders would be responsive. One principal explained:

The [central] office people, they know that that is my job. My job is to get [help] from them, and if they're not able to get it, then they need to figure out where we can go to get that.

By contrast, only a few school leaders in Hawthorne said they felt comfortable contacting their central office leaders, and they were only comfortable contacting certain people. Moreover,

Principal Supervisors & Senior Leadership	Hawthorne	Magnolia	
Principals Meeting	Monthly	Weekly or Bi-Weekly	Weekly or Bi-Weekly
Assistant Principals Meeting	Monthly	Monthly	Monthly
Site Visits with Principal Supervisor	Monthly	Monthly	Monthly
Principal PLC	Monthly	Monthly	Monthly
School Coach PLC	Monthly	Monthly	Monthly
Reviewing School Improvement Plan	Monthly	Monthly	Monthly
Superintendent's Newsletter	Monthly	Monthly	Monthly
<b>English Language Arts Department</b>			
Literacy Coaches Meeting	Monthly	Monthly	Monthly
Literacy Leadership Meeting	Monthly	Monthly	Monthly
Teachers and Coaches PD	Monthly	Monthly	Monthly
Literacy Numeracy PD	Monthly	Monthly	Monthly
Site Visits with District Coach	Monthly	Monthly	Monthly
ELA Department Newsletter	Monthly	Monthly	Monthly
Curriculum & Instruction Newsletter	Monthly	Monthly	Monthly
Online Information Portal	Monthly	Monthly	Monthly

Figure 3. School leaders' reports of the frequency of routines with central office leaders

school leaders from one Hawthorne school said central office leaders sometimes provided limited help.

Perhaps because of the more frequent interaction between school and central office leaders in Magnolia in both formal and informal settings, along with central office leaders' use of persuasive strategies that leveraged systemic power, school leaders in Magnolia were more consistent in the high degree with which they made decisions in line with central office preferences. They also felt the pressure more intensely, with many feeling as if they had little choice in spite of the fact that they had legal authority to make their own instructional decisions.

Ultimately, the interplay between central office leaders' persuasive practices and school leaders' responses in both districts resulted in norms of decision-making that granted central office leaders a great deal of influence over instructional decision-making in areas where they had limited formal authority. In so doing, central office and school leaders together remade decentralization policies in ways that undercut the legislation promoting school-level autonomy and control.

## Discussion

Consistent with prior research on school district decentralization (Hashim et al., 2019; Mayer et al., 2013; Watson & Supovitz, 2001), we found that even though school leaders in both districts had legal authority to make decisions on most matters related to instruction, they used this authority to make decisions that were overwhelmingly in line with central office leaders' preferences. The question is why. By examining the microprocess of interaction between central office and school leaders in two urban school districts, we found that rather than compelling school leaders to make these decisions, central office leaders leveraged systemic power to persuade them. More specifically, they linked their suggestions to institutionalized norms, rules, and shared understandings in the district and profession. In other words, they exercised episodic power by leveraging systemic power to push against state and school board decentralization policies. In Magnolia, differences in the particular combination of strategies used by central office leaders as well as the greater frequency and number of venues for interaction between central office and school leaders fostered less variability in the degree to which school leaders made decisions consistent with central office leaders and greater feelings of coercion among school leaders as compared to Hawthorne.

These findings extend existing research on the implementation of decentralization policies in three ways. First, existing research suggests that the existence of policies granting authority to school leaders to make decisions does not ensure that they will use this authority (Hashim et al., 2019; Steinberg & Cox, 2017). This study confirms this result, finding that school leaders made decisions in line with district preferences an average of 80% of the time in both districts. Second, we extend the literature by uncovering the mechanism by which this outcome was produced. We show that central office leaders do not compel school leaders to make decisions in line with their preferences; they do not, as some scholarship has argued, actively resist school leaders' decision-making power or impose limits (Mayer et al., 2013; Weiner & Woulfin, 2016). Rather, in this study, central office leaders *persuaded* school leaders to make particular decisions. They did so by linking their suggestions to deeply institutionalized norms, rules, and cultural-cognitive understandings. They relied on normative strategies most often, but also connected suggestions with taken-for-granted understandings and with rules related to aspects of instruction over which school leaders did not have authority (e.g., accountability policy). Our study also identifies key venues within which this persuasive activity unfolds, showing that the frequency and range of interaction between central office leaders may intensify the pressure that school leaders experience, leading to less variability in the nature of decisions they make.

This study also contributes to research at the intersection of institutional theory and education. While there is a growing body of research outside of education that focuses on the role of power in institutional theories of stability and change, few scholars have brought these developments into institutional studies of education. The work that does so tends to portray the institutional

environment as sources of constraint for individual action and agency, demonstrating how it bounds available strategic choices (Jabbar, 2016) or creates access to some logics and not others (Rigby, 2016; Woulfin, 2016). By contrast, we show the ways in which institutionalized rules, norms, and shared understandings (what Lawrence calls “systemic power”) can be sources of agentic power. In our study, central office leaders used their agency (or what Lawrence calls “episodic power”) to leverage institutionalized norms, rules, and shared understandings in their persuasive practices. In so doing, they were able to remake decentralization policy in ways that created a stronger role for themselves. Further, in the case of one of the two districts (Hawthorne), they did so in ways that masked their use of power.

Existing scholarship at the intersection of institutional theory and education that addresses power tends to focus on the role of individual agency in remaking, contesting, or reproducing institutionalized norms and routines from the environment (Coburn, 2004; Jabbar, 2016; Rigby, 2016; Woulfin, 2016; Bray & Russell, 2016 is an exception). Here we move beyond a focus on individual agency to investigate how individuals at different levels of the system act agentially. This study suggests that the micro-foundations of organizational stability and change are fundamentally social and interactive. Central office leaders did not act unilaterally or force school leaders to make particular decisions. Instead, it was the interplay of central office leaders’ persuasive practices and school leaders’ responses that together *co-produced* school-based decisions. Over time, this interactive dynamic created new norms related to appropriate roles for central office and school leaders in decentralized systems—roles that were quite different than the rules enacted by policy bodies governing the two districts.

Finally, this study has implications for leadership practice. Specifically, it illustrates the trade-offs involved in central office leaders’ use of different combinations of persuasive strategies. On the one hand, Magnolia central office leaders were successful in influencing the vast majority of school-level decisions across all four schools in our study through a combination of employing more aggressive persuasive strategies and creating formal and informal structures for frequent interaction. But at the same time, these strategies laid bare central office leaders’ use of episodic power. School leaders in Magnolia reported feeling coerced. They argued that even though the school board policy granted them authority to make instructional decisions, they often did not have the choice. By contrast, school leaders in Hawthorne reported that they had a choice. When they made decisions related to instruction, even when they were in line with central office preferences, they felt as if they were their own decisions. By utilizing less aggressive persuasive practices with more limited interaction, the central office leaders in Hawthorne managed to secure school-level decisions that were often in line with their preferences by leveraging systemic power while simultaneously masking their own use of episodic power. At the same time, there was greater variability in the degree to which schools made decisions in ELA in line with district preferences in Hawthorne. This suggests a strategic trade-off for central office leaders between influencing decisions across schools and fostering a climate where school leaders feel as if they have little control in a system formally designed to grant that control.

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